Chapter 26
Pedagogical Issues in Multicultural Education: An Autoethnography of the Challenges in Delivering 'A' Levels Non-western Music Curriculum in Singapore Schools

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Part I: Behind the Scenes

Motivational Background

I had recently completed my Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at the University of Washington when I moved to Singapore in 2005. The circumstances that confronted me during my early years brought me to the teaching job I was not expecting I would engage in after earning my doctorate: teaching 'A' levels music at a junior college.[1] This experience is the focus of this research. I would like to analyze the experiences as they reflect on the challenges of my teaching practice at the 'A' levels juxtaposed with my apprehensions as an ethnomusicologist about the demands of the syllabus I was expected to deliver. It is my goal to share these long-kept observations about how the study of non-western music is viewed in Singapore schools and to use this encounter to come to a better evaluation of my own pedagogical system as a scholar/lecturer.

[1] A levels is an important pre-university examination given yearly to junior college students in Singapore. It is a certification given in collaboration by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore and the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). It is an internationally recognized certificate for qualification in universities locally and overseas. Please see the section on "Musings on the Singapore Examination System" in this paper for a detailed history and explanation.

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C.-H. Lum (ed.), *Contextualized Practices in Arts Education: An International Dialogue on Singapore*, Education Innovation Series,
DOI 10.1007/978-981-4560-55-9_26,

Theoretical and Methodological Tools: What Approach Will Best Translate My Research Intentions?

If you are reading this paper up to this point, you may already have noticed how academically untraditional the presentation is. You may already be wondering how much the writing is self-focused to be categorized as scientific. After all, academic writing and research, even though qualitative in design, is expected to exemplify the scientific approach of systematic data collection, validation and analysis. It is not my intention to abandon clear methodology and systematic analysis. As an ethnomusicologist, I am trained in the qualitative methods of doing research with specific emphasis in ethnographic methodologies. But even at the time of my dissertation writing, I have already espoused what anthropologists refer to as the "new ethnography" (Clifford and Marcus 1986; James et al. 1997; Rosaldo 1993; Hammersley 1992), which regards ethnography as akin to literature and storytelling (Clifford 1988; Van Maanen 1995; 1988) and invention rather than representation (Clifford and Marcus 1986). As a result, I have always intentionally written in the first person in order to emphasize that the "accounts are specific and positioned" (Costes 2005, p. 27).

The limitations surrounding this research, namely, time constraint and necessity to rely largely on personal memories and materials, lend to the type of ethnographical approach that includes the self as the object of research and self-experience as a tool for analysis. This methodology is called autoethnography, which is a type of research which connects the personal to the cultural and a style of writing that is literary and a process of self-discovery (Ellis 2004, p. xix, 4). Autoethnography is a conscious inclusion of the self in writing about people and culture, or, in Ellis' (2004, p. xvii) words, a 'systematic sociological introspection' and 'emotional recall' to understand a lived through experience.

Although I have always believed in ethnography as a story from the author's perspective, I have never written an autoethnography where I specifically write about myself or start from my personal experiences. I usually limit the inclusion of myself based on my background that could influence my reading of a phenomenon. In a lot of ways, I am doing the same in this study except that most of the data for analysis are materials that I used for the classes and my emotional recollection of events rather than field data collected from others. I did not have the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with current students and teachers of the same class that I taught, but I managed to collect responses to an open-ended questionnaire I distributed in 2011 that the students were more comfortable answering. These responses along with the current syllabi constitute the documents from which correlation of my experiences of 4 years ago were based.

Presentation: What Is the Best Way to Convey and Analyze My Data?

There are many forms by which to write an autoethnography[2] but I will adopt a combination of detailed storytelling which are "reflected upon, analyzed, and interpreted within their broader sociocultural context" (Chang 2008, p. 46) and personal essay. In the ensuing sections, I will present my recollections, reflexive analysis, and suggestions in a narrative format. I would like to express that this is my first attempt to write in such format and so I already anticipate certain shortcomings.

My characters will be based on real colleagues and students but will bear different names. I will purposefully not include the name of the school I taught in to increase anonymity of my main characters; I will also recreate scenarios based on actual events. As with any other autoethnographies, I hope to bring the readers into the actual situations in order to have a more concrete grasp of the issues that will be raised and contemplated in this study.

Part II: The Story

Reflections on the Syllabus

It was January 2007 when I started my first job in Singapore. I still have mixed feelings about taking this post: first, this school is obviously not a university as I hoped would be my first employment; and second, I am a little apprehensive about the junior college system,[3] which is non-existent in my native country of the Philippines, where I received my primary, secondary, and undergraduate education.

I remember my main motivations for taking on this job are the content of the syllabus and the opportunity that I thought I would have in developing its non-western music component. The main modules I am expected to deliver are music theories and analyses of Indonesian gamelan and Indian classical traditions. I

[2] Heewon Chang (2008, pp. 35–37) named the following as types of autoethnography: (1) autobiography (chronological, comprehensive look in life); (2) memoirs (thematic, fragments of life); (3) journals (logs or records of daily growth, musings, insights); (4) diaries (daily happenings); (5) personal essay (insights to environment); (5) letters (when it contains thoughts and behaviors of author). All these have in common: memory search, self-revelation, and self-reflection.

