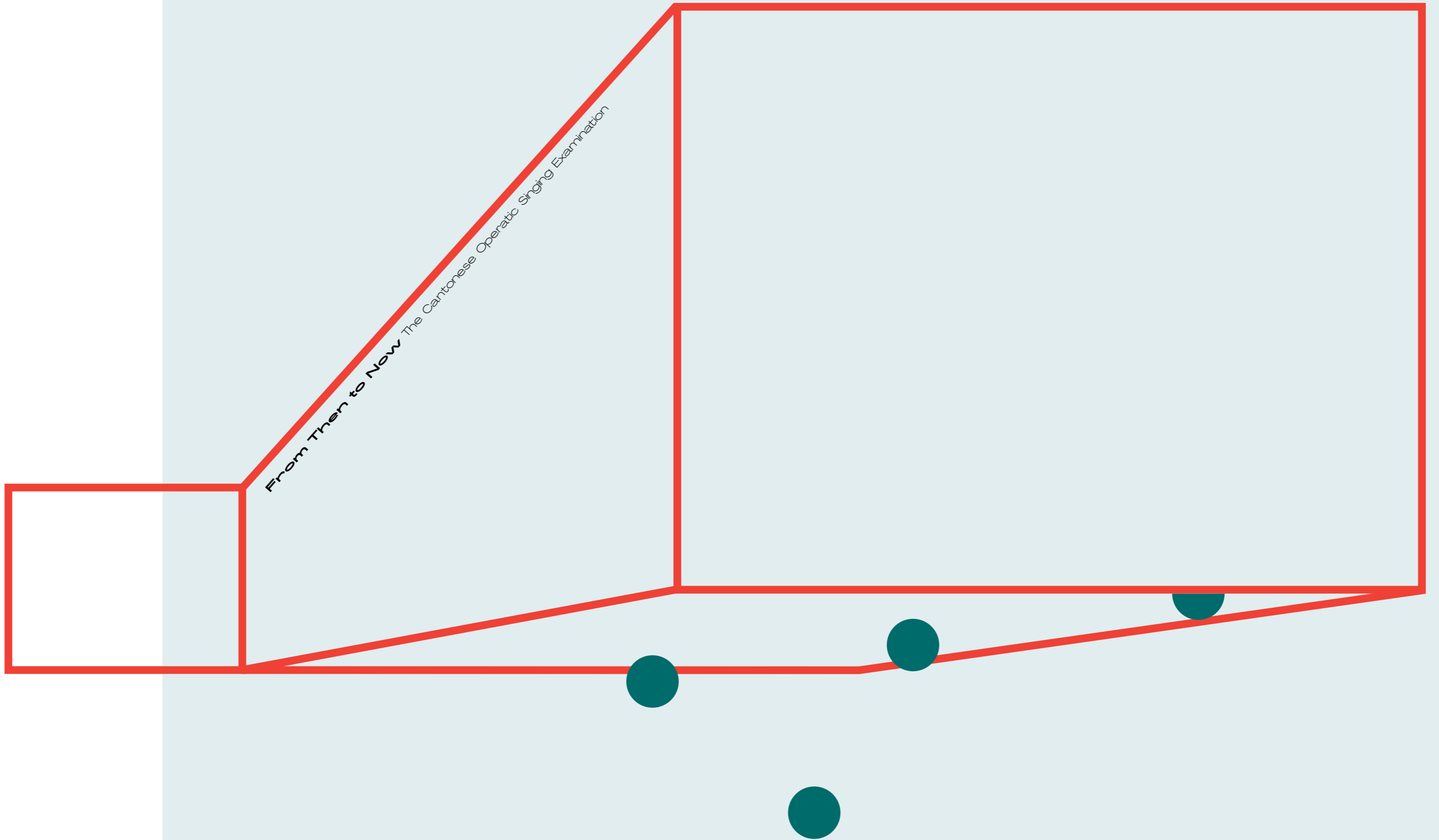


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From Then to Now

The Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination

Text
Chan Sau-yan

Introduction

On 18 January 2019, the world's first Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination was launched in Hong Kong. It was jointly organised by the Hong Kong Association of Cantonese Opera Scholars (HKACOS) and the London College of Music (LCM) of the University of West London. A total of 56 candidates took the first exam, while 26 candidates sat for the second exam held in July 2019. The third exam, which had originally been scheduled for January and February 2020, was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since its inauguration, 82 candidates have taken the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination.

