

BATTLES AND SURVIVALS: THE MANILA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA DURING WWII AND COVID-19: CONTEXTUALIZING FILIPINO RESILIENCE AND BAYANIHAN

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Received: 15 August 2025

Revised: 8 December 2025

Accepted: 18 December 2025

Published: 30 December 2025

Citation:

Sunglao, Rey. (2025). Battles and Survivals: The Manila Symphony Orchestra During wwii And Covid-19: Contextualizing Filipino Resilience and Bayanihan. *PULSE: Journal for Music and Interdisciplinary Practices*, 6(2), 14-28. https://so18.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/pulsejournal/article/view/vol6no2_1/reysungla

Abstract

Through the cultural lenses of Filipino resilience and bayanihan, this article explores the Manila Symphony Orchestra's (MSO) survival during two global crises, World War II and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Founded in 1926, the MSO has endured economic and social upheavals, rising each time with renewed purpose. This study employs a small-scale humanistic genre using an immersion approach. It draws from primary sources, including data from the World Health Organization (WHO), the MSO's official records, and a documentary by the National Music Competition for Young Artists (NAMCYA). Additionally, it utilises a wide range of relevant secondary literature, including journal articles and historical reports. The findings reveal how the MSO adapted to adversity during wartime devastation and pandemic restrictions by embodying Filipino resilience and bayanihan. This article highlights the contributions of key figures and the orchestra's innovative responses, reflecting how Filipino values have shaped the MSO's legacy and ensured its continuity across generations.

Keywords: Manila Symphony Orchestra (MSO), Filipino resilience, Bayanihan, World War II, Covid-19 Pandemic.

Introduction

Founded by Alexander Lippay in 1926, the Manila Symphony Orchestra (MSO) is one of Asia's oldest orchestras (Cultural Center of the Philippines, 2012) and the Philippines' longest-surviving artistic institution (Manila Symphony Orchestra, n.d.). Through the years, the MSO has hosted many renowned artists, including Yehudi Menuhin and Igor Oistrakh. Due to severe financial difficulties, the orchestra was disbanded in 1989. However, it was reorganized in 2001 by its longtime concertmaster, Professor Basilio Manalo (Manila Symphony Orchestra, n.d.). In 2020, decades after its revival, the MSO faced another catastrophic challenge when COVID-19 struck the Philippines. As concerts and events were its main source of livelihood, the imposed community quarantine severely impacted the orchestra (Gregorio, 2020).

While the Philippines has been exposed to Spanish and American influences, Filipino culture continues to reflect a collectivistic orientation (Church & Katigbak, 2000). This culture of collective behaviour is reflected in two prominent Filipino traits: resilience and bayanihan (Benosa & Ramos, 2021). This article explores how resilience and bayanihan are embodied in the survival of the MSO during two major crises—World War II and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In researching the historical impact of World War II and COVID-19 on the MSO, this article adopts a small-scale humanistic genre. The chosen approach is immersion or saturation, which, as defined by Phillips (2008), involves gathering and reading everything possible on the topic, preferably from primary sources. Since primary sources are central to historical studies (McCarthy, 2012), data from the World Health Organization (WHO), the official website of the MSO, and a documentary film by the National Music Competition for Young Artists (NAMCYA) are utilised. Secondary sources include journal articles and news reports. This article begins with a historical overview of the MSO, followed by an explanation of two key Filipino cultural traits—resilience and bayanihan—to provide a framework for understanding the orchestra's survival. Finally, the study examines historical findings related to

the MSO's experiences during World War II and the COVID-19 pandemic. These Filipino traits, resilience and bayanihan, serve as meaningful lenses for exploring the MSO's survival across two distinct and catastrophic periods in history.