[3] The Singapore education system consists of 3 years pre-school, 6 years primary, 4–5 years secondary, and 2–3 years pre-university or polytechnic. The junior college is a 2 years pre-university education; "The curriculum comprises two compulsory subjects, namely General Paper and the Mother Tongue, and a maximum of four Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education 'Advanced' GCE 'A' Level subjects from the Arts, Science or Commerce Courses. At the end of the pre-university course, students sit for the GCE 'A' Level examination (http://www.singaporeedu.gov.sg/htm/stu/stu0104.htm)."

am also expected to deliver other western music modules. Here's an example of the syllabus for H2[4]:

INTRODUCTION

This syllabus is designed to engage students in music listening, performing and composing, and recognises that each is an individual with his/her own musical inclinations. This syllabus is also underpinned by the understanding that an appreciation of the social, cultural and historical contexts of music is vital in giving meaning to its study, and developing an open and informed mind towards the multiplicities of musical practices. It aims to nurture students' thinking skills and musical creativity by providing opportunities to discuss music-related issues, transfer learning and to make music, endeavouring to develop in them a life-long interest in music.

AIMS

The aims of the syllabus are to:

(i) Develop musical creativity and critical thinking through a range of skills, knowledge and understanding in music
(ii) Heighten social and cultural awareness through music studies and activities
(iii) Broaden intellectual and emotional responses through developing a range of listening, music writing and performing skills
(iv) Develop essential music skills for those candidates who wish to pursue their music studies at a higher level, and/or music-related careers
(v) Provide the basis for an informed and lasting love of music

FRAMEWORK

This syllabus approaches the study of Music through Music Studies and Music Making. It is designed for the music student who has a background in musical performance and theory. Music Studies cover a range of works from the Western Music tradition as well as prescribed topics from the Asian Music tradition. The various works and topics are designed to give opportunities for critical thinking through music analysis and to encourage active listening experiences. Music Making provides the necessary breadth of musical skills while allowing candidates the choice of a major in either performing or music writing, according to their interests and abilities.

[4] The music component of the rigorous examination process of the A levels (please see "Musings on the Singapore Examination System" section in this chapter for a discussion of the A levels) has two parts: H2 and H3. H2 aims to balance the academic studies of music both in western and Asian, and practical music studies. H3 is available for those seeking a deeper level of music studies through research on analytical, performance, and composition.

This syllabus is the 2007 syllabus which is very similar in many levels to the 2012 release.

The objectives and aims demonstrate a more advanced level of music studies with students who are expected to be serious about deepening their skills and knowledge. Upon examination of the syllabus and its assessment objectives, the highly specialized focus comes further to the fore, which is not different from what would be expected of first and second year university students majoring in music. The following are the components of the H2 syllabus:

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES
The examination will reward candidates for positive achievement in:

Component 1: Music Studies
Aural awareness, perception and discrimination in relation to Asian and Western music
Analysis of music in the context of the genre/tradition/style
Discussion of the music in relation to appropriate musical issues

Component 21: Performing (major)
Technical and musical competence on one instrument or voice
Technical and musical competence ***either*** *on a second instrument* ***or*** *in an ensemble setting (first/second instrument)* ***or*** *in accompaniment (first/second instrument)*
Interpretative understanding and stylistic awareness of the music performed

Component 22: Performing (minor)
Technical and musical competence on one instrument or voice
Interpretative understanding and stylistic awareness of the music performed

Component 31: Music Writing (major)
Musical competence in Stylistic Imitation and Composition Techniques
Musical competence in the development and organisation of musical ideas in Composition
Imagination in creative work

Component 32: Music Writing (minor)
Musical competence in Stylistic Imitation
Musical competence in the development and organisation of musical ideas in Composition
Imagination in creative work

This syllabus actually intimidated me a little. For one, in order to deliver the objectives properly and beneficially to the students, the teacher should be highly competent in not only music theory but also in composition techniques and performance on instruments as well. The breadth of knowledge required for such a syllabus is equivalent to a music specialist and definitely not simply a music generalist. This gave me the impression that they might be looking for someone who has a graduate degree in music, even a Ph.D. such as me, to deliver the more

specialized demands of the syllabus. Studying these components and the more detailed expectations outlined in the full syllabus, affirmed my decision to take on the challenge. I was also told that my students would be the cream of the crop in Singapore at this level; although, even at this point, I already am wondering if my specialization in ethnomusicology, Western classical music, and Philippine music alone would suffice to teach all of the above expectations.

