

AGM and Mid-Autumn Treats

The time had come again for the Chapter's members to gather and discuss issues pertaining to the development of our Chapter. **Isaac Lean**, still chewing on bits of scrumptious mooncakes, files this report.



HAPPY FAMILY: Singapore AGO members posing for the camera. Photo | Ong Te-Min

THE SINGAPORE Chapter of the American Guild of Organists (SAGO) held its annual Annual General Meeting (AGM) on 14 September 2008 at Gracefields Kindergarten.

As with all AGMs, our Dean declared the AGM open. Reading through the reports from the various officers, one could easily tell that the Chapter has indeed matured - hence the need for more people to come on board and help!

The Programme Director also gave a brief update on the programmes planned for in the near future. Looking at all the various exciting and interesting programmes got me all enthusiastic and ready to go.

The members present also elected the new office-bearers for the next term.

Dean: Dr Evelyn Lim
Sub-dean/ Programme Director: Mr Yeo Huan
Secretary: Mr Ong Te-Min
Treasurer: Ms Dorothy Teh
Membership Officer: Ms Ng Chet Wei
Publicity Officer: Ms Esther Seet
Newsletter Editor: Mr Isaac Lean

The following were co-opted into the committee:-

Advisor to Treasurer: Dr Shirley Suresh
Assistant to Programme Director: Ms Chong Ten Yeen

The meeting concluded with a feast of 'out-of-this-world' fare that included mooncakes, Chinese Tea and best of all the many beautiful *Chang-Ers*.

Message from the Dean

Dear Friends,

"Are we not formed, as notes of music are, For one another, though dissimilar?"



~ Percy Bysshe Shelley
(English poet, 1792-1822)

WHAT AN eventful year we have had thus far, with world events in frenzy and turmoil. In these trying times, we look to faith and the arts to soothe our minds and spirits. The stained glass windows in the worship spaces of the west remind us of the importance of unity in diversity. Each pane is made of individual, coloured fragments of glass, unique and carefully crafted. Pieced together, they form a cohesive picture. As different angles and degrees of light shine through it, the message of the artwork appears to take on different perspectives. Olivier Messiaen himself was inspired by stained glass, and perhaps we too, could gain insights from this.

Many minds, one focus; many talents, one spirit—such is the AGO community, as we celebrate the International Year of the Organ. Music has the power to touch the lives of people from every race and religion, in every circumstance. Let us as organists and supporters of the arts, continue to do our part, in every way we can.

With best wishes for peace and goodwill,

Evelyn Lim DMA
Dean (2008 - 2010)



A Week of “Organ Immersion”

The AGO Convention 2008 held at Minneapolis, the United States of America. Members who went for the Convention had the opportunity to take part in many seminars and talks. **Ng Chet Wei** summarises the whole experience in an article for *Pipe Echoes*.

THE 49TH AGO National Convention in Minneapolis was held from 22nd to 26th June 2008. After registering for the AGO Convention, we took the bus to House of Hope Presbyterian

London. The other highlight of the convention was “Pipeworks Live” featuring the competition winners, established organists as well as up-and-coming ones. The concert closed with a

rousing “AGO Fight Song” and party noise-makers were used to celebrate the start of the “International Year of the Organ”.

During the National Meeting, we were given a preview of the lyrical “Ornament of Grace” written for organ and a C instrument, and commissioned for the “Organ Spectacular” on 19th October 2008. At the same time, we bade farewell to Dr. Frederick Swann, who



SINGAPOREAN CONTINGENT: Singapore AGO members - From L to R: Chong Ten Yeen, Ng Chet Wei, Dorothy Teh, Yoo Ji Eun and Ong Te-Min with Dr Frances Nobert (middle), Region IX Councillor. Photo | Ong Te-Min

Church at St. Paul for the National Competition for Organ Improvisation (NCOI) Semi-Finals, which marked the start of our “organ immersion”. The competitors astounded with their improvisation skills. During the breaks in between, we explored the huge building, which housed 4 pipe organs of various sizes!

The opening celebration held on Sunday night at the Central Lutheran Church was a sight to behold. As we sang “When in Our Music God is Glorified”, supported by the combined church choirs, designated people swayed long “gold brushes” along the aisles and from the balcony. It was a very memorable experience for me. The carillon concert before the event was also a rare treat.

