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Author(s): Eugene Dairianathan and Lum Chee Hoo
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Vedic metal: issues of local practice, popular music and education

Eugene Dairianathan, Lum Chee Hoo

Abstract
If music of popular culture is a lived curriculum – one that has suffused young people’s lives – can popular musics’ presence in everyday space be extended to educational space?

In this paper, we introduce a group of graduate serving music teachers to the musical practice of Rudra, a local Extreme metal group, and invite discussions of their practice and consideration of Extreme Metal through Rudra, among the repertory of the diversity of musical practices in their school music curriculum. This paper reports on the dynamics of these discussions as well as accounts by teachers who subsequently introduced musical excerpts by Rudra to their classes.

Finally, this paper considers their responses and reflects on the practice of Vedic Metal and relationship/s with local practice, popular music with the implications for education. More importantly, the feasibility and viability of challenging curricula is very much a function of the classroom teacher as agent in and of that change.

Introduction
In her chapter on curriculum discourse, Janet Barrett noted the calls for change in curricular practice along at least four areas:
1. Challenge longstanding views of musicianship and musical understanding including:
   a. More comprehensive views of musical behaviours
   b. A wider array of musical styles
   c. An integrated sense of music as an embodied experience, and
   d. Greater depths of musical understanding (Barrett, 2007, p. 149)
2. Situate the music curriculum as a dynamic social practice;
3. Relate developments in the music curriculum to broad arenas of educational policy that enable or inhibit change; and,
4. Foster views of teachers as primary agents of change in curriculum work (Barrett, 2007, pp. 147-161).

The recently revised General Music Programme for Singapore schools (MOE, 2008) identifies six objectives for engaging in music creating, performing and responding:

1. Sing and Play Melodic and Rhythmic Instruments Individually and in Groups
2. Create and Improvise Music
3. Describe and Evaluate Music through listening
4. Develop Understanding of Music Elements/Concepts
5. Discern and understand Music from and of various cultures and genres
6. Understand the role of Music in Daily Living

Prefacing this document is a preliminary handbook for school music coordinators which exhorts music teachers, through their coordinators to include popular music and technology in the implementation of the syllabus (MOE, 2007, pp. 1-2).

The coincidence of these recent developments in the General Music Programme learning objectives in Singapore and Barrett’s challenges in curriculum discourse are not fortuitous. Together, they reiterate an inclusion in the music curriculum for music as lived and living space. Such a coincidence would locate, if not already discover, the pervasive presence of popular musics; particularly their salience in contemporary discussions and practices. The multiple uses of popular culture and media by young people form a nexus in what Willis calls common culture which acts to:

...provide a wide range of symbolic resources...and are a powerful stimulant of the symbolic work and creativity of young people...young people have not only learnt the codes, but have learnt to play with interpreting the codes...they add to and develop new meanings from given ones (Willis as cited in Dimitriadis, 2009, p. 9).
It is Willis’ point about the use of instrumentality and media which emphasize the importance of nature, role and identity in and of performance. Barrett’s discussions, considered with reflections and assertions on the performative in popular music and culture, are germane to our argument because of the need to contextualize both aspects and situate them in the educational landscape in Singapore. These performative cultures, as embodied and lived experiences, make the musical experience as much a socio-cultural, socio-historical and socio-political experience if not engagement. Concomitantly, as living practices, these musical practices are performed and performative cultures (Dimitriadis, 2006). These musical practices are performed not only in the musical instrumental sense but also re/created by people through a variety of media in the authoring and authorising of their lives (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2007, p.333). There arises a need to reinforce such musical practices as living practices rather than artefacts of and about musics that have privileged specified persons, places and systems more than others based on unilaterally imposed criteria. Conversely, certain musical practices have not been considered because they are unable to satisfy these said criteria.

Barrett’s discussions, considered with reflections and assertions on the performative in popular music and culture, are germane to our argument because of the need to contextualize both aspects and situate them in the educational landscape in Singapore. But it is Willis’ point about instrumentality of young people which emphasises the importance of nature, role and identity in and of performance. Cultures involving performance, as embodied and lived experiences, make the musical experience as much a socio-cultural, socio-historical and socio-political experience if not engagement. Instrumentality targets resourcefulness rather than questions of re/sourcing in the permeability of such experiences. Musical practices are performed not only in the musical instrumental sense but also re/created by people through a variety of media in the authoring and authorising of their lives (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2007, p.333).

Musical practices as such, need to be presented as living practices rather than artefacts of and about musics that have privileged specified persons, places and systems more than others based on unilaterally imposed criteria. Ethnographic approaches enable certain musical practices in popular culture to be considered, especially, when modi operandi make both accessible and discernible their ‘curricula’.

