

MAKING MUSIC FOR COMMUNITIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES AND PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORKS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

This article examines participatory community music practices across Southeast Asia, highlighting how culturally embedded musical initiatives build bridges between diverse communities, generations, and identities. Drawing on a qualitative, practitioner-informed comparative case study of twelve initiatives across all ten ASEAN countries, this article situates contemporary community music practices within a 21st-century Southeast Asian socio-cultural landscape. Grounded in the author's dual role as a scholar-practitioner, the study integrates perspectives from ethnomusicology, music education, and community development. A series of in-depth case studies, from creative placemaking in urban Bangkok to peacebuilding programmes in Thailand's conflict-affected southern provinces, and youth-led projects spanning Myanmar to Brunei, demonstrates how participatory music-making enriches intercultural dialogue, psychosocial healing, and social cohesion. Local pedagogies rooted in oral traditions and regional musical practices support

adaptive learning and cultural continuity, positioning music as both a tool for heritage preservation and a catalyst for social innovation. A cross-case thematic analysis reveals shared principles and recurring challenges, offering insights into inclusive and sustainable community music models. Ultimately, the findings highlight the contribution to theorising a Southeast Asian framework of participatory music grounded in relationality, cultural continuity, and collective resilience.

Keywords: community music, Southeast Asia, participatory music, cultural resilience, intercultural dialogue

Introduction

Music, in its many forms, has long served as a medium for connection, resilience, and transformation. In Southeast Asia—a region rich in cultural diversity and marked by contrasting histories of tradition, colonialism, and innovation—community music practices have emerged as vital tools for social cohesion and intercultural dialogue. This study examines the integration of music into community engagement strategies, with a focus on participatory models that empower individuals and groups through collaborative creation and shared listening experiences.

Rooted in both academic inquiry and practice-based reflection, the discussion draws on the author's experience as a community music catalyst, influenced by the pedagogical philosophies of Thai educators Anant Narkkong and Anothai Nitibhon.¹ Both have been pioneering figures in the development of *Music for Society*² in Thailand. Over the past two decades, they have influenced generations of students by demonstrating the diverse ways in which music can engage with and contribute to societal wellbeing. Key initiatives such as *Music for Society* and localised projects in Bang Yi Khan and the insurgency-affected Southern Border Provinces of Thailand provide contextual grounding. Expanding outward, the article examines Southeast Asian case studies that reflect a range of cultural, educational, and therapeutic objectives. Together, these examples illustrate a dynamic ecosystem of community music work in the region.

¹ In recognition of my mentors, Anant Narkkong and Anothai Nitibhon, whose invaluable inspiration has catalysed the development of music that meaningfully engages and enriches the community.

² For the last two decades, the term Music in the Community may be used, which relates to Professor Nigel Osborn's concept.

This study focuses primarily on community music initiatives developed between 2014 and 2025, a period marked by intensified regional connectivity, post-conflict recovery efforts, and increased recognition of intangible cultural heritage across ASEAN. In situating Southeast Asian practices within a broader international discourse, it is important to acknowledge parallel developments in Western community music led by practitioners such as Peter Renshaw (2013), Nigel Osborne (Woodward, 2012), and André de Quadros (2018). Their works on socially engaged musicianship, conflict transformation, and culturally responsive facilitation provide useful comparative reference points. However, the Southeast Asian cases discussed here foreground relationality, oral transmission, and community-embedded pedagogy, each emerging from distinct historical and spiritual contexts.

Music for society in this context emphasises participatory engagement, social empowerment, and culturally relevant practice. Southeast Asia's diverse musical traditions and social conditions have given rise to a wide array of community music initiatives, many of which are informed by local pedagogies, intercultural exchange, and postcolonial dynamics. While global theories such as Christopher Small's concept of musicking (1998) and Thomas Turino's distinction between participatory and presentational performance (2008) provide frameworks, Southeast Asian models often foreground collective healing, heritage preservation, and adaptive learning in response to local needs.

Each ASEAN country presents unique manifestations of community music. In Indonesia, *gamelan* ensembles serve as intergenerational educational tools; in the Philippines, community music promotes cultural activism among urban and indigenous groups. Cambodia's trauma-informed music programs support vulnerable youth, and Singapore's conservatory integrates community engagement into formal music training. Across Laos, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, and Thailand, oral transmission, spiritual meanings, and communal rituals remain central to community-based music learning. These patterns reflect a Southeast Asian philosophy of music rooted in care, adaptability, and relational knowledge. By examining initiatives in all ten ASEAN nations, this study adopts a regional lens to identify shared principles and local innovations. It demonstrates how musical practices can resonate across cultural and geographic borders, building bridges among communities while honouring distinct identities.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, practitioner-informed case study design (Yin, 2017; Stake, 1995). The twelve cases were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria as follows: (1) sustained community engagement, (2) participatory rather than presentational music-making, and (3) demonstrable social, cultural, or educational impact. Several cases derive from the author's direct involvement as scholar-practitioner, aligning with the tradition of reflective and ethnographic fieldwork in ethnomusicology that acknowledges positionality and relational knowledge (Barz & Cooley, 2008), while others were selected based on documented initiatives, published research, and institutional reports.

