

HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION AND SOUTHEAST ASIA-REFLECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract

Since gaining independence, Singapore's economic transformation has drawn much attention globally and has been an important stakeholder in the Southeast Asian region. Singapore's cultural landscape as a young nation has also undergone much development, of which music plays an integral role in shaping the cultural and national identity of Singapore. Moreover, Singapore's cultural development not only has local but also regional implications on Southeast Asia. By tracing the development of arts, culture, and higher music education in Singapore, and reflecting on its regional impact and future possibilities, these reflections aim to deepen our appreciation that higher music education must meet the region's unique contexts and geographies, and to affirm our responsibility as stewards to develop it in ways that uplift and benefit society. This paper thus investigates the trajectory of Higher Music Education in Singapore and towards the region in three views: its origin in national development, its contributions to Southeast Asia, and future possibilities. As a musician from Singapore, I hope to use this to reflect on my duties to Singapore, to the region, and to the world.

Keywords: Music, Higher music education, Southeast Asia

Background

In 2000, the then Ministry of Information and The Arts published the Renaissance City Report, a comprehensive report and review of Singapore's cultural landscape, that articulated what was the state's envisioned role of arts and culture in Singapore, and what it hoped that a Singapore that is enriched by the arts and cultural activities would look like (Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000, 4).

The vision of the Renaissance Singaporean is one that aspired to cultivate a citizen that is creative, innovative, and culturally rooted to their Asian heritage amidst the evolving notion of Singaporean identity. Renaissance Singapore is also aimed at being an active international citizen with the vision of being an international centre for arts-related activities, alongside its position of an international finance and communications centre. Moreover, cultivating an appreciation and love for the arts and aesthetic appreciation would not only develop a love of life in each Singaporean, but to develop a gracious and socially conscious citizenry. This would also lead to a vibrant and participatory population that respects the multi-racial and multi-religious society of Singapore. Through the arts, Singapore was envisioned to have a distinct national identity that is attractive internationally and holds its people together, with a hope of developing a population that is dynamic, international, communitarian, and rooted to its Asian values (Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000, 38-40).

To support the ambitions of creating Renaissance Singapore, one of the main strategies was to create a comprehensive arts education system. This included improving the education system from schools through implementing an Arts-in-Education programme to encourage students to engage with and appreciate the arts in various forms. Saliently, the report also highlighted the need to enhance the arts education system and the state's plans to develop a tertiary arts education system to further professionalise the field. This also led to the further development of higher music education in Singapore. (Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000, 62).

The trajectory of using the arts and culture for developing a unique national identity, for bringing the community together, and more recently for economic benefit has been consistently articulated in the direction of Singapore's cultural policy throughout history. At the point of independence, the state's idealised vision for Singaporean identity was to have access to the technological know-how of the West, yet the cultural software should be Asian in character (Thumboo, 1996, 190-191). Further, the importance of the arts and culture for nation-building, and subsequently, to be harnessed for economic upgrading, was central to cultural policy in Singapore (Thumboo, 1996, 194). Moreover, the mission to be socially constructive and not undermine the core values on which the survival and well-being of Singapore's multiracial society rests (Thumboo, 1996, 195) reflects the communitarian ideals of cultural policy in Singapore. The moralising effect of arts and culture through inculcating 'appropriate' values such as patriotism is also a primary strategy of creating a national identity through the arts. The utilisation of the arts as a moral ballast was important to the national identity of Singapore in the face of migration. For example, the rapid economic growth of Singapore in the 70s and influx of Western culture, led the ministry to emphasise on 'Asian' or 'ethnic' culture as a cultural defence against the perceived negative influences from the West, which became more vital with the move to education in English (Chong, 2018, xxiv-xxv). Alongside the development of national identity was the use of the arts for national solidarity and to create a shared sense of connection in the community.

Arts education was viewed not only for the purposes of aesthetic training but to serve the function of cultivating a 'well-rounded' and engaged citizenry that is capable of navigating the multicultural nature of Singaporean society. In the post-independence era, characterised by a fragmented public in the predominantly migrant population, the arts were thus envisioned to be able to bridge cultural divides. It was envisioned that by fostering an appreciation for the arts, the state would achieve racial harmony and unify the population, towards postcolonial modernity (Chong, 2017, 114). For instance, post-independence, multiculturalism was instituted as a guiding principle to unite the population, which comprised

many different ethnicities. Within this context, the government aimed towards being ethnically neutral through policies such as instituting English as the lingua franca in Singapore (Tan, 2018, 263). Tan analyses the creation of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in 1979 as a project for ‘national face’ within the context of the nation’s rapid economic growth albeit its cultural sector lagging. Having a state orchestra was a statement that it had reached a high degree of cultural capital akin to other global cities such as London or Berlin (Tan, 2018, 264).

