

BROUGHT TO YOU
BY LIFE & TIMES**PLUSH** people

EXPOSURE to sunlight and humidity can cause people to suffer from sunburns, dehydration and possible heatstroke. But the reason we have to move indoors for Englishman Baker Baker's photoshoot is something altogether different.

"I'm sorry," he says, while reaching into his pocket for tissues. "The sun makes me sneeze."

Once inside the air-conditioned comfort of the cafe in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, Baker says that it was rare for him to suffer like this growing up in Britain because there was hardly any sun there. Trying to rationalise the reason for his allergy, he confesses to not liking beach holidays. Choosing to play golf instead, he adds: "I just put a lot of sunscreen and I'm OK."

Realising the irony of what he said, Baker throws his head back and gives a deep belly laugh. Then, he says: "Maybe, that's why I'm so fond of *Taiping*."

Baker has just finished a symphonic suite for a wind band titled *Taiping*.

It will have its world premiere on Nov 19 at St Mary's Church, Fratton, Portsmouth, England.

Taiping, the wettest town in Peninsular Malaysia, also happens to be his wife Jasmine Chong Chee Wan's hometown. Coincidentally, his first wife was also born in *Taiping*. Her father was serving with the Royal Air Force in Butterworth and the RAF used the hospital in *Taiping* at that time.

PAGEANTRY, THEATRE AND ACTING

Baker says he's always been involved with music and the theatre. In fact, the story goes that in 1965, his parents took him to watch Beating Retreat on Horse Guards Parade in London. Today, it is a colourful pageant of military music and precision drill. Back then, it was the call of the drums for soldiers to return to the barracks after a day of fighting.

"I don't remember but my parents say that when I saw the Royal Marines Band, I told them that I was going to join them when I grew up," confides this 56-year-old grandfather of a year-old boy.

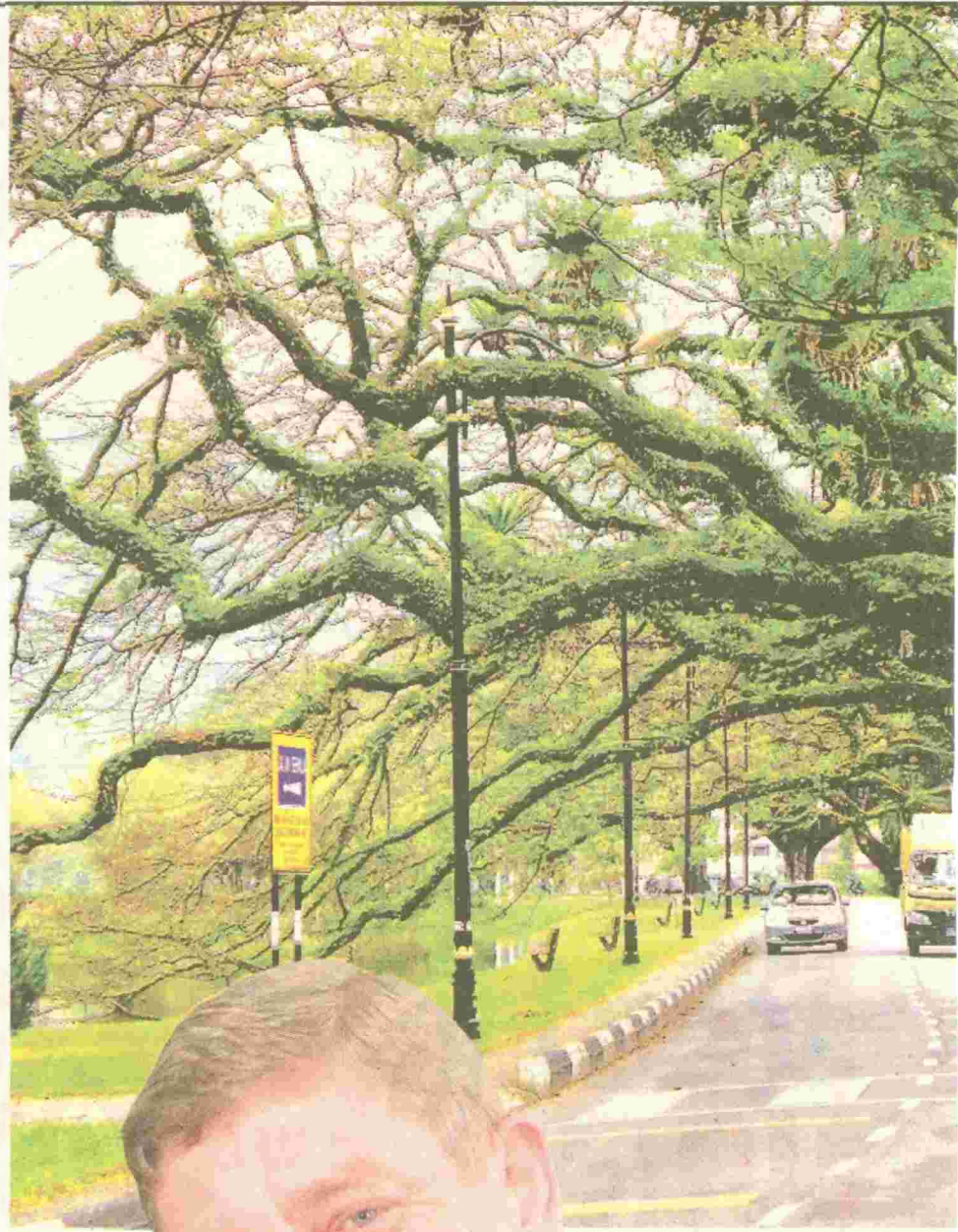
With both parents being keen actors, it was only natural that Baker accompany them to the theatre. He has many happy memories spending time in the props room. "When I was 7, I won a competition reciting the Prologue from Shakespeare's *Henry V*."

