

Teaching traditional music in Malaysian schools: Considering the cultural context

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Abstract

When dealing with traditional music, cultural context and authenticity are issues that need to be considered in designing the teaching of local music traditions. Traditional music is an oral tradition. Learning traditional music among musicians was by non-formal education, i.e., by listening, observing and playing. The transfer of skills and knowledge was carried out orally within the community of musicians. With the advent of formal music education in schools and universities, notation is now being used in part to facilitate and expedite the learning process. However, teaching certain traditional music using notation may not only be a misrepresentation of the authentic practice of this music, but may also not give students the skills necessary in playing traditional music as opposed to playing in western ensembles. Establishing an accurate context for practical activities on the gamelan can provide not only a sound methodology but also allow for appropriate evaluation. This study examined the teaching approaches of selected Malay traditional music in Malaysian schools and universities. The study utilized a qualitative approach. Ten school and university gamelan instructors were interviewed on the nature of the transmission process of traditional music in the classroom. Based on the responses provided by these respondents, it appears that the nature of the transmission process may not occur in the cultural context and that preservation is of the music and playing techniques.

Keywords: Traditional music, cultural context, teaching

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1. Introduction

As an oral art, traditional music is typically taught by listening, observing and playing whereby the transfer of skills and knowledge is carried out orally within the community of musicians. With the advent of formal music education in Malaysian schools and universities, most of the music curricula includes a traditional music component aimed at preserving local music traditions. However, it appears that what is preserved is more the music than the actual context of the music. For example, notation is being used in part to facilitate and expedite the learning process and issues related to the learning of traditional music orally are not emphasised. Implications concerning the authenticity of the tradition when designing the teaching of local music traditions may not be considered.

Establishing an accurate context for practical activities in the teaching of traditional musical instruments can provide not only a sound methodology but also allow for appropriate evaluation (Steptoe, 2005). Teaching traditional music using notation may not only be a misrepresentation of the authentic practice of this music but may also not give students the skills necessary to play traditional music as opposed to playing in western ensembles. Some of these differences include the emphasis on togetherness with no individual instrument dominating, the importance of a high level of sensitivity and depth of feeling as opposed to personal virtuosity, the study of technique at the same time as studying the repertoire and the importance of aural sensitivity in playing traditional instruments where musical dialogue occurs through listening (Supanggih, 2008). In modern day compositions, the characteristics are still maintained and, as such, teaching methods that develop these characteristics need to be adopted.

Dunbar-Hall (2009) proposes the concept of ethnopedagogy in which the learning and teaching of music are perceived as culturally contextualised. To engage in ethnopedagogy is “to utilise and interpret a range of pedagogic strategies to reflect the types of music being taught and the cultures from which those musics derive” (p76). According to Dunbar-Hall, possible outcomes for music education include assisting in understanding music under consideration, deepening understanding of the culture surrounding the music and broadening the methodological approaches of music educators.

In developing a structured method of teaching traditional instruments with the traditional approach and to ensure that students have a foundation upon which they can understand gamelan music, it is very important for students to know the characteristics which define the particular traditional instrument and learn traditional playing techniques and repertoire. As an example, the Indonesian *karawitan* uses a rule centred on the melodic framework called the *balungan*. This is akin to what is referred to as *lagu* in Malay gamelan. The *balungan* is fixed and is a reference point for the ensemble as all parts are drawn from or are elaborated from the melodic framework of each piece of music. In the gamelan ensemble, the *gendang* is the leader of the tempo while the *bonang* is typically the leader of the melody parts and both instruments give the clues and signals for ensemble coordination. This same body of conventions can be used to describe the Malay gamelan repertoire found in Malaysia (Hardjo, 2004; Mastusky, 2008; Perlman, 2004) as follows:

1. Form-defining instruments where the gong acts as the punctuating instrument that marks the structure of a composition/demarcates the time cycles of the lagu, while the kenong defines the subunits;
2. Instruments that bear the melodic framework and include the saron family. The instruments play the same melody but in different octaves;
3. Elaborating parts, i.e., parts which are rhythmically more active as played by the bonang and gambang;
4. The gendang which is the rhythmic instrument and controls the tempo.

Courses in traditional music are typically aimed at preserving local music traditions. However, it is not clear how this objective is implemented in the classroom. The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of the transmission process of teaching the Malay gamelan specifically in Malaysian schools and universities to shed some light on how teachers view the teaching of the gamelan and issues related to teaching.

2. Method

As this study was exploratory in nature, the researchers’ intentions were to examine the teaching approaches of the gamelan in schools and universities. The qualitative method was used in this study in which the instrument selected for data collection was the structured interview format. This approach was selected in part due to the nature of the responses required and the number of respondents involved. Respondents for the interview were 10 school and university gamelan instructors with teaching experience between five and nine years. Where personal interviews were not possible, the interview questions were e-mailed to respondents.