The vision of using the arts as a stimulus for the economy was also given emphasis since the development of the report. Loh highlighted the strategy of using the arts and culture as part of the creative industries development strategy, where the arts and culture, design, media, was envisioned to create a creative cluster to make contributions to the nation’s economy (Loh, 2008, 2). The arts were thus utilised to inspire creative means to solve economic challenges (Chong, 2018, xvii). It was hoped that through enhancing the arts and cultural offerings of the state, Singapore would become a global city that would attract global capital and talent (Chong, 2018, xxix). The creative industries would thus spur on other industries for economic growth (Chong, 2018, xxix). This was in recognition of the need for Singaporeans to be able to navigate an increasingly globalised world in the knowledge-based economy (Kong 2012, 7). It was thus believed that by strengthening the arts and cultural base, there would be a natural support for the development of the cultural scene, with the aim to develop Singaporeans who are more ‘rounded and to enhance their capacity for creativity and innovation.’ (RCP, 2000, 52). Thus, out of the development of the culture industries would be an indirect impact on the population to come up with more creative ways to contribute to the economy.

The exhortations of the Renaissance City Report are still present today. For instance, in Our SG Arts Plan 2.0, the three strategic thrusts of creating ‘A Connected Society’ through embedding the arts in all aspects of life such as education, leisure, and well-being to sustain lifelong engagement; expanding access through partnerships to strengthen cohesion; and driving advocacy to grow support by

focusing on the social impact of the arts across the public, private, and people sectors to diversify patronage (National Arts Council 2023, 55). There is also an emphasis on making arts experiences opportunities for people to form connections and supporting artists to develop participatory artforms that benefit the community (National Arts Council 2023, 60). ‘A Distinctive City: where spaces are invigorated by the arts and contribute to making Singapore an endearing home and attractive destination’, and ‘A Creative Economy: where our arts sector is powered by artistic talent, excellence and innovation, as well as close collaborations with the larger creative industry’ both locally and internationally. These strategies are consistent with previous state cultural policies in Singapore, which positioned the arts and culture as means to build a distinctive national identity, to create a cohesive society, and to advance the economic development of the state. The vision for the arts and culture scene in Singapore is pragmatically oriented, where the emphasis lay on its value in achieving the aforementioned aims in how the arts are to be practiced, appreciated, and valued in terms of its relevance and impact. More importantly, it was the foundation for which many further institutions, including higher music education institutions, were to be created, eventually shaping the approach to music.

It is within this milieu that we shall consider the development of higher music education in Singapore.

Higher music education in Singapore

Following the continuities between the state’s wider cultural policy and the higher creative education sector, it is seen that there is a pragmatic slant towards higher music education.

The push for creating a workforce for the creative industries and eventually a workforce that was more creative was the main idea of higher creative education. (Kong, 2012, 10) There was also a push to develop local talent for the creative industries through enhancing the arts education system, particularly through arts, design and media education programmes at the secondary and tertiary levels, attracting top foreign arts schools to set up here. (Kong, 2012, 10) The primary role

of creative higher institutions was in retaining and developing specialisations in the production of the creative arts, both technically as well as artistically, in order to raise the standard of arts production in Singapore as a fledgling nation state. There was a recognition that local arts education and qualifications would support the evolution of Singapore into the next stage of economic development. This was pertinent for giving more value-creating and value-adding economic activities, and the development of the creative industries. It was envisioned that higher creative education would then increase the number of local arts graduates to have the expertise to fill the workforce in the creative industries. Having more local arts graduates would also inspire creativity and innovation in the wider Singaporean society. (Oon, 2018, 149). As mentioned before, this resulted in the enhancement of the pre-existing arts institutions, and the development of tertiary arts education in Singapore.

Within this core function of higher creative education of creating the workforce of the creative industry, Comunian and Ooi (2016, 66-67) further posit that conceptualising higher creative education is a balancing act of various flows, articulating some of the problems and dilemmas that is pertinent to the value of higher creative education in Singapore.

First, importance of higher creative education was a balance between specialised higher creative education for the creative sector and for the wider benefits to the rest of the economy through the broader development of creativity and innovation. This also takes into account the career prospects and nature of careers in the arts industry. Since the creative industries cannot absorb all graduates and full-time careers in the creative and cultural industries remain a minority, the nature of creative jobs in the creative industries are precarious. There was thus also a push towards being entrepreneurial with careers, viewing creativity as an important trait applicable to everyday practices and non-creative sectors to ensure that graduates can also find employment in adjacent or similar-enough careers (Comunian & Ooi, 2016, 67-69). The mandate for higher music education thus has expanded from its original conceptualisation as a site for the development of technical skills and musicianship to also consider how to best prepare graduates to enter the sector.

