

THE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF CONDUCTING CHAMBER MUSIC CLASSES ONLINE: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

2020 was a year when everyone had to adapt to new ways of doing things. The Covid-19 pandemic had resulted in many countries having a lockdown including Malaysia which will be specifically discussed in this research. This has resulted in music online classes being forced to be conducted online to mitigate the spread of Covid-19. Chamber Music has traditionally been taught face-to-face as all the different musical nuances and gestures were important to a successful performance. It was suddenly forced to adapt to the new online medium with all the new problems and issues arising, The research will cover the issues involved and possible ways of overcoming the problems involved. The research will also study on possible steps to enable chamber music classes online to proceed smoothly. This will be done through various online surveys, related articles and a study of what universities are doing. It is hoped that this research will offer ideas and new viewpoints on teaching chamber and ensemble music effectively in this new medium and spur more research on effective ways to enable students to learn. This will not only help chamber music classes but similar performance-based classes to be conducted effectively.

Keywords: Covid-19, chamber music, online classes.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 has presented many challenges for everyone. With the Covid-19 pandemic raging around the world, many universities were forced to conduct their classes online. Classes that were traditionally conducted face-to-face were suddenly forced to adapt to the situation. While text-based and written subjects do not face as many issues, practical-based subjects generally have a harder time adapting to the new medium.

Malaysia, like many countries, was hit by relentless waves of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many countries around the world started having a lockdown in desperate ways to try to reduce the severity of the Covid-19 pandemic and Malaysia was no exception. When Malaysia was hit by the Movement Control Order in March of 2020 where Malaysians were restricted in their movements and businesses were forced to shut down, educational institutions were forced to bar students and had to adjust to an online medium. To minimise social contact, the universities were forced to conduct their classes online (Palanasamy, 2020). Chamber Music was one of the classes that was forced to adapt to the method of instruction.

This paper examines some of the issues and challenges involved in the teaching of a music course that is traditionally done face-to-face. It will attempt to deconstruct and study potential problems in teaching chamber music online.

It is hoped that the findings will enable other lecturers to decide on what they are attempting to teach and educate in this course when teaching online. It will also help them to decide on the best course of action to implement their ideas and strategies.

Problem Statement

Chamber Music is usually taught face-to-face as this is a practical subject. Doing it online brings a whole new list of issues and problems. There is a lack of information on teaching traditional face-to-face music courses online as this pandemic situation resulting in lockdowns was unprecedented. By not having a proper strategy to handle traditional face-to-face classes in this new medium, the educational process can become ineffective. The paper looks at some of the issues involved specifically from a Malaysian perspective. The issues discussed may offer important viewpoints for those involved in the education process of teaching chamber music especially in a developing country.

Significance of the study

The research will identify and highlight how the different lecturers are coping and adapting to the new medium. It will also briefly examine how educational institutions in developed countries adapt to this medium. The research and study hope to offer insights on some of the problems faced in the educational process of teaching chamber music and possibly share new ideas on how this issue should be handled. The research will encourage and guide teachers on how to teach chamber music online.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

Malaysia has undergone three major lockdowns since the first cases of Covid-19 were detected in the country at the time of research. While a small number of cases were detected amongst Chinese travellers who entered Johor via Singapore in January of 2020 (Sipalan, 2020), the first major lockdown took place in March of 2020 in response to the Tablighi Jamaat gathering that caused one of the largest Covid-19 clusters in the country (Ng, 2020). People were restricted from travelling and businesses with divided into essential and non-essential with all non-essential businesses shut. With the first lockdown, educational institutions were forced to conduct their classes online to minimise the spread of Covid-19. Many educational institutions initially had many difficulties adapting to the new medium. The first lockdown was from March 2020 to June 2020. The lockdowns continued constantly with minimal breaks until October 2021. The constant lockdowns severely disrupted educational activities in Malaysia and while educational institutions mulled the idea of resuming face-to-face classes from time to time, there was too much disruption for this to be viable. On top of this, several cases of Covid-19 amongst students and teachers made face-to-face classes a risky idea.