The Manila Symphony Orchestra (MSO)

The Manila Symphony Orchestra is one of Asia's oldest orchestras (Cultural Center of the Philippines, 2012) and the Philippines' longest-surviving artistic institution (Manila Symphony Orchestra, n.d.). It was founded by Dr. Alexander Lippay in 1926, and its regular season concerts were supported by the Manila Symphony Society (MSS), with Filomena Legarda as its president in 1931 (Cultural Center of the Philippines, 2012). The spacious Metropolitan Theatre, with a seating capacity of 1,670, opened its doors on December 10, 1931, where the MSO, conducted by Dr. Alexander Lippay, performed works by Grieg, Meyerbeer, Strauss, Sibelius, and Beethoven (Carrion, 1958).

Lippay's leadership brought the orchestra to success. However, he passed away from a heart attack in 1939. Within a few weeks, he was succeeded by Dr. Herbert Zipper (Carrion, 1958). Dr. Zipper's first concert with the orchestra took place on August 15, 1939, as a Lippay Memorial Concert. From 1940 to 1960, the orchestra performed major symphonic works, ballets, and opera productions (Cultural Center of the Philippines, 2012). When Dr. Zipper left the Philippines for the United States in 1946, the orchestra continued its monthly concerts under the direction of Bernardino Custodio, Antonino Buenaventura, Antonio J. Molina, Liwanag P. Cruz, and others (Carrion, 1958). The Manila Symphony Society was then sponsored by Don Andrés Soriano.

In the late 1970s, the MSO was led by notable conductors such as Sergio Esmilla Jr., Josefino "Chino" Toledo (Buenconsejo, 2016), Oscar Yatco, Helen Quach, and Regalado Jose (Manila Symphony Orchestra, n.d.). Although efforts were made to sustain the orchestra, including initiatives by Redentor Romero (Buenconsejo, 2016) and Herbert Zipper, the period from the 1980s to the early 1990s came to be known as the orchestra's declining years (Tariman, 2021). Reviving the MSO seemed impossible with the emergence of the Philippine Philharmonic Orchestra and other smaller ensembles. Ultimately, in 1989, the MSO was officially disbanded due to a lack of support (GMA News Online, 2011).

The MSO's long-time concertmaster, Professor Basilio Manalo, who appointed Arturo Molina as his successor (Manila Symphony Orchestra, n.d.), led efforts to revive the orchestra. This revival was made possible with the help of Sr. Mary Placid Abejo, OSB, of St. Scholastica's College in 2001, and was later strengthened with the involvement of Jeffrey Solares in 2008 (Buenconsejo, 2016). Since its re-establishment, the MSO has continued to perform in various concert halls in the Philippines under the baton of Arturo Molina and a roster of guest conductors (Tariman, 2021). A notable milestone was the 10th anniversary concert held at the Philamlife Auditorium on August 27, 2011, celebrating a decade since the orchestra's rebirth (Philstar GLOBAL, 2011).

Through the Manila Symphony Orchestra Foundation, Inc., the Manila Symphony Orchestra Music Academy (MSOMA) and the Manila Symphony Junior Orchestra (MSJO) were founded in 2014 to carry forward the legacy of the MSO's Musical excellence (Manila Symphony Orchestra, n.d.). These institutions offer regular lessons, masterclasses, and music camps aimed at developing the talents of young Filipino musicians.

On September 1, 2019, Arturo Molina was succeeded by Taiwanese-American conductor Marlon Chen (Hila, 2019). Under Chen's leadership, the MSO performed internationally, including in Shenyang, China, in 2019 and Tokyo, Japan, in 2022 (The Manila Times, 2022). At present, the MSO is composed of full-time musicians under the leadership of Marlon Chen as music director and principal conductor, and Jeffrey Solares as executive director and associate conductor (Manila Symphony Orchestra, n.d.).

Filipino Traits: Resilience and Bayanihan

The concept of traits is central to personality psychology and is defined as "relatively stable individual differences in thoughts, feelings, and behavior" (Church & Katigbak, 2002). One such trait is collectivism, which emphasizes strong family bonds, social belonging, group identity, and respect for authority (Church & Katigbak, 2000). Collective behavior is commonly observed in Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Benosa & Ramos, 2021). Despite historical influences from both Spanish and American colonization, Filipino culture remains deeply rooted in collectivistic

values (Church & Katigbak, 2000). The Philippines has been rated toward the collectivistic end of the individualism–collectivism spectrum, receiving a score of 4 on a 10-point scale, where 1 represents the most collectivistic cultures and 10 the most individualistic (Church & Katigbak, 2000). This culture of collective behavior is particularly evident in two Filipino traits: resilience and bayanihan (Benosa & Ramos, 2021).

