

THE GUITAR MAN

ALEX ABISHEGANADEN



Hailed as the “Father of the Guitar”, this pioneer musician has spent the last 50 years championing the classical guitar movement in Singapore. **Joy Loh** charts his illustrious career.

Joy Loh is an Associate Librarian with the National Library, Singapore. Her job entails managing and developing the library’s performing arts collection as well as overseeing the MusicSG digital archive. Joy also enjoys making magic in the kitchen.

Alexander S. Abisheganaden, more popularly known as Alex Abisheganaden, is an accomplished Singaporean musician who was conferred the Cultural Medallion in 1988. The award honours individuals who have achieved excellence in the fields of literary arts, performing arts, visual arts and film, and have contributed to the city’s cultural environment.

Often referred to as the “Father of the Guitar”, Abisheganaden is regarded by many in the music circle as Singapore’s first home-grown classical guitarist and double bassist – an affable and generous musician who has dedicated much of his life educating and popularising the performance of music on the guitar.

In 2015, Abisheganaden donated his collection of handwritten scores, notes and books on the double bass, guitar ensemble and choral singing to the National Library, Singapore. A total of 158 items have since been placed on the shelves of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at Victoria Street and the Library@Esplanade.

This article explores the musical genius of this guitar maestro and previews some of the handwritten scores he used to teach during his illustrious career as an educator. With this donation, the National Library is hopeful that future generations of musicians will benefit from studying Abisheganaden’s sizable canon of works.

Early Life

Abisheganaden was born into an Indian Lutheran family of nine children in 1926. His earliest memories of music were those in his home at Buffalo Road, singing hymns and Christian songs with his family. His father played the violin and ukulele, and his similarly talented older brothers, Paul, Gerard and Geoffrey, were also musicians. Thanks to these early influences, Abisheganaden cultivated a lifelong passion for music.

His talents were spotted at a tender age of six when he made his debut on stage as a singer in a variety show at Moonlight Hall, on the grounds of New World amusement park in Jalan Besar. Numerous performance opportunities followed and this became an unbroken pattern throughout his entire musical career.

The recognition that Abisheganaden received early on in life affirmed his musical gifts. Besides being a naturally gifted singer, Abisheganaden also picked up the guitar easily, having taught himself to play the instrument at age 15 using the textbook, *Ellis Through School for Guitar*.

He also managed to master the piano accordion without taking any formal lessons.

When he was 15, Abisheganaden witnessed the fall of Singapore when Japanese forces invaded the island on 15 February 1942. The Occupation years were a time of deprivation and hardship for many, but fortunately for Abisheganaden, his family and many other Indians were kept relatively out of harm’s way as a result of special ties between the Japanese and the Indian National Army.

Abisheganaden’s strong musical skills stood him in good stead during the Japanese Occupation years. He found employment by playing the guitar in an Indian orchestra for the Azad-Hind radio station, which broadcasted pro-Japanese, anti-British propaganda in support of the Indian National Army. Because of his adept singing and excellent command of the Japanese language, Abisheganaden was asked by the Japanese authorities to sing Japanese folk and propaganda songs over the radio.

After World War II, Abisheganaden completed his Senior Cambridge examination and embarked on a career in teaching. He taught at Rangoon Road Primary School between 1947 and 1957, and later became the principal of several primary schools until 1963. He was subsequently promoted to Inspector of Schools at the Ministry of Education, a role he helmed until 1981.

Family Life

Abisheganaden met his future wife, Eileen Wong, at the Teachers’ Training College in the 1950s. Both shared a common interest in music and attended the same church. Brought up by strict Christian Cantonese parents in a traditional household, Eileen was the eldest child and her parents had

On his passion for teaching:

“Imparting knowledge, having rapport with people is a great kind of blessing, I would say. It is a great thing... because I have been able to help a number of people along the way through life. And it seems to me that this has been my great commitment which I was destined to do. I had been able to touch people’s lives, help them through and see them progress.”



(Facing page) Alex Abisheganaden teaching a young boy how to play the guitar (undated). All rights reserved, Eric Foo Chee Meng 1979–2001. Courtesy of National Arts Council.

