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My Islamic journey after September 11

by Chet Yeng-Loong

When United flight 93 flew above Cleveland on Sept. 11, 2001, I was closeby at Baldwin-Wallace College. After hearing the news of the twin towers, I stood in shock. An hour later, the news came that a fourth airliner had crashed in the Pennsylvania countryside. All classes were immediately canceled. I could see students outside the classrooms on their cell phones, crying. They must have felt helpless because they couldn't communicate with loved ones, some of whom lived in Manhattan. We faculty members walked around campus trying to comfort students, even while we had many questions in our own minds that remained unanswered.

It was a dark semester; students were shocked and angry. We all grieved and also felt confused. Students made the connection between terrorists and Islam because all the terrorists who had hijacked the four airplanes were Muslims. Yet many students and faculty had limited knowledge of Islam and Muslims. To some, foreigners like me, a Malaysian Chinese Buddhist/Daoist, were perceived as a threat to this country. Since the terrorists who staged the attacks on 9/11 were illegal immigrants, many wrongly assumed that the immigrants of Asia, the Middle East and Hispanics also posed a threat to the United States. I had quite a different view because I come from the multicultural country of Malaysia, where Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Animists all live together.

Teaching college students and teachers about Islam

After 9/11, I realized I wanted to help the college students and teachers in my area develop a respect for Islam. Whenever I had a chance, I related the content of my college classes to the Islamic religion. This was especially relevant to my World Music course. I used music as an opening for discussions about Islam to prepare students to understand the news on television, Internet and in the newspaper. As a result, the atmosphere of the classroom was gradually transformed from one of tension to one of calm and understanding.

Two students came to me on different occasions thanking me for educating their classmates about their religion. They were Muslims. At the shopping mall, they were being yelled at, their cars had been bombarded by firecrackers, and they felt discriminated against by friends and neighbors. Yet, they found a safe space in my classroom. Thus, these events started my post-9/11 journey. Before that date, I never realized the importance of sharing my knowledge of Islamic religion and culture among my students and in my community. I soon realized that music is a powerful tool that can be used to cultivate respectfulness and healthy relationships in the classroom.

Early in 2003, I was invited to speak to a group of elementary, middle- and high-school general music, choral and band music educators in a rural area near Cleveland. The purpose was to speak about Islam and provide classroom strategies, with a special

emphasis on the month of Ramadan – an Islamic religious celebration. It was challenging and I was uneasy about my presentation because it dealt with a sensitive topic. Many people still carried a lot of anger about the tragedy of 9/11 and I was not certain how they would react to the workshop.

During the workshop, I found music educators who valued introducing and acknowledging Islamic culture in their classrooms, but lacked resources for Islamic materials. I realized I needed to reach to larger audiences. To make an excellent link between Orff and Islam, I chose to use barred instruments from Southeast Asia, where there is one of the largest Muslims populations in the world. Thus, in November 2004, I started my first attempt at introducing Islamic religion and music to music teachers at the 2004 AOSA National Conference in Long Beach, Calif.

I presented a session in my home country of Malaysia, during the International Society of Music Education Conference in July, 2006. On one side of the room were the Malaysian educators, while, on the other side were my American colleagues. From a quiet and serious introduction of 9/11, I expanded the music from Palestine and Turkey and ended with the "Lenggang Kangkung," a folk song from Malaysia. Both Malaysian and Western participants were excited as they sang and played *kompang* (local hand drum) and *angklung* (bamboo shaking idiophone). The Malays seemed proud that their music was appreciated by educators from around the world. Music linked every single person in the room, without regard to religion, culture or ethnicity. We did not see the conflict; we did not feel the tension; we only heard the music and shared warm feelings. I was overwhelmed by the experience.

In my travels I have found many music educators who have questions about which materials are appropriate in the classroom. Can they use sacred repertoire, or should they focus on folk secular materials? Can they teach dances? What should they do during the month of Ramadan?



When teaching children to play the Orff barred instruments, music educators should take this great opportunity to introduce children to the Islamic music and culture of Southeast Asia.

Understanding Ramadan

To understand Ramadan, educators first need to know a little about the history of Islam. The Islamic religion was started early in the seventh century by Muhammad, a religious leader who proclaimed himself a prophet of God to the nomadic peoples of the Arabian Peninsula. He founded a community of believers who called themselves Muslims (*those who surrender*, that is, to God's will) and their faith, Islam (*surrender*). Muslims pray five times a day. The prayers are performed before sunrise (*Fajr*), early afternoon (*Zuhr*), late afternoon (*Asr*), after sunset (*Maghrib*) and at night (*Isha*). The normal way the Muslims greet each other is by saying, *As-salam-oo-alaykum*; the other person would reply, *Wa Alaykum as-salam*.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. During this month, all Muslims fast for one month, starting from the sunrise prayer until the sunset. The main purpose of the fasting is to demonstrate love for their God, Allah. Fasting also helps the Muslims understand the feeling of being poor and hungry. If we have students who are Muslims in our classrooms, we need to pay attention to their needs, especially during the Ramadan month. Muslim students over the age of 12 will fast during this month. That means no food or water is allowed during the day, except when the student is sick. Music teachers should continue to teach music as usual, but have to be sensitive when involving them in some types of musical activities. Singing and dancing might make them tired and thirsty. According to fasting rules the tongue shouldn't make contact with any other object (Palestinians and Malays have the same rule; Egyptians are slightly different). Thus, playing recorder is not permitted. In this kind of situation, the teacher could ask the students to do the fingering but not play the recorder.

