

# MULTICULTURAL MUSIC EDUCATION IN VICTORIA AND THE EFFORTS OF AUSTRALIAN/SRI LANKAN COMMUNITY ARTISTS TO SUSTAIN CULTURAL TRADITIONS

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## Abstract

This study explores the benefits of multicultural music education and efforts of Australian/Sri Lankan community arts practitioners considering data from literature reviews, three research studies conducted and researcher experiences/observations (as an artist in residence) thus offering a phenomenological account to the reader. The author points out that community arts experts successfully manage to engage learners and effectively deliver related content, transmitting the knowledge of multicultural arts (music) what 'qualified' teachers in formal educational settings struggle to accomplish.

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## Prolegomenon

As Australia tries to reconcile itself with its Asia-Pacific geopolitical situation, Gunew and Rizvi (1994) pointed out that: “Of immense help, but currently under-utilized, are those Asian-Australians who have long been a part of Australia, including the artists. Learning about world culture as a strictly social studies subject without music is insufficient. It lacks the feelings and emotions that can be conveyed through music and thus cannot enhance both cognitive and effective learning that is important for an in-depth understanding (Chen-Hafteck, 2007, p. 227). This study concerns multicultural music education and situated in Victoria, once of the most culturally diverse states in Australia.

Southcott and Joseph (2009a) identified diversity of music styles and cultures in Australia can enhance the provision of inclusive, rich, multicultural and multi-musical programs in schools (p. 2). The involvement of communities and their specialist practitioners/artists in education of different fields may protect their own cultural heritage, which is essential in the struggle for cultural survival in multicultural Australia.

However many community arts practitioners (above discussed) struggle to meet the standards of “professional practice” placed on teaching by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) as it is a mandatory requirement to register with the VIT to teach in Victorian primary, secondary and special education schools, including Victorian schools of languages (VIT, n.d.). The VIT requirements/qualifications act as restrictions for these experienced professional practitioners/artists from different cultures to teach in Australian schools. Although they are experts in their own fields most of the popular and experienced community artists do not hold these types of academic “paper qualifications” to fulfil the above mentioned requirements by the VIT in order to educate the so-called multicultural generation. As a result of the VIT restrictions for artists from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is not possible for artists to work with students in Victorian formal educational settings (especially in schools). As a result many multicultural communities that reside in Australia, engage in extracurricular activities (outside the realm of the normal school or university education) offering their knowledge to younger generations. Focusing on the Sri Lankan community in Melbourne, this paper explores the informal transmission approaches of Sri Lankan musical heritage practiced by Australian/Sri Lankan community performing arts specialists.

In Australia to date there has been little research concerning the teaching of Multicultural music, especially in community (informal) educational settings. Green (2002), Abrill (2006), Chen-Hafteck (2007), found that there has been comparatively little research concerning the challenging attitudes of teachers to include different styles of music in their teaching. Bradley (2006) argued that research on the results of teaching practices in contexts with culturally diverse students or communities is also very limited. Thus this investigation will be a contribution to the enhancement of knowledge in the field of multicultural music education.

A number of authors have offered position statements and a few have undertaken qualitative research into the formal and informal multicultural music education practices. The research that has been conducted is quite recent and will be discussed below.

### **The importance of learning multicultural music and teaching music of different cultures**

Southcott and Joseph (2009) pointed out that we could transform our understanding of learning by engaging with music from other cultures. Anderson and Campbell (1998) argued that, students should be aware of the “many different but equally valid forms of musical and artistic expressions” and this would encourage them to develop “understanding, tolerance and respect for variety of opinions and approaches” (p.1). Joseph and Southcott (2009) mentioned that “in multicultural Australia the development of positive multicultural attitude is essential in the creation of a harmonious society and they argue that music education is a powerful medium to address cultural diversity” (Southcott and Joseph, 2009c, p.1). Southcott and Joseph (2009) acknowledged that multiculturalism fosters a balance between social conformity and change, and encourages the process of acculturation, which will ease the process of adapting to the culture of the society that the students live. Several researchers have advised that learning the music of another culture can assist with learning of one’s own music. Nketia (1988) argued that,

*By incorporating musics by another culture we may better understand our own musical background thus enriching our ability to present effective and inclusive music programs in schools (p. 153).*

Blair and Kondo (2008) pointed out that “multicultural music offers a wealth of rich musical works for students to explore and they are able to learn about music and about other people through active engagement with new musical ideas” (p.55). They also find commonalities with their own music and within themselves as musicians (Blair & Kondor, 2008, p. 50). Regardless of the grade level, the incorporation of world music in general music classes can reinforce the knowledge of music elements through their use and interpretation in various musical styles (Anderson & Campbell, 1989, p. ix). More than increased understanding of one’s own music, exploring music from other cultures can broaden our understanding of our own culture. Blair and Kondo (2008) further discussed the importance studying multicultural music mentioning that,