Background

For a long time, a number of practitioners and supporters of Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic singing in Hong Kong had thought about promoting the art form through the establishment of a standardised assessment, which was to be modelled on exams of Western musical instruments and vocal music. The topic was addressed in meetings at the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee, and in discussions at other related forums. However, considering that Cantonese opera encompasses singing, acting, speech, the four skills and the five techniques, an initial consensus was reached about focusing on Cantonese operatic singing in the pilot of the exam.

The first question that inevitably arose was: Would graded exams serve as an effective way to promote Cantonese operatic singing? On the one hand, if graded exams had helped to foster the development of Western music in Hong Kong, they should serve the same purpose for Cantonese operatic singing. On the other hand, the answer would be largely determined by the quality of the exam board; it would depend on whether the institution in question had the capability and credibility to organise the exam and confer the certification. In Hong Kong, the teaching of, and research about, Cantonese operatic singing was not well established at the time. It would be difficult to invite an institution of similar status to that of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, the

Trinity Hong Kong Music Centre, or LCM, to organise an exam for Cantonese operatic singing. If it was to involve partnership with Cantonese opera or Cantonese operatic singing organisations from the mainland, it would take considerable effort to clarify the different conceptions of Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic singing between the two regions.

HKACOS was founded in 2013. By 2014, it had brought together a group of scholars, veteran artists, educators, and arts administrators with a passion for Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic singing to discuss the feasibility of establishing a graded exam for Cantonese operatic singing. On 6 December 2014, Yuen Siu-fai, Cham Lai Suk-ching, Tai Suk-yan, Lee Siu-yan, and Wong Ki-tak held the first meeting of the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination Working Group. The group concurred that the exam was significant in that it would help to "set phased objectives", "give all learners of Cantonese operatic singing a tangible sense of satisfaction", "establish a framework for passing on outstanding Cantonese opera singing styles", and "respond to society's needs for the preservation of Cantonese opera as an intangible cultural heritage". During the meeting, it was decided that the exam would adopt the Eight-Grade scale, in order for it to align with graded exams of Western music. Furthermore, the group agreed that the *banqiang* singing and *gongche* notation would be the core elements of the exam, while candidates would be encouraged to devote equal attention to singing, theory and cultivating a refined musicianship. Boaz Chow and I joined the group later, and with the other group members, jointly drafted the "Feasibility Study for the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination". In 2015, the group conducted a systematic review of different aspects of the exam including membership of the exam board, syllabus, preparation progress, assessment standards, training and qualifications of examiners, publicity, and budget. Members also consulted Cantonese opera practitioners, educators, media professionals, Cantonese operatic song performers, composers, and Cantonese operatic singing instructors for their opinions.

Of the abovementioned issues, the group members were most divided in their views on what institution should be responsible for organising the exam and conferring the certification. Some members thought it was beyond HKACOS's capability, and others believed the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts or the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) would be ideal for the mission. An EdUHK representative attended one of our meetings and stated that the institution was willing to take up the task. As a result, several members left the working group, since they felt they had fulfilled their mission. Subsequently, the working group ceased operation. In 2016, HKACOS was restructured and registered as a limited company in accordance with the Hong

Kong Companies Ordinance. A new term of executive board began, and the renowned artist Yuen Siu-fai was invited to become a member of HKACOS. As there was still no consensus about the membership of the exam board, HKACOS made it a priority on its action plan.

