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### Listen to the Pong Lang Dance.



Figure 1: Thai music students and professors arriving at Auckland Int'l Airport.

This photographic essay documents the first Thai-Maori Musical Exchange Project.[\[1\]](#) It concludes with theoretical discussion of the myriad ways such endeavors may contribute to intercultural understanding, and proposes new directions for research on international arts exchanges.[\[2\]](#)

The Thai-Maori Musical Exchange Project was implemented in June 2005, as a collaboration between the Graduate Program in Music at Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok, Thailand) and the School of Performing Arts at Te Wananga O Aotearoa, New Zealand. Chulalongkorn University is a leading university of mainland Southeast Asia and an important centre for training in Thai traditional music.[3] Te Wananga O Aotearoa is a Maori-oriented, multi-campus indigenous institution that has recently become New Zealand's largest tertiary provider. Its Bachelor of Maori Performing Arts programme covers both traditional and contemporary Maori forms in various media, including dance, drama, music, and *kapahaka*. [4]

While originally conceived as an exchange between these two educational institutions, sponsorship was also later obtained for a final leg of the Thai musicians' New Zealand tour from the Royal Thai Embassy in New Zealand, Tourism Authority of Thailand, Massey University, Wellington Conventional Center, and Michael Fowler Centre, through the gracious support and hospitality of the Thai ambassador, His Excellency Norachit Sinhaseni. [5]

After a year of planning, the project finally took place on June 1st to 8th, 2005. The group of ten Thai musicians (including 5 graduate students and 5 professors) arrived at Auckland International Airport and were immediately driven to Rotorua where the Maori performing arts students and staff were waiting to provide a *powhiri* traditional welcoming ceremony. At the welcoming ceremony they were officially greeted in front of the *marae* (traditional Maori lodge) of Taiwera campus, Te Wananga O Aotearoa, Rotorua. Their mission was to increase mutual understanding of cultural diversity through the power of music and performance. [6]

At the Rotorua campus in June, it was very cold for the guests from Southeast Asia where the temperature rarely drops below twenty degrees celsius. But the Maori hosts did not show any concern for the cold weather; they were solely committed to offering their welcome through singing and dancing in traditional costumes.



Figure 2: Carved figure on one of the columns inside the *marae*



Figure 3: The token leaf presented by the Maori chief to the Thai chief as a challenge at the *powhiri*.

Not knowing what to expect from the welcoming ceremony, the newcomers from Thailand were astonished by the impressive sound and dance. The welcoming event was solemn, powerful, and astounding. For the Thai musicians, it was their first time to travel this far, and their first opportunity to perform a Thai traditional music concert in New Zealand for a Maori audience.[\[7\]](#)



Figure 4: “Kia ora”: a *hongi* between Thai student and Maori teacher at Rotorua campus.

In Rotorua, both groups of students had a chance to exchange music and culture. The Thai musicians stayed on the *marae* with the Maori musicians as hosts. During

the day, they participated in traditional music workshops together. At night, they gave a concert. Other activities included sightseeing, cultural excursions, and an impromptu song competition.



**Figure 5: Dr. Hebert and a Maori student learning Thai cymbals at Rotorua campus workshop.**





**Figures 6, 7 and 8: Maori students and teachers give workshops to Thai students in Buck Nin Theatre, Taiwera (Rotorua).**



Figure 9: Thai professor and students give workshop on *Angkalung* to Maori students in Buck Nin Theatre.



Figure 10: Thai and Maori students at the Rotorua campus workshop.



Figures 11 and 12: Thai students present an ensemble of northern Thailand at the Buck Nin Theatre, Rotorua.

In Auckland the group of Thai music students and professors gave a concert and workshop. They learned *taiaha*, one of the Polynesian martial arts in the Maori workshop.[\[8\]](#) The Thai-Maori concert took place at Te Wananga O Aotearoa's

Manukau campus in Mangere, South Auckland on June 5, 2005. At the end, Thai students joined the Maori performance, and Maori students participated in *Angkalung* ensemble of Thailand.

