

**ADDRESS BY USHA CHANDRADAS, NOMINATED MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT  
AT LAUNCH OF MA MUSIC THERAPY PROGRAMME AND MUSIC THERAPY  
SYMPOSIUM 2024**

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Good morning everyone, thank you so much for this kind invitation to join you at today's Music Therapy Symposium – I'm truly honoured to be here today. Today, LASALLE officially launches its MA in Music Therapy Programme, and it's the very first of its kind in Singapore.

Looking at our wider present environment, it's actually a very exciting time for the creative therapies and arts and wellness initiatives. Mental health has been at the forefront of Singapore's consciousness and it's been the subject of debates in Parliament. We've had recognition from no less than the DPM (and soon to be PM Mr Lawrence Wong) that "*the Government is making mental health and well-being a key priority in our national agenda.*" Resources are being applied accordingly "*to plug existing gaps and strengthen the ecosystem*" that we presently have.

In case you're wondering what I'm doing here and why I am giving this speech today – first of all, I'm LASALLE alumnus too – I graduated from the MA programme in Asian Art histories in 2017, and last year I was appointed as Nominated Member of Parliament looking after the arts. During the mental health motion which was debated in Parliament earlier this year, more than 20 MPs spoke up to offer their views. I too made a speech, and I spoke on the important role of the creative therapies in mental health. At the end of the debate, I was extremely heartened that the Ministry of Health (MOH) acknowledged that arts-based interventions are important tools in our national mental wellness strategy. MOH stated expressly that it would be willing to engage with arts-based therapists and arts wellness communities on potential regulation and access.

During the even more recent budget debates, the Ministry of Culture, Community & Youth announced a collaboration with the Agency for Integrated Care, and SingHealth to develop a framework and resources to guide the design of programmes that promote the arts for health and wellbeing. The framework, to be developed by 2027, will include best practices, impact measurement tools and case studies that can be used by artists and community partners. While it will initially focus on the wellbeing of senior citizens, there are plans for these initiatives to subsequently expand their scope to reach wider groups of people.

So really to summarise, what we have been seeing this year is a clear and positive movement towards the wider acceptance of creative therapies as an important device in our national arsenal of tools to promote better mental well-being.

In preparing for this speech I had the privilege of speaking to Eta Lauw and Dr Tan Xueli. You'll be hearing more from Xueli later, she was also a key contributor to and developer of the syllabus of the new MA programme—they are both from the Association of Music Therapy Singapore (AMTS). I was really struck by the sense of utter selflessness that they both expressed towards their work. The AMTS was founded in 2007 and its members have been working tirelessly to advocate for the music therapy profession for decades. Eta and Xueli both told me very passionately, about their work.

Their skills are frankly astounding in terms of breadth and depth— Xueli herself told me that in addition to playing instruments, she used to be able to sing in 11 different languages. Eta told me about her work with dementia patients and about how music is able to help them to express themselves and exercise a kind of “muscle memory” to be cognitively present again, even if just for a fleeting moment. And what an amazing gift this is, to give families a chance to be with their loved ones again and to see their minds spark back to life, even if their bodies and other faculties are failing in different ways. Eta talked about her work with an elderly Malay-speaking gentleman with dementia and how she was able to bond with him and deliver her therapies through songs like *Bengawan Solo* – and this is the power of music; it is so emotive and transcendental, and has the ability to overcome all kinds of other differences that may exist between us.

This new music therapy MA programme commences at an exciting and opportune time indeed. New entrants will be amongst the first in their field to venture forward with this brand new local accreditation. Will the journey moving forward be tough? I have no doubt it will be. Pioneers in every field always have the hardest time, because they do the hard work of paving the way forward for future generations.

Coming from my own experience as LASALLE alumnus, I also have no doubt that there is no better place than LASALLE (and now, the University of the Arts) to acquire all the skills necessary to survive and thrive in the face of whatever challenges may come. New aspiring music therapists will also have the AMTS behind them, a dedicated and inspiring group of practicing music therapists who will no doubt lead by example and shine a torch to light the way forward for the new students who will emerge from this programme.

I'd like to end with a quote that Xueli shared with me about how music therapy is fundamentally about being of service to others -- it's a quote developed by visual artist, academic and activist Lilla Watson together with an Aboriginal Rights group in Queensland, and it says "*If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.*"

I particularly loved how this quote reflects that the practice of music therapy is about bringing strength to beneficiaries together – that it is not about the delivery of help *per se*, but about the ability to use music to be in the service of others, through the development of self-empowerment. It is a truly selfless journey that has the ability to transcend the sometimes – artificial constructs of language, educational levels and socio-economic background.

With that, all that is left for me to do is congratulate LASALLE and its incoming students on the launch of the new MA in music therapy – to the students and staff -- I wish you all the very best and look forward to your valuable contributions to Singapore society in the years to come.