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Weather: 27-32°C. Hot and sunny. Humidity 70-95% Outlook: cloudy with rain

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Artistically handicapped

Two organisations help disabled people to not only enjoy the arts, but also to participate, writes **John Kang**

Can you imagine a life without the arts? A life without Monet and Michelangelo, Shakespeare, One Direction and Les Misérables would definitely be dull.

Unfortunately, this is a reality for people who have trouble hearing and seeing. The deaf, for example, can't hear music, and the visually impaired, of course, cannot see works of art clearly, if at all.

A local organisation is doing its part to solve this problem. Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong (ADAHK), which was set up in 1986, provides works of art that can be felt, touched, or experienced in other ways. The surfaces of paintings, for instance, are raised so that blind people can feel the brush strokes or outlines. The descriptions are written in Braille.

Usually blind people ask friends to describe artwork to them. But this experience is more personal.

ADAHK also works with Theatre Noir Foundation and puts on shows for deaf people. Some performers are hearing impaired themselves.

"Being able to enjoy the arts is a human right," claims Michele Chung Lai-lowan, ADAHK's programme manager.

Making a "painting" for the blind is not easy. "We first simplify the

painting and translate the key elements into simple lines and outlines with different textures, so that when [blind] people feel it, they can differentiate the different parts," says Chung.

"The textures also give people the general idea of the artwork, and [together] with an audio description, they get a fuller picture."

If an art show has art accessibility ... disabled people will know that you have included them

ADAHK also offers art workshops "for people with different abilities to help them know that they can be artists themselves", says Chung.

Theatre Noir Foundation's performances are a dream come true for some of the performers, says the group's founder and artistic director, William Yip Shun-him.

But how exactly do deaf people sing?

"They can use their bodies," says Yip. "They use sign language to 'sing', and it's really touching to see 30 people doing the same sign. It's like a dance. It comes very naturally to them because they use sign

language every day, and when it's synchronised, it [looks] amazing."

Most people, Yip says, "have a very conventional mindset on how we look at art and the creative process ... Working with people with hearing impairments was good training for me. It helped me to open myself and really listen to what they are talking about".

Chung says ADAHK's main objective is to make the arts inclusive. "If an art show has art accessibility ... [disabled people] will know that you have included them. It's just a human kind of connection," she says.

As for Yip, he hopes that giving deaf performers the chance to take part will break down boundaries between people of different abilities.

"With my non-hearing performers, we do not want to say 'OK, you cannot hear, you have disabilities, so you can do less'," Yip says. "I don't care if you are deaf or you have disabilities. You are a person who wants to make art? Then let's do this right."

"In the arts, we are all equal."

William Yip and Michele Chung with their tactile art.
Photo: May Tse

