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Integrating Ancient Nanyin Music within an Interdisciplinary and National Education School-wide Curriculum: An Australian-Singaporean Collaborative Arts Education Project

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Abstract

This article describes a school-wide arts education project that incorporates an interdisciplinary approach involving an Australian university, the Singapore Ministry of Education, the Singapore National Arts Council, a community music association, and a local primary school. The Project engages young school children with Nanyin music, an ancient musical art form from China, and works with practicing Nanyin musicians and their musical practices. The Project integrates music into the regular music curriculum for an entire ten-week term, and incorporates a National Education focus with an interdisciplinary approach, encouraging students to make connections with subjects such as language, mathematics and social studies. The Project culminates with a public performance of Nanyin music by the participating students and an exhibition of their project work. This paper will also present the viability and usefulness of the Project from the perspectives of Nanyin musicians and school participants.

A Collaborative Arts Education Project

Some four decades after gaining independence, Singapore, through its Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA), is committed to the vision of a “Renaissance Singapore [which] will be creative, vibrant and imbued with a keen sense of aesthetics”

(MITA, 2000, Introduction, p. 4). The Renaissance City Report aimed “to establish Singapore as a global arts city... [and] to provide cultural ballast in [her] nation-building efforts” (p. 4). So as to strengthen a sense of national identity and belonging in her citizens, the Report identified the need to “inculcate an appreciation of [Singapore’s] heritage...” (p. 4). One important area of focus of the Singapore National Arts Council (NAC) is to “boost the interest in ethnic art forms” so that young children could better appreciate their “rich cultural heritage” in a cosmopolitan city-state (Chong & Chia, nd, p. 1).

A former British colony with a largely migrant workforce, Singapore was culturally, demographically and politically an extension of Britain, Malaysia, Indonesia, China and India, attaining self-government in 1959 and becoming independent in 1965. The *World Factbook* (2004) reveals a population mix of 76.7% Chinese, 14% Malays (including those of Indonesian and Middle-Eastern descent), 7.9% Indians (including Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans), and 1.4% other races. Such convergence of diverse ethnic communities in a small, modernised nation has enriched its people with both a traditional and contemporary outlook. In music education, the objective of fostering in pupils “a love and understanding of [Singapore’s] cultural heritage” was spelt out as early as 1961 (see Leong, 1984). In the domain of the arts and culture, the twin aims of preserving the spectrum of cultural heritages and creating a conducive environment for excellence in the arts have formed the cornerstone of cultural policy. This was reflected in the Addendum to the President’s Speech in Parliament:

The government’s policy is to develop Singapore’s rich cultural heritage derived from the Malay, Chinese, Indian and Western civilisations and through this cross-fertilisation to evolve a national cultural identity... (*The Straits Times*, February 8, 1977)

Since 1993, the NAC has been actively promoting arts education in schools. Aimed at developing arts appreciation amongst young students, the Arts Education Program (AEP) facilitated the involvement of local arts groups in creating and developing special performances or workshops for schools. Music is one of the six main art forms supported by the Program, the others being dance, film/multimedia, literature, theatre, and visual arts. The offerings of the AEP were assessed by arts and education experts, and officials from the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the NAC, and these can be categorized into three types: “Arts Exposure”, “Arts Experience” and “Arts Excursion”. Both government and government-aided schools and junior colleges and centralized institutes are eligible to apply for a special Arts grant, which subsidizes their participation in the AEP. The NAC and MOE work closely together to achieve the aims of music education in Singapore: to develop in students “an understanding of and an open mind for music of local and global cultures, with an awareness and appreciation of the links between music and daily living; develop creativity and critical thinking skills; develop a desire for personal and group expression through music and a life-long love for music” (Music Syllabus – Secondary, p. 4). The official recommended approach in arts education is centered on “arts literacy”, and “should be to expose students to the arts as an aesthetic experience and to broaden their understanding and appreciation of the creative possibilities in our world” (MITA, 2000, p. 52). The 2000 Renaissance City Report recommended that the AEP “should be expanded with additional funding of another \$400,000 per annum” (MITA, 2000, p. 52).

