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The Challenges in Integrating Asian Choral Music in School Repertoire

Micayla Bellamy

Colorado State University

Abstract

Choral music serves as one of the tools in connecting students with cultures from around the world through tonal and accented languages, musical identity, and cultural context from its lyrics. In the twenty-first century, Asian cultures are not truly foreign to westerners. With the internet and social media, Asian music is accessible instantaneously. However, the primary Asian music the younger generation has been most exposed to is that of popular culture, particularly K-Pop and anime. This may result in false perceptions and limited knowledge of Asian cultures. While traditional Asian melodies and harmonies may sound foreign to “western” ears, they present the identity of nations in both sound and meaning. Unfortunately, choral music with Asian influences represents only a minuscule portion of the available repertoire. This is due to language and other challenges in available arrangements. This research, therefore, aims to study the challenges of secondary and collegiate students to learn and perform Asian choral music, as well as to seek out choral techniques and methods that conductors can apply when teaching Asian choral music. Through interviewing and direct observation, the challenges of learning, singing, and teaching Asian music can be clearly identified: these are language and diction, the meaning of the lyrics, singing technique, choral arrangement, and tuning. This research will benefit the field as it will suggest possible solutions for expanding the Asian choral repertoire with proper arrangements for accessibility. Students will be able to study music that provides a broader understanding of cultures that make up a large portion of the world’s population.

Keywords: Asian choral, Asian music, Choral teaching

In a nation composed of immigrants from around the world, it is unethical for school programs to ignore the integration of cultural contents in their education. While many school districts have choral programs from elementary through high school, some districts do not use music as a tool to teach cultural diversity. Music is a valuable tool that teaches many aspects of a

culture, yet current choral programs focus on the Western-European tradition. Including varied repertoire not only provides opportunities to teach musical concepts, it also allows students to feel represented and learn about cultures outside of their own.¹

According to a 2019 study by the Pew Research Center, immigrants from South and East Asia account for 27% of all immigrants in the United States, and the number of Asian immigrants each year continues to rise.² However, I found only 6–7% of choral music labeled “multicultural” on the music distributor JW Pepper’s website had Asian origins. Many of these are folk songs that contain significant errors, such as poor English transliterations and mistakes in the transcribed melody. Available Asian choral music has many flaws that prevent it from being fully accessible to Western-trained secondary school choirs. Evaluation criteria of this research will include five categories viewed through the lens of authenticity: background knowledge, arrangement, language, singing technique, and tuning. This paper will examine the challenges of producing authentic Asian choral music and provide potential solutions found through surveys of professional choral directors and secondary students, and data collection in class rehearsal through implemented instructional tactics with the repertoire.

Authenticity

The dilemmas in authenticity can be obvious or subtle. Obvious authenticity issues may come from the composer or arranger’s background (such as their ethnicity or professional studies and experiences). More subtle issues may arise through translations, language usage/

¹ Stefanie L. Cash, “The Use of World Music in High School Choral Classrooms,” doctoral dissertation (Florida State University, 2012), 5; accessed April 3, 2020, http://purl.flvc.org/fsu/fd/FSU_migr_etd-4761.

² Jynnah Radford, “Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, June 17, 2019), published June 17, 2019; <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>.

pronunciation, or even how the teacher presents the material. In “The School Choral Program Philosophy, Planning, Organizing, and Teaching,” Ben Allaway, 2008, presents a spectrum of cultural authenticity, including variables such as text origin, singers, and native dress (Figure 1). The most authentic performances occur in the original culture, and the least authentic occur when no attempt has been made to recreate that environment through cultural preparation.³ These dilemmas require research and action or risk misrepresenting the culture and perpetuating stereotypes, resulting in cultural appropriation.⁴

³ Michele Holt and James Jordan, *The school choral program philosophy, planning, organizing, and teaching* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2008) as cited in Stefanie L. Cash, “The Use of World Music in High School Choral Classrooms,” doctoral dissertation (Florida State University, 2012), 10; accessed April 3, 2020, http://purl.flvc.org/fsu/fd/FSU_migr_etd-4761.