(Left) Alex Abisheganaden is in the second row holding the double bass in this photo taken in the 1960s. He is with members of the Goh Soon Tioe String Orchestra. Goh Soon Tioe is in the second row, first from the left. *Goh Soon Tioe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

high expectations of her. Marrying outside of one's race in those days was uncommon and often frowned upon by society.

Despite the challenges the couple faced during their early courtship days, the determined Abisheganaden was clearly not to be deterred from marrying Eileen. Unable to receive neither his father-in-law's permission nor blessing, the couple sought the help of Eileen's uncle, Lee Swee Cheng, a prominent individual in Singapore's business circles, to give the bride away in place of her father. Sixty-one years later, the couple is still happily married with two children, Jacintha, 60, and Peter, 57.

Abisheganaden's children, too, grew up in an environment filled with music during their formative years. His wife was also musically talented, and often sang and played the piano at home. Aisheganaden's brother, Paul, had established the Singapore Junior Symphony Orchestra (later known as the Singapore Chamber Ensemble) in the 1950s, and Jacintha reveals that her home was often used as a rehearsal venue. Jacintha has fond memories of how she often "met fabulous people, listened up close to the most intrepid classical music and every day was a party."²

The Abisheganadens often took their children to watch concerts and movies with a strong musical element. While Abisheganaden naturally had a measurable influence on his children, he made sure he did not coerce them into pursuing music as a career. Instead, he believed that it was more important to inculcate in them a deep appreciation of the art form, and provide them with opportunities when they showed interest. Jacintha took lessons in classical piano and singing, while Peter learnt the violin. The former followed in his footsteps, and is now an accomplished actress, entertainer and jazz singer. Peter is a businessman who currently resides in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Turning Professional

In 1950, an opportunity came knocking on Abisheganaden's door. From his brother Paul, Abisheganaden found out that the Singapore Junior Symphony Orchestra was looking for a double bass player. In return for the loan of a free instrument, Abisheganaden agreed to play for the orchestra and to pay for his own formal lessons.

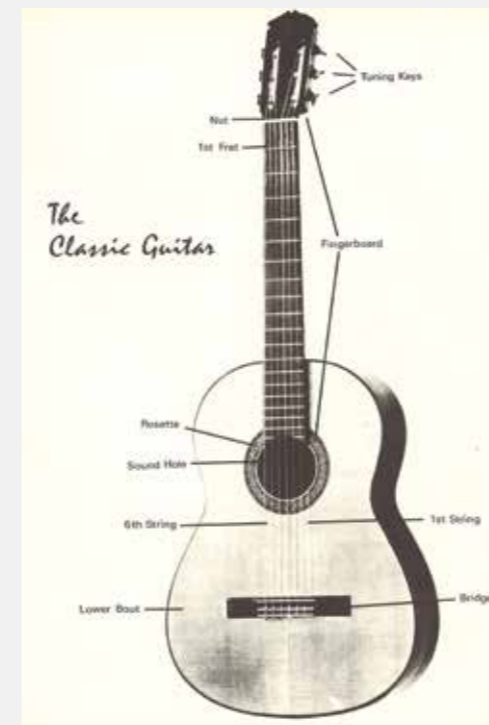
The next few years he spent studying the bass under Hungarian cellist Feri Krempel turned out to be a major turning point in Abisheganaden's musical development. From picking up music through experimentation and trial and error, Abisheganaden rose to become an accomplished virtuoso, taking proficiency exams in various instruments, including the double bass and classical guitar.

In 1960, Abisheganaden became the first person in Southeast Asia to receive a Licentiate of the Royal Schools of Music for performance on the double bass. A year later, as he was keen to pursue a college education, the plucky Abisheganaden went back to school with the aid of a grant, despite having to raise a family with two young children.

He spent a year overseas at the Royal College of Music in London where he studied voice, bass and the guitar. There, Abisheganaden became truly immersed in his element and was fortunate to be mentored by the famous Australian guitarist John Williams. In 1967, Abisheganaden started the Singapore Classical Guitar Society and has championed the classical guitar movement in Singapore ever since.

The Birth of a Guitar Maestro

The widespread use of recreational drugs among Singaporean youths in the early 1970s was a worrying trend for the government. To divert the attention of teenagers to meaningful



activities and keep them away from the clutches of drug peddlers, the Ministry of Education (MOE) leveraged the mass media as a means to facilitate the teaching of musical instruments such as the guitar.

