

# FOR A NEW CULTURE OF MUSIC EDUCATION IN MACAU

By Aurelio Porfiri

There is no doubt that in recent years the interest in improving the quality of music education in Macau has brought important improvements in the way it is offered. In this brief paper I would like to concentrate more on tertiary level institutions and to suggest some possible new ways to advance Macau's standard of music education. I will also mention my own experience at the secondary education level, because some of the problems at the tertiary level have their roots at the previous educational stage, if not earlier. In this paper I will define as the object of musical studies mainly all those repertoires belonging to the Western tradition or that are influenced by it. I will therefore limit myself to this topic, and I will not consider the respected Chinese musical tradition. This will probably be the subject of future studies but cannot be discussed here.

To start with, we should try to understand the relationship between Macau and Western musical tradition. We can affirm, with some degree of certainty, that Western music was present in Macau from at least the 16th century. Indeed, it was during that century that was created the first institute of higher learning in Macau: *"In 1594, thanks to the successful experience of the Italian missionary, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) making his way into China, the Jesuits decided to upgrade the church school to an institute of higher learning and established the St. Paul's College, aimed at training missionaries in China, Japan, Vietnam, etc."*<sup>1</sup> We cannot affirm from this description that there was musical activity in this first center of higher learning but some scholars seem to believe that there was.

We know that Matteo Ricci himself, in his years of study in the Collegio Romano in Rome, was instructed in music. Western music was therefore present from the beginning of Macau's life. After the glories of the Jesuits' instruction at their two main teaching institutions in Macau, namely, the 17th century College of St. Paul, and the 18th century Seminary of St. Joseph, we need to come to our century to witness music education at the tertiary level. Indeed, with the closing of the College of St. Paul in 1726 tertiary level institutions ended. One needs to wait till the 1980s to see its return with what today is called the University of Macau. As regards music itself, we need to wait even more, with the establishment of a degree in music education in 1997 at the Macau Polytechnic Institute. From 2009, in the same institution, there was also added a degree in music performance. The classes in this institution are taught mainly in Chinese but some classes are presented in English.<sup>2</sup>

In more recent time there is also the degree of Master in Choral Conducting offered by the University of Saint Joseph (USJ) from 2010. In the same year the University started a program for pre-university students with an emphasis on music. The USJ is also waiting

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<sup>1</sup> Lau Sin Peng, *A History of Education in Macau* (Translated by Sylvia S.L. Ieong & Victoria L.C. Lei), Macau, Faculty of Education University of Macau, 2009, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Dai Baisheng (2009). *Comparative Studies on Higher Education of Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau*. In APSMER 2009. 7<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Symposium on Music Education Research. ISME Asia-Pacific Regional Conference 2009. Shanghai, China: Shanghai Baijia Publishing House. Pag. 152-153. In the same paper the author quote another paper he has prepared in 2005, denouncing the great work that still need to be done in the field of music education in Macau.

for the approval of its Licentiates in Music Pedagogy and Music Composition, with the hope they can be offered starting in the academic year 2010-2011. In 2012 this University will also use a new campus in the area of Macau known as the *Ilha Verde*, provided with music facilities and musical instruments. The medium of instruction in USJ is English.

The teaching of music in Macau cannot but take into account what made this city very peculiar: the blending of different cultural traditions, that is, the Chinese, the Portuguese and the Anglo-Saxon traditions, the latter because of its proximity to Hong Kong. There are also relevant problems that Macau has to face if it wants to become a competitive city on a musical level. These problems can be summarized in the following way: a) Influence of mainland China's concept of Western music; b) Development of international standards; c) Development of educational teaching practices; d) Perspectives on music education from the students.