I am a trained ethnomusicologist first and foremost, and I also have a strong background in western music and performance. However, the knowledge and skills demanded of such a syllabus is more appropriate to a team of faculty with specialization in composition and music theory, and performance in the different instruments the students hope to take as a major or minor. In short, it needs a faculty akin to a music department in a college or university. At this early stage, although I am grateful for the job, I am under the impression that this is an ambitious syllabus that will be taught by music generalists instead of specialists. The actual depth of knowledge the students will acquire is therefore already questionable as compared to the expected deliverables. Such a syllabus already carries with it an assumption that all teachers who have music as a major will be able to teach composition and performance without any problems and to high standards. It does not take into account that music studies are divided into specialized fields and skills, nor the reason why, at the university level, a major and minor are chosen. In order for the course to be effectively taught, the objectives need clarification and the actual marking of exams should be made available in order to examine the actual standards of the examiners as compared to what was written. The specialized qualifications of the instructor should be kept in mind, as well.

To make things complicated, the Asian component of the syllabus also assumes that the course instructor should be able to teach gamelan and classical Indian music, perhaps under the premise that it is still music studies after all. I remembered the many questions that came to my mind as I leafed through the Asian music component section of the syllabus. These are the things expected of me to deliver:

Asian Topics

The Focus Recordings and suggested readings that accompany each topic are intended to assist teachers in planning courses of study. They are not intended as prescribed materials and are not indicative of the areas within the topics that will be tested in the examination questions.

Topic 1: Gamelan

The topic examines bronze and bamboo gamelan of the Javanese and Balinese tradition. In this syllabus, the listening is focused on:

Central Javanese Gamelan
Gamelan gong kebyar
Gamelan angklung
Gamelan joged

Candidates are expected to:
Identify and describe the tuning systems (pelog and slendro), imbal/kotekan, interlocking rhythms and texture
Identify and briefly describe the common instruments and their functions used in bronze and bamboo Gamelan
Identify and describe the buka (opening melody), balungan/pokok (inner melody) and irama
Identify and describe the Javanese musical structures (ketawang, ladrang lancaran) and Balinese metrical cycles (e.g. gilak)
Follow a transcription of the buka and balungan in Javanese gamelan extract in cipher notation
Discuss the performance contexts (e.g. in Wayang Kulit, dance-drama)

Topic 3: String Music from the Carnatic and Hindustani traditions
This topic examines contemporary classical string music that draws from vocal music of the Karnātak and Hindustāni traditions. In this syllabus, the listening is focused on instrumental kṛiti and the khyal-based gat.

Candidates are expected to:
Identify and describe the rāga, tāla (metric cycle), drone and laya (tempo/rhythm) with respect to the Karnātak and Hindustāni styles
Identify and briefly describe the instruments, their playing techniques and their role in the ensemble
Identify and describe structural and improvisatory features of the Karnātak instrumental kṛiti
Describe the musical development and improvisation in the Hindustāni gat
Follow a transcription of the melodic line in an extract in sargam notation
Discuss the modern performance contexts and the effects of modernisation on the instrumental performance style

As I studied the expectations for the Asian music component, I immediately thought I would probably be working with a faculty who has high level of training and background in these musical traditions. The terminologies and musical elements that require identification, understanding, and analysis definitely require someone who either has sustained experience in performing these instruments or have taken theory classes under masters of these traditions. Take for example the expectations for the Indian classical traditions: Candidates are expected to identify and describe the raga and tala, drone and laya with respect to Karnatak and Hindustani styles. Identifying the various *rāgas* or melodic modes in both traditions will demand more than the 5 h allotted to this musical system[5]

[5] When I taught the module in 2007, the total time allotted for the Asian music component is 10 h: 5 h for Indian music and 5 h for gamelan.

per term.[6] The candidates are even asked to identify the tala rhythmic cycle, improvisations on the melodic modes, and characteristic features of the raga.[7] That is just the Indian music component and there is still the gamelan where candidates are asked to identify the raga and tala equivalents in the balungan/pokok and irama. For the gamelan, there is also the possibility that the students will be given examples to analyze outside of the classical Javanese gamelan and Balinese gong kebyar.

Anyone reading this syllabus who understands what it entails to study these traditions will know that it has very high objectives. Even under a trained specialist, acquiring the ability to analyze what was being asked in the syllabus will take years of training. The first thing that comes to mind is that is there an assumption by the writers of this syllabus that non-western traditions can be analyzed and learned in a mere 20 h of lessons? Even the western component is already very demanding, but most of the students would have background in western theory and performance for years before they come to take their A levels; but this is likely not so for gamelan and Indian music.[8]

There is also the question about the competence of the teacher who is expected to deliver the outcomes effectively for student learning. The specialized nature of the syllabus would require specialists to teach. If there is an assumption that just about anyone who has music training should be able to teach all that is expected, then the objectives will not be met satisfactorily unless the grading system itself has in reality low standards. At best, everything the students will learn is textbook knowledge that can be repeated for examination's sake without any depth in understanding for life-long learning.

I wonder how this system of testing came to be such an important part of Singapore education and who actually designs the syllabus. Are they experts in the field of western and Asian music? How do they assess the papers? Are they aware of the level of expertise required to teach such a syllabus?

Musings on the Singapore Examination System

Before writing this chapter, I revisited my curiosity about the whole system underlying the demand for top examination results and its centrality in Singapore

[6] There are four terms per academic year for the JC level in Singapore. Each term has 10 weeks of teaching instruction, except Term 4 which has only 8 weeks because of the Christmas and New Year Holidays. JC2 level will have a longer Term 4 because of the A levels examination period.

