

Gamelan: a community music activity that became part of the world music curriculum for Toronto's schools in Ontario, Canada

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In May 2000, teachers, students, parents, friends and families as well as Board members from the Toronto District School Board, (TDSB) witnessed the launching of the *World Music Curriculum* for grades 1-8. They saw and heard a wayang version of the Canadian history of the Battle of Fort York in 1813 complete with live gamelan accompaniment. They saw and heard students playing Ghanaian West African drumming and singing folk songs from the Republic of Georgia.

This happened during Education Week, which meant a huge gathering of school teachers and administrators because the Toronto District School Board is the largest school Board in Canada. Formed in 1998, it is the product of the amalgamation of seven individual Boards of Education. It serves almost 1.6 million electors of the City of Toronto. 18,000 teachers work for the Toronto District School Board and it has a total number of 200,000 elementary students in its schools.

Undoubtedly, the significance and impact of the *World Music Curriculum* project extends beyond Education Week. Initial analysis of the case study that I am doing on the *World Music Curriculum* project reveals collaboration, commitment and a vision for active musical knowing and music-making as key ingredients that form and inform the project.

Collaboration

The *World Music Curriculum* initially known as *The Music Of The World* project was the result of a first-of-its-kind collaborative project between three big communities in Toronto –corporate business, musicians, educators and students. Each of these communities are profiled below in order to enhance our understanding and appreciation of their past efforts in communal envisioning and participation.

Dufferin Mall has developed a reputation for initiating and supporting community service programs that empower the underprivileged communities they serve. Situated in a working class neighbourhood in midtown Toronto, Dufferin Mall's clientele is culturally and economically diverse.

In the early 1990's when the Canadian economy was in recession, the mall lost a number of long term retailers but saw that the greatest impact occurred in the community itself. The recession led to high unemployment levels among the area's blue collar workers. Criminal and gang activity increased and inevitably, it found its way into the mall. Customers were scared by youths and others who were loitering in the mall and as a result, customer traffic waned, sales levels began to drop and more stores closed.

Dufferin Mall's "solution" was brilliant in its imagination to see that the "fix" lay not in the immediate issue of getting rid of gang-related activities. Communities in their market area had to feel empowered to want to build a future that reflected worth and dignity in their lives.

Their marketing philosophy involved going from door to door, talking to families and asking them what kind of community they would like to live in and how they saw the mall's role in this process. They found out that the population in their market area was quite young with a median age that was significantly lower than the city average. Two thirds of the homes were occupied by families with young children. Accordingly, their community-based programming focused on

families and included a storefront social services agency for teens; a youth theatre group and an enriched playground. This helped to improve the reputation of the centre which led to a turn around in consumer sales and the overall viability of the shopping centre.

This innovative alliance of community and business interests allowed Dufferin Mall to form working partnerships with area residents, community groups, school boards, local government and social service agencies. Thus, when cutbacks to education funding prior to 1999 substantially reduced the arts and music programs, Dufferin Mall took the leadership role. These programs, considered “expendable” by local school boards in order to ensure sufficient funding for core subjects such as math and English, sparked outrage and set off a series of protests by parents and the artistic community. Dufferin Mall recognized that this issue would have a long term negative impact in the children’s lives and the quality of education in the 75 schools located in their market area.

They came up with the *Music Of The World* project, which was designed to instill an appreciation for the arts as represented by their multi-cultural market. The objectives of the *Music of the World* project were:

- To take a leadership role in the development of a community service program that would provide music education to schoolchildren in their market area. They particularly targeted music programs that had been eliminated from curriculums because of Provincial funding cutbacks.
- To develop a community service program that actively encouraged the intellectual and emotional development of children and youths in their market.
- To develop a community service program which engaged children and youths intellectually; emotionally and physically in music.
- To develop a community service program that reinforced and supported Dufferin Mall’s community-minded positioning.

The musicians involved in the Music Of the World Project were professionals who were known for their versatility and their ability to bring a high degree of musicianship to more than one musical culture. Except for the musician from Ghana the rest had their training in the Western Classical tradition.

At some point in their professional journeys they made the decision to study music of other cultures. This meant going to the countries where the music originated, studying there and developing relationships among members in the arts community. They established exchange programs and visits and invited musicians from the home country to come to Toronto to present workshops for their community music groups. These community music groups comprised of participants who came from all walks of life and whose audience base was equally diverse.

Partnerships were also developed with educators through outreach enrichment programs sponsored by individual schools and through the artist-in-residence programs funded by the Ontario Arts Council. Community links and networks were established through this process as these musicians shared their resources with teachers and students.

Music educators in the elementary level depended on these enrichment programs to supplement their lesson planning for multicultural music. The availability of world music resources for grades 1-8 teachers was meager. There were multicultural songs within songbooks, records and tapes but most of these materials were outdated. During an interview that I conducted with a music teacher, he remarked that he only knew of the Portuguese and Greek songbooks because he saw them in a box as he was helping to sort out the Toronto District School Board library. Individual teachers did purchase updated materials but these came out of their own pocket and could not be done on a regular basis.