The next 4 days were filled with concerts and workshops from morning till evening. Besides a heavy dose of organ music, we also heard the music of the *Ondes Martenot* during the Messiaen Gala Concert and the world-famous St. Paul’s Cathedral Choir of



OPENING CEREMONY: The start of many good things to come. Photo | Ong Te-Min

stepped down as AGO President after 6 years at the helm. Besides attending concerts, workshops and meetings, we also spent much time hunting for good buys at various booths in the exhibition hall.

The AGO Convention drew to a close with a concert in St Paul's Cathedral on Thursday night. The second half was a massive chorus and orchestra work based on the story of the fire that destroyed the *Frauenkirche* in Dresden many years ago. During the section about the fire, the orchestra created a sound effect that was so mesmerizing that I could visualize huge flames licking the buildings. In another section about the organ, I was amazed at how the chorus could combine effectively with the organ on J.S. Bach's famous "Toccatina in D minor" for solo organ. It is admirable that the chorus and orchestra could perform such an amazing work.

This has been an educational and enjoyable trip for me. If you have not attended any national conventions yet, do consider setting aside time in early July 2010 for the next one in Washington. I am sure it will be a memorable experience for you too!

Chet Wei is the Membership Officer of the Singapore AGO, and organist at two Methodist churches. She is a staff member of the Methodist School of Music, and specializes in teaching organ to young children using the Wayne Leupold method.



Messiaen - and the *Stained Glass* Connection

THE GREAT French composer Olivier Messiaen is like Wagner; you either love him or hate him.

One reason Messiaen inspires such devotion is that - again like Wagner - he ventures into those extreme areas of human experience that most composers fight shy of. But, whereas Wagner aimed at a very human, earthly sort of ecstasy, Messiaen always has his eyes fixed on the Beyond.

He was a devout Catholic in an irreligious age, and his whole life's work was devoted to proclaiming the truths of the faith. But his was an unusual kind of religious music. There are no Passions, no liturgical pieces, no sense of this world being a difficult preparation for the next. Awe, fear, and joy at the contemplation of the hereafter are what concern him.

His music is full of apocalyptic visions of Last Judgments, angels, the celestial banquet, the glorious body of Our Saviour, the colours of the celestial city. "Dazzlement" was what he aimed at, and in pursuit of it his music piles up stupendous radiant chords of brass, gongs and voices, like a vast stained-glass window in sound.

Meeting the creator of this awe-inspiring music must have been a terrifying prospect for the 16-year old Aimard. At that time (1973), he was an amazingly gifted youth who had just won first prize at the Olivier Messiaen Piano Competition, and wanted to meet the creator of the music he had become obsessed by. How does he remember him? "Oh, as everyone remembers him."

"Messiaen," he says, "walked through life like a dreamer, always speaking very quietly, with a wonderful sweet, humble quality, but also with a tremendous capacity for work. He had this ability to really listen to people, which was just as acute as his ability to hear sounds. I remember he made someone unimportant like me feel completely special."



Messiaen's is the kind of music that sweeps impressionable young things off their feet. Now that he's turned 50, Aimard still loves the music, but looks at it with a more judicious eye. "For me, there are three pleasures in this music. The first is the joy of sound - how he makes the instrument ring and opens up your ears. The second is the way he invents these amazingly precise and very radical musical gestures. In that way, he reminds me of Beethoven. And the third thing is the phenomenal energy that just carries you along from one moment to the next."

But what about the things that embarrass many listeners, such as the sugary chords in the early organ works, the mix of perfumed eroticism and spirituality? (One of Messiaen's works from the 1940s was described by a disgusted Pierre Boulez as "music of the brothel".) Aimard admits there are problems in Messiaen's music, but says that the melange of many things is part of his genius. "The problem is that Messiaen is not an organic composer, like Beethoven or Schoenberg. He works by accumulation, putting things side by

side, or on top of one another, rather than synthesizing them.

"And these things refuse to mix. On the one hand, there is the visionary who uses very sensuous means to overwhelm the listener; and for some people these are the best things in his music. On the other hand, you have a speculative, pedagogic mind, who loved to play with numbers and patterns. And for some people these austere, symbolic passages are the best thing. The problem is that, in Messiaen, you cannot have one without the other."

"If you understand the culture Messiaen came from," he says, "you understand the music better, with all its difficulties and contradictions. Instead of being a Messiaen fanatic or rejecting him, you see him in the round. And this is important, because a creator is also a human being."

