Private Music lessons in Hong Kong: A Case Study

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Introduction

Because of its unique history as an entrepot and trade centre, Hong Kong is a vibrant city immersed in the capitalist traditions and well known for its status as a regional hub in trade, commerce, investment activities. With its claims as an “international city”, the Government has recently felt the need to “upgrade” its cultural facilities, which culminates in its effort to develop the West Kowloon Cultural District as if “world class” cultural venue would automatically give us “world class” status. On the other hand, there are often complaints from the arts sector that the arts has long received insufficient attention from the Government. The only “support” consists of the miserly funding schemes administered by the Arts Development Council; efforts in the education system by the Government to promote art stops at music and art classes which are discontinued after Form 3. Even those classes are more aiming at basic skills than opening the students’ eyes to the world of art and music. Local artists find little audience in Hong Kong and most of them depend upon the piecemeal funding handed out by the Arts Development Council for survival. Artists are forced to adopt “bohemian” lifestyles by the meager salaries they receive. Out of this miserable picture however, classical musicians enjoy a special status; by teaching alone they could command salaries which are the equivalent of professionals in Hong Kong which are often 20 times the salary of the average waiter, salesperson or manual labourer. Why is this the case? This is a question which had hung above my head for so long that I would like to make use of this opportunity to find an answer.
The major difficulty in conducting this research project (or writing this research paper) is the lack of statistics. The time constraints render it impractical to conduct anything more than the most rudimentary survey and as a result, most of the observations come from my personal experience gained during the 10-odd years of being a part-time private piano teacher.

**What is art?**

Victoria Alexander, the author of “Sociology of the Arts”, categorizes arts as such: (1) fine arts, or high arts, (2) popular arts and (3) folk arts¹.

No one has ever been successful in his/her attempt to crystallize the concept of “art” and to arrive at a conclusive definition of art, or come up with a set of workable criteria to determine what is or is not art. It is simply not possible to come up with an objective and conclusive definition of art or any set of criteria capable of filtering “true art” from the “false art” or one that would be operative in differentiating between what is or is not art. One way of viewing the problem would be to adopt a power perspective – such that art would be defined as something that the properly qualified, authoritative person or persons would say has enough artistic merit to constitute art (or who is or is not an artist)².

Major categories of fine arts would include: visual arts (painting, sculpture, calligraphy etc), classical music, drama, dance, literature etc. Even the boundaries of “fine arts” cannot precisely be drawn – here we are faced with a problem of attempting to talk about something which we cannot define – but for the purposes of this paper this

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² See, for example Bourdieu’s work “The Field of Cultural Production”, chapter 1.
question must be bypassed and we will adopt the above categories (visual arts, music, drama, dance, literature) as a sufficient working classification for the purposes of this paper.

Historically the appreciation of fine arts has been confined to the group of “elites” whether in Western society or in China, the reason being that training, or “taste”, without which one can at best only achieve a superficial understanding or appreciation of art, is something that can only be acquired through time – a luxury that only the privileged class can afford. Over time the fine arts, or high arts, have come to be afforded a status of legitimacy which signifies distinction and taste etc.

*Artist vs. teacher*

Alexander in her book “Sociology of the arts” has the following to say about the career of artists in general:

“Social scientists know two things about artists. First, the artistic career is risky (Menger, 1999). The odds of becoming even a modest success are low… Furthermore, success is precarious. “Making it” presages fading away. Finding a publisher or dealer, getting a grant, or selling a song is a step forward, but artists always worry whether their most recent success might be their last…

The second thing we can say for sure about artistic careers is that they are poorly paid. This goes without saying for the “failed artists” with no successes, but it is also true for most successful artists…
As a result, most artists must rely on second jobs, or on employed spouses or partners for their subsistence. Others draw on unemployment insurance of the dole…

… most artists do not make a living from their art work, and commonly take a “day job” to support themselves in between gigs or as an ongoing supplement to their income. Some artists are able to find an arts-related job, often in the teaching professions, while others rely on more flexible supplemental work, as in the archetypical example of the waiter who is waiting to make it big."³

It seems that when the need arises, artists have to turn to supplementary occupation for survival. In the case of Hong Kong it is teaching which most classical musicians turn to as a source of supplementary, or even major source of, income.