By the time he was 10, Baker was already an award-winning choir boy and even wrote his own play, *Romanov and Juliet*. He had also landed the lead in London's West End play *Oliver*.

Baker smiles broadly at the memory of the adulation he received at the time. Indeed, he adds: "Such adulation did things to a boy's hormones. It was a serious ego trip."

MUSIC AND BRITANNIA

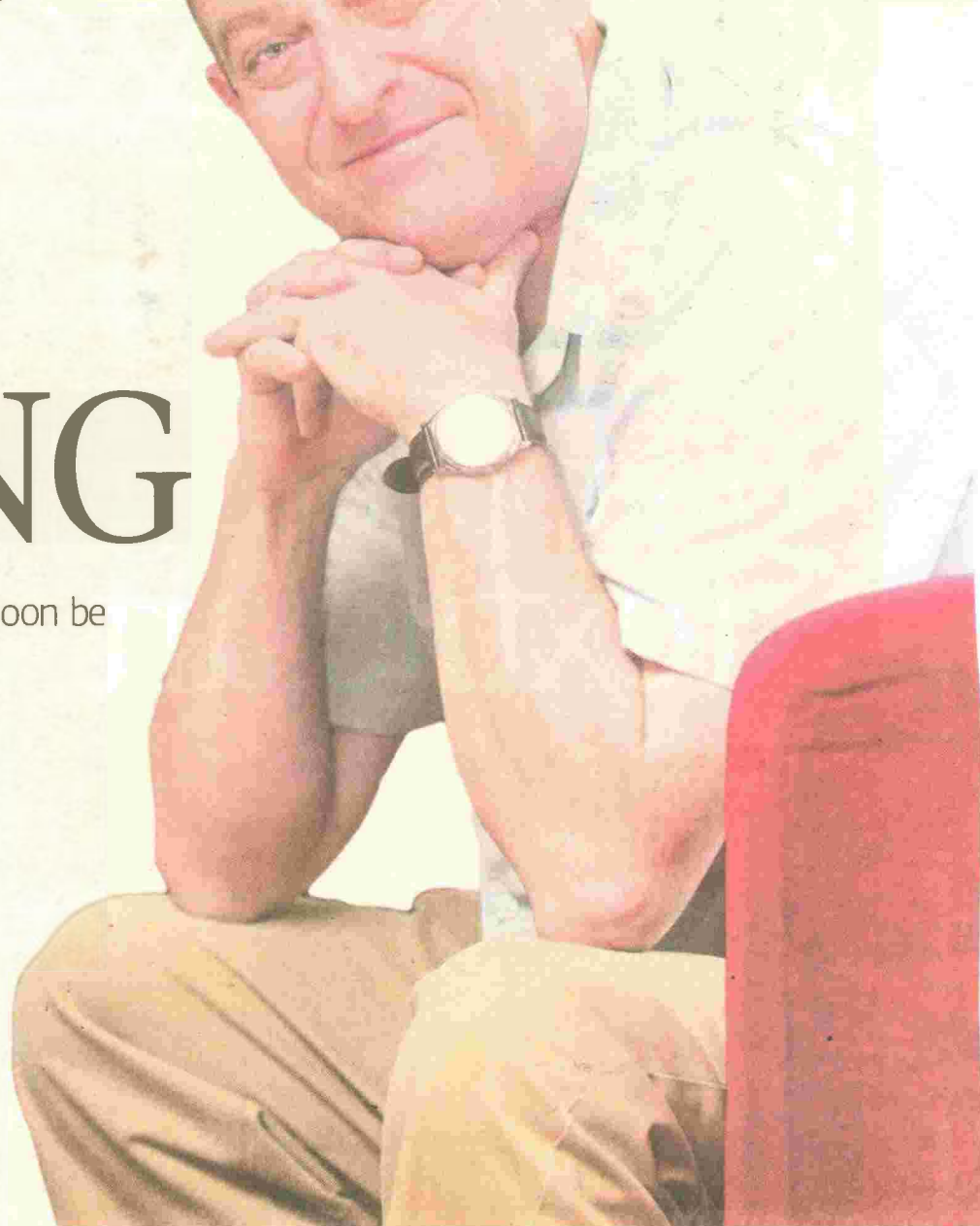
