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MUSIC, CULTURE, AND EDUCATION IN POST-COLONIAL HONG KONG

A student's path to tertiary studies in music, whether at a university or conservatory, may begin in one of many ways. For some, it begins by being sent, grudgingly, to piano or violin lessons – lessons that gradually lead to an appreciation that in turn grows into a passion. For others, hearing recorded music may touch an instinctive need to participate, be it by rapping, playing the electric guitar, or mastering turntables. In some cases, the path begins in school, as the result of an inspiring teacher, and a second-hand clarinet or erhu.

In this article focusing on music education in Hong Kong, I explore the role of the public-school system in cultivating musical talent and consider how well the curriculum and extra-curricular music making prepare secondary school students for what awaits them in university. These are especially interesting questions as Hong Kong's entire education system, from P1 through university, has been transformed in the past two decades. These educational reforms followed on the heels of a profound political realignment, and were aimed, in part, in smoothing the transition.¹ Culture was elevated within the revamped education system. Music was given far greater emphasis and more resources. These changes have been the subject of several studies. The transition to a broader music curriculum was the subject of a study by Ho and Law, focusing on attitudes of students and teachers in that early stage of the change, and a wider study published two years later.² As the impact of the changes is still being felt and assessed, this paper looks at the teaching of music in public schools and at the tertiary level to consider how well the curriculum is enabling students to transition from secondary school to university.

¹ See B. MITTLER, *Dangerous Tunes: The Politics of Chinese Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China Since 1949*, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997; *Policy and the Political Life of Music Education*, ed. by P. Schmidt and R. Colwell, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017.

² See W. C. HO - W. W. LAW, "Sociopolitical Culture and School Music Education in Hong Kong", *British Journal of Music Education*, 26/1, 2009, pp. 71-84; and W. C. HO, *School Music Education and Social Change in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, Leiden, Brill, 2011. See also *Creative Arts in Education and Culture. Perspectives from Greater China*, ed. by S. Leong and B. W. Leung, Dordrecht and Heidelberg, Springer, 2013.

The Context

The former colony of Hong Kong became a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China in 1997, after 157 years of British rule. At the time of the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, the territory was by far China's most prosperous city and it remains affluent, albeit with a wide disparity between rich and poor. As in many Western societies, the birth rate is low, and over the past twenty years the population has grown from about 6.7 to 7.1 million as a result of immigration primarily from Mainland China administered by the central government. The local government and civil service have largely retained the structures created by the British administration. The territory's official languages were and remain Chinese and English. In addition to Cantonese, both English and Mandarin Chinese are widely spoken. Culture and language are closely linked and politically sensitive issues for many Hongkongers and for the local government which must balance the needs of the Hong Kong people with the political reality of being part of the Peoples' Republic of China.³

To some extent, music may be seen as common ground. The government's Home Affairs Bureau oversees cultural policy. Its stated vision on culture is that: "Hong Kong becomes an international cultural metropolis with a distinct identity grounded in Chinese traditions and enriched by different cultures, where life is celebrated through cultural pursuit; and creativity is a constant driver of progress in the community".⁴ Further, it provides a list of five objectives (see Table 1), and a list of basic principles, the first of which is "to encourage citizens to fulfil their needs for cultural pursuit and to realize their potential in the arts". If not stated directly in government publications, there appears to be an intended synergy between the wider cultural policies and the place of the arts in the public schools.

³ As I work on this essay, in the summer of 2019, large and sometimes violent demonstrations have been taking place in Hong Kong in response to the government's proposed introduction of an extradition law, and subsequent attacks on demonstrators by gangs of criminals hired by supporters of the government.

⁴ HONG KONG HOME AFFAIRS BUREAU, *Cultural Policy*, 2018, https://www.hab.gov.hk/en/policy_responsibilities/arts_culture_recreation_and_sport/t_arts.htm (last accessed, 20.01.2019).