Data collection methods included discussion with music scholars in the music scene, participant observation, reflective field notes, informal interviews with facilitators and participants, project documentation, audio-visual materials, and the review of secondary literature. The comparative analysis that follows was conducted through thematic coding across cases (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying shared principles, contextual adaptations, and recurring challenges.

Case Studies from ASEAN Countries

Thailand: Bang Yi Khan & Southern Border Provinces

Participatory music-making is used for creative placemaking in an urban neighbourhood and for peacebuilding across religious divides in a conflict region.

Music for Society at Bang Yi Khan

Bang Yi Khan neighbourhood is a multi-generational urban community with a rich culture, located along the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok. A recent surge in development has heightened tensions between tradition and modern life. In 2014, the *Music for Society* initiative was launched to reintroduce music-making into everyday community life as a tool for expression and cohesion. Facilitated by the author and musician-activists from the Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music (PGVIM), the project involved collaborative workshops, street concerts, and collaborative composition sessions. It began with listening walks and oral history

interviews to map the neighbourhood's sonic identity. Elders and youth gathered local sounds using mobile phones and field recorders, which were then woven into site-specific compositions combining spoken word and urban soundscapes. Workshops focused on co-creating musical songs that reflected the community's shared concerns—environmental change, local history, and identity—using a dialogic, non-hierarchical approach that allowed participants to guide the creative process (Suwanpakdee, Nitibhon, & Jitduangprem, 2024).

The project culminated in a series of public performances, and residents reported increased pride in their neighbourhood and a stronger sense of intergenerational connection. Youth participants gained a sense of ownership over cultural expression, while elders saw their memories honoured through new songs. The researchers' role shifted from expert to co-learner, underscoring the importance of humility, deep listening, and responsiveness in community music work. Despite challenges such as limited funding and space, the grassroots nature of the project ensured adaptability and resonance with local values.

Participatory Music-Making in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces

Deep south or Thailand's three southern border provinces, multicultural area—Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—are predominantly Malay-Muslim and have faced decades of ethno-religious tension and insurgent conflict. Despite marginalisation, these provinces sustain rich musical traditions (e.g., *dikir puteri*, *Silat practices*, *gendang* drumming, and Islamic devotional chants). In 2025, a series of *Inspiration Music Camps* was implemented as part of the Innovation of Creative Music Process for Community Development Phase 2, led by author and co-researcher Pongthep Jitduangprem and in partnership with both local educators and community leaders. Supported by Thailand's National Research Council (NRCT), the programme established music camps at the Yala Youth Centre to create safe, creative spaces for youth from diverse cultural backgrounds. Workshops integrated traditional instruments such as *rebana*, frame drums and *rong ngeng* dance music, with collaborative composition. Researchers encouraged participants to share songs from their own cultural heritage and reinterpret them in an ensemble context. In

some sessions, folk melodies were reimagined with new lyrics that addressed local challenges, such as displacement, educational access, and environmental change.

Improvisation and story-based composition were key methods. Auditioned local youth participants shared personal and ancestral stories, which were then collectively transformed into original musical pieces. In mixed religious settings, music served as a neutral, shared language that facilitated respectful exchange and co-creation. Researchers employed non-formal techniques such as call-and-response, sound painting, and body percussion to facilitate inclusive participation, regardless of musical literacy. Six youth-composed pieces (one as a graphic score) emerged, reflecting themes of peace, cultural pride, and hope. These works were performed for local communities. Participants reported increased confidence, self-expression, and cross-cultural empathy. Educators observed that the camps nurtured creative risk-taking and revealed hidden talents among students who often felt marginalised in formal classrooms (Suwanpakdee & Jitduangprem, 2025). The findings emphasised culturally sensitive facilitation that respected local belief systems while gently opening space for creative experimentation. Ultimately, this Thailand deep south case demonstrated music's power to cultivate resilience in a conflict-affected society by focusing on process over performance, creating a communal space for listening, healing, and imagining a shared future.

In summary, the Thai cases demonstrate how participatory music could function simultaneously as placemaking and peacebuilding. Their specificity lies in combining grassroots facilitation with institutional research support. Key challenges include sustaining long-term funding and maintaining trust across religious and generational divides.

- ***Myanmar: Gitameit Project***

Youth-led musical co-creation in response to political crisis, enriching cultural resilience and interethnic solidarity.

Gitamitr Project – Music and Resilience in Myanmar

Emerging amid Myanmar's shifting socio-political landscape, the *Gitameit* (musical friends) exemplifies how participatory music-making can nurture resilience, empathy, and cross-cultural solidarity in times of crisis (Htun, Aung, & Young, 2025)—following the 2021 political upheaval, decades of military rule and civil conflict had left deep fractures within society and restricted opportunities for creative expression. Against this backdrop, a small collective of musicians and educators from Yangon and Mandalay, many of whom had previously collaborated with the Gitameit Music Institute, initiated *Gitameit* as an informal network for musical healing and community rebuilding. The initiative sought to empower young people from diverse ethnic groups, particularly those affected by displacement and trauma, by providing inclusive spaces where music could serve as both refuge and resistance (Higgins, 2012; Stige, Ansdell, & Elefant, 2010)

Operating under precarious conditions, *Gitameit* partnered with local monasteries and humanitarian organisations to host mobile workshops, online sessions, and small-scale music circles in temporary shelters and community schools. Activities centred on voice, percussion, and storytelling—mediums accessible even with minimal resources. Participants learned traditional lullabies and folk tunes from Karen, Chin, and Shan repertoires, fusing these elements into hybrid compositions that articulated shared experiences of loss, hope, and solidarity. Improvisation and group songwriting were prioritised over formal performance, with sessions facilitated by activist-musicians trained in trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice (Bartleet & Carfoot, 2016). Reflection and listening circles, integral to each encounter, encouraged empathy and mutual recognition across ethnic divides (Ruud, Holck, Schepelern, Bonde, & Wigram, 1999).