The performance showcase by Thai students included a variety of music and dances from the North, South, Northeast, and central Thailand.



Figures 13 and 14: Thai students give a workshop on Angkalung to Maori students at the Mangere campus.





Figure 15: Maori performance at the Manukau campus of Te Wananga O Aotearoa in Mangere, South Auckland



Figure 16: Thai students perform *taiaha* with Maori students at the Mangere campus.

The third city that the Thai musicians visited on the cultural exchange tour was the nation's capital, Wellington. The trip to Wellington was generously sponsored by the Ambassador of Thailand to New Zealand. The Thai ensemble performed at New Zealand's largest performance hall – the Michael Fowler Centre – on June 8, 2005 for delegates of various nations and ambassadors to New Zealand. The performance included the regional musics of Thailand and a dance workshop that invited interested participants from the audience to join on the stage.



**Figure 17: A rehearsal of the Northeastern Dance at the Michael Fowler Centre.**



**Figure 18: A group of Thai students and music professors with His Excellency Norachit Sinhaseni and Mrs. Sinhaseni, Thai Ambassador to New Zealand.**

Friendships between the two groups of students from New Zealand and Thailand were highlighted by an impromptu singing contest in the *marae* after a late evening snack. Each side took turns singing a traditional song (for about 30 seconds) immediately followed by a song from their opponents: back and forth with breaks of only a few seconds. Great excitement built up through dozens and dozens of songs and accompanying dances, and choruses of enthusiastic voices overflowed

the *marae*. The winning nation could not be decided, as both groups finally gave up in joyous exhaustion (with hoarse voices) from a song competition that had lasted well over three hours and beyond midnight. The project was a great success, and we look forward to further international collaborations through the unique media of traditional music and performing arts.

*Kia ora!* - [and] - *Khop khun mak kha!*



Figures 19 and 20: Impromptu singing contest between Thai and Maori students at Taiwera campus, Rotorua.



Figures 21, 22, 23 and 24: The singing contest becomes quite intense!



Figure 25: Everyone is a winner: Kia ora!

## Theoretical Discussion

*“As educators in the field of music we must undertake a mission new to some of us: to lead students to an understanding of music as a worldwide and varied phenomenon which will help them to comprehend all kinds of music and also provide an entry into understanding other things about the world’s cultures” (Nettl, 1992:7).*

What are the sociocultural, educational, and scholarly implications of an arts exchange project of this kind? First, it is important to examine how the significance of similar projects has been interpreted elsewhere, in other contexts. While cross-cultural educational exchanges are hardly a new phenomenon among performing arts students, they appear to have mostly proceeded without the support of an adequate research base.

## Previous Research

Articles in music teaching magazines have discussed the educational significance of international experiences in music (Goodnite, 1994) and the opportunities that performance brings for cultural exchange (Nyomi 2001; Solomon, 1990). They have also provided suggestions and guidelines for international tours with student ensembles (Taylor, 1983; Wilcox, 2001), and highlighted the significance of networking opportunities provided by international tours (Reimer, 2001).

According to one investigative journalist, such cultural exchanges through the arts provide unique opportunities for the training of prospective teachers (So, 2001). Recent publications have even proposed that educators, and those charged with the task of training future teachers, have an obligation to promote a more global

understanding of music and performing arts among their students (Campbell, 2004). UNESCO has repeatedly issued statements in support of education for international understanding, making particular reference to the potential of performing arts to contribute in this area (International Bureau of Education, 1996).

Contributions by Scandinavian scholars are especially encouraging in this field, with the assertion that international music exchange projects may ultimately contribute to increasing prospects for peace and intercultural communication (Skjellstad, 2000), as well as multicultural cooperation (Sommerharju, 1999). However, despite such high levels of interest and enthusiasm there are minimal examples of empirical research on projects of this kind to be found, and the modicum of studies available in recent years tend to confirm the assertion that this is still a relatively unexplored area in need of further development (Leong, 2005).

