

# **MALAY GAMELAN: APPROACHES OF MUSIC LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNITY MUSIC**

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## **Abstract**

More often than not, community music gathers people from different backgrounds. Experiences are shared and this enables community development in terms of personal growth, self-esteem and self-confidence. These are just some of the aspects that community music promotes, apart from music making. Creativity and expression are important in music making as this will further develop creative thinking skills among musicians. This paper looked into the role of Rhythm in Bronze (RiB), a local music group in Malaysia, in community music work practices that uses Malay gamelan as the medium. The research delved into the different aspects of the approaches used to enhance music learning through community music, particularly the activities used and how they relate to Vygotsky's theory of socialization in learning. Qualitative approaches are used in this research, where observation, interview and review of the group's past work were conducted to gather information and data on how music has been taught to children through community music.

**Keywords:** community music, Rhythm in Bronze (RiB), Malay gamelan, music learning, Vygotsky

## **Introductory**

Community music is an expression of cultural democracy where musicians are focused in making and it also helps in creating music<sup>1</sup>. Koopman mentioned that there are three main characters which can be found in community music: 1) collaborative music-making; 2) community development; and 3) personal growth<sup>2</sup>. Creating community music based on these three main characteristics helps the people of the community to grow not only among themselves but also within the society they interact with. Hedegaard in Pui Ling and Fleer mentioned that children learn and develop every day when they play music and taking parts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lee, Higgins. *Community music: In theory and in practice*. New York, NY: Oxford. 2012. (p.7)

Lee, Higgins. (2007). "Growth, pathways and groundwork: Community music in the United Kingdom." *International Journal of Community Music* 1.No.1 (2007).doi: 10.1386/ijcm.1.1.23/1

<sup>2</sup>ConstantijnKoopman."Community music as music education: on the educational potential of community music." *International Journal of Music Education* 25, (2007). 153. 151-164. doi: 10.1177/0255761407079951

<sup>3</sup>Pui Ling (Pauline) W. & Fleer, M. (2012) A cultural-historical study of how children from Hong Kong immigrant families develop a learning motive within everyday family practices in Australia. *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 19, no. 2 (2012). 107-126. doi: 10.1080/10749039.2011.634941

In Malaysia, community work focuses more especially in performing arts area with a long history. Several researches have been conducted to educate the local about the importance of this. Works and researches on community in performing arts by Tan SooiBeng, Janet Pillai, Mark Teh, and Rhythm in Bronze (RiB) has contributed to a tremendous outcome to the society. Pillai mentioned that community are used as a platform to gather people with different age group and different thinking skills.<sup>4</sup>

### **Statement of Problem**

Through observation done by the researcher, it is seen that children have always been given minimal chances to do music, especially in schools<sup>5</sup>. With the current implementation of Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) or *Standard Curriculum Primary School*, the previous one hour lesson time for music has been reduced to only half an hour<sup>6</sup> (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2012). In addition, with the latest implementation of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in schools, these are even less time used for face to face learning in music classes. With the decreasing opportunities of using music as a medium of learning in schools, music community are now becoming an alternative avenue for giving children the chance to explore music outside of school hours.

### **The Topic**

This study will look at a local gamelan music group in Malaysia called Rhythm in Bronze (RiB) that has performed a lot of community projects in and around Kuala Lumpur. The approaches used to enhance music learning among community and also how community music is able to encourage music learning among children will be explored. Research conducted regarding community music such as Higgins (2007), Koopman (2007), and Price (2010) mentioned that community music helps in delivering either in teaching or learning, therapy, organization, and networking.

### **The Research Problem**

With less time being allocated to teaching music classes in school, community music has become an alternative way of providing children with music lessons. Current issues in Malaysia public schools are that music classes have been cut down to half an hour slot compared to an hour before this. Teachers are trying their best to complete the syllabus with the new time slot. Beegle (2010) mentioned that extra time needs to be given to children for them to ‘look’ at their musicality during a specific period of time allocated in the school day. Only through this can they be exposed to meaningful learning experiences. Lessons gained from the community will help them learn and understand music in a bigger and wider perspective. It is crucial that children are offered with plenty of opportunities in learning through music classes in school.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Janet Pillai. n.d. Biodata. [http://www.paralimes.ntu.edu.sg/NewsnEvents/3rd%20Singapore%20Heritage%20Science/Documents/Janet%20Pillai\\_BA.pdf](http://www.paralimes.ntu.edu.sg/NewsnEvents/3rd%20Singapore%20Heritage%20Science/Documents/Janet%20Pillai_BA.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Colleen Wong. 2013. “Assessing elementary school students’ Creative-Thinking abilities in Music.” PhD diss., Nova Southeastern University, Florida.