When his time playing *Oliver* ended, Baker had to decide which career to pursue—music or acting. Coincidentally, the family's house was being redecorated



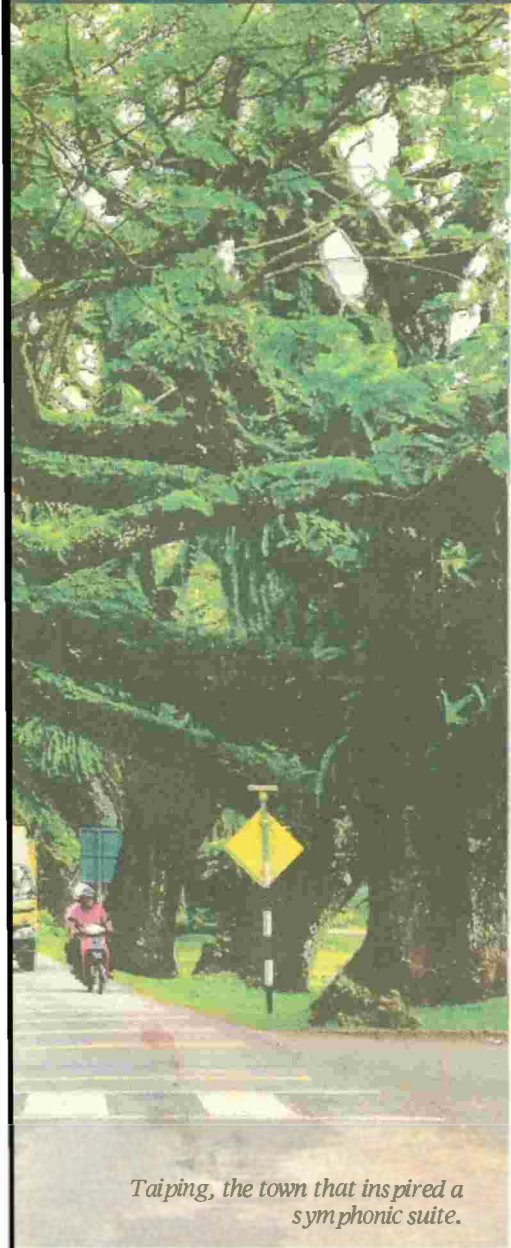
STRIKEUP THE BAND FOR TAIPIING

A musical suite based on Malaysia's wettest town will soon be showcased in England, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

'In the past 10 years or so, Paul has become a well-known and respected figure in the local music and theatre scene.'