[7] In this 2007 syllabus, the focus is on the instrumental forms of vocal music. Identification of raga features is now incorporated in the lower 'O' levels.

[8] The syllabus also suggests Chinese music as an option for the two Asian music requirements. The school I taught in chose the gamelan and Indian traditions. I believe the other junior colleges also opted for the same traditions as my school. Again, the teachers are not qualified to deliver such a syllabus to their students.

education.[9] What I quickly learned in my one year of teaching 'A' levels at the junior college was that the whole curriculum was designed around the examination that students needed to pass to gain as proof of their competencies in music. Thus, everything became mechanical for the students, memorizing terms and doing exercises over and over again in a pedagogical style of "hit and miss" or learn-as-you-do system. Nothing is really explained in-depth to the students in relation to the exercises and everything is supposed to be absorbed through experimentations and constant practice[10]; all these expectations crammed in 10 h of lessons per term for the Asian music component. In my research in reflecting on my experiences, I found the book *Examinations in Singapore: Change and Continuity (1891–2007)* by Tan et al. (2008). This provided me with an insight into the history and context of this system.

Since the British colonial period, Singapore has developed a long partnership with the University of Cambridge. It started with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) in 1891. It was first introduced in the English-stream schools, where students are educated in the language of the colonial administrators. The systematic examination system of the English-stream schools gave them a more structured approach to education as compared to the vernacular schools. The students who graduated from the English-stream schools had the competitive advantage in securing jobs.

The examinations such as the Competitive State Scholarship Examinations and the Queen's Scholarship became the basis to promote quality education through a healthy competition among schools. Those who successfully pass with high marks would have the privilege to study in the prestigious Oxford or Cambridge Universities in England. The scholarship was discontinued in 1910[11] and reintroduced in 1939 but was limited only to Raffles College and College of Medicine students. The President's Scholarship introduced in 1966 is the current manifestation of the Queen's Scholarship.

By the late 1800s, passing in the Cambridge examinations became the benchmark of quality education to the extent that the Secondary education has been centered on preparation classes for the commerce examinations or Cambridge Local Examinations. The reports validated the system in such a way that English education improved ever since its implementation. The examination results became the basis for admission to Raffles College and scholarship studies in the UK. After

[9] Obtaining top marks in examinations ensures better acceptance in universities and jobs.

[10] Most of the classes are devoted to what they call "tutorials" where students are supposedly trained almost at a one-to-one level through giving them exercises for practice. If any theory is to be explained, that is reduced to just one or two lecture hour sessions and students are left on their own to study further.

[11] The reasons given for discontinuing the scholarship examinations were (Tan et al. 2008, p. 9): "one, the subjects of Latin, French and Mathematics were deemed to be not suited to local needs; two, scholarships led to unwholesome competition; and three, a few brilliant pupils benefited at the expense of the majority of the pupils."

this period, the history was replete with several examination systems with a special favor to those passing the English standards when it comes to opportunities.

So where does the 'A' levels fit in all this? It is one of the national standardized examination systems that were considered to be a crucial response to Singapore's need to unify its ethnically diverse population in the 1960s when the country attained internal self-government. The People's Action Party (PAP) saw the need for a more inclusive national education system with a focus on giving equal treatment to all four language streams.[12] The inauguration of the Ministry of Education (MOE) is meant to create a central supervising body that ensures a national curriculum enabling equal opportunities for all language-streams schools. This is to differentiate from the former English-stream school bias of the colonial period. The English language is still considered mandatory for the reason that it will serve as neutral unifying language for all ethnic groups and will provide competitive advantage to Singaporeans in the international community.

The national system of examinations is believed to be an effective tool to bring about a common national curriculum. It started with the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) in 1960 and followed by the Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' levels in 1971 and the Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'A' levels in 1975. GCE is the General Certificate of Education introduced in 1959 for those who do not have the Cambridge School Certificate to qualify for the Higher School Certificate. The continued collaboration with Cambridge stems from the confidence the administrators have in its examination system. The 'O' and 'A' levels were patterned after the UK with some adjustments suitable in the Singapore context.

The 'A' levels is a replacement for the Higher School Certificates conducted for all language streams. It is meant to standardize the pre-university qualifications of the students. It is administered, set, and graded largely by Cambridge with only the MOE being responsible for the Mother Tongues.[13] In 1983, the national stream was introduced, which prioritizes the English language in all subject areas except mother tongue or second language.

The advantages and disadvantages of setting an entire curriculum based on the examination contents were debated within the MOE. There was a concern about whether "curriculum drives examinations or examinations drive curriculum" during the British colonial period and again in 1963 by the Commission of Inquiry into Education (p. 83).

I paused in my reading and thought, "Hmmm. . .so they did weigh the consequences." Still I'm curious why the 'examination drives curriculum' was favored in the end.

The argument on the cons side is that a curriculum focused on examination may conflict seriously with those aspects of the subjects that have educational value. The pros argue that it improves performance in theoretical studies such as university

[12] Singapore has four official languages: English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil.