Secondly, higher creative education institutions have to balance between the need to remain open and the development of local national identity through higher creative education. The music industry, as a global market, is highly competitive, and therefore, it was deemed strategic to position Singapore's arts and cultural development amidst global developments. Moreover, international recognition was a benchmark of success and there was a push for various sectors in the creative industries to have an international outlook. In order to provide a workforce to the local creative industry that is compatible with global standards, the higher music education system had to remain competitive to stay relevant amidst the evolving times. This was seen in relation to keeping Singapore open and attractive for drawing global trade and talent. It was believed that having an arts sector that is keeping pace with international trends and standards remain an important strategic priority. Thus, an outward-looking strategy for keeping higher creative education up to date was seen to be important to the development of the local music industry. At the same time, the push toward internationalisation had to be balanced with a focus on developing local national identity through the arts. For instance, the focus on more international forms of artistic practice such as classical music rather than embracing Singapore's cultural traditions was seen to be a sign of providing higher education in specific fields. (Comunian & Ooi, 2016, 70) Chong further notes how the rhetoric of arts education evolved was dependent on the socio-industrial conditions of the state, oscillating between pushing for national identity, economic development, or developing creativity and innovation (Chong, 2017, 112).

Thirdly, there is the consideration between higher creative education being for economic or cultural contribution. Comunian and Ooi echo the emphasis on the perceived economic benefits on the arts - the perception among stakeholders in the arts sector that the direction taken by higher creative education institutes had moved away from the traditional value of the arts in Asian society, towards a professionalisation of the industry (Comunian & Ooi, 2016, 72). This was in part due to the value system posited by the state of higher education being steered towards prioritising employment outcomes and economic development, rather than looking towards the societal contributions of the individual artist or musician (Comunian &

Ooi, 2016, 73). Situating this dilemma among the contemporary global debate about the role of higher music education in fostering artistic citizenship, considering the social purpose and impact of music on people, Gaunt highlights how music education and musicians ought to consider how their work has the potential for social engagement (Gaunt et al., 2021, 4). Saliently, she posits that the social value of music not to be competing against the artistic focus of higher music education, which historically had advocated for art-for-art's sake, but rather adopts the framework of 'musicking' as a pathway towards seeing both paradigms as partnering values (Gaunt et al., 2021, 6).

The trajectory of higher music education in Singapore is thus a complex one and multi-layered one, considering various historical, economic, societal, cultural, and artistic flows, while maintaining both a global and local outlook. Understanding how various regional flows and developments in the sector is important to reflect on its potential for national development.

The impact of Higher Music Education on the Region

Having situated the development of higher music education at the local level, it is then important to turn to consider how it has influenced the wider region.

Firstly, higher music education institutions are important as hubs for the development of an emerging Southeast Asian musical identity and voice. There are two strands in which such a task is undertaken by higher music education institutes-cultural preservation and promotion. The cultural impact of higher music education is demonstrated in preserving and shedding light on the musical traditions of the region. For example, Dr Jean-David Caillouët at the Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music (PGVIM), created a documentary of the musical contributions of Professor Ramón Pagayon Santos, a Filipino composer, ethnomusicologist, and educator and a prominent figure in Filipino classical music. Titled "TINIG-TUNOG-AN: The Life & Works Of Ramon Pagayon Santos", the documentary presented Professor Santos' works, giving insight on the aesthetics of Filipino music and artistic traditions of Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the film also captured his extensive musical output alongside his philosophical and aesthetic reflections on music. The film was part of the PGVIM's

mission of sustainable development of music and the arts in the Southeast Asian region by advancing research understanding of musical practices of the region and showcasing them both for local and global audiences (PGVIS, 2025). These efforts are important in showcasing the musical practices from the region to the wider academic world and beyond. Moreover, the resources of higher music education help to platform these musical practices on an equal intellectual footing to more globally recognised musical practices. Hence, these initiatives preserve the musical traditions of the region by continuing to produce knowledge and information of these traditions, for a contemporary audience.