Preparation

On 14 March 2017, HKACOS' new executives met with Professor John Howard, Director of Examinations of LCM. An initial understanding was reached about the joint organisation of the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination. Professor Howard also noted that without considering any potential benefits, LCM would be willing to lend its over a century's worth of experience and its framework for organising music exams, as well as other possible forms of assistance, to HKACOS.

On 22 March, the re-established Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination Committee held its first meeting, with Yuen Siu-fai, Cham Lai Suk-ching, and me, who were members of the 2014 working group, alongside new members Ip Sai-hung, the former Head of RTHK Radio 5, and Wong Yee-man, a veteran Cantonese operatic singing instructor and HKACOS' executive. They were later joined by HKACOS' Vice-Chairperson To Tsang-cheung, and Cheung Kwan-hin from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, as well as seasoned head musicians Mak Wai-man, Ko Yun-hung, and Lau Kin-wing. The committee also invited several established professionals in Cantonese operatic singing to serve as its advisors, including Yeung Lai-hung, Fong Man-ching, Wong Sing-kwan, and John Fan Kam-ping.¹ In the meantime, on behalf of the Cantonese Opera Musician and Vocalist Association, Yeung Lai-hung kindly agreed to provide financial support to the exam.

After the committee had decided on the syllabuses, scope, formats and assessment standards for the Grades 1-8 exams, the members discussed a number of other key issues. They included the number of examiners, the provision of musicians to perform accompaniment, the number of musicians provided, cost effectiveness, and exam fees. Some of the resolutions made then were later revised after three mock exams had been held.

On 17 May, some committee members proposed forming a partnership with EdUHK in organising the exam. On 13 June, there were reports from committee members that EdUHK intended to organise a graded exam of Cantonese operatic singing of its own. The committee resolved to step up its efforts to establish the exam.

¹ Some of the exam committee members and advisors later became members of HKACOS.



The Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination Committee after meeting on 15 August 2017 (From left of the back row: Cheung Kwan-hin, To Tsang-cheung, Chan Sau-yan, Ip Sai-hung, Wong Yee-man, Ko Yun-hung; from left of the front row: Yuen Siu-fai, Mak Wai-man, Cham Lai Suk-ching) — Photo courtesy: HKACOS

Mock Exams

The committee believed it was imperative to hold mock exams for providing an opportunity for committee members and advisors who might serve as examiners to attempt grading, evaluate the objectivity of the assessment, and to review the design of the score sheets. It would also allow committee members who were in charge of exam arrangements to gain a clearer view of the details. On 15 August, 11 September and 26 December 2017, the committee held three mock exams. They invited both beginners and experienced performers of Cantonese operatic singing to take the Grade 1, Grade 5 and Grade 8 mock exams, which comprised singing, an oral test, sight-singing, and an aural test. Professor Howard attended the second mock exam, and watched a recording of the third exam. He noted that he was pleased with the arrangements, and he approved of the key focuses and assessment weighting. On behalf of LCM, he also pledged to sponsor the expenses of one of the mock exams.

After the three mock exams, the committee agreed unanimously on the followings: 1) there would be four musicians who would perform accompaniment, including the head musician, a *yangqin* player, a head percussionist, and gong-cum-cymbals player; 2) as a way to maintain the examiner's authority and accountability, there would be only one examiner presiding at each session, who would be assisted by an observer;² 3) in view of resource constraints, only Grade 1, Grade 3, and Grade 5 exams would be offered at the inauguration, while other grades would be included in due course, and 4) the committee would publish *qupu*, the script of the test pieces, for candidates.

In the following months, the committee members worked on the exam syllabus. The "Exam Materials Unit" and "Script Unit" were set up, which were jointly responsible for preparing the scripts for the Grade 1, Grade 3, and Grade 5 exams. On the other hand, the committee had discussions with record companies regarding the copyright of the pieces to be used for the exam, and with Parsons Music regarding exam venue rental and distribution of the script books. Thanks to a generous sponsorship from the Life Encouraging Fund, the committee was able to recruit a chief executive officer to oversee the coordination.³ The most pressing task was to design and launch the exam website, which would allow candidates to obtain information about the exam and submit their online applications. In addition, the committee established a review panel. Over half

² It was later renamed "assistant examiner".