Music education in Hong Kong

History

Popularization of western classical music as a hobby and as extra-curricular activities in school or outside school only began in the 1980s. Since the 1980s at least two generations of students have passed through the education system; slowly and gradually, as the economy develops and living standard improves, more and more parents are able to afford music education for their children and we have seen great increases in the number of instrumental students in the last 2 decades.

Many secondary schools, sometimes even primary schools, nowadays have their own

Chinese orchestra, wind band, chamber orchestra or even full-size orchestra with enough players or parts to perform a full-blown symphonic work. Students meet annually in the Hong Kong Schools Music Festival, an inter-school competition which is considered an important event, to test out their skills with the goal of championing against their rivals. The best schools in terms of academic results would consider themselves inferior if they do not also have the best orchestras.

**Music instruction today**

The following table shows the number of persons employed in the art industry in Hong Kong as of 2009:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of establishments</th>
<th>Number of persons engaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performing arts activities</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>1880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative artists, musicians and writers</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of establishments</th>
<th>Number of persons engaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Music instruction</td>
<td>1,160</td>
<td>4,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance instruction</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting instruction</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sculpture instruction</td>
<td>Less than 10</td>
<td>Less than 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calligraphy instruction</td>
<td>Less than 10</td>
<td>Less than 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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4 Statistical Department, *Number of establishments, persons engaged and vacancies (other than those in the Civil Service) analysed by industry sub-class, 2009 Edition* (released on 20 Sep 2010).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photography instruction</th>
<th>Less than 10</th>
<th>Less than 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General fine arts and performing arts schools (except academic)</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presumably these figures represent the number of people employed in the fine arts industry who have roles directly related to the production or instruction of such arts in Hong Kong. (It is unclear whether the last group includes those in administrative roles.) However, the above figures do not include “independent artists”\(^5\). Presumably it also does not cover private teachers (who are self-employed), who in fact constitute a significant part of the population currently engaging in music instruction. This is probably caused by the fact that many private teachers (there are no concrete figures or reliable statistics but the author believes the majority) have not registered with the Business Registration Office as self-employed persons.

We can see that 4,120 people are employed in the music instruction sector i.e. by private or public institutions. This number already far exceeds those in other sectors (it is not known why musicians are not counted as part of those engaging in performing arts activities, since music is widely, if not universally, recognized as one of the performing arts). The number of people in private teaching practice may well be higher.

**Market structure**

In Hong Kong, the music instruction sector (excluding full-time schools and the tertiary institutions) comprises chiefly the following institutions or individuals:

1. Commercially run music studios or centres which offer group lessons or one-to-one

\(^5\) *Ibid* (see Notes).
lessons in instrumental playing or music theory to the public. Admission is normally gained simply by paying the prescribed fee, and occasionally also by meeting some basic requirement, such as possession of a certificate of a certain grade. These studios or centres employ teachers on a full-time or part-time basis. A large number of those employed in the music instruction industry would be teachers working for (or with) these studios/centres either as employee or as independent contractors (i.e. on a split-fee basis with no employment relationship between them).

2. Private teachers who either teach in their own chosen venue, such as home or teaching studio, or at the home of the students. Private teachers can vary greatly in their fees charged, expertise and the level of qualification attained. Private teachers mostly offer one-to-one lessons in instrumental playing or in music theory, although occasionally small group classes are also possible.

3. Institutions which offer group classes and/or one-to-one lessons, e.g. the Junior Music Programme of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (香港演藝學院青少年音樂課程), the Hong Kong International Institute of Music (香港國際音樂學校), the Hong Kong Music Institute (香港音樂專科學校) etc.

Today the field of musical instruments learning is highly institutionalized, with a number of examination boards in various countries holding international annual exams in instrument playing and teaching. Coming from the United Kingdom are the

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6 Some of the larger centres (e.g. Tom Lee Music, Parsons Music) offer group classes, mostly for young children, as preparatory course – children are introduced to music and grounded with fundamental concepts to prepare them for later instrumental training.
Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), Trinity Guildhall, an examination board jointly established by the Trinity College London and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and the London College of Music (LCM), the most recent examination board and the least popular one among the three. There is also available the Central Conservatory of Music Practical Examination (中央音樂學院音樂水平等級術科考試) and the Associated Board of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (中國上海音樂學院試), both recent additions that have only been available in Hong Kong since less than two decades ago.

