

# Life Enriching Music Enriching Life: A Short Tour with the Millennium Orchestra

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Figure 1: The Millennium Orchestra in performance. All photographs courtesy of author.

## Introduction

For as long as I can remember, my mother has been learning and playing the *gu zheng*, a 21-string Chinese zither, one of the most popular and recognizable Chinese instruments today. Despite many relocations, from Hong Kong to Canada, back to Hong Kong, and finally back to Canada, the *gu zheng* never left my mother's side.

In 2014, she joined the Millennium Orchestra, a community senior Chinese orchestra based in Mississauga, Ontario. In May 2016, I had the opportunity to participate as a member of the orchestra on a tour to Calgary, as a substitute keyboard player, providing bass and chordal accompaniment. Although I had participated in the orchestra's annual concert last year, this trip gave me a chance to connect with its members on a more personal and social level, and to

experience first-hand the various practices and goals of this unique music community. After the trip, and upon deciding I would like to write about my experience of it for *CFM*, I met with Bill Ko, the orchestra's conductor and founder, to learn more about the history, values, and aspirations for the orchestra.

## Background

The Millennium Orchestra was founded in 2008 by Bill Ko, a former conductor for numerous orchestras in Hong Kong, and also an author, calligrapher, and artist. The Millennium Orchestra evolved out of *erhu* classes that Ko was asked to teach at the Yee Hong Geriatric Centre in Mississauga in 2007. As Ko recounted during our conversation, he had no intention of forming an orchestra when he started teaching, as almost all of his students had no experience with the

erhu (or any other instrument). Despite the recreational nature of the classes, the students were dedicated and enthusiastic. When Ko took a three-month sick leave in 2007 due to a stroke, the students continued to meet regularly, although, as members admitted afterwards, the practices were sustained more through socializing and snack-sharing than through practising or working towards a musical goal. Still, Ko noted that students continued to attend classes consistently, and some seemed happy just to hold their instrument.

The turning point for Ko came in 2008, when the class received an invitation to perform at Yee Hong's annual Christmas event. To diversify the instrumentation for the performance, Ko and the students invited musical friends from other social circles (such as *mahjong* games or sports) to join the ensemble. As a result, percussion, *yangqin*, *pipa*, and non-Chinese instruments such as keyboard, guitar, and saxophone were added to the orchestra for its Christmas program, which was enthusiastically received. The performance also marked the first time Ko arranged pieces such as "Jingle Bells" and "Silent Night" with multiple parts, which the students performed with a great sense of accomplishment. Following the popularity of the Christmas program, and the students' positive response to the performance, Ko decided to establish a performing orchestra. He realized that the best way to motivate the members was to put them on stage, which would compel them to practise more seriously. In fact, performance opportunities became Ko's main strategy for presenting members with new challenges and for motivating them to continue to develop their skills. The stage was the ideal site for artistic growth, and to be able to perform familiar yet challenging repertoire for their family, fellow retirees, and other members of the community would give them a sense of accomplishment and of being seen as valuable, active members of society. Since 2008, the orchestra has performed numerous community and charity events, including events of all sizes for fellow retirees at Yee Hong. Since 2013, the orchestra has produced an annual, ticketed concert in a formal theatre space.



**Figure 2: The Millennium Orchestra.**

The Millennium Orchestra's repertoire consists of classical Chinese music, from ancient melodies to folk tunes and festival pieces, as well as orchestral arrangements of contemporary Chinese popular tunes from Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan. Occasionally, members of Yee Hong's singing group will join their performances (as was the case in Calgary), and, as mentioned above, Ko will also compose arrangements of popular non-Chinese pieces for specific occasions, such as Christmas or New Year's tunes.

### **The Millennium Orchestra (and me) in Calgary**

When I first arrived in Calgary with my mother and the orchestra, I knew very little about the backgrounds of its members. Because most of us stayed in the same hotel, I had a chance to have breakfast with them and drive them to rehearsals and performances. Throughout the trip, it was during group meals and car rides that I got to know the members on a personal level. What immediately appealed to me was the diversity of backgrounds, careers, and identities represented in the orchestra, ranging from accountants, engineers, and nuclear physicists, to professors, teachers, post office workers, grandmothers, and housewives. I also heard stories of migration and hardship, as one of the members first emigrated from Hong Kong to Calgary before moving to Toronto. She reminisced about the streets of Calgary's Chinatown as we drove into the neighbourhood to perform at a seniors' home.

I was also curious about the members' musical backgrounds and the circumstances that led them into the orchestra. As mentioned above, most, if not all, of Ko's early erhu students had little to no experience in any musical instrument. Members that joined at the formation of the orchestra either had some previous experience, and/or had been away from an instrument for many years. The saxophone player in the orchestra began taking lessons because his son was learning saxophone. Two other members – a housewife and a retired accountant – both mentioned to me that playing an instrument has helped them connect with their children, who are pursuing musical careers or university studies. I was also moved by the openness and kindness with which Ko accepted members of various skill levels – as long as they were willing to learn and participate, and could benefit from the experience of making music with others, they were welcome into the orchestra. One of the members on tour was a young man with intellectual disability named Frankie, who was given simple percussion parts. He performed in every song and was treated like every other member.

