

Tuning the Future: Youth, Culture, and Orchestral Possibility in the PYO Ecosystem

Asst Prof Dr Suppabhorn Suwanpakdee

School of Music, Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music, Thailand

Dr Pongthep Jitduangprem

School of Music, Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music, Thailand

Siravith Kongbandalsuk

School of Music, Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music, Thailand

Warinart Pitukwongwan

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand

The Princess Galyani Vadhana International Symposium 2025, Bangkok,
Thailand Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music Youth Orchestra (PYO) is a vibrant musical ecosystem that promotes youth empowerment and cultural exchange. This study explores an interdisciplinary methodology that bridges organisational anthropology and a theory-of-change framework, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The assessment examined PYO's development from 2013 to 2024. Quantitative data from PYO's records show 69 performances, 41 workshops, 18 large-scale events, and engagement with over 1,000 youth participants. Qualitative findings reveal a family-like culture where creativity blossoms and a profound sense of belonging is cultivated. Cross-generational exchanges between young musicians and parents promote social inclusion and education, reinforcing PYO's role as a creative community hub. The results reveal that PYO is a living model of a sustainable orchestra that empowers youth and bridges communities through music. Ultimately, PYO's journey highlights how diverse voices can unite in harmony, transforming a youth orchestra into a wonderland, a powerful vehicle where diversity thrives through shared learning, inspiration, and unity.

Keywords: PYO, Youth Orchestra, Youth Empowerment

Introduction

The Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music Youth Orchestra (PYO) is a flagship cultural initiative of the Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music (PGVIM), established in 2013 to support young Thai talents through international-level orchestral experience (Figure 1). The PYO project aligns with the institute's mission through PYO's nurturing of musical excellence while developing creativity, personal growth, and community connection. It promotes broader public engagement with music and advances interdisciplinary research through collaboration. Operating as a semi-professional ensemble, PYO adopts a concert season model, featuring intensive rehearsals and performances led by national and international guest conductors, and incorporating orchestral expertise. More than an orchestra, PYO serves as an evolving platform for artistic exploration and societal contribution, embodying the spirit of the *PYO Experience: Explore, Exchange, Excel*.



Figure 1 PYO Inaugural Concert was on 4 November 2013, at PGVIM.

Youth orchestras are increasingly recognised as powerful tools for musical development and social change. Youth orchestras such as Venezuela's El Sistema demonstrate how access to orchestral training can empower young people from diverse backgrounds, reduce social inequalities, and strengthen communities through artistic expression (Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar, 2024). In the Thai context, PYO represents an adaptation of this model, integrating musical excellence with cultural participation and national identity.

Scholars in organisational anthropology highlight the importance of understanding cultural practices within institutions, especially in education and the arts (Bate, 1997; Garsten, 2013). This framework provides insights into how organisational rituals, leadership patterns, and symbolic systems shape youth experience and community building within ensembles like PYO.

Jordan and Caulkins (2012) argue that such anthropological perspectives are essential in decoding how learning spaces function as cultural systems, particularly in non-Western contexts. Moreover, contemporary Theories of Change (ToC) emphasise the participatory design and systems thinking in evaluating impact (Clark & Anderson, 2024). In PYO's case, this approach illuminates not just outputs—such as concerts or workshops—but also long-term effects on youth agency, community cohesion, and cultural policy alignment.

Research in music education by Hallam (2010) and Rabinowitch et al. (2013) highlights how inclusive, ensemble-based programmes foster empathy, social confidence, and a sense of belonging among youth—outcomes that resonate strongly with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), aligning closely with the ethos of the Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music Youth Orchestra (PYO). These findings support the view of youth orchestras as socio-cultural ecosystems that can serve as transformative learning environments.

Contemporary Theories of Change (ToC), such as those proposed by Clark and Anderson (2024), further reinforce this perspective by emphasising participatory design and systems thinking to assess not only tangible outputs like concerts and workshops, but also long-term impacts on youth agency, community cohesion, and cultural policy engagement. PYO's evolution offers a compelling case study of how music, community, and shared purpose can unite and empower young people in Thailand.