Although public concerts were rarely feasible due to prevailing security constraints, *Gitameit*'s songs circulated widely through social media and civil society networks, becoming symbolic expressions of perseverance and unity. The project demonstrates the capacity of community-based music practice to sustain emotional well-being, preserve interethnic dialogue, and reaffirm cultural identity under extreme social stress (Young & Campbell, 2017). Within Myanmar's continuing struggle for peace and freedom, *Gitameit* stands as both an artistic and civic gesture—a testament to music's enduring power to connect, console, and mobilise collective resilience (Stige, Ansdell, & Elefant, 2010).

The specificity of the Myanmar case lies in its operation under precarity, where music becomes both refuge and subtle resistance. While its flexible, mobile format ensures accessibility, security risks and limited public performance opportunities remain ongoing challenges.

- ***Cambodia: Kampot Music School & NGOs***

Community music for trauma recovery and education among vulnerable youth, utilising traditional Khmer music and intergenerational learning.

Music for Social Care and Community Healing in Cambodia

Cambodia continues to heal from the traumas of genocide and social upheaval under the Khmer Rouge. In the decades since, music, once silenced, has re-emerged as a force for cultural restoration, education, and psychosocial support. Beyond heritage preservation, community music initiatives now address trauma and social vulnerability (UNESCO, 2021). A notable example is the *Kampot Traditional Music School for Orphaned and Disabled Children (KTMS)*, founded in the early 2000s by Catherine Geach (n.d.). KTMS offers free instruction in traditional Khmer music and dance, including *Pinpeat* orchestra, *Mohori* ensemble, and *Yike* theatre music, to children facing poverty, displacement, or disability.

KTMS employs a holistic model of care: students live on-site and receive general education alongside intensive music and dance training. Teaching is based on oral transmission, with master artists mentoring youth in technique, repertoire, and performance etiquette. Community workshops, often held in temples or village centres, feature songwriting, shadow-puppet theatre accompaniment, and intergenerational music circles. These gatherings emphasise trust, emotional safety, and reconnection to heritage, as villagers are invited to observe or join in, blurring the line between participants and audience.

Graduates of KTMS have gone on to become performers and teachers, using music as a pathway to dignity, livelihood, and social reintegration. The presence of music has increased cultural pride and sparked renewed interest in traditional arts among the younger generation. Facilitators note the critical role of music in trauma

recovery and identity rebuilding: creative expression allows youth to process pain and reclaim hope rooted in cultural continuity. Cambodia's case demonstrates that when community music is embedded within care structures, it can encourage deep, sustainable social impact, helping to rebuild trust and resilience in a post-conflict society.

Cambodia's model is distinguished by embedding music within residential care structures, integrating artistic training with psychosocial support. However, reliance on external funding and limited public performance opportunities remain ongoing challenges.

- ***Vietnam: Youth Sing Quan Họ***

Reviving traditional quan họ antiphonal singing among youth through oral learning and creative reinterpretation.

Revitalising Traditional Music in Vietnam through Youth Engagement

Vietnam is home to a rich array of traditional music genres, many inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list (e.g., *ca trù*, *hát xoan*, *quan họ*). However, rapid urbanisation and modern media have challenged the transmission of these practices to younger generations. In northern Vietnam, community-driven projects have emerged to revitalise such traditions through participatory education. One such initiative in Bắc Ninh Province, renowned for *Quan họ*, a call-and-response folk singing tradition, aims to reconnect teenagers with this heritage through mentorship and school–community collaboration. Launched in 2018 with support from the Vietnam Institute of Musicology, *Youth Sing Quan Họ* has trained over 200 youth in vocal techniques, traditional repertoire, and the cultural context of the songs.

Elders and master folk singers teach entirely through oral methods, using techniques such as imitation, repetition, and group singing in village temples and cultural centres. After mastering the classic songs, participants are encouraged to create new verses or songs that address contemporary issues, such as environmental awareness or rural-urban migration, while maintaining traditional musical forms. Workshops incorporate movement, traditional costumes, and storytelling to enliven

the learning process. The broader community is invited to open rehearsals and performances, nurturing intergenerational bonds and collective pride. This program has reawakened local interest in *quan họ*—youth participants have formed their own folk clubs, and their performances at festivals and schools have raised awareness of this heritage among peers. Young performers report gaining musical skills and pride in their cultural identity. This case illustrates how blending traditional forms with creative innovation can preserve intangible heritage in a dynamic and living way. (Nguyen, n.d.) It also highlights the significance of community-based mentorship for raising sustainable cultural education in Vietnam's rapidly evolving society.