<sup>6</sup>Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, “Kurikulum standard sekolah rendah: Muzik [Standard curriculum for primary school: Music]”. Retrieved from [http://www.moe.gov.my/bpk/index.php?option=com\\_docman&Itemid=83](http://www.moe.gov.my/bpk/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=83) (accessed January 27, 2015).

<sup>7</sup>Chan Cheong Jan&Kwan ShwuShyan. “Implementation of music in government preschools in Malaysia: Music activities, teachers’ perceptions and teachers’ self-efficacy.” Pertanika Journal of Social Science and Humanities 18, (2010). 209-225.

This study will look into how RiB plays an important role in enhancing the teaching and learning of community music within the society will also be looked at. The researcher's primary concern in this study is to comprehend music learning through community music by looking at the local Malaysian gamelan group known as Rhythm in Bronze (RiB).

### **Purpose of Study**

This study seeks to “unpack” and interpret the development of community through gamelan learning. This study will also look into Vygotsky's theory and how it helps in the process of music learning during community music classes and social interaction. Local gamelan practitioners in Malaysia, the group known as Rhythm in Bronze (RiB), will be the subject of the research. The whole teaching and learning process within the classes will also be measured.

### **Current Fieldwork Findings**

The researcher had identified three significance community music work conducted by RiB through the past years. Based on the interviews and observations with the group members, as well as looking through archives of the report of each work<sup>8</sup>, the researcher had analyzed and organized the approaches or learning approaches implemented. It was then categorized based on the research objectives. Three main community music identified were 1) Selayang Project (2004); 2) Selayang Project II (2006); and 3) Children's Music Theatre: Bites of Delights (2012).

In both Selayang Project and Selayang Project II the purpose of this project was to draw out the creativeness of young people in the Selayang community using gamelan. Workshops were conducted with 15 identified children from Selayang Prima community. The first Selayang Project had 11 sessions in total where else Selayang II had 18 sessions. Each session lasted for two hours where children were basically learning about gamelan, creativity sessions, and exploring the uniqueness of using gamelan instruments for music activities and playing repertoires for gamelan. There were also group sessions where presentation on work based on the children's creative work was displayed. Examples of the children's work are Dikir Barat, Story-telling, creating songs with movements or implementing movements on songs they have already known, sound exploration with objects, playing with bottles filled with water, visual story mapping, sound effects, and many more.

Besides two major community music project, there was Bites of Delight; another community project by RiB in 2012. Three main objectives serves the whole project whereby it educates the urban children of the own traditional art form, to be able to be creative, and letting the younger generation to be in touch with their own identity<sup>9</sup>. The purpose of this project is to inspire and engage children in the creativity by using stories from the Asian region. Gamelan was used as the main instruments besides other percussion instruments. These project involved more people as facilitators as well as the participants. A total of 27 children were involved in the project with a range of between 7-17 years old. The participants were divided

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<sup>8</sup>Rhythm in Bronze.*Bites of Delight Post Mortem Reports 2012*. 2012

Rhythm in Bronze.*Rhythm in Bronze in the Community: Selayang Project*. (2004)

Rhythm in Bronze.*Rhythm in Bronze in the Community: Selayang Project II*. (2006)

<sup>9</sup>Rhythm in Bronze.*Bites of Delight Post Mortem Reports 2012*. 2012.

into 12 children in the musical team and 17 in the theatre team. Nevertheless all of them need to be able to play instruments and act.

