

LEISURE TIMES

THE SHY PIANO PLAYER?

By AHMAD FAUZI

THE pianist now playing at the KL Hilton's Malacca Grill is Ms June Tan Sook Ee. When we met at a pre-arranged interview last Friday night at the KL Hilton, she had not started playing her piano for the evening.

She is a little shy of publicity and was a little uncomfortable in answering questions.

The meeting was, in fact, the idea of Ms Elizabeth Soo, the hotel's public relations manager.

June starts her nightly three and a half sets at 7.30pm. Each set is 30 minutes long with a 15 minute break in between.

She does not perform on weekends.

Twenty-eight-year-old June is small built and looks more like a schoolgirl with her curly hair and steel-rimmed spectacles than a piano player in a classy joint.

She has been tinkling with the piano at the Hilton for the past month and has two more months to go in her contract.

The kind of music she plays is soothing to the ears and helps provide the mood for the restaurants' clientele to enjoy their fare that much more.

Restaurants are still restaurants, however, and very few people frequent the place just for the music.

She is not unduly worried, though, because all she ever wanted was to play her piano and sing in some obscure little corner, "where people don't smoke but just listen to her play."

After all this is her first full-time stint after a series of semi-pro and charity concert appearances singing inspirational songs.

She is the product of a musical family. Her first exposure to music was through her late father, Mr Robert Tan, who led a 3-man band, *The Chempaka Trail*.

"He used to play at all the big hotels in Penang back then, like for example, his band played at the Ambassador when it opened for business.

"My father was a self-taught musician and when he sent me to study classical piano music formally he came along to study, too."

Mr Tan passed away eight years ago leaving



□ June Tan offers soothing music with her Ivory keys in Malacca Grill

June, who was then still in Form five, to care for the family.

"The surviving band members still play at the Rasa Sayang hotel (in Penang) today."

June was already taking on a part-time job as a music instructor with the Yamaha school of music

in Penang when she was in Form six.

"I did it initially while in Form five because I liked the pocket money but when my father died I guessed going into music to support my two younger sisters in their studies became the natural thing to do."

While she was waiting for her A-Level result she was offered a three-month organ instructor job by Yamaha.

"The offer was in Kota Kinabalu and so I got stuck there for a while."

She recalled, however, an unhappy incident in a pub in Sabah where she was playing which has left an "indelible mark on her".

She was playing her usual repertoire when a pregnant woman seated quite a distance from her requested that she played softer.

"And I have been playing softly whenever there are people sitting close to me ever since," reveals June.

Her listeners during the interview, which comprised two journalists and Ms Elizabeth Soo, raised their eyebrows in surprise at this bit of news.

"No, no, you shouldn't cramp your style, no. Play as you feel like, June. You sound better, no," said Elizabeth.

After some coaxing from her listeners, she agreed that it would not help her career if she were to stifle her play.

Work was sitting down at her piano and setting forth some of the most beautiful tunes that one can hear and are familiar with.

Her rendering of several golden oldies from the late 60s and early 70s just bowled over her listeners.

"I can never play as good as my favourite piano players Oscar Peterson and Peter Nero (who are two American jazz piano players)," said June whose favourite singers are Barbra Streisand and Sandi Patti.

"I really didn't plan to go into music full-time initially," she said, adding that it was all fated to happen.

Once, for the fun of it, June sang with the Jazz mates, a group also performing at the same hotel.

A member of the group, David Gomes, who bumped into this reporter after the interview, had only good things to say about her singing.

"I'd like to sing if I were given the chance," June had said but unfortunately her contract is only to her to tinkle her piano.