



From Sham Shui Po to the world: local school brings music education to another level

Ying Wa Primary School brought home the trophy from the World Music Contest this July—here's how.

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Maria Lam Woon-sum held dear to the belief that “life without music is a mistake” when she became principal of Ying Wa Primary School (YWPS) back in 2004. Her faith brought her pupils to the world stage, 13 years later.

This July, the school’s symphonic band, with members aged between seven and 12, won a top prize at the quadrennial World Music Contest (WMC). They were the youngest team in their division to do so.

More than 200 bands from 60-plus countries flew all the way to Kerkrade in the Netherlands to play their selections at the event.

Other than concert contests for wind and brass bands and percussion ensembles, marching parades and workshops were also part of the programme.

The school band performed two compositions for the competition – a set piece *The Land of Zarathustra* and another of their choice. “We opted for *Jericho* by Belgian composer Bert Appermont,” Eleanor Luk Yin-hung, the school’s music director says. “The song is based on a biblical story and has a very rich harmony to it, with quite a few solo parts we can play with.”

During the 12-day excursion, Lam was amazed by the carnival-like atmosphere at the WMC, which stood in stark contrast to the often intensely competitive feeling encountered at the Hong Kong Schools Music Festival.



Since 1949, participants in the local event have been asked to perform a set piece according to the festival syllabus. Venues are often overcrowded, meaning contestants may have to leave after performing and then return to hear the results announced.

“Therefore, pupils rarely have a chance to see how well other bands play,” Lam says. “Festivals should be a time for sharing and learning and not so contest-oriented.”

At the WMC, in contrast, the participating bands could watch each other’s concerts, and there was a real sense of exuberance in the air.

“In Kerkrade, you can feel their passion for music,” Lam says. “When the results were announced, everyone burst into song no matter where they were placed in the competition. In Hong Kong, the hall falls silent as everyone solemnly waits for their results.”



Luk says playing alongside other bands was a great experience for the boys. “Performing in town squares and concert halls in Amsterdam and Kerkrade made them realise how different spaces and structures affect sound, which prompted them to adjust their music and methods accordingly.”

For Lawrence Ma Chun-wai, a flutist studying in Primary 5, the most unforgettable moment of the tour was when the judges and the audience broke into applause after the band’s performance. “It felt like our hard work had paid off,” says Ma, who has been playing the flute for about five years.

“Everyone had practised for nearly 100 hours for the competition,” he jokes.

When advising parents how best to nourish their children’s musical talents, Lam says that a combination of high expectations, tough training and consistent support was needed if anyone hopes to achieve excellence.

“By high support, it means really backing what they’re doing, rather than forcing expectations and goals on them,” Lam says. But she also noted that, for many children, music came very easily.

“To me, music is something I do when I’m bored,” says clarinettist Jeffrey Wong Sze-chit, who is in Primary 6. “Some of my friends practise merely to get to Grade 8, after which they’ll quit, but I don’t think that’s the right approach. I don’t rush through the grades. I want to get good, and when you rush things, it becomes less fun.”

At YWPS, an exhibition is held at the start of the school year where the older boys play all sorts of instruments to show the Primary 1 newcomers what options they have. The music director gives further explanations and guidance. In Jeffrey’s case, it was love at first sight with the clarinet, partly because it looked “so cool”.



“But the important thing about learning an instrument is perseverance,” Lam says. “It’s a kind of attitude. The band training might be tough at YWPS, but ask any member and they will tell you this is necessary if you want to play at world-class contests like the WMC.”

When they reach a certain level at school, pupils can join various orchestras or music groups. During weekly rehearsals, each group works towards a goal for the year. It could be working with a new composer, doing a summer concert in Central or, like this summer, attending the WMC.

“Once they realise how fantastic it is for the whole group to make music on stage, they see the effort pays off,” Lam says. “Being in a group is quite unlike playing solo. It requires cooperation and knowing how to be part of an ensemble.”

When choosing instruments, Luk says boys often went for brass, for instance the euphonium, trombone or trumpet, something which could make a lot of noise.

“When it comes to training, discipline comes first and we give them clear instructions on what to do.”

Unlike elsewhere, class groups at YWPS are based on musical interests. For instance, all members of the band are assigned to class B, all choir members to C, while those in the sports and maths teams go to classes A and D.

“If children with the same talents and interests are put in the same class, it’s more convenient for arranging activities,” Lam says. “For instance, class C can go for choir practice together after lunch.”



Music is a key element in a child’s development, Lam adds. Performing on stage is a chance to share with others the fun, joy and sadness, when things don’t go as well as they could. “These are the things they remember for life,” Lam says.

http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/2115723/sham-shui-po-world-local-school-brings-music-education?utm_source=Direct