Abisheganaden was commissioned by then Minister for Education Goh Keng Swee to produce 26 episodes of the TV programme, *Music Making with the Guitar*, which was broadcast on MOE's Educational Television Service for two years from 1970 to 1971. He also wrote the two textbooks that accompanied the series. The programme not only helped to raise the profile and popularity of the classical guitar, it also established Abisheganaden as the master of the classical guitar in Singapore.

In 1981, Abisheganaden founded the National University of Singapore Guitar Ensemble (GENUS) at the university's Centre for Musical Activities. Beginning as a guitar class with fewer than 10 enthusiasts, GENUS has now grown into a 50-member strong ensemble with a wide repertoire and is recognised as one of Singapore's premier guitar ensembles. Its annual public concerts often feature Abisheganaden's original compositions and music that he has transcribed for the guitar.

These works reflect Abisheganaden's personality and musical style: he enjoys taking a popular ASEAN song, arranging it into a style suitable for the guitar ensemble, and then teaching it to his students. Some notable examples include the Tagalog song "Anak" written by Filipino musician Freddie Aguilar; "The Pursuit" composed by local music legend Dick Lee and popularised by the late Cantopop singer Leslie

Cheung; and "Jingli Nona" (or Jinkli Nona, which means "Fair Maiden"), one of the most popular Portuguese Eurasian folk songs. It was often sung and performed at Eurasian weddings, and the dance movements are somewhat similar to the Malay *joget*.

Abisheganaden also composed works for the guitar – including original pieces and transcriptions of popular songs – for didactic purpose as a means to train and improve playing techniques of the guitar orchestra. Iconic works include the 16-bar long "Katong Blues," a short work composed in 1971 for the TV programme *Music Making with the Guitar*, which derived its name from the east coast district in Singapore, and "Huan Yin-Vanakam", a double concerto Abisheganaden composed in 1995 for the sitar, erhu and guitar orchestra.

"Huan Yin-Vanakam" combines elements of Indian and Chinese folk music – musical traditions that Abisheganaden has kept close to his heart. The concerto blends sinuous Chinese folk melodies with the rhythmic tempo of songs sung by Indian foreign workers that Abisheganaden remembered from his childhood days. Together with the inclusion of Chinese and Indian musical instruments as well as Western classical influences, the work has distinguished itself as a singularly important example of world music.

"Gela Nexus" is another important work for the guitar orchestra by Abisheganaden. Composed in 1995, the title is an amalgamation of GENUS, the NUS Guitar Ensemble, and Abisheganaden's first name "Alex", symbolising his feelings of pride and achievement with the ensemble he founded. "Huan Yin-Vanakam" and "Gela Nexus" were first performed in January 1996 by GENUS, and again in 2007 in Singapore. Additionally, "Gela Nexus" was performed by GENUS in a guitar orchestra competition in Germany in 2007. It became one of the first local works of this genre to be performed overseas.

Later Years

In 2007, Abisheganaden received the Cultural Medallion grant which he used to present popular ASEAN folk songs as well as his original compositions. During GENUS's 25th anniversary concert – organised as part of the NUS Arts Festival – on 23 March 2007, Abisheganaden's compositions were performed by an ensemble of more than 50 guitarists from GENUS in honour of its founder. In the years that followed, Abisheganaden continued to score church hymns and teach classical guitar at various schools. He even explored teaching the ukulele.

Now in his 90s, Abisheganaden continues to have an unbridled enthusiasm for music and life. His generous spirit and winsome personality endear him to many, and his legacy and generosity remain etched in the hearts of

(Below) Pictured here are the handwritten music scores for: (clockwise from left) "Huan-Yin Vanakam", "The Pursuit", "A Song for Teachers' Day" and "Gela-Nexus". Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.

(Facing page) Parts of a classical guitar. All rights reserved, Abisheganaden, A. [1970]. *Music Making with the Guitar* (Vol. 1) (p.6). Singapore: ETV Service.



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Notes

- 1 Tan, B. L. (Interviewer). (1995, March 9). *Oral history interview with Alex Abisheganaden* [Transcript of recording no. 001461/11/01, p. 3]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.
- 2 Telephone correspondence with Jacintha Abisheganaden, daughter of Alex Abisheganaden, on 24 January 2017.
- 3 Email correspondence with Bernard Tan Tiong Gie, a prolific and acclaimed local composer and a friend of Alex Abisheganaden, on 19 January 2017.

the numerous lives he has touched, many of whom still make the effort to keep in contact with the legend. Having taught and nurtured generations of students, his protégés continue to keep the flame of guitar-playing and his love for music alive.