<p><i>The Stated Objectives of the Hong Kong Government's Cultural Policy</i> (Hong Kong Home Affairs Bureau) https://www.hab.gov.hk/en/policy_responsibilities/arts_culture_recreation_and_sport/t_arts.htm</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide opportunities for wide participation in culture and the arts • To provide opportunities for those with potentials to develop their artistic talents • To create an environment conducive to the diversified and balanced development of culture and the arts • To support the preservation and promotion of our traditional cultures while encouraging artistic creation and innovation • To develop Hong Kong into a prominent hub of cultural exchanges

Table 1 – The Stated Objectives of the Hong Kong Government's Cultural Policy.

As colonial administrators, the British established an education system in Hong Kong modelled after the one in place in the United Kingdom. After six years of primary education, students completed five years of study leading to the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) – the equivalent of Britain's General Certificate of Education (GCE Ordinary-levels). After this, those who chose to continue their course of studies at university would first complete two more years of study, leading to the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) – the equivalent of Britain's GCE Advanced Levels (A-Levels). Most bachelor's degrees were completed in three years. Between 2009 and 2012, this system was replaced with what became known as the "New Academic Structure," or "3-3-4" – with primary school followed by three years of compulsory junior secondary school, three years of senior secondary, and four-year bachelor's degrees. The secondary school leaving exams are now known as the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE). In addition to core subjects – Chinese, English, mathematics, and liberal studies – students are required to complete two or three electives from five learning areas (see Table 2). The music examination is offered by many schools, but not all, as it requires both trained music teachers and adequate facilities.

<i>Elective Options for Students Completing the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education</i> (Hong Kong Education and Assessment Authority, <i>Introduction of NAS</i>) https://334.edb.hkedcity.net/new/en/introduction.php		
	LEARNING AREA	SUBJECTS
Senior Secondary Subjects	1. Personal, social and humanities education	Chinese history, economics, ethics and religious studies, history, tourism and hospitality studies
	2. Science education	Biology, chemistry, physics, science (integrated, combined)
	3. Technology education (5 areas including)	Design and Applied Technology, Health management and social care
	4. Arts education	Music, Visual arts
	5. Physical education	
Applied learning		Creative Studies; Services; Media and Communication; Applied Science; Business, Management and Law; Engineering and Production
Other languages		French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Spanish, Urdu

Table 2 – Elective Options for Students Completing the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education.

Music in the Curriculum – The Transition from Secondary to University

The place of music in Hong Kong's public-school system began to expand after 2000, at a time when the first students who would complete the HKDSE were entering the school system. In 2003, the Education Bureau's Curriculum Development Council published a *Music Curriculum Guide (Primary 1-Secondary 3)* for teachers of primary and junior secondary school students. These materials provide the foundation for much of the teaching of music in the early years. The philosophy behind them might be summarized by the *Guide's* reference to four learning targets: "[1] developing creativity and imagination, [2] developing music skills and processes, [3] cultivating critical responses in music, and [4] understanding music in context, through integrative activities of creating, performing

(singing and instrumental playing) and listening”.⁵ This document was followed in 2007 by the publication of *Music: Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6)*, which provided teachers with additional resources and guidelines on continuing instruction in music in the last three years of secondary school. At the same time, the government began an initiative that increased opportunities for students to learn instruments. Whereas music had largely been taught in schools through singing, the Education Bureau provided funds for schools to purchase instruments (primarily percussion, wind instruments, and strings). The availability of instruments was also intended to enable schools to fulfil a wider mission, through the programs known as “One Life, One Sport, One Art” and “Other Learning Experiences,” to place increased emphasis on whole-person development.⁶

The increased presence of musical instruments in the schools and of music making more generally also made it possible for students to consider taking music as an elective subject in the HKDSE. The music examination consists of three compulsory parts: Listening (40%), Performing (20%), and Creating (20%), and an elective section (20%) from which students may choose performance, composition, or an extended essay.⁷ The first half of the two-part Listening exam tests knowledge of music in the Western classical tradition (20% of the overall grade). The second half tests knowledge of Chinese instrumental music (8%), Cantonese operatic music (6%), and both local and Western popular musics (6%). For the Performing section of the examination, students play two or more contrasting pieces with a combined duration of 10-15 minutes in an instrumental or vocal ensemble (15%), followed by a 3-5-minute viva voce in which they explain their understanding and interpretation of the music performed (3%), and a short sight-singing test (2%).⁸ For the Creating section of the examination, students submit two or more compositions (16%) and a reflective report (4%) of about 500 words.⁹