Beyond preserving the histories and cultures of musical traditions indigenous to the region, higher music education promotes contemporary interpretations of musical identity, serving to strengthen the regional identity of Southeast Asia. Articulated through collaborations between musicians and institutions across the region the Southeast Asian Golden Age Symphony, premiered during the Performers(‘) Present 2023 symposium at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, brought together seven composers from across the region to write a single symphony. The group composed of the following composers, Gema Swaratyagita (Indonesia), Hoang Pho (Vietnam), Lee Chie Tsang (Malaysia), Thatchatham Silsupan (Thailand), Danny Imson (Philippines), Jonathan Shin and Syafiqah ‘Adha Sallehin (Singapore), wrote a single symphony, with each composer working on a single movement. Facilitated by mentor Adeline Wong and working with curator Topi Lehtipuu, this project was poised as a rich melding of the composers’ respective cultures and compositional voices, the project reflected ‘the vibrant energy and diversity poised for even more exciting growth ahead’. Here, the role of the higher music education institute serves to platform the enunciation of a contemporary Southeast Asian musical identity (YST Conservatory, 2023). Moreover, the symphony served as a discursive space to reflect on and revitalise the musical meaning and heritage of the region. The process of seven different composers working together to write a single cohesive symphony also provided an opportunity to reflect on the linkages across the region and express them in music, thus playing a role in shaping and platforming shared Southeast Asian musical identity.

Further, higher music education institutions play a role in bringing across the broader region, creating music that reflects not only the artistic styles but also as a site to reflect on the issues of music in the region. For example, in the 2025 SEADOM congress at PGVIM, students of PGVIM and Bansomdejchaopraya Rajabhat University, under the guidance of Anant Narkkong, Prof. Dr. LaVerne de la Peña, Dr. Mayco Santaella, Varis Likitanusorn, held a workshop titled ASEAN Music Experience & Beyond (PGVIS, 2025). The workshop aimed to explore the diverse traditions of Southeast Asian music, that presented a collaborate performance that reimagined the story of Alice in Wonderland through the lens of Southeast Asian sound worlds. Using this creative framework, the musicians experimented with the music of various parts of Southeast Asia sought to use music to present an alternative version of Southeast Asia, culminating in a music and visual performance that uncovered how traditional music navigated the various global flows, environmental concerns, and socio-political influences. This project was significant not only in showcasing the various musical traditions around the region, but also to demonstrate how the plural identities of the region are a site of negotiating between historical, contemporary, sociopolitical, and cultural flows. In doing so, participants were invited to think critically about the impact and representative nature of their music.

Thus, some of the impacts of higher music education may be seen in how it serves to preserve and promote musical practices across the region.

Towards a Higher Music Education of the Region

The scene of creative higher education serves as a site that negotiates various flows and priorities of specialist industry preparation and wider societal impact - being globally oriented while supporting local development, and balancing between economic and cultural contribution.

In reflecting on the examples of the regional impact of higher music education and how it has served to preserve and articulate the musical practices of the region, and how music serves as a bridge across cultures and locations, there is a fundamental question of the value of music practices in Southeast Asia. How

does higher music education respond to transnational waves not only in terms of shifting economic landscapes but cultural and creative evolutions that represent the region? Beyond this, what are the wider implications of higher music education on the arts landscape across the region? What is higher music education of the region giving voice to and how can it better serve the communities that it finds itself in? How is musical knowledge being produced, and how power is begotten from the generation of such knowledge? In reflecting on how higher music education in Southeast Asia ought to evolve and what are the cultural responsibilities and what is the mandate of higher music education. As higher music education continues to develop, it is imperative that education remains an emancipatory force both ideologically as well as pragmatically. The musical practices that higher music education have been empowering needs to expand. Moreover, there is a need to generate new practices that present a contemporary vision of the region through music.

Looking at the case studies before, it is increasingly becoming clear that further collaboration between higher music education institutes across the region is important for the value of music in Southeast Asia to be reflected on and articulated. Collaborating to reflect on and articulate the value of music in the region can take place on two levels, collaborating to produce new knowledge about music in the region, and collaboration to make music.

