Cantonese Choral Artistry:
Practical Inclusion for the BC Music Classroom

BCMEA Conference 2026 — Workshop Handout
Man Li, M.Mus. (manlimusic.com)
Vancouver Cantonese Choir (@vancantonesechoir)

Framing Inclusion & BC Classroom Demographics

1. BC Classroom Demographics & Community Context

According to **Statistics Canada (2021 Census of Population)**, Cantonese is the third most widely spoken non-official language in British Columbia:

- **2021 Census Data (BC Total):** 156,465 people report speaking Cantonese (*Yue*) most often at home, with an additional 50,595 speaking it regularly (totaling over 207,000 speakers across the province).
- **Regional Concentration:** The majority of Cantonese-speaking households are concentrated within Metro Vancouver and the Lower Mainland (e.g., Vancouver, Richmond, Burnaby, Coquitlam).
- **Bridging Home and School:** BC music classrooms reflect these demographics through a rich mix of fluent speakers, heritage language learners, and students encountering Cantonese for the first time. Programming Cantonese repertoire reflects students' lived experiences, fostering cultural representation and a sense of belonging within school music programs.
- **Accessible Literature:** Contemporary Cantonese composers are actively writing accessible, high-quality works designed specifically for school ensembles—making it straightforward for directors to integrate culturally responsive literature across elementary, middle, and high school choirs.

2. Pedagogy: Applying the Three-Block Model of UDL (Katz 2012)

Incorporating Cantonese repertoire aligns directly with Jennifer Katz's **Three-Block Model of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**, offering a structured framework for inclusive music-making:

- **Block 1: Social & Emotional Learning (Belonging & Identity)**
  Singing in a student's home language validates their identity and fosters intercultural fluency across the choir. Establishing a low-risk environment for exploring new speech sounds (such as unreleased p,t,k stops) reduces vocal anxiety and builds ensemble trust.

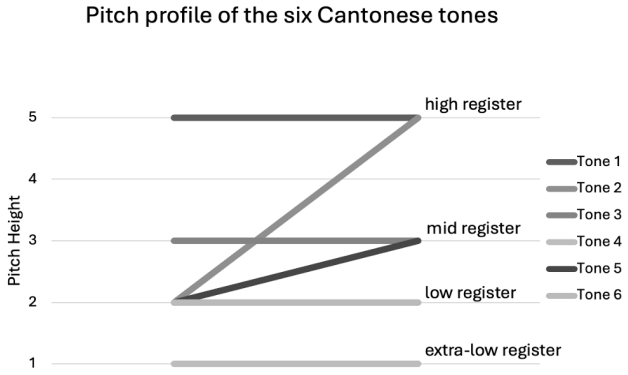
- **Block 2: Inclusive Instructional Practice (Multiple Entry Points)**
  The 4-step rehearsal sequence provides multi-modal access to the music. Students who struggle with standard sight-reading can engage through rhythmic monotone speech, while those with strong ear-training absorb melodic contours quickly through Word-Tone Alignment (WTA).

- **Block 3: Systems & Structures (Flexible Curriculum & Materials)**
  Utilizing works with adaptable voicings (from Unison/SA to SATB) allows directors to program culturally responsive repertoire that scales easily to changing enrollment and diverse learner needs.

Decoding Tonal Language (Word-Tone Alignment)

Cantonese is a 6-tone language where relative pitch height and direction define word meaning. Contemporary composers use **Word-Tone Alignment (WTA)**, matching musical melodic lines directly to spoken pitch contours.