Adapted from: www.telegraph.co.uk by Ivan Hewett

PIPES@Victoria

An organ recital by Dong-ill Shin - 2 October 2008

By Charles Cousins



WITH ONLY one hour for the programme, the young Mr Shin delivered a nail biting tour through several representative examples of different era of the organ repertoire. From the mandatory Bach and Messiaen (it is his year after all), to the “technique-stretching” Liszt and Alain, the pieces were well chosen and placed extreme demands on the organist, organ, audience, and even stop-pullers!

Always a good place start is a Bach *Toccata and Fugue*, and BWV564 with its *Adagio* transition, was an excellent choice. Safe in the key of C, a key that is safer to hear than to play, Dong-Ill stepped right into a well-measured delivery of the Toccata. His playing was steady and crisp, and with a clarity of phrasing that notes carrying the melodic line stood out clearly above the others. The nimble pedal work, especially during the solo section, did not betray the slightest hint of the leg twisting challenges imposed on the organist.

Dong-Ill’s rendering of the *Adagio* was a beautiful respite before the intellectually challenging *Fugue*. Although written note for note of course, one could easily imagine Bach himself improvising a different version of the *Adagio* every time he played the piece. And it was Dong-Ill’s skill that made us feel that this performance was “just for us”.

With many members of the audience never attending an organ recital before, let alone hearing or understanding a *Fugue*, this was a truly excellent introduction to fugal style, and Bach’s mathematically precise genius in creating lines that sound complete on their own, yet fit together perfectly. With eyes closed, Dong-Ill’s phrasing of each line was such that one could easily imagine separate musicians on

the stage.

Mozart’s *Andante in F major*, K 616 is a piece more famous for its curiosity value than its contribution to the music repertoire. It is equivalent to asking today’s greatest living composers to create jingles for TV Advertisements. However, when times were tough, as was frequently the case with the Mozarts, then even the most banal commission was welcome if it helped to feed the family.

Dong-Ill delivered a convincing rendition of a mechanical music box, with limited range of notes, and choice of stops. Yet somehow, he was able to subtly convey the hints of sarcasm that were undoubtedly occupying Mozart’s mind as he penned the work.

One wonders if the fever of the previous week’s F1, when cars sped past the concert hall at mind blowing speeds, was in Dong-Ill’s mind when he dived head first into Jehan Alain’s *Litanie*. Having listened to virtually every YouTube performance of this work, including Alain’s sister Marie-Claire’s of course, I believe Dong-Ill’s performance would rate in the upper percentile for speed.

But despite its sub-four minute delivery, it was Mr Shin’s precise articulation, coupled with the dry acoustics of the Victoria Concert Hall, that ensured all the many notes were clearly heard. And at the end, organist, audience and stop-pullers were left

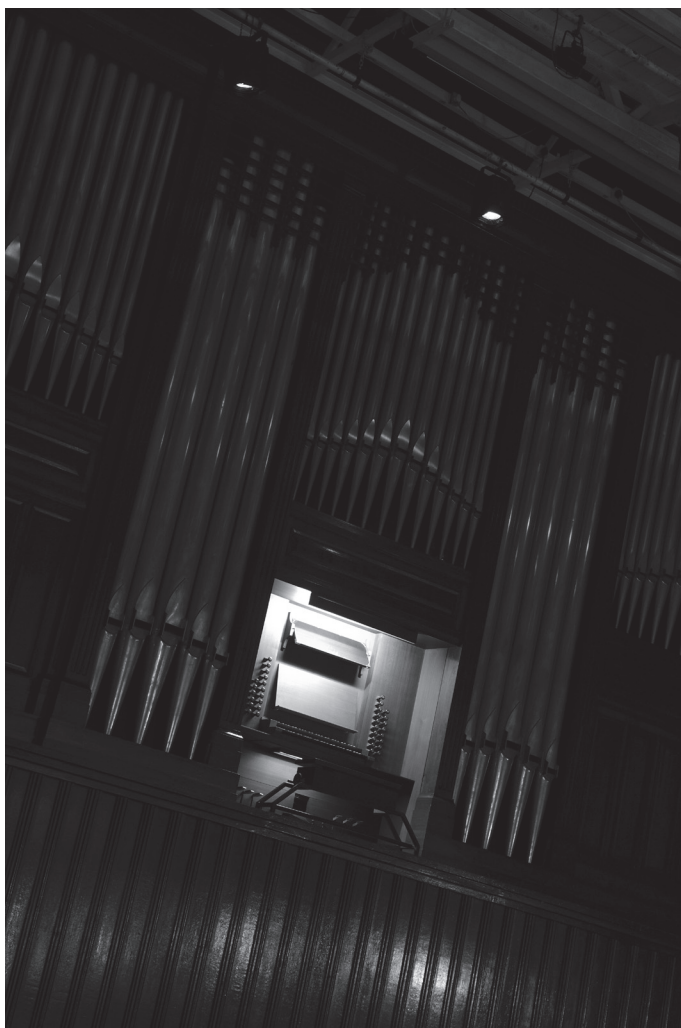


IN CONVERSATION: Mr Dong-Ill Shin being interviewed by Mr Charles Cousins. Photo | Lin Yang Chen



MAESTRO IN ACTION: Dong-Ill working the organ. Photo | Lin Yang Chen

“gasping” (or as Marie-Claire said to Dong-Ill, “haletant”!)