⁴ Karen Howard, “Equity in Music Education: Cultural Appropriation Versus Cultural Appreciation—Understanding the Difference,” *Music Educators Journal* 106, no. 3 (2020): 68–70; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432119892926>.

Spectrum of Cultural Authenticity

	Most Authentic				Least Authentic	
	Purist		Fusion		Generalist	
Origin/composer of the song	Folk song	Indigenous composer	Indigenous arranger	Outside arranger steeped in the culture	Outside composer steeped in the culture	Outside composer with no training
Origin of text	From the folk tradition	Indigenous poet	Indigenous translator	Outside translator	Outside poet writing about or in voice of, with cultural preparation	Outside poet writing about or in voice of with no cultural preparation
Origin of performers	All performers are from the culture	Outside choir or director tours to home of the culture, studies traditions	Singers, musicians, dancers, and others from the culture or outsiders who have studied tradition help prepare, guide, research, perform with choir; resources such as films, local ethnic festivals, library research, pen pals, ethnic dinner party for choir and ethnic community leaders		No preparation	
	Singers: from the culture, not necessarily a choir		Choir from the culture	Choir from outside with indigenous conductor or soloists	Choir from outside that has visited the culture or done much preparation	Choir from outside with no cultural preparation
	Traditional instrumentalists: percussion and others played by members of the culture		Some effort made to use authentic instruments with some substitutions; a guest musician from the culture may be included		No instruments used, not even substitutes	
	Native dress (where applicable): full regalia made by people from the culture		Replicas made: some or all in traditional garb	Some effort made; accessories to choir apparel evoke culture		No effort to reflect culture in apparel
	Dance (where applicable): performed authentically by dancers from the culture		Indigenous dancer teaches outside dancers or some or all of the choir; guest dancers from culture perform with the choir		No effort to perform appropriate dance or movement	
	Audience participation (where applicable): people from the culture have been invited and are in the audience; audience is encouraged to participate when appropriate		No others from the ethnic community, but the audience is prepared to participate where appropriate		No audience movement	

Figure 1. *Spectrum of Cultural Authenticity* Allaway, 2008 (as cited in Cash, 2012)

Background knowledge and choral arrangement.

The Allaway grid (Figure 1, above) shows that the most authentic performances are written and sung by individuals from the culture. Composers and arrangers that were raised in the culture they are representing have first-hand knowledge about what a piece traditionally sounds like and means. Therefore, their pieces have the most authentic origins. Arrangers that are not native to the culture must put in considerable research to produce an accurate

representation of the song and the culture it comes from. Their arrangements should take into consideration notable features of the music beyond the text and melody, such as instrumentation and special rhythms, accents, or other expressive components. By identifying and highlighting these parts, the piece becomes more authentic and students' ability to connect to and understand the music is increased.⁵

Figure 1 does not give guidance on the background of the teacher. How does a teacher determine the proper way to present choral music, so their students gain musical and cultural significance from the piece? Through research and score study, teachers increase their ability to provide an authentic and meaningful experience for their students.

I was initially hesitant to use Audrey Snyder's arrangement of "*Ngam Sang Duan*" because she did not appear to have an authentic background. Her website biography does not mention her experiences in Asian music and culture, let alone Northern Thailand, where this piece originates.⁶ However, the score includes some details that show effort was made to be authentic. For example, the score includes notes on the context of traditional performance and suggests instruments to replace the piano part. Musically, the baritone line features an important rhythm that is typically played by the percussion in a Thai ensemble (Figure 2).⁷ Together, this showed the piece was an acceptable arrangement with culturally authentic value.

⁵ Hyesoo Yoo, "Multicultural Choral Music Pedagogy Based on the Facets Model." *Music Educators Journal* 104, no. 1 (2017): 36–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432117708602>.