For the interviews, questions posed to the respondents were on the issues related to the teaching of the gamelan as a traditional form of music, course contents, approaches and sequences of activities used in teaching, notation, and repertoire.

3. Results

For each question, responses were collated and summarised according to the similarity of the answers from the respondents (Table 1).

Table 1. Responses to interview questions

No.	Question	Summary of Responses
1.	Being a traditional form of music/ensemble, are there issues that you feel need to be taken into consideration when planning to teach the gamelan?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficient space for the instruments and students; the instruments need to be in good condition and tuned periodically, an appropriate class size to allow ample opportunity for students to learn without having to wait too long for their turn. • History of the Malay gamelan to allow students to understand the differences between the Malay gamelan and the Indonesian gamelan, including differences in scale, playing techniques, terminology and repertoire. • The musical score. • The students’ interests; being a traditional form of music/ensemble, there may be some students who are not really interested in playing the gamelan, as they feel it is rather easy to play.
2.	Do you incorporate these issues in your teaching? If yes, how? If not, why not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have to adjust accordingly if space or instruments are an issue. We need to arrange the instruments every time the class is in session. The management should consider buying an extra gamelan set so that classes are

- not disrupted each time there is a performance invitation.
- As an art enthusiast, I need to ensure my students know the origins of the gamelan and differences between the Malay and Indonesian gamelan styles. People are sometimes confused when they hear gamelan music thinking the gamelan is from Java. The approach I take to show the differences to my students is to teach the art of playing the traditional Malay gamelan including the repertoire. I also teach them techniques such as the *cincang* and damping on the saron instruments and improvisation on the bonang. When they understand the traditional style of playing, I then introduce contemporary gamelan music.
 - I introduce students to the different styles and techniques of playing the gamelan. I teach both traditional and contemporary gamelan so that they can see that playing the gamelan can be as challenging as playing other musical instruments.
3. What are the contents of your gamelan syllabus?
- Students have to learn seven pieces and are free to select whichever instrument they prefer. They can either stay on the selected instrument or change it. From the seven pieces, there will be one compulsory piece in which all students must be able to play on the bonang for their mid semester assessment.
 - History, playing techniques (including damping on the saron and *cincang*,) improvisation for the bonang, reading gamelan notation using cipher notation and gendang rhythms. Once they have achieved a certain level of proficiency, I teach contemporary repertoire. Students are taught to read western notation and exposed to techniques for playing creative compositions. This way, the students will know the difference between playing the traditional style as opposed to creative gamelan music.
4. How do you approach teaching the gamelan? Can you list the sequence of activities in your teaching?
- Besides hands-on activities, students have to do a folio assignment about other types of gamelan apart from the Malay gamelan as part of their final assessment. Course contents include an introduction to the gamelan instruments, history, exercises to familiarise students with the instruments, *kepatihan* notation (gamelan notation including symbols for the kenong and gong) and how certain instruments (bonang, peking, gambang) will interpret the notation from the lead sheet. The frequency of moving to a new piece depends on the performance level
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of a taught piece. In the seventh week of the semester, all students must be able to play a compulsory piece on the bonang. Discussions and presentations are held periodically. The final assessment will be either to perform a traditional Malay gamelan piece or a contemporary piece.

- The approach that I take is to introduce the culture of traditional music in Malaysia; explain how an almost extinct type of traditional music has been preserved and commercialised; encourage students to attend gamelan concerts such as the World Gamelan Festival; encourage students to perform the gamelan at occasions such as Convocation ceremonies and competitions organised by universities or the government.
 - Contents of my classes include: a) history; b) instruments; c) playing techniques; d) notation; and e) basic arrangement.
 - I normally demonstrate to the students how to play each instrument in the gamelan family. After I have explained to them about the history of the gamelan, I will start by introducing the different techniques of playing on the gamelan set. Students have to play each and every instrument. Once they are able to play it, they will be put in smaller groups and they will play in an ensemble.
5. In your classes, are students expected to learn all instruments of the gamelan including the gendang (percussion instrument)? Why?
- Students are not required to learn all the instruments. However, I encourage students to learn all the instruments (at least how to play the instrument with the correct technique). If students are able to achieve a high level of proficiency on all instruments, it means they have reached a higher order thinking skill of the psychomotor domain. This will make the marking process easier.
 - Yes, I make it compulsory for students to play at least 3-4 of the gamelan instruments at the fundamental level. This is to allow students to understand and familiarise themselves with the instruments. As for the gendang, students have to know that it is the instrument that controls the tempo. They will then be able to feel tempo changes.
 - Yes, as the gendang is the most important instrument (rhythmically) and is included in the secondary school music exam paper.
 - Yes, because this will prevent them from getting bored.
6. Do you teach with or without
- I use both cipher and western notation as it is

notation? Why?

easier for students to understand, e.g., the gendang rhythm patterns.

