



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***LOCAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF LEARNING JAZZ IN AN  
INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING IN MALAYSIA***

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INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING IN MALAYSIA**

**By**

**WONG SIAO ERN**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science**

**November 2018**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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**November 2018**

**Chair : Chan Cheong Jan, D. Lit**  
**Faculty : Human Ecology**

This research was derived from the repeatedly observed struggles of local students in studying jazz performance as a major in an uncoordinated teaching environment for the new specialization. It aims at clarifying and giving voice to the experience of learners in undergoing a period of intense study at the receiving end of the delivery of a Bachelor of Music curriculum. Particularly, it examines how non-culture bearers of jazz, being educated in a “non-jazz” society, came to form their personal ways of understanding jazz as a genre as well as a study subject, and how they created personal ways in perceiving and handling different learning components. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or IPA was identified as the methodology for this study due to its relevance in examining complex human experience and major life events. The research design follows closely the manual for IPA published by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009). Semi-structured interviews that focuses on the understanding of jazz and the handling of learning components were conducted on three participants who have engaged actively in and completed a four year study program of jazz in a local higher learning institution. Interview text were coded, interpreted and reinterpreted to identify emergent themes. The result of study reveals that participants’ experience of learning jazz is an intercultural struggle in navigating tacit rules in order to sound like jazz. Learning jazz is not only about learning a new musical language with its repertoire and vocabularies, it is also about acquiring an intangible set of ethics. Participants struggled in navigating an intersection of discourses comprising of instructional language, tacit rules, ideals in jazz playing and social expectation. They also struggled in making a paradigm shift from autonomous to heteronomous thinking in music playing. Furthermore, learning jazz involves a continuous effort in attempting to be “in” a phenomenological state of the music. Premature pressures from lessons, examinations and competitions had rendered the gap of abilities irreconcilable, resulting in frustration and self-doubt during learning. Implications of study include that educators should be aware of learning that takes place within an intercultural context, and explain their instructional language accordingly. Local

students shall be equipped with ample knowledge on stylistic and social history of jazz in order to cope with cultural shock when learning jazz as a specialization. Further phenomenological studies could be conducted on local students who studied jazz abroad in order to complement results of the present study.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

## **PENGALAMAN PEMBELAJARAN JAZ PELAJAR TEMPATAN DALAM SEBUAH INSTITUSI PENGAJIAN TINGGI DI MALAYSIA**

Oleh

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Kajian ini diwujudkan daripada pemerhatian berulang tentang permasalahan pelajar tempatan mempelajari persembahan jaz sebagai pengkhususan dalam satu suasana pengajaran yang tidak diselaraskan untuk pengkhususan baru ini. Ia bermatlamat menjelaskan dan menyuarakan pengalaman pelajar yang mengalami tempoh pengajian yang intensif semasa berada pada hujung penerimaan penyampaian kurikulum Bachelor Muzik. Khususnya, ia menyelidik bagaimana orang yang bukan pembawa budaya jaz, yang dididik dalam sebuah masyarakat "bukan jaz", membentuk cara peribadi untuk memahami jaz sebagai satu jenre muzik dan juga sebagai satu subjek pengajian, serta bagaimana mereka membentuk pandangan dan cara peribadi dalam mengendalikan pelbagai komponen pembelajaran. Analisis Fenomenologi Interpretatif atau IPA telah dikenalpasti sebagai metodologi untuk kajian ini disebabkan kesesuaiannya dalam mengkaji pengalaman manusia yang kompleks dan kejadian kehidupan yang signifikan bagi seseorang insan. Rekabentuk kajian mengikut secara rapi manual untuk IPA yang diterbitkan oleh Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009). Temubual separa-struktur yang memokuskan kepada pemahaman terhadap jaz dan juga pengendalian komponen pembelajaran telah dilaksanakan pada tiga responden yang telah menglibatkan diri secara aktif serta menyempurnakan program pengajian jaz yang mengambil jangka masa empat tahun di sebuah institusi pengajian tinggi tempatan. Teks temubual telah dikodkan, diinterpretasi dan diinterpretasi semula untuk mengenalpasti tema yang terwujud. Hasil kajian menunjukkan pengalaman pembelajaran jaz responden adalah satu perjuangan antarabudaya yang melibatkan pengemudian peraturan tacit demi berbunyi seperti jaz. Pembelajaran jaz bukan sahaja mengenai pembelajaran satu bahasa muzik baru dengan repertoir dan perbendaharaannya, ia juga mengenai menguasai satu set etika yang tidak kelihatan. Responden bermasalah dalam mengemudian satu interseksi wacana yang terdiri dari bahasa instruksi, peraturan tacit, ideal-ideal persembahan jaz dan jangkauan sosial. Mereka juga bermasalah membuat perubahan paradigma dari pemikiran autonomi ke heteronomi dalam permainan muzik. Penguasaan jaz merupakan satu usaha

