

# **Paul Harrison (Music) - Sabbatical Report – Summer Term**

## **September 2014**

Once the Sabbatical was confirmed I contacted the Examinations Co-ordinator at the University of West London. She kindly offered me three tours and asked me to choose. The first two, Singapore and Indonesia, I had done previously, so I chose the China/Hong Kong/Malaysia tour which would incorporate new places and then leave me in Kuala Lumpur which would enable me to travel further afield once the work had been completed.

My first journey took me to Kuala Lumpur and then onto Shanghai on a very comfortable Malaysian Airline A380 which is one of the newest super planes. I had taken the advantage of flying a week earlier than my examining started in order that I could explore Shanghai and also fly to Beijing to visit the Great Wall of China which everyone has to do once in their life!

### **Suzhou**

This is a beautiful small place about a two-hour drive from Shanghai. The Music School was in fact a floor at the top of a modern office-block. I was met by two small children holding flowers. It was clear that my visit was an important event and the hospitality verged on the embarrassing. The standard overall was rather mediocre with all piano pieces played from memory, at a rushed tempo, with almost no pause between one piece and the next. Very little English was spoken and I had to have a translator present for some candidates.

### **Panyu**

This was in the New Territories not far from Guangzhou. Miss Lee was the owner of the business and had three Music Schools in different parts of the city. All were studios above shops that sold musical instruments - pianos, guitars etc. as well as providing rooms for teachers to give lessons. The inside of the school was quite smart but the access was from the rear down a dirty back lane. The main exam room was very impressive with a lovely grand piano on a raised stage with curtains and a huge banner introducing the exam session. Oh - and a life-size banner of me with my CV for all to see. The walls were covered with certificates of previous successes with candidates mark-forms and certificates laminated or framed.

The standard was very good. I had an interpreter with me all of the time. All students took their exams wearing full evening wear. One girl was even wearing a 'wedding dress' and a tiara. Whilst I was here I also ran a workshop for teachers and parents which focussed on how to get the best results from London College of Music exams. This went quite well despite having to deliver material through an interpreter.

There was high school across the road which provided many of the pupils. However, Music is only provided at Primary level and then it is singing only. After that it is not seen as important as it doesn't make 'real' money. Only the well-off can afford individual lessons and even then, most children give up when they reach a Grade 4/5 level so that they can concentrate on mathematics.

### **Hong Kong/ Macau**

The first centre was a private company run by Dr Ho who was also the conductor of the Hong Kong Youth Orchestra. Standards were very good with him teaching along with members of his family. However, as I talked more to him, it was clear that he was very worried about the future. Under British rule, Music was supported and valued. Now, under Chinese control, it is under-valued and struggling. He can't find venues for his orchestra to rehearse and perform as hire charges are prohibitive. Publications are expensive and getting more so as the exchange rate increases. He is aware that he and his brothers only got into Music through being taught by the organist of St.

John's Cathedral who also taught at the local Anglican school. There is no such teaching in schools in Hong Kong any more and as such, music education has almost disappeared. My second centre was located, like Panyu, at the rear of a large shop selling pianos. The company was called Happy Music which had centres in Hong Kong and Macau where I was to visit next. Apart from a few diplomas and grades, the majority of my eight days work was dealing with Early Learning candidates aged 3 - 6. This nightmare involved groups of children, some in costume, acting out a story (normally the hare & tortoise!) before being asked their names and attempting to engage in dialogue. Individual candidates had to sing a song, play an instrument (normally a glockenspiel or hand-bells) and then talking to me about their family. Most had no English (an interpreter was provided) so it was rather difficult. The special thing about this 'exam' is that it is a Kindergarten/Preliminary exam and as such, the candidate cannot fail. After days of this I was fully prepared to go to jail having strangled at least one hare or tortoise or caused GBH to a candidate with a set of Rainbow Bells!

I decided to find out what was going on by talking at some length to one of the owners. Lo Clay and his daughter Hailey Shum explained to me that in Hong Kong, there are not enough Primary School places for the population. If you want your child to go to school then you will do anything to prove that your child is more worthy of a place than another child. This means collecting bits of paper (certificates, commendations, badges, testimonials etc.) and present your portfolio to the education authorities. Music exams fall therefore in this category. The more exams you take, the more chance of getting a school place. This has resulted in a huge business, which makes a lot of money, run by people who are not really interested in Music, just in making money. I suddenly found myself a small part of it. Rather depressing frankly.

### **Kuala Lumpur**

My role here was to attend the Graduation Ceremony for all the students from the Far East who wanted to receive their diploma certificates in person. There was a huge reception, workshops, meetings and the ceremony itself. I was one of six examiners from the University of West London as well as the Chancellor and the Head of Operations in KL. It is clear that there is huge money being made here and there are a large number of students who believe that a Music Diploma from a UK university is of real benefit whether they intend to be an undergraduate student in London or stay in KL or Singapore.

### **Conclusions**

Music in the Far East has little to do with becoming a better musician. There is a huge industry which focuses on making as much money from music exams and the system as it can.

Passing a music exam means that you have a certificate which can be really helpful in making a child's education possible.

However, are the two statements above any different than the Music Exam system in UK? I suspect not. I have examined some atrocious playing in UK centres and have come across some really poor teaching. Is getting a certificate to gain a primary school place in China any different from a CLS boy getting his Grade 8 on an instrument so he can put it on his UCAS form? Both pupils generally give up the instrument once they have gained a pass mark.

How has this all helped me be a better teacher at CLS? I have a better perspective about music exams and the system. I remain convinced that we are doing a very good job. Despite the reality of the exam room situation I am convinced that learning an instrument makes one a better person and whether a student reads Music or not, their participation in musical activities is of huge benefit socially and intellectually.

I fell rested and energised, and ready to recommence my teaching at CLS. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to take this time to regain my strength and focus.

**Paul Harrison**