### **a) Influence of mainland China's concept of Western music**

#### **1) Reformers**

The great development of the study of Western music in mainland China start at the beginning of the 20th century, thanks to educators such as Zeng Zhimin (1879-1929), Shen Xin'Gong (1869-1947) and Li Shutong (1880-1942).<sup>3</sup> These pioneers were trying to bring to China Western musical ideas (often through Japan, which took as a model the German conservatories). But these ideas were limited to a specific period of time, mostly from the 18th century to modern time. That was the period that, even in Europe, was defined the classic period of Western music. But because of this a great part of Western music history, like the medieval and renaissance period, was out of consideration. The problem about this is that still today there is not a clear perception of the development of music history, the deep connection among periods, the absolute mistake of considering the 18th century, or even the 17th century as the starting point of music history. I mention always to my students that you cannot understand later periods without a strong background on the previous ones. Therefore, in my opinion, this influence of the way Western music enter in China in the 20th century has also influenced in some ways the development of a certain part of music education in Macau. Indeed, it is also understandable why this process was happening. The Chinese reformers (and the educators mention above were among them) wanted to take the culture of countries that they considered as role models in the process of modernization. To be sure, music of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century was "the" main repertoire in many of these countries (Germany, France<sup>4</sup>, etc.). Also, most of the pre-Baroque repertoire was strongly influenced by religious ideas, not the main concern of these reformers. So, this is for me one of the main problems: to put music history in its right perspective.

#### **2) John Dewey (1859-1952)**

Probably we have also to take into account the possible influence on music education of the thinking of John Dewey. His pragmatism, his concept that experience is life, and that life is to be aware of your environment, may have shaped some conceptions that are also

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<sup>3</sup> Liu Ching- Chih (2010). *A Critical History of New Music in China*. Translated by Caroline Mason. Hong Kong, China: The Chinese University Press. pp. 34-65. A really valuable book about the influence of Western music in modern China.

<sup>4</sup> But indeed in France the culture of early music was vastly developed; the Abbey of Solesmes from the middle of XIX century to this very day was the center for the renewal of Gregorian chant studies.

at the base of Chinese music education. Indeed we know he was in mainland China during one entire year, from 1919 to 1920, and the educators from China welcome him with great joy.<sup>5</sup> Indeed the ideas of Dewey are important and very interesting but the way these ideas can be put into practice is another matter. Indeed it is not possible to downplay the role of experience on learning, and to understand that students build their knowledge together, that is, through the experience of Otherness, but we need also to consider that this social element should not become a political one. So, music should not serve political purposes of exclusion of some historical periods because they do not conform to the dominant views on life and religion. In this way the students cannot understand the connections in the historical musical system and this cannot be accepted in a serious music education curriculum. But the role of music as educator of citizens is a strong part of the Chinese tradition: *“Music was considered to be one of the four fundamental societal functions, together with moral, law and politics, in traditional Chinese society. Confucius thought that the cultivation of reason depended on the appreciation of the proper kind of music, for ‘music and government are directly connected with one another’, and ‘music harmonizes the community’ (Portnoy, 1949, p.237)”*.<sup>6</sup> This is a very interesting point. Also, the classic Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, thought that music has a strong influence on morals and the Chinese tradition seems to connect perfectly with the Greek one. And so, my point about the musical curriculum is not mainly concerned with music in itself, but is more concerned with moral and ethics, what vision of the world we want to offer to the students through music.

### 3) Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940)

We cannot fail to mention another thinker that would have a decisive influence on the culture of his time, Cai Yuanpei. In his opinion aesthetic education was a very important part for the shaping of every human being. But, also, he thought that religion should not be part of education, because education is progress of ideas and religion is, according his opinion, only a very conservative and not innovative way of thinking.<sup>7</sup> We should not forget that this thinker would help in the establishment of one of the main musical institutions in China, what today is called Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