Bernard Tan Tiong Gie, a critically acclaimed Singaporean composer and professor of physics at NUS describes Abisheganaden as the “quintessential musician’s musician – always young at heart and ever generous with his immense talents”.³ ♦

THE ABISHEGANADEN COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS

Among the items Alex Abisheganaden donated to the National Library are his handwritten scores, pedagogical notes on teaching the guitar as well as his private collection of books on the double bass, guitar ensemble and choral singing. In view of copyright restrictions, only the handwritten materials have been digitised and made accessible on MusicSG – Singapore’s premier digital music archive (<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/music>). His other donated materials are available for reference at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and the Library@Esplanade.

Here is a selection of original handwritten scores donated by Abisheganaden.

Afternoon with Alex Abisheganaden (2010) [Call no.: RCL0S 787.870922 AFT-[AA]]

This is a bound publication of handwritten pedagogy notes that Alex Abisheganaden used to train guitarists for Christian worship ministry. It contains photocopies of certificates of proficiency that Abisheganaden received in guitar, voice and bass training.

Eleven September Two Thousand and One (2002) [Call no.: RCL0S 781.095957 ELE-[AA]]
Conceptualised and arranged by Alex Abisheganaden, this work was inspired by the aftermath of the 2011 terrorist attacks. It includes two sets of draft summary text on Singapore’s history and development since 1819. The work comprises arrangements for “Sumatera”, “Singapore”, “God Save the King”, “Negara Ku”, “Count on Me Singapore” and “Let There be Peace on Earth”. The piece was performed by GENUS in a concert in 2002.

Friends (1983) [Call no.: RCL0S 787.87 ABI-[AA]]
Alex Abisheganaden wrote “Friends” in 1983, in memory of a dear friend who had passed away. The music is based on the popular ballad “Danny Boy” (sung to the tune of “Londonderry Air”) that he had rearranged. “Friends” was performed at a GENUS concert in the 1990s with a narrative by Abisheganaden.

Loy Krathong: Thai Ethnic Traditional Arrangement for ASEAN Selector II (1999)
[Call no.: RCL0S 787.87 LOY-[AA]]
The popular Thai Song “Loy Krathong” was

rearranged for the guitar orchestra by Alex Abisheganaden, and performed at “ASEAN Serenade: An Evening of Music, Song, Dance and Poetry” concert held at the Esplanade in July 2008. The piece was a collaboration between GENUS and the NUS Thai Music Ensemble.

Teachers Day Song: Our Teachers, Our Mentors, Our Friends (undated)

[Call no.: RCL0S 782.0095957 ABI-[AA]]
This song was written by Alex Abisheganaden for the Ministry of Education to celebrate Teachers’ Day in schools throughout Singapore. Sung to the tune of “Tennessee Waltz” by Pee Wee King, the title encapsulates the deep relationship between students and their teachers.

The Life of Christ: Aframerican Folk Song Cycle (undated) [Call no.: RCL0S 787.87 HAY-[AA]]

This is an excerpt from “The Life of Christ”, an Aframerican folk song compiled by Roland Hayes and arranged for solo classical guitar by Alex Abisheganaden.

Three Cities Suite: Johor – S’pore – Batam (undated) [Call no.: RCL0S 784.1858 THR-[AA]]
Alex Abisheganaden composed this piece of music, which was inspired by the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942–45). It is a reflective piece on the incursion by the Japanese military as they advanced into Southeast Asia in the early 1940s. It begins with a nostalgic feeling of loss and despair that gradually builds up into a frenzy before ending on a patriotic high inspired by the National Day song, “Count on Me Singapore”.

Yaaka Hula Hickey Dula Prime Ensemble Version with Steel Guitar Percussion & Etc (undated) [Call no.: RCL0S 787.87 GOE-[AA]]
Composed by Ray Goetz, Joe Young and Pete Wendling, this arrangement by Alex Abisheganaden features the steel-pedal guitar for a Hawaiian-like effect. It was an encore piece for the 1995 GENUS concert.