

Social Engagement Through Music

New Course Connects Students, Local Artists of Color

Lesley Bannatyne for the Harvard University Department of Music

“Social Engagement Through Music: Histories, Economies, Communities” is a new, team-based, immersive course in which students collaborate with and provide professional support to musicians from Boston’s immigrant communities. The course also provides an intellectual framework for understanding the historical circumstances, economic and political realities, and community needs of these artists.

The course is the first of its kind, a collaboration with the Massachusetts Cultural Council (Maggie Holzberg, MCC folklorist, helped recommend the artists through MCC’s 2018 Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program), the Bok Center Learning Lab, the Mindich Program in Engaged Scholarship, the Music Department’s faculty—Carol Oja, Kay Kaufman Shelemay, and Michael Uy—graduate students Matthew Leslie Santana and Caitlin Schmid, and the four brilliant musicians who have made Boston their home.

Fourteen Harvard undergraduates spent the spring semester working with Bethlehem (Betty) Melaku (Ethiopia), Sixto (Tito) Ayala (Puerto Rico), Lin Zhantao (China), and Shyam Nepali (Nepal). Each artist was assigned a team of three or four students and a faculty advisor.

Student teams executed ethnographic interviews, assessed the needs of the artist, and collaborated with them to come up with concrete methods of support. One team created business cards, another helped teach their artist



Betty Melaku performs with students from Music 24.

how to build a kickstarter page, others searched out performing and teaching venues, drafted letters, and helped write grants. All the teams produced materials that their artists can use for promotion in the future.

“At our last class, some students commented on how close they got to the musician,” says Uy. “They’re struggling with what to do next; they want to do more. One, for example, will be exchanging English lessons for lessons on the erhu.”

“The students were amazing,” Matt Leslie Santana agrees. “I was surprised at how happy they were to do extra work. We asked a lot of them, but they were willing to do more; they wanted to help. And although we can’t fix the bigger issue of ‘this course ends,’ these students did the best they could to find ways to support their artist long-term. They were immediately thinking of sustainability.”

Websites, for example, were built on free platforms, and where there was a language or technology issue, social media access was given to the artist’s adult chil-

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so that updates would be easier.

The technical pieces of the course—video and photo shoots—were bolstered by the Bok Center Learning Lab and coordinated by Schmid. “Students learned to record and edit video of their artist teaching, shoot and produce good head shots, and conduct ethnographic interviews, all skills that are useful going forward,” she says.

“I would say that our students may have benefited more from this collaboration than the musicians,” says Uy. “This was a great cohort. They put their hearts and souls into this class and they wanted to do more, learn more, engage more, which speaks to their level of commitment.”

Andrew Perez is one of those students. “I had the privilege to work with Tito Ayala, a percussionist from Puerto Rico,” says Perez. “Our team worked tirelessly to make a digital presence for our artist and bolster his marketing toolkit. This was the first class that gave me skills which directly translate to my future job. This summer I will be working at a record label back home in Los Angeles, and my responsibilities entail doing exactly what we did for Tito—helping artists establish their presence and strategize their careers. Prior to this class, I would have felt extremely unprepared to throw my hat in the ring for a job like that, but this class gave me the confidence and passion to say, ‘I want to do that.’”

“Most importantly, Tito reminded me of my family back in Los Angeles, and he helped me regroup myself as to why I am at Harvard. While he was amazed and excited to be at Harvard, I felt the same honor working with him. His presence reminded me of the world that exists outside these walls and how the privileges we, as students, are afforded at this university can be used to help the greater community.”

Students and artists at a concert of the artists’ music in Holden Chapel in March.



ZHANTO LIN is an erhu player and Tai Chi teacher. He was an erhu professor at Guangxi Arts Institution before moving to Boston in 1999. He has performed at the Museum of Fine Arts and Lincoln Center among other institutions, and teaches the erhu at the Huaxin School of Arts and the Dana Hall School of Music. He is the founder of the Boston Youth Erhu Ensemble.



SIXTO (TITO) AYALA is a percussionist and dancer from the famous Ayala Family in Puerto Rico, known for their musicianship and preservation of traditional Afro-Puerto Rican bomba music. During his 52-year tenure as a percussionist, Tito has played with renowned artists across the Caribbean and in the once-famous Latin clubs in New York City. He’s been living in Boston for the past 34 years.



Hailing from the centuries-old Gandharba musical tradition of Nepal, SHYAM NEPALI has been performing around the world for 30 years. Born into a family of legendary Sarangi players, Shyam is a teacher and mentor to new generations of players. He works with Project Sarangi in Nepal, the Imagine Rainbow Project (Switzerland/Nepal), and founded the Himalayan Heritage Cultural Academy in Boston. Shyam has received awards from the government of Nepal, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and was appointed honorary consulate of Italy by the Italian Embassy in Kathmandu.

BETHELEHAM (BETTY) MELAKU is an Ethiopian-American who emigrated from Ethiopia with her family in 1997 and toured the United States performing her music. Taught to play the krar by her father, musician Melaku Gelaw, Betty also studied maseqo, piano, and violin at the Yared School of Music in Ethiopia. Betty combines Western and popular influences with traditional Ethiopian sounds to create her music, and hopes to share her tradition with students in the Boston area.