Amidst this growing demand for an understanding of popular culture on its own merits and terms, is a more immediate and direct concern that the curriculum of musical practices of youth are being separated from that which seems to parade as school-based curriculum. As Dimitriadis points out,

these imperatives have left little room for educators to creatively...engage the complex lives of young people...a schism has grown between in-school and out-of-school culture (Dimitriadis, 2009, p. 8).

**Rudra**

I met Rudra on the internet while on a research grant to study local musical practices. Attempts to schedule interviews with all Rudra members at their meeting spaces proved difficult partly because of conflicting times, partly also fuelled by a sense of wariness. When their confidence was won and with bassist/vocalist K.Kathirasan acting as group spokesperson, I gained access to their songs, lyrics, clippings of the group from various media, as well as privately held materials. Information obtained through e-mail exchanges was corroborated by e-documentation available on Rudra’s website alongside information from other media.

It is with an understanding of the local, contemporary and lived and living curriculum and its place within school-based curriculum that we focus on local Extreme (Death) metal group Rudra who has emerged in public/ised performing space in Singapore. Three notable moments suffice; a tour of three US cities with partial sponsorship from the local composers and performers association (COMPASS); an outdoor performance at the Esplanade; and participation at the Rock On Singapore! Festival organised by the National Arts Council in 2005. We highlight their public emergence to suggest that local Extreme metal is no longer ‘unknown’ and underground practice but do not intend their public profiles as reason to legitimize their place in the music classroom.
Rudra was introduced as local Vedic musical practice to two student cohorts. The first was a cohort of undergraduate trainee teachers (July 2008) as part of a course they took called Musical Behaviours (NIE 2009a). The second involved four sessions with eight serving music teachers doing a course called Musical Practices (NIE 2009b) as a component of their part-time Masters in Education programme (January 2009). It is this second group we focus on because of their roles and immediacy of contact with the music classroom.

**Ruminations**

Of the eight, five were secondary and three primary school teachers. They were introduced to Rudra selections on *youtube* sites to enable ease of accessibility to these tracks. Focusing on specific musical excerpts, teachers were given a brief chronological account of the group, their interests, their initial albums, their compositional modus operandi, choice of musical and textual content alongside discussions and debates about their choice of form and content. Finally, three questions were given: How was Rudra received and read by all of you? Is there a place for Rudra in the GMP? Is there a place for Rudra in your teaching repertoire? In so doing, I hoped to elicit considered responses even as they had experienced Rudra for the first time, and mooted consideration of Vedic metal excerpts as classroom re/sources.

The reception of the teachers was instructive. Among the eight teachers in the class, three were of Indian ascription. Pradeep wondered if their music 

*would be as meaningful, without the lyrical incantations. It [Rudra’s music] appeals to me, because it represents their view of the Vedas, its depth and wisdom. I don’t think I would have appreciated it had Rudra chosen a different musical style (e.g Rap or Reggae) to express...the text.*

Pradeep’s reference to rap and reggae is also instructive of descriptions of music played in local Tamil clubbing scene which includes *Tamil songs* and *black music* [sic] (Tamotharan, 1999, p. 21). Moreover, musical styles in south Indian film have drawn influence from rap and reggae since the 1990s (Dairianathan, 2009, p.587). Nonetheless, Pradeep explained why he was/would not introduce it at an instant:

*I haven’t tried it [playing Rudra] in my music lessons. I need to spend time in creating a sound (excuse the pun) lesson plan around it. The intention is to look at it in detail...then incorporate into next year’s scheme of work. Where it will fit at this moment, I don’t know.*

Sharmini, a primary school teacher, recognised her drummer cousin Shivanand Palanisamy in *Rudra*; which was rather unexpected. She recalled being invited to a gig featuring another group Shivanand played with called *Shatriya* but did not know what to make of attending to or being cognisant of the soundscape. However,

*what I did some years back was to get pupils to listen to music from Shatriya and a classical piece of music and get them to draw out how they felt. It was to contrast heavy metal music and calm peaceful music.*

But in a more academic discussion of musical practice,

*Rudra is very different from the kinds of songs that I usually listen to...my interest was [also] because my cousin was in the band. Trying to understand where this group was coming from, their interest in death metal, Sanskrit etc., was especially interesting.*

As a primary school music teacher, she found herself in a rather difficult situation. Not that she would have had trouble identifying her raison d’etre for including Death metal because it would be well within her purview of developing an understanding of music elements and concepts as well as describing and evaluating music through listening – the third and fourth objectives of the General Music Programme. Rather her difficulty was fuelled by indirect concerns: I wonder if parents may disapprove of teaching young children this genre of music.
Her concerns parallel Dunbar-Hall’s predicament (2005, p.12) who, when teaching in an inner-city Sydney secondary school, had to entertain complaints from the priest from the Greek orthodox community for using rembetika to engage students of Greek ascription. For Sharmini, it was less about fulfilling educational objectives than it was about fearing the socio-cultural backlash from out-of-school objections to a musical practice long held for its notoriety by mere mention rather than substantiated fear.