### **b) Development of international standards**

We now come to a quite delicate point. Macau is a little city. This is nice in many regards, but one of the side effects is that the mentality of the people is not always open to change. Indeed, sometimes is difficult to bring new ideas because at certain levels people from outside are still perceived as someone who is trying to enter in a territory that does not belong to him or her. After discussing this point with local people and foreigners I have come to the conclusion that the Portuguese colonial period has left a definite influence regarding this local attitude. I can see that in the last few years things are changing and the young people are certainly more open to the new world we are all living in. I think this will also have a positive influence on music education, hopefully starting from primary and secondary schools. I am noticing also, through my many connections with the Macau educational community, that there is a change toward a more internationalized

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<sup>5</sup> Hu Gui Ping (2004). *L'Educazione in Cina e l'Influenza dell'Occidente all'alba dell'Era Moderna (1850-1950)*. Bologna, Italia: Cooperativa Libreria Universitaria Editrice Bologna. p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Ho Wai-Chung (2010). *Moral Education in China's Music Education: Development and Challenges*. International Journal of Music Education. 28. p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Hu Gui Ping (2004). Op. Cit. p. 118.

approach to education, putting an emphasis on the teaching of English, including institutions where English is not the main medium of instruction. This is a good sign to shape the citizens of tomorrow.

Nevertheless, Macau is not yet a really international place in the way that, for example, Hong Kong is. I want to state clearly that I am not constructing a hierarchy between these two cities; I am only saying that Macau, being also much smaller than Hong Kong, it is still developing its international stature. Macau is certainly living in a period of transition from old to the new. This was also pointed out by art historian David Clarke: “*While thinking of Macau as undergoing a transition between ‘old’ and ‘new’ that can be temporarily mapped onto the 1990 handover moment, it is also important to consider the matter in spatial terms, and note that in a certain sense the ‘old’ Macau is still present alongside the ‘new’ Macau albeit that the two exist in largely separate locations*”.<sup>8</sup> Macau is still between old and new and this is something that can also be felt in the field of music education. There are forces pushing toward a new culture of music education that have to struggle with forces that prefer to maintain the *status quo*.

International culture today is more accessible, thank to the internet, but if you want to buy a published hard copy English book, for example, here you have very little choice. Also, music stores (or music shops) in Macau are merely places where people go to be offered some piano lessons, and probably there is only one store that can be compared to the ones in Hong Kong (Tom Lee Music, that indeed is a brand from Hong Kong). There is an important music festival in October organized by the Cultural Institute but it is not yet at the international level. With my experience in choral competitions I have to state that I have seen choirs from basically all of Asia, even from Iran, but I have never seen a choir from Macau. Is it not possible to have good choirs from Macau? Certainly it is. As I have mentioned, there are really talented people here, but the environment is not yet favorable for the full growth of these young talents. This is probably why young students prefer often to go abroad to further their studies.

### **c) Development of educational teaching practices**

In the last decades we witness many changes on the field of education. An enormous amount of new insights has shown us that a new way for education is possible. The relationship between the student and the teacher that existed before has changed dramatically in many Western countries, but it is still anchored in old models in mainland China and partially in Macau. The “sage on the stage” model was important for many years, but now is showing its limitations in the kind of society we are living. This model is still present in modern educational practices in this part of the world. The students are encouraged to be reproductive but not productive. There is a huge amount of works that clearly show that collaborative learning and other strategies best serve the need of the students, but this has still not become part of common practice at the present day.

The role of the teacher should change from “sage” to “mentor”, a person that shows a possible way, more than the seat of knowledge. The latter model could work when information was available only through books and there were not many books around. But today, when through my computer I am able to access this very moment millions and millions of books and articles and websites, this role has obviously got to change. I think

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<sup>8</sup> Clarke, David (2007). *Illuminating Façades: Looking at Post-Colonial Macau*. Journal of Visual Culture. 6; p. 395.

in Macau there is the will to follow this direction. Also I personally experience the care that educational bodies are putting in the development of teachers and to do it in a way that they can follow the pace of progress. But it is also evident that more work needs to be done. I have met many dozens of very young and talented students and all of them repeat to me the same thing: they were taught to play a few pieces to achieve one good result during examinations, but their knowledge of that piece and about everything around it is enormously limited.