Filipinos have often been characterised as able to endure adversity. One prominent characteristic attributed to Filipinos is resilience (Garay, Garay, & Martinez, 2020). Resilience is a trait that allows individuals to thrive despite hardships (Reyes et al., 2019). It serves as a protective resource that reduces the potential for negative outcomes, particularly in the presence of factors that intensify difficulties. Persistence and flexibility are key characteristics of resilience (Garay, Garay, & Martinez, 2020). Filipinos have developed various coping mechanisms, and as they find ways to manage challenging situations, resilience is strengthened (Ang & Diaz, 2021). The long history of Spanish, American, and Japanese colonisation has been cited as a contributing factor in the development of Filipino resilience (Ealdama, 2012).

Bayanihan, as identified by social scientists, is an ancient Filipino custom that symbolises teamwork and communal unity (Ang, 1979). Rooted in the word bayan, meaning nation or community, bayanihan reflects a deep sense of solidarity that expresses compassion and empathy for others (Ealdama, 2012). Bayanihan can also be understood as mutual help and aid, a system deeply embedded in Filipino culture. This value is particularly evident during times of disaster, when Filipinos come together to assist those in need. As a manifestation of the Philippines' collectivistic culture, bayanihan serves as a practical response to both individual and collective challenges—one that would be difficult to achieve without cooperation and shared resources (Ang, 1979). In this sense, bayanihan parallels the American concept of brotherhood, emphasizing unity and collective action.

Two Battles and Two Survivals

This section explores historical findings on the MSO's experiences during two significant global crises: World War II and the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining these periods, the article highlights how the orchestra navigated and survived

these catastrophic events. Filipino traits of resilience and bayanihan are used as a framework to understand the crucial role these values played in the orchestra's endurance. Through this lens, the discussion demonstrates how these values not only sustained the orchestra's survival but also fostered a sense of community and solidarity amid adversity.

MSO and World War II

On December 5, 1941, the MSO performed a Mozart Anniversary Concert (Carrion, 1958). Just three days later, on December 8, 1941, Japan launched a surprise attack on the Philippines. News of the bombing was received after three in the morning, when most of the Philippines was still asleep (Jose & Yu-Jose, 1997). The attack began with aerial bombings, followed by the landing of ground troops in both north and south Manila (Dolan, 1991). Thousands of Filipinos evacuated the city, resulting in overcrowded train stations and forcing many to continue their evacuation on foot (Jose & Yu-Jose, 1997). As a result, the Manila Symphony Society stopped its activities, including performances of the Manila Symphony Orchestra, upon the outbreak of the war and the Japanese occupation (Carrion, 1958).

On January 10, 1942, Dr. Herbert Zipper, then the director of the Manila Symphony Orchestra, was detained by the Japanese authorities (Legarda, 2016). His arrest was reportedly due to his associations with high-ranking Americans and a speech he had delivered that was critical of the occupation (Fax, 2022). The Japanese Military Administration contacted Filomena Legarda, the then president of the Manila Symphony Society, on March 9, 1942, to reorganize the Manila Symphony Orchestra (Legarda, 2016). After spending four months in prison, Dr. Zipper was released under the condition that he would resume conducting concerts as a means of showing the world that peace and order had returned to the Philippines under Japanese occupation (Carrion, 1958). Dr. Zipper did not keep this promise (Fax, 2022). Together with Filomena Legarda, the Manila Symphony Orchestra and Dr. Zipper avoided playing for the new regime (Legarda, 2016).