[13] For a more detailed discussion of what subjects are tested at the 'A' levels, please refer to Tan et al. (2008, *Examinations in Singapore: Change and Continuity (1891–2007),* pp. 81–83).

entrance exams and fulfills the urge to excel and achieve; they also believe that this type of controlled system will help the teachers to deepen their knowledge of their subject areas by keeping abreast on what is currently relevant. The conclusion of the authors, who are from the Singapore Examination Board, was in favor of retaining the examination-based curriculum.

> The efficacy of a common certificate for national unity was clear, as it reflected the parity and unity of Singapore's education system, and brought about the integration of the four language streams.
>
> National examinations have played an important role in contributing to the development of human capital in post-independent Singapore. Criticisms notwithstanding, national examinations have supported an education system aimed at providing a common educational experience for students from different communities. It seems national examinations have come of age, and are here to stay. (pp. 84–85)

I closed the e-book and decided it is best to relate my personal experiences as a teacher of the 'A' levels to reveal actual situations that ensue out of this 'examination drives curriculum' position of the MOE and Singapore Examination Board. After reading this argument, I wanted to actually gain more insights from the situation and objectively approach the experience as I recalled my story. I opened my computer and began to write.

Designing an Examination-Based Curriculum: Setting the Scenario

After settling on my workspace, which was an enclosed cubicle with a spacious desk and a common area that I shared with two other music faculty,[14] I immediately set to work on my syllabus for the Asian music component. I opened the syllabus and thought to start in the gamelan, an area I am more familiar with since my specialization is on the gongs and drums of Southeast Asia. I read the details of topics once again.

Asian Topics

The Focus Recordings and suggested readings that accompany each topic are intended to assist teachers in planning courses of study. They are not intended as prescribed materials and are not indicative of the areas within the topics that will be tested in the examination questions.

Suggested readings intended to assist in the planning of courses of study. I underlined that sentence and thought "so I am free to design my own syllabus", which was good for me as someone who values freedom in the structure of the

[14] For the first term that I was with this junior college, there was only one other faculty since the other one was on leave.

courses I teach. The second sentence bothered me a little as it stated that the topics were not indicative of the areas that would be tested in the examination questions. I wheeled around to ask Bing Wen.[15]

"Excuse me, but I just want to clarify what this means." I handed him the syllabus with the highlight on the second sentence.

"This is the guideline but we can never be sure what examples or excerpts will actually be given. And, yes, the questions could be anything. So you have to prepare them to answer any kind of possible questions and scenarios." Bing Wen answered as a matter-of-fact.

"Do you at least have an example of the past exam questions so I can have an idea what to teach the students?" I asked.

"The past exams are not shown to us, only a model. We just started this Asian music component so we are also unsure as to how to approach it. But here are some of the practice exams I have given them and the only examination sample from Cambridge." He quickly tried to locate the papers from among the folders lined up on his desk. "Here you go. I just based the questions from that guideline."

I glanced at some of his questions: (1) identify the instrument in the *buka* section; (2) identify the *balungan* and *irama*; (3) identify the tuning system; (4) identify the instruments that are playing in this section and name their functions; (5) discuss the performance context, etc. I immediately noticed that all the questions were based on what was suggested in the syllabus.

"These questions require detailed analysis. So have teachers before me undergone training in the gamelan, both Javanese and Balinese? And we have to teach all the concepts in 20 h for a year, correct? Also, when it says musical structures, are these examples the only ones students need to know?" I asked still wondering how I could successfully make the students grasp gamelan theory in such a limited time considering they are without any exposure in the tradition.

"There really isn't any teacher training at the moment, so we try to develop our own materials. We do not know how they are going to be tested in those theories and structures as well; again, those are only examples. The key is to give them more materials to listen to and analyze. Like out of the 20 h, 5 h per term to be exact, you are given 1 lecture hour and the rest should be tutorials. You give them exercises and check their work. That is how we structure our classes." Bing Wen explained, not showing any concern at all about the demanding and very general syllabus given to lecturers.

I asked, "If the types of musical structures and metrical cycles are not specified, that's quite a lot to grasp without any immersion in the actual music, don't you think?" Bing Wen just shrugged his shoulders in response.

I thought to myself, if all cycles and structures were potential examination points, then that meant students were expected to familiarize themselves in all of them in all levels of musical examples. Even identifying and describing the interlocking rhythms could be very tricky since they go really fast in actual

[15] Not real name. All names that will appear in this paper are fictional but the characters are not.

performance and they have different types that are not easy to identify unless you have been playing them for some time. The students would need to try each metrical cycle and experience how the different instrument parts relate to each other to truly come to an understanding of these concepts. I did not believe simply listening would enable them to answer the metrical cycle and melodic modes given to them at random. They would get some out of it, but how deep the understanding that would be, is a different matter altogether. The lecturer should have intense exposure and background in the tradition as well to analyze those examples and break them down to the students.

I turned to Bing Wen again and asked, "Do you have a gamelan in the school?"