beterusan untuk berada “dalam” keadaan fenomenalogikal muzik tersebut. Tekanan pramatang yang berasal dari pembelajaran, peperiksaan dan pertandingan telah menyebabkan jurang kebolehan tidak dapat disesuaikan justeru itu mengakibatkan kebimbangan dan perasaan ragu diri. Implikasi kajian meliputi hal bahawa pendidik perlu sedar akan keadaan pembelajaran ini dan menerangkan bahasa pengajaran mereka dalam konteks antarabudaya. Pelajar tempatan perlu dilengkapi dengan pengetahuan sejarah stilistik dan sosial jaz yang mencukupi demi menangani kejutan budaya semasa mempelajari jaz sebagai satu pengkhususan. Kajian fenomenalogi lanjutan boleh dijalankan terhadap pelajar tempatan yang telah mempelajari jaz di luar negara untuk memantapkan lagi hasil kajian ini.



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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

Since the 1990s, jazz improvisation began to be offered as an option for study in local Bachelor of Music programs. Despite the increase of students pursuing jazz performance as their specialization in the past ten years, the outcome has been less than effective (Chan, 2013b). This issue may have its roots in the lack of established social environment for jazz music, and also in the lack of teaching methods suitable for local students. The inner perspective of learners—what they encounter while going through the journey of learning is most significant if we are to improve effectiveness in teaching and learning.

So far, little is known and documented of the challenges, learning problems or journey a Malaysian student undertakes when learning jazz. Jazz is considered to be an external culture to Malaysian students, and majoring in jazz is a process of trying to embrace this new music and make it theirs. Readers who are unfamiliar with the situation in Malaysia may be confused by the fact that how one would come to choose to major in a subject, in this case jazz, that he/she is not familiar with. This is however the reality on the ground: the lack of pre-college music appreciation and education opportunities in jazz has caused many to begin a Bachelor program with inadequate preparation. Most local jazz majors entered the program with substantial training in classical instrumental skills, however, they lacked knowledge and skills in jazz performance. For many, learning jazz in Malaysia, is essentially a journey of acquiring a foreign culture, not unlike a Japanese trying to learn Balinese gamelan.

This study looks into the inner perspectives of Malaysian students who learn jazz in a tertiary program. By presenting participants' inner experiences through interpretation, reflection and discussion, the study hopes to build towards understanding jazz learning in Malaysia as intercultural learning; a process where learners embrace the music of "others" as "ours". This has potential for wider applications in music education in Asian and particularly Southeast Asian countries, where westernization of culture is still a relevant issue.