We now arrive at a crucial question: how well does the HKDSE prepare students to study music in university? Each year, roughly one hundred secondary school graduates enrol in BA programmes in music in Hong Kong. Three

⁵ CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL, *Arts Education Key Learning Area. Music Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 – Secondary 3)*, Hong Kong, Government Logistics Department, 2003, p. 6.

⁶ CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL, *Secondary Education Curriculum Guide, Draft (May 2017), Booklet 7: Life-wide Learning and Experiential Learning*, Hong Kong, Education Bureau, 2017, p. 20, https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/renewal/guides/sec%20booklet%207_20170531.pdf (last accessed, 20.01.2019).

⁷ The extended essay, called a *Special Project*, should be an analytical essay of 3,000-5,000 words.

⁸ In the sight-singing test, students are asked to sing a tonal melody of 8 to 12 bars.

⁹ The total duration of the pieces should range from 6 to 15 minutes, and at least one composition must be scored for an ensemble.

universities offer a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in music: the University of Hong Kong (known as HKU), the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), and the Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU).¹⁰ I will focus on the BA program at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where I teach.

CUHK was established in 1963, as the colony's second university, with the aim of providing instruction in Chinese (as English was and continues to be the medium of instruction at HKU). The CUHK Department of Music was founded in 1965 and offers a BA in music as well as graduate degrees.¹¹ The Department currently admits thirty full-time students to the BA program each year, and usually five to eight music minors. Most years, all undergraduates entering the BA program in music are local applicants, due largely to CUHK's language requirements, and to the mix of Chinese and English used in the classroom. Courses in Western music history and ethnomusicology are among the few that are taught exclusively in English.

The current publicity information for CUHK's BA program in music highlights the "well-balanced" curriculum, with equal emphasis on practical and academic studies. Students are required to complete 123 credits to earn a BA in Music. This number includes a minimum of 39 credits of general education courses (University Core), and a minimum of 72 credits in music courses. Requirements within the 72 credits include applied music and choir (12), ear training, theory, and analysis (14), ethnomusicology and Chinese music (6), and Western music history (6).¹² There is some concentration in the final year, when students select a capstone area from a choice of composition, pedagogy, performance, or research. Most prefer to opt for performance but admission is competitive. This preference for performance is not surprising; playing and singing would be the usual musical activities throughout secondary school. Still, other aspects of the HKDSE mirror the CUHK curriculum in a number of ways. Listening to and writing about music are the main activities in history and ethnomusicology. Creating should prepare students for composition. There is also a

¹⁰ The Faculties of Education at HKU and CUHK offer education degrees and diplomas with a concentration in music. The Education University of Hong Kong offers a BA in Creative Arts and Culture, with an emphasis in either music or visual arts, and a BEd in music. The Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts offers diplomas as well as the B.Mus and Master's degrees.

¹¹ CUHK offers graduate degrees in composition (MMUS and DMUS), and research degrees in musicology, ethnomusicology, and theory (MPhil and Ph.D), as well as an MA earned through course work.

¹² The six credits in ethnomusicology and Chinese music include two required courses (Music, Culture and Society, and Foundations of Chinese Music), and an elective. The six credits in Western music history include a two-semester survey and at least one elective course.

link in that engaging with a mix of Western classical music and traditional Chinese musics is required in both the HKDSE and the CUHK curriculum.¹³

Apart from these general connections, secondary education and university curriculum diverge in several fundamental ways. We find evidence of this in the instruments on which students hope to pursue their university studies. Table 3 illustrates the primary instrument of applicants to the CUHK music program who were invited to an audition/interview in the past three years (2017-2019);¹⁴ further data concerning this Table in the Appendix).

