



George Sapounidis is currently recording a new collection of Greek-Chinese fusion songs at a studio near Chelsea, Que. DAVE CHAN FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CULTURE

THE UNLIKELIEST ‘CHAIRMAN’ IN CHINA

He’s Greek-Canadian and a former Statscan public servant, but George Sapounidis can also sing in Mandarin onstage. Now, as **Bill Curry** reports, he is enjoying a new life as a star abroad

OTTAWA

Of the thousands of federal public servants whose jobs disappeared this year, few have a Plan B quite like that of George Sapounidis.

His was one of the 10,980 positions the government erased within six months of unveiling a budget with billions in spending cuts.

A career mathematician at Statistics Canada, he has a doctorate from the University of Toronto and spent his work days designing business surveys. But starting in 2000, through bits of vacation time here and there, he began to cultivate another life on the other side of the world.

To his fans in China, he is now known as Chairman George: a Canadian troubadour who sings a mix of folk, rock and traditional Chinese songs, mostly in Mandarin.

His heritage and his fascination with the Olympics helped to bring Mr. Sapounidis to prominence, first with the historic return of the Summer Games to Athens in 2004, when he spent a month as an official Olympic volunteer with the Chinese delegation.

Then came China’s debut as host nation four years later, when his popularity reached new heights. On the final day of the relay to kick off Beijing 2008, he was among a handful of non-Chinese torchbearers.

Mr. Sapounidis has not been back to China since 2010, but now that, at the age of 55, he has accepted an early-retirement buyout, his day job is no longer an obstacle to pursuing his dream.

He is busy at a recording studio near Chelsea, Que., working on a new collection of Greek-Chinese fusion songs he plans to promote when he returns to China next month to perform at the International Camellia Festival in Kunming, the capital of southwest China’s Yunnan province.

ONLINE

Chairman George talks to Bill Curry about his unusual taste – and success – in music.
tgam.ca/chairman-george

At home, elsewhere

With his curly, greying locks and intense nature, Mr. Sapounidis is as distinctive as his music. He speaks with passion, his hands in constant motion, punctuating each sentence.

“I don’t have an ounce of Chinese blood anywhere – what am I doing in China performing in Chinese, I ask myself,” he says. “But whenever I land in Beijing, I hop into a taxi, I start bantering in Chinese with the taxi driver and I feel ... completely at home.”

Feeling at home while abroad comes naturally. He was born and largely raised in Montreal, but the Sampsons (a North American version of their name, which Mr. Sapounidis also used in the public service) moved around a lot. His father’s career as a university professor also took them to Antigua, Greece and Newfoundland.

Even while Mr. Sapounidis worked full-time, performing was a big part of his life. He played mostly Greek and other ethnic folk songs at cultural events in Ottawa. Then, while dating a woman from Beijing in the late 1990s, he took an interest in China. She taught him to sing a few well-known Chinese folk songs and, before long, he was spending three hours every Saturday morning at Glebe Collegiate Institute taking Mandarin lessons.

He quickly found a math-like quality to the language that allowed him to add new vocabulary gradually once he had grasped the basic formula.

“Chinese grammar is very logical,” he says, pulling out a beginner’s lesson to drive home his point. It quickly becomes clear why he is also a popular math tutor among Ottawa students.

Mr. Sapounidis was far from fluent in 1998 when he first went on stage to perform in Mandarin – two songs during a Chinese Spring Festival at Ottawa’s Centre-pointe Theatre. And yet “the house fell down,” he recalls. “They were applauding every 15 seconds. It was an extraordinary experience.”

As his Chinese skills improved, he organized East Meets West, a multicultural concert with two local Chinese musicians held in June, 2000, at the auditorium of what is now Library and Archives Canada. They sold about 400 tickets – and Mr. Sapounidis wisely invited Chinese and Greek diplomats.

“Two months later, the phone rings. It’s the Chinese embassy,” he says. “The cultural attaché invited me to China to perform at these two pretty big international festivals.”

By October, he was singing on an outdoor stage in Shanghai, with Chinese ballerinas in pink dresses dancing around him. A large crowd – including government officials in a VIP section – cheered him on while singing along to the traditional songs Mr. Sapounidis first learned in Ottawa.

It would be the first of nearly 30 trips to China over the next decade. Now that Prime Minister Stephen Harper has made improving relations with China one of the government’s more pressing policy goals, many of his ministers might love to have a look at Mr. Sapounidis’s extensive Rolodex.



Chairman George plays a Chinese folk song on a Greek bouzouki for Chinese athletes at the Athens Olympics in 2004. PHOTO COURTESY OF GEORGE SAPOUNIDIS

Chairman George meets Chairman Mao

After returning from the first trip, he began to read about Norman Bethune and decided the exploits of the Canadian surgeon remembered in China as a hero for treating Communist forces fighting the Japanese might be worth a song. He ran the idea by his contact at the Chinese embassy, and wound up co-writing the song with the cultural attaché.

Only later did he realize that lyrics suggested by the attaché had been pulled from a letter written by Mao Zedong, who gave the story of Bethune a central role in the propaganda of the Communist regime.

“Chairman George wrote a song with Chairman Mao,” he says, laughing.

His stage name is borrowed as well – from *Chairman George*, a deeply personal 2005 documentary produced by Montreal filmmakers Daniel Cross and Mila Aung-Thwin that aired on CTV and the BBC.

The camera crew followed Mr. Sapounidis and his bouzouki around Beijing, capturing the highs of performing for massive crowds and the lows of being turned down for a national television show that a promoter had promised would cement his stardom.

At one point, Mr. Sapounidis is asked why bad news does not seem to upset him. He answers that he probably keeps his emotions buried because his father often picked on him as a child.

“‘Pathetic little boy’ ... I heard that a lot,” he says.

Looking back today, he says his father, now in a seniors home, could be fun and engaging, but also had a dark side. (Mr. Sapounidis lives with his mother, Rae, never having followed his parents’ advice to settle down and start a family.)

The film later shows Mr. Sampson plugging his ears, telling Chairman George that his singing in Chinese is painful.

And yet, after the closing ceremonies in Athens, Mr. Sapounidis calls home in the dark to his parents, who are watching the ceremonies on television.

“I’m proud of you,” Mr. Sampson tells his son, who, for the first time on camera, breaks down and cries.

But his father isn’t finished. “You’re ahead of the times,” he adds.

Bill Curry is a member of The Globe and Mail’s Ottawa bureau.

SOUR NOTE

Performance and travel are the adrenalin that drive Chairman George, along with his deep love of China. With his background in business statistics, he also fully appreciates how topical his musical interests are – being polar opposites in economic terms has made Greece and China big news in recent years.

Yet he still finds himself frustrated by the Chinese government’s confusing bureaucracy, especially when it comes to securing travel documents.

He has spent the past week visiting the Chinese embassy in Ottawa in a bid to secure a visa for the bass player in his band in time for their Jan. 18 departure to Kunming. So far, no luck.

Bill Curry