This study examines (1) the evolution and impact of PYO from 2013 to 2024, and (2) proposes strategies to enhance PYO's management and operations. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study evaluates both performance activities and institutional practices, incorporating in-depth interviews with stakeholders involved with PYO in different capacities to explore the orchestra's outcomes and broader significance.

Methodology

The study was conducted by framing organisational anthropology (Bate, 1997), and a new theory of change (United Nations Development Group, 2017) to investigate the first decade of PYO's operations. The research examines the development and impact using a mixed-methods approach. In total, there were 39 participants selected by purposive sampling. These individuals fell into three groups: 1) administrators and experts, 2) alumni and current members, and 3) parents and audience members closely involved with the orchestra. Data collection tools included semi-structured interviews and document analysis forms. The analysis synthesised field and archival data

in a structured way, connecting cultural phenomena with sustainable transformation. The study was carried out in three phases: preparation, data collection, and analysis, with ethical considerations integrated throughout. All materials will be archived in the Institute’s digital repository as a historical and cultural resource for future learning.

Results

The outcomes and insights from PYO’s first decade, highlighting both quantitative achievements and qualitative results, are discussed in the context of relevant United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Overall, PYO’s activity scope and reach have grown impressively.

Quantitative Achievements

PYO delivered 68 concerts spanning 12 annual seasons, including regular season performances and special celebratory events. Over 1,200 young musicians have participated in PYO’s programmes, including orchestra members, competition participants, and workshop attendees. Each concert season holds open auditions for students from diverse schools and universities, selecting around 60–70 young musicians each year and providing them the opportunity to perform orchestral repertoire at a high level. PYO organised 41 workshops, masterclasses, and music camps featuring professional guest artists, all designed to develop musical skills, cultivate personal growth, and enhance ensemble performance techniques among the youth. PYO also hosted 18 large-scale events, including concert tours and joint programmes. It represented Thailand in high-profile cultural events, such as the celebration of 45 years of Thai–Chinese diplomatic relations in 2020 (Figure 2), participation in the Splash, Thailand Soft Power project that promoted Thailand’s soft power campaign, and engagement in other international exchange and collaboration programmes (Figure 3).

Over the years, PYO has invited 37 renowned guest conductors and 37 soloists or guest artists for international collaborations and has partnered with youth ensembles abroad. For instance, the 2025 Tribute project united PYO with Germany’s Studio Musikfabrik and the Lübeck University of Music, enabling a cross-cultural musical exchange that bridged the musical traditions of both countries (Figure 4). This expansion of partnerships to a global network has provided invaluable exposure to diverse musical traditions.



Figure 2 China–Thai 45th Diplomatic Relation Concert, The Dawn of Spring Concert 9 December 2020, Thai National Theatre.



Figure 3 Splash, Thailand Soft Power, 10 July 2025, at Queen Sirikit National Convention Center, Bangkok.

PYO’s record underscores a focus on performance excellence and community outreach. By the end of 2024, PYO had amassed a diverse repertoire of over 200 pieces, ranging from classical masterworks to new compositions, reflecting a commitment to both tradition and innovation. Equally important, the orchestra established itself as a sustainable institution, in line with the vision of HRH Princess Galyani Vadhana to raise Thai musical youth to international standards.



Figure 4 Tribute concert was on 4 April 2025, Kunststation St. Peter, in Köln, Germany.

Qualitative Findings: Cultivating Creativity, Belonging, and Community

Insights from stakeholder interviews, including alumni, current members, parents, and staff, reveal that PYO's impact extends far beyond what can be understood from quantitative analysis. Several emergent themes characterise the PYO experience and its social significance. For creativity and musical innovation, PYO can be described as a powerful musical vehicle—a platform where young musicians are encouraged to explore new sounds and ideas through experimental programming. The orchestra not only performs standard repertoire but also premieres new works by Thai and international composers, for example, the PYO Call for Score competition, and explores contemporary pieces. This creative environment empowers youth to take artistic risks and express themselves. In later seasons, PYO placed greater emphasis on new music creation within social contexts, integrating activities such as commissioned works and site-specific performances. Such experiences spark innovation and keep the orchestral art form vibrant and relevant for participants.