"Unfortunately we don't and none of us can play either. Maybe you can? What we do is we engage an outside vendor to provide 1 or 2 workshops on the instruments to give the students exposure." Bing Wen further explained.

"I have some experience playing in a gamelan, Javanese specifically, but it may not be sufficient to the expectations of this curriculum. I know the foundational principles but since there is a great chance that students will be tested in a more advanced material, and in so little time without any regular hands on experience, I am not sure how far I can get them up to the expected level." I admittedly expressed my limitations and concerns.

I paused and asked, "And what kind of teaching materials do you have for the other forms of Balinese gamelan and classical Indian music?"

I glanced at the syllabus for Indian classical music and immediately felt overwhelmed by the expectations.

"Our students just started their classes last term on Javanese gamelan. They have not started with the Indian and Balinese, yet. Jia Yin is in-charge of the Indian supposedly but since she's on leave this term I'm not sure if she has prepared anything already. I think I remember she invited a musician to play sitar for the students." Bing Wen recalled then added, "By the way, I worked with the JC2s[16] already on the gamelan last term so it would be better to give them more advanced materials, especially on Javanese gamelan."

At this point I wondered what he meant by 'advanced' materials; could it really be possible that the students learned the concepts really well in 5 h of the past term and ready to move on to advanced topics? I noted this and told myself I would wait and see in the first meeting.

"So basically, the students last term had some exposure to musicians and 1–2 workshops; that was all the hands-on exposure and the rest was classroom listening?" I tried to re-affirm.

"Basically, yes. We try to build a library of CDs so they can practice on their own. We also have budget for books if you have anything to add to our collection." He offered.

[16] There are two years of A levels education. JC stands for Junior College and students are referred to as belonging to either JC1 or JC2, first and second year, respectively.

"So you said you basically try to just build materials on your own. So, even without any training or background you're still expected to deliver this syllabus."

"Well, I have some background in gamelan from my university undergraduate since one of the professors there is an expert in Balinese gamelan." Bing Wen tried to defend his competency on the topic.

"But there are no teaching materials from the examiners or MOE?" I asked.

"No materials available. We just try to share what we have between JCs. That syllabus is all we've been given by MOE and know about the topic."

I went back to my own planning trying to absorb the information about how this component has been taught. I assessed the situation: (1) The JC2 students had only one term of introduction to the gamelan; (2) Both JC1 and JC2 students have not started in Indian music and other types of Balinese gamelan; (3) only 10 h per term is given to the Asian music component, giving students at the JC1 40 h of lessons and the JC2 20 h; (4) there are no specific instructions on what aspects of the broader categories in the syllabus will be tested; and (5) there are no teaching materials available either from Cambridge or the Ministry of Education (MOE).

I realized I am basically on my own in teaching this component. The only basis for the quality of teaching would be the student assessment grades. It is entirely up to me to determine how to teach the broad concepts outlined in the syllabus and to guess the level of depth and the kinds of questions that would be asked in the students' exams. I am also bothered by the fact that my planning was so focused, influenced and limited by these concerns about what would be tested and how the students would be tested.

I turned to Bing Wen and asked, "So, how do teachers cope with the demands of the syllabus if they do not have background in gamelan and Indian music? How do they even begin to prepare?"

"Well, we just study and make things work or bring students for a workshop. At this level, we expect the students to do their own independent studying on the topics they will be tested on as well. Actually, you have to really give the students different examples each time you draft a common test. That way you can be sure of the integrity of the results. But, of course, you have to search listening examples on your own as well." Bing Wen casually shrugged like he was used to this method. Then after a pause, he added, "See, the more important thing is that they pass the A levels, with high marks hopefully. So far this school is doing very well."

I weighed this answer in and the clarity dawned on me that the exam result was the end goal and not really the longer-term learning. In this system, the students were free to forget after the exams or the mentors could just hope they learned deep enough to remember later on. I also thought how the teachers without sufficient background and competencies to teach Asian music must be feeling really alone and at a loss. For even if my colleague was trying not to show any weakness as a lecturer to me, I sense that this school's faculty was also unsure as to how to approach the topic effectively. How do they teach? How much do they teach? How deep do they teach? How confident are they in teaching this component? I did not

get answers to these questions until a year after I decided to move on to another post. A recent survey I conducted with current 'A' level students also yielded some answers.

What Students Say About Their 'A' Levels Asian Music Education

I walked to my first class lecture in gamelan to about 25 eager JC2 students. After the introductions, I went on to ask them what they have already covered during the past term. A student raised her hand.

"Well, we actually just had very few lessons. We had 1 workshop in gamelan but that's about it. We do not know anything about the other type of gamelan at all. As for Indian music, we had workshops that helped a little."

"Okay then. Let me just pass this evaluation exam and try your best to answer." I passed a short Javanese gamelan exam covering only the basics such as identifying terminologies such as *balungan, slendro, pelog* and *irama* and naming of instruments and their functions. For the musical example, I used the exact same one that was given to them by Bing Wen in their end of the year Common Test.