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Taiping, the town that inspired a symphonic suite.



The Royal Yacht Britannia.

and their friends, mainly actors and musicians, came to help. Making the conclusion that there were more out-of-work actors than musicians, Baker decided on a career in music.

The-then 16-year-old Baker commenced a three-year training programme with the HM Royal Marines Band, widely regarded as the finest military band in the world. His stint with the band included being part of the 26-strong band of the Royal Marines serving aboard the Queen's ship, Her Majesty's Yacht Britannia.

Other than the Honeymoon Tour of 1981 (during which Charles and Diana, the Prince and Princess of Wales took their honeymoon), Baker is most fond of the memory of the tour of the Northern Isles two years later.

"They (members of the Royal Family) really enjoyed themselves," recalls Baker. "Without media intrusion, they could be themselves. After dinner, there was music and the Queen Mother, in her kilt, got up and danced to our Scottish tunes."

What wasn't factored into the decision to decommission Britannia in 1997, Baker feels, was the enormous foreign trade that was generated on board the royal yacht. On any given State Visit, when the royal yacht docked at a foreign port, the Queen would host a dinner for the foreign nation on the first night. This would be reciprocated by the host nation on the second night. On the third, the Queen would host dinner for business leaders on board. Indeed, it has been reported that the business done on the royal yacht was estimated to have earned the Exchequer some £3 billion (RM19.88 billion) between 1991 and 1995.

By the turn of the century, Baker began to feel increasingly disenchanted with life in Britain. He still finds the reason the Blair government gave for refusing

to celebrate the bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar in 2005 — where the Royal Navy fought against the combined fleets of the French and Spanish Navies — unpalatable.

Shaking his head, he says: "They said that if we celebrated this, it would upset the French."

OPPORTUNITY FOR SUCCESS

This self-confessed monarchist then started to travel and, in time, made his way to Malaysia. Other than marrying Jasmine, Baker also believes that the country holds many opportunities for success. The analogy he makes is that Malaysia is akin to an enthusiastic teenager running to the top of the hill without any idea of what it'll do when it gets to the top.

In the past 10 years or so, Baker has become a well-known and respected figure in the local music and theatre scene. Maintaining his connections with the Royal Marines Band Service, Baker contacted them when he completed the first movement for *Taiping*. The suite was then commissioned by Lieutenant Colonel Nick Grace OBE, principal director of music of Her Majesty's Royal Marines Band Service.

Once he knew who he was writing the music for, Baker was able to compose the entire suite quickly. The suite is in four movements and, for the upcoming performance in Portsmouth, there will also be a pictorial backdrop of scenes from Taiping. DJ and actor Patrick Teoh will give a recorded introduction to the suite and to each movement.

The scenes of Taiping that Baker has chosen to showcase are his personal favourites. The Old Market reflects that his in-laws (Mr and Mrs Chong) still run a vegetable stall in Taiping Market. In fact, Taiping is Baker's tribute to his in-laws.



Mr and Mrs Chong, Baker's in laws, at their stall in Taiping Market.



HM Royal Marines Band getting ready to perform in the State Room on the royal yacht.

The Kopitiam is about the quintessential Malaysian coffee shop. "They don't just eat there," says Baker. "In Taiping, they go to the kopitiam to play dominoes, mahjong and bet on what time it will rain."

The third movement, Lake Gardens, echoes the idyllic park with boating lakes, oriental pavilions, acres of grassland

and wooded walks. The final movement, Maxwell Hill honours the hill named after the first Governor of Taiping and includes an orchestrated section of Negaraku.

If *Taiping* is well-received in Portsmouth, it may be selected for The Royal Marines Mountbatten Festival of Music that will take place in London's Royal Albert Hall next year.