

Going with the musical flow: sharing music and culture in rural Timor-Leste

Lina Andonovska, April 2013



Photo: *Lina meets student performers from Mau Nuno school, Ainaro District, Timor-Leste*



Many Hands International
culture based community development

In the last few years I have travelled to many different places, exploring all kinds of musical opportunities. I have become very familiar with the airport transfers on the trans-continental Melbourne-London-Melbourne routes, navigating myself around the baggage halls of Europe and finding my way to a warm bed at the end of long journeys. In January this year, despite how accustomed I had become to travelling to far off places, nothing could have prepared me for the time I spent sharing music with communities in the Ainaro district of Timor-Leste.

My previous experiences working through music with low socio-economic communities in London and assisting music facilitator Gillian Howell during her Asialink residency in Timor-Leste in 2011, helped me with the very big challenge of leading music workshops with hundreds of young people, as well as collaborating with local artists, in a language that I knew only a little of. I was pleased to discover how my classical music training and my life experiences helped me make a positive impact in communities that were so different from the people that I usually play music to.

I had been enlisted to help carry out the final stage of a larger scale effort involving NGO Many Hands International and Friends of Ainaro, Ballarat. The year before I had held a classical flute recital to raise money for materials, including goatskins, for several sets of traditional instruments that were going to be presented to school and youth groups throughout the district of Ainaro. Organisers hoped that this would encourage the younger generation to embrace their cultural traditions. The final part of the project was a series of school visits, where we planned to present the instruments and also offer participatory workshops to share musical cultures between Timor and Australia. We were lucky to have Timorese artist, Marqy da Costa, accompany us on our travels and assist with leading the workshops. Marqy also helped us communicate more freely with the communities.

Our first visit was to a very isolated mountain village of Mau Nuno. This place had been hard hit during the Indonesian occupation, when many members of the village lost their lives in a massacre or fled to live atop a nearby mountain. The initial thought of potentially walking two hours to lead this day-long program was daunting, but luckily, to ease my first-world mind set, the opportunity for a bumpy ride that got us most of the way proved a savior. We (myself, Kim Dunphy, Director of Many Hands International and community development worker Kate Owen) were officially welcomed as special guests to the village (which only recently has installed electricity lines) with a traditional Sergala ceremony. Witnessing the ceremony was overwhelming; the young people had set about learning a traditional song and dance when they heard of our visit, and had put in a lot of effort to share the tradition with us.

After this marvelous introduction, it was our turn to share some music making and collaborative activities with the group of children gathered. I played some contemporary flute solos in the middle of a circle of school children, followed by a few Irish jigs that I had up my sleeve. At this, one of the older members of the community came into the middle of the circle and started dancing. Everyone followed suit, making a really joyful experience. We then taught the children a version of Australian bush dance, where I asked some onlookers to join me with the musical accompaniment by beating their traditional drums along with the jig that I was playing. A real collision of cultures!

After an exhausting couple of hours of sharing music and dance, we sat down to wait for lunch. While we waited for the chickens to be plucked, more and more children gathered around while I was talking to the teachers about my musical studies in Australia and abroad. One thing led to another, and before I knew it I was helping the young people come up with a rap song about our day together. With their few words of English, and my direction regarding rhythm and verse, we created a few lines of poetry to describe our meeting and collaboration on that special day. One young girl was then inspired to share a song with the rest of us. In a community with so little access to the outside world, we were amazed to discover that she had learned this song from a ring tone of a mobile phone. She had such a beautiful voice, I was inspired to take out my flute and accompany her melody.



During the rest of the week, we visited a number of other schools. The activities that we shared with groups of young people in the Ainaro district included a number that I had learnt from my work in music outreach in both London and Australia. One was a simple game where a clap or a sound is passed around a circle. There are different stages to this process; initially, you start with

just demonstrating the idea to pass a sound around the circle. As the participants get used to this, you can then introduce new parameters that encourage the participants to think about rhythm, dynamics and most of all, listening.

Our second workshop was at Soro School, not far from the town of Ainaro. First we presented the traditional drums and gongs we were donating to the school. Then with a group of about 100 children, I led a series of musical games and songs. One was a familiar song taught in music classrooms around Australia, 'A Ram Sam Sam'. I taught this along with actions. The song was perfect to bring the group together because the words and actions are repetitive and very easy to learn. The lyrics are:

A ram sam sam, a ram sam sam
 Guli guli guli guli guli, ram sam sam
 A ram sam sam, a ram sam sam
 Guli guli guli guli guli, ram sam sam
 A rafiq, a rafiq
 Guli guli guli guli guli, ram sam sam
 A rafiq, a rafiq
 Guli guli guli guli ram sam sam

Once the whole group learned the song, we sang it as a two-part round. This became a favourite song of some of the children that we worked with. I then led a group rendition of a popular Timorese song I had learned about the struggle for independence of Timor-Leste. This song is similar to a hymn as it united the

Timorese people during the resistance as a form of silent protest and resilience during the oppression. To this we all sang and improvised on our instruments, me on my flute and the children on either instruments or body percussion. After this, the bush dance session followed where once again the children with instruments accompanied the dance being taught and performed.



Mid-week, we were invited to attend a choir rehearsal in a nearby village where the young people gather regularly to rehearse traditional songs. I shared some insights with the young people (who were not much younger than me) about my professional life as a travelling musician and Marqy was able to share some of his story on what it means to be a full time Timorese artist. His is a remarkable story, because he has made his reputation as a local artist who travels overseas for exhibitions and festivals- a very rare lifestyle for someone raised in Timor-Leste.

The three days that followed were jam-packed with more school sessions. To conclude our time in Ainaro, we had collaborated with local performing group *Nafu Fila* to organize a music concert in the town square, rain, hail or shine. And rain it did. Torrential amounts. But that didn't stop the group gearing up in full regalia, the band playing and the people dancing. Following this was a feast of local food including cow livers.



Photo: Marqy da Costa and Lina (front), with colleagues from Ainaro

One thing I learned about this kind of collaboration was the need to be flexible and open to new possibilities. Some of the times that we arrived at schools for workshops, the staff were neither expecting us nor the instruments we were coming to distribute. We would explain to teachers that we had come to share some of 'Australian' culture, as well as classical music to the group, through a short workshop series, as well as present the group with a set of instruments. The group leaders would find that they could trust us to engage in this process, and every single encounter was a true success.

The conclusion of my trip was our return to Dili, where I met with renowned composer Simeo Barreto. I was surprised to discover that I was the special guest performer at a soiree, after initially thinking that I had arrived for a short friendly visit with the composer. I performed all of the pieces that I had stored in my memory bank to form a recital program for a number of dignitaries that were in attendance. This just goes to show that you have to go with the flow when in Timor-Leste!

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