Much is to be clarified in the subject of jazz education in Malaysia: Jazz is not currently part of its mainstream culture, and information concerning learning environment, learning content, teaching approach and the situation of learners is lacking. As a step towards building a discourse for jazz pedagogy in a "non-jazz" environment, the researcher would like to begin with a focus on the situation of the learners. It would be beneficial to understand students' perception of their learning, as well as problems faced in learning. Chan has in 2012 presented a case of a student's jazz learning from his observation as a teacher (Chan, 2012). Discussions on the issue of confidence and self-esteem among Malaysian

students were also presented in that article, which helped form the starting point for this study. Different from the study in 2012, this study approaches the situation of learners from a third-person's point of view: the researcher is involved neither as teacher nor learner, but as interpreter and analyst of participants' learning experience.

After enjoying a period of popularity in the 1960s where it was championed by musicians such as Jimmy Boyle, Alfonso Soliano and others, jazz fell out of popularity and was seldom played in Malaysia between 1970s and 2000s (Chan & Boyle, 2016, p. 336). The beginning of jazz instruction in the 2000s within local music undergraduate programs was therefore a new era altogether (Chan & Wong, 2016). Most of the undergraduate music programs in local varsities were launched after the millennium. The Bachelor program in Universiti Sains Malaysia was launched in 1993, Universiti Putra Malaysia in 1996, University Malaya in 1997; the rest of the music programs were offered after the year 2000. Nearing its third decade since music programs were launched, many of the problems in implementing music curricula centers on the acquiring of new cultures (education culture included) in a cross-cultural context (Chan & Wong, 2016).

**Table 1 : Local varsities that offers jazz performance as an option for major instrumental study**

<b>University</b>	<b>Program</b>
Universiti Teknologi MARA	Bachelor of Music Performance
University Malaya	Bachelor of Performing Arts (Music)
Universiti Putra Malaysia	Bachelor of Music
Universiti Sains Malaysia	Bachelor of Music (Performance & Pedagogy)
Sultan Idris Education University	Bachelor of Education (Music)
University Malaysia Sarawak	Bachelor of Applied Art (Music)
Universiti Malaysia Sabah	Bachelor of Arts (Music Studies)
UCSI University	Bachelor of Contemporary Music (Hons.)
International College of Music	Bachelor of Music in Professional Music

(Adapted from Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2010)

The structure of tertiary music programs in Malaysia is characterized by its compartmentalization. Different from other programs, a music program has, beyond the area of specialization, a further division in terms of instrumental study: It is termed as "first (instrument) study", or "major (instrument) study". In many institutions, jazz as a major is situated even further down the level of division. For example, a jazz piano major study comes under "piano as first study", which in turn comes under the "program of music", which could be under a title of "Bachelor of Arts". Table 1 shows tertiary education providers in Malaysia that offer jazz as an option for major study (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2010). Other than UCSI University and International College of Music, all institutions provide a generic program in music where jazz is not mentioned



or stated in their curriculum structure, but embedded as one of the many possible majors. Implications of such compartmentalization within a program is that at the lowest level of division (for example, for a division of “jazz piano major”), the number of students are small and the instructional structure tends to be loose. In many institutions, there could well be less than ten students per year majoring in jazz. The situation of small enrollment for music programs and the lack of coordination due to the insufficient use of teaching man power was already pointed out in 2005 (Kementerian Kebudayaan, Kesenian dan Warisan, 2005, p. 23):

“Kehadiran hanya antara 30 sehingga 50 siswa muzik di IPT bagi sepanjang tempoh mana-mana tahun pengajian adalah satu statistik yang menggambarkan ketenatan sumber gunatenaga bidang ini di masa depan.”

The compartmentalized nature of music program also contributes towards the small number of jazz instructors in each institution. Other than UCSI and ICOM mentioned above, all institutions has only one to two lecturers specializing in jazz, and there are institutions that have to rely solely on part time tutors to provide tutelage to jazz major students. Another evidence that shows the undeveloped jazz curriculum can be found in a report of music tertiary programs published by the Ministry of Higher Education (2010, p. 10). In the report, “jazz studies” was one of the items listed under “Areas of Specialization” that is “recommended in the future”. This indicates that jazz studies, though in actual implementation for some years, had not been formally acknowledged as a proper area of specialization. Although the said report was published in 2010, the situation today in 2018 has not seen much change. This can easily be confirmed by perusing the respective web pages of each institution, as well as by observing the number of music lecturers who are currently teaching in local institutions.