THE OLD DAME: The pipe organ at VCH. Photo | Lin Yang Chen

Louis Vierne wrote some beautiful melodies and these two *Impromptus* are fitting examples. Dong-Ill gave a wonderfully swirling, almost swinging, delivery. His phrasing, generous use of swell pedal, and carefully measured *staccato* pedal lines, ensured the pieces had such wonderful momentum you could see some members of the audience swaying gently in time to the music.

No single piece can ever represent the full panoply of Messiaen's unique contribution to 20th-century music in general, and the organ repertoire in particular. But his passion for bird song at one extreme, and violent crunchy chord clusters at the other are well demonstrated in *Communion & Sortie* from *Messe de la Pentecôte*.

Ably supported by not one, but two agile stop-pullers, Dong-Ill used this Messiaen work, to fully explore the range of stops of the Victoria Hall's Klais Organ. Although the end was a musical shock to ears of some audience members, everyone was clearly enchanted by the wonderful bird sounds that filled the hall in the preceding sections.

Liszt was undoubtedly a composer and performer of works that gave vent to his “showman” personality, and his *Prelude and Fugue on the name B-A-C-H* for organ is no exception. Though the constraints, and location of most organ consoles would have hampered the visibility of his “at-the-keyboard” persona, the music alone tells us this is the work of a 19th century rock star.

Dong-Ill's interpretation was surely faithful to the way Liszt would have wanted, though with far less body movement I'm suspect. And the “machine-gun-like” stop changes of the Klais Organ only added to the excitement of the piece.

The mysterious opening of the *Fugue* created a wonderfully eerie start to the long *crescendo* that culminates in the final majestic delivery of the *B-A-C-H* theme on full organ. A wonderful performance, and a fitting conclusion to a well balanced programme.

But, with time for one encore, and the audience's hunger for more unrelenting, Dong-Ill rewarded us with the *Prelude* (but not the *Fugue*) from the *Toccato and Fugue in D minor* attributed to JS Bach. With everyone in the audience knowing the arresting opening notes, it was a welcome and comforting conclusion for all concerned and Dong-Ill was well rewarded with more extended applause.



ONE FOR THE ALBUM: SAGO members with Mr Dong-Ill Shin. Photo | Lin Yang Chen

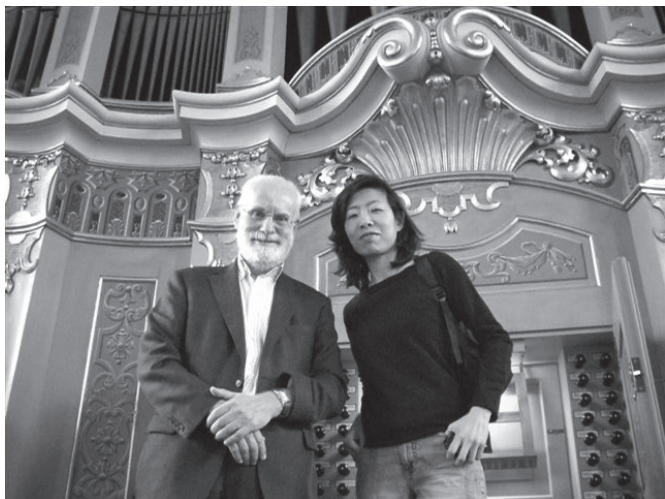
Charles Cousins is a British citizen, and a Permanent Resident of Singapore, where he has lived for more than 19 years. In his native England, he studied Piano, Pipe Organ and Timpani while at school and university. Eventually however, he chose a career in engineering and business, which brought him to Asia and Singapore. Charles has always maintained a keen interest in classical music, is a regular concert-goer and continues to play the piano and organ for personal enjoyment.