<i>Primary Instrument of Applicants Invited to CUHK Music Programme Admissions Audition/Interviews in the Past three Years (2017-2019)</i>		
INSTRUMENT / GROUP	NUMBER OF APPLICANTS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
Voice	27	7.8%
Woodwinds	36 Bassoon (2), clarinet (12), flute (6), oboe (8), recorder (1), saxophone (7)	10.4%
Brass	16 Euphonium (2), horn (3), trombone (3), trumpet (4), tuba (4)	4.6%
Harmonica	1	0.3%
Percussion	12	3.5%
Bowed strings	62 Cello (7), double bass (2), viola (6), violin (47)	18%
Plucked strings	7 Guitar (2), harp (5)	2%
Piano	150	43.5%
Organ	2	0.6%
Chinese instruments	32 Erhu (8), guzheng (1), liuqin (4), pipa (2), ruan (5), sheng (2), suona (2), zheng (6), yangqin (2)	9.3%
Total	345	100%

Table 3 – Primary Instrument of Applicants Invited to CUHK Music Programme (2017-2019).

¹³ In an average year, three or four students will be admitted to CUHK’s BA program in music after having completed the International Baccalaureate or A-Levels, but most will have completed the HKDSE, including the Music examination.

¹⁴ After pre-selection, based mostly on grades, and a test of applicants’ aural skills and knowledge of Western music theory, roughly one hundred students are short-listed for an audition/interview.

These numbers vary from year to year but are generally consistent with those of previous years. As we see, pianists (43.5%) form, by far, the largest group, compared with 44.3% for all of the voice, winds, strings and percussion students combined. While instruction in singing and in wind and percussion instruments is offered by most secondary schools, and many others now offer training in string instruments, very few schools provide piano lessons. Those who apply must therefore be studying outside of school. The other striking statistic in the table is the number of applicants who are majoring on Chinese instruments – thirty-two, or 9.3% of the 345 students interviewed. Although schools have increasingly offered instruction in Chinese music and it is part of the HKDSE in music, the university attracts relatively few students who wish to focus on Chinese music at university. We will reconsider this in more detail below, but it is clear that although Chinese music has always had a prominent place in the curriculum at CUHK, the majority of classes are concerned with the Western Classical tradition.

Before reflecting further on that point, we will consider how well secondary schools are preparing students in two aspects of Western Classical music: theory and history. Extensive knowledge in both areas is generally recognized as a requirement for developing a well-rounded musician, and hence they are central to music curricula in BA programs internationally as they are at CUHK. In 2017, I surveyed our current students on how well they believed that their schools had prepared them for university, specifically in the areas of theory and history. Nearly half (49.5%) claimed that their schools provided no assistance in theory. The results were similar if not quite as extreme in students' perception of what they had learned about music history in schools, where 44.9% believed their schools did nothing to prepare them for university.¹⁵ We should be cautious in drawing conclusions from these results, especially as follow-up interviews were not conducted, and individual teachers will undoubtedly take different approaches in the secondary school classroom, but looking to assessment guidelines for the HKDSE it is clear that emphasis has not been placed on either theoretical or historical knowledge.

Students applying to university will have acquired knowledge of Western music theory and history from a variety of sources but primarily through preparation for external examinations. Almost without exception, the students admitted to the BA program at CUHK will have completed the practical examinations of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) or Trinity

¹⁵ B. C. THOMPSON, *Adapting the Survey for a Changing Environment*, in *The Norton Guide to Teaching Music History*, ed. by C. M. Balensuela, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2019, pp. 235-246: 238-241.

College London (TCL) on at least one instrument.¹⁶ The practical examinations do not place very much emphasis on historical information, beyond interpretive considerations, but they do require some preparation in theory. Why so many students choose to pursue studies in Western classical music is beyond the scope of this article but the cultural capital associated with Western classical music is undoubtedly a factor, as parents are willing to invest heavily in their children's musical training outside of school. Despite the Hong Kong government's efforts to be inclusive in its approach to music in the public-school system, Western classical music is likely to retain a privileged place. As a recent comparative study of music assessment methods in schools across East Asia has shown, "Music curricula in Asian countries grow more international by the year".¹⁷

