

# WHAT PRICE ASIAN STUDENTS? Music Training in Asia

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*A paper given at the CONNECTING WITH... Seminar,  
Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, April 2002.*

Asian countries have very disparate approaches to music training and a variety of institutions in which such training is offered. Whilst relatively few of these institutions have the title 'conservatory', there are a number which assume the conservatory role.

Why the interest in this phenomenon, anyway? After all, the conservatorium is a 19<sup>th</sup> century Western concept. That they have found their way into Asia is largely the result of colonization. The oldest of the Asian institutions were established in pre-Maoist Shanghai and in French-colonised Vietnam. To some extent, the effect of colonization explains why some countries do not have 'conservatories' at all, and why others may give them a different name.

The relevance for Western countries is two-fold: most Western conservatories are under pressure to recruit fee-paying international students, and, more particularly, currently there is an increasing interest in Western music in most Asian countries. These facts in combination would suggest that Western countries might do well to better understand the content and quality of training in Asian countries from whence potential students might originate.

Western music is very popular in Asia, both classical and pop. Klaus Heymann of Naxos records says that half the classical music audience in Asia is under age 30. More than half the Western market is over age 60<sup>1</sup>.

The influence of the Asian Youth Orchestra is due some credit for this interest. The orchestra has had a significant impact on young orchestral players in a number of Asian countries. Perhaps it's a chance to break away from the crowd, do something special, or perhaps it is, after all, the music itself?

There's also a more pragmatic view. Chairman of the orchestra, Daniel Ng, was the man who brought McDonald's to Asia, and not surprisingly he likens orchestral music to hamburgers:

*"Twenty years ago, everyone said that the Chinese will never eat hamburgers. Now they eat them by the tonnes. It's the same with classical music; we force-feed them, make the music sellable, and the people will come."<sup>ii</sup>*

However, whilst Western classical music may be in demand, contemporary improvised musical genres other than jazz are not generally understood because teaching methodology is very conservative. From one country to the next, even Western classical music may not be given the same style or quality of teaching institutions in the West might expect to assume.

There are a few common undercurrents to music training in Asia:

**1. Most Asian institutions exhibit large gaps in the training programs they offer.** Some gaps relate to the instruments offered – in most Chinese conservatories, for example, there is an emphasis on piano and strings. In Thailand, string training is the weakest area.

Across Asia, very few institutions approach contemporary music practice in any form. Even the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA), arguably the flagship of Asian conservatories, offers some jazz and composition but no other genre of contemporary music. In a society which has a strong following of contemporary pop music, music technology and multi-media, this is a narrow focus, but not unusual. Most similar institutions in the Asian region concentrate on traditional styles and genres of Western music, with a limited scope of Western instruments.

**2. 'Western' classical programs take priority, sometimes even to the detriment of the local classical traditions.** In some countries, this may be the result of local traditions of imparting musical knowledge. They are often handed down orally, rather than through an institutional program. Shanghai Conservatory is one of the few conservatories which has continued to maintain traditional music (albeit interrupted by the Cultural Revolution). For its part, HKAPA has increased enrollments in Chinese music post-1997, now that it is easier for Chinese musicians to study in Hong Kong. At the International Academy of Music in Bangkok, the smallest department is that of Thai Classical Music and Dance.

However, the fact that Western music takes priority does not automatically lead to Western music being offered with content and quality equivalent to that expected by Western institutions<sup>iii</sup>.

**3. Cultural differences in teaching methodology, and student and parental attitudes create a divide between East and West.**

The differences in pedagogy combined with various cultural aesthetics are far too often ignored in approaching institutions, students and music-making within Asia.

In Asian countries it is not unusual to have a teacher demonstrating method rather than asking the student to apply it. Whilst disciplined practice may be important in some countries, there may be little emphasis on practice technique and purpose. Each country also has differences in student attitudes, parental attitudes and varying emphases placed on artistic development and technical formation<sup>iv</sup>.

This has the potential to create significant problems for students when they study in a Western country.

Cheng Wai, a professional piano teacher in Hong Kong, was born in Beijing and studied at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. She said the experience abroad was like "starting another life".

*"It was pretty tough," said Cheng of her first two years in the United States. She said teachers in China focus on technique and precision, while in Hong Kong, they stress musical understanding and artistic appeal.*

*But in the United States, "the teacher leaves it up to you", she says. "You need to create your own interpretation of the music and form your own personality. "I just couldn't get what the teachers meant at the very beginning although the exercise proved to be stimulating and fulfilling later," recalled Cheng<sup>v</sup>.*

The differences in each culture are significant. At one extreme is the methodology found in China where students are pushed to the limit to excel:

*"Fed as much knowledge as possible, and trained to acquire skills as complicated as they can possibly master, Chinese children are seldom given time and opportunity to create and explore new things in their own way, said Li Danna, director of the Music Education Committee of the Chinese Musicians Association.... Current education is directed almost solely at making students score high marks on exams."<sup>vi</sup>*

In Thailand, the methodology is quite the opposite of the Chinese. Those Thai students who study Western music are rarely disciplined into hours of practice, and it is rare to emphasise technique. As a result, the students may hold undergraduate degrees which in no way compare with Western equivalents (e.g. BMus). Their training is inadequate if they wish to study at post-graduate level overseas, but Western institutions might not appreciate that until after the student arrives.