After an hour, I gathered the exams and went back to my office space to check the responses of the students. I was not the least surprised, despite the same excerpt, to see that majority of them could not identify properly the instruments and define the basic terminologies. The students were also clueless as to how to determine the rhythmic cycle and the tuning system. I could see that most of them were very talented in that they could identify exact pitches but those were randomly placed without clear indication that they understood the tone relationships. I knew that even though Bing Wen expressed that these students should be given "advanced" materials since they had lessons with him the past term, with the very few sessions and 1 workshop, I doubt if everything was clearly understood by the students. The assessment test just proved my predictions correct.

I did the same assessment exam in Indian music, and the results were far worse than the Javanese gamelan. Again, I asked myself how I could possibly cram all the necessary knowledge and skills in 20 h for the entire year, 10 h for each music culture to be exact. Besides, as the lecturer, my background was also not as extensive in these musical traditions, which means I would have to study and analyze to the best of my understanding whatever musical examples I would give my students. I told myself, I would need more than a crash course to properly understand how the raga and tala system work in Indian classical music! This was a real challenge most specifically to the lecturer.

Looking back at this experience, it is now understandable why the teachers I talked to in writing this paper end up simply inviting guest speakers for these components, giving students only 3 h at the most to learn everything. Supposedly, the teachers should follow up but how is this possible if they themselves do not

understand the musical systems really well? It is not uncommon that the 1–2 workshops or guest lectures per year will be the only preparation students would have for the Asian music component at the 'O' and 'A' levels.

This was confirmed when a student from the same JC came to me a year after I left the school for private tuition. This student and mother had no knowledge about me being a former lecturer in the school. The student only had a month preparation time left before the 'A' levels and was panicking because she was not clear about the Asian component. When I sat down with the student, I felt like I had to spell everything out from the very basics when she supposedly had at least 60–80 h preparation already.[17] She told me she encountered the terminologies but was really unsure how they function and work within the music. She explained that I might say that it could be just her not listening at all to her lessons, but the fact was they only had two sessions plus a workshop each to cover both gamelan and Indian music. The student expressed that even if I ask her schoolmates, they would tell me the same thing. The mother said no one in the faculty seemed to really know what to do with this component.

I remembered sending Bing Wen a Facebook message about this situation and offered to help in the school again since I had the time then. Surprisingly, I received a response that he thought he knew who that student was and that she and the mother were making up stories. He also said the school did not have any problem at all teaching the Asian music component and that my help was not needed. I just sighed and wondered why some lecturers could not admit they needed help in certain areas when there was clear evidence that students were struggling to get by.

I sent out an open-ended survey questionnaire to four schools offering 'A' levels in writing this paper. Unfortunately, only one school sent out the responses of students; the lecturer also did not answer the questions specifically addressed to him/her. Out of the 29 students, 11 are from the 'O' levels. The results of the survey are therefore context-specific to one school program. There are also very few thoughtful responses with majority simply answering 'yes' or 'no' without any further explanations.

Below is a summary of the responses:

Eighty three percent of the respondents have at least 10 years of western classical music background in piano or violin; 93 % have theoretical background and some practical hands-on experience through brief workshops on gamelan, Indian music, and Chinese music from their 'O' levels; 76 % think that the requirements are reasonable, but this is unclear since responses allude to the general 'A' levels including the western component; 79 % feel they are given enough materials although they feel these are not clearly explained; 45 % express they will not be able to retain what they have studied, while 41 % feel they will retain only the general facts but not the details; 72 % of the students think that studying non-western music is necessary for their education.

[17] The student is a JC2 who is about to sit for the A levels. At this stage, students should have had 30–40 h per year of Asian music preparations for a total of 60–80 h in 2 years.

Table of summary of questionnaire responses

Categories	Percentage of responses (%)
Students with at least 10 years of western classical music background	83
Students with theoretical background and some hands-on experience in non-western music during their 'O' levels	93
Students who think the requirements are reasonable (includes western music)	76
Students who think materials are enough although not clearly explained	79
Students who think they will not retain what they have studied after the exams	45
Students who think they will retain only general facts and not the details after the exams	41
Students who think non-western music education is important	72

The top suggestion by 93 % of the respondents is related to practical knowledge on the instruments and ensemble playing. Most students feel they need more hands-on experience to relate theory to practice. One student wisely suggested bringing in local musicians at a regular basis to explain the concepts more to them. The students feel that although they are given enough materials, the teachers are unsure as to how to systematically organize them. They also have the impression that their teachers are not familiar with the exams. There is also a comment that the materials are mostly text-based but not enough listening extracts.

In general, considering my personal experience and the student feedback, there really is a serious need to design a proper way to organize instruction and development of practice exam materials that will be effective within the 30–40 h timeframe per year given to the Asian component. But first, the lecturers need to acknowledge the fact that assistance is needed; Only through this first step that any form of action on the part of the exam board and national curriculum planning can be expected.

