

**KEYNOTE SPEECH BY TAN XUELI, PHD, MT-BC
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AT LAUNCH OF MA MUSIC THERAPY PROGRAMME AND MUSIC THERAPY
SYMPOSIUM 2024**

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It's About Time: Anchoring the Profession Launching the Discipline

Good morning everyone. Although I stand alone before you, the truth is, I bring with me an entire entourage of music therapists. I am referring to not only those who are present here today at this event; but rather, I am also referring to the many music therapists who have been practicing and advocating for the profession in the country for over 20 years.

As one of the 11 founding members of the Association for Music Therapy Singapore, AMTS, I ask for all founding members to please stand so we can acknowledge you. May I also ask for all music therapists here at the event today to please stand so we can acknowledge you too? Among the 11 founding members, 6 of us are still in the profession.

Music therapy practice in Singapore started way before the formation of our national association in 2007. There were records of the first music therapist, Louise Cheng returning to Singapore to practice after she graduated from the University of Kansas in 1963. We have evidence to show that music therapy practice in the country pre-dates Singapore's independence in 1965.

Some of you in the audience who might have been around for a while, might recognize the names Audrey Ruyters, Eudora Chiu, and May Clulee, who are our pioneer music therapists working with children with special needs in the early 1990s. I, myself, have been practising as a music therapist in Singapore and United States for eight years before the formation of the association.

So a few of us were around throughout the 1990s. But it's only when we reached a critical mass of 11 credentialed music therapists, then we can formalize the creation of an organization. Little would the 11 founding members have imagined, that when we submitted our application to the Registry of Societies on September 19, 2007, that today April 13, 2024 marks one of our profession's most important milestones – the launch of the first music therapy degree program in Singapore.

With our current strength of 54 members, AMTS remains the sole professional music therapy organization in the country. The vision of AMTS is for **ALL people to have access to quality music therapy services in Singapore**. With our mission to **Lead**

the national conversations and efforts in progressing the music therapy profession, services, and education through advocacy, professional development, and governance of standards of ethical practice.

Back in 2019, AMTS created several task forces to help create three documents. One, the Code of Ethics and Professional Standards. Two, Professional Competency Standards. Even though music therapy, like all other forms of creative arts therapies, are currently not formally recognized as an allied health profession in the country, we can still take the initiative to inch our way towards such professional aspirations. We start by governing ourselves first.

The third document we created has a direct impact on the master's program that we are launching today. It is the Proposed Curriculum for Master's Degree document. At that time, we were not certain which university in Singapore might consider offering such a degree. The association was not formally approached by anyone to advise on a curriculum. It was sheer hope and optimism that we were clinging on to. Hope, that if our members work towards a proposed curriculum, so that whenever, and whichever university is ready to start a program, the association is ready to jump onboard. When we have done the work, and laid the foundation for such trajectory, all it takes is for time to pass, for time to happen. It's about time.

Three years ago, in 2021, I met two young persons who were very eager to become music therapists. They were both in their early twenties. Let's call them Jill and Jane. Jill was in her final year of undergraduate studies in general music in the United Kingdom. Her friend, Jane, was teaching piano classes at a music school in Singapore. Jane was trying to save enough money from piano teaching so that she could pursue a music therapy degree overseas, just like her friend Jill.

Earlier this year, Jill updated me that she is in a master's degree program in music therapy and about to finish and return to Singapore at the end of the year. Coincidentally, Jane also got in touch with me because she wanted to observe music therapy sessions at my workplace. Through a brief chat during her visit, I found out that Jane was still teaching piano classes, and still trying to save money to pay for her music therapy education overseas.

Over a span of three years, I see one young person moving forward to pursue her teenage dream of becoming a music therapist. And another young person, equally passionate, equally talented and diligent, having to overcome much more obstacles, not even nearing her goal of enrolling in a music therapy program any time soon.

Launching this Master's degree programme today will make a prominent difference in the life of someone like Jane. For those of you in the audience, if you have to take on another career because back when you were ready to enter university, there was no music therapy degree program; for those of you who heard about music therapy in

your secondary school days, and wonder if it is something you can pursue when you turn 19 or 20; we know you have been waiting. I give you permission to bang on an imaginary table in front of you and say “It’s about time!” Music therapists in Singapore have been anchoring the profession for the last 20 years, it is about time to launch the discipline today.

My fellow music therapy colleagues, we know that we will never stop talking about music therapy. The people at my workplace, St. Luke’s Hospital, know that I will even talk to a fire hydrant about music therapy. It is ingrained into the fabric of our professional being.

It is not about those moments when we feel a need to correct others calling us “music ladies,” or having to explain to an elevator full of people seeing us carry our guitars and drums to the hospital wards that we are not putting up a “band performance for the tea break at 3 o’clock.”

It is about those moments when you get to witness something in your sessions. It is not difficult for you, I am sure, if I ask you to conjure up a memory of a patient, a student, or a client whom you’ve worked with. Maybe it is that brief spark of humanity that you manage to draw out from a patient with advance dementia through your music. That fleeting moment of social connection via music with an autistic child. That last utterance from a dying patient to his family is his singing of his favourite songs. We all have such stories to tell.

I remember my very first patient as a music therapy student in my first clinical placement. It was 30 years ago, in 1994. I was posted to a psychiatric hospital in downtown Miami, Florida. My patient had schizophrenia. He’s a Cuban refugee who ended up in Miami. He did not speak English, and I, at that time, did not know any words in Spanish. I don’t remember his name, but I remember very well what he looked like. His beard, his baggy jeans, and his happiness whenever he hears his favourite song *Guantanamera*. We managed a whole semester of therapy sessions; the diversity in our languages did not hinder the connection we were able to form through songs and music. All music therapists have such stories to tell.

As the great American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou said, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.” My fellow music therapy colleagues, we must promise to continue telling our patients’ stories.

And now we have a new mission starting in August – to encourage and empower the new batch of music therapy students coming into the program to create such patient stories of their own. I do caution you to treat the students with care, you never know, they might remember their stories for the next 30 years.

I hope, by now, it is quite evident that I don't stand up here alone today. I bring with me all the music therapists who had come before me, and those who are here with me today.

This launch today unites us further. We are no longer several generations of music therapists who came into the profession in the last 17 years. Today, we are the first generation to witness the start of a local training program. We are the first generation of clinical supervisors providing clinical placements for music therapy students from a local training program.

Lastly, to the first batch of incoming music therapy students, we want to welcome you into the professional practice of music therapy in Singapore. It's a matter of time that I'll also get to address you as "my music therapy colleagues".

Thank you.