

MUSIC SYLLABUSES

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AVAILABLE FROM SEPTEMBER 2011 - Piano 2012-2014

SRI LANKA - the Pearl of the Indian Ocean

The unique cultural vibrancy of Sri Lanka is born of many immigrant populations, and in recent years European culture has become increasingly influential. A number of international examinations are now offered, including Trinity Guildhall. Maneesha Foneska (Perera) entered candidates for Trinity Drama & Speech exams in Sri Lanka and when she immigrated to New Zealand last year she was eager to make contact with our New Zealand office. Subsequently she spoke with Cathy Martin about Performing Arts education in her country.

CM: Tell us how East meets West in Sri Lankan Performing Arts.

MF: Performing Arts Education in Sri Lanka originated primarily through appreciation of Sri Lankan Culture. However with the arrival of the Europeans and urbanisation, Sri Lankans began to view Performing Arts as a more serious and secular art. Currently Performing Arts brings together elements of the early folk rituals, dance, music and drama traditions with the western theatre traditions and stage style, thus creating a new genre of art which appeals to a worldwide audience.

CM: How has this impacted on education?

MF: Initially, Wendy Whatmore, the founder of Wendy Whatmore Academy and one of the first to obtain FTCL in Far East Asia in 1947, sent her pupils for exams conducted by the Trinity College of Music and Speech, London. This attracted many Private and Government Schools to incorporate Performing Arts into their school curriculum. Currently pupils are encouraged to take a Performing Arts subject for Higher Studies. The majority of teachers are London qualified but are also trained in the special methods devised for teaching Sri Lankan students. Both teachers and pupils have the opportunity to witness staging of renowned performances by touring artists. Local groups also perform foreign productions for learning and the pleasure of audiences.

CM: This sounds exciting but it can't be easy to teach Drama & Speech in English when English is not the first language.

MF: The duty of the Performing Arts teacher is twofold; that of teaching the English language in addition to the syllabus. Parents are extremely keen on exposing their children to the Performing Arts, however the teacher needs to explain the concept and purpose of a Drama & Speech class as they tend to mistake it for an "English" class. The students need an overall development and teachers struggle to achieve this, as an hourly class per week is not sufficient for most students. The exposure to outside influences for teachers is limited to research or self help. Therefore, workshops of an international standard are of paramount importance to the teachers to produce finer results.

CM: What kinds of obstacles do the students themselves have to overcome?

MF: Students come from predominantly Sinhalese or Tamil speaking backgrounds. As a result grasping the



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language is the greatest difficulty to overcome. The vast difference between the fees charged by the locally based exam board as opposed to an international board such as Trinity deprives talented students of being assessed against international benchmarks. Sri Lanka is simply not as rich as New Zealand! Some parents do not approve certain aspects of the modern Drama & Speech subjects due to their cultural restrictions; this in turn discourages the student.

CM: Do you think standards are rising?

MF: Standards are without a doubt increasing among teachers and students. Sri Lanka has a number of Performing Arts centres which are affiliated to prominent global institutes. Teachers are enthusiastic about gaining further qualifications in order to be able to impart their knowledge clearly and concisely. Students are required to meet global standards at examinations regardless of their cultural differences in order to achieve comprehensive recognition.

CM: Lastly, what did you gain from teaching Drama & Speech in Sri Lanka?

MF: Working with students from multi-cultural backgrounds who need an overall development in all areas of the subject required meticulous work in preparing case studies, workshops and lesson plans. All these meant extensive research and it has made me an efficient and enthusiastic teacher.