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**Virtually Asian: An examination of current trends in open and distance learning in the performing arts, and their potential to transform education in Asia.**

**Abstract**

For the performing arts, practice plays a significant role and open and distance learning (ODL) challenges traditional learning systems, assessment and quality management. Whilst distance learning is available in music, to date it has generally been confined to theoretical units, effectively eliminating performance-based study for off-campus students. Relatively new to universities, programs in theatre and dance have yet to seriously consider delivery by distance.

Current innovative approaches to practical studies in music including institutional partnerships, satellite and virtual operations, offer huge potential for all performance-based learning, and an increasing emphasis on student mobility points particularly to application in Asia. In the context of competitive, scholarship-based higher education in the West, Asian countries need to explore ODL options in order to retain performing arts talent.

In the light of the ease with which students access interactive media outside university, delivery represents a significant challenge for institutions. The paper examines current examples of distance learning in music, noting trends which may be applicable to Asian settings, outlining implications for student mobility, performance styles, and faculty development.

**Introduction**

Only in relatively recent times have the performing arts found their way into institutionalised learning. Two centuries ago, the first conservatories of music set the precedent of developing a cohort of promising young performers in one place, extending the maestro-student relationship of earlier times to include ensemble work. For similar reasons, academies of dance and drama developed alongside the professional companies they served. In each artform, practice remains the principle focus of training, and links to their respective industries are deemed essential to producing successful graduates.

Over time, the vocational model has been transformed, the concentration on performance modified to embrace a more academic approach. In the West, most conservatories remained aloof from mainstream academia until the last 3 decades, when they began to marry into the sector. In different countries, these marriages became necessary for varying reasons: in Australia, they were forced; in Europe and the USA most were

marriages of economic convenience. Few music institutions are now autonomous in Western countries, and even those have negotiated relationships which allow them to offer university awards to their students. Academies of dance and drama have followed a similar pattern. This gradual assimilation into the university sector has created for the performing arts a circular dilemma in respect of open learning.

From within universities, performing arts institutions now incorporate more diverse curricula, their intensity of focus on practice having been to varying extents diffused. Links to professional companies are more tenuous, and in some cases deliberate attempts are being made to revive them. University partners expect performing arts institutions to engage in flexible delivery and internationalisation. The need to address flexible modes of delivery causes arts institutions to question their original *raison d'être*: is it possible to deliver training in the most essential element - performing arts practice - from a distance? And if it is, how might professional connections be reconstructed within that context? Thirty years ago, these suggestions would have been considered implausible. Now, the concept is not only feasible, but would seem appropriate to institutional objectives and student needs. Nonetheless, progress remains tentative.

### **Innovation: Music from another room**

The reluctance to deliver music via distance mode is easily explained: performance-based programs have until now been predicated on the expectation that instruction includes a high percentage of one-to-one tuition and ensemble performance, neither of which has been easily adaptable to distance education by correspondence or telecommunication modes. However, this conventional focus on individual and group coaching assumes traditional training in Western music forms, and ignores the current argument that future musicians will need to be more flexible, and more connected to the audience (de Haan; Gregory; Renshaw).

Moreover, traditional approaches to music training ignore the emergent role of technology in the art itself. Recent developments in interactive musical composition and performance on the Web demonstrate quite clearly the potential for non-elitist creative activity in real time across unlimited locations. Composer William Duckworth describes his interactive composition *Cathedral* as “almost unimaginable, and certainly physically impossible, a mere decade ago” (Duckworth, [The Perceptual and Structural Implications of “Virtual” Music on the Web](#)). An interactive website with web-based musical instruments that anyone can play, this piece blurs the distinctions separating composers, performers and audiences, offering each individual listener the ability to create his or her own unique musical experience online (Duckworth 4).