The 6 Cantonese Tones



	Pitch height	Register
Tone 1	[55] (Level)	High
Tone 2	[25] (Contour)	High
Tone 3	[33] (Level)	Mid
Tone 4	[11] (Level)	Extra-low
Tone 5	[23] (Contour)	Mid
Tone 6	[22] (Level)	Low

- **Tone 1:** si1 — High Level (詩 Poem)
- **Tone 2:** si2 — High Rising (史 History)
- **Tone 3:** si3 — Mid Level (試 Try)
- **Tone 4:** si4 — Extra-Low Level (時 Time)
- **Tone 5:** si5 — Low-Mid Rising (市 Market)
- **Tone 6:** si6 — Low Level (事 Matter)

Why Tone Accuracy Matters: Malapropisms (唱出界)

- **Example #1**
  校長 (hau6 zoeng2) — *School Principal*
  姣象 (hau4 zoeng6) — *Flirty Elephant*
- **Example #2**
  主 (zyu2) — *Lord*
  豬 (zyu1) — *Pig*

Pedagogical Bonus — The Melody Speed Hack:

> Because Cantonese choral music uses **Word-Tone Alignment**, the melodic line naturally mirrors spoken pitch contours. Once students get the speech tones into muscle memory, they learn and retain the written melody significantly faster than standard non-tonal music.

Three Core Diction Features

1. **Unreleased Stop Consonants (p,t,k / 入聲):** Syllables ending in p, t, or k block airflow at the vocal tract without releasing plosive air bursts.

2. **Rising Contour Tones (Tones 2 & 5):** Executed as a quick, smooth pitch inflection moving upward on the beat within a diatonic step. Modern scores notate these with grace notes or glide symbols before the principal pitch.

3. **Diphthongs & Vowel Continuity:** Prolong the primary vowel (V_1) for the majority of the note value and transition to the secondary vowel (V_2) at the very end of the syllable. Applies as a general rule for choral stylistic treatment unless otherwise specified in the score.

The Rehearsal Sequence

- **For Directors Fluent in Cantonese:**
  Skip monotone speech! Demonstrate natural spoken sentences with full inflections and have the choir echo-read after your voice.

- **For Directors Learning or New to Cantonese:**
  Use the 4-step sequence below. Monotone speech isolates p,t,k stops and vowel continuity without requiring you to model spoken tones, allowing the composer's written melody to guide pitch accuracy.

1.Learn the Pitches：Build musical confidence on a neutral syllable

Singers learn the written pitch framework and harmony on a neutral syllable (e.g., *loo* or *mah*) to lock in pitch accuracy first.

2.Rhythmic Monotone Speech：Isolate diction without pitch confusion

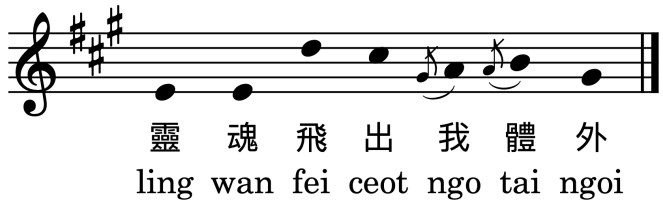
Speak the text on a single monotone pitch in exact rhythm. Focus on unreleased stop cut-offs (p, t, k) and delaying off-glide vowels. (Directors fluent in Cantonese may substitute this step with direct echo-reading).

3.Text & Pitch Integration：Merge lyrics directly with written notes

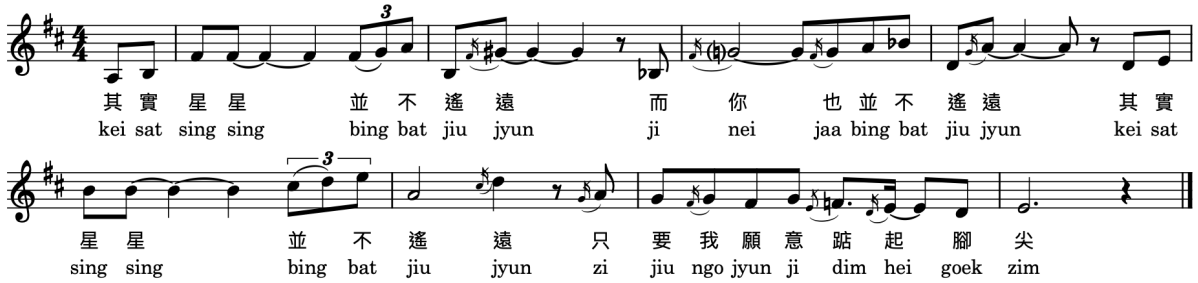
Apply the Cantonese text directly to the learned pitches. Word-Tone Alignment automatically handles Tones 1, 3, 4, and 6.