The independence granted to the Philippines on October 14, 1943, lacked substance, as the Japanese military continued to control the country (Jose & Yu-Jose, 1997). By August 1944, American planes could be seen over

the Philippines, a sign that the Japanese were losing the war (Jose & Yu-Jose, 1997). However, in February 1945, the orchestra suffered a tragic loss when its concertmaster, Ernesto Vallejo, and his entire family were killed by a grenade thrown by a Japanese soldier in his hometown of Santo Tomas, Batangas (Legarda, 2016).

On May 9, 1945, the MSO held a monumental post-war concert in the ruins of Santa Cruz Church (Carrion, 1958). This performance celebrated the liberation of the capital, Manila (Fax, 2022). The programme featured Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, dedicated to the fallen heroes of World War II, and Dvořák's *From the New World* Symphony, dedicated to the United States of America (Carrion, 1958). Legarda (2015) asserted that the 1945 concert was rich in symbolism. The funeral march of Beethoven's symphony mourned those killed in the war, while "the bold dissonances mirrored the difficulties the Filipinos faced, and the sweeping climaxes and thundering chords asserted the country's determination to move forward to a greater future" (Legarda, 2015). Dvořák's symphony, on the other hand, was dedicated to the United States of America, which had fought against the country's "nightmare of Japanese oppression and brutality" (Legarda, 2015).

As the orchestra performed, machine-gun and artillery fire could still be heard in the distance, a reminder that the echoes of war had not yet fully faded. Prior to the start of the concert, Mrs. Legarda delivered her welcome address (Carrion, 1958). In her speech, she remarked, "This glorious music rising above the cacophony of war, these heroic strains rising so soon from the ruins which surround us in this desecrated church, are symbols of the aspiring and invincible spirit of men, which, it has again been proved, cannot be crushed to earth forever even by the most brutal tyranny." Additionally, an excerpt from the concert notes featured in the Santa Cruz Church programme stated:

"... amid the Santa Cruz Church ruins, great music was heard as the Manila Symphony Orchestra, on a makeshift platform where the high altar was, played Beethoven's *Eroica* and Dvořák's *From the New World* to an audience of Filipinos and Americans, civilians and soldiers, officials and humble men. Even the music chosen was symbolic of the promise rising from the rubble of a shattered city... The rains came during the concert... the sky was the ceiling, but both concertists and GIs didn't budge an inch."

(Carrion, 1958)

The war ended when the Japanese formally surrendered on September 2, 1945 (Jose & Yu-Jose, 1997). The MSO survived the war with its music library intact, and most of its instruments were stored in a secure location throughout the conflict (Carrion, 1958). Many orchestra members who were former guerrillas and war prisoners returned to work when their regions were liberated. Some arrived at the first rehearsals in tattered clothing, sunburnt, and starving (Tariman, 2021). With the help of Professor Bernardino Custodio and Lieutenant Antonino Buenaventura as associate conductors (Carrion, 1958), Dr. Zipper reorganized the MSO immediately after liberation and joined an underground intelligence unit (Fax, 2022).

In 1946, Dr. Zipper left the Philippines for the United States, but the orchestra continued its monthly concerts under the leadership of Bernardino Custodio, alongside Antonino Buenaventura, Antonio J. Molina, Liwanag P. Cruz, and with the generous support of Don Andrés Soriano (Carrion, 1958). Dr. Zipper later became a pioneering advocate for arts and education, returning to Manila to conduct the orchestra every summer (Fax, 2022). However, by 1949, the orchestra was forced to suspend performances due to several factors, including the absence of suitable concert halls, the implementation of taxes on concert revenues, musicians' employment elsewhere, and a decline in members and patrons (Carrion, 1958). In 1951, however, Mrs. Basilio Valdés of the Asociación Musical de Filipinas sponsored the MSO in three concerts under Dr. Zipper, who offered his conducting services free of charge in an effort to support the orchestra's restoration. The post-war revival of the MSO was made possible through the generosity of organizations and individuals, including the Asociación Musical de Filipinas, the Artists' Guild of the Philippines, Don Juan Javier's National Opera Company, and the Music Promotion Foundation. Moreover, the orchestra's primary sources of revenue came from donations by private individuals and firms such as Don Andrés Soriano (Carrion, 1958).