All of the above examination boards provide graded examinations, with grade one being the most elementary grade. The ABRSM, Trinity Guildhall and LCM adopt a similar structure; they offer 8 different grades and beyond grade 8, 3 or 4 separate levels of diploma examinations leading up to the fellowship diploma, the ultimate and highest level that could be attained by candidates. The Central Conservatory examination board offer a purely graded examination structure with 10 grades while and the Shanghai Conservatory offers 10 grades and 3 levels of performance diplomas.

Thus there is a clear path of progress for learners with diverse choices at each level. We will see that this structure and framework has an important part to play in the rise of classical music education in Hong Kong.

Regulation

Music education in the private sector is very loosely regulated. While there are organizations open to teachers which recruit members, such as the Hong Kong Piano/Electone Teachers' Circle (香港鋼琴/電子琴導師協會) and the Hong Kong Music Tutor’s Union (香港音樂導師同盟), these are in fact organizations affiliated to the big
music retailer in Hong Kong (to Tom Lee Music and Parsons Music respectively) and not purely non-profit organizations aimed at uniting music teachers. There are no professional regulatory bodies in Hong Kong which are empowered to qualify teachers, nor are there any qualifications that one has to attain before being “properly” qualified. In fact anyone having (or posing to have) the requisite knowledge and skills can be a teacher and start recruiting students. It is not uncommon for someone highly skilled and yet without any “proper qualification” to become a successful teacher. However, the commonly accepted minimum level attained would be grade 8 of any one of the major examination boards. While someone not having a grade 8 certificate or the equivalent level of competence may decide to take on beginners, this is usually frowned upon by one’s peers i.e. other teachers.

Fees

The fees that could be commanded by teachers can vary significantly, from around $150 per hour to over $2,000 per hour which only teachers having a “star” status could charge. Teachers usually adopt a progressive scale of fees which increases with a student’s level of competence. A typical fee scale of a private music studio would be as follows (note the location of the studio also matters; fees tend to be higher in areas with higher land value because of the rent factor and the higher income level):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Fees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
It also depends on the location of the lessons – a teacher would charge more if he/she has to travel to a student’s home. A teacher with higher qualifications would command higher fees. While the hourly rate of someone with only grade 8 qualification would typically range from around $150 to $200, the “market rate” of a teacher with a DipABRSM (the first-level diploma awarded by the ABRSM) or the ATCL (the Associate level, roughly equivalent to the DipABRSM, awarded by Trinity Guildhall) would be around $300 per hour. For someone with a Licenciate diploma awarded by the ABRSM or Trinity Guildhall or someone who is an undergraduate music student in one of the three institutions recognized as best in Hong Kong, i.e. the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Baptist University of Hong Kong, the typical hourly rate would be around $400.

Given that the 90th percentile in the overall hourly rate distribution in Hong Kong in the second quarter of 2009 is $171.8 (i.e. 90% of the working population which is 2,498,800 people was earning hourly wages lower than this figure)\(^7\), the above hourly wages for music teachers might seem to be unreasonably high. The starting monthly

\(^7\) Statistical Department, *Overall Hourly Rate Distribution, Second Quarter 2009*, released on 18 March 2010.
salary of a resident doctor employed in the public health service in 2010 is $42,175\textsuperscript{8}; assuming that he/she works 60 hours per week, the monthly salary would break down into an hourly rate of $164.

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\text{Number of weeks} = \frac{30 \text{ days}}{7} = 4.29 \\
\text{Total number of working hours} = 4.29 \times 60 = 257.14 \\
\text{Average hourly rate} = $164
\]

If working hours per week is taken to be 44 then the hourly rate would be $223. To attain an hourly rate of $400 with working hours of 44 per week, one would have to have a monthly salary of $75,504. Why is it that a music teacher (who might be an undergraduate student) aged 20 or so could earn more than a doctor or a company executive of considerable seniority? Can it be simply explained by the supply-demand theory in economics? Or are there other factors at work?

