

Examination-Oriented Music Composition Training: The Current Teaching Phenomena of Creating at the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Level

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ABSTRACT

In this case study, the author researched the current teaching phenomena of Paper 3: Creating of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examination Elective Subjects: Music. The examination has been implemented after the curriculum reform of the senior secondary school since 2012, where music composition becomes one of the compulsory assessments. According to the Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6) Music by the Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, the assessment objective is to create and arrange music using appropriate compositional devices and explain the use of music elements in compositional devices of their compositions. Without any prior experiences in the teaching composing for public examination in the past, schools have adopted different models to teach composition, including hiring external companies and tutors to teach, forming a joint-school network; and teaching the whole curriculum by the schoolteacher. This qualitative study contributes to understanding the current HKDSE learning and teaching situation with a focus on the perspectives of school music teachers and composer-instructors.

Keywords: Composing, music exam, assessment, curriculum, case study

JACE Vol 15, No 1 (2021)

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the HKSAR Government recommended the Education Commission to adopt a three-year senior secondary and four-year undergraduate academic system. It aims at providing a senior secondary curriculum that is more flexible, coherent, and diversified. The new senior secondary curriculum was implemented in September 2009, and the first Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Exam was held in 2012. Music is one of the elective subjects in the Arts Education Key Learning Area curriculum, which provide a platform for the students who are interested in continuing their music development. According to the Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6) Music, the Music curriculum aims at enabling students to:

- develop creativity and nurture aesthetic sensitivity.
- further develop their musical competence.
- construct knowledge and understanding of diverse music cultures.
- develop critical responses to music and communicate effectively through music.
- build a foundation for pursuing further studies in music and preparing for careers in music and related areas; and
- cultivate a lifelong interest in music and develop positive values and attitudes towards music

In this comprehensive music training, students gain rich and all-rounded music experiences through actively engaged in various practical music activities of listening, performing and creating in which the following four learning targets are achieved: (1) Developing Creativity and Imagination; (2) Developing Music Skills and Processes; (3) Cultivating Critical Responses in Music; and (4) Understanding Music in Context (Curriculum Development Council, 2007).

Students are required to study all three modules, namely Module 1: Listening, Module 2: Performing I and Module 3: Creating I and the addition of an elective module of either Module 4A: Special Project or Module 4B: Performing II or Module 4C: Creating II to sit for the public exam. Various components are examined with related modes of assessments which are outlined in Table 1:

Table 1: Mode of Assessment in HKDSE Music Examination

	Part	Mode	Weighting
Compulsory Part	Paper 1: Listening	Public written exam Part A: Music in the Western classical tradition Part B: Chinese instrumental music, Cantonese operatic music, Local and Western popular music	40%
	Paper 2: Performing I	External assessment (Practical examination)	20%

	Paper 3: Creating I	External assessment (Portfolio)	20%
Elective Part	Paper 4A: Special Project	External assessment (Project report)	20%
	Paper 4B: Performing II	External assessment (Practical examination) OR other recognised qualifications	20%
	Paper 4C: Creating II	External assessment (Portfolio) OR other recognised qualifications	20%

With this new curriculum and assessment, music teachers without adequate music composition training find various challenges in teaching the core part, Paper 3: Creating I, in which students are required to submit a composition portfolio of at least two pieces with a duration of 12 minutes. After the previous nine years of experience, schools and teachers have developed ways to implement the subjects. This research was designed to investigate the experiences of the school music teachers and composer-instructors regarding the current constraints in teaching composition. The paper considers the following questions:

- How does teacher training affect the teaching content of composition?
- What are the challenges of teaching composition at the HKDSE level?
- How does the recourse affect the teaching of composition?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Education of Music in Hong Kong

The training programme of music teachers was first developed in the three training colleges, Northcote, Grantham, and Sir Robert Black College, in the mid-1990s (Yu-Wu, 1997). They provide teacher certificate courses to equip student teachers to teach various levels ranging from Primary 1 to Secondary 3. These one-year or two-year training only provides necessary pedagogic skills, musicianship and music history knowledge which suit the needs of primary and junior secondary schools. The colleges merged and formed a degree-conferring institution titled The Hong Kong Institute of Education in 1994. The institution provides a Bachelor of Education (Music) and Post-Graduate Diploma in Education for primary and secondary sectors (Cheung, 2004). In 2016, the institute was retitled as The Education University of Hong Kong, which further enhanced the music teacher education by offering a newly developed double degree: Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Creative Arts and Culture and Bachelor of Education (Honours) (Music) (Five-year Full-time) Co-terminal Double Degree. The programme provides intensive training on performance, composition, pedagogy, world music and arts administration that suit the current needs of the primary and secondary schools.

