



Outstanding Youth in Education Award

THE LANGUAGE OF MUSIC

By Leu Yifang

Ms Leu Yifang believes that music lessons go beyond learning how to play instruments and recognising notes. She wants her students to view music as the gateway to understanding themselves, each other, and the world.

I believe that teaching music is not all about imparting knowledge and theory or guiding students to pick up and learn to play an instrument. As a music teacher, this belief guides my work and motivates me to always think of ways to bring across to my students what I find so important and special about music—that it is a means of communication; a language that allows one to interact with others and express themselves.

When I joined Haig Girls' School in 2010 as a new teacher, I quickly saw that the girls were often excited by the prospect of performing and were always eager to share their creative process. I felt that it was important to contextualise the concepts and topics for my students within a larger understanding of music. Hence, I decided that a creation and performance focus would develop the girls' potential and engage them in the subject, providing them with a fuller appreciation of music.

Music has always played and still plays an important role in my life. As a child, I was exposed to various music and dance experiences, having learnt to play the violin from a young age all the way until I was 19. I also picked up dance, and even now I am learning to play the piano. From a very young age, I felt that music gave me an opportunity to express myself in another language. Music became a core part of my being, and in return, it has helped me understand myself and the world better.

All my life, I had wished that everyone would be able to welcome music into their lives and have a deep connection with it. It was a very large part of why I decided to teach. At Haig Girls' School, I feel it is important that the girls interact with music at a deeper level by feeling and understanding it, and creating something that they can identify with and be proud of. I hope to teach my students that expressing themselves through music is not something complex

and beyond them; that they are able relate to it, use it, modify it, and make new meaning from it.

To that end, I attended courses, did research and worked with my team of music teachers. After two years, our team of three sat down and created classroom modules that we felt would allow the children to apply the music theory they had learnt and work towards a composition or performance piece at the end of each term. In one such module, our primary one students learn about beat and rhythm, as well as the sounds a tambourine can make, before creating rhythm and movement to accompany songs that they are familiar with.



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At the start, I just wanted the girls to look forward to their music classes, and be ready and eager to learn, play and most importantly, create. As the music curriculum we created and continued to refine for the girls started taking shape, I saw how it helped them not just appreciate the music but also begin to understand the world from the eyes of the composer. The girls also started bringing what they “see”, “feel” and “hear” into every composition or performance piece that they were working on.



Once, a student came up with a picture of a lone pagoda on top of a hill, likening it to Rapunzel being locked away in a tower, when she was asked what she thought a piece of music was trying to portray. That came as a pleasant surprise to me, to see how a young girl like her was able to come up with something this creative.

Through these ways, students were able to interpret a composer’s intent and make connections between the music and their personal experiences. During one lesson, I played a graceful and regal piece of music. The girls lit up when they heard it and shared how the piece had made them feel royal, lady-like and more compelled to behave like “a proper lady”. And when I played them some sad pieces, they talked about how they just wanted to curl into a ball as the music reminded them of the times their friends rejected them.

I saw that music helped them understand different perspectives and how their friends and classmates relate or identify differently with the same piece of music. They began to accommodate each other’s ideas and even found ways to blend the different ideas together to create something new. And they were just primary school children! In one lesson, a group had differing views of what the music was trying to portray. They were divided between “shock” and “joy”. After much discussion, the group concluded that they would represent the music as a “happy surprise”—taking into consideration the different views each of them had and showing respect for one another’s ideas.

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I am heartened to see my girls react and interact with music in a more involved and personal manner now. I am proud of how the music curriculum in Haig Girls’ School has changed and evolved over the years. And as grateful as I am that I had the chance to help influence this curriculum and change the way things are done, I understand too that not everyone is a born performer, musician or dancer. Not every child will walk away from the music classroom with a burning desire to master an instrument, and in fact, many will likely not pursue music after they leave school.

However, what is important to me is that the girls leave my classes and lessons with an understanding and appreciation of the value of the arts as a means of communication. My goal is for the children to understand that the arts allow us to freely express what we may not be able to put into words, that it is another means of understanding themselves and making themselves heard to the world. Music is simply another language.

That was something I learnt in my youth and it had made all the difference in my life, and if nothing else, I hope that through my lessons, and through my teaching, the girls will become future patrons of the arts and continue to be engaged in it. I hope they will continue to make personal meaning of what they see, hear and create, through the language of “music”.