Thus the stage is set for a new generation of music training, the principal players being music as an expanded interactive form occurring in any conceivable venue, including cyberspace; videoconference technology for delivering performance practice; and a new model of musician inflating the potential for flexible approaches to music training. Match these players with the current trend toward increased access to higher education (Rogers; Maxey; Tam, “Developing Countries and the Future of Distance and Open Learning in the Twenty-First Century”), and the overwhelming potential in student numbers across

Asia (Tam, “The Current State of Distance Education in Asia, Its Challenges and Response”), and the future for music via flexible modes of training is very promising.

However, to ignore traditional training altogether would be too simplistic. Traditional musical genres may be less prominent in Western countries (Sandow), but they are on the rise in the East. The high level of successful Asian musicians playing Western classical music, and sales of classical recordings in East Asia is evidence that traditional training is still in demand (“The Rise of Asians in Classical Music”; Adams). The question remains as to whether it might be made to fit within a distance education model. To date, few have explored the possibilities.

During the same decade in which the arts have been grappling with the concept of real-time composition and performance of various artforms via interactive media (Ascott; Duckworth, “Making Music on the Web”), most training institutions have maintained a blinkered approach to flexible learning in the performing arts through deliberate avoidance of the distance mode or, if offered, a non-performance perspective only. The first offerings in music from the UK Open University (1969) set the pattern of interdisciplinary learning without a performance component. As is the case in Asia now, most of its audio-visual communication with students was via public network television and radio (Hendrie and Gilbert), allowing no interaction between teacher and student. In music performance, reliance on face-to-face individual instruction and emphasis on ensemble work erects a barrier for distance education, making teaching or learning from a distance questionable from the traditional perspective.

Improved technology and recent developments in videoconferencing have weakened the questionable element related to practical tuition. Violinist Pinchas Zucherman has resorted to videoconference technology in order to maintain contact with his students at Manhattan School of Music whilst undertaking performance commitments elsewhere (Callinan). His use of the medium, together with similar projects at Oklahoma University and the New World Symphony in Florida “have shown that videoconferencing can be used successfully to teach [instrumental] music, conduct masterclasses and produce collaborative performances” (Callinan 16). Such examples make use of very high broadband technology available through Internet2 ([www.internet2.edu/](http://www.internet2.edu/)) which underpins various projects across a consortium of universities and institutions in North America. From the Internet2 website, Callinan lists some of these projects:

A performance event showcasing regional dance and music from numerous campuses; a digital film festival; [...]; musical theatre with ‘Broadway Local’ in which students at Manhattan School of Music and Columbia interacted with Oklahoma University to perform; a music masterclass and discussion; a collaborative dance project staged live in four locations; the Remote Barbershop Quartet; Internet2 Video Production Workshop; an Internet2 Virtual Arts Festival; [...]; a musical linking performers in Troy and Manhattan into a single musical presentation; and videoconferencing demonstrations with a dance company as well as with Pinchas Zucherman teaching a violin student in Canada (16-17).

These examples endorse the conviction that “the issue for the twenty-first century will not be whether to use technology and multimedia in music teaching, but how to use it

effectively” (Uszler, Gordon and Smith). By examining a few current Australian cases, we might determine the potential of these advancements to transform distance learning.

### **Music from a distance in Australia**

In 2000 the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music (CQCM) established the *Virtual Conservatorium*, and thus by “utilising a mix of electronic delivery, intensive mode delivery and software based learning activities, CQCM is able to accommodate students from multiple locations with multiple learning needs and demands” (Bofinger and Whateley 1). The *Virtual Conservatorium* confronts the dilemma of performance practice by commissioning teachers in close proximity to the students to give regular face-to-face coaching, supplemented by occasional intensive mode delivery on campus or in a nearby metropolitan area (Voltz). As with non-performance programs, problems include student familiarity with technology, but also extend to teacher commitment: teachers on campus need to devote significant time to the program and locally-based tutors need to understand and endorse the concept. Voltz reports one teacher in the CQCM program saying that “you need a certain type of staff to make it work, that’s the greatest threat, there needs to be a shared understanding and enthusiasm for it” (4). Moreover, given that the local tutor is selected after the student is enrolled, the question of quality assurance may be an issue: if no suitable teacher is found, coaching may be infrequent. One teacher reported refusing to coach a student because the distance involved meant that they would meet only 2 or 3 times over a 6-month period, for a minimum of 4 hours on each occasion (Teacher C). Given that the *Virtual Conservatorium* was developed because CQCM was “faced with an uncertain future” (Whateley and Bofinger, “24/7 Learning” 1), and “this surplus making exercise is fundamental to future growth” (Whateley and Bofinger, “Virtually Yours” 36), the provision of excellence at each level of contact may be threatened by economic considerations.