Two the challenges facing arts education leaders in Singapore are to encourage arts practitioners and students to think “outside the box”, and to popularize the traditional music of the main ethnic groups represented in her citizenry. Are these two

challenges presented as distinctly different trajectories? It would be good to state it explicitly in the introductory sentence. The eminent arts educator, Charles Fowler, had advocated for arts educators to “broaden [their] bases, to burst narrow specialities, to seek a multi-dimensional focus... [requiring] a new process of transaction– with the other arts, with artists,... and with the entire community” (1976, p. 24). And the late anthropologist, John Blacking, pointed out at the meeting of the International Folk Music Council in 1984, that the time had come to:

consider very seriously the national problem of music education in the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. ... [T]he survival of traditional music in the modern world will be best achieved by traditional ways of making music and of transmitting the tradition. And those ways happen to be best for transmitting all types of music and indeed are being adopted by progressive music educators in many parts of the world. They depend on music being integrated into all aspects of life and with the other arts, and secondly on a strong institutionalized back-up system of public informal and formal music education. (In Shehan-Campbell, 2001, p. 21)

Since the 1940s, the migrant musicians of a community music association had maintained their musical traditions through loyalty, perseverance and sacrifice, aiming to preserve, develop, and promote Nanyin in Singapore. As a voluntary organisation, the viability of the association had faced increasing threat since the 1970s when Western cultural influences competed against traditional musical practices in Singapore. With an aim to assist local community music groups which upheld traditional musical practices, and considering that Chinese people represented over 75% of the population, the NAC and MOE identified Nanyin as the focus for a collaborative arts education project. The project brought together like-minded groups of people: the NAC, MOE, a girls’ school, a community music association, and a tertiary arts educator. The project acknowledged the important role music contributes to children’s education, and sought to facilitate children’s appreciation of an ancient but “living” musical tradition, and traditional approaches to learning and teaching. To make Nanyin music accessible to young children, Nanyin music was integrated into the overall fabric of a school.

The project was conceived with careful consideration of local conditions and was informed by established models of arts education projects (viz. Arts Propel and ARTSEDGE at the Kennedy Centre). Studies such as Takizawa (1990) and Leong (1997) on local approaches to multicultural education were reviewed. The project design also considered the ten goals of arts education projects recommended by Taylor (1999), particularly to teach children “the essence of a given art form”, help them understand artistic “expression and communication”, enable the sharing and communicating through an “artistic medium”, link the “arts experience in some way to students’ lives or some aspect of their existing education”, use their “skills, knowledge, and experience to expand their awareness of what might be possible”, teach “what the arts have in common”, and provide them with “tools to engage with any artistic effort” (pp. 32-36).

An independent and experienced arts educator was engaged as the project trainer-facilitator, who had to be bilingual (English and Chinese), for the Nanyin musicians spoke mainly Chinese, and had very limited English. The principal of a school where both Chinese and English were taught as first languages was particularly interested in the project, and was prepared to commit all the eight Year 4 classes as participants. However, the project had to incorporate the goals of the school’s “Interdisciplinary Project Work” (IPW) and the National Education (NE) programs and become a school-wide project (see details below). To cater for the administrative, timetabling and other

adjustments needed to accommodate the project within the school curriculum, the project had to commence at the beginning of a new academic year. The time frame of the project was set in three phases spanning three school terms: Phase 1 – initial discussions and project planning (Term 3); Phase 2 – detailed project design, planning, and training of Nanyin musicians (Term 4); and Phase 3 – project to be implemented for ten weeks in the school (Term 1 of the following year). The project culminated with a public performance of Nanyin music by the Year 4 pupils and an exhibition of their project work.