Another key problem encountered is students’ low self-confidence in learning and improvising jazz. Combined with a lack of awareness and understanding of the cultural and musical aspects of jazz, these factors can significantly affect a student’s progress in learning. In the process of learning to play jazz, learners are required to improvise creatively. In the context of Malaysia, a developing country, students learn to improvise while “acquiring the art form as a new culture” (Chan & Wong, 2016, p. 4) at the same time. In reality, students find themselves in a situation where they must immediately apply the new knowledge and skills learned, with barely any time allowed for internalization; many lacked confidence while performing the music and experienced emotional break-downs during study (p. 4).

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Since the 1980s, studies on jazz learning in the US have been building in momentum. In Malaysia however, available literature on this topic are limited to Chan (2012, 2013); Jähnichen (2009, 2010) and Chan & Wong (2016). Other than Chan (2012), the writings mentioned above do not focus exclusively on the situation of jazz learning in Malaysia. No other literature on the topic of jazz learning produced from Asia was identified at the time of this study. For this reason, the statement of problem has been synthesized through an array of sources that are related to jazz learning in certain ways; this includes communications between jazz instructors, documents from government ministries, as well as the aforementioned locally written research on jazz.

After the 1960s where jazz enjoyed a period of popularity, it fell out of favour and was seldom played locally between the 1970s and 2000s. The globalization of jazz music, and the introduction of jazz as a subject of study in undergraduate music programmes in the 2000s has caused an increase of jazz learning among music undergraduates. However, there exists a wide gap between the day to day music environment in society and the more artistic genres being focused on in varsity music programs. Students' prior knowledge of music are limited to types of popular music they were regularly exposed to (Shah, 2006). Local media, which rarely reports music as an industry but more as mere entertainment (Norshafawati S., et al, 2010, p. 63) further contributes towards the gap of understanding. Limited availability of jazz educators and lack of appreciation towards jazz music have been addressed by senior musicians in Malaysia like Ahmad Merican, Johari Salleh and Mokhzani Ismail (Ahmad, Johari & Mokhzani, 2012). The need to close the gap of music training between secondary and tertiary level was acknowledged in the Action Plan for Development of Malaysian Music Industry (Kementerian Penerangan, Komunikasi dan Kebudayaan Bahagian Muzik, 2011) but largely remains as a plan today, with the exception of the establishment of several secondary schools specializing in arts named Sekolah Seni Malaysia (Utusan, 9 May 2017), of which the outcome of education remains unknown.

Difficulties in learning, accompanied by anxiety and communication breakdown, due to low readiness, lack of prior training and huge skill and knowledge gap has been prevalent among the music undergraduates (Wristen, 2013; Burland & Pitts, 2007). Music undergraduates in Malaysia are of no exception. Stress and anxiety were reported when music undergraduates faced difficulty in making adjustments to their study program (Soo & Chan, 2014; Chan 2012). One of the main issues that motivated this study were reoccurring incidents of depression and emotional breakdown among the jazz major students in local institutions, which was observed over a span of time between 2012 to 2016 (Chan, 2012; personal communication with jazz instructors Chan Cheong Jan, 2013, Tay Cher Siang, 2013, Toro Cheng, 2013, James Boyle, 2014, and Leonard Yip, 2016). These incidents intensify when students approach their graduation recitals. The ambiguous and over-individualized instructional process of jazz lessons were a

known fact to lecturers and students; these were also part of a larger background in which the program is located.