**The concept of cultural capital**

Bourdieu has devoted much of his time into the subject of social stratification including its formation and manifestation in taste and dispositions. This had culminated in several books or chapters on the topic, the most notable being *La Distinction*, and *The Forms of Capital*, originally published in the *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Bourdieu utilizes the concept of capital to provide a common denominator in the analysis of the social world. According to him, capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital.\textsuperscript{9}


Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, in the objectified state, i.e. in the form of cultural goods, and in the institutionalized state i.e. in the form of educational qualifications or recognitions of institutions. Cultural capital in the embodied state and in the institutionalized state is acquired, i.e. it is something which one can accumulate by learning, either consciously or unconsciously, throughout the socialization process. They belong to the person and become part of his properties or disposition, and cannot be transferred to another.

According to Bourdieu, because the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital, it is usually unrecognized as capital and is recognized as legitimate competence. Cultural capital in its embodied form is manifested in what are considered “desirable” traits, e.g. intelligence, talent, exquisite taste etc which usually correspond to traits commonly found in the dominant classes and seldom in the working, or dominated, classes. Cultural capital in its institutionalized form is in the form of legally guaranteed qualifications, formally independent of the person or their bearer. Possession of a qualification awarded by an institution officially recognized as competent means that the bearer’s competence is proven and officially recognized by those in power, i.e. the state and its institutions. On the other hand, simple cultural capital is constantly required to prove itself. In short, a certificate renders competence as “proven” and saves the bearer the trouble of constantly having to prove himself; in a highly institutionalized and bureaucratic society such as ours, this entails tremendous practical advantage when seeking opportunities, as will be seen below.

10 Ibid, p. 245.
Cultural capital, while not always directly convertible to economic capital (most of the time it is through the purchase of skills and labour in the context of paid work or employment), nevertheless has a strong role in the preservation of economic and social status and the bolstering of existing hierarchies of social stratification. Numerous researches had shown that the families or individuals with strong economic capital also tend to possess strong cultural capital, which would be transmitted through upbringing and education to the next generation and thus result in the reproduction of the existing class structure. Those in possession of large amount of cultural capital is rewarded in the education system by increased opportunities available in the institutions e.g. in tertiary education, admission by prestigious schools, higher salary and better chances of promotion during career stage etc. This will in turn lead to economic success and higher economic power which is then converted to cultural capital in the next generation when parents pay for the education of their children.

The content of cultural capital i.e. what constitutes the body of knowledge, habit or skills which are highly valued in a particular society, is of course fluid and constantly changing, and varies with time, community (e.g. of different nations or ethnic groups) and different life stages. What was once valued as highly desirable for one group may not have remained so today – e.g. young girls in the Victorian age in England, or in the Qing dynasty in China, might have considered embroidering a socially useful skill which would increase their prospects of “marrying well”, which of course would not apply in today's Hong Kong.

The concept of embodied cultural capital encompasses all forms of knowledge, manner, taste, ability, attitude etc; in short, everything that can be imparted, acquired, and
learned. The importance and significance attributed to each form of cultural capital would of course vary. Their “usefulness” would also vary; some skills or knowledge bear the characteristics of practical usefulness e.g. scientific knowledge or knowledge in computers; some signifies taste, e.g. fashion sense; some gives the impression that the bearer is of high intelligence and sophistication e.g. knowledge in poetry.

Musical knowledge or ability to make music i.e. perform on an instrument, is obviously also a form of cultural capital. What is it that makes classical (or western) music so popular and its teachers so sought after, being only a recent import into a city/society famous as a financial centre, which pays little regard even for its own heritage in history, architecture and arts? Most of the parents who send their children to music centres or engage private teachers are people for whom classical music does not mean a thing. Why would they who in fact care little about classical music expend hundreds or thousands each month on musical education but without wanting that their children will one day turn professional?

*How is price or value determined?*

Value, in conventional terms, is the amount of money a consumer in the market is willing to pay for the goods or services. What we are concerned with is this – how is the price for instrumental education determined and what are the forces at work behind this apparently hefty price?