Brief Introduction to Nanyin Music

Nanyin music (literally translated as “the music of the South”) is considered to be the most ancient musical art form in China. Also known as *Nanguan* or *Xianguan*, it has been ascertained to be among the oldest and best preserved musical art forms in the world, having its own unique musical and notation system. Also regarded as a “living fossil”, the music dates back to the Han Dynasty (c. 206 BC – 220 AD). It originated as royal palace music but eventually established itself in southern China when court musicians migrated south as a consequence of civil wars. Nanyin musical practices and instruments have been faithfully preserved for centuries, incorporating the customs of *Xianghege* of the Han Dynasty, the *Qingshengyue* of the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234), and the seating positions of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). The music may be described as “serene and elegant”, reflecting a bygone age when the pace of life was unhurried, and its music may be categorized into two types: instrumental ensemble music to be played or sung, and songs. A typical piece may be as brief as two minutes or as long as forty minutes. The four main pitched instruments used in Nanyin music are *xiao*, *pipa*, *erxian* and *sanxian*, and the *ban* is a percussion instrument used by the vocalist to control the rhythm (Siong Leng, 2002; Chong & Chia, n.d.). Of the five main types of Nanyin percussion instruments, the *sibao* (literally “four treasures”; see Figure 1), a fourpiece wooden percussion instrument, was selected as the main performing instrument for the children in the project.



Figure 1. Sibao (a Nanyin percussion instrument)

The Project

Following exploratory communication via email between the NAC and the author, the difficulty presented by the non-residency of the Australian trainer-facilitator was acknowledged, and three site visits were agreed upon—once during each of the

three Phases. In addition to devising the conceptual framework for the entire project, the trainer-facilitator was expected to work in conjunction with both the administrative and music staff of the participating school, liaise with NAC and MOE personnel, and train the performing artists to operate as teachers within the regular music curriculum. As the artists were non-trained teachers, they needed guidance in writing up lesson plans and to clarify appropriate and achievable educational outcomes for the 10-week module. They also needed teaching tips and approaches to facilitate meaningful interaction with the children. This project went beyond previous practice by having the local musicians teach children as an integral part of the school curriculum over an entire term in collaboration with the music teacher. Moreover, music was integrated into two school-wide programs of "Interdisciplinary Project Work" (IPW) and "National Education" (NE).

Linking with the school's IPW program required the Project to become interdisciplinary and to consider the main aims of IPW. These were: to develop children's problem solving skills, develop and apply process and thinking skills, build teamwork and social skills, improve communication skills and reduce the number of projects done by the children. In this program, pupils were encouraged to be critical thinkers, independent workers and lifelong learners. For the first time Music became the central focus of IPW with the theme set as "Nanyin", and involved teachers of other subject areas. This made the Project different from the usual practice of contracting arts groups to teach in their area of expertise followed by a "showcase" performance, and restricting the activities within the music curriculum. Direct links were made to other subjects of the primary curriculum: English language, science, social studies, and art and crafts. Some of the interdisciplinary aspects engaged by the children included:

- ❖ exploring the geographical settings of Nanyin music in China;
- ❖ examining the social and historical contexts Nanyin musicians worked under in China and Singapore;
- ❖ applying language skills in researching and presenting materials in English and Chinese;
- ❖ understanding the principles of science and technology through making simple Nanyin instruments; and
- ❖ making artistic representations (e.g. photographs, charts, models) of Nanyin costumes, instruments and art.

A consensus of the project approach was arrived after a number of meetings held with school staff, NAC and MOE officials and the performing artists. The music lessons for Year 4 children were to be hands-on and interactive, and the children would appreciate that Nanyin music is a living art form practised by living artists of an ancient tradition which was handed down mainly through oral transmission. The children were made aware that living exponents of an ancient musical art form continue to compose and perform "new" works while respecting traditional approaches to teaching music. The participating artists selected were in their 20s and 30s, and the repertoire selection included a Nanyin percussion piece composed by one of the performers. This composition provided sufficient scope for introducing the main Nanyin instruments as well as engaging the children in music-making.