Elders and master singers taught the youth using oral methods: mimicry, repetition, and group singing. Participants then experimented with new lyrics addressing contemporary concerns (e.g. environmental awareness, urban migration), maintaining the musical form while innovating the content. Workshops included movement exercises, traditional costumes, and performance-based storytelling. Community members were invited to provide feedback and participate in joint performances. The program revitalised interest in *quan họ* and sparked youth-led clubs in nearby districts. Participants gained the technical skills through a sense of cultural pride. Performances at local festivals and schools raised awareness of traditional heritage and built intergenerational bonds.

Vietnam's initiative highlights the effectiveness of elder-youth mentorship within structured heritage safeguarding programmes. The main challenge remains sustaining youth engagement amid rapid urbanisation and shifting cultural interests.

- ***Singapore: YST CELab Program***

Professional music training integrated with social engagement, promoting civic musicianship through institutional partnerships.

Community Engagement and Professional Development at Yong Siew Toh Conservatory (Singapore)

Singapore's highly urbanised, multicultural society has well-funded arts institutions but needs more inclusive, participatory approaches to music-making. In response, the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YST) at the National University of

Singapore introduced community engagement into its curriculum to cultivate what it calls 21st-century musicianship, equipping students to be socially responsive cultural leaders as performers. Since the late 2010s, YST's flagship Community Engagement and Access to Music initiatives have embedded social responsibility into professional training. Students participate in projects co-designed with community partners—senior centres, schools for youth with disabilities, and migrant worker dormitories—transforming traditional outreach into reciprocal exchange (Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, 2019).

Conservatory students participate in preparatory workshops on cultural sensitivity, communication, and adaptive performance practices. Project teams then collaborate with community members to create participatory musical experiences. For example, chamber ensembles provide interactive performances at eldercare centres, where residents participate through singing, movement, or storytelling. In other projects, students and neurodiverse youth co-create songs using both acoustic instruments and digital tools, or conservatory musicians collaborate with migrant worker bands, incorporating a mix of Western and Southeast Asian instruments. Reflection and mutual learning are built into each project: students keep journals and receive feedback from participants and mentors, emphasising process over product.

These experiences have begun to reshape how emerging musicians view their role. Many reports increased empathy, communication skills, and openness to non-traditional career paths in community arts and education. Faculty observe that engaging with diverse groups enriches students' artistry by broadening their listening skills and sense of purpose. For local communities, the programs have created more inclusive access to music while softening the elitist image of conservatory culture. As Heard and Bartleet (2025) argue, such initiatives reposition musicians not just as performers but as facilitators of dialogue and co-creators of meaning in society. YST's model illustrates how conservatories in Asia can align high-level musical training with grassroots community empowerment.

Singapore's conservatory-based model is unique in institutionalising community engagement within professional music training. Nevertheless, balancing academic rigour with socially embedded practice continues to require curricular negotiation and institutional flexibility.

- **Malaysia: Elderly & Intergenerational Music**

Inclusive music ensembles bridge generations and ethnic groups, promoting wellbeing, and cultural transmission.

Intergenerational and Elderly Music Programs in Malaysia

Malaysia's ageing population—particularly in cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang—faces issues of social isolation and intergenerational disconnection. In the country's multicultural context, comprising Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous communities, community music has been increasingly recognised as a way to support the well-being of older adults while bridging cultural and age groups (Matusky & Beng, 2017). Over the past decade, initiatives including community choirs, intergenerational drumming circles, and storytelling-through-song projects have emerged via NGOs, cultural centres, and universities to address social inclusion and cultural sustainability.

One notable programme is the Senior Voices Choir Project, launched in 2016 by Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) in collaboration with local councils and senior activity centres. This project engages elders (ages 60 and above) in weekly group singing sessions that blend traditional Malaysian folk songs (e.g. *dikir barat*, *ghazal*, *ngajat*) with contemporary tunes. In parallel, music education departments have piloted intergenerational learning labs that bring school-aged youth together with elderly participants for co-creative music-making—whether it be folk storytelling set to music, ensemble performances, or songwriting that merges old melodies with new lyrics.

Sessions are intentionally low-barrier and culturally diverse. Facilitators use techniques like call-and-response singing, simple percussion, and guided improvisation to ensure everyone can participate regardless of musical background. Songs are chosen from Malay, Tamil, Chinese, and indigenous repertoires, often based on participants' personal memories and cultural affiliations. The workshops emphasise mutual learning: elders share songs and life stories, while children contribute energy, rhythm, and fresh ideas, such as adding rap verses or digital beats. These gatherings often culminate in informal performances at community

halls, temples, or cultural festivals, celebrating shared heritage and promoting pride among participants and their families.

Outcomes in Malaysia's intergenerational music projects include improved emotional wellbeing and social connectedness among seniors, as well as enhanced empathy and cultural knowledge among young people. Many elders describe choir or ensemble meetings as weekly highlights that alleviate loneliness and keep their minds engaged and active. Children and teenagers gain a deeper appreciation for older generations and for the music of their own and others' cultures. Scholars note that programs preserve cultural heritage and education, valuing elders' experiences and wisdom. Challenges have included sustaining funding, addressing language barriers, and maintaining regular participation; however, the community-driven spirit and adaptability of these initiatives have enabled them to continue in part through volunteerism and local support. As Soh et al (2026) suggest, intergenerational community music "humanises" ageing and learning by re-centring the voices of the elderly in cultural life.

