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The Wind Band Ensemble, Music and Education; A perspective from Singapore,

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Abstract

Concerts for the Wind Band ensemble account for the vast majority of the annual concerts in Singapore, attended by people from all walks of life. Of all the Co-Curricular Activities conducted for schools, the Wind Band movement claims the lion's share of participants to date. Yet in an entry on Singapore in Groves (2001, 421-423), musical activities of the band are noticeably absent. Similarly, an overview of the musical scene in pre-independence Singapore (Tan 2002, 80) suggests that it remained largely an amateur activity, save the relatively few professionals such as military bandsman or Chinese opera singers and musicians trying to eke out a living.

Given the coruscating profile of the wind band ensemble in the present context in Singapore, gaps in its history beg questions: What is this social and musical phenomenon we identify as and with the Band? When do we learn of its presence? Who supported it? What were the means of support and how was support given and sustained? Who were involved in its practice? What was the musical dimension of this practice? How did teaching and learning for it take place? Did the Band have an audience? Who was the audience? What was the role of the Band among communities in Singapore? This paper is an attempt to reconstruct a narrative of the Wind Band ensemble in Singapore and use it for further discussion.

Of all the Co-Curricular Activities conducted for schools, the Band movement claims the lion's share of participants to date. Band Concerts account for the vast majority of the annual concerts in Singapore, attended by people from all walks of life. Band Concerts can at least lay claim to a wide-ranging audience appeal. Recital programmes in Band Concerts have also shifted focus from familiar and traditional favourites to a wide ranging and eclectic repertoire and even works by local composers. The movement in the schools reveals the supportive role school teachers, principals, students and their parents also play in sustaining the momentum and engendering growth of the band movement in schools and beyond. Yet in Lee Tong Soon's entry on Singapore (Groves 2001, 421-423), musical activities of the band are noticeably absent.

Similarly, an overview of the musical scene by composer and long time champion of Singapore music, Bernard Tan (2002, 80) makes the following reference to the band:

Pre-independence musical activity in Singapore remained largely an amateur activity, save the relatively few professionals such as military bandsman or Chinese opera singers and musicians trying to eke out a living.

Given the coruscating profile of the wind band ensemble in the present context in Singapore, gaps in its history beg questions: What is this social and musical phenomenon we identify as and with the Band? When do we learn of its presence? Who supported it? What were the means of support and how was support given and sustained? Who were involved in its practice? What was the musical dimension of this practice? How did teaching and learning for it take place? Did the Band have an audience? Who was the audience? What was the role of the Band among communities in Singapore?

Music: A working definition

My explorations are reliant on a conceptual framework of the Band as a **musical practice** (Elliott, 1995) where music-making reveals, at deeper structural levels, social and practical realities, regardless of their individuality or non-utilitarian purposes. Musical practices encompass not only musically-specific elements but also reveal their involvement and association with site-specific social and historical contexts. Since the conceptual framework begins with the practice, my explorations are first phenomenological. At this initial level of exploration, however, much of the evidence has appeared in a variety of written sources or documentary evidence; primarily newspapers, memoirs, as well as oral interviews with current practitioners, among other sources. It is from this evidence that presences and practices are deduced. This paper is an attempt to reconstruct a narrative of the presence and practice of the Band and use it for further discussion.

Brief Chronology

Since the founding of Singapore as a British Colony by Stamford Raffles in 1819 and arrival of the first military regiments in Singapore in 1823 starting with the Bengal Native Infantry, the band was prominent in European social life. The earliest available copies of the Singapore Chronicle reveal sufficient newspaper accounts, albeit brief, of bands from some of these regiments. At the celebration was held at Government Hill (Fort Canning today) to mark the birthday of King George IV in 1827, there is an account (April 26, 1827) of the dinner being prefaced by performances by Javanese musicians and dancers and then followed by:

The "fair arrivals from Madras" and the other ladies of the Settlement had an opportunity of indulging in the most delightful recreation ***quadrilling****, which was kept up with commendable spirit to a very late hour when the party separated much delighted with the entertainment of the evening.* (emphasis mine)

The *fair arrivals from Madras* could have been either the Band of the 35th Madras Native Infantry or the Band of the 3rd Battalion Madras Artillery stationed in Singapore, at least according to the register of Bands at St. Andrew's Cathedral. Evidence of the reception of Band performances in Singapore can be found in a letter of regret to the Editor of the Singapore Chronicle (January 22, 1834). This letter clearly displays the prominent role that the band had come to assume in introducing music to the European community in the early days of Singapore as a British port. If anything, the music performed by the band could well also have been the most made available to the population at large. Further evidence of political support of a military band is found in a statement dated 3rd December 1829, of the presence and cost of the appointment of Governor and its appendages for the united Presidency (Penang, Singapore and Malacca) of the Straits Settlement. Expenses listed under the Band, including instruments {r}ations and dress amounting to 1 500 Sicca Rupees which accounted for about 0.66% of the total expenditure (227 030 Sicca Rupees).