One field where still there is a long way to go is the psychological consideration that must be given to the needs of - students. Unfortunately this is not yet as developed as it should be. I have a quite consistent experience with choirs; I participated as jurors in many choral competitions. When it comes to mainland Chinese choirs, you can notice often that they are not singing with joy, maybe they sing correctly, but the spirit is not there. I think this attitude has some consequences also here, where many teachers come from mainland China. Some of them are really trying to change their perspective on the relationship between teacher and students (also taking into account the Confucian tradition that does not contradict change in relationship, if we maintain different roles) but other still maintain the attitude of “sage” and this does not influence in a positive way the learning of the students. This is obviously terrible for music education. How many talented students come to hate music because of this? I think this is a question that should be asked.

#### **d) Perspective on music education from the students: building a learning culture**

Through my teaching in Macau, I have the opportunity to meet every week a consistent number of students. They are from primary school, secondary school and from universities. I notice that they really love music, and that music, just as it is for all the young people in the world, is an important part of their life. The problem starts when they switch from the pleasure for music to music education. In the latter we come against the constraint given by the culture: the urgency to get the “piece of paper” (diploma) is of paramount importance. This is understandable. We know that without certain qualifications it is more difficult in our society to get a job. But the problem is, when this urgency becomes the main motivator of what one studies. In my opinion, this also influences in a very negative way the quality of what one studies and the quality of one’s future work. How do we come to assess these students? What is the parameter for the assessment, the exams, or their attitude? We know now that this content-based learning is no longer the best option for a real learning experience. We are immersed in a teaching culture, where the teacher is the seat of knowledge and the students is the one that benefit from the teacher culture. But is that really the case? We should instead strive to transform our school from “teaching stronghold” into learning organizations. What is the meaning of all this? The meaning is that the way students build and construct their knowledge becomes the focus of teaching, not the knowledge itself. “Knowledge” today can be vastly acquired through social media, but the way students make sense of this information is the real challenge for a teacher. What is the teacher assessing, the content or the process of learning? I am quite sure that most of the teachers consider a certain amount of content, and make this the goal for which they have to strive. The concept of a “learning culture” is not a concept that can be applied only to education. Indeed it is a concept widely used in organizational studies.<sup>9</sup> It is very difficult to measure the outcome of a

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<sup>9</sup> Baiyin Yang (2005). Identifying Valid and Reliable Measures for Dimensions of a Learning Culture. In *Advancing in Developing Human Resources*. 5: 152



learning culture, and so the exam is an easy way to get a certain sort of measure of the proficiency of the student in a subject. But we should be aware that music only measures acquired notions (which can be a piece one can play), but that seldom can an exam measure the way a student has made sense of those notions. And this is the important part. What I suggest is a model that was first developed in Venezuela, and is now becoming world renown with the name of *El Sistema* (the System). In this system instruction is given to the young musical performers following three levels: individual, sectional and all combined. It is quite remarkable that we can find something very similar in organizational studies when we refer to a learning culture. In an article of 2005, Baiyan Yang makes reference to some studies of Watkins and Marsick that assert that there are three levels of organizational learning: individual (continuous learning and dialogue and inquiry), group (team learning and collaboration) and organizational (embedded system, system connections, empowerment and leadership for learning).<sup>10</sup> These threefold system of learning, if implemented correctly, can really help to change the way instruction is given in the music education field. Obviously this has to be used together with new pedagogical concepts and with the idea that “teacher” or “professor” is only another name for learner. It is only an indication of a moment in a career of learning, it does not mean speaking from a tower. Who put teachers on this tower if not themselves? The implementation of a true musical culture based on learning can only benefit the process of acquiring skills for a true knowledge.

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<sup>10</sup> Baiyin Yang (2005),. Op. Cit, 154

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