The need for a *World Music Curriculum* for elementary teachers was also generated by the immigrant population of the TDSB students from non-Western countries. About 24% of the TDSB elementary students are born outside of Canada in more than 175 countries. 41% of its students in the elementary schools have a language other than English as their first language (TDSB website). It is not uncommon to hear Urdu, Swahili and Cantonese spoken in the schools' hallways.

The need for a World Music Curriculum was pressed further when *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: The Arts* document published in 1998 mandated that students were to be exposed to a broader scope of musical encounters:

Grade 2 – Creative Work

Sing music from a variety of cultures and historical periods

Grade 3 - Critical Thinking

Express their response to music from a variety of cultures

This was emphasized at the elementary level because it was seen that students who entered grade 9 did not have the necessary background and skills to enable them to fully participate in a high school music curriculum that also included the study of non-Western music. The high school music curriculum was revised in 1999 for grades 9 and 10 and in 2000 for grades 11 and 12. It stated clearly the use of non-Western music, among other styles, for serious study:

Grade 9 – Theory

The student will explain the function of music in a variety of historical and cultural contexts (e.g. Indonesian gamelan).

Grade 12 - Analysis

The student will describe through research and listening, a distinctive aspect of a non-Western musical tradition.

Vision for active musical knowing and music-making

The idea of a World Music Curriculum was therefore a topic much discussed within these three communities – educators, musicians and the corporate business. It took one phone call to start the game plan rolling. This happened in the Spring of 1999 when the marketing manager of Dufferin Mall approached TDSB officials about developing their concept of enabling students to explore music from different cultures in the classroom. They were able to bring the musicians on board soon after, because of their strong affiliation with world music musicians through their sponsorship of “Music In The Park”, a west end World Music Festival.

The music of Ghana, Indonesia and the Republic of Georgia was chosen because these musical cultures could address the needs of a large student body in the classroom. Moreover, they were established groups in the community music scene in Toronto. Gamelan Toronto, for example, which plays the Central Javanese repertoire, has performed at the Du Maurier Theater and the Betty Oliphant Theater, public venues for the performing arts. In 1977, it was the host for “Gamelan Summit”, a nationwide festival that brought all the Canadian gamelan ensembles to perform in Toronto and in 2001, it was invited to take part in the Canadian Asian Dance Festival.

Nur Intan Murtadza, Andrew Timar and David Powell, all members of Gamelan Toronto have shared their knowledge of gamelan through workshops in schools and in museums. David Powell patiently took 14 years to build his own set of gamelan out of oil drums and cooking pots of various sizes.

From the beginning, the World Music Curriculum was envisioned to be a resource that would engage music educators and their students with real live musicians who were deeply involved in

creating their own music. This was approved by the TDSB district-wide music coordinators who wanted a curriculum that would engage and elicit genuine participation on the part of the teachers and the students. This perspective also had the full support of Dufferin Mall who wanted educational programs relevant to the communities they serve. The curriculum, informed by community music practices, was structured to include professional musicians who would help the music teachers understand performance practices and the cultural milieu of the music. Having musicians dialoging with teachers brought confusion and heated moments but also allowed for experiences such as the following to occur:

The musicians were able to impart their passion and vibrancy for the kind of music they were doing to a large body of students.

The students were able to immerse themselves totally in a music-making project and were able to articulate how much fun it was. The gamelan curriculum which also incorporates wayang had the students designing the puppets themselves and doing historical research to come up with a Canadian story.

The dynamic engagement between students, musicians and teachers made the curriculum come alive.

Commitment

Instruments needed for the World Music Curriculum were bought by the TDSB, making it the only school board in all of Canada to own a complete Central Javanese gamelan set. Music educators sought to find out more of the musical cultures they were learning about and shared with their students. Some of these music educators have even joined the community music groups of these three musical cultures, thereby establishing links between formal and informal music-making contexts.

Students who have had the Indonesian gamelan curriculum expressed interest in continuing to play and learning more about gamelan. Nur Intan Murtadza proposed the idea of having a children's gamelan community group. In 2002, she organized weekly rehearsals for them and this past May, the Indonesian Consulate honored the group in a special naming ceremony. The group is now known as Sekar Sunu Laras. In Spring 2003, they will perform a joint concert with the Riverdale Youth Singers, a choral community group for youths.

These and other links established since the World Music Curriculum was launched will be part of my case study research on teaching processes and relational dynamics that occur when community music practices interfaces with music learning in schools. The results of this research will be shared at a later conference date.

References:

The Ontario Curriculum: The Arts (1998; 1999; 2000) published by the Ministry of Education, Government of Ontario, Canada

Toronto District School Board website: <http://www.tdsb.on.ca>