



# A PLATFORM FOR MUSIC

MAKING A CASE FOR THE CHAOS OF BUSKING IN THE PUBLIC TRANSPORT SYSTEM IN SINGAPORE.

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WHEN I THINK OF THE MAJOR TRANSPORT SYSTEMS of the world, I think of music. The Paris Métro charms passengers with accordions and xylophones; the New York subway announces itself with Rhythm and Blues; the London Tube stirs up nostalgia with anything from classical music to the Beatles. There is always live music as one moves through the public transit system in these Western cities.

I have always wondered about Singapore's commuting soundtrack. But my search has barely garnered an echo. It should not be so, what with Singapore's well-run public transport and burgeoning reputation as a vibrant city. Is our city muted because for the longest time, spontaneity has been outlawed in the public arena? Or is its silence the result of our unwillingness to applaud those to come forth?

Busking restrictions aside, our population has seen an unprecedented degree of acoustic isolation with the encroachment of new technology. Gone are the days when we were limited to a 12-track CD screaming to make itself heard over low-quality earplugs; an iPhone can now store up to 5,000

songs – enough to last you for a 10-day journey on the MRT if ever you find yourself trapped in this commuter nightmare. The truth is, technology has both improved and isolated our travelling experience. With the prevalence of MP3 players, gaming devices, and smartphones, the twenty-first century commuter is safely tucked into his own cocooned bubble, each marching to a different tune.

In July this year, an opportunity for disruption presented itself. For the first time, as part of a series of social experiments to enhance commuters' experience, the Land Transport Authority, in collaboration with the National Arts Council and SMRT, has allowed buskers to perform in five train stations – Raffles Place, City Hall, Eunos, Bukit Batok, and Jurong East. At the end of three months, the said authorities will make an assessment as to whether to continue the programme.

I do not envy the good men and women who are taking on this unenviable task. For how does one make an objective evaluation on whether the live music has improved or degraded these public spaces? To be sure, not all music is pleasant. Badly played music is certainly repulsive but even good, popular music can be disagreeable when it involves the question of taste. For every man who embraces the live performance, there is another who detests the auditory intrusion. Unfortunately, busking suffers from a bad rap in Singapore, with the general population relegating it to a "sympathy art" practiced by the destitute and disabled. The more indiscriminating you are in giving, the deeper we sink into this vicious cycle, they argue.

What these detractors forget is that a city thrives not on predetermination – such as a carefully selected soundtrack by the authorities or one to your taste – but on the synergy of chance. The standards of busking may not be as high as that in the West but if we Singaporeans do not give our street musicians a chance to experiment and compete, then we may never cultivate the messy unpredictable chaos from which great art or indeed a great metropolis is born. What makes a city attractive is the flame of spontaneity when one human touches another. Iconic architecture and world-class master plans may provide the grand stage for this interaction, but without us coming out of our shells, acoustic or otherwise, our city may as well be as exciting as a shop window installation.

Let us give serendipity a chance. The next time you see a busker, stop and listen. Give a smile, a word of encouragement, constructive feedback (if you dare!) even if the music is not stirring enough for you to part with a coin. Whilst they may not be world-class artists, these musicians may just be the spark to ignite our city's symphonic soundtrack. «