

Documenting the Preview Concert and Creative Compositional Process of the Opera Serikandi Nusantara

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This research project is about documenting the preview concert and creative process of composing the Opera Serikandi Nusantara which are using the Malay and Southeast Asian traditional musical elements into creating a new composition for opera. It utilizes materials entitled 'Legendary Princesses of Malaysia' written by Raman and illustrated by Emila Yusof through Modern Compositional Method and Perspective: materials taken out from local Malaysian context and stories and move on to a wider context of music composition, especially international classical contemporary art music; mainly Europeans and North Americans.

Keywords: *opera, contemporary arts; composition; Malaysian music; Opera Serikandi Nusantara;*

Introduction

It is found Malaysia has less produced new original music, especially large-scale composition work (Tajuddin et al., 2021). Following the latest 'Dasar Kreatif Industri Negara' (Malaysian National Fundamentals of Creative Industry), we need more new music that is original and different from the usual Malaysian contemporary popular music scene. Nurturing to create new music needs time and long-term thinking. This project is not just creating new music, but it involves reporting and documenting the process. With this project, new original work will be created using elements of traditional Malay and western compositional techniques. References will also be based on previous composition works such as 'The Study of Arabesque' by Tajuddin (2002).

The outcome will be a concert preview and original music written by a Malaysian composer with an academic commentary explaining the process, compositional method, and concept behind this work. The latter will be disseminated into compositional and performance



workshops and will be presented in composition seminar/s at UiTM and elsewhere; and finally, both documents will be available for future reference in universities music libraries. As for the music notation score it can be performed in the future.

There are two phases in this project. The first phase is 2 months for curating a program for the concert compilation of materials and research works. The second is 6 - 8 months for composing the work and may include disseminating it into workshops and presentations. In total the project is planned for 8 months.

The experimentation in contemporary western music since the 1960s - in pitch, tuning, scales which are in non-equal temperament and new concepts of noise, resonance, and sonority, including using unconventional form, metre, and structure - opened up new possibilities for non-western music concepts to be integrated in new ways in the standard contemporary musical understanding. This project will integrate traditional non-western musical concepts (Malay) into western contemporary music. It will be notated, written, and documented from western and eastern compositional perspectives. Our increasingly multicultural environment should be reflected in artworks created from a synthesis of different techniques and perspectives. This project will treat the western and Malay traditional materials as equally important, rather than viewing the traditional as 'exotic' source material.

This project will address two composer's perspective; 1) How to integrate Malay traditional musical elements of melody, rhythm, metre, and structure into new composition work? And 2) How to integrate the tuning systems, notations, and performance techniques. The objective of this study includes:

- To compose a new music composition work incorporating Malaysian Malay traditional elements, singers, choir, and western instruments. Research materials from Malaysian music will be incorporated and integrated into the musical language of the new composition work.
- To explore how these melodic, rhythmic, metric and structure can be integrated and arranged.
- To document in a commentary, form the process of transformations and integrations from Malay traditional elements to the new composition work.
- To disseminate, through public workshops, rehearsal and performance, the outcomes of the project to composers and research communities.



Literature Review

Musicians may express their creativity in a variety of ways, including performance, improvisation, and composition. However, including ideas that promote creative thinking into music composition may be tricky. Solving challenges, acquiring real-world experience, and improving one's creative thinking are all current hot topics (Ismail et al., 2021; Ismail & Anuar, 2020). Eastern music has long been seen as unique in the western music world. The most obvious example is where Debussy was fascinated by the gamelan music, he encountered at the Paris Exhibition 1889, and his famous quote on this event: '*gamelan music makes Palestrina sound like child's play*' (Sorrel, 1992). Some of his music reflects this, notably the piano piece *Pagodes*.

Later, Benjamin Britten (British composer) visited East Asia in the 1950s and got to know Balinese music through Colin McPhee, a Canadian composer (Cooke, 1998). McPhee himself wrote gamelan transcriptions for two pianos. In the USA, an American composer Lou Harrison was a pioneer who introduced the gamelan to the West Coast and composed works for gamelan and Western instruments. Later the influence of gamelan appeared in the works of American composers such as Steve Reich and others. Contemporary European composers including Salvatore Sciarrino, François-Bernard Mâche and Jean-Yves Bosseur have also written for the gamelan. Ethnomusicologist-composers such as Dieter Mack (Germany) and Alec Roth (UK) have been inspired by traditional Javanese and Balinese music and structures and both have incorporated gamelan and other traditional East Asian instruments in their music. Works by Alec Roth and Geoffrey Poole, as well as one of the researchers' compositions, were performed in a BBC Symphony Orchestra/gamelan education project on 14 February 2004, and work for gamelan and chamber ensemble was performed in Birmingham Conservatoire in 2006, *Opera Puteri Saadong* Makyong elements, gamelan and western instruments (2013-2016), *Topography* for traditional Chinese instruments and Western instruments (2016), *Gamel-Rawak* for solo gamelan (2016), *Princess Bidasari* (2021), *Ulek Mayang* (2021)..