⁶ Audrey Snyder, "Audrey Snyder," Audrey Snyder-About the Artist, accessed April 11, 2020. <http://audreysnyder.com/about-the-artist.html>.

⁷ Montri Pramote, "Shining Moon (Ngam Sang Duan)" (Chalerm Savetanant, lyrics), arr. by Audrey Snyder (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2016), 5.

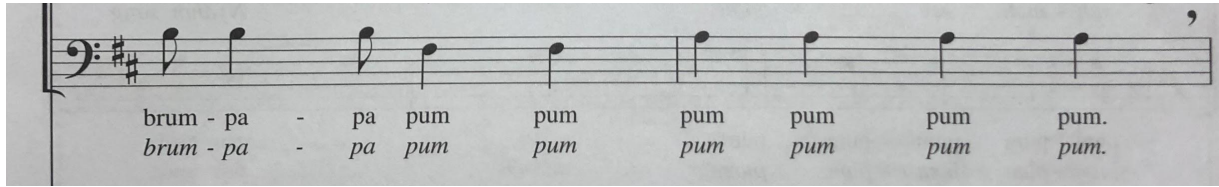


Figure 2. Pramote, *Shining Moon*, rhythmic pattern in baritone part.

In contrast to Snyder’s arrangement, “*Si Filemon*,” arranged by Jude B. Roldan, demonstrates the freedoms a native composer may exercise. since Roldan is a native to the Philippines, where this folk song originates. In the piece, he presents a fun melody with harmonic support on “la,” then creates a canon. Eventually, all voices sing the text of the song in harmony.⁸ The harmony is a reflection of Roldan’s Western music training, yet the piece still holds a significant amount of authenticity.

Overall, teachers should take time to research the backgrounds of not only the songs they present to their students, but also the arrangers. By doing so, they may discover details about the culture and music that were not obvious.

Language

For the most authentic study and performances, choral music should be performed in the original language with accurate and understandable text. The languages of Asia can provide difficult barriers for American students to overcome. Accurate text requires attention to three main areas: diction, tones, and syllabic and phrasal stress.

Some Asian languages use sounds that do not exist in English or use them in a different manner. For example, the Thai language uses many more consonant sounds than English,

⁸ Jude B. Roldan, “*Si Filemon*” (San Pedro: Pavane Publishing, 2017), 2–7.

including the nasal “ng” sound. In Thai, the “ng” consonant can be found at the beginning of words. One example of this is found in “Shining Moon (*Ngam Sang Duan*)” arranged by Audrey Snyder (Figure 3).⁹ The transliteration of the Thai text (“Nyahm”) shown in Figure 3 is not an accurate depiction of the sound that students should create while singing the text. I rehearsed this song with both of my advanced choral ensembles, composed of students from 9th–12th grade. Before teaching diction, I asked how they would pronounce “Nyahm.” The result was mostly “ni-yam” with two distinct syllables and “n” created with the tip of their tongue. To correct this mispronunciation, I applied two tactics. With one group, I wrote the IPA on a whiteboard: [ŋam]. The group practiced the [ŋ] “ng” sound in isolation before adding it to the beginning of the word. The benefit of this method was that the students had something visual to connect the sound to. Negatively, the IPA did not account for the tone the word is supposed to be spoken with. The second group learned the pronunciation from a native speaker by repeating words and phrases. While this was the more authentic method because Western practices were not superimposed, the students took longer to learn the accurate pronunciation. This may have been related to the foreign accent they heard and the tones they were deciphering simultaneously. Both groups required revision several times, and the second group eventually wrote visual cues in their score. One student was a member of both choirs and reflected that the combination of methods was more helpful than either alone.

⁹ Pramote, “Shining Moon (*Ngam Sang Duan*),” 6.