Creating the HKDSE Music Examination

The HKDSE Music Examination first launched in 2012 and has been revised from time to time. The development of Paper 3: Creating I throughout the first decade can be divided into three phases:

- Phase I starts from 2012 until 2014, candidates are required to submit at least two compositions (12%) with a total duration of around 5-15 minutes, and at least one of the works must be scored for an ensemble. In addition, one music arrangement of an existing piece (4%) and a 500-word reflective report (4%) are included in the portfolio.
- 2015 to 2020 marks Phase II of the paper development. The changes include (1) the cancellation of the music arrangement assessment; and (2) the increase of compositions weighting and total duration to 16% and 6-15 minutes, respectively. The cancelled music arrangement was turned to Paper 4B: Creating II.
- The current version of the paper starts from 2021 under the Covid-19 pandemic. The cancellation of Paper 2: Performance leads to the increase of the Paper 3 total marks to 25%. The compositions and reflective report scores have been adjusted proportionally to 20% and 5%, respectively. Also, due to the reduced school contact hours under pandemic, the total duration of the compositions is lowered to 4-12 minutes.

According to the *Music Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6)*, it is noted that there has been no change in the assessment guideline since the first examination in 2012. The marking criteria focus on three areas: 'Ideas & Development', 'Structure' and 'Use of Medium & Notation' (Curriculum Development Council, 2007).

Teaching Composition: A Brief Review

There is a debate about whether composition can be taught or not (Lupton & Bruce, 2010). Although there are various debates, some approaches have been developed which provide a particular guideline for educators to teach composition. The teaching of composition has been investigated in the past decades. A sequence for teaching music composition has been developed, which include the exploration of sounds, the organising factors of music composition, the domain-specific skills used in tonal music, the concepts of unity and variety, tension and release and balance (Hickey, 2003). The composition pedagogical model by Lupton & Bruce has been constructed with four themes: (1) Learning from the masters; (2) Mastery of techniques; (3) Exploring ideas; and (4) Developing voice (Lupton & Bruce, 2010). The support by ICT is becoming essential in the teaching of composition as it enhances pupils' progress with instant playback to where a track can be muted or enhanced to isolate musical features usually hidden in a complex texture (Pitts & Kwami, 2002). In the context of Hong Kong, creativity is one of the areas that music educators find it challenging although priority is given in the *Music Curriculum Guide* (Leung, 2015). The teaching and learning of music in school was mainly focused on singing and music appreciation. Music composing, arranging, and improvising were rare to be taught. Teachers tended to have a negative attitude to the area of teaching composition (Leung, 2000).

PURPOSE OF STUDY

There is no research investigating the current teaching situation of composition at the HKDSE level after the implementation of the new Senior Secondary Education. In the past public exams, namely Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), music subject was examined with focuses on music history, music theory and musicianship in which music composition is not an assessment in the exams before 2009. In other words, Hong Kong music educators have just started teaching composition since 2009. Hence, the current teaching phenomena of creating at the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education level is worth to be studied.

Method

This case study applied a phenomenological approach that describes the experiences of individuals about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2006). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken for music teachers and composition instructors to collect their opinions and experiences about the teaching at HKDSE Music.

Participants

The data used in the below discussions comes from six teachers who have been teaching composition at the HKDSE level. They are from different schools with different musical training and academic backgrounds, which provide more representative information in this study.

Table 2: Demographic information of the teacher interviewees

Code of the Interviewee	Gender	Employment Status	Highest Qualification Attained	Year of Teaching Experiences
F/PT/T/MA/2-4	F	Part-time music teacher	Master of Arts in Music	2-4 years
F/FT/TC/MMus/5-10	F	Full-time music teacher and composer-instructor	Master of Music (Composition)	5-10 years
M/FL/C/DMA/5-10	M	Freelance composer-instructor	Doctor of Musical Arts in Composition	5-10 years
F/FT/T/BEd/>10	F	Full-time music teacher	Bachelor of Education (Music)	>10 years
M/FT/T/BA/>10	M	Full-time music teacher	Bachelor of Arts (Music)	>10 years
M/FL/C/DMus/2-4	M	Freelance composer-instructor	Doctor of Music (Composition)	2-4 years