Both Marx’s concept of value of labour time being the “basic unit” and the source of the surplus value that can become realized in exchange, and the concept of value in neoclassical economics – that a commodity derives its value from the utility it procures to its holder, fail to explain the phenomenon. The inadequacy of the former arises from
the fact that we are talking about different “value” for services for a fixed period of time; that of the second because in the present case, “utility” is only measurable in terms of opportunities and the extent, if any, of the increase of opportunities at any stage is incapable of quantification.

**Du Gay’s Circuit of Culture**

Du Gay’s circuit of culture, of looking at the five facets of a cultural artifact i.e. production, consumption, regulation, representation and identity, provides a useful perspective of looking at how a cultural artifact enters our world of commodities and the meaning it gains and imparts throughout the process, and is a useful starting point in our analysis.

**Production/consumption in the education context**

Consumption and production in the form of one-to-one music lessons consist of: teachers and students (central actors) within a time frame (duration of each lesson) and in a fixed location. During each lesson, a student plays the assigned pieces for the teacher’s comment. The teacher sets the curriculum and monitors the progress of the student, by assigning suitable pieces, and determining pace of learning including timing for examination or competition enrolment. The teacher is solely responsible for monitoring the student’s progress and designing the “curriculum”, and is accountable to the student and the fee-payer – usually parents in case of young children or adolescent learners, or the student if he/she is an adult student. The student would then have to practice the assigned pieces after the lesson for the teacher to review in the next lesson. The teacher is the “service provider” while the student (or the parents) is the consumer – what is “consumed” is the teacher’s time, effort, knowledge and skills.
Usually when the student reaches a certain level of competence, he would enter examinations organized by the various examination boards. After successfully passing an exam, he/she would be “promoted” to the next grade. This usually entails a higher fee (though not always and it depends on the practice/habit of individual teachers) and/or a longer lesson and increased demands are made on the student by the teacher and the repertoire. Some students would be sent to join competitions, or student (or parents) might request to join on their own accord… the learning process is divided into stages, each stage culminating in an attempt in examinations (competitions do not serve the same purpose). It is only after a successful attempt in an exam that a stage is said to be “completed”.

*How are lessons conducted and fees determined?*

Most instrumental lessons take the form of individual lessons with only the teacher and student as participants and sometimes the parent(s) as observer(s). Lessons normally take place either in the home of the student, or that of the teacher, or in outside venue which is either a music centre where the teacher splits his fees with the centre, or some privately rented studio.

Due to their accessibility (they are normally located in shops on the streets or inside shopping malls), music centres often serve as entry-point for students or parents who have no or little connection and options in looking for a music teacher. In exchange for providing the venue and administrative services (lining up students, contacting them in case of rescheduling or cancellation etc), music centres usually retains 50% of the fees paid by students, the other 50% going to the teacher.

As most music centres rent their premises, the monthly rental payment constitutes a
significant part of their expenditure. Music centres in areas with higher rent would charge higher fees and vice versa. The rent factor, and the additional costs of running a music centre including staff, utilities such as water and electricity, and start-up costs including renovation of premises etc are all costs that need to be recovered by way of fees from students. The is however an upper limit on the number of students that a music centre can take as a result of the availability of rooms and the duration limitation – students can only come after school which means that the majority of lessons have to take place between around 3pm and 8pm on weekdays, although more can be accommodated on Saturdays and Sundays. That means there does exist a minimum level of fees beyond which sustenance would be very difficult.

Thus the net hourly income of teachers teaching at music centres is normally in the range of $80 to $100 (for a monthly fee of $320 and $400 respectively – for 4 lessons each lasting for 30 minutes) depending on the monthly fee charged by the music centre. The fees charged by music centres somehow represent a “market rate” for each grade and this fee structure is largely followed by the private teachers. The increase in fees as the student progresses could be justified either by reason of the increasing level of expertise involved (more competent teachers are required) or the increase in preparation time for the teacher, e.g. in familiarizing themselves with the repertoire.

The fee structure of music centres serves as a kind of “standard” for comparison – competent teachers or those with higher competitiveness would charge fees above the “standard fee” and vice versa.