³ There were two paid part-time staff members assisting the exam committee at one point: the chief executive officer and a research assistant. Other than the part-time research assistant, HKACOS members have been working for the committee on a voluntary basis.

of the panel members were independent advisors, including a convener with relevant experience, and the panel would be in charge of reviewing appeals from candidates.

Announcement and Launch

Despite the complicated procedures and heavy workload, the committee made excellent progress with the abovementioned tasks. On 26 July 2018, HKACOS held a press conference at the New Wing Function Room of Ko Shan Theatre New Wing, where Yuen Siu-fai and I introduced the mission, scope and conditions of the exam to practitioners and supporters of Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic singing, scholars, media representatives, and members of the public. In the presence of those in attendance, Dr Cham Lai Suk-ching, Chairperson of HKACOS, signed a partnership agreement with Professor John Howard of LCM.



On 26 July 2018, Dr Cham Lai Suk-ching, Chairperson of the HKACOS, signed a partnership agreement with Professor John Howard, Director of Examinations of LCM (left in the front row) — Photo courtesy: HKACOS

As mentioned above, HKACOS started to consider what institution should be entrusted with the organisation of the exam as early as in 2014. Strictly speaking, the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination is an “accredited” music exam. Since it goes beyond the scope of academic studies, it should not be organised by a tertiary academic institution. Before it became part of the Polytechnic of West London (now the University of West London), LCM was an independent school which had more than a hundred years of experience in offering accredited music exams. In partnering with LCM, HKACOS wishes to learn from the structures, models and practices of LCM’s exams. The certification is jointly conferred by HKACOS and LCM of the University of West London. The joint venture is welcomed by many practitioners and instructors of Cantonese operatic singing, as well as by students and parents, who hope that the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination will achieve the same level of international recognition as graded exams of Western music. As for exam syllabus, repertoire selection, recruitment and selection of examiners, and exam arrangements, they are decided by the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination Committee, which currently consists of Yuen Siu-fai, Ip Sai-hung, Ko Yun-hung, Mak Wai-man, Lau Kin-wing, Cheung Kwan-hin, Wong Yee-man, Cham Lai Suk-ching and me. LCM is subsequently informed of all of the committee’s decisions.

LCM’s exams are unique to the graded exam sector in that their certificates are awarded by a university. In addition, they are regulated by Ofqual in England. In other words, it will be an advantage for students who are applying to the University of West London or other universities if they achieve a Pass or higher at Grades 6-8.⁴

On 1 October 2018, HKACOS held a briefing session on the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination at the Yau Ma Tei Theatre, where Yuen Siu-fai and I introduced the mission and details of the exam to the public. There are four objectives in launching the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination: 1) to improve the standards of teaching and learning of Cantonese operatic singing; 2) to enhance the academic standards of research on Cantonese operatic singing; 3) to clarify some of the ill-defined concepts in Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic singing,⁵ and 4) to promote the core elements of Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic singing such as the *gongche* notation and an emphasis on *banqiang*, which are unique to Hong Kong. The exam is designed for university, secondary and primary students who are learning Cantonese operatic

⁴ The Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination is yet to become one of LCM’s exams that are regulated by Ofqual. The exam committee is working towards this goal.

⁵ For instance, the vocal form known as “*xipi*” should be renamed “*erhuang siping*”, and the tune known as *Liantan* should be renamed *Liantanlang* (“Loving a Handsome Man”).

singing at school, working adults who practise the art form, and instructors who wish to improve themselves. All candidates are graded according to the following assessment bands: Distinction (85-100), Merit (75-84), Pass (65-74), Near Pass (55-64), Fail (0-54). The singing test is the key section, as it comprises 80 per cent of the assessment weighting. The remaining 20 per cent is comprised by the following sections: an oral test on music theory at ten percent, sight-singing of *gongche* notation at four per cent, an aural test on melody and percussion pattern⁶ at six per cent.