One of the requirements of the project was to make connections with the National Education (NE) Program, which aimed to develop national cohesion through a shared sense of nationhood, and was described as "an exercise to develop instincts that become part of the psyche of every child" (Goh, 1996). The Project made direct links to the NE program by selecting a Singapore-Nanyin piece with lyrics describing the nation

as “Garden of the East”. During the music lessons, children learned about the work of a Singaporean Chinese businessman who composed hundreds of Nanyin lyrics, which were made into songs by a Nanyin musician. The children were encouraged to value their cultural heritage in a predominantly immigrant society. They learned about the difficult journey taken by a music association to establish Nanyin in a foreign land, and how it preserves, promotes, extends and passes on this ancient musical heritage to Singaporeans today. In addition, the children transcribed the national anthem using traditional Nanyin notation, learned to sing the anthem using Nanyin pitch-names, and composed a tune using Nanyin notation.

Among the many issues discussed between the trainer-facilitator and the artists during the first site visit included matters of logistics, sequencing of activities, reinforcing learning and principles of classroom management and group teaching. Initial lesson plans were discussed via email and the class music teacher provided assistance with other teaching-related issues. The second visit, planned for the beginning of the new academic year, dealt primarily with the refinement of lesson plans and implementation of the Project module, and the third visit focussed on the preparation of items by Year 4 children to be presented during a concert-workshop presided by the author of this paper at a national arts education event.

Perspectives of Project Participants

Three perspectives of the Project from student participants, performing artists and the school music teacher will be presented in this section. The data were gathered during personal interviews, meetings and project debriefing. Short written responses were solicited from the children and four were interviewed informally during the third site visit by the author. The three questions asked were: (1) What did you like about Nanyin music? (2) What did you like about the Nanyin project? (3) What did you learn that was most interesting to you?

Perspective of Year 4 Children. Most children found the experience “useful” and “interesting”. Very few children referred to the IPW and NE aspects of the Project. It was clearly evident that the children were very enthusiastic about their Project experience and revealed aspects of their preferences and learning in their responses. Some children enjoyed the composition exercise at the end of the module but most mentioned the musical performance aspects of the Project. One child, A, expressed her preference for playing the percussion instruments because of the “noise” generated. As children were permitted to take certain instruments home occasionally, her mother attempted to play the sibao with some difficulty and she was thrilled to have played the role of teacher to her mother. Another child, B, thought that Nanyin music would be very “boring” at the commencement of the Project, but soon “realised it was quite fun”. The music was “often pleasant to the ear”, and she “[did not] mind listening to it though [she] might not understand a few words”. Many children referred to sibao, the main instrument they performed on, but mention was also made of the shuangling (double bells), paiban (type of wood block) and xiaogu (small drum), which were other instruments they were allowed to perform on “at the end of the lessons”.

Perspective of Performing Artists. Speaking mainly in Chinese to the author who is bilingual, the artists reported spending many hours preparing and evaluating their

lessons, and having to reschedule personal practice and group rehearsal times to accommodate the school timetable—evidence of their commitment to the Project. Despite having to undergo a steep learning curve, they undertook this Project with a very positive attitude, being open and willing to do things they had never experienced before. They took the initiative of improving their teaching via micro-teaching, rehearsing the lesson plans amongst themselves, making critical reflections and refining their teaching approaches. These novice teachers confessed that classroom discipline was “the most difficult” aspect of teaching, but the class music teacher assisted a great deal in this respect. Parents of the pupils showed “enormous interest” in the Project, and their support contributed to the rate of progress by the pupils in learning the new musical style. The artists expressed “fascination” with the students’ willingness and capacity to learn, starting from scratch in performing the *sibao*, singing in a totally unfamiliar musical style, and learning the repertoire for performance within ten weeks. Overall, they were unanimously “satisfied” with the progress and level of achievement of the students within a limited time-frame, and they looked forward to building upon this Project experience in similar projects at other schools. In the words of one artist: “...this project has enabled the Association to gain important lessons that would be built upon for other school projects. This has been a most worthwhile experience for both teachers [referring to the artists] and pupils.”