MSO and Covid-19

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first reported in the Philippines on January 30, 2020 (Estrada et al., 2022). According to the World Health Organization, the country has reported 66,779 deaths due to the virus (World Health Organization, 2023). The implementation of community quarantines severely impacted the economy (Estrada et al., 2022). Because of strict lockdown policies, many small businesses were forced to suspend operations temporarily, while others closed permanently. The pandemic disrupted the livelihoods of approximately 10.9 million Filipino workers, with the manufacturing, food service, and entertainment industries among the hardest hit (Estrada et al., 2022). Activities that relied on live audiences were significantly disrupted (Sorilla, 2020), which had a profound impact on both visual and performing arts. Despite these challenges, the crisis also created opportunities for innovation, particularly through the adoption of online platforms. Visual art fairs and online concerts became widespread during the pandemic. However, the arts community was projected to face a prolonged recovery (Sorilla, 2020).

With concerts cancelled, many musicians turned to alternative means of sustaining themselves (Bodegon-Hikino, 2020). Some offered online music lessons, while others ventured into businesses outside the field of music. To better understand the impact of the pandemic on the livelihoods of artists, a survey of 101 Filipino musicians was conducted. Data were gathered from participants aged 18 and older, including both full-time and freelance musicians (Bodegon-Hikino, 2020). Among the respondents, most were male and between the ages of 25 and 40. The results revealed that 56% of the musicians experienced a decline in income, with 22% reporting a dramatic drop of 81% to 100% (Bodegon-Hikino, 2020). Despite these challenges, Filipino artists demonstrated remarkable resilience. Although the transition to online platforms posed difficulties due to technological demands and skill requirements (Sorilla, 2020), the pandemic revealed the perseverance and adaptability of Filipino artists (Asian Cultural Council, 2021).

The MSO was not spared from the struggles of the pandemic. In 2020, the orchestra's live performances were abruptly halted, but it adapted by transitioning to online platforms (Tariman, 2021). Beginning in April 2020, the MSO launched a

series of virtual performances (Gregorio, 2020). The first project, entitled “*Tagpi-tagpi Tagpi Damdamin Video Series: MSO in Quarantine*” (Manaloto, 2020), aimed to uplift spirits through music during a time of uncertainty. Initiated by the orchestra’s executive director and associate conductor, Jeffrey Solares, the first online performance featured works by Morricone and the Beatles (Gregorio, 2020). The orchestra also performed “*Tifa’s Theme*” from the soundtrack of *Final Fantasy VII*. Below are excerpts from an interview with Jeffrey Solares, sharing the difficulties and struggles of the MSO during COVID-19 (Gregorio, 2020).

... at first I didn’t know how to make those videos where several people are on one screen, but I had some time during the quarantine to do some research. I arranged it for the orchestra and distributed the vocal parts to some of the musicians. I bought a video editing software and did trial-and-error, and after about four days I was able to make my first attempt. It’s not yet perfect, but I’m still refining the process and, hopefully, the next video we will make will have better quality. It’s a difficult setup because we do not hear each other, which is essential to ensemble playing. I only sent them an audio guide of a mockup mp3 file with a click that serves as a conductor, and they play it with their earphones on while they make the video. That somehow partially solves the issue of ensemble and playing together.