Firstly, as a networked community of higher music educators across Southeast Asia, there can be a reconceptualisation of musical knowledge of the region at the epistemological level. Out of these collaborations and networks, new theorisations, new conceptualisations of ways to understand music, and thus new musical practices can be formed to bring new ways to represent the region's unique musical identity that is contemporaneous and more relevant. Beyond the training of musical excellence, higher music education of Southeast Asia can thus take on the role of being thought leaders for the development of music in the region. As advocates for music, we, musicians, bear the responsibility to continuously create and to articulate new knowledge about musical developments in the region,

holding on to the belief that the Southeast Asian voice has much to offer for the rest of the world. Some of such work was observed in the Asia-Pacific Improvisation Symposium at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music that showcased the vibrancy of musical cultures and contemporary developments of improvisational practice across the Asia-Pacific region (Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, 2025). Since improvisation is central to many musical practices across Southeast Asia and also the West musical cultures, it allows for collaboration that is responsive, dialogic, and sensitive to the contexts of our region to take place. These collaborations through improvisation allow for an exploration of new ways to make music across cultural borders. Higher music education institutes thus can serve as hubs of knowledge for the region, bridging between cultures, borders, and between academia and the industry. The creation of new knowledge can also then lead to the development of new artistic practices that have industry and societal impact. Moreover, this would have a wider impact than at the local level itself. Thus, the work of researching into and the developing of musical concepts from the region that informs practice and allows for the production of intellectual discourse on music of the region remains a key responsibility for higher music education.

Beyond collaborating to generate new knowledge and practices about regional music, higher music education institutions can build networks for knowledge exchange to amplify the impact of music across the region. For instance, the Southeast Asian Directors of Music Association (SEADOM) Congress serves a platform for leaders in the music sector to develop and deepen the understanding of societal developments both at the local and regional level. In facilitating dialogue amongst educators, practitioners, artists, and administrators, the congress fosters the exchange of knowledge and best practices, highlighting how music can play a broader role in terms of its cultural, economic, and social impact (Southeast Asian Directors of Music Association (SEADOM, n.d.). Moreover, such collaborations keep the broader sector abreast of industry developments, and how practices or structures can be adapted to stay relevant and strengthen the regional and local music ecosystem. In doing so, the SEADOM congress serves to share insights among leaders in the regional music ecosystem and to generate new perspectives about music in the region, thus strengthening the Southeast Asian musical voice when translated to practice.

Beyond collaborating to play the role of producing and articulating musical knowledge of the region, higher music education institutes in Southeast Asia can also facilitate musical collaboration across borders. For example, the National University of Singapore Symphony Orchestra's recent tour to Kuala Lumpur, which culminated in a performance at the prestigious Dewan Filharmonik Petronas (DFP), demonstrated how a new generation across Southeast Asia is charting fresh approaches to learning, leading, and listening across cultures. The tour showed how music could serve as a means towards regional understanding and collaboration. This was observed in how the students had the opportunity to work with their peers from Sunway University and the Malaysian Philharmonic Youth Orchestra (Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, 2026). A key feature of the tour was having the students perform side-by-side in the concert at the DFP (Sunway University, 2026). This collaboration also served as a site for cultural and musical exchange between the students from both countries. Beyond the performance at Kuala Lumpur, the tour also served as a platform for students to deepen their understanding of the creative and cultural industries and cultural ecosystems in both Malaysia and Singapore. Through industry talks and exchanges with practitioners, the students learned about topics including arts management and audience development strategies. This was important for the students' development to be practitioners who are aware of the developments of music around the region. Moreover, the students also had the opportunity to engage with students from Chung Hwa High School in Muar, Johor Bahru. Through making music together and exchanges, these sessions fostered a spirit of sharing through music, building bridges across communities. The tour demonstrated how higher music education institutions can play a role in fostering collaboration across countries in Southeast Asia, and to equip musicians with the knowledge, communication skills, and mindset needed to contribute meaningfully to the development of the musical landscape in Southeast Asia. Creating musical collaborations across the region thus can bring practitioners together to foster interpersonal ties and strengthen professional pathways. These have the potential to then nurture a shared Southeast Asian musical identity. Collaboration then remains a key pathway to reflect on and articulate the value of music in the region.

Conclusion

As the world becomes more complex, we need to adopt an approach dynamic and reinvention. Sustaining arts practice should be executed by continuously reinventing, communicating in order to remain relevant. Moreover, we need to seek connections beyond what we traditionally construe to be within the domain of music and innovate across disciplinary boundaries, creating new opportunities and pathways for the continuous development and practice of music. Music is an inherently interdisciplinary art as it communicates meaning on multiple levels, likewise, the musician must continuously seek out ways to communicate their audiences in various ideas. In creating these new pathways, there is potential to redefine what a musician in society. Amidst the rapidly evolving musical landscapes, arts practice must be contemporary and our responsibility to educate the student must be placed above that of teaching the craft of music. Higher music education institutions play a role in influencing the institutional value of music and it is our responsibility to empower and to enliven, to uncover possibilities for how things can be done. The mandate to empower and bring to the fore underrepresented musical voices is one that must be continuous and iterative. The trajectories that we create have to be reflexively being produced in relation to our students, and our evolving contexts.

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