English newspapers in 19th century Singapore contained occasional listings of when and where the band of the regiment stationed in Singapore would perform and repertoire performed, aside from the band's appearances in public spaces such as either the Esplanade or Botanic Gardens. Buckley (1965, 496-497) writes of band performances at Masonic functions while the Singapore Free Press (3rd September 1857) records incidental performances to commemorate the King's birthday. The *Straits Times* and *Singapore Free Press* also publicised performances by visiting bands. For instance, The Royal Inniskilling Fusilliers, the Band of HMS Invincible led by Captain Buckle and Officers, "The Buffs" The Band of the Battalion and the Band of the 5th Fusilliers counted among the most press-worthy bands not because they performed their

obligatory military duties extremely well, but because they were seen and heard to provide entertainment at homes of Municipal Council members and as well as at the Botanic Gardens and the Esplanade.

Beyond its public performances, the band also provided support or accompaniment to theatricals or orchestral concerts even from the early days of the settlement. For instance, tucked away in a review in the Singapore Free Press, of a performance of *Damp Beds and My Young Wife and Old Umbrella* on the 27 September 1846, was a brief acknowledgement that *the excellent music of the 21st Regiment's Band added not a little to the evening's entertainment.*

Bandsmen acting in the name of the British Empire were actually personnel from the Indian Native Regiments, the most notable in Singapore being the Madras Native Infantry at least till about the British annexation of the Maratha kingdom around the Madras area into the Presidency of Madras. Subsequently, the reorganisation of the Madras Army in India created an anxiety more deeply felt in Singapore. A letter in the Singapore Free Press (7 December 1865) informs us of the concerns since it entailed the loss of free band performances to the community at large.

Bands continued to play an important role in ways unique to the Singaporean context. A newspaper report (14 February 1896) tells us exactly the impact in Singapore of a decision to change the concert pitch in London: *From a home paper we learn that…it has been announced that this year the Philharmonic society in London will lower its pitch to the* ***diapason normale*** *or French pitch. Again, by the Queen's regulations, all military bands are required to conform to the Philharmonic pitch…****Here in Singapore the matter is of great importance in the interest of local music. For it has been felt that if the changes were not to come soon into effect, it might be advisable to contemplate the idea of purchasing orchestral instruments at the French pitch so as to improve the conditions under which orchestral music has at present to be played***. (emphasis mine)

An explanation for this rather curious excerpt is found in one particular occasion involving the preparation for a Popular Orchestral Concert on 8 April 1899, (Singapore Free Press 5 April 1899) featuring the second and third movements of Mendelssohn's Second Piano Concerto in d Minor, besides selections from Wagner's *Tannhauser* and two movements from a Haydn symphony. Orchestral forces for the concert, a comparatively large one, totalling 43, 27 amateurs and 16 members from the band of the King's Own Regiment, the regiment stationed in Singapore then, who supplemented the wind section of the orchestra for it was "*naturally impossible to find in any musical community in the Far East more than a small*

number of Amateur players of wind instruments…". We are informed that a special "Children's Concert Fund" (Singapore Free Press 6 December 1898) was set up based on donations of $1 or more from adults who wished to attend to cover expenditure on gas, **bandsmen's fees and transport**, printing and incidental expenses. (emphasis mine)

This continued into 20th century Singapore. The Cathedral Monthly Paper of St. Andrews, March 1928, had this to report: *The three performances of the Messiah on February 17, 20 and 21 were well patronised and were very well rendered…the conductor was Mr. E.A. Brown. The chorus of about 100 strong did excellently and* ***the orchestra with the help of members of the Duke of Wellington's Band are to be congratulated on their efforts.*** (emphasis mine)

Here we have evidence of the King's Regiment stationed here (though hardly audible in print-news space) and we learn of their 'additional' role; supplementing of wind instrumentation in amateur orchestral concerts and rehearsals. More importantly, in the face of a lack of wind instrumentalists, members of the wind band provided vital orchestral support in Singapore.