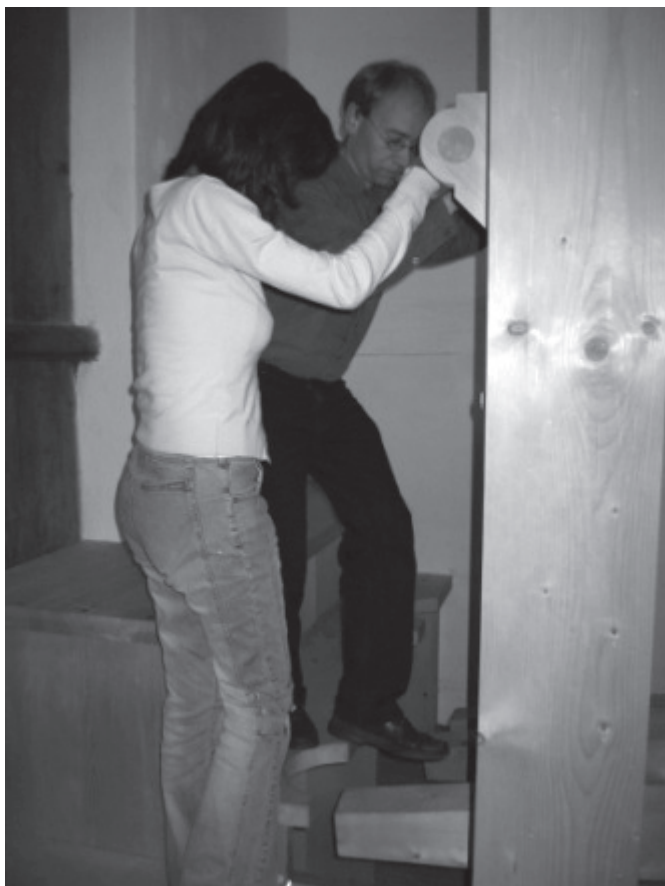
Schwebungs, Sperrventiles and Schiebekoppels

In our next feature of Singaporean organists abroad, **Alexia Tye** shares with us her experience of a German *Orgel* tour.

“REGISTRATION IS the least important thing in the performance of a piece”; “You can change dynamics without changing any registrations or closing boxes. Just by thinking “p” you will be playing less loud.”



THE SAGE: Alexia with Mr Ton Koopman. Photo | Alexia Tye



PUTTING THEIR BEST FOOT FORWARD: Alexia working the bellows. Photo | Alexia Tye
Ed's Note: Ladies! Working the bellows is a good way to keep that hour-glass figure. :)

Such were the words of instruction from Ton Koopman, during a 4-day masterclass which I attended in June 2008 in Freiberg, Saxony, in “Mitteldeutschland”.

These were grueling, 8 hours per day classes where Ton Koopman gave of all his energy, inspiration and erudition, to a group of organists from all over Europe. He would tell us about Baroque articulations, tiny breaks of varying but precise length in the middle of a musical phrase. One should trill wherever possible, he also said – but never with the thumb – “it sounds too heavy”. He would also tell us that certain pedal parts in Buxtehude’s works were not intended for the pedal - indeed it is never clear from the “tablatur” which parts were pedal parts - and that one can transfer these parts to the left hand. Or even vice versa.



FREIBURG: The Dom organ in Freiburg. Photo | Alexia Tye

The masterclass took place on the historic Silbermann organ of the *Petrikirche* in Freiberg, a little town where the organ builder lived. Gottfried Silbermann (1683 -1753) was a contemporary of J.S. Bach and his name signifies the pinnacle of German organ building. There are more than 30 surviving Silbermann instruments in Central Germany, including four in the town of Freiberg alone.

Central Germany, the heartland of baroque, spawning great masters like Bach, Handel, Schutz, Telemann....

This organ encounter was the prelude to a week-long tour of central German organs, ranging from those of Silbermann and his followers (eg Oehme) to modern instruments by present day *Orgelbauer* such as Sauer, Schuke and Kern. This voyage took us through tiny villages, where many of Silbermann's instruments are installed and whose main role was hymn playing and accompaniment of the loud-singing congregation. This was the reason for the loud and often shrill sounds of his organs, as was explained to us. The heavy action of the keyboard was so that it would be so sturdy that Silbermann would therefore never have to come back for repairs. And for someone used to the French cathedral sound (living in Paris), I personally found the acoustics of the churches quite dry. In addition we had the "inconvenience" of Silbermann's short pedal compass – mostly going up to only c', and lacking C# at the bottom. But how can one play J.S.Bach's works on such instruments, we lamented? "But Silbermann's organs were not meant for playing Bach – they were arch rivals!"