Distribution:	M	Part-time = 3	Bachelor degree = 2	2-4 years = 2
	= 2	Full-time = 3	Master degree = 2	5-10 years = 2
	F	Music teacher = 4	Doctor degree = 2	>10 years = 2
	= 2	Composer-instructor = 2		

According to the demographic information of the teacher interviewees in Table 2, all participants ($N = 6$) have at least a bachelor degree related to music or music education in which one-third has a doctoral degree ($n = 2$), one-third has a master degree ($n = 2$), and one-third has a bachelor degree ($n = 2$). Half of the participants ($n = 3$) are male, and half are female ($n = 3$), while half of them is full time ($n = 3$) and half is part-time or freelance ($n = 3$). Two-thirds is music teacher ($n = 4$) while one-third is composer-instructor ($n = 2$). One-third has 2-4 years of teaching experience ($n = 2$), one-third has 5-10 years teaching experience ($n = 2$), and one-third has more than ten years of teaching experience ($n = 2$). The reason for selecting both music teachers and composer-instructors is that these educators have very different musical training in their backgrounds.

Procedure

Written consents from the interviewees were received before the interview. Each interview session was private and lasted for around one hour, which the researcher and the research assistant conducted. The interview was held in a classroom in the interviewee's school, a silent, safe, and comfortable environment. No observer is allowed in the room except the researcher and the research assistant. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese and later translated into English for analysis. The interviews were aurally recorded on an audio recorder for documentation use.

Development of semi-structured interview

A series of questions are designed to cover the music training background of the participants, their students' backgrounds, course structure, pedagogy, facilities, resources, assessment, application of technology, nurturing creativity and difficulties encountered. Detailed interview questions can be found in the appendix.

Findings

The following paragraphs present the qualitative interview data analysis result in which identification codes were assigned during the transcript coding. For example, (M/FL/C/DMA/5-10) represents a female freelance composer-instructor who obtained a Doctor of Musical Arts degree with 5-10 years of teaching experience.

How does teacher training affect the teaching content of composition?

All the participants ($n = 6$) obtained at least a bachelor's degree in music or music education and are able to describe their musical training. One-third of the participant ($n = 2$) mentioned that the musical training in the 80s-90s focused more on music appreciation, history, theory, performance, and pedagogy. The subject knowledge of music composition, for example, transformative techniques, motivic development, orchestration, is inadequate for teaching the HKDSE Paper 3: Creating I.

I self-learn musical instruments like clarinet and alto saxophone when I was small. I joined a wind band during my secondary school study. My first degree is an engineering degree, while I did my part-time second degree is music which focuses on musicianship, history, theory with less content about music composition. (M/FT/T/BA/>10)

On the contrary, the music training after the 90s provided more subject knowledge on music composition and its pedagogy.

I obtained my Bachelor of Education (Secondary) and Master of Arts in Music degree. I took core courses about music composition and composition teaching during my study. However, there was no training on teaching composition at senior secondary level but only junior form. Currently, I am teaching piano, music theory course and HKDSE Paper 3: Creating I. (F/PT/T/MA/2-4)

Composer-instructors have a different music training from the music teachers in which they were trained with skilful craftsmanship in music composition. However, they received no training in music pedagogy.

I studied for my doctorate at the University of Missouri, where I learned from maestro composers Chen Yi and Zhou Long. My training is mainly in the mode of individual study with my supervisors and a few course works. I collaborate with the student performers to make music. Since my study was a pure music composition degree, there was no training on music pedagogy. (M/FL/C/DMA/5-10)

Composer-instructor tends to emphasise the composition techniques and music theory more while music teachers provide more room for imagination. The former can assure a better musical structure while the latter can nurture students' creativity.

I teach composition in a more traditional way which begins with four-part harmony, non-chord tones, dominant 7th, secondary function, modulation, and motivic development. Theory exercises are provided every week for the students. If the music is purely written in diatonic, I would suggest that students apply more techniques in their composition, such as adding a Neapolitan Sixth chord or Augmented Sixth chord before a dominant chord. (M/FL/C/DMA/5-10)

I guide students to compose a piece of programme music by writing a script to realise their concept and imagination in literature first. Then, students can explore suitable music materials and organise them to create contrasting sections. (M/FT/T/BA/>10)

What are the challenges of teaching composition at the HKDSE level?

All participants ($n = 6$) addressed the difficulties of teaching composition at the HKDSE level. One-third of the participants ($n = 2$) felt that their students do not have adequate musicianship to realise their creativity from idea to notation.