*Exploring musics from other cultures is essential and valuable because bridges of understanding it creates among people and because of the expanding world of sound that enriches the musical lives. It allows us to broaden and clarify our musical understanding of the music of our own culture (p. 55).*

Volk (1998) identified the importance of the educator in multicultural music education. She points out that “regardless of methods or materials, the teacher is the factor that makes a difference in the classroom. Multicultural music education cannot happen unless the individual music educators in classrooms all around the country make it happen” (p. 190). It is

important that future teachers become well grounded in both their own music and culture and at least another culture. This is probably optimistic, given the sometimes-limited time available to music education in teacher education programs. Volk (1998) argued for best practice, stating “today it is generally recognize that students should have both solid grounding in the music of their own culture and general knowledge of music of other cultures” (p. 190).

There are discussions about how this education in other cultures should and could proceed. By exposing students to other cultures and their music we can create and explore cross-cultural possibilities more fully, richly and critically (Oerhle, 1991). Drummond (2005) claimed that “learning of the music of other cultures has a musical impact, in that it can increase musical vocabularies, stimulate creativity and enlarge music-making choices” (Drummond, 2005, p. 8). Chen-Hafteck (2007) found that “An in-depth study of an unfamiliar culture brings novelty to classroom subject matter and motivates learning” (, p. 227). Regardless of the grade level, the incorporation of world music in general music classes will serve a dual purpose: to reinforce the knowledge of music elements through their use and interpretation in various musical styles, and to develop a greater understanding of people in other cultures (Anderson & Campbell, Preface, 1989, p. ix).

### Teacher education issues

In Victoria, the guidelines provided by the accrediting body, the Victorian Institute of Teaching (2003), confirm the importance of appropriate teacher education:

*While all teachers will have completed general studies in the theory and practice of teaching, particular specialist areas may require particular approaches and understandings for successful teaching. This will include aspects of subject-specific assessment and program planning. It is important that specialist teachers understand the teaching methodologies appropriate to their specialist area. It is therefore expected that specialist teachers will have undertaken appropriate teaching methodology studies (VIT, specialist area guidelines 2003).*

Exploring the issue of teacher education, in a case study Joseph and Southcott (2009) identify the importance of preparing programs that are inclusive and inculcate in their pre-service music student teachers a wide range of cultural understanding and diverse experiences that will make them culturally responsive music teachers (p.3). The findings of this study provided insight into the preparation of culturally responsive teachers. To improve the teaching of multicultural music in schools, it is important to consider the inclusion of multicultural music in teacher education. Belz (2006) pointed out that “the majority of the world’s music traditions are currently left out in the training of musicians and music teachers” and “in a nation where the musical traditions valued by an ever-increasing segment of society lie outside Western European traditions, we can no longer afford to invalidate or devalue multiple perspectives of music and music making” (Belz, 2006, p. 42). In another case study, Joseph and Southcott (2009a) recognized that the effective inclusion of music of other cultures in teacher education is often is very difficult, given the constraints of time and resources in contemporary

Australian teacher education programs. They found that the pre service music student teachers interviewed in this study were clearly aware of the challenges of including multicultural music in schools. Optimistically Belz (2006) suggested that “music education students should learn to express musical ideas from at least two different musical cultures be required to perform on a non –Western instrument and study non-Western music with a member of that culture” (Belz, 2006, p. 42). This is not always possible but this does not mean that we should not try. Joseph and Southcott (2009a) further suggested “The inclusion of multicultural musics in the curriculum could also extend to the wider community of the school to promote cultural responsiveness in a multidimensional way that not only empowers and transforms both content and the context but can also be emancipatory” (p.4). These authors argue that this inclusion can extend to the schools wider to promote cultural responsiveness (Southcott & Joseph, 2009a, p. 4). As teacher educators in the field of music education it has been the experience of Joseph and Southcott, “over many years of visiting schools during student teacher placements that classrooms in Victoria becoming even more culturally diverse reflecting the contemporary society in which they exist (Southcott & Joseph, 2009b, p. 4). Therefore it is highly important to include multicultural music in music education.