Final Reflections and Suggestions

As I look back at these experiences, I realized that I have been keeping these thoughts of assisting lecturers of the 'O' and 'A' levels Asian component long enough to warrant their importance to me. I am still unsure how I can effectively accomplish this task but I believe that I can try to use my immediate opportunities. This chapter is a first step of getting this problem out in the public. It is important to show the voices of the students and my experiences as a former lecturer. I am hoping to conduct a more extensive research of interventionist nature in the near future to actively test ideas on a suitable pedagogical system. In the meantime, as closing thoughts, I would like to offer some suggestions to maximize learning beyond examination in the 'A' levels Asian component.

First, there is a need for a more progressive curriculum design for the Asian component from 'O' to 'A' levels. In this way, the 60–80 h total in both JC levels supposedly allocated to the study of Asian music will be effectively utilized. As I see it, 60–80 h of education in gamelan and Indian music should be sufficient enough, especially if there is some preparation already done at the 'O' levels and the goal seems to be for students to have a grasp of their essential elements for a deeper appreciation. The bigger problem in actual classroom situations, as related by the students, is either: (1) lecturers barely utilize the maximum hours, resorting to 1–2 guest lectures or workshops to cover the entire module; or (2) the hours are not used effectively because of the uncertainty of lecturers about the syllabus and the subject matter. If there is a curriculum design that clearly specifies what types of skills are targeted for each level, lecturers will not second guess what preparations should be done.

Second, lecturers should be given sustained teacher training in the various components. During the course of my teaching the 'A' levels, I constantly took mental note that I should devote my summer vacation to intensive lessons in the gamelan or Indian vocal/tabla lessons. I unfortunately did not have the opportunity that year but I went the following year and spent 40 days in Solo, Indonesia studying Javanese and Balinese gamelan and dance 3–5 h every day. I subsequently went to Bali to learn *kendhang*[18] and dance. I can truthfully say that my understanding of the theoretical knowledge I have previously acquired in my graduate studies and preparations for my 'A' levels classes made more sense within the context of performance. Even the functions of the instruments go beyond textbook knowledge when contextualized. Each component requires some form of specialized knowledge and experience and so teachers should be given this first before they can be expected to teach the students.

Third, the Cambridge exam board should identify the specifics of the musical elements that will be tested. For example, specific scale systems and rhythmic cycles should be itemized. Expecting the students who have not had any substantial background in any of the Asian music genres outlined at the 'A' levels to randomly identify the myriad scales and cycles in these traditions is rather ambitious. The goal for introducing Asian music tradition is "to give opportunities for critical thinking through music analysis and to encourage active listening experiences" (H2 Music Syllabus 2007, p. 2). These experiences must be contextualized and approached systematically in order to develop a "life-long interest" in these musical systems. There is a progressive system in learning gamelan and Indian music and this should be presented to students in a similar manner. The goal should be re-evaluated of whether it is just to give a general idea of the systems without any focus or to develop a deeper understanding of the systems through focused examples. In any case, a thorough and specific examination of selected scales and rhythms will ensure better understanding and appreciation of these systems.

[18] This is a two-headed Balinese drum used to lead the Balinese Gong Kebyar ensemble.

Fourth, MOE and Cambridge should make appropriate resources available for the teachers to use as classroom practice materials. The student comments show that although enough materials are given to them, they are not clear as to how they should be applied. When I was teaching, the tendency was to prepare a lot for the classes due to the broad expectations of the syllabus. There was also this concern of not knowing how the students will be tested exactly and so I wanted to make sure that they were at least exposed to a whole lot of things. This just caused confusion and information overload on the part of the students. Once the specific aspects of a *raga* or *tala* have been narrowed down clearly for the teachers, for example, appropriate materials should be provided for instructional purposes. These materials should be guided, considering the fact that the lecturers will most likely have very minimal knowledge of these traditions.

And, **fifth**, the schools should maintain a budget to pay local artists to provide more sustained hands-on workshops for the students. These workshops should direct attention to the relationships and functions of instruments within the musical structure and not simply for exposure or experience. Students can spend a whole day playing gamelan, for instance, but if the necessary information they needed to get out of the workshop is not highlighted and emphasized the entire exercise will only serve as a good experience in the end. Hands-on learning is very important in the development of listening skills especially of an oral tradition, and so these workshops should be a sustained part of the curriculum design and not a one off activity. This will also create a healthy relationship between the schools and community artists.

It is my hope that this personal narrative will serve as a data source for the re-evaluation of the 'A' levels Asian syllabus. At present, a friend who is teaching at the 'O' levels showed me the example exam; The syllabus has become even more demanding in that students are expected to learn not only gamelan and Indian music but also African music, Japanese Noh and Kabuki, and Chinese music. It is good to increase the listening experiences of the students through different musical systems, but we always have to ask whether life-long appreciation and understanding can really be achieved through unclear and crammed musical knowledge. As an ethnomusicologist, I appreciate the inclusion of varied musical systems in the syllabus, but we have to be careful in their implementation. We need to understand that non-western classical musical systems require specialist teachers and long-term, rigorous learning just as much as western classical music. The 'A' levels is not just intended for general music appreciation but for those seeking deeper knowledge of music. If the Asian syllabus will remain the same, then I really doubt if it will serve its purpose.

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