They get stuck when they can only think of the sound, but they cannot notate it in the score. Some students can think of a particular melody that they feel nice, but their notation does not reflect their thoughts. There are various reasons. Maybe because of their listening skills, dictation skills, etc. I have not yet figured out how to help; sometimes, I receive messy scores. Some compositions sound good, but you feel strange when looking at the score. It sounds like compound-time work, but they mark it simple quadruple time. Why do they make it so weird? They find it challenging to notate the musical sound. (F/PT/T/MA/2-4)

Two-thirds of the participants ($n=4$) indicate they have insufficient time to complete the creating curriculum.

I cannot teach the whole creating paper within the senior secondary school. I have to give extra tutorials during the summer holiday. (F/FT/T/BEd/>10)

The teaching hours are minimal. Although the curriculum is ideal that every student can appraise, perform, and compose music, the learning of composition only began when students are secondary 4. (M/FL/C/DMus/2-4)

A participant ($n = 1$) addresses the difficulty of notation, especially for Chinese instruments such as dizi, which requires some non-Western symbols.

It is tough to notate Chinese music in staff notation other than the usual Chinese numeric notation. One of my students wrote a piece for *dizi*, it is difficult to notate it in staff notation, and it is even more difficult to notate the dizi performance techniques such as flutter-tongue. We have to draw the symbols eventually. The notation software cannot notate the articulation symbols of Chinese instruments, which hinder students' composition progress. (F/FT/T/BEd/>10)

One-third of the participants ($n=2$) state that the lack of suitable learning material (e.g., textbook) challenges the teaching.

There are nearly no local teaching materials for composition. I am lucky because I majored in music composition in my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. My colleagues who only studied Postgraduate Diploma in Education have very little composition knowledge. They are not able to teach Paper 3: Creating I. If there were more textbooks on music compositions, it would help a lot. (F/FT/TC/MMus/5-10)

Teachers found it very difficult to guide students throughout the creative process.

It is challenging because we cannot give a model answer. Therefore the comments which I gave may sound vague to my students. Sometimes I guide them to think by playing some musical notes as examples. However, my students may still not know what is right or wrong. (F/PT/T/MA/2-4)

How does the recourse affect the teaching of composition?

Nearly all the participants ($n = 5$) mentioned that resource is one of the main issues affecting the teaching of composition, including minimal lesson time per week.

Verbally commenting on individual student work is problematic because it consumes much lesson time. Sometimes, I will mark comments on their homework and correct their writing through email. However, I am not sure whether they read it or not. (F/PT/T/MA/2-4)

Two-year is a concise time for students to learn composition from zero. With insufficient lesson time, I cannot teach students how to notate music using a notation software. They self-learn it with online resources like YouTube videos. (M/FL/C/DMus/2-4)

There are inadequate teaching resources of composition at the HKDSE level. Most of the composition reference books are too advanced, which is not suitable for senior secondary students. Teachers teach composition mainly by past experiences.

We do not have teaching materials now, but we hope to have them in the future. There are insufficient resources in Hong Kong, so it is difficult to find suitable materials. Even I do not have learning materials during my study of composition. Some references are not in line with the HKDSE syllabus and assessment. I would like to reflect that we do not have a proper composition textbook. It will be helpful if we can have it in the future. I am fortunate to have studied composition before. Many of my colleagues did not receive any composition training during their studies. They can't teach the creating part in HKDSE Music even they are excellent in music performance. (F/FT/TC/MMus/5-10)

One participant ($n=1$) mentioned that there is no chance to realise the completed compositions by musicians.

There is no opportunity for students to hear the actual sound of their work. The only possible realisation is through MIDI. We do not have the resources to hire musicians to perform the student works. (M/FT/T/BA/>10)

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

There are many constraints encountered when teaching composition at the HKDSE level. Without adequate teacher training on music and pedagogy, music teachers and composer-instructor found it challenging to teach composition. Music teachers might consider receiving further training on music composition to sharpen the techniques in which they should be able to demonstrate their own musical and technical skills with a suitable medium and provide more opportunities for practical composition activities. Music educators in Hong Kong treat composing as paperwork that does not involve many practical activities like improvisation.

In this twenty-first century, I would suggest that Hong Kong educators use technology to facilitate students' creative process. They should develop and master the technology to lower the barrier of composing. Schools might consider providing necessary equipment such as notation software, sequencing software, and MIDI controller for the whole study period so that students would have adequate tools in school and home.

FUNDING

The work described in this paper was fully supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. EdUHK 28606216).

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