- I use traditional notation in order for the students to know how gamelan was learnt using cipher notation. I teach western notation for students to understand music written in musical language. It will make it easier if they were to play in an orchestra setting.
 - Playing with notation is very important to develop a student's playing skills.
 - Malay gamelan repertoire is in the numbering system form. I teach them western notation to make them understand better the whole concept of the repertoire.
7. What repertoire do you start with in your teaching and why?
- In the beginning, I do not start with the repertoire. I focus on exercises such as playing scales and intervals, both ascending and descending. This is for students to get used to playing the respective instruments. Techniques such as damping on the saron can be mastered correctly.
 - Repertoire which is easy and has basic techniques suitable for beginners.
8. What pieces are included in the repertoire you teach and why?
- Perang, as it is a simple piece with repetitions until the piece ends when the Coda is played. The gong cycle is also different (played more frequently and alternates between the gong agung and gong suwukan) compared to other repertoires.
 - Perang Selinan (Perang Besar) which is similar in form to Perang but structurally expanded. This piece is introduced for students to understand the difference between Perang and Perang Selinan.
 - Timang Burung; an easy piece with rests on the first beat.
 - Togok; an easy piece with rests on beats one and four in certain passages.
 - Topeng; faster in tempo than Timang Burung and Togok, with attacks that students might face difficulty feeling and mastering.
 - Lambang Sari; to introduce eighth notes and rests.
 - Antawada as it is melodically similar to Lambang Sari and is also taught to introduce eighth notes and rests.

The above repertoire is selected to help develop students' playing abilities in order to prepare them towards a more advanced level where the students will learn to improvise.

4. Discussion

Responses to the interview questions appear to indicate that the issue of contextualising traditional music does not directly appear to be a main consideration in the teaching of the gamelan for the instructors interviewed. While the contents of the course generally constitute the components necessary for teaching the gamelan, i.e., history, instruments, playing technique and repertoire, the approaches described do not indicate that the gamelan is necessarily taught according to the body of conventions. All the teachers used notation to teach, be it cipher or western, for ease of understanding and playing. None of the instructors mentioned the need to teach gamelan orally to develop the sensitivities as described by Supanggih (2008). It is unclear whether the teachers are developing ensemble playing among the students in order to teach them how to learn to listen out for all parts, which is an essential component of gamelan playing. While the selection of the repertoire is based on the level of difficulty, only one respondent mentioned the teaching of a piece because of the different gong cycles in the piece.

One possible approach to teaching the gamelan contextually is to follow the body of conventions as follows:

1. Students are first introduced to the melody line which is similar to the concept of *balungan* in Indonesian gamelan. Students are made to feel the stress that falls on beats 2 and 4, and to listen to the question and answer nature of the melody. The melody is taught in phrases and repeated until it is mastered.
2. Once the melody is mastered, students are introduced to the structure of the *lagu* as determined by the gong cycle. The instruments that provide the underlying structural punctuation are the gong and kenong. Students will learn to direct their attention to the structural markers and observe their relationship to the melody thereby allowing them to relate their own playing to those around them.
3. The instruments that have an improvisatory function, i.e. the bonang and gambang, are then introduced. Once the part is mastered, students are taught to improvise.
4. Students are introduced to the rhythmic pattern of the gendang and how the pattern changes as it heads to the end of the *lagu* and the gong.

5. Conclusion

As the respondents for this study were gamelan instructors in schools and universities, the main aim of the course is for the students to be able to play the gamelan to satisfy the course objectives within the time constraints of a semester or term. Given the nature of the art form and the semi-improvisatory style of the gamelan, it is suggested that the non-formal method of transmission actually be applied to teaching the gamelan as it will not only help students develop their listening and aural abilities as well as an awareness of playing in an ensemble, but also help them understand the cultural context of the gamelan. As the Malay gamelan repertoire is more melodic in nature and not structurally complex, this may be possible even given the time constraints of lessons in schools and universities. Notation can be used as a working guide that provides the framework of a piece. An understanding of the function of each instrument will allow the musicians to elaborate the line according to the instrument played. In this way, students not only learn to do, but also learn to think the way traditional musicians do. It can also allow students to learn to be reactive and flexible and develop their listening skills and ensemble playing. The gamelan can also be used to encourage active participation in music making, emphasise musical knowledge, and foster intercultural acceptance and understanding that can help with the musical growth of children. In this way, students are directly

involved in preserving and revitalising their own music culture which is an important mission and vision of the music curriculum (Bramantyo, 2009).

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