

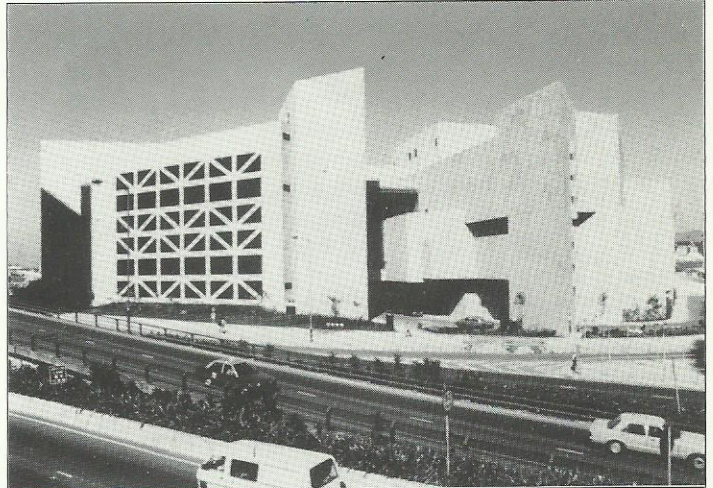
# Performing Arts in Hong Kong

By Dr John Hosier, CBE, Director of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. He has recently been elected to the Court of Assistants.

**THE GENERAL IMAGE** of Hong Kong is a place of business and banking, of luxurious hotels and endless shopping malls, of thrusting skyscrapers and countless restaurants, of teeming streets and restless vitality.

All this is true. But there is another side to Hong Kong: a cultural tradition inherited through a population that is 98% Chinese; and a developing popularity in the performing arts, particularly Western, encouraged by a positive government policy. During the three and a half years that I have been here, Hong Kong has played host to a number of world-class orchestras: the Boston Symphony, the BBC Symphony, the City of Birmingham, the Cleveland, the New York Philharmonic, the Philharmonia, the Prague National, the Royal Philharmonic, and the late USSR State; dozens of world-class soloists and chamber ensembles have also visited the territory, as have leading dance companies from Canada, France, Mexico, Russia and the US; drama companies from Hungary, Japan and the UK (including the Royal National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare) and opera companies based on Glyndebourne or drawn up eclectically from singers from all over the world. There are not many cities in the UK that could offer its inhabitants such international fare. It is not simply by the proliferation of visiting performers from abroad that the cultural life of HK must be measured, but by the growth in its indigenous performing groups. Hong Kong can boast a permanent Philharmonic Orchestra, made up of local and international players, a Chinese Orchestra, a semi-permanent Sinfonietta, three full-time dance companies (Ballet, Chinese Dance and Modern), and two full-time drama companies.

Because there are no trades unions in Hong Kong, there is no line of demarcation between the professional and the amateur. Many groups form and re-form to give performances, with continuity maintained by enthusiastic organisers. During 1991/2, 34 part-time drama companies received grants from the government-funded Council for the Performing Arts, to put on performances. Other recipients of grants include two full-time drama companies, two of the full-time dance companies, the Sinfonietta, as well as many dance and choral groups. The annual International Arts Festival which was started in 1972 and was perhaps the event responsible for a broader appreciation of the performing arts in the territory. The Urban Council funds the Philharmonic, the Chinese Orchestra, the



*The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts*

Chinese Dance Company and the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre. It also promotes concerts by visiting artists from all over the world.

In South China, the all-pervasive art form is Cantonese opera, which integrates, in a highly stylised way, singing, dance, drama and acrobatics. Up to the 1950's it was the most popular art form across a wide social spectrum in Hong Kong. Even as the cinema gained increasingly wide audiences (Hong Kong has one of the biggest film industries in the world), Cantonese opera still retained its position as a major element in entertainment. Today it still remains popular with the older generation.

The extraordinary development in the performing arts really began in the decade beginning in 1970, with the increase in economic prosperity and a new generation of people born in Hong Kong. The territory was becoming home for a population made up largely of refugees and immigrants who had originally viewed Hong Kong as a stop-over on their way to other destinations. In the 70s, education had become free and compulsory. Massive housing schemes were inaugurated in the new towns, and the government developed a policy to foster the humanising as well as the material necessities of life. Recreation and cultural facilities became an important feature of all new town planning. Between 1974-1981, support was given to performing groups and companies for the first time. From 1980, thirteen new cultural venues were opened culminating in the extensive Cultural Centre complex in 1989.

The concept of an institution dedicated to the training of future performers was a natural consequence to this burgeoning of performing arts activities.

A memorandum on training for the performing arts was presented to the Executive Council 1980, recommending the creation of the Academy. Fortuitously 1980/1 was a bumper year for the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club, and a large sum of money was available for public and charitable works. The Jockey Club saw an Academy as an attractive and appropriate project to commemorate its centenary in 1984. It donated HK\$300 million for building and towards equipment. The government made the land available (a reclaimed site in Wanchai) free of charge. They guaranteed HK\$70 million towards equipment and undertook to cover recurrent costs through an annual subvention. In 1982, international panels were convened to advise on the organisation and curricula of the Academy, which at that stage consisted of only the foundations. Allen Percival, our Senior Warden, and I were invited as members of the music panel. Allen had been the advisor for the Hong Kong Conservatory, which had started operation in 1978, and which was to be subsumed into the Academy. The Academy admitted its first students in the Autumn 1985, dead on schedule.

The building is probably the finest of its kind in the world for training students in the performing arts. Its three theatres, (the largest, the Lyric, rivals any West End theatre) are lavishly equipped. There is a Concert Hall with a Rieger Organ, a Recital Hall, eleven dance studios, a television studio (with a second about to be built) and all the normal classrooms, practice rooms and teaching studios.

When the performance venues are not being used by the Academy, they are rented out to local companies or visiting