### **Observations and Speculations**

Our observations from the Thai-Maori Musical Exchange Project will focus on the reported experiences of two student participants from the graduate program in Thai music at Chulalongkorn University: Staporn Wanghunthod (Phoasavadi, 2006a), and Kiatisak Udomnak (Phoasavadi, 2006b). Both students currently teach music professionally in addition to their ongoing graduate studies. Staporn Wanghunthod teaches Thai vocal singing at Darasmuth secondary school in Chonburi province, and Kiatisak Udomnak is a Lecturer at Thanksin University in Songkhla province.

### **General Impressions of Aotearoa**

Wonghunthod's impressions of New Zealand were quite positive: "I saw many green areas in the cities and green fields. Everywhere was green, clean air, very quiet and peaceful." The Thai musicians explored downtown Auckland, Rotorua, and Wellington, but they also had a taste of rural life by observing sheep shearing at the *Sheepworld* visitor's centre. Further, they learned about the lives of Auckland's Thai residents through dining at the *Zap 2* Thai restaurant and *Wat Yarn Prateep* Thai temple.

### **Powhiri Opening Ceremony**

Both Wonghunthod and Udomnak reported that they were deeply moved by the *powhiri* opening ceremony in Rotorua. Upon finally arriving at the *marae* after a long airplane ride, the Thai visitors may have wanted nothing more than a bath and warm bed. Instead, they were challenged in the cold evening by the spectacle of Maori warriors wielding clubs, grimacing and bellowing at them with astonishingly aggressive voices, followed by ritualistic chants and singing of *waiata* in a language the Thais had never heard before.

According to Wonghunthod, "The welcoming ceremony in Rotorua was really an

eye-opening experience. We felt scared and intimidated, and felt that we were really encountering Maori warriors in battle. However, when they began to sing, we learned that under their masculine and frightening display, Maori are very gentle, artistic, kind and sweet.” As Udomnak also explained, “It’s one of the best experiences of my life to visit and meet Maori people in New Zealand. It is truly impossible to forget the welcoming ceremony in Rotorua. It was real, serious, sincere, but very intimidating and frightening. It showed the mystic power hidden under their strength and their bodies. It will stay with me forever, that moment.” The formal *powhiri* ceremony, implemented according to Maori tradition, provided a powerful first impression that seemed to set the tone for the entire cultural exchange. Upon completing the *powhiri* ceremony, all the Maori and Thai participants shared a *hongi* greeting (pressing of noses) and entered the nearby building, where a delicious hot meal of Maori *kai* was waiting for them (Hebert, 2006a).

### **Indigenous Education and Identity**

Wonghunthod commented on the strength of indigenous identity in New Zealand, attributed partly to the opportunities provided by indigenous tertiary education: “What surprised me the most about Maori culture is that their identity and pride to be Maori is very strong. They are able to continue their Maori culture in a very authentic way and keep it alive. The establishment of a program for Maori people, and a Maori university for everyone, was very impressive. It helps continue Maori language, martial arts, Haka, and Maori singing.”

Indeed, Maori identity is alive and well in contemporary New Zealand, which may be attributed to a variety of conditions. Many historians and political theorists consider the Treaty of Waitangi to be a critical factor in this regard. Since most fundamental promises made to Maori by their colonizers were united within a single document, it has been possible for Maori make use of legal processes to defend their human rights with far greater success than most other indigenous peoples. As a result of Waitangi Tribunal settlements, New Zealand has also become home to the world’s largest indigenous tertiary institutions (*wananga*), some of which offer degrees through the PhD level. *Wananga* have played an important role in the postcolonial recovery process by which many threatened Maori traditions have been salvaged and largely reinvigorated.

### **Impromptu Song Competition**

Udomnak recalled the impromptu song competition as an important highlight of the project: “The activities we did together included a singing competition between Thai and Maori students. We both sang in our own languages. We didn’t understand each other’s songs. Nevertheless, the more we sang, the happier we were. We felt more connected, encouraged, bold, and it was unbelievable. Time went by for almost five hours and we didn’t realize that we were singing and competing for a very long time. I think that I can’t experience anything quite like

this from anywhere besides New Zealand.” The impromptu song competition was also identified by the authors as a key event within the Thai-Maori Musical Exchange Project. The contest began quite casually as a simple exchange of songs, but it gradually developed more form with rules and escalated in intensity, incorporating dances and gestures, and soon several hours had passed.

