



Thailand Music Education Reform: A Study of Vision and Strategies of Dr. Sugree Charoensook

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Abstract

The aim is to study the historical development and professionalism of Dr. Sugree Charoensook; an influential music educator who has helped raise Thailand's music education standards to international levels. This investigation comprises biographical research concerning his life and career to highlight his contributions to music education in Thailand. His vision, philosophy, and approaches to Thai music education are articulated by reflecting on his leadership creating Mahidol University's College of Music and its affiliated programs to lead the new generations to prepare them for their future careers through the strength of quality teaching.

Key words: Thailand music education reform, Sugree Charoensook

Introduction

Anyone working in the field of music education in Thailand would have recognized the name of Dr. Sugree Charoensook, Dean of the College of Music, Mahidol University. Dr. Sugree is one of the most important music educators who has raised Thailand music education to international standards and serves as a leader of music education in Southeast Asia. Reflecting on the history of music education Thailand in the 1950s, it was young and ignorant with regards to establishing music education for the higher education. Creating a music curriculum for Thai people was a big challenge despite its history in Thailand, dating to the seventeenth century within the domain of church and courtly music. The challenge came from both students and the institutions plan-

ning to introduce music as it was treated as an unimportant subject for collegiate level study within a university curriculum. Identifying the value and merits of post-secondary music education had to be promoted among prospective students, university and government administrators and directors, as well as financial supporters.

This investigation comprises biographical research concerning the life and career of Dr. Sugree Charoensook to document his contributions to music education in Thailand, articulate his vision, philosophy, and approaches to Thailand's music education barriers, and to discuss his various roles he has held as a founder and leader of the College of Music, Mahidol University and its affiliated programs. Information for this study, gathered between 2008 and

2009, is drawn from a variety of sources including books, articles, recordings, and interviews. A large volume of Dr. Sugree's writings and publications were examined and contribute to the insight of the story. Also, many formal interviews with Dr. Sugree's associates and colleagues provide extensive information and perspective on the subject.

Objectives

1. To study biographical data of Dr. Sugree Charoensook.
2. To study vision and strategies of Dr. Sugree Charoensook in Thailand music education reform.

Results and Discussion

I. Knowing Sugree Charoensook

Dr. Sugree Charoensook was born in 1952. He grew up in Chian Yai, an agricultural village in Nakhon Si Thammarat province in the southern part of Thailand. His musical foundation was instilled by his father who was a folksong singer and a school master who planted the idea of seeking an advanced education into his son's mind. During his childhood, he attended schools in his hometown and was exposed to western music through singing in a school choir and playing various instruments in a school band. Even though Dr. Sugree respected his country lifestyle, he yearned to receive a better education that awaited him outside of his town.

Before pursuing higher education, Dr. Sugree pursued freelance music opportunities playing for events such as weddings, funerals, and festivals. Among the many instruments that he played, the saxophone became his favored instrument. His higher education in music began in 1971 in Bangkok at Bansomdejchaopraya Teacher College, a place where he decided to make music his profession. His studies were supported by the Ministry of Education and after graduating, he taught at the Chandrakasem Teacher College in Bangkok. His true exploration of music at

an international level began when he pursued graduate studies at the University of Northern Colorado in the United States, supported by the Thai government. Through hard work and perseverance, Dr. Sugree mastered the performance skill in saxophone and music education knowledge to earn a Master of Music Education. Dr. Sugree continued his post-graduate studies at the University of Northern Colorado to pursue a Doctorate of Arts in Woodwind performance and pedagogy in 1985. He sought to bring back to Thailand a better music education, as revealed in his dissertation, *Undergraduate Music Curricula in Universities of Thailand and United States: A Comparative Study and Recommended Curriculum for Thai Universities*. It showed how much he cared about the music education of his country. His decision to help develop music curriculum for his country was expressed in his own words in *Sarakadee* and *Dichan* journals.

"Do I want America or does America want me?" The answer was America most likely does not need me, there are plenty of music doctors out there, it's me who wants America (Moonjinda, 2004, p. 100). Who needs me then? Thailand, probably . . . At least I knew what I could do for the country (Mintra, 2000, p. 280).

He was the first Thai citizen to ever earn a Doctor of Arts in Music. Upon his return to Thailand, Dr. Sugree's vision of music education reform in Thailand began and never ceased.

