

View from Hong Kong: Revitalizing the Music Curriculum

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A music curriculum should reflect a comprehensive and balanced view of what has been happening in society in the past and what is happening at present emphasizing both traditional ethnic and contemporary music cultures (Leung, 2004a, 2004b). It should be designed to facilitate the love of music and hence the effective transmission of various music cultures to the new generation. The music curriculum surely should provide better understanding of music of the world around us. It is also imperative that there is a stress on the local context with regard to traditional ethnic, contemporary and popular music (Leung, 2004a, 2004b), despite the fact that the young generation mostly prefer to study popular music (Ho, 2004; Ho & Law, 2004). The curriculum should reflect the culture but with refinements and educational purposes (Quist, 2001) and be flexible enough to fit the students' needs (Hornfischer, 2005). At the same time, the curriculum should also address that "circulation, mobility, diversity, and mixture" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 150) are the very conditions of possibility in this global village. With a panoramic understanding and perspective of the music happening in the past and present, the future generation will have the knowledge, skills and ability to choose what they love and enjoy.

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Western music and cultures have long had a huge impact on the development of music and music education in many parts of the world especially in countries that have undergone colonization, westernization and modernization (Akrofi, 2003; Flolu, 1998; Leung, 2003a; Miller & Williams, 1998; Wallerstein, 1990). Many of their music education systems were modeled on the West (Leung, 1999; Ho, 2003; Quist, 2001; Takeshi, 1996; Watanabe, 1982). To an extreme, the learning of music in schools in these countries means learning western classical music, which exposes the fact that western music enjoys far greater popularity. In some remote areas where Christianity is the major source of religious influence, Christian music dominates. Traditional ethnic music of these countries has long been ignored and has been fading away from their education system in the past (Akrofi, 1998; Everitt, 1998; Fan, 2001; Goolsby, 1994; Zhao, 2000; Zhou, 2000). Post-colonial experiences have revealed the awareness of the need to educating the school children with their own ethnic music (Fung & Ng, 1999; Quist, 2001). This was seen as one of the many signs of reestablishing the sense of belonging to the culture and pride of their nations, which have long been submerged during modernization, westernization and colonization. The bringing back of these countries' ethnic music to schools is slowly in progress, but with varying degrees. As such, the need for and the acceptance of the concept of world music or multiculturalism, which is commonly accepted in North America but

countries with immigrants from many other countries, is not as widely accepted. Even where multiculturalism occurs, there is always some domination of a few cultures which led to complication in schooling, for example, in China, Ghana, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Japan, Malaysia, etc. Within each country, there are ethnic and regional differences, which need careful consideration. More often biculturalism of western classical music and traditional ethnic music co-exists in these places, having western classical music still dominating the music curriculum. These countries are still in the process of rebuilding the status of their “lost culture” in school, while world music is struggling for a status in the music curriculum. At the same time, some of these places are the midst of the cultural pull and push factors as well as the thrust of globalization which may lead to a new era of cultural convergence, of which the music school curriculum has to take care.

Along with the domination of western classical music is the huge impact of the commercialized popular music which has intruded the entire modern world. The globalization of popular music has further pushed back and marginalized the existence of ethnic music and western classical music. Scholars (Desroches, 1996; Elteren, 2001; Erlmann, 1998; Helms, 2000; Meyer, 1996; Perlman, 1993; Walker, 2000; Yuasa, 2000) all over the world caution the fragility of local culture and the danger of loosing local identity under the continuous thrust of globalization which has

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already led to the homogenization of popular music. The influence of popular style music is so great that even ethnic music has adopted this style of music expression. This saves very few of the original traditions left untouched (Santos, 2001) and they are barely surviving in schools. At the same time, the globalization of popular style juxtaposes different music styles and genres, mixes classical music into popular style (Allsup, 2004), creates new genres of cross-cultural music, and migrates these genres to distant countries (Elteren, 2001). The impact has been extended to religious music, including Christian, Buddhism, Taoism, and lots of African music. In a good sense, music, as a social practice reflecting the current context, changes with time (Jayatilaka, 1976). However, this is at the expense of the authenticity of music. Though there are studies which believe that many musical cultures are still in its original form of existence (Bontinck & Smudits, 1997), and that ethnic music can still be sustained in music education (Santos, 2001), the globalization and homogenization of popular music is and will be profound and lasting.

In connection to view music as a social practice, contemporary classical/serious/art music of the 20th century has not been doing much better than ethnic music when compared to the prosperous development of popular music. Even when compared to music of the 18th and 19th century, contemporary music in the 20th century has not been developed to the same level of popularity. This can be reflected from the low performance opportunities and

low audience rate in concert. Contemporary music surely is reflecting the social context of the time but increasingly limited to a group of elite composers. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary music has run away from the expectation of its populace. Unlike music of the 18th and 19th century, contemporary music has never been “popular” in history. This is also reflected in the school music curriculum where not much contemporary music has been taught in class. Nevertheless, creativity continues and composers survive, though with constraints. As music educators, we still have the responsibility of transmitting the contemporary context in order to provide students with a comprehensive view of what has been happening. As such, the emphasis on contemporary style will to cultivate students’ interest in contemporary music. This could be conducted in a three-fold approach in composing, performing and listening as pointed out by many scholars (Hoffer, 1991; Plummeridge, 1991; Regelski, 2004; Swanwick, 1994; Winters, 1986). This also applies to the learning of all musics including traditional ethnic music.

Starting from the 1980s, contemporary music, especially those composed in North America and Australia, has revealed a more embracing and inclusive approach towards different styles and cultures. The music is more acceptable to audiences, which helps to further its development. This is a valuable chance for music educators to review its music curriculum with more emphasis on creativity, which has already occurred in the 1990s in the written music documents of countries like Australia and

Britain (Australian Education Council, 1994; Department for Education, 1995). In the United States and other western countries, ample research has been focused on composition and creativity among school children (Cox, 1999; Goins, 2003; Hickey & Webster, 2001; Honig, 2000; Kiehn, 2003; Kratus & Wilcox, 1994; Lapp & Lungren, 2000; Stauffer, 1999 & 2002; Webster, 2000). However, in practice, the music education system does not always support creativity when the curriculum is performance-oriented (Lapp & Lungren, 2000; Leung, 2003b). Educators pay extra effort but receive minor positive results. Thus, a review on the music education system of having a balance between music appreciation, composition (including improvisation and arrangement) and performance is needed to solve the problem.

As an overview, the music curriculum needs to embrace the diversities of music from a local to global perspective consisting of western classical music, traditional ethnic music and popular music dating back from the past, the present, and looking towards the future. Local culture should be the foundation of emphasis in order to preserve the identities of different musical cultures. But the ultimate of the music curriculum should be comprehensive enough to cultivate students to have the capability to choose and love music and that the transmission of musical culture, old and new, does not stop in the school education system.

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