Expressing sensitivity toward the needs of the students is especially critical in classroom settings. Understanding the diversity among the Islamic cultures will help us understand and teach our students better. It is important that we do not assume Muslims are one homogenous group. Muslims live in different parts of the world: the Middle East, Persian countries, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa and North America. There is great diversity among Muslim regions and their inherent cultures, which were established before the introduction of Islamic religion. For example, the Malay culture in Southeast Asia has Siamese, Javanese and Sumatran influences. The influence of Hindu India was historically significant. The Malays were mainly Hindi before they were converted to Islam in the late 15th century. The original culture of a people influences how Islam is interpreted and practiced.

Teaching children about Islam

Islamic music is foreign to most American music educators. Musically speaking, when a folk or traditional piece of music from a culture other than our own stimulates our senses, we tend to interpret the piece through the lens of our own social/cultural backgrounds and perspective. Rather, our understanding of "foreign" music is deepened by studying the past experiences and cultural backgrounds of the people who created the music. If learning music from another culture is too intellectual and the intended aesthetic feeling of the music is ignored, then one may not be able to accept the music of the other culture with an open mind. Some music may even seem unappealing until the intent behind the creation of the music is understood.

Finding appropriate materials to teach the children is always a challenge in American classrooms. Sometimes, people hold wrong assumptions about the culture. For example, many people assume Muslims are not allowed to dance. Yet many Muslims, found in different regions of world, incorporate dance in wedding, harvest, and local festival celebrations. In Malaysia, specifically in Johor, Zapin, a popular Malay dance was introduced to Malaya during the 15th century. At that time Muslim missionaries of the Middle East, namely Persia and Arabia, came to Malacca to convert the Malays to Islam and to conduct business. It is believed that originally only men danced the Zapin, but now both men and women perform the dance in pairs.¹

We can connect our children with the Islamic religion by teaching them dances that are not solely related to Islamic religious ceremonies. Folk dances from different regions of the Islamic world are each influenced by and reflective of diverse cultural groups. For example, one of the most popular dances shared among the Malay communities in Malaysia is the *joget*. The *joget* (or *ronggeng*), was greatly influenced by Portuguese folk dance. It could have been brought to the Malay world after 1511 when Malacca fell to the Portuguese. The *joget*, derived from the Portuguese *branyo*, is usually accompanied by a violin or flute, a drum, and a gong.²

Teaching music from this part of the Islamic world is not an easy task since further research, reading, and understanding is needed. Performing sacred music on stage can be a sensitive issue. For example, it is not appropriate to teach non-Muslim children to chant the Islamic “Call to Prayer” in the classroom. Folk materials are the better choice. When teaching Islamic music in our classrooms, we must remember the importance of studying the intent behind the music. To initiate this understanding we should start by embracing the similarities between Islamic music and our own.



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Instruments from the Middle East

Sequencing our lessons from known to unknown materials is a great way to cultivate children's interest and assist their retention.. For example, many instruments we play today in the West originated from the Middle East – from the cradle of civilization. The current lute and guitar derived from the *Ud* of the Arab and Persian regions. The hammered dulcimer – a common zither found in Europe and North America – was brought to the West by English missionaries from Persia and Egypt in the latter half of the 15th century. Many assume the bagpipe is from Scotland. In fact, this aerophone, or *tulum*, is from Turkey, where it is commonly used to accompany dances. Valuable information and pictures can be found in Jenkins's *Music and Musical Instruments in the World of Islam*.³

Moors from Turkey played an important role in bringing instruments to the Western World. In 1683, the Turks invaded Vienna, but Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) became increasingly corrupt. When they withdrew, the Turks left musical instruments and weapons behind in the city. Even the idea of the marching band came from this region.⁴

The Orff barred instruments that are found in general music classrooms in the United States are partially modeled after Indonesian Javanese & Balinese metallophones and xylophones. *Gambang* and *saron* are gamelan instruments brought to the Pahang court in West Malaysia from the Riau Island (Java). Malay gamelan are tuned in pentatonic (*slendro*) and diatonic (*pélog*) scales. The *gambang* (xylophone) normally is played in octaves. The *saron* (metallophone) is played with a hard mallet in a single hand. The other hand damps each bar as the next one is struck. This is usually done by holding the end of the bar with the thumb and the index finger.⁵ Carl Orff was introduced to these instruments early in the 20th century. He turned them into Western instruments by using the Western diatonic scale. When teaching children to play the Orff barred instruments, music educators should take this great opportunity to introduce children to the Islamic music and culture of Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

No matter where our students come from, we need to teach, educate and nurture them to become individuals who know how to respect each other. We can help them learn how music functions powerfully within various cultures. Once they have studied their own musical culture from this integrative approach, they are better prepared to learn, understand and appreciate music from another culture. If we are aware of our children's needs, they will appreciate our sensitivity. In addition, awareness and respect will be cultivated in all who participate, and our emotional responses to particular circumstances may be better understood or even improved.

Shookran (Thank you in the Arabic language).

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- ² Loong, op cit.

- ³ Jean Jenkins and Poul Roving, *Music and Musical Instruments in the World of Islam* (London: World of Islam Festival, 1976).
- ⁴ Hamidah Husain and Mohamed Roselan Malek, *Alat Muzik Tradisional* (Petaling Jaya: Penerbit Prisma, 1995).

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