As mentioned in the report by the Ministry of Higher Education (2010), the master-apprentice model at conservatoriums continued to be used in training musicians despite being no longer adequate (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010, p. 9). The instruction of jazz, likewise, is carried out within this model. The consequences of these developments are the lack of a clear instructional standard. The level, repertoire, and pedagogical methods used differs from one instructor to another. The lack of coordination among the institutions have long since been mentioned:

“...namun pengendaliannya adalah secara tersendiri yakni mengikut citarasa masing-masing. Justeru, secara amnya pendidikan seni muzik di peringkat ini boleh dikatakan kurang terarah” (Kementerian Kebudayaan, Kesenian dan Warisan, 2005, p. 22).”

Curriculum designed according to global standards are being executed on local students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010) as it is being executed in advanced countries, and students were left without the support and strategies to cope with adjustments needed to comprehend, embrace and learn designated musical performance skills external to their background. As it is, the statement that music programs in local varsities were less well-planned (*kurang terancang*) and lacking in directions (*kurang terarah*) as stated in National Music Policy (Kementerian Kebudayaan, Kesenian dan Warisan 2005, p. 20) still stands.

The amount of research information in jazz in Southeast Asia falls drastically behind the dynamic development of musicians at the front lines. At present, the body of knowledge of music education informs little about the status of learners in higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Overemphasis on the use of quantitative methods in music education research has produced findings inclined to understand each aspect of learning problems in separation. Teaching methods and procedures (Khor, 2015; Soltani et al., 2011), students' achievements (Cheong et al., 2014; Lim, 2014), students' perceptions (Chan & Juriani, 2010; Shah, 2006) have been examined, but experience of the learners as a whole had received little attention. Qualitative discourse on music learners' experience are active internationally (Cabedo-Mas & Diaz-Gomez, 2013; Lonie & Dickens, 2015; Westerlund et al., 2015). Such is not the case in Malaysia. Research on music teaching and learning produced locally have been dominated by quantitative research such as Cheong et al. (2014), Lim (2014), Khor (2015), Juriani (2007) and Mong (2004). The only qualitative research in music teaching and learning could be Wu's (2018) educational ethnography on children in vernacular school. Little is known, therefore, of how music learners' feel and the challenges they face in the process of music education in post-colonial, multicultural Malaysia.

Inefficiencies in curriculum implementation, lack of localized and holistic research approach and lack of focus on student's lived experience as integrated beings in learning has resulted in difficulties in dealing with the problem on the ground. The on-going struggles experienced by music undergraduates in jazz learning, real as they were, have remained invisible: the root of these problems are many-layered and interrelated, and unable to be diagnosed from exams alone. Often, these struggles in learning only came to attention when students experience severe emotional break downs, sometimes near the end of the major programme.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Aiming at clarifying the lived experience of jazz students in going through their study, the main research question of this study is formulated as below:

What is the experience of Malaysian university students in going through jazz performance study as their major?

This research question can be further elaborated with the following questions and considerations:

Situated in non-cultural bearers' position, what had Malaysian students been through, as persons bound by their upbringing and training background, in going through jazz performance as their major study? What have local jazz student experienced, as learners, on the receiving end of the jazz education program? What characterizes these learning experiences of local jazz students? What were the feelings, difficulties or challenges faced in going through the jazz program, and what does this process mean to them?

This study will focus specifically on student's understanding of their study subject and their experience in handling learning components throughout the undergraduate program.

#### **1.4 Objectives of Study**

This study examines lived experiences of tertiary students in learning jazz improvisation within the intercultural setting of Malaysia. Intercultural setting here refers to a learning situation where students are non-cultural bearers of the culture being learned. This is done with a focus on the process of learning from the inner perspective of learners in order to gain insights in the area of intercultural pedagogy and learning.

Specific objectives are as stated below:

1. To illustrate students' personal understanding of jazz as a genre as well as a subject of study.
2. To depict students' personal ways of perceiving and handling different learning components involved in jazz study.