Similarly, teachers are the crucial element in the VideoLink program offered via Sydney Conservatorium to regional centres across New South Wales. In this program established in 2000, teachers from the Conservatorium provide individual instrumental instruction via videoconference to pre-tertiary students in remote locations. The links may be by phone or internet and whilst the results are different for each, current technology makes the prospect more feasible than it was a decade ago. Developments in high-speed broadband networks now deliver accurate representation of both picture and audio (Callinan), so most problems relate to pedagogy. As with reports of the *Virtual Conservatorium*, Callinan’s study of the VideoLink program found that because of the time involved, teachers need to be extremely committed and prepared to change their teaching approach to suit the medium. Moreover, “teachers using videoconferencing [need] to have a high skill level and be very experienced in teaching to enable them to deduce what the videoconferencing does not allow them to fully assess” (154). The greatest advantage of the program is that it provides access: removing “some of the problems of isolation experienced in regional New South Wales, and [reducing] some of the distinctions that exist between city and country areas” (151). Beyond the initial investment for the institution, it is also a cost-effective means of delivering real-time

tuition. However, depending on the availability and type of access in remote locations, it may not necessarily reduce the cost to the student (Walton).

### **Dancing to another tune**

In 2000, Education Queensland initiated a project to determine the feasibility of videoconference technology in the delivery of practical instruction in dance to students in remote locations. The trial created a “learning triangle”: like the VideoLink program, it recognised the value of good teaching models (Searle and Mandile); and, as in the *Virtual Conservatorium*, it included a local coach. As Searle and Mandile explain, “all partners in the learning triangle [also] regularly used informal contact via phone, e-mail and fax”, and this communication proved “pivotal to the success of the project” (4). All students involved reported that videoconferencing was a great way to learn, although the results give no indication of whether this response might be influenced by the lack of alternative options for these students wishing to study dance. This trial established similar criteria to those which have been confirmed by the VideoLink program: that teachers need to treat online delivery as “a new tool for learning” (7), identifying new pedagogy and strategies suited to the medium; that communication and directions must be clear; that eye contact is important in reducing the sense of isolation; that interactivity and building relationships between teacher and students, and among students is critical; that prior planning and structure are essential; and that all users must be familiar with the technology (Callinan; Searle and Mandile).

### **Transformation: Considering Asian contexts**

Given the diversity of cultural and geographic traits in Asia, it would be inappropriate to generalise in regard to context. However, certain facts are clear: the need for flexible modes of delivery has been well-established by the rapid growth of mega-universities offering distance education in Asia (Daniel); there has been a great leap forward in the use of technology in some Asian countries; and, as Tam reminds us, “the dimensions of Asia’s educational challenges are staggering by any standards” (“Developing Countries...” 2).

The potential for further growth may well be huge, but there is reason for some caution. As Narayanan warns, “simply publishing a World Wide Web Page with links to other digital resources does not constitute instruction” (1). More relevant to Asian diversity is the fact that “most cultural differences are not visible in cyberspace” and thus, “content developers may overlook [the fact] that virtual communities are real human beings who are bound to a particular cultural and social environment” (van de Bunt 129). Apart from any debate on cultural differences in learning styles, there is a specific cultural difference in the mode of transmission: training performers is not commonly institutionalised in Asian cultures. The exceptions are institutions which emulate the Western conservatory, a stark reminder of the concern about future relevance of Western classical artforms.

