



CLASSICAL MUSIC

HITTING HIGH NOTES WITH OUR SOPRANOS

They may be known as the real divas of the showbiz industry, but all that sass is hushed once they start to sing, writes FARIDUL ANWAR FARINORDIN

Question: How many sopranos does it take to change a light-bulb?

Answer: One. She holds the bulb and the world revolves around her.

THOSE in the classical music circuit surely have heard that joke before. By today's pop culture standard, a soprano or the grand dame of opera, is the showbiz industry's first real diva.

Stories about misbehaving sopranos are the stuff of legends.

A famous soprano once threw

an apple at a conductor during her performance because she was not pleased with the music.

When another soprano had her first concert in Kuala Lumpur not too long ago, she demanded that the air conditioner units in the conference room (where she had an interview) be switched off and the pollen from the lilies removed.

Tantrums and tiaras aside, it is the passion, first and foremost, that defines a great soprano.

Just ask Malaysia's own sopranos Ang

Mei Foong, Yeoh Ker Ker and Chaing Yi Ling, who have been singing from as early as 4.

With impressive accolades and academic qualifications under their belt, the three are starring in the production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at Dewan Filharmonik Petronas (DFP), KLCC.

"We auditioned separately and were selected to sing together for the role of the three ladies," said Ang, an active researcher in the field of voice rehabilitation and a faculty member at Universiti Putra Malaysia's Music Department.

She is an alumni of Conservatorio di Musica Santa Cecilia in Rome, Italy and University of Melbourne in Australia.

She made her opera debut in Malaysia as the title role in the famous opera *Carmen* by Bizet with EST Opera (now known as Kuala Lumpur City Opera, or KLCO).

The three ladies in *The Magic Flute*, a fantastical comedy in two acts, serve the diva supreme in the story; a soprano aptly named Queen of the Night. Well, of course.

Not only does the queen have magical powers, her song (known as an aria in classical music term) *Der Hölle Rache*, requires a vocalist (typically a coloratura soprano) to scale impressively high notes.

It is not a surprise that it is regarded as the Mount Everest for sopranos.

In this production, the queen's role is played by

a renowned Polish soprano, Anna Siminska.

"The story carries a lot of symbolism with deep philosophical meanings," said UCSI University music lecturer Chaing, who studied music at Birmingham Conservatoire in the United Kingdom and the Kodaly Institute of the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music in Hungary.

"Mozart chose three ladies to defeat the serpent (a glow-in-the-dark Chinese dragon in this production), picked the lowest note for Sarastro (bass-baritone), played by Daniel Carison, and the highest for the Queen of the Night.

"Some songs begin in minor notes and end on major notes to denote that good has triumphed over evil," the Penang-native said.

Good and evil are the main themes in the two-act opera, sung in German (with surtitles for the Malaysian audience).

"The story presents big moral questions: the perception of right and wrong, and the interpretation of truth," said Yeoh, who teaches at the

National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage.

Chaing and Ang will star in the comedy, *The Marriage of Figaro*, by Mozart, to be presented by KLCO in October.

"The classical music scene in Malaysia is growing year by year and the audience is increasing," said Ang, who gave 16 concert recitals in Malaysia last year.

"More children are embracing music and parents are beginning to see its importance in their children's lives.

"Just look at the children here who are part of the production," Yeoh said, pointing to a group of children in the rehearsal room, who play angel roles in the opera.

The fantastical comedy, performed as a semi-staged opera today (3pm) and Tuesday (8pm), also stars Malaysian-born Australian tenor Steve Davislim (Prince Tamino), Dimitry Ivashchenko, Siminska as well as talents from KLCO Chorus and the Universiti Malaya Lion Dance Troupe.



(Top, from left) Yeoh, Chaing and Ang with Davislim in a scene from the opera. (Bottom) Yeoh, Chaing and Ang with Carison.



(From left) Ang Mei Foong, Yeoh Ker Ker and Chaing Yi Ling. PIX BY MAHZIR MAT ISA