Music in South India – Kerala
A Global Sound Lesson
Designed by Lum Chee Hoo

Suggested grade level | 9-12, Secondary
Musical culture | Kerala, South India
National standards | 6 and 9
Musical knowledge/Skills | Listening (instruments, singing style, beat)
Identifying instruments
General knowledge/Skills | Locating Kerala and knowing its culture (language, values and musical traditions)

Materials from Smithsonian Global Sound:
1. “Idakka” from Music from South India- Kerala (FW04365)

2. “Nala Charitam,” Music from South India- Kerala (FW04365)

3. “Panchawadyam” from Music from South India- Kerala (FW04365)

4. Liner notes from Music from South India- Kerala (FW04365)
Other materials:
1. The JVC video anthology of world music and dance: South Asia I, India
   Track 11-2 (Kathakali-dance-drama: Dryodana vadham from the
   Mohabharata
   Vanguard Cinema. ASIN: B000066C7A
3. Map of South India
4. Pictures of instruments: from liner notes and Music in South India:
   Experiencing music, expressing culture.

Experiences

I) Video (The JVC anthology of world music) on Kathakali –
   1. Before showing the video segment, ask pupils to note down:
      i) where they think the music drama is from
      ii) what language is being sung
      iii) what instruments accompany the music drama
      iv) who are singing (actors?)
      v) what type (genre) of story is being told
      vi) what was interesting about the music drama
   2. Illicit responses from pupils.
   3. See map of South India – locate Kerala (talk about its geographical,
      social, historical-context)
   4. Talk about the main languages spoken in South India (highlighting the
      language spoken in the Kathakali dance drama (Malayalam))
   5. Talk about the singers (Ponnani & Sinkidi), instruments (Chenda,
      Maddalam, Chengalam, Illatalam), and the dancers (character types,
      costume, makeup) in the dance drama.
      (information can be obtained from Liner notes, Music from South
      India-Kerala (p.6-8) and Viswanathan & Allen, 2004, p.105-108)

II) “Nala Charitam” (The story of Prince Nala)
   i) Relate the scene to students (from liner notes of Music from South
      India, Kerala p.8)
   ii) Listen to recording
iii) Clap the beat and determine the Tala (metrical cycle) – cempata (eight-beat cycle)
iv) Listen to recording again and this time, chant the solkattu (vocalized syllables) along with kriya (hand gestures)

Solkattu – ta ka di mi ta ka jo nu
Kriya – C pinky ring middle C W C W
(C- clap with palm down, W- wave, ‘pinky’, ‘middle’, ‘ring’ – finger counts)

[depending on prior knowledge of pupils, the teacher might have to go through basic Karnatak tala, solkattu and kriya before proceeding with the abovementioned activity]

III) As percussion instruments and drumming is a distinct feature of the Kerala soundscape (Viswanathan & Allen, 2004), some of the common percussion instruments should be highlighted, referring to their use in religious rituals and in dance drama.

“Idakka”
i) Listen to recording
ii) Compare the Idakka to the West African talking drums. (See picture of the Idakka (Viswanathan & Allen, 2004, p.104)

“Padchawadyam”
i) Listen to recording
ii) Clap with the Illatalam
iii) On repeated listening, draw a listening chart for the Illatalam and the Kombu (See pictures of the instruments – from liner notes of Music from South India-Kerala, p.3)

IV) Extension activity
Video – Vanaprastham: The last dance.
Select segments to show:
i) Chenda and other percussion instruments accompanying Kathakali,
ii) Kathakali training,
iii) Kathakali performances,
iv) Relationship between singer and dancer.
Reference