Malaysia's intergenerational programmes emphasise inclusivity across ethnic and age groups. Their strength lies in low-barrier participation, though maintaining consistent attendance and long-term funding remain recurring concerns.

- ***Indonesia: Community Gamelan (Yogyakarta)***

Post-disaster cultural revitalisation using gamelan, youth mentorship, and ecological themes in a mutual learning environment.

Community Gamelan and Cultural Revitalisation in Yogyakarta

Indonesia encompasses one of the most vibrant musical landscapes in the world, with each island sustaining distinct traditions. Among the best-known is the Javanese gamelan ensemble of metallophones, gongs, and drums—a central part of communal life, ritual, and social cohesion. Beyond its ceremonial role, gamelan has also become a platform for healing and empowerment in the wake of crises (Sumarsam, 2013). In Yogyakarta, the community arts centre *Sanggar Seni Belantara*—founded in 2011 after the Mount Merapi volcanic eruption—integrates

gamelan education with environmental awareness and peacebuilding. The centre offers free weekly gamelan classes for children and teens, alongside workshops in traditional theatre (*wayang kulit*), mask-making, and nature conservation.

The teaching approach is grounded in the Javanese concept of *gotong royong* (mutual aid and cooperation). Older youth mentor the younger children; learning is hands-on, oral, and collective. Sessions begin with group singing and simple rhythmic exercises, then move into ensemble practice, often using familiar pieces like *ladrang* or *ketawang* as frameworks for improvisation. Facilitators intersperse storytelling and discussions about the pieces, linking them to local issues such as deforestation, waste management, and community displacement. Students are encouraged to compose new songs or lyrics addressing these challenges, blending traditional musical forms with messages of environmental stewardship. Workshops frequently involve local elders, women's groups, and visual artists, making the gamelan classes a hub for broader community engagement.

Over the years, *Sanggar Seni Belantara* has become a beacon of cultural resilience. Dozens of youths have developed musical and leadership skills through the program, with some alumni founding their own community arts groups or pursuing formal arts education. Public performances, held in locations ranging from rice fields to evacuation shelters, have underscored the relevance of traditional culture in contemporary life and contributed to community healing after disasters. This Indonesian case exemplifies the synergy between indigenous pedagogy, community development, and ecological consciousness (Dibia & Ballinger, 2012). It demonstrates that even a deeply traditional art form like gamelan can be a living, adaptive practice that bridges the past with present-day community needs.

The Indonesian case demonstrates how indigenous pedagogies could frame music as an ecological and communal practice. Yet access to resources and infrastructural limitations continue to shape the scale of impact.

- ***Laos: Youth Heritage Project (Luang Prabang)***

Oral tradition workshops reconnecting rural youth with endangered instruments and ancestral stories.

Preserving Oral Musical Traditions in Luang Prabang

Laos is a multiethnic country where traditional music is intertwined with spiritual life, agricultural cycles, and oral storytelling. Instruments such as the *khaen* (bamboo mouth organ), *phin* (lute), and *ponglang* (log xylophone) play roles in festivals and village ceremonies. Nevertheless, rapid urbanisation and limited formal music education threaten the continuity of these traditions among youth. In response, local cultural practitioners and the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) launched the *Youth Music Heritage Project* in Luang Prabang Province in 2019, with support from UNESCO. The project established mobile workshops in four villages to promote the intergenerational transmission of musical knowledge within Hmong, Khmu, and Lao Loum communities (TAEC, 2019).

Workshops engaged elders as instructors and youth as apprentices in the making of instruments, learning folk songs, and storytelling. Teaching followed an oral approach: instead of written notation, students learned by watching, listening, and imitating as elders demonstrated songs and techniques for crafting instruments. Sessions often began with a story about a song's origin, whether a myth, a harvest ritual, or a moral folktale, allowing youth to grasp the cultural context before learning the music. Classes took place in temples, communal yards, or even under trees, reinforcing the link between music, place, and spirituality. Youth participants were also encouraged to adapt old melodies or craft new lyrics to reflect their lives, covering topics such as schooling, migration, or the environment. These creative reinterpretations kept the tradition relevant while honouring its roots.

The project led to a modest revival of interest in traditional instruments, such as the *khaen*, among the village youth, with informal ensembles forming and performing at local ceremonies. Importantly, it also documented endangered songs and techniques on video, now archived at TAEC for future generations. Participants reported a strengthened connection to their heritage and ancestors, and elders expressed satisfaction in passing on their knowledge. This Laos case underlines the importance of grassroots, participatory approaches in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. It highlights how a slower, place-based mode of engagement can successfully bridge generations and restore pride in cultural identity, even amid social change.

Lao's heritage workshops foreground deliberate, place-based transmission rooted in oral tradition. While culturally resonant, the lack of systematic documentation and institutional backing presents preservation challenges.

- ***Brunei Darussalam: Gulingtangan Youth Revival***

Youth-led revitalisation of traditional music using peer mentorship and digital media.

Youth-Driven Heritage Innovation in Brunei

Brunei Darussalam, a small but culturally rich nation on Borneo, upholds strong Malay-Islamic traditions. Musical heritage—such as the royal *Gulingtangan* gong ensemble, *Hadrah* frame-drum music, and *Adai-Adai* fishing songs—figures prominently in ceremonies and celebrations. However, interest among youth in these traditions has been waning in recent years. In 2021, a group of graduates from Universiti Brunei Darussalam's Academy of Brunei Studies launched the *Gulingtangan Youth Revival Project* to spark new enthusiasm for traditional music through informal, youth-friendly approaches. Supported by microgrants from the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, the project held workshops at youth centres, mosques, and schools in areas like Kampong Ayer (Adi & Arafat, 2024).