Several Malaysian universities have been offering music degrees for the last few decades {Chong and Pan, 2008} and these classes are traditionally done face-to-face. This is more suitable for the music medium as it would enable the lecturer to observe the movements and the subtle nuances of the music. The current Covid-19 situation in Malaysia has made this situation untenable as universities scramble to reduce the spread of the disease resulting in classes having to be conducted online and leaving many teachers having to suddenly adapt to this new medium. Being unable to see the students perform in a live situation has made the medium more restrictive.

Chamber Music Curriculum

According to the Chamber Music course outcome (UiTM AIMS, 2021) at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), at the end of the course, students should be able to perform classical chamber music of various musical periods, demonstrate effective communication in ensemble playing and demonstrate teamwork skills in performing chamber music. Even though the classes have changed their mode from face to face to online learning, these things should be achieved.

As for the String Ensemble class at UiTM which primarily consists of small string ensembles, the course outcome (UiTM AIMS, 2021) says that at the end of the course, students should be able to perform a variety of genres and styles of music collaboratively in an ensemble, demonstrate knowledge of musical styles and performance practice and apply instrumental techniques in performance. As you can see, many of the learning outcomes are actually similar to the chamber music class as essentially there are many overlapping similarities. The course outcomes for both the Chamber Music and String Ensemble classes are almost the same as course outcomes at other universities. It is expected that at the end of the class, you should have achieved sufficient performing proficiency in those subjects. While the student may not necessarily play at a virtuosic level, he or she should have a better understanding of the subject and be able to at least play together with sufficient musical and technical ability for a student performance.

Online Teaching

According to Lemov (Lemov, 2020), there are two kinds of online teaching: Synchronous and Asynchronous learning. Synchronous learning happens when the class is happening at the same time but in different places. For example, the teacher will be teaching from his office while his students could be having lessons from home and at the same time, each of these respective students could be in different states or cities. Asynchronous learning happens when the class is happening at different times and different places. It is possible to have an element of pre-recording for the particular class or for the student to learn at his or her leisure pace. While the traditional nature of a chamber music class would require synchronous learning as the musicians will need to perform together for the teacher to listen, the paper will also mention on whether asynchronous learning can be useful in the learning process.

Asynchronous learning has its advantages and disadvantages. The student feels rather detached from the teacher as the class is not done in real time with the teacher commenting. The student feels isolated without the spontaneous feedback. At the same time, the student has better control as he or she can record the playing first before splicing the videos together at their own leisure away from distractions. He or she can also ensure that mistakes are kept to a minimal level.

Synchronous learning has its benefits and disadvantages. The student feels engaged with the teacher with proper interaction. The common medium for conducting chamber music classes using this method would be through either Google Meet, Zoom or Webex but there is usually the time lag and internet connection problems that will be encountered. The teacher will be able to point any issues or problems immediately if the student were to make a mistake during their playing.

Devices

Several devices have become more popular after the restrictions throughout the world due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of them were actually in existence way before the lockdowns started but the search of new mediums has helped to boost their popularity.

Jamkazam {Jamkazam, 2021} has touted itself as a miracle device that can be used for remote music rehearsals and one will also be able to rehearse with friends, join open jams, co-write songs, make recordings, broadcast yourself in its own words. It boasts that it will be possible to play music live and in sync with others from different locations. It is supposed to be able to assist in recording without travel or rented space. One is also able to join open sessions to meet and jam with new friends, record master mix and individual stems and simulcast live performances free on YouTube and other similar mediums.

Another platform that has touted as a possible solution is SoundJack [Howell, 2021}. SoundJack is a low latency audio/video communication platform created by Dr Alexander Carôt. Just like Jam Kazam, you are much more likely to find these installed on college campuses than in someone's home. The uses and advantages are also very similar to Jamkazam. This is not something you can just download for free on your phone and use leisurely without the proper set-up so naturally, the students might have problems using these apps.

