

ELISA ARNESTO-SIASOCO

Reunited with Music

by MALOU L. AGUILAR
AJPress



It was a reunion of sorts – just in front of me are two people who have so much in common through music and yet were separated apart for more than two decades. Elisa Arnesto-Siasoco, who once played with the Manila Symphony Orchestra (MSO), could not hide her happiness while she told Asian Journal how she found Bob Shroder, a colleague with the MSO and now the musical director of the Filipino-American Symphony Orchestra (FASO).

"My sister was reading the Asian Journal and saw the (FASO) ad, thinking it was MSO. Then I saw Bob's picture," she said.

But FASO is based in Los Angeles and Siasoco lives in Northern California. Still, in some sort of musical fate, she called Shroder and found out that he, along with Asian Journal publisher Roger Oriol and *Balikbayan Magazine* Editor-in-Chief Lito Ocampo Cruz were heading the same way to visit.

Now two people bonded by the love for music now eagerly reminisce the good old days.

Siasoco started to play the violin at the age of 7 or 8. "I was playing on and off, I wasn't really serious," she said and added, "I really started learning the piano first." She also explained that it was her sister, Cynthia, who was really into playing. "She plays the viola," Siasoco said. From a project of former First Lady Imelda Marcos where they played at the Nayong Pilipino, someone saw Siasoco's potential and was invited at the University of the Philippines. "From then on, *nahatak na din ako* – that is where it started."

That was in 1979. There on, Siasoco moved up the musical chain, being the youngest member of the Philippine Youth Orches-

tra (around 13 to 15 years old), to having been taught by mentors Prof. Rizalina Buenaventura and Prof. Sergio Esmilia. With MSO, she toured the Philippines for performances and even played during the late Pope John Paul's visit in Manila. "*Para kaming family*," she said, referring to her MSO colleagues.

After MSO around 1984-1985, Siasoco became part of a string quartet that played at the Marco Polo Hotel in Singapore. "Somehow *mas gusto nila doon ng Pinoy*," she explained when asked why she thinks Filipino musicians are in demand abroad. "Natural feel ang tugtog kasi nila, unlike ng iba, *pilit* – parang robot, too mechanical."

Today, Siasoco is a paralegal assistant, but as music runs in her blood, she still plays and teaches the violin privately. "I enjoy that. That's my passion – teaching, playing."

Siasoco left the Philippines in 1986. She earned her music degree at the Notre Dame in Belmont and played for the university's quartet. She married in 1991, and has now two kids, aged 16 and 6 years old – and yes, both are budding musicians.

Siasoco hopes to teach her students not just how to play the

violin, but something more on style and expression. "A high level of music, keen intonation," she said, explaining that these are some of the things she learned through experience.

So as Siasoco and Shroder joked, laughed and reminisced their days at the MSO, she explained that she was glad to have found out about FASO. "Konti lang kami dito sa Bay Area," she said, referring to Fil-Am musicians, "*Nalulungkot ako, so naghahanap ako. Namimiss ko magplay sa orchestra.*"

Siasoco was also able to play with the CA East Bay Symphony. "I looked at the music and the music I played with the MSO – it came back, it's there," she said. Now being playing with her fellow Filipinos in FASO makes it all better. ■

Making Music, Making History

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"Thank God, Roger and Cora Oriol and Lito Cruz passionately took up the cudgels and just did it," he said.

Roger and Lito met with some of FASO's key players: powerhouse musicians, which included Andy, Botchok and Bob, as well as violinist Cecilia Coo Cruz and flutist Cheryl Lopez, along with SIPA's (Search to Involve Pilipino Americans) Nonoy Alsaybar.

Harmony

The Asian Journal, the leading Filipino-American community newspaper, paved the way for other Filipino-American musicians—from within Los Angeles County and reaching as far as San Francisco and San Diego—to be involved in FASO.

"Some even drive for an hour just to get to the rehearsals. The parents of younger musicians also help out whenever they can. Sometimes, you'll see them arranging the seats before and after the sessions," shared Andy. "You can really see the involvement of the entire family."

Preparations for FASO have seen cooperation and creative genius spark, not only among its musicians, but also between the symphony orchestra and its supporters from local communities,

such as those from Orange County, Long Beach and Riverside.

And through the support of SIPA Executive Director Joel F. Jacinto, the organization also opened its doors for FASO's rehearsals. The symphony orchestra met on Tuesday nights at SIPA's headquarters in Historic Filipinotown.

FASO showcases a line-up of talent -- from child prodigies to veteran chamber musicians. They bring with them not only their musical instruments, but also their wealth of experience and passion for their craft. Among these passionate artists are cellist Art Octamio, pianist/violinist Kendro Calica, and violinist Jerico Flores.

"It never fails to overwhelm me as I see the group growing and growing right before my eyes. From just a handful, FASO has expanded to over 40 musicians," said Andy.

"Most of them come from work or school," he added, "Rarely does anyone miss practice. We just love music."

Curtain Call

FASO's May 17 gala at the esteemed Saban Theatre in Beverly Hills marks another achievement for the Filipino-American com-

munity. The performance in this historic venue brings together the best in musical talent across generations.

Play it forward

The Filipino-American Symphony Orchestra continues Asian Journal's vision to reach out to the community -- and to pay it forward -- as proceeds of the concert will provide scholarships for talented Filipino musicians.

And as the curtains are drawn on May 17, FASO once and for all takes its place in the annals of music history.

This symphony orchestra represents harmony in our community as it signifies both the reveries and memories of home and of family.

By popularizing our music -- from the *kundiman* to the OPM--the richness of the Filipino musical heritage evokes memories of our homeland, even when we find ourselves thousands of miles away from it.

Armed with big dreams and a commitment to make a difference, The Asian Journal family and the Asian Journal Foundation give voice to our brightest musicians -- all while paying homage to our culture, all for love of country.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome FASO! They're playing our song. ■

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