As for learning styles, Tam quite rightly warns that ignoring cultural relevance is akin to “a type 1 error” in education (“Developing Countries...” 3), lamenting the fact that “many people erroneously think that the design of instruction does not matter as long as there is the medium to convey the facts” (2). Yet cultural differences associated with

passive and interactive learning styles may have a significant impact on the effectiveness of a program in a particular context, as has been established by many studies (e.g. Fat). Tam offers the example that even for the Open University of Hong Kong, “our movement into mainland China has been cautiously guided by our need to tailor our courses to the local situations and needs within China [...] knowing that what obtains in Hong Kong does not necessarily apply to the mainland” (“Developing Countries...” 3).

Although these learning stereotypes have been long established, a recent study questions their reality and application across “many millions, living in cultures as diverse and as far apart as India, Burma, China, and Korea!” (Littlewood 32). From a survey among students in eight East Asian countries, Littlewood confirmed that if Asian students adopt passive classroom attitudes, “this is more likely to be a consequence of the educational contexts that have been or are now provided for them, than of any inherent dispositions of the students themselves” (33). His study also found that Asian students enjoy group activities and want to explore knowledge together with their fellow students (34), confirming the need to establish a student cohort which transcends distance.

On the other hand, cultural difference may adapt well to flexible modes of delivering education services. Hong Kong provides an excellent example where a high density population within a limited area with limited available places in the traditional higher education system create a sizeable market for flexible delivery, or distance education without the distance (Tam, “The Current State...” 11). One of the fundamental principles of the *Virtual Conservatorium*, this concept is also being explored in Australian universities, to deliver programs on a 24-hour basis to students who may live nearby but have problems accessing class times in a regular timetable.

### **Development: Realising the potential**

These examples together describe flexibility in training the next generation of performing artists, and allow some speculation on how flexible modes of delivery and learning might be tailored to suit the performing arts in individual ways in different Asian contexts. VideoLink and the American programs demonstrate the value of videoconferencing between specialist instructors and individuals or small groups in order to overcome the tyranny of distance if the teacher is travelling or if the student lives in a remote location. Further, Callinan’s study found that having a lesson with a teacher from the Sydney Conservatorium highly motivates the students involved (151). Concern regarding teacher commitment has caused the program’s founder, Mark Walton, to include senior students in his work. By doing so, he has already developed a new generation of teachers accustomed to the medium, and some are now teaching in remote locations. For them, using videoconferencing with their students has the additional benefit of an ongoing mentoring relationship with Walton. There are parallels in this example with the vast distances involved across Asia in general and some Asian countries in particular; and specific examples are available to demonstrate that because of economic considerations, students are left without a teacher for periods of time when that teacher is undertaking professional development or other activities off-campus. For example, music students at a university in Bangkok were without a teacher for more than 3 months while he undertook professional development in the United States (May-August 2000). Walton’s example

demonstrates the potential for professional development of the next generation of teachers, which is extremely relevant to this discussion. As a multi-mode model, the *Virtual Conservatorium* mixes various media, replacing the videoconference with a local coach to provide traditional individual instruction. Ideally, neither mode should be exchanged for the other: videoconferencing enhances traditional instruction (Callinan). Offering alternatives to establishing costly facilities, the *Virtual Conservatorium* model sets out to demonstrate that the physical environment needs no specific location: a virtual institution “doesn’t need to look like a school anymore” (O’Grady 3), so resources can be directed primarily to content and delivery.

