

Bridging the Gap: A Piano Program for All

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The year 2014 marks the seventh year of Universiti Sains Malaysia's Community Music Program (CMP) which provides a platform for music learning and teaching within the campus ground. The core operation of this program offers piano instruction, music classes and performance opportunities to its participants. Spanning a period of 10 weeks, one of the programs consists of nine weekly lessons, culminating in a performance concert. This concert showcases what was learnt and honed during the course of nine lessons. At its inception, this program was envisioned to provide teaching experiences to pre-service teachers comprising both final year undergraduate and graduate students. The program coordinator, who is also a member of the music faculty, supervises all lessons conducted in addition to providing demonstration lessons. These demonstrations enable trainee instructors to model and observe instruction given by an experienced member of the music faculty. In essence, this program offers invaluable training and inspiration to university music students as they prepare to teach in the real world upon graduation.

The feedback obtained from the participants of this program has been truly encouraging. The CMP has afforded many young children the opportunity to experience the joy of music making, particularly through piano lessons despite many parents' skepticism over their children's musical aptitude. Under normal circumstances, the duration of 10 weeks is sufficient to gauge a child's interest and affinity towards learning the piano. In a nutshell, this program has attracted many interested members from inside and outside the university campus and has established a reputation of being a splendid program with a waiting list for enrollment.

CMP has brought considerable visibility to the School of the Arts, in particular the Music Section of the school. Through its annual intake announcement via the internet and also through verbal recommendation by parents of the existing participants, the program has witnessed exponential growth in its enrollment. The attraction of a program that offers initial 10 free piano lessons coupled with a concert to showcase the achievement of the students to family and friends is very much welcomed and supported. One unique feature of this concert is that it is deliberately combined with performances by the university's music students. CMP hopes that in such an unusual setting, both the young students and university music majors will be inspired by the respective performances given by these two groups of students.

For participating children who decide to continue learning the piano after the 10-week course, CMP has expanded its program offering to provide a repeatable short course. In this three-month short term course, the young students receive three individual lessons and one group lesson each month. These lessons are taught by a member of the music faculty from USM's music section, together with two music student assistants. While individual lessons are catered to each student's learning ability, group lessons provide exposure to cooperative learning with an opportunity to perform to an audience on a monthly basis.

Another tangible benefit of the programs offered by the CMP is that student participants are given the opportunity to bi-annually perform in a public hall setting. In many respects, this is an invaluable experience as formal performing venues equipped with a grand

piano such as the one available in the School of the Arts are not commonly found and are inaccessible to the general public. Recitals and concert events are excellent avenues by which young performers are carefully guided to perform at their best. They are simultaneously groomed to observe performance and spectator etiquette. This rewarding experience is a motivational force to all involved in the process of preparing the students – namely support rendered by the instructors, parents, family members and friends.

During the school holidays at the end of the year, CMP offers a music camp catered to children in the lower primary school age group. Through carefully designed and structured lesson plans, children get to participate and enjoy a four and a half-day music group instruction. Participants receive an average of five contact hours of lessons on each day of the camp. For the past two years, a USM music lecturer has run these camps with graduate students serving as assistants. For the graduate students, the camp provides an excellent training medium to teach, manage and work with children in a group setting. Other subsidiary benefits include the experience of working together with their peers in matters of professional development such as organisational skills, planning, teaching material and content. On the other hand, the children are exposed to music through a myriad of exposure and medium such as movements, singing, dancing, drawing, and listening. At the conclusion of the camp, a presentation is given, incorporating all the skills and knowledge acquired during the time spent at camp.

As part of the educational outreach vision and community network program of the School of the Arts, CMP organises a Piano Achievement Day on an annual basis. Students from pre-school to 20 years old are given an opportunity and encouraged to perform as soloists in a designated hall in the School of the Arts. Each participant is required to prepare two contrasting classical pieces and thereafter receive critical comments from three different evaluators comprising either USM music lecturers or graduate pedagogy students. Students who receive an excellent rating from the evaluation panel will be given the honor to perform again to acknowledge their commendable achievement.

The Community Music Program at the School of the Arts has played and will continue to serve a pivotal role in reaching out to the community through its programs. With its humble beginning of approximately just five participating students, this program has expanded its borders and continues to attract students from USM's campus community and those around Penang. This has brought about greater awareness of the function of music making and has fostered closer ties between the different schools within the university campus and members of the community alike.



Photo 1 Music Camp for lower primary school children: Playing rhythms with cups.
Photographer: Kam Li Suang.