Jamulus is another device for playing, rehearsing, or just jamming with friends, a band or just anyone online. Jamulus is designed for high quality, low-latency sound, making it easy to play together remotely and in time. Jamulus is a no-frills application for sharing audio in real time. One person has to run the JamulusServer app on their computer to create a server that others can connect to using the Jamulus app. Whilst Soundjack requires users to login via the website, Jamulus is run entirely from the app. Unfortunately, the technology is greatly limited by geographical distance.

Jamkazam, Soundjack and Jamulus are more applicable in advanced countries with strong music education programmes like America. In third world countries like Malaysia, they are not used at all due to the lack of resources and the simple fact that music is not considered an important priority in higher education. To use them will simply stretch the budget and resources of the faculty and it is a fact that the government will probably allocate a higher budget to departments that can publish more index publications like the science departments.

Survival of the Music Institutes of Higher Learning

The Covid19 pandemic presents specific challenges to music making, especially instruments like voices, woodwinds, and brass which produce droplets and aerosols. By virtue of geographical location, some schools will be better positioned to provide high speed internet connections (Wardrobe, 2021) than others. Obviously, different music schools and faculties will have different levels of service and clearly and the facilities in a third world country like Malaysia will probably not be on par with a developed Western country. However, in the past century we have not seen such a sudden and uniform challenge to academia's ability to provide safe spaces for making music together. Even accepting that there are different levels of quality, schools that offer real time online collaboration as an option will likely be able to survive better in the education market.

Currently many institutes of higher learning in Malaysia lack even the basic network infrastructure to carry the needed on-campus data traffic. Many lack the financial resources to equip students and faculty with computers, let alone a high-quality audio signal chain. While many of these institutes of higher learning are situated in the urban areas with a decent enough internet connection, many of their students may not necessarily have a robust broadband infrastructure and may be living in rural areas where the internet access is sparse. These challenges are significant. Due to the devastating economic resources wrought by the lockdowns, it is unlikely that the government is going to spend a lot of their financial resources

making sure all the rural folk have access to fast internet. In addition, music is not considered a top priority for cash-strapped education ministries in an ever-shrinking economic budget that is increasingly being diverted for medical resources in the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Background

This research will be conducted through qualitative research. It will be conducted through a combination of online questionnaires and through article and document research. The researcher will find out from the students currently taking the Chamber Music class and String Ensemble class in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) about some of the challenges and problems involved through class-based questions. Through observations of how the online classes were able to proceed and through student questionnaires, the researcher will be able to gather the necessary data.

In addition, the researcher will attempt to find out about how other universities are coping with this. The pros and cons of what some of the overseas institutions are using will also be discussed.

In addition, the researcher will attempt to do research on the available written material that discusses online learning so that a clearer overview can be done. The researcher will use the above methods because these are the most effective way of getting data for this subject which has limited information.

Limits of the study

Chamber music has traditionally been a face-to-face subject. This unusual situation of having to teach online is something that most institutes of higher learning were suddenly forced to do. Consequently, there is very little research material for this area. There simply has not been enough study material on this area. While there is increasingly research material on the medical aspects and economic devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has not been much research material on the educational setbacks wrought by the pandemic. Many of the traditional face-to-face practical courses were suddenly converted to one which were more historical or theoretical-based classes. For example, a chamber music class that is generally performance-based would be converted into one that instead discusses about either the literature of history of chamber music or the performance components will simply be omitted. Much of the information has to be updated and adapted from time to time as the world continued to adjust to the new situation.