Most of the children's interaction among each other has proven that Vygotsky theory of social interaction had occurred during their communication. Through teamwork children are able to share their ideas, brainstorming, learning to lead, and also to respect each other's different background. As believed by Vygotsky, the community plays an important role in the process of "making meaning". He believes that the exploration of social development of an individual is important.<sup>10</sup>

## Discussion of Findings

Based on the two research objectives raised in this research the researcher was be able to find the outcome based on the research questions. The first research question is what are the approaches used to enhance music learning in community music? There were few approaches in learning which took place during the community music work process 1) Formal learning; 2) informal learning; and 3) non-formal learning. Formal learning occurred during how lectures from some facilitators were delivered during Selayang Project II. Lesson plan were drafted and planned even before the class started. The approach used was more theoretical as it helps to equipped children in their cognitive thinking. Informal learning happens when lesson plan which was created were slotted in with plans of wanting children to use their own ideas in delivering their thoughts to their fellow friends. During the process of learning the gamelan, there were notes regarding the history and the evolution of the gamelan given to them as well as the score for the repertoire. Methods and approaches of music learning were also seen. For example, during ice breaking session in Selayang Project, children were asked to use word syllable according to their names to introduce themselves to others. As mentioned by Carl Orff, using objects or rhythm to represents something you want to learn will help them to learn rhythm even faster.

In the second research objective, the research looked at how does community music encourage music learning among the children? Vygotsky believes that the major theme in his theory is that social interaction plays an important role in the development of cognition<sup>11</sup>. Learning comes in two levels: 1) interaction; and 2) incorporating learning into the individual's mental structure. Children who went through community music conducted by RiB were trained to work together in groups. Orff believes that playing in an ensemble improves the ability of the students or children to work with others and taking responsibility for an individual part.<sup>12</sup> All the activities implemented to them had an objective which was to train and lead them to interact with others. RiB facilitators indeed had encouraged learning music among the children in groups and them being able to voice their ideas out. Facilitation in the community does not refer to controlling the group or surrendering all responsibility; when we lead, there will be a strong sense of setting towards the beginning,

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<sup>10</sup>Saul, A., McLeod "Lev Vygotsky" simplypsychology. [www.simplypsychology.org/vygotsky.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/vygotsky.html) (accessed January 27, 2015).

<sup>11</sup>UNESCO. Vygotsky's socialcultural theory. Retrieved from [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=26925&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=26925&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html). 2003. (accessed April 18, 2015).

<sup>12</sup>Dough, Goodkin. Play, sing, and dance. Miami, FL: Schott Music Corporation. 2012.

Hanna. K. E. Powell. "Teaching Children Hymns in the Church setting using Orff- and Kodály-based Strategies." PhD diss., Indiana University. [https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/10326/Powell,%20Hanna%20\(DM%20Organ%20%26%20Church%20Music\).pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/10326/Powell,%20Hanna%20(DM%20Organ%20%26%20Church%20Music).pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accesed April 18, 2015).

middle, and end of the activity.<sup>13</sup> Based on the interviews conducted with the facilitators, some children had problems expressing themselves. They were shy, was not sure what to do when they were given a task such as to create a movement, shout out a note, or to act like one when a theme was given. By the end of each session they can be seen to have given their best and it gradually build up till the end on the whole project. Although there were dilemmas among the facilitators because they do not know how much can they pushed the children; at the very beginning of each session, children's facial expressions were always looking forward for the days' activity. Overall the researcher found that this community music project had answered both the research questions.

## Conclusion

This study has looked into Rhythm in Bronze (RiB) and their community music projects in Malaysia in reaching out to children through few learning in music. It justifies the current state of this group and the amount of work which were already being conducted. It is hoped that work conducted by RiB will be used as a setting platform for other performing arts group to showcase their work and to educate the community regarding the importance of music in their children's life through academic writing.

Community music should also be widely extended to the hospitals and shelter homes. Although gamelan is an ensemble which uses big size instruments, pots from bonang and other smaller sized instruments can be used to create music activities. As mentioned by Carl Jung (1875-1961) "The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves." Elementary students should also be exposed to gamelan playing. The current music curriculum in Malaysia public schools currently offers gamelan learning in secondary school where else elementary students are exposed to other instruments such as recorder and percussion instruments. It will be a good opportunity for them to learn after school through community program.

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