The next most prominent Band to appear was the **Second Straits Settlement Police Band** reportedly formed in 1925. Its function was to *add to the atmosphere and provide entertainment at police functions. Following an audition held in India, successful candidates-all of them with musical background –were brought to Singapore to form a 32-instrument band* (Singh, 2003, 16). 33 Punjabi bandsmen made up an ensemble configuration of eleven woodwinds, twenty brass, single side-drum and bass-drum (http://www.spf.gov.sg/sites/spfband/index.htm). The band was directed by a F.E. Minns till 1935 and was succeeded by J.Hitch. Paul Abisheganaden (1997, 6) believes that for an ordinary Singaporean, the band of the Singapore Police Force in the 1920s was one of the sources of Western music available to the public at large: *the earliest influences - shall we say, for the ordinary people was the* ***Police Band****; for the people who went to church it was the Anglican and Catholic church influences; those who went to neither of these places went to the cinema where they could hear music. So maybe in this way a love for what we call "Western music" became ingrained in the people.* (emphasis mine)

Alec Dixon's undated memoirs, recalls how F.E.Minns *succeeded in transforming a gang of somewhat tatty Sikhs into a highly efficient military band in a remarkably short time.* What also reads as remarkable was a concert repertoire, within a short space in time of Minns *described as a 'Malay Medley' during a band concert given at Tanjong Katong. A large crowd of Malays and Straits-Chinese turned out to hear the music, and its delight was expressed in a great ovation for*

Minns and his band when the 'Medley' concluded with the familiar and haunting rhythm of Bandoeng. The Police Band was to retain its basic formation even during the Japanese Occupation. Re-named **Syonan Police Band**, it continued to perform at concerts conducted by a Mr. Ganda Singh. One such instance appears in the Syonan Times 17 June 1942. The Syonan Times reported that on Thursday, 15 June 1944, *The Syonan Police Band will perform at Hong Lim Green from 7-8 pm on Sunday* offering repertoire such as *Kogun No Sieka and Military Band I*. Information was also provided in relation to scheduled venues for performances in June 1944, for instance one on the 11th June at Jalan Besar and another on the 14th June at the Botanical Gardens.

Following the Japanese surrender in 1945, Syonan Police band was renamed the **Singapore Police Force Band**. This was when local bandsmen were first enlisted and the band master was J.Hitch. By 1950, Mr. J. Hitch retired and Mr. R.E. House was appointed as the next bandmaster. The Band had by this time a total strength of 32 bandsmen and 20 boy learners. The Singapore Police Force Band's strength had grown to 56 and was composed of 75 percent Malay bandsmen. Mr. R.E. House retired early to join the Police Band of Brunei as its bandmaster. In 1958**,** Mr. J. E. Boyle was transferred from the Prisons Service to serve as the Police Band's next Bandmaster. By 1960, Mr. J.E. Boyle retired and Mr. Ridzwan Salmy Bin Mulok, sent on a Departmental Scholarship to undergo a 3-year Bandmasters Course at Kneller Hall in 1957, became the first local Bandmaster, marking the beginning of a new era for the Police Band. (http://www.spf.gov.sg/sites/spfband/index.htm).

Bands from Clan Associations were also prevalent in early 20th century Singapore. Presence of the **Yeung Chin Primary School Band** before the First World War, supported by the Cantonese clan associations. Matthew Chua (A678), a member of the Mayflower Minstrel Party from the Peranakan community, describes amateur music-making activities and mentions the participation of:

Good musicians from the Cantonese clan – Yeung Chin[g] High School had a brass band, so they would join us. Even the band master would come along when his students were inside the band and we played dance music! We would get all our orchestrated sheets form London. If not, we have our local music suppliers. We would get the latest hits and before they sell, they would pass [to] *us to try. So, we made use of the music for our dance and orchestra*.

The Hokkien clan association initiated the formation of **Ai Tong Primary School Band** before the Japanese Occupation. Usually after their primary school education, alumni of the Band would join the **Ai Hwa Old Boys Band**. According to Ho

Hwee Long, *in the 1950s…..some of the Hokkien Clan Associations had a very big military band for funerals, weddings, mainly for social events.*(Ho, 2004)

The third most prominent wave of the Band came again in the form of political support but this time in the domain of Education. The Ministry of Education, in response to a direct call from the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, set up the formation of the **Band Project** in 1966 and had for its rationale, a committed artistic and cultural endeavour, awareness and education of a general public, and a tradition that could resonate a national identity. The **Band Project** was launched as part of the extracurricular activity programme in both Primary and Secondary Schools beginning with four bands in aided secondary schools and nine bugle bands functioning mainly under the banners of the Boys' Brigade and Boy Scouts. Bands at this stage were mainly bugle and fife and marching and military in nature.

