

Monique Pong

In Conversation with Gigi Lam

EPTA UK trustee Gigi Lam chatted with Monique Pong to discuss her remarkable work in supporting music education for socio-economically disadvantaged children in Hong Kong. From concert pianist to entrepreneur, Monique is the founder of the El Sistema-inspired Hong Kong charity Music Children Foundation (MCF). She recently graduated with a Master of Music Education from the Royal College of Music in London. During our conversation, we explored how musicians like us can be agents of change in our communities.

Gigi Lam: Hello Monique. Can you tell us more about the Music Children Foundation?

Monique Pong: My sister Annike and I established the Music Children Foundation (MCF) in 2013, a charitable organisation officially registered in Hong Kong. The foundation's primary goal is to offer instrumental and choral music education to children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. When we started, we focused on introducing music to children in a specific district, prioritising those from underrepresented communities, including new immigrants, families residing in subdivided flats (a common challenge in space-constrained Hong Kong), grassroots families and ethnic minorities. In a city known for its wealth, access to cultural activities can be really difficult for those with limited financial means.

GL: You were a concert pianist, so how did you come up with the idea of setting up a charity foundation?



MCF offers free musical training to children in poor districts of Hong Kong

MP: I am a pianist and I always will be. But I did work as a school music teacher for a few years, which is a compulsory subject and is free to access in a school environment. I realised that music education i.e. instrumental lessons outside school is expensive, and many children miss out simply because they can't afford them. I tried to create various programmes to enrich my students' learning, but I strongly believe that all children should have the right to learn and enjoy music. I even invited my musician friends who worked in a professional orchestra to volunteer for my students. Then, after having children of my own, I became more empathetic with people, especially children, and felt a natural urge to care about them. Sham Shui Po, the area in Hong Kong with the highest concentration of low-income families, caught my attention. One day, while on a plane, I watched a documentary on El Sistema, a non-profit programme founded in 1975 in Venezuela that aims to create social change through music. Its collective learning approach, led by professional musicians volunteering their time, resonated with me and reminded me of my teaching and learning experiences in China when I was young. Teaching music without monetary reward is incredibly honourable.

GL: That's inspiring. What was your first step in setting up the charity?

MP: We started small, with an intake of twenty-seven children in the first year. Many of them faced behavioural challenges, including ADHD and dyslexia. They had enormous potential but lacked access to music education. We made do with limited space – each child had just a square foot to play their instruments. Even the toilet and kitchen were used for practice and rehearsals. I have to constantly make personal calls to families to remind them about lessons and conducted interviews to follow up with learning progress. Family involvement is crucial because they need to understand how music can transform their children's lives. It's a lifelong gift. Our goal is not to turn them into professional musicians; there are no exams or competitions. We simply want to offer them possibilities and help them open up to the world.

GL: Since then, MCF has grown significantly, right? I noticed the impressive list of sponsors on your website, including both local and multinational corporations.

MP: Yes, over the years we have been very fortunate to receive strong support from various corporate donors. Some have even offered free space for MCF, which is extraordinary given the high land prices in Hong Kong. I am absolutely thrilled that people are willing to invest in music education.



During COVID, one of the MCF students imagined herself playing on the stage while she didn't have a chance to hold a real musical instrument.



Over 215,000 people are still living in sub-divided flats in Hong Kong. (Statistic from Government in May 2024)

GL: I understand you went to the UK to further your studies two years ago. What prompted that decision?

MP: I believe as human beings, we need to engage in continuous learning to draw inspiration and create space for reflecting on our practices. My time



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I want to challenge the perception that music is solely a tool for social intervention; rather, it should be an integral part of everyone's life.



Circle Singing workshop opens a door for Monique to revamp programmes in collective musical events.



A fruitful year at the Royal College of Music, accomplishing a Master of Music Education degree

at the Royal College of Music has been immensely inspiring. It provided me with the opportunity to share the work of the Music Children Foundation (MCF) with colleagues from diverse international backgrounds. Through these interactions, I met musicians with whom I was able to connect, collaborate and develop new projects. In addition to these valuable connections, I visited numerous local organisations that share a vision similar to MCF's. These experiences reaffirmed my belief that the work I am doing is meaningful and impactful. Before my studies at RCM, I lacked a deep understanding of the theoretical knowledge that underpins my practice. The education I received has greatly helped me to critically examine and refine my approach, allowing me to think more deeply and strategically about how to continue and expand the mission of MCF.