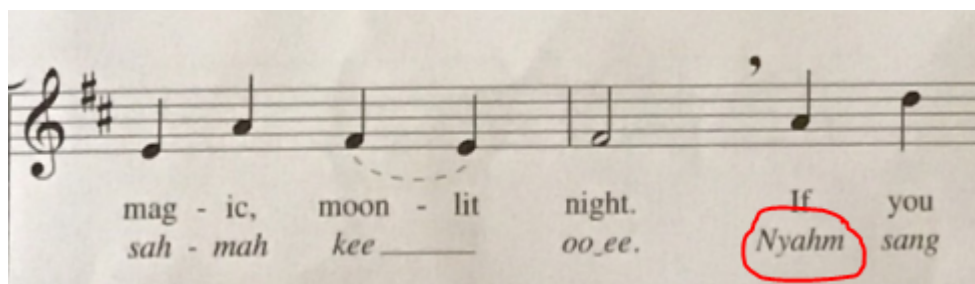


Figure 3. *Shining Moon*, inaccurate transliteration of “ngam.”

Tones are another aspect of language that should be addressed. The tonal languages of Asia present a difficult challenge for students to overcome. English is not a tonal language to the extent that some Asian languages are. In English, the tone is an inflection of meaning and emotion. In languages like Mandarin, Thai, and Vietnamese, the tone is essential to the meaning of a word. To the students that have never studied or critically listened to a tonal language, there is no difference between a high-tone “ma,” low-tone “ma,” or rising tone “ma.” Yet, these words have vastly different meanings (mother, scold, horse). Some Asian languages can have more than 9 tones.¹⁰ In choral arrangements, tones change the melody of the song to reflect a rise or fall in pitch. The tones are not always accurately notated. For example, “Shining Moon” places melodic changes as the result of tones on incorrect syllables (Figure 4).¹¹ As originally notated, the text took on a different meaning than the original folk song. Notice that the inaccurate tones also created inaccuracies with rhythm and text placement. By conferencing with a native Thai singer, we were able to adjust these mistakes. I then taught the section using two methods. The first method was the more authentic rote style. On a neutral syllable, “ah,” I sang the new rhythmic melody to the students. Once they mastered the rhythm, we applied the correct text. This method

¹⁰ John McWhorter, “The World’s Most Musical Languages,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, 2015), accessed March, 10, 2020; <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/11/tonal-languages-linguistics-mandarin/415701/>.

¹¹ Pramote, “Shining Moon (Ngam Sang Duan),” 4.

was very effective compared to the second method. In the second method, I asked students to write in their scores the corrections shown in Figure 4. This quickly became confusing for students. They struggled to follow their notes with additional writing around them and sang the incorrectly written melody. Thus, it took the class longer to learn the correct melody. When comparing outcomes, the authentic rote teaching had a significant advantage.

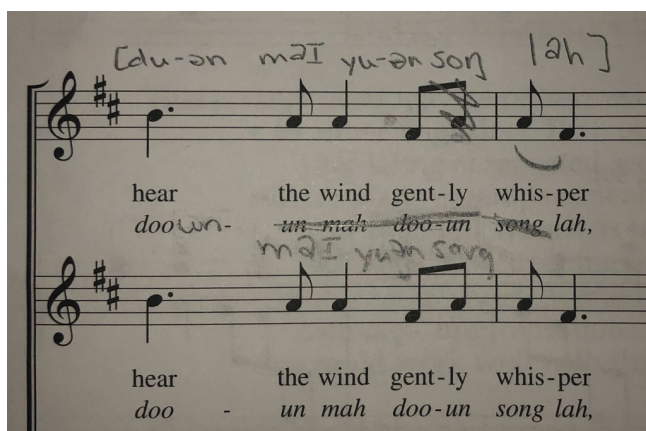


Figure 4. *Shining Moon*, written modifications to correct the wrong placement of tones.