FINDINGS

Surveys

According to a UiTM (Universiti Teknologi MARA) class survey, when the students were asked about the advantages of having a chamber music class online, most of them agreed that it was a good experience and they liked the flexibility of the environment. They agreed that they could still improve their technical skills in the class. In other words, they were still able to learn to improve their chamber music skills. They also liked the ability to have personal space while online. They could have classes within the personal space of their bedroom, kitchen or any preferred personal areas. They were able to learn new string ensemble repertoire and they would probably not have the chance if not for the class. Also, students found this new editing technology beneficial. When asked about the disadvantages of online music leaning, they replied about the problems of a time lag due to internet connection. In addition, there was a lack of eye contact. They found it difficult to focus on playing as an ensemble. It was also

difficult to hear each other online occasionally due to poor internet connection. These are important issues as in a real live face-to-face chamber music rehearsal, eye, body and breathing cues are important in playing together. In a real-life face-to-face performance, the split-second nuances of these physical gestures can make or break a successful concert.

When the students were asked about the problems of online chamber music, some complained about the extra noise, the internet connection and the time lag. Occasionally, there were static and buzzing noises in class during the playing. In addition, they had to deal with unavoidable sounds caused by family members, pets or even construction work near their homes. They were also not able to spontaneously discuss bowing and musical issues with their fellow ensemble members. When asked about what they wished they could do, some of them hoped for being able to have classes in person.

When the students were asked about what they learned, they mentioned about learning to be patient, to count and to listen to the balance. They also found that having to learn new technology to combine recordings useful. This was a new skill that they had to adapt and learn. The responses were mixed when asked if they improved their chamber music playing by having an online class. However, they agreed that this was the best temporary solution for now and until a better solution can be found, this was what they had to do for now.

The students agreed that the online chamber music class has helped them to become a better chamber musician. They also agreed that their knowledge of chamber music increased, and the knowledge gained in the class will be useful to them as a musician. The responses were mixed though when asked whether learning chamber music online had stimulated their interest in chamber music. The adrenaline rush of playing together face-to-face in real time was simply missing.

When the chamber music classes were conducted, there was frequently a time lag, and it was sometimes difficult to hear them together. This is due to the students being in different parts of the country with various strengths of internet connectivity. This resulted in students sometimes sounding seconds apart from each other resulting in coordination problems. The class had less issues when the instructor had the different parts playing separately. Sometimes the class needed to be conducted with players playing separately when the teacher was trying to fix individual playing issues. When it was time to do the final exam, some students chose to combine their playing and splice together into a recording which worked but the feeling of playing in an ensemble was missing.

As mentioned earlier, the Chamber Music course outcome at UiTM was that at the end of the course, students should be able to perform classical chamber music of various musical periods, demonstrate effective communication in ensemble playing and demonstrate teamwork skills in performing chamber music. Despite numerous issues and problems, it seemed that the course outcomes were achieved. The students were generally positive about the outcomes despite the problems. The students were able to perform the chamber music of different periods. There was communication and teamwork when they performed.

Similarly with the String Ensemble class at UiTM which primarily consists of small string ensembles, at the end of the course, students should be able to perform a variety of genres and styles of music collaboratively in an ensemble, demonstrate knowledge of musical styles and performance practice and apply instrumental techniques in performance. The students did manage to play different styles of music in an ensemble. They demonstrated knowledge of

musical styles and performance practice and they were able to apply their instrumental technical proficiency in their playing. So overall, the course outcomes were achieved.

Usage of Devices

Several local institutes of higher learning in Malaysia namely Universiti Malaya, Universiti Putra Malaysia, UCSI University, Sunway University, ASWARA used the following for their online ensemble classes: online meeting devices like Google Meet and Zoom, splicing several recordings, online discussions. As with Google Meet and Zoom, the main issues were the time lag and coordination in the sounds. The class found it difficult to play together online so had to resort to prerecording. As for splicing the recordings what some of the students did were to record their parts separately and then splice them together. In UCSI University, the students reported that they used the following: Adobe Premiere Pro, Adobe Premiere Rush, DaVinci Resolve. Easy Virtual Choir, Filmora, FilmoraGo and iMovie to splice the recordings together. As mentioned earlier, the feeling of playing together was missing in this situation. Having online discussions seem like an easy solution out of this problem. For example, a chamber music class could be readjusted to become a class learning about the literature and repertoire of chamber music without the actual playing. While the students may still learn something about chamber music and would certainly know more about the history and literature of chamber music, they would ultimately miss the experience of playing as part of an ensemble. This would be detrimental for a performance-based course.