Perspective of the Class Music Teacher. Besides assisting with writing up the lesson plans and classroom management, the class music teacher also provided feedback to the artists regarding the pupils’ responses to their teaching. She was also able to offer teaching suggestions to address the pupils’ learning needs. She was gratified that the Project had raised the profile of Music and “validated” the place of Music within the school. She appreciated the manner in which the professional artists valued and transmitted the fundamental requirements of musical practice and performance. Overall she felt that the Project had made a “very positive impact” on her pupils and believed that “the musical knowledge and skills picked up by her pupils through Nanyin music comprised ‘universals’ that could be applied to other musical traditions”. These include etiquette relating to concert attendance and performance, developing listening skills, and appreciating an ancient art form. While being initially ambivalent about the ambitious nature of the Project, she was “eventually convinced” by its successful outcomes and was pleased that her school’s participation in the Project had contributed to the development of arts education in her country. She was also pleased to be able to share her Project experience with colleagues from other schools during the demonstration-workshop. One of the major lessons she learned was that “vision, commitment, combined expertise and co-operation” were key ingredients for the effective implementation of a project.

Presentations and Exhibits

The girls presented their prepared items on Nanyin music at a school morning assembly. These items were also featured in a concert-workshop for arts educators organised by the MOE and NAC, and chaired by the author. Four examples of the exhibits are shown in Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5 below. Figure 2 shows examples of Nanyin costumes, Figure 3 shows pictures of Nanyin musicians, Figure 4 shows models of Nanyin musical instruments, and Figure 5 shows pictures of Nanyin instruments.



Figure 2. Costumes of Nanyin

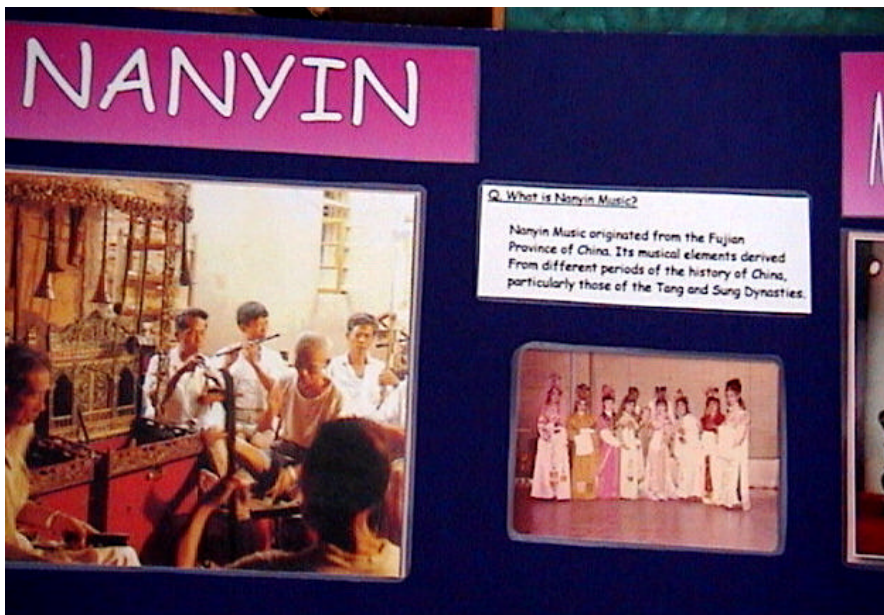


Figure 3. Pictures of Nanyin Musicians



Figure 4. Models of Nanyin Instruments



Figure 5. Pictures of Nanyin Instruments

Conclusions

This article has described the principles and process of implementing a collaborative arts education Project that brought together several parties with similar interests. It required several departments of the participating school to work closely with external organisations towards tangible outcomes within a time-frame of ten weeks.

Through careful planning and commitment from all parties involved, the Project participants overcame many challenges brought about by its unique setting and curricular requirements. The Project outcomes demonstrated that it was feasible and viable to implement a school-wide project with external expertise complementing school expertise. Integrating music into a school-wide interdisciplinary program raised the profile of music within the school and made explicit its direct connections with other learning areas. The provision of some level of training prepared performing artists to successfully operate as novice music teachers in a regular music classroom with the assistance of the class music teacher. Feedback from participants indicated overwhelming consensus of the Project's benefits for pupils, school and the community music association. The lessons gained from this experience were disseminated to colleagues at a concert-workshop where the pupils presented music items featuring Nanyin music repertoire. These lessons were deemed by the performing artists to be adaptable and applicable to other school contexts.

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