Nevertheless, she referred again to her earlier experiment to elicit contrast in a primary school music lesson, in her case contrast between Shatriya and a classical (Euro-American art music) piece to draw out their responses on attending to both pieces of music. For her, it was less about cultivating an understanding between noisy and pleasant music as it was about fulfilling the fifth learning objective of the GMP syllabus, albeit superficially; exposure to different genres of music and being able to differentiate among them. But, there were also prospects and problems in attempting the third and fourth learning objectives:

*If we were to go in-depth into death metal, we will need to teach them about the vocals, the drumming etc… I don’t foresee Rudra having a place in the primary school GMP. I feel that the content is too heavy for primary school pupils… the whole notion of teaching them about death metal. I suppose it’s a different story with secondary school pupils…*

Other responses centred on how difficult this practice was on the ear – aurally and orally. Hoon Hong, a secondary school teacher of Chinese ascription, described his reception of the music when he first listened to Rudra’s tracks:

*I am open to all kinds of music, I am not repulsed by it… [but] their music also does not appeal to me. It’s not something I will say is nice, I like or I will recommend to others. I take a clinical view to it, but as there is nothing much I can identify with within their music, there is nothing I can enjoy about it too. I can understand it, but there’s neither emotional link nor appeal.*

Hoon Hong shared in class how he had introduced Linkin Park and Limp Bizkit (Nu-Metal) to his classes among other groups and genres. He could not identify with the music of Rudra, understood but could not connect with the music and ideas expressed by Rudra but stopped well before excluding it from the music classroom. The scepticism is both a revelation of an objective distance between the teacher and the subject matter at hand. In relation to its place in the General Music Programme, Hoon Hong suggested bringing in such repertoire

*as one of many existing musical styles, example of fusion between culture and musical style… they can be brought in briefly, taking into consideration the limited time we have for GMP.*

As a means of education through dissemination, Hoon Hong recommended playing Rudra’s music,

*as an assembly performance for exposure of different musical styles, to inject authenticity to school programmes by introducing contemporary music and groups but cautioned that they will need to be able to talk about their music and their musical journey and influences, and explain it at the student’s level. They should not just play and go.*

Hoon Hong believed that the value of making a work heard through public address systems had to go beyond auditory enticement, to develop an understanding of music elements and concepts as well as describing and evaluating music through listening – the third and fourth objectives of the General Music Programme.

Shahrril is a secondary school teacher of Muslim faith, but has had an active engagement in musical practice of local Teochew Opera troupes as well as choral and vocal repertory besides
musical practices of his faith. Some months later he shared details of his lesson where he used a track from Rudra in a music lesson built on ‘word-painting’:

The class I used Rudra’s music was a lesson in preparation for the ‘O’ Level Music coursework a Secondary four class. The initial part of the lesson revolved around discussions of romantic affectations regarding text-setting. Lieder were the discussed at length, and I also took the opportunity to share with the class Gerald Moore’s Lecture on the Art of accompaniment (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2YHb-sge3D&feature=related): I then selected twentieth century settings of sacred texts, particularly those that revolve around the sacred feminine, demonstrating to students the application modern concepts into old and ‘sacred’ texts. The first text was the Ave Maria by Igor Stravinsky as a means and point of ‘departure’. It was Neo-classical, full of tertiarian harmony and in a tonal setting that was familiar to my students (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A7kjq08b1ik&feature=fv): The next text was Nilakantha dhārāni or the Great Compassion Mantra. The central theme of the text revolves around the Bodhistava Avalokitesvara and associations with Guan Yin (the Goddess of Mercy). This recording featured a popular remix of the chant, and was used as a discussion of modern elements of music, juxtaposition of ancient and modern and effectiveness of bringing out the ‘appropriate’ feel of the music [or] Mantra (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0cRX8O74fc&feature=related). To end the lesson, I introduced Asura Mardhini, a text about Goddess Durga and her victory over evil. Rudra’s own rendition of the text was also available on Youtube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ4aFwbrSN0&feature=PlayList&p=27BB868697684395&index=44). After listening to the performance, I had a discussion of the effectiveness of bringing the meaning of the text into the music, and inevitably, there was a discussion of whether such applications were deemed ‘appropriate’. (Huh? Death Metal? using holy text? Eeeef(also)! After allowing my students to articulate their own views about the objectivity of Music and its symbiotic relationship to sociological structures (sacred, mundane, profane), I encouraged everyone to be open to explore boundaries and paradigms.