#### **4. In many cases, local economic conditions prevent many students from accessing appropriate training and instruments of reasonable quality.**

Until ten years ago, the Hanoi Conservatory had a gaping hole in its roof, and student instruments were held together with rubber bands. Five years ago, a Japanese company was convinced to provide quality instruments for the conservatory, but this doesn't guarantee that students will have quality instruments to play after they have graduated.

Tuan le Quang, an outstanding trumpet graduate of HKAPA (where he was on scholarship), now serves noodles in the family restaurant in Hanoi. He can't afford a decent instrument, and he can't get a job in the local orchestra until the older players retire. He won't get one outside Vietnam because most Asian countries have negative immigration policies towards Vietnamese people. Nor will he get a job in the West until he gets more experience, and not of the noodle-selling kind. After years of intensive study and considerable progress in Hong Kong, he is dispirited. Tuan is only one of a number of such stories.

Then there is the cost of quality tuition. In many Asian countries, the economy remains relatively fragile, and profits are in the hands of a relative few. The larger majority are unable to afford quality tuition. This relates also to music institutions. Outside Hong Kong and Singapore, there are relatively few which are financially able to offer high quality opportunities and scholarships for students. Some of the universities awarding undergraduate music degrees do not have appropriate staffing to support training at an appropriate level.

#### **5. The most significant of the problems is the lack of local infrastructure to support appropriate levels of training for music students.**

Essentially, while some countries have conservatories and others don't, the largest problem is the lack of infrastructure – not just physical facilities, but an artistic infrastructure which understands the Western expectations of the student, the artist, the professional; an infrastructure which offers such things as emphasis on technical training, structured concert practice, regular access to visiting artists in workshops, masterclasses and concerts; one which understands that an opportunity to perform is more than just an excuse for a photo opportunity.

For us, the presence of such infrastructure is significant. Artists and teachers from all over the world expect to visit Asian conservatories for performances and teaching, whether or not there is a student recruitment agenda.

In my experience, visiting artists are effective only where there is an infrastructure which can prepare for and follow up on the visit. If there is no local appreciation of what a masterclass might achieve, then it achieves nothing except a line in the artist's CV. If such activities are a regular part of the institution's activities, the staff and students know how to prepare and what to expect of it. In countries like Thailand the effect of a brief visit may be negligible. The legacy of regular visits, with intervening follow-up is constructive. The result of establishing on-the-ground stimulus is undeniable.

Allowing for the fact that no two countries are the same, and each one has its own cultural identity to complicate the process, this situation challenges us to consider the opportunities available to Western countries for involvement in Asia.

I liken these opportunities to parallels in trade – companies may rush in and grab the best of what is there, when it is available, or they can take a slower approach by assisting with the development of the product and in doing so benefit on many more levels than may at first seem obvious.

With the pressure on Australian conservatories to find paying students, the temptation is to take the first option. Yet few conservatories understand how to approach recruitment in a fashion which is likely to lead to long-term success. Connections are important, even more important than the quality of the training on offer. Establishing connections is becoming more difficult. The economic downturn in Asia has reversed the trend of inviting Western artists and teachers to Asian schools and performing venues, and in some countries (notably Japan and Korea) this has given impetus to their own performers and teachers of Western music. Whilst one might well applaud this development, it does make Western involvement more challenging.

Asia's economic rise happened too quickly, and the region's wealth is not widely spread, nor (on the whole) well-managed. In most countries, there remain many gaps (including) inadequate infrastructure and a lack of universal education<sup>vii</sup>.

There is the risk of a divide emerging between the richer north and the poorer south in Asia. From our perspective, it's worth noting that most fee-paying international students are recruited from the 'rich north', some of which is currently not so rich. If we are intent on recruitment, what do we do when the supply dries up? If we focus only on those countries which are already producing students, what happens to those which are struggling?

Australian and other Western conservatories might look to the business model: to focus on capacity building, to help develop local infrastructure. This has the potential to create the connections which are important to Asian cultures; to build the infrastructure for an ongoing supply of well-trained musicians; to create confidence in non-Western genres; and to minimise cultural differences.

Such things have the potential to bring more than just a flow of paying students.

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<sup>i</sup> Leah Krakinowski, Playing for keeps, *Far Eastern Economic Review* August 5 1999, p.32-34

<sup>ii</sup> op.cit

<sup>iii</sup> Notable exceptions include Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, Shanghai Conservatory, Beijing Central Conservatory, LASALLE-SIA College in Singapore

<sup>iv</sup> Angelo Hao-Chun Lee, Methods and Approaches of Teaching Music : A Comparison between Australia and Taiwan, *AJME*, p.38

<sup>v</sup> Zhou Wanfeng, Hong Kong Pianist Plays in Beijing, *China Daily* May 23, 2000, p.9

<sup>vi</sup> Li Xing, Reform to foster creative talent, *China Daily* June 2 1998, p.9

<sup>vii</sup> David James, Tell your fortune? *Management Today*, January/February 2001, pp.4-5.