II. Music Education Reformist

Upon returning to Thailand in 1985, Dr. Sugree Charoensook started to teach at his alma mater, the Bansomdejchaopraya Teacher College. In 1987, he was invited to offer music instruction at the collegiate level at the Institution of Language and Culture for Rural Development at Mahidol University. At the beginning of his career at Mahidol, he has established several music professional activities including a music journal, small ensembles, and orchestras. In 1994,

Dr. Sugree was appointed as Director of the College of Music, Mahidol University. Because of his previous experience at Bansomdejchaopraya Teacher College, Dr. Sugree was determined to offer a way to improve music education. The College has become not only his work but his life.

I devote my health to the service, my brain to be weapons, and my heart to reinvigorate. I govern people with conscience and spirit. My management has only one option-to get things done...No matter how long it takes, I have to fulfill the work. (Charoensook, 2006, p.12)

If devotion is his mind-set, planning and strategies are the process to make his vision comes true. Dr. Sugree's self-motto is *Think big, Start small, and Act now.* Aiming towards the best and the strongest in Thailand is not an easy path, he has encountered several difficulties and challenges in running the College. One major problem he has faced is the quality of the students which, at the beginning of his directing year, was well-below international standards. He told himself that this problem needed to be fixed and that became the beginning of his music education reforms in Thailand.

"We must reform music education...new generations of musician have to be built. Thai's philosophy of ten kin ram kin has to be changed. Study music can be profitable and music people can be respectful and reliable." (Charoensook, 2002, p. 15)

His goal is to build an excellent music college that meets international standards, with supporting infrastructure, facilities, musical instruments, with qualified and talented music teachers to teach comprehensive music programs from pre-college to doctorate degrees. In doing these, he has kept in mind five main strategies: freedom from any structures, aim only for success, strict adherence to the mission, working diligently, assuring quality, and fostering a good learning environment. He believes that a good surrounding and facilities can support positive learning outcomes.

Dr. Sugree's music education philosophy is to lead the new generations to prepare them for their future careers through the strength of quality teaching. He believes that good teachers provide a good learning environment and create qualified students to become the next generation of musicians. He expects his faculty to be intelligent, possessing a good heart and attitude, able to work with a high level of skill and efficiency, and continue devoting time to their craft as professional musicians. He wants to encourage faculty to put in the energy, brain, and heart (Charoensook, 2009, pp. 23-24).

Believing that the heart of music learning is by performing at an early age, Dr. Sugree initiated several research projects and initiatives to explore the potential of early childhood learning experiences and development. By working with the youth, they will have the time to develop their abilities and become good music students ready for college level instruction. Goals are set, and projects are designed through many activities and experiments such as music camps, Settrade Youth Music competition, Dr. Sax's chamber orchestra, Music campus for the general public, the Asian Symphonic Band Competition, Thailand International Wind Ensemble Competition, etc. Several of his research activities have influenced Thai music education, musicology, and ethnomusicology: the talent education research project, the research for pitch and system of Thai music, Royal anthem, National anthem, Trumpet in Siam, etc.

To help guide the expected path of learning for students of all ages, he has created projects to aid all levels of ability, ranging from the 3-year-old child to the doctoral level student aspiring to become leaders in music instruction, research, and advocacy. Through this way, the college not only provides higher education but also extends its reach to support the general public. As one of his goals is to treat music as equal to other science disciplines, and make music a recognized and significant profession, graduating music students should have a respected career and income.

Seeing the role of music in the society, curriculum in higher education needs to address social needs. Jazz music, music business, music technology, as well as music therapy are expanding areas that differ from other music academic and performance areas, based on the students' own interest to provide not only music specialists, but good people benefitting Thai society.

Dr. Sugree's policy of budgeting is to invest money on the projects, not to save without developing any. Organizing the College is difficult since it demands huge amounts of money. Money does not flow in easily; slashing of budget by the Government's Bureau of Budget made the College struggle. Dr. Sugree, without the word "impossible" in his mind, finds a way to receive money from the rich to take care of the poor in order to create works for the society (Charoensook, 2002, p. 6). His love towards the nation is so strong, he never stops expanding music education in every corner of the country. The project "grow flowers in your heart," aims to provide music learning opportunities to underprivileged students from rural areas. Also, the "Kru dontri mue plao" and "Teachers help Teachers" projects are designed to improve the quality of music instruction in rural areas.

Dr. Sugree can overcome obstacles through skills in problem solving and excellent leadership skills:

As an executive, bear in mind that you have to make decisions, but not to abuse the power...Do not be afraid if you are hated, as long as you work for the public with clear objectives and fulfill the job with quality." (personal interview, December 10, 2008).