The Silbermann organs were however good for showcasing composers such as Georg Muffat, Johann Ludwig Krebs, Matthias Weckmann, Gottfried Homilius etc.

In Dresden I had the thrill of playing on the Dresden Cathedral (*Hofkirche*) organ. We heard but were not allowed to go anywhere near the recently installed Kern (a major organ builder in Strasburg, France) organ at the newly reconstructed Frauenkirche in Dresden. This is a massive 68-stop organ built in 2005, when the Frauenkirche was literally resurrected, brick by brick, from the ruins of the Second World War bombardment. In addition to the classic German Hauptwerk, Brustwerk and Oberwerk, parts of which aim to replicate Silbermann ideas, there was a 4th manual called the "Récit Expressif", which is entirely French in style.

I must have tried about 10 different organs. We finally ended up in Berlin, where we were treated to a further 5 organs, including one belonging to a Prussian princess in 1755, and the 113 stop Sauer organ in the Berlin Dom.

Breathtaking experiences, where one felt transported back to history, not just 18th century Prussia, but also the more recent events of the separation of East and West Berlin and the reunification of communist and federal Germany. Churches have re-emerged from the ruins, conserving amidst their ultra modern glass and steel structures the vestiges of the destroyed historic monument.

Schwebungs, *Sperrventiles* and *Schiebekoppels*? Ah, German organ terminology – strange and wonderful terms that I tried to imagine in their French or English equivalents. To get to know more, I invite you all to embark on the adventure of an *Orgeltour*.

Alexia Tye Wai-Chun, a Singaporean organist, lives and works in Paris, France. She plays the organ in several churches in Paris.



KERN: The Kern organ at the *Frauenkirche* in Dresden. Photo | Alexia Tye



FELCHOW WAGNER: The Organ. Photo | Alexia Tye

Da Capo

by Yeo Huan

“AT THE moment of beginning, even before beginning, slowing down, *adagio* and even *lento*, *lento*, one knows, yes one knows that one will always have to begin again. That is to say deploy or multiply the beginnings. Which will be each time unique.”



GLAM SHOT: Yeo Huan at the piano. Photo | Yeo Huan

I particularly like these words by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida: not only do they capture a certain musicality, they also bear the very *rhythm* of beginning again.

Da capo: from the beginning. As new office-bearers take on responsibilities for the 2008-2010 term, and as a new team is formed to take the helm, it is perhaps appropriate for us to reflect on beginnings. This is especially meaningful, because retrospection—looking back at how and where we started—clarifies our perspective and direction.

The chapter has seen many beginnings since its inception. As the Programme Director for the past two years, I have been very fortunate to witness marvellous synergy in the chapter. Many ideas have sprung forth and new programmes have been introduced. It is effective teamwork that has made this possible, allowing us to venture into uncharted arenas and forge important partnerships with music groups and institutions.

2009 will be a cornerstone year for the chapter, because it will be a celebration of beginnings in more ways than one. For the first time in history, the American Guild of Organists has designated an “International Year of the Organ,” where music groups worldwide will pay tribute to the King of Instruments.



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We are doubly excited, because it coincides with our fifth anniversary—five years since we *began* as a chapter.

As we continue to strive in putting our best step forward, the challenge remains in garnering continued and devoted support from chapter members and organ-music lovers. The vibrancy of a chapter is determined by the commitment and involvement of its members. Won't you join us today, in creating more wonderful beginnings?

Yeo Huan is the Sub-dean/ Programme Director of the Singapore AGO. He is currently completing his Masters degree in English Literature at NUS, and serves as organist at the Wesley Methodist Church.

What's Hot?

8 Nov 08, Saturday, 7.30pm

Abendmusiken: Music in the time of King Christian IV of Denmark

Guest performers: Ab Oriente

Danish Seamen's Mission, 10 Pender Road

Admission \$10, including light refreshments after the concert

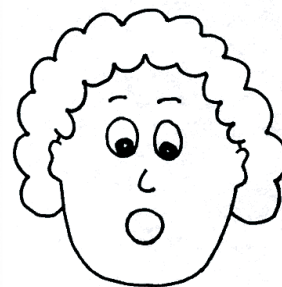
Tickets at the door, or email enquire@singaporeago.org to book



Notice is hereby given that the year 2008 - 2009 shall be the

INTERNATIONAL

YEAR OF THE
ORGAN!



**KNOW OF ANY
SCOOPS?
WRITE TO US!**



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