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A small group of music students are leading a revival of the harp in schools

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While today's students are more likely to be familiar with smartphones than stringed instruments, a small group of students are leading a revival of the harp in the city's schools, writes Heidi Chik Wiseman

A colourful painting of children playing myriad musical instruments adorns the back of the spacious, light-filled music room of the Sheng Kung Hui Kei Fook Primary School. In the middle, seated neatly on a row of beige coloured chairs, are 14 giggly girls and one chubby boy. By the windowsill are six small harps - the kind held by angels in romantic oil paintings - in vibrant hues of red, blue, purple and natural wood.

"We have a total of 20 students, but we don't have enough harps for everyone. So two students share one harp between them," says Chiu Pik-kay, the music teacher.

Six students are chosen to pose with the harps for the photographer. The rest stand by the window waiting for further instructions.

Located in Cheung Sha Wan, an older part of Kowloon filled with industrial buildings and housing estates, Kei Fook is one of two primary schools in Hong Kong which incorporates harp lessons into their regular school hours; they call them "activity lessons". The school's music teacher actually teaches the instrument herself and the students get to learn without paying any extra fees. Students who cannot make it due to a clash with other activities take their lessons after school.

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"Miss Chiu was honest about how expensive these instruments are, but she offered to bring her own harp back for students to try it out," says principal Chan Chi-wing. Due to a good response from the students, she soon got support from her principal to buy a few small harps. "Hong Kong Harp Chamber also loaned us some harps while we were waiting for the instruments to arrive, which took nearly two months. We are really grateful for that," says Chiu.

Formed in autumn 2005, Harp Chamber is the first resource centre in Hong Kong to promote harp learning, playing, performing and appreciation. They host 200 hours of harp education programmes a year. These include storytelling, talks, workshops, educational concerts, classes, helping schools to form ensembles and providing harpists to local orchestras.

The Royal Schools of Music, which administers music examinations internationally, says there are about 150 pianists for every harp candidate, so harpists are few and far between. Chan acknowledges that he is only able to introduce something as unusual as the harp at his school because he happens to have the right teacher. He gives another good reason for broadening his students' horizons: "Secondary schools have a 30 per cent quota for selecting their own students. So far, we have had three or four students each year who have been accepted into so-called 'elite' secondary schools because of their outstanding performance in extracurricular activities, such as sport or music."

Chan Chi-wing, principal of SKH Kei Fook Primary. Photo: May Tse [1]While the harp is a new addition for SKH Kei Fook, Yan Chai Hospital Wong Wha San Secondary School has an established harp ensemble - the first in Hong Kong.

"It took me 10 years to prepare for it," says music teacher Rita Hui Yuk-ling. When she joined the newly established school in 1999, most students living in Tseung Kwan O were new immigrants. She started the "One Child, One Instrument" programme, and the school managed to secure financial support from the government's Quality Education Fund to buy some instruments; however, persuading parents of its benefits was the main challenge.

Ten years later, the school finally saved up enough money - nearly HK$1 million - to buy some pedal harps (at a greatly discounted price). In 2010, the harp was added to the music programme and an ensemble was formed. Within a few months, they flew to France to attend a master class with the renowned harpist Isabelle Perrin. Currently, there are 19 harp students, of which four will be taking Grade Six exams and five, Grade Five.

Hong Kong Harp Chamber's general manager, Kitty Tse Kit-ling, recognises that their outreach efforts have been limited by a lack of experienced harpists. It started to form its own outreach ensembles in 2008 and will invite every school to stage an educational concert featuring the harp for the first time this year. "It has taken us a few years to teach more students - including quite a number of adults - so that we have more people who can demonstrate and do more sharing at the schools." At present, its two centres have 200 regular students.

When the photo shoot was over, the students gradually went back to their classrooms, until there were only three children left.

Ten-year-old Nelson Wong, the only boy in the harp class, reveals that he wants to learn the harp because "it has so many more strings than the violin!" Would he like to learn a third instrument? "I would rather learn another sport. I want to play football."

Kiki Yeung, his classmate, is more keen. She is already taking digital piano and harp lessons at her school, but what she really wants is to be able to play a real piano. "My parents tell me it is very, very expensive, but I really want to learn. I could become a musician one day even if I may not excel in my academic studies."

In addition to the harp, Chloe Shum, their senior by two years, also plays the xylophone, the marimba, the piano and sings. She is less optimistic about making music her profession. "I think it may be easy to teach music, but it would be difficult to develop a career as a professional musician in Hong Kong."

However, their innocent, beaming faces tell you that most of all, learning musical instruments makes them happy. The children's memory also improves and they learn to focus as well, says principal Chan. The students point out that the painting at the back of the room is a pictorial representation of Psalm 150 from the Bible. On it is written: "Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre ... Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." Harps belong not only in heaven; they also bring happiness to schoolchildren in Hong Kong.

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