The College reaches its international level because of Dr. Sugree's vision and creativity. His imagination goes far beyond anyone's expectations. It seems that he can see things ahead of time and is able to predict the future, which means he can design things and make today's plan ready for the future.

Imagine creates opportunities for organizations,

Imagine is a next world, vision, scheme, dream...To direct with imagination is to manage and accept dissimilarity (Charoensook, 2006, p.129).

III: The new era of Thailand music education, looking towards the 21st Century

The success of Dr. Sugree's reforming music education in Thailand is indicated in the Rhinegold's World Conservatoires 2009 where his college is the only Thailand institution of music learning that is listed. Dr. Sugree continues to follow his vision to never stop working, taking the College to higher levels as a leading music institution of the Southeast Asia. The strategies now cover the collaboration of music activities and knowledge sharing. To stand as the center of Southeast Asia and involved in the ASEAN community, he created a SAYOWE project, Southeast Asian Music Director Conference, Southeast Asia Music Museum. The challenge Dr. Sugree bears in mind is how to keep the growth of the College to meet the changes of the world in the beginning of the twenty-first century. He then turns to develop faculty and staff to increase their skill of twenty-first century technology, giving scholarships for faculty to their advance education. He always insists that faculty standard has no compromising (personal interview, December 10, 2008). To make the College head forward, people need to combine their energies together. Dr. Sugree believes that success can not be achieved by a single individual working alone. Success requires networking and relationships with friends and supporters.

Thailand Philharmonic Orchestra (TPO) commands fame for the nation as it is an orchestra that performs at an international standard. The uniqueness of TPO is it covers the nation's identity. By Dr. Sugree's suggestion, TPO concerts begin with traditional Thai repertoire. This serves to reaffirm that this orchestra serves the country.

Conclusions

From the outset of his musical life, Dr. Sugree

Charoensook has overcome adversities to create new realities where only dreams and fanciful notions once stood. Ascending from a modest background, he worked relentlessly to further his education and obtain a doctorate in the United States. Upon his return to Thailand, his passion for music would continue as a performer, teacher, scholar, and leader.

As an innovator in music educational leadership, Dr. Sugree Charoensook re-envisioned music education for the masses. Examples of these initiatives include the Talent Education Research Project and the creation of Mahidol University's College of Music. Pro-active measures were taken by Dr. Sugree Charoensook in both his teaching philosophy and actions establishing centers of music learning for students of all ages to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn music. Charoensook's optimism in the human capacity to learn and its potential to make music is equaled only by his perseverance to create opportunities to nurture its growth. Fostering these opportunities required the establishment of, and physical construction of, the College of Music, its Pre-College program, Music Campus for the General Public, Dr. Sax, the Dr. Sax Chamber Orchestra, among other learning centers. Such innovation in teaching and access transcends historical models of music education in Thailand.

The plight of professional musicians is multifaceted; including the legitimization and professionalization of their trade (in music education, higher education, and as professional performers), acknowledging that quality music-making constitutes a product of value to our society, and increasing the general awareness and appreciation of music in a broader segment of the population, both Thai and international. Dr. Sugree Charoensook has sought to promote the status and condition for aspiring professional musicians. In addition to the formation of Thailand-based music ensembles, such as the Bangkok

Saxophone Quartet and the Thailand Philharmonic Orchestra, Charoensook has been involved in the hosting of international music festivals to help raise the status and awareness of music-making at the highest level in Thailand, with invited artists at events such as the World Saxophone Congress and the Thailand International Jazz Conference.

His devotion and work ethic transforming his vision into reality, on paper and by brick, serves as a testament to all of the potential of a single man's vision to take shape, coalesce into reality, and help so many pursue their own aspirations. This is more than a biography of a music reformist. It's a story of how one person explored the supreme potential of a human being: brain, mind, and body, and how one's heart could be so powerful so as to overcome the impossible without hesitation. Also, it demonstrates how one's love of their nation can be expressed through uncountable gifts to its people.

Recommendations

This focus on vision and leadership qualities serves as a model to identify and better understand personal commitments demonstrated by devoted leadership. Research examining other aspects of Dr. Sugree Charoensook's leadership; namely his administrative skills and style of management, would identify his interactions with both senior administration of the university and those working under him in the College of Music. An examination of his record of success to secure financial sponsorship for capital infrastructure projects would offer insights and perspective for other senior administrators seeking to expand or enhance their own programs. Further research of other leaders could help identify common traits of those demonstrating this rare combination of leadership and innovative. Such an examination of these related factors could serve to identify effective "best practices" for aspiring leaders.

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Further Readings

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