Conclusions

The changes in Hong Kong's education system were initiated in the wake of the territory's return to Chinese sovereignty. In that time of uncertainty, and over the past decade, Hong Kong's Education Bureau has endeavoured to strike a balance between Western and Chinese musical traditions while generally increasing opportunities for students to make music a part of their lives. On the other hand, evidence suggests that the changes to the curriculum have been only modestly successful in providing the foundations students require if they wish to continue their studies in music at the tertiary level. While the HKDSE music examination conforms partially to the curriculum at the university level, it fails to provide foundations in either the history or theory of Western classical music, even though that is the tradition that most students choose to focus on in university. To be adequately prepared for university, students attend lessons outside of school and complete external examinations – usually those administered by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. This is undoubtedly a legacy of the colonial era and one that remains as vigorous as ever. Its value must be reconciled with the fact that its cost and its emphasis on Western classical repertoire will present barriers to students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, limiting the likelihood that they will consider music to be a viable option for higher-level study.

The transition from secondary- to tertiary-level music education remains a topic requiring careful, transnational study. Hong Kong's recent history and unique characteristics – from its bi-cultural traditions, to its role as a financial centre, and its reputation as a free-market city – highlight some of the competing

¹⁶ For a discussion of Hong Kong's preoccupation with graded music exams, see L. POON, *The Piano as Cultural Capital in Hong Kong*, Ph.D diss., University of Hong Kong, 2012.

¹⁷ See H.-F. CHEN, *Curriculum-Based Music Assessment Policies: Asian Perspectives*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Assessment Policy and Practice in Music Education*, vol. 1, ed. by T. S. Brophy, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 119-143: 139.

interests in education and culture. Given the resources that the Hong Kong government has allocated to music in the schools, the commissioning of a more extensive study, examining the music curriculum in all of the territory's tertiary institutions, and the relative ease with which students transition to those programs, is overdue. Such a study should be of much more than local interest. Despite its distinctive situation, Hong Kong is not alone in its need to seek a new way forward. As it grapples with its identity and future, Hong Kong may have much to offer and to learn from other post-colonial societies.

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APPENDIX

<i>Year-by-Year Breakdown of the Data Presented in Table 3</i>						
(*A total of less or more than 100% results from rounding off the percentage at one decimal point)						
INSTRUMENT / GROUP	2017		2018		2019	
	Number of applicants	Percentage of total	Number of applicants	Percentage of total	Number of applicants	Percentage of total
Voice	12	9%	8	7.1%	7	6.9%
Woodwinds	14 Bassoon (2) clarinet (5) flute (1) oboe (3) saxophone (3)	10.5%	14 Clarinet (4) flute (4) oboe (3) sax (3)	12.6%	8 Clarinet (3) sax (1) flute (1) oboe (2) recorder (1)	7.9%
Brass	9 Euphonium (1) horn (1) trombone (2) trumpet (3) tuba (2)	6.8%	3 Horn (1) trombone (1) trumpet (1)	2.7%	4 Euph. (1) horn (1) tuba (2)	4%
Harmonica	0		1	0.9%	0	0
Percussion	5	3.8%	5	4.5%	2	2%
Bowed strings	27 Cello (4) double bass (1) viola (2) violin (20)	20.3%	19 Cello (2) double bass (1) viola (3) violin (13)	17.1%	16 Cello (1) violin (14) viola (1)	15.8%
Plucked strings	2 Guitar (1) harp (1)	1.5%	4 Guitar (1) harp (3)	3.6%	1 Harp (1)	1%
Piano	54	40.6%	47	42.3%	49	48.5%
Organ	1	0.8%	1	0.9%	0	0
Chinese in- struments	9 Erhu (3) liuqin (1) pipa (1) ruan (1) suona (1) zheng (2)	6.8%	9 Erhu (3) liuqin (1) pipa (1) ruan (3) zheng (1)	8.1%	14 Erhu (2) guzheng (1) liuqin (2) ruan (1) sheng (2) suona (1) yangqin (2) zheng (3)	13.9%
Total	133	100.1%*	111	99.8%*	101	100%