Through Rudra, Shahril was able to realise the third, fourth and fifth learning objectives of the General Music Programme, albeit at the upper secondary level.

Mable a secondary school teacher of Indian ascription conveyed the most reticence in being able to deal with Rudra because it was a

totally new genre for me to know much about but at least the session that we had opened up some space in me to accept this form of music. Whether there is a place for Rudra in the GMP is still very vague as to how we can bring it across. Are our lower secondary students too young to be able to accept this music? Should we introduce it [Rudra’s Music] to them or wait till they learn about it and share it with us when they are older?

I suggested to Mable Rudra’s recent public emergence as mitigation. Almost immediately Hoon Hong objected to using such credentials through governmental agencies. This would, in his view, reinforce censorship – in this case ‘validating’ an underground popular music practice because they were seen to have been screened as ‘safe’ local musical practice or worse exemplified nationalist and/or political agenda. Consequently, this might render Rudra and Vedic metal suspect local practice.

Some months later, Mable described her experiments with Rudra with her NT music classes:

I used Rudra as part of my teaching repertoire for my Secondary Three Normal Technical [NT]

level Music (http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2001/pr1092001_print.htm)...heavy metal as a
genre of music as required by NT music syllabus. I showed them the youtube videos of Rudra and the lyrics of the song as you had given us during the lessons [Aham Brahmasmi – I am Brahman http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arhWNeCjVWC]...and realised that
the students had lots to share about this genre. I discovered two boys from my class [who] formed a band with another boy from another class ...the boys were able to share with the whole class how they chose songs for practice and how they played chords and so on...I invited them to perform for a lunchtime concert...their performance was very well-received by the student audience.

By introducing Rudra to her class, Mable had not only fulfilled the third, fourth and fifth learning objectives but had 'unwittingly' brought about the sixth learning objective; the role of music in daily living. The additional bonus was discovering that two of her class were active practitioners of Metal music. By inviting them to do a concert for the school, she was actively engaged in the second objective which was about creative music-making. Whether or not the boys were playing ‘covers’ or ‘originals’ would have been supplanted by a more substantive point which was their direct and lived engagement with the musical and textual content of Extreme Metal musical practice.

**Concluding remarks**

The foregoing discussions demonstrate varying measures of permeability of Rudra’s introduction to the music classroom but such prospects are no longer speculative. Extreme metal – as teachers who brought them to the music classroom have discovered – is now a potential musical practice re/source for consideration of contemporary, local, and lived/living musical repertoire. Neither has this meant total porosity of a practice more notorious as a moniker than a musical reality. A discussion of possibilities of its inclusion in the classroom has garnered, if not generated, debate and discussion about its presence and application yet positive responses from the students themselves.

The challenge from such exposure on all fronts is how Extreme Metal may be negotiated as re/sources and practices of the informed and intuitive selves from short- through long-term engagements and creative projects in the music classroom. Such change challenges Vedic Metal – and by consequence, creators, makers and participants – music-making and meaning-making through music. Rudra’s songs indicate how much of popular music’s musical and textual endeavour is rooted in extra/musical modalities; as lived, living, performative, self-authored and authorised practice.

These developments return us to Janet Barrett’s calls to challenge longstanding views of musicianship and musical understanding; more comprehensive views of musical behaviours; and greater depths of musical understanding (Barrett, 2007, p. 149). If this is done effectively, Extreme metal – read Vedic metal – can be situated in the local music curriculum as a dynamic social practice. As our paper reports, Extreme Metal’s place/ment in the Singapore music classroom reinforces Barrett’s belief of classroom teachers as the catalysts of change.

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**About the authors**

Eugene Dairianathan is Associate Professor and Music Coordinator in the Visual & Performing Arts Academic Group at the National Institute of Education/Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests involve interdisciplinary perspectives of musics and their impact on music and education; particularly musical practices in Singapore, which he has been active in promoting through local and international publications and conference presentations.

Lum Chee Hoo is assistant professor in the Visual & Performing Arts Academic Group at the National Institute of Education/Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include children’s musical cultures and their shifting musical identities; the use of media and technology by children, in families, and in pedagogy; creativity and improvisation in children’s music; elementary music methods and world musics in education.