4.Add Rising Tone Inflections：Apply Tones 2 & 5 glides

Add the quick upward pitch inflections on Tones 2 and 5 (notated with grace notes or glide symbols) without destabilizing breath support.

Excerpt #1：**Man Li - Soul is Leaving My Body**《靈魂飛出我體外》

Text / Jyutping / IPA / Literal translation / Poetic translation

靈	魂	飛	出	我	體	外
ling	wan	fei	ceot	ngo	tai	ngoi
leŋ4	wɐn4	feiˍ1	t͡sʰɵt̚1	ŋɔː5	tʰɐiˍ2	ŋɔːiˍ6
soul / spirit		fly	out of	my	body	outside
My soul is leaving my body.						

Excerpt #2：**Man Li - Reaching for the Star**
《其實星星並不遙遠 只要你願意踮起腳尖》

Text / Jyutping / IPA / Literal translation / Poetic translation

1

其	實	星	星	並	不	遙	遠
kei	sat	sing	sing	bing	bat	jiu	jyun
kheiˍ4	sɐt̚6	sɪŋ1	sɪŋ1	piŋ6	pɐt̚1	jɐuˍ4	jyːn5
In fact		stars		not at all		far away	
Stars are not far away,							

2

而	你	也	並	不	遙	遠
ji	nei	jaa	bing	bat	jiu	jyun
jiː4	neiꜜ5	jaː5	piŋ6	pɐt̄1	jɐuꜜ4	jyːn5
and	you	also	not at all		far away	
and you are closer still,						

3

其	實	星	星	並	不	遙	遠
kei	sat	sing	sing	bing	bat	jiu	jyun
kheiꜜ4	sɐt̄6	sɪŋ1	sɪŋ1	piŋ6	pɐt̄1	jɐuꜜ4	jyːn5
In fact		stars		not at all		far away	
Stars are not far away,							

4

只	要	我	願	意	踮	起	腳	尖
zi	jiu	ngo	jyun	ji	dim	hei	goek	zim
tsi2	jɐuꜜ3	ŋɔːˊ5	jyːn6	jiː3	dim2	hei2	kʊɛk̄3	tsim1
as long as		I	am willing to		stand up on		tiptoes	
for I am willing to stand on tiptoe to reach for thee.								

Recommended Works for School Choirs

Alex Tam (譚天樂)

- The Elephant Dance (大笨象) — SSA
- The Pi Song (圓周率) — SSA
- No Woundless World (沒有沒有傷口的宇宙) — SSA / SATB

Austin Yip (葉浩堃)

- Run on, Ding Ding (彳亍叮叮) — SSSAAA
- Says Yasi (也斯說) — SATB

Cheuk-Yin Ng (伍卓賢)

- A Tale from the Magical Beanland (豆芽國) — SSA / SATB
- Singing the Voices of the World (我唱出了世界的聲音) — Mandarin — SSA / SATB

Ernest Hui (許榮臻)

- Beneath the Same Moonlight (同一抹朗月) — SA / TB / SAB / SSA / TTB / SATB / SSAA / TTBB
- When the Stars Wish Upon You (星星許的願) — SSA / SATB

Jason Liu (廖梓丞)

- I believe (信) — SATB

Kai-Young Chan (陳啟揚)

- Psalm 23 (詩篇二十三篇) — SSA / SATB / TTB
- From the Chrysalis (囹語：繭中蝶) — SSA / SATB / SAB
- Maybe You Have Grown Weary of Weeping (也許) — SSA / SATB / TTB

Man Li (李旻禧)

