

Unlikely Pair Play Traditional Chinese Music

Difficulty:

AVERAGE

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Discussion activities to be done after completing this EA lesson

Today's report was about an "unlikely pair" in an orchestra of traditional Chinese music. In what way are they "unlikely"? How do the other members of the orchestra accept them? Beyond the musical aspect, what is the message transmitted by the report?

Extension discussion topics

A. Talking about and going over the specific topic / idea / issue in listening text

Introduction = What is the orchestra and who are its members?

(Note to the teacher: because the answers overlap, the different parts of this section could be allocated to students or groups of students who subsequently pool and share their answers).

1. What do we learn in the report about the orchestra?

- It is a youth orchestra near Chinatown (the Chinese district) of Oakland, California.
- It is an after-school activity ("a safe haven for students who would otherwise have nothing else to do").
- It is led by music professor Sherlyn Chew.
- It plays traditional Chinese music and opera.
- Most of its members are Chinese ("a sea of Chinese faces") and many are "latchkey children".

Explain in your own words what you understand by the term "latchkey children".

2. What do we learn in the report about Sherlyn Chew?

- She is a Chinese American music professor.
- She leads the youth orchestra.
- She discovered the "unlikely pair" when they were four and five years old.
- She taught Tyler Thompson to sing songs in Chinese at a school in Oakland's Chinatown.
- She hopes the orchestra will teach students not just to appreciate the music, but also to appreciate each other (and help build an integrated community).

From what she says, and from her voice, what image do you form of Sherlyn Chew?

3. What do we learn in the report about Tyler Thompson?

- He is not Chinese (he is in fact a black African American) and cannot speak Chinese.
- He learnt to sing songs in Chinese with Sherlyn Chew at a school in Oakland's Chinatown when he was four or five.
- When he was four or five his mother worked in Oakland's Chinatown and often came home tired.
- Tyler sang to her the Chinese songs he had learnt and that made her feel better.
- He has a gift for singing Chinese opera but found it difficult at first because he did not understand the language.
- He understands why some of his Chinese classmates had a problem with him singing Chinese opera (what would he think if they sang R&B?).
- He is accepted by many of his classmates because he wanted to "learn more about their culture".

Do you think Tyler is a "nice kid"?

4. What do we learn in the report about Alejandro Chavez?

- He is not Chinese (he is in fact a Latino) and cannot speak Chinese.
- He was "discovered" by Sherlyn Chew in a predominately Latino school 10 years ago when he was four or five (that makes him 14 or 15 years old).
- He plays an ancient Chinese (wind) instrument called the Sheng.
- He seems proud of his achievement ("Just being able to say I play an instrument from ancient China, it's, you know, I have history in my hands.")
- Playing in the orchestra has changed his life ("... it's taught me not to be, ... Latinos here, ... white people here, ... so I'm mixed together ... 'cause if I weren't here where would I be?").

In what way do you think Alejandro summarizes the "message" of the report?

B. Expanding on (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

Topic = (Ideally) Comparison of the Audio report with the Video report.

The report was the audio part of a video report on VOA. If possible, watch the video report and report back (to a partner or to your teacher) all the information given visually which was not available in the audio report. (Think about the appearance and clothes of the people, the form of the instruments, ...). Here is the link:

<http://www.voanews.com/english/news/usa/Unlikely-Pair-Find-Solace-in-Traditional-Chinese-Music-134900488.html>

Did what you saw of Sherlyn Chew correspond to the image you made of her from the audio?

OR, Topic = "Latchkey children".

What do you understand by the term "latchkey children"? Do you know any children who fall into this category? Discuss with a partner or with your teacher whether parents (especially mothers) should stop working in order to look after their children or continue working in order to ensure the material comfort of the family. Think about the effects on the children, the need of adults to have an activity outside the home,

C. Extending discussion of (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

Topic = Musical Ability.

1. Do you play a musical instrument or sing in a choir? Did you learn a musical instrument when you were a child? Recount your experiences. Was it difficult? Do you agree with Sherlyn Chew that "music is a discipline. You have to practice"?
2. If you don't play music, which instrument would you like to play and why? Do you envy people who have musical ability?
3. In the report you heard that Tyler Thompson "had a gift" for singing and that Alejandro Chavez "has excelled" in playing the Sheng. Do you think that musicians are born with a talent for music or that musical ability is simply the result of learning and practice?

Audioscript

"One, two, three, one two, go!"

Near Oakland's Chinatown, this youth orchestra is a place where Chinese children can get in touch with their roots and learn a unique skill.

It's also a safe haven for students who would otherwise have nothing else to do when school is out, says music professor Sherlyn Chew.

"A lot of our students are what you call, you know, latchkey children where the parents work long hours in restaurants."

In this sea of Chinese faces, there are two students who at first, don't seem to belong.

Alejandro Chavez and Tyler Thompson are not Chinese and don't even speak the language. But they have become key players in this orchestra. Chew was their music teacher when they were just four and five years old. In each of them she saw something special.

"Music for all students should be fun, but it is a discipline. You have to practice. And both of them were willing to do that."

Tyler Thompson attended a school near his mother's workplace in Oakland's Chinatown where he learned songs in Chinese from Chew.

"One day he said to me, he said 'you know my mother comes home from work very tired and I would sing her the songs you teach me and I'm able to make her feel better.' And I said, you know, what a nice kid."

Chew also discovered that Thompson had a gift for singing Chinese opera.

"It was a challenge to me at first to actually, like, understand it."

He says it was also hard for some of his Chinese classmates to understand why he wanted to sing Chinese opera.

"I didn't see any problem with it but they did, and I know it would probably be the same, vice versa, if ... like, you know, I heard one Asian kid singing some really old school R&B songs. I would just be like 'what would you know about that?'"

But there were also classmates who accepted him more because he wanted to learn about their culture.

Alejandro Chavez has also excelled ever since Chew discovered him in a predominately Latino school 10 years ago. He plays an ancient Chinese instrument called the Sheng.

"Just being able to say I play an instrument from ancient China, it's, you know, I have history in my hands."

Chavez says being part of the orchestra has opened his mind.

"Well it's taught me not to be, you know, Latinos here, you know, white people here, you know so I'm mixed together, it's like that. And it's really changed my life really. Cause if I weren't here where would I be?"

Chew says she hopes all her students will learn to appreciate not just the music, but each other and carry the life lessons they have learned beyond this orchestra.

Elizabeth Lee, for VOA News, Oakland.