In 2008, Blair and Condo came up with a different point of view about teachers who teach multicultural music. They pointed out that

*“We must also respect the cultural authenticity of a musical work and its process of transmission within its source culture. Teachers, very appropriately, wish to respect the people whose music they are teaching. With this in mind, they tend to believe that the music exactly as it would be taught in its original cultural context. However what some teachers forget is that the children of that culture live in that place. They have heard that music daily since birth. They have experienced the activities and celebrations in which this music is embedded, resulting in a rich cultural heritage of previous experiences that informs their understanding of this music (p.51).*

Blair and Condo (2008) admitted that “we must respect the cultural authenticity of a musical work and its process of transmission within its source culture” and they also claim that teachers forget about the background environment of their students and the students themselves have a good understanding of their music. These authors accuse the teachers for not considering their students’ background (knowledge) and it is possible to understand that these teachers might not be cultural insiders thus may not know about the experiences of students. Cultural insiders from students’ own cultural backgrounds are in a better position to understand about their experiences.

Considering these difficulties involved in multicultural music education it is possible to recommend the community (informal) educational practices as an effective approach which covers most of the concerns discussed before.

**The efforts of Sri Lankan community artists**

Sri Lankans have settled in Victoria since the nineteenth century and the community remained small until the mid twentieth century. Today, Sri Lankans make up the eighth largest immigrant group in Victoria numbering 43,991 people (Museum of Victoria, 2011). Gamage (2010) asserted that “it is the right of newcomers to preserve and express their cultural heritage and identity” (47), however the Sinhala Cultural and Community Services Foundation (1998) declared “No one had bothered promoting our culture”. Through my own observations and “lived experiences” (Van Mannen, 2006), it is possible to claim that this is not the case presently anymore. There are a number of community cultural groups that engage in informal performing arts educational practices across different suburbs around Melbourne and this paper introduces those practices of Sri Lankan performing artists who offer their experiences through informal education in their new country, having migrated to Australia.

Three research studies have been conducted so far in Victoria by the author researcher and one of his colleagues exploring the Australian/Sri Lankan community and its performing arts transmission practices. Two of these studies were published in international research journals (Nethsinghe, 2009; 2012) and the third paper has been submitted to the *International Journal of Arts in Society* recently, which explored transmission practices of senior Sri Lankan/Australian community artists. The first study (Nethsinghe, 2009) titled: *To the land of the Tea Trees from the Island of Tea, A learning experience in performing arts for children of Sri Lankan community in Melbourne* explored a successful performing arts workshop, conducted by traditional Sri Lankan professional artists who have migrated to Australia in the past decade. At present, these drama workshops are thriving and all stakeholders engaged are greatly satisfied with the results (such as drama productions and student learning outcomes). The second study (Nethsinghe, 2012) dealt with a separate learning experience (in Music) offered for children of Sri Lankan community in Melbourne and investigated how Sri Lankan/Australian students use music in their construction of self-identity. Both studies revealed benefits of community music-making for students.

There are a number of other community organisations that offer Music classes, Drama and Traditional Dance workshops (some also provide traditional drumming classes- upcountry and low country/devil drums) including Bharatanatyam workshops. Among these establishments, there are organisations such as performing arts circles (for teenagers and adult learners) and Societies (for younger children). Experienced artists offer these workshops and events from Sri Lanka residing in Victoria, Australia. These individual workshop providers hold grand events such as annual performances and drama/musical productions, some even managing to ferry their Australian/Sri Lankan casts (participants) to Sri Lanka to perform in popular venues for local audiences. These performers also use platforms such as community television and radio channels (in Victoria and beyond) to broadcast their concerts.

In this process, it is also highly important to include the service of the older Sri Lankan/Australian artists in residence. There are a number of mature experts who engage in transmitting their knowledge to younger generation through these informal community workshops/events. As mentioned before a case study of four senior artists has been conducted

(Southcott and Nethsinghe, in press) and the findings indicated the benefits of learning directly from these experts.

### **Lessons to be learnt**

It is evident that the community arts experts successfully manage to engage students and effectively deliver related content, transmitting the knowledge of multicultural arts (music) what 'qualified' teachers in formal educational settings struggle to accomplish (pointed out by Blair and Condo, 2008). These engagements of performing art were found highly beneficial for both providers and participants (learners). Sri Lankan artists who struggle to obtain formal qualifications (required by the VIT) to teach in schools to continue to their practice to professional activities via such community establishments and acquire reasonable financial gains in addition. The senior Sri Lankan/Australian arts practitioners also receive similar benefits through these engagements and achieve a sense of validation and invigoration (Southcott and Nethsinghe, in press) from the community.

One of the above mentioned studies which investigated how Sri Lankan/Australian students use music in their construction of self-identity found that students developed respect and tolerance through appreciation of multicultural music (Nethsinghe, 2012) and this educational approach can be adopted to build bridges of understanding in the Sri Lankan context to improve reconciliation efforts among multicultural communities in the country where these expert arts practitioners live in abundance. In other words, arts engagement could be use as an effective tool to enhance cultural understandings and harmony in places where multicultural societies reside.

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