Combining these models unlocks many possibilities for Asian settings. In a moment for conjecture one might imagine a virtual provider offering a supermarket of program options and delivery modes across borders and cultures, some of them in collaboration with existing institutions elsewhere in the world, some with professional organisations linking students to industry prior to graduation. A promising performer might connect with a maestro elsewhere in the world for regular tuition, and with like students in another conservatory for mentoring. If this were an orchestral student, linking him to a professional organisation provides for him a transition into the industry after graduation. If he were a contemporary musician, his music might be linked to online production even before graduation. Cooperation is possible across cultures, countries and artforms; for example, between Asian and Western conservatories to extend the experience of composition students in each location. Programs might encourage staff and student mobility, allowing participants flexibility to reside nearby or afar at different times during the course. Mixing the media appropriate to the individual project and the available resources allows unique programs to develop for specific needs.

The greatest challenge in this concept is overcoming a traditional mindset, or the firewall “of the mind” (Coghlan, Fox and Finkelstein). Further, there may be increased acceptance of and engagement in distance education, and expansion in the variety of modes in which learning occurs (Bown), but in the light of such potential, teaching styles require adjustment to the new media. “As the historical record shows, it is a mistake to just copy the way it used to be done onto the computer” (Turoff, Discenza and Howard 1). Even in this essential requirement for teachers to design specifically for the new media there is further potential for collaborative delivery of professional development between institutions, locally and internationally.

Another significant firewall is that which protects the traditional musical forms. The new technology and flexible modes of delivery available lend themselves especially to the extension of music training to include greater diversity, giving the next generation of musicians the option of preparing for a different kind of professional future. The interactive opportunities already available (e.g. Duckworth, “*Cathedral* and The Cathedral Band”) are testimony to potential for further musical growth using these media. Such examples demonstrate the opportunity for experience on an individual level, tailored by the learner as well as the teacher. A learner-centred approach encourages deep understanding because learners take responsibility for their own learning, providing “a contemporary counter to the traditional teacher-centred approach to education which has

been authoritative in nature” (Pulist 1). Although this argument might apply to other disciplines, the “unfettered individualism and choice” (Nunan 1) in flexible delivery brings us back to the original modus operandi for training in the performing arts – the development of the individual’s distinctive talents in particularised ways. Although the teaching strategy may be different, the objective remains the same: “Individualisation, [and] student-centred approaches are some of the old pedagogical keywords which assume new relevances in virtual learning spaces.” (Peters, in Narayanan 2). If consideration of the individual’s unique learning needs is the priority, a mix of flexible modes is an acceptable approach. Flexible delivery provides access, equivalence and excellence (Tam, “Developing Countries...” 1-2), a foundation which parallels the goals of performance training. Most significantly, it also allows for the flexibility to go beyond the firewall protecting traditional artistic styles. The argument for learner-centred experiences also returns us to the question of cultural difference. The benefit of flexible modes is that collaboration with other institutions worldwide has the potential to embrace, rather than diffuse, difference. By tapping into the experience of other providers, each one benefits from the others. Institutions do not need to do it alone, nor do they need to remain isolated from the industries they serve.

Amid the positive advantages of new media, new artistic outcomes, and a new style of graduate flexible enough to meet future demands, technology acts as both advantage and barrier. Technology may be moving quickly across Asian spaces, but there is yet to be a standard common to all. Recent history demonstrates the speed at which technology might overcome barriers, but the potential cost is an ultimate consideration, more so for the consumer than the provider. A multi-modal approach to learning may lessen the economic impediment in the interim. The greater long-term concern is that the rush for borderless learning might result in a loss of cultural identity among the many Asian settings. For the performing arts, this is the most critical of issues, transcending learning styles and modes of delivery. Just at the time it becomes possible to deliver performance studies to students in distant locations, the danger emerges that the individual character of each culture embodied in the arts might be neutralised.

The future for training in the performing arts must recognise the emerging role of technology not only in delivery of the training but also in creating the art. Both transform the traditional approach to training performers: used in multi-modal delivery, technology makes a performance degree a reality for students in remote locations; moreover, technology carries the potential to transform the way in which performers perceive their work. Traditional performance need no longer be the only option. The new generation of performers may find that learning from a distance in the digital age allows them a flexibility which transforms their access, their development, and their artform.

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