HKACOS held three exam preparatory workshops for candidates on 17, 20 and 21 October, covering the rules, syllabus and scope of the Grade 1, Grade 3 and Grade 5 exams respectively. A mock exam was held as part of each workshop, in which candidates took part in the singing, oral, sight-singing and aural tests.

At last, the world’s first Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination was launched on 18 January 2019. The first exam, which consisted of seven sessions, ended in the afternoon of 27 January. A total of 56 candidates took the exam. The second group of exams, consisting of three sessions, were respectively held on 15, 22, and 27 July 2019, with 26 candidates.

Looking Forward

Due to the current pandemic, the third exam covering Grades 1-6, which had originally been scheduled for February 2020, was postponed. The fourth exam covering Grades 1-8, which was to be held in August 2020, was also postponed.

In August 2019, HKACOS set up the Cantonese Operatic Singing Diploma Examination Committee. The committee members include Wong Sing-kwan, Wong Yee-man, Fanny Chung Ming-yan, Yemina Yu, May Chu Yuk-lan, Liu Po-chu, Cham Lai Suk-ching and me. The committee is designing diploma exams in Cantonese operatic singing and teaching that would be comparable to the qualifications of the associate degree, fellowship and senior fellowship. We also plan to introduce a series of courses for helping the candidates.

⁶ The exam committee later produced and published a CD of percussion patterns for supporting the candidates.

Concluding Remarks

In Hong Kong, graded exams have always been at the core of Western music education, with the number of exam candidates estimated at over 20,000 each year. In recent years, graded exams have been introduced to Chinese musical instruments. While graded exams are no longer exclusive to Western music, the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination is groundbreaking in introducing Chinese opera to the graded exam sector. At present, there are some hundreds of thousands of Cantonese operatic singing practitioners in Hong Kong. The Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination is yet to gain greater recognition in this community. Nevertheless, I believe the exam will make a tremendous contribution to the development of Cantonese operatic singing, as it is grounded in years of planning and unflinching endeavour. We must make consistent efforts in terms of refining and promoting the exam, and work on further launching diploma exams specialising in performance or teaching. There is a long path ahead, and we look forward to working with different segments of our community as we strive towards our goals.

Special thanks to Dr Cham Lai Suk-ching for her input on this article and Ms Liu Po-chu for providing the statistics included in Appendix I and Appendix II.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

[Chan Sau-yan](#)

A Cantonese opera scholar, Chan Sau-yan is the current Vice-Chairperson of HKACOS.

Appendix I

**Numbers of Applicants of the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination
Jointly Organised by the Hong Kong Association of Cantonese Opera Scholars and
the London College of Music of the University of West London**

Grade	Grade 1	Grade 3	Grade 5	Total
Exam Date				
2018 Winter				
2019.01.18	2	2	4	8
2019.01.20	2	8	7	17
2019.01.21	1	2	5	8
2019.01.25	1	4	4	9
2019.01.27	2	2	13	17
Total	8	18	33	59
2019 Summer				
2019.07.15	3	3	3	9
2019.07.22	2	1	6	9
2019.07.27			9	9
Total	5	4	18	27
Total Number of Applicants	13	22	51	86

Appendix II

**Examination Results of the Cantonese Operatic Singing Examination
Jointly Organised by the Hong Kong Association of Cantonese Opera Scholars and
the London College of Music of the University of West London**

Grade	Grade 1	Grade 3	Grade 5	Total
Results				
A: Distinction	15.38%	4.55%	7.84%	8.14%
B: Merit	15.38%	31.82%	35.29%	31.40%
C: Pass	53.85%	40.91%	35.29%	39.53%
F: Near Pass	0.00%	9.09%	13.73%	10.47%
G: Fail	0.00%	9.09%	5.88%	5.81%
U: Unattended	15.38%	4.55%	1.96%	4.65%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Pass Rate 79.07%

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