While an ensemble may somehow by luck or chance sound together online, ultimately the feeling of playing chamber music as an ensemble with proper musical and physical coordination is missing. Without the proper funding to install and use the proper equipment like JamKazam and SoundJack, the proper sense of coordination that is required for chamber music will not be there as these are not apps that all students can easily have access to.

Some lecturers have resorted to using a click track with a metronome beat to help synchronize and coordinate the playing. This only works in smaller ensembles with more advanced players. The level of chamber music playing in Malaysia amongst the students is still not very high and it would be likely for many problems to surface in the ensemble.

In US, the musicians have been working virtually. They used SoundJack and JamKazam. SoundJack uses Ethernet but Jamkazam can use wifi. Students are not allowed to be on campus. If wifi is not available, there are rooms with ethernet that they can come and do rehearsal and recital. For the youth orchestra, the students record their part in metronome and put them together for a performance.

While the usage of Jamkazam, SoundJack or Jamulus seems like it may solve the problem there are certain drawbacks in developing countries like Malaysia. To play with others, students need the application, with a host of other devices such as an audio interface, cables to connect the mic to the audio interface and the instrument to the audio interface. Most students will not be able to afford all this equipment [Richardson, 2021]. Setting up the equipment can be a technical challenge, involving ethernet cords and an interface that connects a microphone or instrument into a computer.

Currently, none of the universities in Malaysia are using either one of these. It does not seem likely that this situation will change in the future. Therefore, it seems like for time being for the classes to continue as being practical-based, the lecturer will have to wisely use a

combination of real-time online meetings to explain concepts or hear individuals and to use pre-recorded recordings when assessing the groups for the class.

CONCLUSION

Findings and Discussions

As chamber music classes are more practical-based, a synchronous teaching method would work best. It would however need to be combined with some asynchronous teaching as the problems with internet connection and time lag need to be addressed as Malaysian music institutes would not have devices like SoundJack and JamKazam already set into place due to financial constraints.

Using Google Meet, Zoom or Webex may not be the best solution due to time lag and the differences of internet connection but as long as the instructor is just trying to introduce the students to chamber music without aspiring for them to play at the highest professional ensemble standard, this is a practical if somewhat flawed solution. However, as the level of chamber music amongst the students in Malaysia is still now not yet of a very high standard, most students should still be able to learn something.

In a live chamber music, the teacher will be able to guide inexperienced chamber ensembles in cueing and playing together based on visual and physical gestures. He or she could teach the members to read physical and facial gestures and to breathe together. In an online class, it may be more difficult to read visual and physical actions as the feeling of being together is just not there.

Implications

The results have clearly shown that having an ideal online session is not practical but may sometimes be needed despite the shortcomings due to a lack of other available options. In addition, the lecturer can choose to either have the students prerecord and slice the recordings together. The other possibility would be to just convert the course into a historical and academic-based course with no actual playing of musical instruments by the students.

While this study clearly shows that this class will work better in a face-to-face format, it is still possible to maximize the learning potential in this environment. This is especially true if the students would like to learn in a more academic style rather than a practical-based style. If the class is to proceed in a practical-based manner, the student has to be aware of the limitations and be prepared to be more flexible in the learning process.

Recommendations for Further Study

The challenge will be for researchers to develop an app that all students will be able to use with basic wi-fi that will enable them to play together with other students wherever of where they might be. Until that day arrives, students will just have to make do with other ways of learning chamber music online.

While there were obvious limitations with playing traditional repertoire online, it is worth exploring more avant-garde repertoire such as chance music, electronic music or music with improvisatory elements as the as the concept of playing exactly together might not be as important in an online situation. This could offer a new challenge to contemporary composers and arrangers to create something that can used for these challenging situations.

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