



The sound of music: (from left) The inclusion choir mixes autistic children with UPM music students in a form of music therapy; Dr Indra has organised a seminar on music therapy to help parents and teachers work with autistic children.



Rehearsing for this concert is therapy in session.

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Photos by **GLENN GUAN**

Play, play. Can play?" Clement Ooi says, his unfocused eyes darting across the rehearsal room.

"Sit down, Clement," his mother Annie Kam says, a gentle rebuke to a boy that just wants to get up on stage and sing.

Clement is 26, but he is autistic and developmentally delayed in his speech and verbal skills. Looking dapper in a crisp yellow dress shirt and a black bowtie, he doesn't make eye contact and can't start conversations. He is oblivious to social niceties, and won't pretend to like you if he doesn't.

He pulls at his shirt cuffs, restlessly shuffles his feet from side to side – but once he gets on stage, his voice soars.

"Music helps him to calm down. He loves to sing in front of an audience. When he's up there, he feels a great sense of achievement. This concert and preparing for it has really boosted his confidence," his mother says.

Music to their ears

The concert Clement and others with autism will sing in is organised by Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), in conjunction with UPM Music Cares: Music Therapy and Autism Seminar from May 29 to May 30. The seminar aims to educate parents of disabled children on how to use music to help them.

"I thought it'd be a good idea to get music therapists together so we could inform the public and raise awareness. What's most important is that parents from all socio-economic backgrounds can attend. They are desperately seeking solutions," says UPM lecturer and music therapist Dr Indra Selvarajah who organised the seminar.

Dr Indra says special needs teachers are also keen to learn how to use music as a teaching tool.

"Music therapy offers a solution. They can learn to use practical methods in their classrooms, like simple rhythmic exercises or group musical activities."

The concert itself, and the months of rehearsal leading up to its performance at the end of the seminar, is one such method. Called an inclu-

sion choir, UPM music students and autistic children sing together.

The UPM students are arranged between the kids, holding their hands and guiding their voices. The students' voices are stronger, more accomplished in scope and tone, but you can hear and see the sheer joy that singing gives these children.

Often in a world of their own, with their fidgety bodies almost folded into themselves, they leave that world, however momentary, when they sing. The handholding appears childish to an outsider, but it's a gentle way of holding the attention of the kids and soothing them.

The music conductor speaks animatedly to the group, teaching them how to enunciate correctly.

"Kindness," he stresses several times, elongating "kind". The kids know the lyrics by heart at this point, although they have trouble emoting and expressing some of the words.

Autistic children struggle to read emotional and social cues; that's why they are so isolated. When the kids sombrely belt out lyrics to a

love song, the music conductor stops them and patiently tells them to try again. After a few false starts and coaxing by the UPM students, they get it right.

"Music enlarges everything. This rehearsal is therapy in session. By singing, they can understand the nuances of language better. It also helps with their pronunciation, because many of them have problems with verbal skills," Dr Indra explains.

Furthermore, singing with the UPM students introduces them to a new social setting. For children who are usually uncomfortable with strangers, the music makes the presence of unfamiliar faces more bearable. Instead of running away, over time they become more responsive.

Autistic children are also more easily overstimulated. In the controlled chaos of a rehearsal, surrounded by the din of loud instruments, they learn how to remain calm. They naturally lean towards structure, so the structure that is inherent in music is comforting. The repetitiveness of the lyrics, the refrain and the rhythms are therapeutic.

"This is why I think the seminar is so important. For us, it's a grassroots and social outreach movement. We want to offer our services to people who otherwise wouldn't be able to access them," Dr Indra says.

The seminar will gather experts in the field, where they will show how music therapy can help with autism. It will let parents and teachers network with therapists, experts and doctors.

The grand finale, the concert, will be a showcase music therapy's benefits.

"We want to spotlight their ability, not disability," she emphasises.

For the UPM students, the ones who may one day teach disabled children, the experience has been enlightening.

"It really opened my eyes to the challenges they face," orchestra manager Joyce Low says. "When I first met them, they wouldn't really talk to us. But the more we got to know them, the more they started to make eye contact and respond. With disabled kids, it's almost like you don't see or hear them. Now, I do."

■ **UPM MUSIC Cares: Music Therapy and Autism Seminar** will be held from May 29 to May 30 at the Bentley Auditorium in Mutiara Damansara, Petaling Jaya. For more information, please visit www.facebook.com/upmmusiccares.