Interviews revealed a strong sense of belonging and a family atmosphere among PYO members. The programme gradually nurtures an inclusive, supportive culture where every young musician feels seen, heard, and valued, regardless of background. Bringing together youth from different schools and socio-economic backgrounds, PYO breaks down social barriers and forges lasting friendships. As one inclusive music advocate notes, a diverse ensemble enables young people to form meaningful connections without the usual social divisions, instilling a sense of belonging. Many interviewees described PYO as a family. Alumni often stay in touch long after

they graduate, returning to collaborate on music or to support each other's musical journeys. "What I really like is the feeling that PYO is a family," said one former administrator, noting that even after moving on, "the kids who used to be in it still keep in touch, inviting each other to play music outside. It shows the warm relationships." This familial culture has tangible outcomes: several PYO alumni have remained involved by taking on roles as junior staff, stage managers, or co-project coordinators with the orchestra, helping to mentor the next generation. The welcoming atmosphere undoubtedly boosts the confidence and well-being of the youths, echoing findings that inclusive musical groups encourage kindness, support, and compassion in young people.

Cross-Generational Interaction

PYO's activities have bridged generational gaps by engaging not just youngsters but also their families and the wider community. The orchestra actively welcomed family members and community audiences into its events, helping to create deeper shared musical experiences. At one outdoor riverside concert, families and community members joined a festive gathering with music and even appeared in commemorative photos that still hang in their homes. These cross-generational exchanges through music helped strengthen family bonds and community support. Parents interviewed expressed appreciation for PYO, as it provided a healthy, family-friendly activity that everyone could enjoy together, with easy accessibility. By uniting youth, parents, teachers, and community members, PYO created a broader musical community, rather than an isolated, elite group.

Community Relevance and Social Inclusion

From an organisational anthropology perspective, PYO functions as a musical ecosystem within its community. It challenges the elitist norms often associated with classical music by expanding access and participation. PYO recruits from a broad pool of young talent, including those who might not otherwise have access to advanced music training, thereby reducing inequalities in arts education. The orchestra also extended its reach through community outreach concerts in public spaces, bringing performances to parks and cultural events to engage new audiences. These efforts align with the notion that music can serve as a tool for social inclusion. Venezuela's famous El Sistema youth orchestra programme similarly utilised free classical music education to integrate at-risk youth, yielding clear social outcomes, including improved quality of life for participants and their families, and stronger communities through music (Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar, 2024).

PYO's experience mirrors this; interview data indicate improved confidence, discipline, and leadership in participating youth, as well as greater public interest in classical music in Bangkok and beyond. As one stakeholder noted, PYO has become a space where diverse young voices unite in shared learning and a spirit of harmony, demonstrating that orchestral music can blossom in an inclusive setting.

PYO as an Inclusive Musical Ecosystem

Combining the above themes, PYO is a holistic ecosystem for music education that also promotes social development. It simultaneously nurtures musical excellence and personal growth, operating with a structure that encourages youth leadership and broad participation. An analysis through an organisational anthropology lens reveals that PYO's core values and practices centre on equality, youth empowerment, and collaborative learning. The shared vision of the organisation—to develop young Thai musicians to international standards while building community—has enabled PYO to adapt and flourish in its operations.

Key factors contributing to PYO's success include:

1) a semi-professional support system in which managers, coaches, and invited conductors give young players a flavour of professional orchestral life while still in a learning environment.

2) emphasis on learning and mentoring, where older or more experienced members mentor newcomers, and faculty or orchestral experts provide guidance that flattens traditional hierarchies and empowers youth to take ownership.

3) ongoing innovation in programming and projects, which keeps the orchestra's activities fresh and engaging, ranging from standard repertoire concerts to multimedia storytelling performances and contemporary music.