The workshops combined reverence for tradition with creative experimentation. Participants first learned basic *Gulingtangan* patterns and songs by listening to master players and practising on instruments (some handcrafted from recycled materials to reduce cost). Then, in “open lab” sessions, they experimented with blending traditional Bruneian melodies and rhythms with modern elements, such as beatboxing, hip-hop beats, and spoken-word poetry. The goal was to show that old and new can coexist: one group, for example, layered a *Gulingtangan* tune over digital drum loops and bilingual rap lyrics about youth identity. The project also included a digital outreach component, in which students recorded their sessions on phones and shared clips on TikTok and Instagram, thereby bringing traditional music to new audiences.

As a result, the *Gulingtangan* Youth Revival cultivated a small but growing community of young traditional musicians. A new youth ensemble formed and

began performing at local events, and a compilation of their fusion pieces was released online to positive feedback. Initially, sceptical elders came to see that creative innovation could ensure the survival of traditional music among the young. This Brunei case exemplifies how empowering youth as cultural agents can bridge generational gaps and revitalise heritage in a contemporary, globally connected context.

Brunei's youth-led revival illustrates how digital platforms could revitalise traditional music among younger generations. Tensions occasionally arise between innovation and cultural conservatism, requiring sensitive intergenerational dialogue.

- ***Philippines: Tondo Rondalla & Musika Para sa Katawhan***

Empowering marginalised urban youth and indigenous communities through rondalla ensembles and activist songwriting.

Bayanihan-Inspired Music Empowerment in the Philippines

The Philippines has a long tradition of community-centred art and music, rooted in the concept of *bayanihan*—collective unity and cooperation. In both dense urban slums and remote rural areas, community music continues to empower young people, preserve cultural knowledge, and inspire civic engagement. One example is the *Tondo Rondalla Youth Project* in Manila's Tondo district, which began in 2015 as an after-school program teaching children to play *rondalla* instruments and grew into a community-run youth music academy. Another, *Musika Para sa Katawhan* (Music for the People), brings together indigenous and folk artists to reclaim ancestral music and perform it in activist contexts, supporting land rights, environmental protection, and social justice (Maceda, 1998).

In the Tondo project, older students are trained to mentor younger ones, creating a self-sustaining cycle of teaching. Songwriting workshops invite participants to compose music that reflects their daily struggles, such as unemployment, housing insecurity, and violence, alongside their aspirations. These songs, along with folk tunes, are performed at *barangay* (community) events and city festivals, giving youth a platform to be heard. In indigenous communities working with *Musika Para sa Katawhan*, a similar co-creative process unfolds, where elders share chants

and epics while young musicians infuse them with contemporary styles to address modern challenges, including mining and deforestation. Music thus becomes both a form of cultural preservation and a mode of social advocacy.

The outcomes in the Philippines underscore the music's role in social empowerment. In Tondo, participation in the *rondalla* program has kept many children in school and away from gangs, while providing them with artistic skills and confidence. Some graduates have pursued university studies in music or become community music leaders, creating a multiplier effect. In indigenous areas, collaborative music-making has helped safeguard endangered languages and strengthen community resolve in the face of external threats. Public performances—whether on improvised stages in Manila's slums or under forest canopies—serve as acts of visibility and pride for marginalised groups. These Philippine cases show that community music can advance both cultural revitalisation and social justice. Musical excellence and grassroots activism are pursued hand in hand, illustrating that artistic and community goals can be mutually reinforcing.

The Philippines initiatives stand out for explicitly linking musical excellence with grassroots activism. However, poverty and political instability continue to affect programme continuity.

In summary, across the ASEAN region, community music serves multifaceted roles as an educational tool, a means of cultural preservation, a means of social inclusion, and a means of healing. While some countries prioritise heritage continuity, such as Vietnam and Brunei, others foreground innovation and social justice, such as the Philippines and Thailand. Despite differences in infrastructure and academic research, all ASEAN nations show a growing interest in participatory music practices tailored to local realities. These cases highlight the need for context-sensitive frameworks that view music as both product and relational process of community building (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparative Table of Community Music Case Studies in ASEAN