GL: Is the music education landscape in the UK very different from that in Hong Kong? Many of our readers teach students who recently immigrated from Hong Kong, so this could be helpful.

MP: The music education systems in the UK and Hong Kong share some similarities, largely due to Hong Kong's history as a British colony. We have inherited many common practices, but during my placements in schools and music hubs in the UK, I observed a broader embrace of diverse pedagogies. In contrast, Hong Kong tends to emphasise a singular approach to learning and teaching, with a strong focus on examination and performance as the primary measures of success. This experience has led me to advocate for greater involvement of parents in the learning process, allowing them to experience the joy of music and its transformative power firsthand. I was also inspired by the emphasis on continuous professional development for teachers, which is crucial for maintaining and enhancing the quality of education.

During my time in the UK, I was introduced to circle singing, a practice that profoundly impacted me. Circle songs are guided, improvisational group performances that typically lack words but are rich in rhythm and harmony. This form of music-making celebrates spontaneous, in-the-moment creativity, as participants layer melodies, harmonies and rhythms. What struck me most was the flexibility it offers; participants can choose to engage actively or simply observe. This concept of allowing space for observation resonated with me, especially as we often put significant effort into encouraging children to participate in music-making. However, it's equally important to provide them with the freedom to step back and reflect when needed.

As a classically-trained musician, I was always taught to follow the score and aim for perfection. While my entrepreneurial and educator mindsets encourage innovation, I found it challenging to break away from this conventional approach during performances. Circle singing pushed me to step outside these self-imposed boundaries and practise thinking creatively. Like any art form, circle singing can achieve high levels of vocal and musical complexity, evolving organically to meet the needs and capacities of the group. This concept aligns perfectly with my beliefs about music education. While the Music Children Foundation (MCF) primarily focuses on classical music, that doesn't mean our approach should be rigid or one-dimensional. Instead, we should remain open to incorporating diverse methods and allowing music education to evolve in response to the needs of our students.

GL: You recently toured for EPTA China and met EPTA Chair Penelope Roskell. Can you tell us more about that meeting?

MP: Meeting Penelope and learning more about EPTA UK's work was wonderful. I know many members are interested in similar work but don't know where to start. I have been inspired by the work of Freire, particularly his pedagogy of the oppressed. He advocates for a fluid relationship between teachers and students, where both are active agents in constructing and reconstructing meaning in the classroom. We need to embrace uncertainty and keep trying, always thinking about how we can improve.

It would be great if students had more opportunities to attend live performances. At MCF, in addition to learning an instrument, students are taken to performances, which may be their first exposure to live music. Hong Kong has a number of symphonic orchestras, as well as many solo and ensemble recitals, so we are supporting the local music scene while growing the future musicians. Graduates of the programme are also encouraged to return and mentor younger students, creating a wonderful continuity.

GL: This is so inspiring. What lessons do you think EPTA UK piano teachers can learn from your experiences with MCF?

MP: Every interaction we have, no matter how small, has the potential to create a ripple effect. As musicians and music educators, we are doing remarkable and powerful work. Trust yourself and start small – keep sharing your projects, and you never know what opportunities might arise. No



UBOX – an imaginative project which combines live music and visual arts

course or programme can fully prepare a classically-trained musician to become an entrepreneur or run a charity organisation. Those passionate about helping others through music should seek out like-minded individuals who share their vision. Begin with a small mission and a modest group of beneficiaries. I encourage teachers to stay informed about new methodologies and emerging genres of music. Be creative and proactive. MCF also welcomes EPTA UK piano teachers to observe our teaching when visiting Hong Kong. Let us know when you're in town.

GL: Thank you, Monique, for sharing your work. What are your plans moving forward?

MP: We will be launching a partnership with ABRSM to further expand our efforts in widening participation and to help Hong Kong teachers gain a deeper understanding of the UK music education landscape. Additionally, I will be introducing a project called UBOX, an immersive environment for live music and visual arts. This initiative is not only for those in financial need but is open to everyone. I want to challenge the perception that music is solely a tool for social intervention; rather, it should be an integral part of everyone's life. I will continue to advocate for music as a lifelong gift, and the MCF is committed to providing a crucial access point for the communities we serve. As a musician-educator, I encourage us to keep challenging norms and breaking boundaries, both individually and collectively, so that we can empower music by extension to families and communities, unite people as a powerful force for change.