4) a focus on social values, respect, teamwork, and inclusion as much as on musical technique. In PYO's inclusive culture, "*there are no rights or wrongs.*" Every member is encouraged to contribute and express themselves without fear of criticism, illustrating how the environment cultivates confidence and leadership in the young musicians.

International collaborations further promote cultural exchange. Members of PYO participated in the 2025 Tribute project that partnered with Germany's Studio Musikfabrik and Lübeck University of Music, exemplifying how music bridges differences across borders. This collaborative spirit is a hallmark of PYO's ecosystem. Through projects like *Tribute*, young musicians learned to communicate across cultures and discovered "the power of music

as a unifying force that bridges all differences.” Such experiences not only develop musical skills but also encourage global awareness, empathy, and partnership skills among young musicians, outcomes that traditional music training alone may not achieve.

In summary, PYO’s model has transformed it into a vibrant community of practice where diversity is celebrated and young talent flourishes in unison. It serves as a working example of how a youth orchestra can function as a social programme, providing quality arts education, promoting inclusion, and engaging the broader community. This dual impact makes PYO an innovative model in the realm of music education and cultural organisations.

Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals

The analysis of PYO’s first decade reveals a strong alignment with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, underscoring the broader significance of its work. In particular, the outcomes correspond to

SDG 4: Quality Education is addressed by PYO’s nurturing of holistic youth development through intensive orchestral training and creative exploration. Beyond technical skill, young musicians develop discipline, teamwork, and self-confidence—key 21st-century competencies. Research confirms that inclusive music programmes promote emotional well-being, self-esteem, and social cohesion (Hallam, 2010). PYO’s outreach and free participation model make arts learning accessible, supporting SDG 4’s goal of equitable, lifelong education for all.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities is achieved by the use of auditions and a commitment to diversity, PYO bridges socio-economic divides. Inspired by global models like *El Sistema*, the orchestra empowers underrepresented youth from both rural and urban communities. Participants from elite schools rehearse alongside peers with fewer resources, forming a shared musical community. In doing so, PYO promotes mutual respect and opportunity, advancing SDG 10’s aim to reduce inequality within and among populations.

SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals is reflected in the fact that collaboration lies at the heart of PYO’s model. Domestically, the orchestra collaborates with schools, universities, and cultural institutions; internationally, it fosters connections with ensembles across Europe and Asia. These partnerships enable exchange, innovation, and cross-cultural dialogue. With sustained support from the government, the private sector, and community allies, PYO reflects the spirit of SDG 17, demonstrating how music can build enduring, cross-sector networks for development and diplomacy.

Future Outlook: Toward a Sustainable Orchestral Model

To ensure PYO's continued impact, five key strategies are proposed. These are now briefly explained.

1) Expand community outreach and access. PYO can deepen its community role by organising concerts in schools, provinces, and public spaces. Bringing classical music into everyday settings will engage broader audiences and inspire the next generation.

2) Enhance leadership and professional development. PYO should offer structured training in event planning, conducting, and peer mentorship to prepare youth as future cultural leaders. Integrating these practices into PGVIM's curriculum would enrich student learning and support the institute's mission of excellence in music education and real-world readiness.

3) Promote regional and international networks. To elevate its international role, PYO could initiate regional camps and collaborations with young musicians from other countries. Touring and exchange programmes would promote intercultural understanding and position PYO as a hub for international youth orchestras, aligning with SDG 17.

4) Sustain and diversify funding and support. Diversifying funding from government, private sponsors, alumni, and cultural partners will sustain PYO's mission. Strengthening community and alumni engagement will also reinforce public ownership and investment in the orchestra's future.