After World War II, composers from East Asia started to look to the West for inspiration, came to Europe or the USA to study and composed music for Western instruments, often drawing on notions of time from Asian religions and spiritualities (Everet & Lau, 2004). These composers, from different generations, include the Koreans Isang Yun and Unsuk Chin, the Japanese Toru Takemitsu, Yoshihisa Taira and Toshio Hosokawa, the British-Indian Param Vir, and the Chinese Tan Dun and Qigang Chen, among others. Earlier compositions that integrated East Asian ideas (such as McPhee's works) are quite straightforward and simplistic as they do not address the issues of tuning, nor the East Asian concepts of noise, resonance and silence. However, from around the 1960s, the influence of electronic music and increasing curiosity about tunings beyond the chromatic scale brought new sounds and concepts to western music and allowed composers to experiment with texture and microtonal tunings. The integration of silence in Cage's music, influenced by Zen Buddhist teachings, also broke new boundaries in contemporary music. Boulez recognised the contribution of the East Asian music



aspect by saying: ‘the technical aspects, which are always analysed and regarded as being of primary importance when a contemporary European score is studied, are here (in the East) a completely secondary matter. We are all aware that Asia has contributed the utmost significance to the organisation of intervals, and with a unique sensitivity. *‘I would be happy to acquire this acuteness of listening, this fineness of the horizontal interval disengaged from the thickness of polyphony, but this would involve working out a different kind of polyphony.’* (Boulez, 1990)

Malaysian traditional music has been researched but not yet enough (Karim, 2016). Our perspective as composer and researcher is to experiment with the traditional elements developing new compositional methods and ideas. Researchers have conducted studies on *Makyong* from both theatrical and dance perspectives but not many have made detailed analysis of the music and its integration into new work. There is an opportunity to explore this area, and as a composer, this research will be very valuable. There is much detailed research on the music of Javanese and Balinese gamelan (by Sumarsam, Michael Tenzer, Collin McPhee, and others) but very little about the compositional perspectives of Malaysian traditional music.

Further relevance according to Malaysian Fundamentals of Creative Industry (*Dasar Kreatif Industri Negara*) is that it will be able to produce high quality art music. It will retain some traditional art music and be transformed into new contemporary art-music using traditional elements. This research added value and development into the creative field, especially in art-music. The commentary about the process, the compositional method and the concept behind this work will interest academicians and intellectuals. It will be disseminated into compositional and performance workshops and will be presented in composition seminar/s at universities; it will be documented and will be available for future reference in the university music libraries. All these are valuable for composers, musicologists, ethno-musicologists, music researchers and music educators.

Methodology

This study was conducted through the compositional process of the new work: exploring tuning systems, basic music elements of melody, rhythm, metre, and structures derived from Malay traditional and folk music. Some integrative compositional techniques (e.g., *Tenunan*, *Mediasi Ukiran* and *Gamelbati* cycle: 1999 – 2009) and other similar techniques employed by composers such as Sciarrino, Lachenmann, Unsuk Chin, Takemitsu, Boulez, Saxton and Czernowin. Finding music notations and recordings that are relevant to the research proposed. Finding relevant extended techniques in western contemporary music. Collaboration with singers and performers exploring new sounds and techniques suitable for the new work and exploring the most appropriate modern notation.

- These data were integrated into the new work
- Final new music score and written commentary



The project outcomes:

- An original composition.
- Academic commentary will be written about the process.
- Information dissemination, shared through presentations.
- The documents will be available for future reference in libraries

The research data collections are collected from traditional repertoires and performances using a new approach of contemporary compositional view. Then the information collected will be applied to a new creative work. This will also lead to a new, cutting-edge area suitable to be potentially transformative research.

Concept of Composition Work

The composition work is for a narrator, 4 soloists (playing the 11 role of the princesses), choir, percussion ensemble exploration into composing a cross-cultural context using the musical elements of Malay traditional music. It examines and analyses non-western music and instruments and demonstrates, through a large-scale music composition, how those could be integrated and transformed into a contemporary musical language with Western instruments. The composition is around 70-80 minutes long. The opera is written for soloists who are mainly local opera singers such as Datuk Syafinaz Selamat, Khairunnisa Diyana Md Noor and Chaing Yi Ling, the multiple international award-winning choir, UiTM Chamber Choir and UiTM Percussion Ensemble, both ensemble are home local grown. Opera performance is equipped with stage production, lighting, backdrop and costumes, screen projector, visual digital, pre-recorded sounds, and electronics.

The opera is based around the stories of legends, myths and historical figures in Malay and Nusantara region. The stories are from Princess *Gunung Ledang*, *Cik Siti Wan Kembang*, Princess *Saadong*, Princess *Hang Li Po*, Princess *Santubong* and Princess *Sejinjang*, Princess *Ulek Mayang*, Princess *Walinong Sari*, Princess *Zaleha*, Princess *Bidasari* dan *Tun Fatimah* (Raman, Emila Yusof). This new experimental work combining Malay Nusantara musical elements, interdisciplinary medium is a work that takes on traditional subject and transforms it to become cutting edge contemporary; negotiating between traditional and modernity; mediating between eastern and western musical elements.

Discussion

The work was fully notated score, and written commentary produced the primary research result; while most traditional East Asian music is not notated (or not notated in Western form), this research involves finding appropriate notations for all instruments and voices. A written commentary of the research process will be made; this will be presented at appropriate



conferences on contemporary music and published. Depending on the extent of the findings, material on Malaysian traditional music could be written up as an article and submitted to journals such as *Asian Music* or *Malaysian Music Journal*. A written commentary of the research process will also be made; this will be presented at appropriate conferences on contemporary music. Potential applications of this study are for composers who will be able to utilize the materials. Composers will be able to apply the information to their works. Composers also can compose or write more new music and expand the existing repertoires. It will also be a useful reference for musicologists, ethno-musicologists, music educators and music researchers. This research can be applied to all types of art music compositions.

Conclusion

This project providing information to composers or music amateur to be a creative researcher in a supportive environment for a period which is sufficiently long enough to develop and produce a large-scale music composition work. We hope this will be a starting point for other art music projects to grow utilising the possibilities of working with organisations and producing new compositional projects in the future. As new generation of Malaysian composers, our works have been inspired by both eastern and western cultures. This study will enhance and develop further ideas towards musical integration of two cultures and contribute to contemporary multiculturalism from a composition-based perspective.

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