With little to no regulation by either the Government or professional bodies, fees are determined solely by the operation of market forces. The “career” or “progress” path of
a teacher is typically like this: firstly he/she would start to teach in a music centre where entry is relatively easy to gain experience; at the same time or slightly later he/she would start to recruit private students. As he/she accumulates experience, network, connection or “clientele”, fees could be increased to reflect the increased prestige and rise in position, and/or any certificate/qualifications subsequently gained.

The amount of fees represent value measured in terms of hourly rate, i.e. how much an hour’s time of a teacher is “worth”. While this figure is arbitrary, it does represent the teacher’s own perception of how good he/she is and this has a certain significance at least psychologically. It also marks the individual teacher’s position and level of competence relative to other teachers. Teachers feel strongly about incompetent or inadequately-qualified teachers charging fees higher than “those they should be charging” as they feel that a fraud is being practiced on parents and students, by ripping-off or falsely representing that the teacher in question is better than what he actually is.

Supply of teachers

It is a peculiar feature of instrumental learning that there is no fixed curriculum to be followed and that not two students are the same – students differ widely in ability, potential, learning habit, diligence, aptitude, strength and weaknesses as well as personality. A lot depends on the judgment of the teacher and it is amazing how much a good teacher can do, or how much a bad teacher can ruin – but in this paper there is no scope for discussion on pedagogical issues and no such attempt will be made. Enough to say, however, that quality does matter tremendously in the learning process and unfortunately the quality of teaching is not always commensurate with the amount of fees charged (though the correlation between price and quality is certainly significant).
Because the boom in classical music learning is only of relatively short history (western music instruments learning only became popular since the 1980s), there was a shortage of teachers and at one time grade 8 was considered a benchmark of competence which qualifies someone to become a teacher. If a child starts to learn at 7, it takes at least 8 or 9 years before he/she is considered “old enough” to teach even if he/she may have attained grade 8 examination earlier. For older learners it normally takes at least 5 years before he/she could attain grade 8. It takes even longer to train a professional – he/she has to go through tertiary education in Hong Kong or elsewhere. We also must not overlook the fact that many of those who successfully complete their grade 8 examination may not take up teaching. Thus the expansion in number of music teachers in Hong Kong was a slow process. The same thing could be said of those who rise to the top of the profession. Each of the three major tertiary institutions which offer musical education in instrumental performance i.e. the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, the Chinese University and the Baptist University, only turn out dozens of graduates each year. We do not have statistics on the number of student each year who go overseas to study music full-time but we can estimate that the numbers are few compared to the number of students in Hong Kong. This results in high demand for well-qualified teachers, which in turn fuels the demand for those on the very top. As diplomas become “profitable” i.e. possession of diplomas almost automatically entails the ability to earn higher fees, the demand for diplomas, and hence, teachers who are capable of taking a student through diploma exams increases which in turn lead to increase in price.

Therefore the fee, or value, is the result of the balancing of many factors including supply, demand, external factors such as rent, affordability etc. No single factor is
dominant and the variation in fee or value could tilt the balance – for example, if rent decreases significantly, the competitiveness of private teachers might decrease if they insist on charging the same fee. As the overall profitability decreases, less people might be attracted into the teaching profession and in turn increases the demand.

*Representation and identity*

The activity of learning to play musical instruments is at the same time a cultural activity (by which one accumulates cultural capital) and a form of consumption. Skills and ability to understand, appreciate and perform classical music (other genres as well to different extent) is a thing often associated with class, prestige, taste, talent, refinement, sophistication and hard work. As “legitimate competence”, it represents abilities which schools and institutions regard as useful qualities that are indicative of a person’s distinction and potential. In the competitive school environment and education system in Hong Kong, possession of such useful qualities increases the chances of being admitted to prestigious schools, where the socialization process and cultural capital accumulation process continues, with the result that the student gains institutional recognition for his achievements.