5) Continuous monitoring and evaluation. Using a ToC approach, PYO tracks outcomes in skill development, alumni progress, and community engagement. Regular assessment will ensure the model remains responsive to youth needs and aligned with social change goals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the first decade of the Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music Youth Orchestra showcases a powerful model of an inclusive, creative, and socially engaged group of young people. The results reveal that PYO has successfully fulfilled its initial mission of nurturing young Thai musicians to a high standard while simultaneously delivering broader social benefits in line with sustainable development ideals. The analysis, conducted through organisational anthropology and theory-of-change frameworks, highlights that PYO's impact is both systemic and sustainable. It has built a vibrant community of practice that extends to families and society, influencing attitudes toward music and education in Thailand. With the recommended strategies for its next decade, PYO is well-positioned to be a leader in youth orchestral development. It stands out as a vibrant vehicle of creativity where diversity truly thrives in unison. PYO can serve as an inspirational model for

policymakers and music educators in reimagining the future of orchestral culture—one that champions artistic excellence, thereby creating lasting value for individuals and communities. By continuing this path, PYO is not only orchestrating music but also orchestrating positive change.

Acknowledgement

We warmly thank the PGVIM, home of PYO, and its Presidents, Khunying Wongchan Phinainitisatra, Choowit Yurayong, and Anothai Nitibhon (present), for their enduring vision and unwavering support for the PYO. Our gratitude also extends to government and private sector partners who believe in the arts as a force for human development. We especially recognise the dedication of the PYO operations team, Komsun Dilokkunanant, Tawanrat Mewongukote, Thitima Suksangjun, Nateepat Manuch, Tuchawong Sirisawat, Napim Singtoroj, Guntiga Comenaphatt and all those who have shaped PYO's journey, especially the PGVIM staff. Their efforts have empowered young musicians and shown how music can truly build inclusive, resilient communities. Appreciation goes to Christopher Ireland for English proofreading.

References

- Bate, S. P. (1997). Whatever happened to anthropology? A review of the field of ethnography and anthropological studies. *Human Relations*, 50(9), 1147–1175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872679705000905>
- Clark, H., & Anderson, A. (2024). Theories of change and logic models: Telling them apart. Center for Theory of Change. <https://www.theoryofchange.org>
- Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar. (2024). Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar official website. <https://fundamusical.org.ve>
- Garsten, C., & Nyqvist, A. (2013). *Organizational anthropology: Doing ethnography in and among complex organizations*. Pluto Press.
- Hallam, S. (2010). The power of music: Its impact on the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people. *International Journal of Music Education*, 28(3), 269–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761410370658>
- Jordan, A. T. (2012). Expanding the field of organizational anthropology for the twenty-first century. In A. T. Jordan (Ed.), *A companion to organizational anthropology* (pp. 1–23). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rabinowitch, T.-C., Cross, I., & Burnard, P. (2013). Long-term musical group interaction has a positive influence on empathy in children. *Psychology of Music*, 41(4), 484–498. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735612440609>

United Nations Development Group. (2017). Theory of change for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/theory-change-implementation-2030-agenda>

Biography

The PYO project is the result of a long-standing commitment to music as a bridge between people, cultures, and communities. From 2013 to 2022, Asst Prof Dr Suppabhorn Suwanpakdee served as the founding project director, guided by a deep belief in participatory practice and the power of research to inform social change. In 2023, leadership passed to a new generation, with Dr Pongthep Jitduangprem and Siravith Kongbandalsuk now co-directing the project. Drawing on their rich experience in orchestral mentorship, youth empowerment, and creative collaboration, they continue to lead PYO. Warinart Pitukwongwan, an anthropologist from Sukhothai Thamathirat Open University, provides grounded insights through thoughtful fieldwork and ethnography. Together, the team weaves research, artistry, and stakeholders' voices into a living tapestry, one that continues to grow across Thailand's borderlands and beyond.

1. Assistant Professor Dr Suppabhorn Suwanpakdee
Email: suppabhorn@pgvim.ac.th
2. Dr Pongthep Jitduangprem
Email: pongthep@pgvim.ac.th
3. Siravith Kongbandalsuk
Email: siravith.k@pgvim.ac.th
4. Warinart Pitukwongwan
Email: p.warinart@gmail.com