Country	Case Study Title / Site	Key Focus	Methods & Approaches	Primary Impact	Challenges
Thailand	1. Bang Yi Khan (urban)	Placemaking & conflict	Sound-mapping, co-composition,	Intergenerational bonding,	Sustainability
	2. Southern Border Provinces	transformation	intercultural dialogue	peacebuilding	
Myanmar	Gitameit Project	Cultural resilience under political crisis	Story-based co-creation, trauma-informed workshops	Youth solidarity, healing in conflict zones	Operating under surveillance
Cambodia	Kampot Music School & NGO networks	Music for care and trauma recovery	Oral heritage, residential music education, intergenerational mentorship	Psychosocial recovery, heritage preservation	Resource limitations
Vietnam	Youth Sing Quan Họ, Bắc Ninh	Heritage revival among youth	Oral transmission, elder-youth mentoring, lyric adaptation	Cultural continuity, youth cultural pride	Urban disinterest
Singapore	YST Conservatory	Professional development with social focus	Conservatory-based community engagement, cross-sector collaboration	Shift in musician identity, civic musicianship	Institutional constraints
Malaysia	Elderly & Intergenerational Music Programs	Ageing & social inclusion	Community choirs, mutual learning, culturally diverse repertoire	Wellbeing elder-youth dialogue	Continuity & participation
Indonesia	Gamelan & Ecological Learning – Yogyakarta	Post-disaster healing & environmental justice	<i>Gotong royong</i> pedagogy, ritual-based creation, composition with local themes	Creative resilience, ecological consciousness	Funding, access
Laos	Youth Heritage Project – Luang Prabang	Oral tradition & endangered instruments	Master-apprentice learning, storytelling, workshop tours	Heritage transmission, youth agency	Documentation gaps
Brunei	Gulingtangan Youth Revival Project	Youth-led heritage innovation	Remixing tradition with tech, informal peer learning	Digital heritage, youth identity through tradition	Institutional conservatism
Philippines	Tondo Rondalla / Musika Para sa Katawhan	Empowerment through grassroots music	Peer mentoring, political songwriting, and instrumental <i>rondalla</i> ensembles	Youth leadership, cultural agency in activism	Poverty, safety in urban slums

- **Comparative Analysis of Community Music in Southeast Asia**

The comparative framework was developed through cross-case thematic analysis. Each initiative was examined according to its primary social objective, pedagogical approach, community participation model, and sustainability conditions. Attention was given not only to shared strengths but also to recurring and context-specific challenges. The case studies spanning all ASEAN countries reveal a diverse yet interconnected landscape of participatory music practices. Each initiative has distinct primary goals, ranging from trauma recovery and heritage revival to intercultural dialogue and civic activism, but all reflect a regional ethos that treats music as a relational, community-embedded process rather than a performance product. Several thematic clusters appear in comparison as follows:

1. Heritage revitalisation and continuity: Preserving or reinvigorating traditional music is central in cases such as Vietnam's quan họ revival, Laos's instrument workshops, and Brunei's gulingtangan project, which prioritises cultural transmission and pride among young people.

2. Trauma healing and peacebuilding: In post-conflict or high-stress contexts, such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Southern Thailand, and Indonesia, music programs provide psychosocial healing, reconciliation, and mutual understanding, enabling participants to process trauma and bridge divides.

3. Intergenerational learning and inclusion: Malaysia's choir and similar projects in Laos and Vietnam deliberately connect elders and youth. These efforts combat the social isolation of seniors while cultivating respect and continuity between generations, often across ethnic lines as well.

4. Civic engagement and social change: Initiatives like the Philippines' community music projects, Thailand's Bang Yi Khan, and Singapore's CELab empower people to voice social issues and engage in civic life. Music serves as a medium for advocacy, community organising, and building social capital.

Despite their different emphases, all these programs leverage participatory music to bridge divides, whether generational, ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic. They demonstrate how collaborative music-making cultivates empathy and

shared identity among participants. In essence, these community music practices are resonating across borders within Southeast Asia. Local in form, yet united by common principles of inclusivity, cultural respect, and collective empowerment. Taken together, they demonstrate that in this region, music is widely regarded as art or entertainment that bridges people and serves as a foundation for resilient communities.

- **Discussion**

From this comparative review of ASEAN community music initiatives, several shared principles and innovative practices emerge. These inform an emerging framework for culturally grounded participatory music-making in the region, as follows:

Shared Principles Across Contexts

Despite differing in contexts, Southeast Asian community music initiatives share core principles. Participation is valued over performance; music is understood as a social practice embedded in communal life. This perspective resonates with Christopher Small's notion of *musicking*, in which the meaning lies in the act of making music together, rather than in the final output. Oral and embodied transmission predominates, with learning occurring through imitation, group memory, and storytelling, as seen in Vietnam's *quan họ* and Brunei's *gulingtangan* traditions. Furthermore, music-making actively forwards cultural identity and agency. Indigenous youth projects in the Philippines or Islamic musical ensembles in Malaysia, for example, use music as a cultural anchor that empowers marginalised groups and affirms their heritage.

These principles resonate with Renshaw's concept of socially engaged musicianship and Osborne's work in conflict-sensitive music facilitation. However, the ASEAN cases further emphasise collective spirituality and rational knowledge as foundational dimensions. Compared with Quadros's global peacebuilding initiatives, Southeast Asian practices display a particularly strong grounding in local ritual and oral epistemologies. While Renshaw (2013) frames socially engaged musicianship as a response to isolation in late-modern Western societies, the ASEAN cases emerge less from individual alienation than from collective historical memory,

ritual continuity, and intergenerational obligation. Similarly, Osborne's conflict-sensitive facilitation foregrounds reconciliation in post-war Europe; in contrast, Southeast Asian initiatives often embed peacebuilding within everyday communal practice rather than exceptional intervention. In comparison with de Quadros's transnational peace project, ASEAN models remain deeply place-based, rooted in oral epistemologies and spiritual cosmologies that precede modern institutional frameworks.