#### **1.5 Significance of Study**

This study contributes, first of all, towards the rare body of knowledge of learners' experience in music and arts learning. It breaks the ground by making a case for students' needs in going through habitual changes, reorientation of mindset and acquisition of new understandings while embarking on a professional education. Particularly it points towards a long-awaited discourse on situations faced in intercultural learning, when learners learn a language, culture or aesthetic system that are not of their mother tongue or of their local culture. This study reveals the real experience that took place on the ground of education practice, how the learners perceive, handle, and value these experiences based on their own understanding which was inextricably bound up with their up-bringing and cultural background. This, at the same time, challenges the notion of a universal university curriculum: it's implicit belief that nothing could be scrutinized beyond the design and delivery of the curriculum content; and it's assumption that holds learners as uniformed beings lined up on a single continuum from less to more trained or educated.

On the practical side, this research places jazz study by non-Western students under a new light—an intercultural perspective. Failures in making adjustment to the environment of learning new knowledge or skill sets have been dismissed as being the learner's individual responsibility. By revealing the kind of cultural adjustment made within students in coping with "foreign" settings and sources, this study evokes a sense of accountability among educators, education providers and pedagogy researchers: the global and intercultural setup of today's learning curriculum will need attentive considerations on the gap between evaluation and readiness, and some kind of mediation and translation is necessary between delivery and receiving of instructions. This will have wide applications in music and cultural education in Asian and particular Southeast

Asian countries, where westernization, modernization, and acculturation is still a relevant issue.

## **1.6 Limitation of Study**

This is an intermediate IPA study conducted on three participants according to the standards and procedures by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009). Deep personal experiences were acquired through multi-staged interpretative analysis of interview data and this naturally limits the number of respondents that is viable to be included in a study. The amount of data acquired was too huge that some parts were spared in this thesis. Data on learners' self-image and being, though significant in phenomenology studies, were not able to be included due to the limitation of length in a Master thesis. As it is, the thesis gives an extensive account of participants' experience in aspects of understanding of learning subject and handling of learning tasks. The results of this qualitative study is useful as reference for formulating localized teaching, learning strategies and creative solutions for jazz learning; but it could not give concrete technical suggestions as it was not meant for such. Lastly, the learning situations faced by participants are bound by time and space. Changes in learners' readiness and exposure, social background, political climate and education design are unavoidable. The thesis shall therefore be read for insights of human experience in attempting arts studies rather than a factual report of learners' response.

## **1.7 Definition of Terms**

### **Jazz**

- i) A music tradition that originated by a meeting of diverse musical influence (among them "European" and "African"), that was introduced and developed during early 20th century in the United States.
- ii) An attitude of performing music characterized by a fluid creative process called improvisation.
- iii) A musical style characterized by syncopation (emphasis on the weak beats instead of the strong beats in music), melodic and harmonic elements derived from the blues and western harmony, a cyclical form and a rhythmic characteristic known as swing (Tucker & Jackson, 2001).

### **Jazz improvisation**

To perform music in a way that "reworks precomposed material and design in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance" (Berliner, 1994, p. 241). This is usually done by generating melodies (or harmonies) in relation to the chords, "within the tune's cyclical rhythmic form" (p. 184).

### **Local jazz major student**

Students who studies/studied jazz in a major programme in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia.

### **Non-cultural bearers (of jazz)**

In this study, this refers to persons who do not originate from a background where jazz as a music culture exist as part of their daily environment.

## **1.8 Organization of Thesis**

This chapter gives an introduction to the basic set up of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature on jazz playing, pedagogy and learning, to pave theoretical understanding and ways in approaching the study topic. Chapter 3 gives a systematic description of the methodology of IPA and the methodological set up created for the study. Chapter 4 presents the results of study by interpreting and analyzing lived experiences of participants in understanding jazz and handling learning components. Chapter 5 concludes the study by revisiting the research question and synthesizing a new frame of understanding concerning jazz learning in a postcolonial Southeast Asian country.

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