The livelihood of musicians in the MSO primarily depends on performances at concerts and events, which were halted due to the pandemic. Few patrons agreed to support projects proposed by Solares during that period. Some relief came in the form of grants and assistance from government agencies (Gregorio, 2020). Following the success of the “*MSO in Quarantine*” online performances, the orchestra presented an online version of its concert staple and partnership with the Ayala Museum, “*Rush Hour Concert*” (Requintina, 2020). The concert featured songs such as “*Limang Dipang Tao*” (1981), composed and arranged by Ryan Cayabyab; “*Si Aida, O si Lorna, O si Fe*” (1989), composed by Louie Ocampo; “*Anak*” (1978), composed by Freddie Aguilar; “*Handog*” (1970), composed by Florante; “*Sana’y Wala nang Wakas*” (1986), composed by Willy Cruz; “*Kahit Maputi na ang Buhok Ko*” (1981), composed by Rey Valera; and “*Ang Huling El*

Bimbo” (1996), composed by Ely Buendia (Requintina, 2020). Solares carefully selected the repertoire for its familiarity and meaningful messages, appropriate for offering comfort during a time of isolation. The virtual concert marked the 30th anniversary of Avida’s partnership with the Ayala Museum. The initiative formed part of the Ayala Museum’s fundraising campaign to provide internet access to underprivileged Filipino students for online classes. Through the virtual concert, Avida, the Ayala Museum, and the MSO were able to provide one year of internet access to a student for every ticket sold (Requintina, 2020).

On December 18, 2021, the National Music Competition for Young Artists (NAMCYA), in partnership with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), released a documentary featuring five musicians from the Manila Symphony Orchestra who shared their experiences during COVID-19. The documentary, entitled “*Playing With Hope*,” was live-streamed on Facebook. The musicians spoke about how they coped with daily challenges when their livelihoods were disrupted, highlighting the emotional and professional toll of the crisis (NAMCYA, 2021).

In “*Playing With Hope*,” each featured musician shared a deeply personal account of resilience during the pandemic. One supported their family’s daily needs by selling chicken wings and entering entrepreneurship during a time of crisis. Another demonstrated perseverance by producing performance recordings and participating in virtual music competitions. One musician, who had suffered an injury that nearly ended their ability to play, found renewed hope during the pandemic. Another viewed the crisis as an opportunity to write a children’s book and produce an online benefit concert to support their finances while pursuing graduate studies abroad, which were also deferred due to the pandemic. Lastly, one musician shared how they nearly lost their passion for teaching but, after months of reflection, rediscovered their calling through online violin lessons. In the documentary, Solares expressed deep admiration for these musicians, highlighting their passion, determination, and grit during the pandemic (NAMCYA, 2021).

Conclusion

Resilience and *bayanihan* are traits deeply embedded in Filipino Identity. The resilience of the MSO during World War II can be seen in several ways. First, the

musicians showed determination by returning to rehearsals despite being sunburnt, starving, and dressed in tattered clothing. Second, Mrs. Legarda's speech, describing the musicians as people with invincible spirit. Lastly, the concert notes reflected a carefully chosen repertoire, music that symbolized hope and will to rise from the rubble of a devastated city and move forward to a better future. The spirit of bayanihan was equally evident in the post-war revival of the MSO. This collective effort was made possible through the generosity of organizations and individuals who came together to support the orchestra in the time of need.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the MSO once again demonstrated its resilience by continuing to perform through online platforms. The orchestra adapted to the changing circumstances, finding ways to innovate, survive, and be flexible in the face of uncertainty. This adaptability ensured that music continued to reach people despite the absence of live performances. The spirit of *bayanihan* was also evident in the MSO's efforts to collaborate with various organizations. These partnerships enabled the orchestra to participate in performances that served meaningful causes, such as fundraising campaigns for the benefit of underprivileged Filipino students. Through these initiatives, the MSO demonstrated communal unity and teamwork, the very core of the *bayanihan*, through music in a very difficult time.

By exploring the survival of the MSO through the lenses of World War II and Covid-19, it is worthy to note that the orchestra survived these two global catastrophes with resilience and the *bayanihan* spirit. Tariman wrote, "*The new generation of musicians and music lovers should remember that the Lippays, the Zippers, the Manalos, the Brimos represent the Musical life and times of the MSO*"(Tariman, 2021). While this recognition is well deserved, the efforts of Molina, Abejo, and Solares have been instrumental in sustaining and advancing the legacy of the MSO. It is equally important to acknowledge their contributions that have played vital roles in the orchestra's continued existence.

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