The final language challenges are syllabic and phrasal stress. Stress is created by manipulating four aspects: pitch, duration, sound intensity (volume), and timbre. The importance of these four manipulatives varies from language to language.¹² Authentic language skills require producing stress according to the language's typical patterns. Otherwise, words and phrases may sound broken, jumpy, or incorrect entirely. My middle school ensemble studied "Doraji," a Korean folk song arranged by Yoojin Muhn. Korean is a smooth language with an open sound. This quality is artfully emphasized in this arrangement of the popular folk song. The score

¹² Chuandong Ma and Tan Lunhua. "Comparison on the Word Stress Patterns and Functions between English and Sichuan Dialect," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 03, no. 10 (2015): 33–34.

includes many markings for breaths and dynamics that show the language phrasing more clearly. In addition to the score, I played many recordings of the melody in other scenarios for students to compare and contrast the melody they learned. This active listening exercise supported the score markings, teaching students music literacy and cultural relevance. Furthermore, the score included a collection of tools to aid in text study (Figure 5). This figure provides the text transliteration, IPA, translation, and pronunciation notes.¹³

Text and IPA	Translation	Pronunciation Notes
Doraji, doraji, bec doraji, [doradʒi, doradʒi, bec doradʒi]	<i>Doraji, doraji, white doraji</i>	* The 's' in 'sim' and 'san-chun-e' should be pronounced with very soft 's.' However, the 'S' in 'ul-si-goo' should be pronounced with hard 's.'
sim* sim sanchune bec doraji, [sim sim sanchʌne bec doradʒi]	<i>In the deep mountains, white doraji</i>	
Han doo ppooriman** ke-uh-do [han du ppurman ke ʌ do]	<i>Though only one or two roots I pull</i>	** The 'pp' in 'ppoo-ri-man' should be uttered with double p as in Italian.
debagooni chul chul chul da numnunda [debʌɡʌni ʧʌl ʧʌl ʧʌl da nʌmnʌnda]	<i>slowly but surely my basket grows full.</i>	The vowels 'a', 'e', 'i', and 'u' are open, but 'o' is closed.
eheyo! eheyo! eheyo! [eheyo, eheyo, eheyo]	<i>ey-yoh hey!</i>	
e-yala nanda jihwaja jota [e-yala nanda dʒihwʌdʒʌ dʒota]	<i>ey-yah, so good</i>	
ulSi*goo jokoonā ne sarang a [ʌlsigu dʒokʌnʌ ne sarʌŋ ʌ]	<i>under your spell my heart melts away.</i>	

Figure 5. *Doraji* (Muhn, 2015).

Choral music arrangers, composers, and publishers need to make accurate text aids, such as International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), transliterations, and native speaker recordings, available for study. These tools allow educators and students to understand the structure of language and its connection to the music they are studying. Increased understanding allows for a more authentic performance and learning experience.

¹³ Yoojin Muhn, "Doraji" (San Pedro: Pavane Publishing, 2015), 2–12.

Singing technique

The bel canto style of Western singing has become the standard for most choral music. This style features tall, open vowels, crisp consonants, and the use of vibrato. Since it is already accessible and understood by students, directors erroneously apply the technique to the music of many cultures. The traditional singing styles of many Asian cultures are quite different. Developing students' understanding of the music requires as much authenticity as possible. Furthermore, allowing rehearsal and performance with traditional techniques enhances the students' and the audience's ability to connect with and understand the nuances of the represented culture.¹⁴

To achieve an Asian singing technique, I employed two strategies. The first, used in all of the choral classes, was to listen to recordings. While listening to recordings of the song in a traditional setting, students gained an understanding of the tone and timbre that is traditionally used. The high school ensembles listened to several recordings of Thai ensembles performing "*Ngam Sang Duan*." In each of the recordings, singers used a nasal timbre that is very different from the bel canto style. To encourage this tone from the students, we practiced vocal exercises that feature bright and forward-placed vowels, then applied them to the arrangement we were studying.

