

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Reports - 2022

Cultural Connections Through Music

Patty Chan

What is this research about?

The goal of Cultural Connections Through Music is to enhance the music school curriculum by introducing a collaborative and culturally rich music program that is experiential, fostering exchange and connection between students, musicians, and the community. These new experiences and connections will hopefully inspire more projects and activities that bring communities together.

This project will build upon the current curriculum and provide a program model with the following objectives:

- 1) Heighten the sense of community
- 2) Encourage cultural exchange and collaboration through music
- 3) Allow students to experience rehearsals and performances with a Chinese orchestra
- 4) Celebrate diversity

What did the researcher do?

The project consisted of presenting a series of virtual workshops/sessions that introduced Community Music School of Toronto (CMST) students to Chinese instruments and music, culminating in a collaboration between students with members of the Toronto Chinese Orchestra (TCO) in a community performance. A traditional Chinese orchestra has four sections: bowed string, plucked string, winds, and percussion. Western instruments like cellos and double basses are also used. Students had the opportunity to play/sing a traditional Chinese work as well as a piece that is familiar to them which was arranged by TCO musicians.



The biweekly workshops began in February with an introduction to the traditional Chinese orchestra and its instruments to several classes, ranging in ages from 6 – 15 years. Due to the pandemic and having to

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Reports - 2022

resort to virtual teaching, two classes were selected for the project (taking into consideration the ages of the students): the Intermediate Jam (ages 9-12) and the String Quintet (high schoolers). The Intermediate Jam were taught to sing a song in Cantonese, and a song that was written for CMST, called "Every Little Voice." In order to help the students feel comfortable on concert day, Diane Kolin (a classical and jazz singer) would lead the students in singing both songs in their classes and on stage.

For the String Quintet, Chinese instruments were lent to the students and teacher to use. Each selected an instrument (zhongruan, liuqin, or the erhu) and learned the basic playing techniques and the two songs to be performed.

The performance was part of the Toronto Chinese Orchestra's *Lift Concert* which took place on June 25, 2022 at the P.C. Ho Theatre, Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto. Students and their families and friends were invited to attend, with the offer of transportation to and from the school to the venue. Dinner was provided for the performers. The students performed in the first half of the concert, then were seated in the audience for the second half.

What did the researcher find?

The workshops and performance were a great success. With the pandemic that prevented in-person interaction and presented logistical challenges of learning new instruments and songs through Zoom, being flexible and ready to pivot was very necessary. Staying engaged with each student, offering encouragement, and being empathetic to their challenges helped create a safe and welcoming atmosphere. At the concert, the parents/guardians, friends, and families of the students expressed gratitude for this collaborative experience. The students enjoyed the learning process and this unique performance opportunity. The Intermediate Jam included students without any previous music experience. Learning to sing in a different language and perform with an orchestra on stage was at first daunting at the dress rehearsal, but they were thrilled with the results. The String Quintet students and teacher also enjoyed learning the new instruments and playing with a traditional Chinese orchestra. There was a deep sense of joy and pride in their accomplishments, and they all asked for more future collaborations!



The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Reports - 2022

Although music can act as a cultural connector, there remain many obstacles: the organizations and institutions that decide funding, presenting, programming, and educational curriculum are strong gatekeepers, and implementing changes that celebrate diversity will take time. Meanwhile, we need to continue to listen to diasporic voices and press for action. This project will lead to a better understanding of one another, bridging the gap between generations, cultural identities and perspectives, through music.

I will end with a short story of what happened after a Chinese music workshop with 6 – 8 year olds from CMST:

It was question and answer time after the presentation. I saw a little boy wave his hand excitedly trying to get my attention. I asked if he had a question. He blurted out loudly: “I am Chinese!” He was so proud – his classmates were learning about music from his heritage! It was very moving - this is what I wished I experienced as a child – celebrating, rather than hiding our differences. Music is a bridge and can help keep a link to heritage but also gently connect with other cultures. In education, moving beyond Eurocentric arts and music will introduce and lift music of other cultures, sparking curiosity and bringing appreciation of diversity and new perspectives.

How can you use this research?

Creating cross-cultural collaborative programs with community organizations that uses music to connect will reap long-term benefits:

- 1) Engaging and encouraging curiosity and creativity while learning about music from other cultures
- 2) Possible expansion of this project to include music from many different cultures, thereby allowing students to connect with music of their own heritage while exploring the arts outside of the Eurocentric genre
- 3) Community-building and finding ways to bridge differences and build relationships

About the researcher

Patty Chan is a second generation Chinese Canadian erhu musician, educator, and author. She is the Music Director of the Toronto Chinese Orchestra, Co-Founder of the cross-cultural PhoENX Ensemble, and Director of Centre for Music Innovations (musinno.com). Completing her MA in Ethnomusicology at York University in 2022, Patty’s area of research is in the exploration of the history and development of Chinese orchestral music in Canada and its impact on identity and community.

Patty has taught erhu and Chinese music at York, Toronto Metropolitan, and Carleton universities and has led and participated in music exchanges and tours in Canada and Asia. She has written several English language books about the erhu that have sold in over 30 countries, and a storybook in three languages about Chinese instruments for children. Patty is currently creating a Chinese music database for English readers at the Centre for Music Innovations in partnership with the Little Giant Chinese Chamber Orchestra in Taiwan. Her focus continues to be forging cultural connections through music.

Citations

Departments of Justice. 2018. “The Politics of Multiculturalism”, Cultural Diversity in Canada: The Social Construction of Racial Difference
https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/jsp-sjp/rp02_8-dr02_8/p5.html

Dere, William Ging Wee. 2019. “Being Chinese in Canada : the Struggle for Identity, Redress and Belonging.” Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre.

Djao, Wei. 2001. “Being Chinese: Voices from the Diaspora”. University of Arizona Press.

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Reports - 2022

Prinz, Aloys. 2019. "Migration, Cultural Identity and Diasporas – An Identity Economics Approach". IZA Journal of Development and Migration.
<https://doi.org/10.2478/izajodm-2019-0001>

Slobin, Mark. 2011. "The Destiny of 'Diaspora' in Ethnomusicology." Clayton, Martin, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, eds. *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge

Keywords: Community music programs, multiculturalism, Chinese music, identity, cultural bridges, Chinese orchestra

About the Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

The Helen Carswell Chair represents a partnership between York University and Community Music Schools of Toronto at Jane and Finch. For more information on this partnership, visit our website at helencarswell.ampd.yorku.ca.