Methodological Adaptation and Local Agency

Rather than adhering to a rigid template, ASEAN community music programs demonstrate methodological fluidity shaped by local conditions. Creative co-composition and improvisation, as observed in Thailand's southern provinces and Myanmar's *Gitamitr* Project, enable participants to become co-authors of new music, blending tradition with contemporary voices. Intergenerational learning, prevalent in Malaysia, Laos, and Vietnam, connects elders and youth through reciprocal teaching, sustaining continuity by adapting tradition to modern contexts. Institutions such as Singapore's YST Conservatory demonstrate that even professional training can incorporate community partnership and reflection, equipping musicians to be culturally sensitive facilitators. Meanwhile, NGO-led efforts in Cambodia illustrate how music can support trauma therapy and education within local cultural frameworks. Across these cases, facilitators often adopt an ethos of humility and deep listening, frequently becoming co-learners, while community members steer the creative process in meaningful ways.

Music as Social Intervention

Many of these initiatives treat music as an intentional intervention in social issues, rather than a passive cultural activity. In conflict-affected communities, such as those in Myanmar and Thailand's deep south, participatory music workshops have helped youth articulate their resilience, process their experiences of conflict, and envision peaceful futures. In urban informal settlements such as Bangkok's Bang Yi Khan

and Manila's Tondo, music provides a vehicle for community pride, mentorship, and civic engagement. Malaysia's inclusive ensembles bridge generational and cultural gaps, improving elder care and strengthening social cohesion. In all these scenarios, music is not merely reflecting society but actively shaping it: bringing people together to heal, dialogue, and collaborate in addressing shared challenges. These practices extend the discourse of community music beyond civic engagement models toward what might be termed relational cultural resilience, in which music functions not merely as an intervention but as an embedded mode of sustaining communal life.

Challenges and Sustainability

Despite clear benefits, these projects face ongoing challenges. Many rely on short-term grants, volunteer efforts, or individual champions, making their long-term stability uncertain if resources dry up. Official recognition in cultural policy or education curricula remains limited, so community music often operates at the margins of institutional support. Balancing innovation with tradition presents another delicate challenge: while youth may push creative boundaries, elders or cultural gatekeepers sometimes worry that core traditions could be diluted. Successful projects navigate this by involving tradition-bearers in the innovation process and demonstrating that evolution can coexist with preservation. Building supportive networks among practitioners and securing local endorsements from community leaders or religious institutions will be crucial to bolster these initiatives without compromising their grassroots ethos.

Toward a Southeast Asian Framework

Taken together, the cases suggest the contours of a distinctly Southeast Asian framework for community music grounded in relational, collective, and spiritual dimensions. This emerging framework is characterised by cultural adaptability, process-oriented pedagogy, and an emphasis on healing and co-creation, especially in post-conflict or marginalised settings. It complements and challenges dominant

Western paradigms by offering an alternative vision: here, music is not just an artistic product, but a communal process deeply intertwined with local knowledge systems and values. By resonating across national and cultural boundaries, Southeast Asia's community music movements present a paradigm in which musical engagement is fundamentally about building bridges between past and present, between different social groups, and across the region's diverse communities. Rather than positioning Southeast Asia practices as peripheral adaptations of Western community music, this framework suggests a parallel epistemology, one in which musicking, spirituality, and social responsibility are inseparable dimensions of communal life.

- **Conclusion**

This article presents a comprehensive exploration of community music practices across all ten ASEAN countries through 12 diverse case studies. These real-life examples illuminate the powerful and adaptable role of music in promoting social connection, cultural resilience, and participatory creativity in Southeast Asia. Amidst distinct national histories, political landscapes, and musical traditions, common threads emerge: the importance of collective authorship, intergenerational learning, cultural rootedness, and music as a socially responsive art form. Whether in the form of trauma-informed songwriting in Myanmar, intergenerational choirs in Malaysia, or digital-traditional fusion in Brunei, each case demonstrates that community music in Southeast Asia is not merely about access to performance—it is about restoring agency, honouring memory, and reimagining identity.

The findings call for a reconceptualisation of community music beyond Western-centric models. Southeast Asian practices foreground relationality over individualism, orality over literacy, and healing and heritage over formalised output. These approaches provide rich, culturally situated alternatives to dominant paradigms in music education and participatory arts. For policymakers, educators, and practitioners, the implications are clear: to sustain community music, it is essential to support slow, locally led, and context-sensitive processes. Investments in facilitation training, intergenerational platforms, and regional knowledge exchange are crucial for achieving a lasting impact.

Future research should focus on documenting and theorising Southeast Asian models on their own terms, paying close attention to indigenous knowledge systems, ethical facilitation, and the role of music in postcolonial and post-conflict settings. Comparative studies within the Global South and intra-ASEAN collaboration could further enrich the global conversation on music's role in society. Ultimately, this article affirms that in Southeast Asia, creating music for communities is more than just a practice; it is a pathway toward collective healing, cultural continuity, and social transformation.

Beyond social outcomes, these initiatives also generate significant aesthetic value. Community-based creativity in Southeast Asia produces new hybrid forms, revitalised repertoires, and context-sensitive artistic expressions that enrich the broader musical landscape. In this sense, community music contributes to social cohesion, artistic innovation and cultural conservation. By foregrounding Southeast Asian epistemologies, this study expands academic discourse on community music and calls for greater recognition of the Global South perspective in international scholarship.

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