Despite their age, and the community nature of the orchestra, I learned that many members did not



stay content at playing their main instrument. Lai, currently the oldest member of the orchestra at 80 years old, began learning the recorder when the orchestra formed in 2008, because Ko realized there were no woodwinds in the ensemble. She later learned the *dizi* (transverse bamboo flute) from another member, and recently began learning the *xiao* (vertical bamboo flute) as well as keyboard. The second-oldest member, Sun Sun, plays the erhu, but has been taking lessons on the *liuqin* (small plucked instrument). Teacher Bao, the orchestra's leader, started as an erhu student, but later switched to percussion, and is currently learning the gu zheng. Even my mother, who has had a lifelong love affair with the gu zheng, has recently begun learning the *zhongruan* (another plucked instrument). Other members, according to my mother, have picked up a second instrument and are learning on their own. And because

many are taking lessons from other orchestra members (or from Ko), learning a new instrument has never been more accessible, and seems as much a musical undertaking as it is yet another opportunity for social interaction and connection.

As we performed in Calgary the week before Mother's Day, our final group dinner was a celebration of family and motherly sentiments. We celebrated Mother's Day with a group singalong of a popular Chinese song, "Mothers are the Greatest in the World", and also Frankie's birthday. The orchestra's principal dizi player, Calvin, and percussionist, Peter, both of whom had vocal training in earlier years, showed off their baritone vocals during the dinner while I accompanied them on keyboard. The meal was joyous, high-spirited, participatory, tolerant, bonding, and full of positive energy.



**Figure 3: Heidi with MO members, Calgary.**

At the end of the tour, I realized that my deepest impressions and fondest memories of this trip were not of the music performances themselves, but of the many social episodes that fully exemplified the ideo-

logies and goals of what ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino has described as "participatory music-making", as distinguished from what he calls "presentational music-making", embodied in the world of

“professional”, full-time performing musicians and ensembles (2008: 23-65). Some of the features that Turino articulated are an emphasis on social interaction amongst participants; a proper balance between artistic challenges and the skill level of the participants; a priority placed on “encouraging people to join in regardless of the quality of their contributions”; and the facilitation of the music-making experience as a life-enriching activity (2008: 35).

Speaking to Ko about his vision and goals for the orchestra further substantiated my impressions of what the Millennium Orchestra offers and means to its members. At the same time, Ko’s insistence on providing the orchestra with performance opportunities makes this orchestra a fascinating case study of a primarily participatory musical community whose success and sustenance is built on the challenges brought about by the prospects of presentational opportunities.

#### **Bill Ko and the Heart of the Millennium Orchestra**

In addition to understanding the history and formation of the Millennium Orchestra, my conversation with Ko after the Calgary trip revealed a number of interesting points around his vision and goals for the orchestra, as well as the challenges in leading such an ensemble. One of the most poignant points on his leadership role is his emphasis on the “sideline work” that needs to be done. Emotional support, respect, and friendship were his main themes in vision and in practice. He pointed out that emotional support is just as important as musical support, and that to provide the right kind of support at the right time, especially on stage, has been crucial. He pointed out the balance that needs to be made between respecting his “elders” (as many members are older than he is), a highly moralized value in Chinese culture, and exerting enough authority to be able to successfully conduct the ensemble. Ko’s underlying vision for the orchestra, which he articulated to me, as well as in a short documentary made by Yee Hong for their 2016 fundraising Telethon program, is to endow its members with a sense of purpose through participating in communal music-making. He seeks to elevate their sense of value of life during these twilight years, by offering them a space for music-making, skill development, social connection, and sharing of their accomplishments.

Through my brief experience with the Millennium Orchestra in Calgary, I saw how community-based, participatory music-making can enrich the lives of individuals in profound ways. At the same time, the trip has taught me how life itself – the individuals you play with, their histories, and the lives that

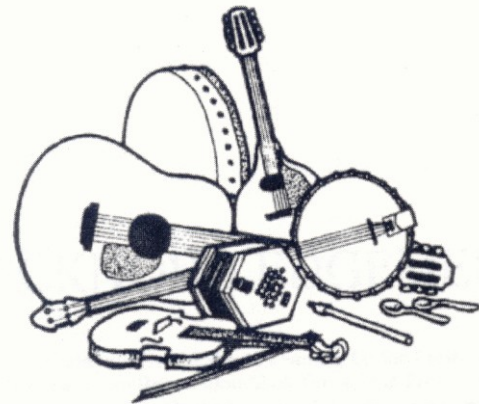
they’ve lived – can in turn enrich one’s musical experience.

#### **References**

Turino, Thomas. 2008. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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