- Reaching for the Star (其實星星並不遙遠 只要你願意踮起腳尖) — SAB / SSA / TBB

Steve Ho (何崇志)

- In One Accord (只有和聲) — Unison / SA / SSA / SATB
- Merry Go Round (冚冚轉) — SA
- MTR Song (請勿靠近車門) — SSA
- Moonlight Lullaby (月光光) — SA / SSA / SAB / SATB
- Kung Fu (功夫) — SA / SSAA / TBB / SATB

Victor Li (李唯德)

- Hopter (竹蜻蜓) — SATB

Victor Wai-Kwong Chan (陳偉光)

- Autumn Night (秋夜) — SSA

Databases

Database of Cantonese Choral Works
https://choral.cantonesecomposition.com

Cantonese Christian Choral Database
https://choirdb.hk/?srsltid=AfmBOornU5Pqn-4DVfTILve29PXdPeymzulPgq796sT9aadrUARISFXC

Publishers

Chinese University of Hong Kong Chorus
https://www.cuchorus.org.hk/scores?lang=en

Hong Kong Children's Choir
https://www.hkcchoir.org/tc/songbooks

Hong Kong Inter-School Choral Festival
https://hkicf.com/commission-premieres/

Universal Edition
https://www.universaledition.com/en/Works/Constraints-Creativity/P0285697

Leadingnote Music Publications (by levels)
https://stevehomusic.sellfy.store

Resources for Learning Cantonese

Jyutping Converter
https://jyutping.net/converter

Learning Jyutping
https://jyutping.org/en/learn/

Cantonese Pronunciation Database
https://jyut.net/

Chinese Character Database: With Word-formations, Phonetically Disambiguated According to the Cantonese Dialect
https://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/Lexis/lexi-can/

Wing Font
https://wing-font.chunlaw.io

Cantonese Creative Suite: Cantonese Melody Generator
https://app.cantonesecomposition.com

Further Readings:

Cantonese Choral Music & Composition Techniques

Chan, Kai-Young. “From Constraints to Creativity: Musical Inventions through Cantonese Contours in Hong Kong Contemporary Music.” *Principles of Music Composing: Phenomenon of Creativity* 21 (2021): 41–59.

Chan, Kai-Young. “Writing Choral Music in a Tone Language: Problems, Practices and Potentialities.” *Tempo* 80, no. 312 (forthcoming).

Kwok, Yee Yan Michelle. “Cantonese Choral Music: Development, Learning Diction with Jyutping, and Performance Suggestions.” *DM diss.*, Indiana University, 2025.

Winzenburg, John. “Bridging ‘Local’ and ‘International’: Emerging Notational and Performance Practices in Cantonese Choral Music.” Keynote paper presented at the symposium *Composition and Performance of Cantonese Contemporary Music*, Hong Kong, April 29, 2023.

Word-Tone Alignment & Linguistic Foundations

Bauer, Robert S., and Paul K. Benedict. *Modern Cantonese Phonology*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997.

Chan, Marjorie K. M. “Tone and Melody in Cantonese.” *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 13 (1987): 26–37.

Hung, Shin-Fung. “From Singing ‘Out-of-Tone’ to Creating Contextualized Cantonese Contemporary Worship Songs: Hong Kong in the Decentralization of Chinese Christianity.” *Religions* 15, no. 6 (2024): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060698.

Lee, Jason. “Tone-Melody Correspondence in Cantopop: Patterns of Directionality and Interval Size from a Corpus Study.” *Empirical Musicology Review* 20 (2026): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.18061/emr.6598.

Inclusive Music Pedagogy & Demographics

Katz, Jennifer. *Teaching to Diversity: The Three-Block Model of Universal Design for Learning*. Winnipeg: Portage & Main Press, 2012.

Statistics Canada. “Non-Official Languages Spoken at Home by Largest Number of People (All Mentions), British Columbia, 2021.” *Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population*. Released August 17, 2022. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/alternative.cfm?topic=6&lang=e&dguid=2021A000259&objectId=6.