The second strategy was participating in a lesson with a singer from that style. The singer, currently living in Thailand, hosted a phone lesson with one of the advanced choirs. She noted that their nasal tone was appropriate but made adjustments to the text. In Thai music, the final consonants of some words, specifically those that end with a [k] sound, change to an [ŋ]

¹⁴ Hyesoo, "Multicultural Choral Music Pedagogy Based on the Facets Model," 36.

when sung. These details create a more authentic sound while educating students on cultural practices.

This is not to say all choral music from an Asian background must be sung with a nasal and/or straight-tone quality. Rather, the director must research traditional performances of the song and make a judgment based on the recordings and writings they find.

Tuning

The tuning systems of Asia can vary drastically from the accepted Western tuning system. Some systems have many more divisions than the Western scale, and others have fewer. Figure 6 shows a comparison of the Thai octave divisions to the Western scale using cents, based on a graphic by researcher David Morton. The Thai scale has 7 functionally equidistant tones, while the Western scale has 12.¹⁵ In choral arrangements for Western singers, this precision is disregarded and the melodies are molded to fit Western scales and tuning. While this adaptation makes the piece easier for Western singers, it also takes away from the nuance that the piece may have contained in its original form, thereby diminishing its authenticity.

¹⁵ David Morton, *The Traditional Music of Thailand* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 26. https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_Or9wc1mtxxgC/page/n41/mode/2up.

Comparison of Thai and Western Tuning Systems, by cents.