The Ministry of Education went further to organise annual indoor concerts in addition to the annual outdoor marching band competitions. Additionally, in 1966, the Music Department of MOE was charged with the responsibility of forming and training school bands. The Music Bulletin of Yamaha informs us that *in 1965, when the idea was first started, British servicemen (bandsmen) were employed to train brass band instructors. (Yamaha, 1973-75).* By 1971, Inche Mohd. Ghazali Ismail, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Education (Programme 30 December 1971) was able to say, "….*no school, primary or secondary would consider itself a complete entity if it did not possess a marching Band*", a revelation of how the Band movement had "…*developed at a dynamic rate…*" given that there were in that year, 88 Brass Bands in Secondary Schools and over 100 Bugle and Fife Bands in Primary Schools. Its support within the school system has been consistent and has been increasing at an incredible rate.

During the 1970s, a special committee was formed to ensure highest quality of marching in addition to band performance. The former Extra Curricula Activities Branch (ECA for short), Police Academy, and Singapore Armed Forces were involved in the training and Band leaders from the various schools were trained in footdrill, conducting and leadership before returning to their respective bands. As a consequence of the highly competitive school system in Singapore, one of the largest and most prominent spheres of activity and discussion has always surrounded Band competitions in Singapore. According to Ho Hwee Long, one of the most prominent figures in the Band movement Singapore…*from 1971 up to early 1980s, it was an annual event…indoor and outdoor…the same band must do outdoor display and indoor concert to show their versatility…in the early 1980s…parents complained that it was too time-consuming…then the indoor and outdoor*

alternated…outdoor competitions have dropped in terms of numbers…this year [2004] *there were only 5…but in the early days, the National stadium was full…40 bands taking part…preliminary rounds and final rounds…*(Ho, 2004)

Given the move from scratch and beginning with bugle and fife as well as initially brass band instrumentation in the 1960s through the 1990s into the present, there was inevitably a transition in instrumental configuration. From *flutes, clarinets, trumpets trombones, alto and tenor horns, sousaphones* [depending] *on function, financial support and the availability of the students to military band* [configuration] *based more on an American model to European and Japanese music in the 1990s competing with the American repertoire today*. (Ho, 2004)

By 2000, there were reportedly 44 primary schools, 132 secondary schools and 14 junior colleges with their own bands. A total of 7, 709 students from 117 secondary school bands and 14 junior college bands were involved at the Singapore Youth Festival Central Judging Competition in 2001. We are also informed that while *in 1997, there were reportedly 13, 613 students participating in military or brass bands, by 2002, this number had increased to 18,023.*
(http://www.mica.gov.sg/pressroom/press_0507113.html)

Currently, approximately 27.5% of students taking part in CCA music activities are involved in the Band. In the present context, The Ministry of Education today, which oversees the Band movement in the school system, makes financial provision of S$ 132, 000 for a Primary school band with minimum numbers of 53; S$ 203, 000 for the formation of a Secondary school band with a membership of 65 students; and S$ 207, 000 for Junior Colleges with memberships of not less than 65. This grant is based on what it would cost in terms of standard instrumental equipment for a wind band.

More schools and tertiary institutions are also setting up alumni bands. Anecdotal evidence suggests much of the supporting audience base comprises friends, family and loved ones. More innovative wind ensembles even set up their own wind ensembles to experiment with interesting and challenging repertoires, programmes and instruments. This development has helped to provide more avenues for school band members to continue with their interest in band-related activities once they have left the school system. (Mohd Rasull, personal communication, June 2002). But it hardly needs reminding that it is the schools that provide the critical mass of wind ensemble players in the post school community.

That many school bands are coached by free-lance band directors has prompted moves for a support system. One such avenue was the formation of the **Singapore Band Directors Association** in 1995 with its stated objectives:

- To develop, promote, organise and co-ordinate the band programme in schools, junior colleges and centralised institutes
- To strive for balance in the band programme and to maintain a perspective for the total educational development of the learner.