The song competition demonstrated a number of features that may generally be attributed to shared characteristics between Thai and Maori cultures. First, there is an enormous shared song repertoire within each culture. Secondly, both joy and pride in the beauty of these songs was evident in the singing from each side.

Thirdly, the song repertoire known by both groups was very wide ranging, from traditional folk songs to hymns, lullabies, chants, popular songs, and various other genres. Finally, neither the Maori nor Thai side was ever willing to accept defeat – despite physical exhaustion and hoarse voices after hours of exchanging songs – so in the end a tie had to be declared.

### **Hospitality and Friendship**

Udomnak valued many social aspects of the experience and indicated that she felt especially welcome among the Maori hosts: “The friendship we bonded with students at School of Performing Arts was one of the most impressive things during our trip in New Zealand. Their attention, their friendliness, their inquisitiveness to ask us questions and to take care of us while we were there, was great. They helped us to live, and eat easily, and relax in their schools. They welcomed us with their songs. We really appreciated their friendship and kindness.”

The significance of social aspects of learning is often downplayed in educational research, with learning viewed as “serious business” in contrast to other activities that merely consist of “playing around”. However, in the fields of arts and intercultural exchange, it may be that “playing around” is among the most important paths toward learning. This is certainly true in the field of second language learning, as the most efficient language acquisition often takes place in informal environments rather than grammar classrooms. In the music field, “jamming” seems more often to result in the development of new musical ideas than academic studies of theory. The actual experience of interacting with real people from an entirely different culture may similarly entail a rich experience that offers advantages over more theoretical activities offered in academic contexts. The Maori and Thai participants from this project developed new friendships with their colleagues from the “other” culture. They exchanged email addresses, and many intend to keep in touch through the opportunities provided by this technology. Only time will tell what may develop from their new friendships, but perhaps we may see further tours in the near future.

### **Directions for Future Research**



Based upon the experience of this project, we advocate the implementation of further international arts exchange projects that are intentionally designed with specific research outcomes in mind. In other words, the examination of key research questions could guide the planning of such projects, with systematic data collection incorporated into the design (e.g. questionnaires, observations, interviews, journal writing, etc.). Further studies should focus on the perceptions of the group that hosts an intercultural exchange project of this kind, and evaluate the project's effects within the local community. The experience of implementing the Thai-Maori Musical Exchange Project opened up a number of questions that we hope to see examined in future research studies among various cultures.

### **Music and Intercultural Understanding**

One question raised by the Thai-Maori Musical Exchange Project concerns the efficacy of arts performance activities for the development of intercultural understanding. Manins (1996) has theorized a process that he refers to as “bicultural sensitivity”, from his perspective as a *pakeha* (non-Maori) who sought to develop effective and meaningful ways of teaching Maori traditional arts to young children in New Zealand. This notion may be applicable to other contexts in which an indigenous culture is confronted by that of a colonizer (e.g. Hawaii, Taiwan, Okinawa, Alaska), yet also fits into more universal concepts, including multiculturalism and intercultural understanding. Further studies should examine the extent to which musical exchanges of this kind may result in improved attitudes toward the “other” culture, and the extent to which such attitudinal changes may then also apply toward additional unfamiliar cultures. In other words, the development of bicultural sensitivity through music requires further exploration, as well as its implications for intercultural understanding more generally. We believe that further research will provide increasingly convincing evidence of the positive effects of intercultural music exchange projects, and may lead to the development of new procedures and designs that better enable participants to reap the full range of benefits offered by such experiences.