Thus parents pay for the extra-curricular activities of their children in the hope of increasing their chances of being admitted to schools of their choice. The accumulation process continues throughout the whole education process, with successful completion in one stage leading to, or greatly increasing the chances of, the admittance into another. Ultimately, after the student finishes his education and enters the labour market, the cultural capital (in institutionalized form) earns him higher salary – cultural capital is converted back to economic capital.
Examinations play a pivotal role in fuelling the market for instrumental learning and playing. The grading system (together with the pass/merit/distinction divide) makes musical skills “measurable” and provides a framework which allows easy comparison (and which allows people not well-versed in music to have a rough but nevertheless moderately reliable understanding of how good a person is in a given instrument). This gives instrumental playing a “special status” not enjoyed by arts without a similar grading system such as painting, calligraphy etc.

Through the accumulation of cultural capital in its institutionalized form i.e. the backing and official recognition of institutions which are the stamps of honour, a person is recognized as having achieved legitimate competence which is considered well-deserved. It is pertinent to note that certain certificates, such as performance or teaching diplomas, carry with them titles such as FTCL or FRSM which can be added to a person’s name. It is not uncommon to see teachers with a string of titles after his name (e.g. Simon Chan BA(Hons) ATCL LRSM FTCL). Titles carry with them a sense of legitimacy and pride – both of them inseparable with identity.

Bourdieu’s theory on cultural capital also explains why instrumental playing in pop or jazz music does not receive the same level of attention in Hong Kong. Even though graded exams in pop music or jazz is in fact available in Hong Kong, it does not carry the same prestige that classical music carries, and is commonly associated with qualities that are either deviant, or not favoured by the authorities and institutions.

Lastly for the sake of fairness we must mention that there is a not insignificant number of students who pursue music for its own sake purely for the love of it. Even though there is no motive for gain either in the form of cultural capital or economic capital,
they are equally subject to the forces of the market and the same fees. For them, music learning is more of a hobby, a drive, sometimes even compulsion, than an investment; and their bond with music is usually so strong that their consciousness and identity is inseparable from music. I have encountered various persons, some of whom are friends and some are my own students, who learn music purely out of passion and love. Some of them work as full-time or part time teachers simply because it is the only thing that they love to do; others have full-time job that is unrelated to music and yet devote all of their energy and spare time into musical activities. By reason of their common interest which sets them apart from others, these people tend to form a natural group, often with the love of music being the sole common characteristics between them.

**Luxury goods and conspicuous consumption**

While Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption – “wasteful” consumption as the display of wealth to show one’s status – offers an insightful working explanation of the consumption of luxurious goods, we can safely rule out the possibility of music learning in the majority of cases being a form of conspicuous consumption for the following reasons: firstly, that while the display of skills on a musical instrument earns envy and admiration, “display” has no part to play in the act of paying for the lessons since the choice of teachers largely determines the amount of fees payable; secondly, learning with a “star teacher” may be worthy of pride, ultimately it is the student’s ability to perform on the instrument and the certificates or prizes he/she is able to accumulate which counts, rather than the fame, or qualifications, of the teacher; thirdly, the discrepancy between the fees of an ordinary teacher and a “star teacher” (a famous teacher can charge 3 or 4 times more than an ordinary teacher) is often not as significant as that between, say, an ordinary handbag and a luxury handbag, and as such the element of “conspicuousness” is not as marked in the field of instrumental learning.
**Conclusion**

Thus on the whole, the market for instrumental lessons is mostly driven by the parents’ desire for their children’s success in the competition for resources, for which they are willing to pay hundreds of dollars, or even thousands, each month. In the process, the participation of the institutions in the form of admission decisions and systems of reward, if any, serves to reinforce the trend. Does it however cause any deep-seated or lasting changes in the way we perceive music as a form of arts or culture? Given the high post-grade 8 drop-out rate, it seems that any influence is only superficial. To be sure instrumental education has helped to foster a number of music enthusiasts. However, the market for classical music in Hong Kong seems to have undergone only limited expansion. Twenty years ago we had only one professional orchestra; nowadays we have two\(^{13}\). Compared to the boom in the size of the body of music students in Hong Kong, the demand for concerts had only increased slightly. But slow it may be, it seems that we are catching up – if the end is favourable perhaps we should not be too particular about the means used to achieve it and the motives behind.

\(^{13}\) The Hong Kong Philharmonic was founded in 1957 and turned professional in 1974; the Hong Kong Sinfonietta was founded in 1990 and turned professional in 1999.
References