The formation of the Association has been to develop and improve the band programme, curriculum, supervision and instruction. A concomitant task has been to encourage and find ways for band directors to upgrade and improve their skills through workshops, clinics, courses and competitions. To date, there is no specific tertiary programme in Music that allows for studies in the Band movement besides the Music Specialisation undergraduate programme at the Nanyang Technological University, National Institute of Education. Since 2004, the Music Department, in the above-mentioned university has been running a Band Directing programme to enable free-lance band directors opportunities for a more rigorous study and reflection of their skill and craft in practice. The same Music department is active in postgraduate supervision and there are on record two theses written on the Band Movement in Singapore. Additionally, faculty members are engaged in research in the band from Composition to Musicological studies.

Studies of the recent history of Band movement in Singapore (Tan 1999) have enabled their categorisation into:

- School bands (primary, secondary and junior colleges)
- Tertiary bands (polytechnics and universities),
- Amateur groups (all Community Club-based bands),
- Peoples Association Military Band – from the Canton and Hokkien Clan associations.
- Independent groups such as the Singapore Wind Symphony (Formerly NTSB), Philharmonic Winds, Paradigm Wind Ensemble, and others,
- Professional bands (SAF Central and Police Bands). Except for this last group, members who join these groups will come from various walks of life, from being a student in the school to a fully-fledged working professional.
- Singapore Youth Wind Orchestra-entry by auditions and expected performance in WASBE 2005 and beyond.
- **Clan association Bands**
    - Yeung Chin Primary School Band (Canton Clan);
    - Ai Tong Primary School Band (Hokkien);
- **Service Bands**
    - Police Band

- SAF Central Band
- PA Military Band
- PA-Pipers Band
- Overseas Service Bands

- **Visiting Bands–**Overseas bands active in the 1960s and 1970s were:
  - Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment band
  - Military Band of the First Gordon Highlanders – the only bagpipe & drum band
  - Band of the Royal Highland Fusilisers of UK
  - First Battalion, Royal New Zealand Regiment
  - Australian Army Band
  - Far East Air Force Band
  - Gordon Highlanders of UK
  - United States Seventh Fleet Band
  - Royal Marine Band (Far East) of the UK
  - Royal Australian Air Force Band
  - Royal Artillery Band founded in 1962, formed with eight players and resident in Singapore during the 1960s. (Ho, 2004)

It is clear that the wind band ensemble has had a long presence in Singapore. From the Indian Native Regimental or Royal Regimental or even visiting bands in the 19th century, the Second Straits Settlement Police Band (Punjabi in all but name), the Syonan Police Band, Band of the Singapore Police Force and later the Band Project, brainchild of the Ministry of Education in the 20th century, the wind band was and is, seen as an institution capable of transforming its participants, albeit varying degrees of adaptation. The wind band exemplifies a symbiotic relationship between music and social settings. In Mannheim's (1968, 188) words, *"Each idea acquires a new meaning when it is applied to a new life situation. When new strata take over systems of ideas from another strata…the same words mean something different to the new sponsors…This social change of function, then, is … also a change of meaning."*

Here it is not the words but the sounds that are the subject of this transformation. Its chosen medium of expression, in this case, music, rendered it the authority of an artistic institution which historically found favour with political and military institutions. This is significant, given the variety of communities and variety of participatory strategies throughout the processes of colonisation in Singapore.

Gayatri Spivak (1993, 103) informs us certain practices of*...arts in the broadest sense are said to inhabit the private sector. But institutions of...art, as well as the criticism of art, belong to the public*. Questions abound; was the Wind Band a political phenomenon mediated through music or was it an artistic phenomenon mediated through a political *esprit des corps*? Was the Band so powerful a colonial gift that the only strategy to sustain its practice would have been to render it a political commodity in contemporary history? The gaps left behind between the **Madras Native Infantry**, **Second Straits Settlement Police Band** and the **Band Project** inform us of the necessity of robust patronage for sustainability of the Wind Band.

Despite the changes in adapting to political, social and cultural realities, the Wind Band in Singapore seems to have survived, if not thrived towards its prominence. I believe this is because the Wind Band as a political and artistic institution was accorded, has been accorded and on balance, deserved its spatial prominence, pervading and permeating much of the traditional and contemporary performing spaces, in terms of personnel, musical resources and musical instruments.

A historical account of the wind ensemble in Singapore could well have been an account by which *Band Music* underwent a transition towards *Music for the Band*. What are the processes that engendered such a change? What were the motivations for them? Responses to these questions are best left to pursuits in future and further scholarship.

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