### **Impromptu Song Competition**

The development of the impromptu song contest was an especially fascinating event for the authors, for we had each recently studied music competitions in other nations as the subject matter for our doctoral dissertations (Hebert, 2005; Phoasavadi, 2005). Competition is a musical phenomenon that continues to be in need of further research, and the elegant simplicity of this impromptu contest that developed during the Thai-Maori Musical Exchange Project was striking in the effect it had on participants. We remain convinced that impromptu song contests of this kind should be tried elsewhere, between other cultures. One can only wonder what the results would be: Would a group of Canadians run out of songs and have to quit early? Would a group of Latvians outlast even the Maori or Thais? While it would be absurd to suggest that national character can be determined through a single activity, it seems that much can be learned through the experience of an

intercultural song competition, ranging from the genres of songs to the themes of songs, the kinds of dances and movements associated with them, and how the “other” culture responds. While songs play an important role in all cultures, some seem to place greater emphasis on song repertoire than others, and particular songs appear to more successfully transcend cultural and linguistic barriers.

### **Dance Versus Music Alone**

While philosophical theorizing on the origins and ultimate social functions of dance appears to still be in its infancy (Sheets-Johnstone, 2005), the authors would speculate that inclusion of accompanying dance movement may better enable cultural outsiders to “relate to” and develop an immediate appreciation for unfamiliar music traditions. This point may seem obvious, yet we are unaware of any empirical studies that have examined this specific question. We found that the audiences in our project tended to show greater appreciation for music performances that included dance movement, and would suggest that further research studies examine the effect that the inclusion of dance may bring to bear on the appreciation of unfamiliar musical styles. Additionally, further research could examine the kinds of dances that are most effective in this regard, or the kinds of music that most require visual accompaniment in order to be better appreciated by unfamiliar listeners.

### **Replication in Other Contexts**

Similar projects could be designed and implemented to enable intercultural exchange among indigenous performing artists of other nations (Hebert, 2006b). With limited resources, a similarly meaningful project could be designed based upon interaction between community music ensembles located within a single urban area. Projects of this kind will especially be of interest to scholars active in community music, a rapidly developing field of study that seeks to support a range of amateur musical activities in diverse contexts (Veblen, 2004). We encourage readers to explore the full range of musical traditions accessible to them, and hope that our project may inspire others to develop similar initiatives within their own communities. In this way, we may contribute to Nettl’s vision by providing an “entry into understanding” through the unique magic of harmony between cultures.

### **Notes**

1. The authors would like to especially thank Mahuta Amoamo, Personal Assistant to the Director of the School of Performing Arts at Te Wananga O Aotearoa (now working for Maori TV) for all of her hard work in coordinating various aspects of this project. We also express our sincerest appreciation to Jonathan Fohrman (Director, School of Performing Arts, Te Wananga O Aotearoa) and Bussakorn Sumrongthong (Professor of Music and Chair, Thai Music Division, Chulalongkorn University) for their generous support.

2. In designing the Thai-Maori Musical Exchange Project, the authors did not plan the inclusion of formal data collection procedures to enable empirical research. Still, to the extent that our own perceptions as active participant observers, in combination with content from retrospective interviews, may provide a valid and credible source of data, we offer here some tentative speculations to be tested by future research.
3. For further information, see the internet website for the Thai Music Graduate Program at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok, Thailand) [<http://w3.chula.ac.th/college/fineart/music/thai/teacher.htm>].
4. For further information, see the internet website for Te Wananga O Aotearoa (tr. University of New Zealand) [<http://www.twoa.ac.nz/>].
5. For further information, see the internet website for the Royal Thai Embassy to New Zealand [<http://www.thaiembassy.org.nz/>].
6. This objective is promoted by a number of international scholarly organizations that offer relevant resources online, including as Society for Ethnomusicology [<http://www.ethnomusicology.org>] and International Society for Music Education [<http://www.isme.org>].
7. This link provides a recorded example of the music taught by the Chulalongkorn University Thai Music Ensemble during its visit to New Zealand: [ [Angkalung Ensemble](#)]. Further information on Thai music may be obtained elsewhere (Phoasavadi & Campbell, 2003). Other articles in this ejournal describe Maori music traditions, most of which are also examined in previous publications (McLean, 1996).
8. Taiaha is a long club used in Maori traditional dance movement.

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