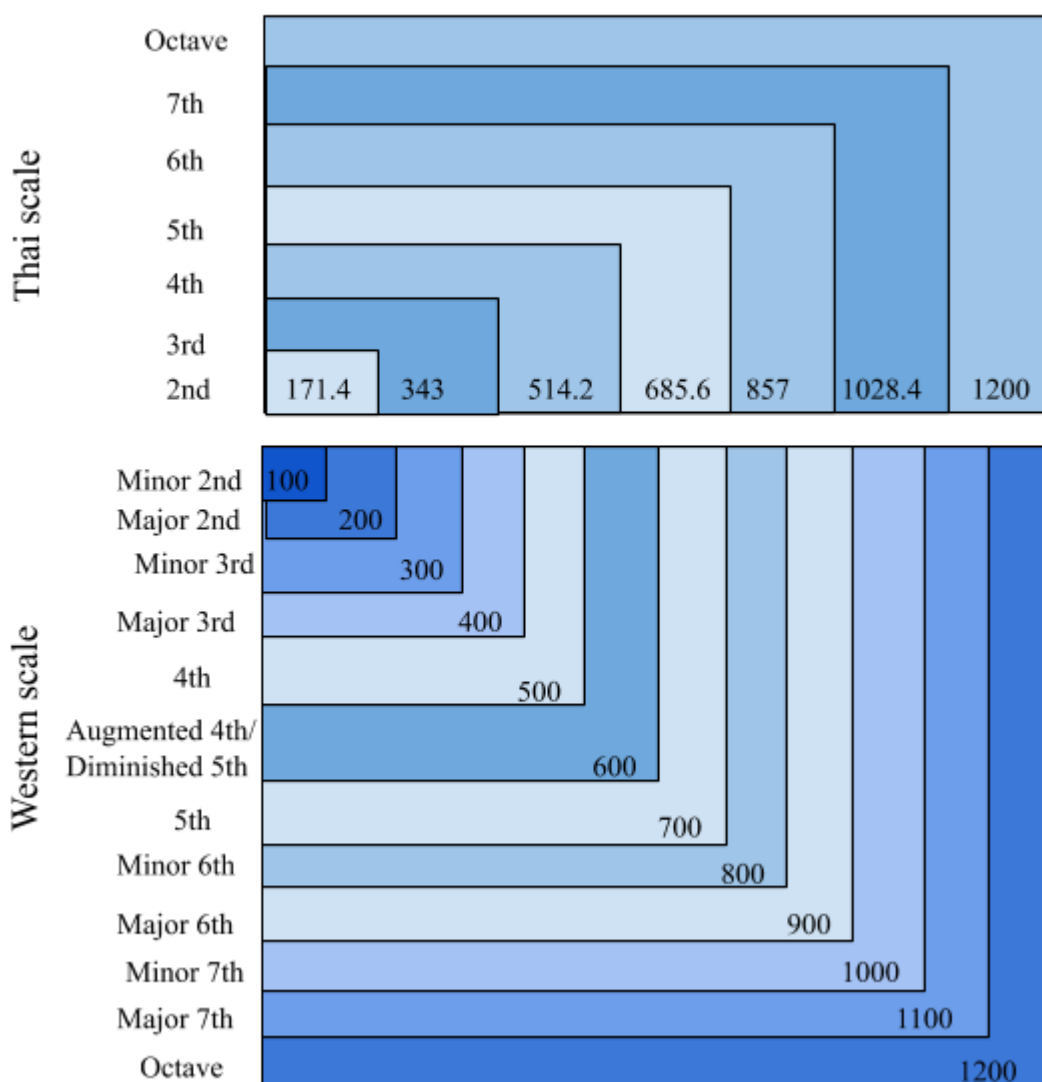


Figure 6. *Comparison of Thai and Western Tuning Systems.*

Training students to hear the nuanced difference in tuning is a task that requires several rehearsals and repetition. Two strategies were applied to class rehearsals to build this skill. First, students practiced in-class exercises that manipulated that ensembles' pitches. An example of this was asking all students to sing a unison pitch on a neutral vowel, like "ooh." The students

then pulsed the vowel while slightly raising their pitch over 8–12 beats. The goal of this was to divide a half-step, or semitone, into approximately 12 equal pitches. After students indicated they could hear and feel the pitch divisions, a new exercise began. The students again sang a unison “ooh,” then certain groups were instructed to slowly slide their pitch up to another while the fundamental group maintained the original pitch. To begin, this exercise used Western tuning, especially for the major and minor third intervals. Then, the students that shifted pitch were asked to adjust their pitch slightly down or up to achieve the approximately correct tuning according to Figure 6. These exercises put their aural skills into practice and were then applied to the repertoire.

The second technique, presented for many of the challenges in this paper, was to actively listen to many recordings. The intent of the exercise, in this case, was to compare tuning. Some students had built skills in identifying the pitches that were tuned differently than Western scales. Many, however, were distracted by the instrumental and vocal timbres. Active listening for tuning was not as effective as I had hoped in developing the students’ tuning skills.

Effectively applying the varied tuning in choral music is difficult to achieve, especially since much of choral music is accompanied by piano. Pianos cannot be easily adjusted for the many tuning systems of Asian music. Their Western origin and inflexibility negatively impact the authenticity of a performance. So, it is encouraged that traditional instruments from the culture are used when possible, especially when played by someone trained in its traditional techniques.¹⁶ This allows for flexibility in the singers’ tuning and teaches the singers and audience about instruments they may not experience otherwise.

¹⁶ Hyesoo, “Multicultural Choral Music Pedagogy Based on the Facets Model,” 36–37.

Conclusions

Learning music from a variety of cultures provides students with an enrichment that they cannot achieve with Western music alone. Asian choral music, in particular, offers insight into a large portion of the world's population through musical structure, technique, and context. Asian choral repertoire is limited to a handful of countries or groups that should be expanded to include a wider array of cultures. To provide authentic learning experiences for their students, teachers must conduct significant study into the cultural practices surrounding any piece of music they might choose. Publishers, composers and arrangers need to provide teachers with more accessible tools for teaching the language and context of Asian choral repertoire, including text guides, performance notes, and recordings of authentic performances.

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