

Planning a Structure for a Musical Piece: A Composer's Creative Process

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Abstract: In creating a musical composition, a music composer often depends on anomalous skills and abilities such as recalling the timbre of a specific musical instrument, reading into an entirely unique language different from any spoken language in the world, and imagining inanimate objects as sound-emitting entities. Because of the possible interactions among these challenging and complex skills and ideas, it is thus important for the composer to have a plan in structuring the composition or a pre-compositional overview before going into the actual creative process of producing a coherent, meaningful piece. The structure or organization assists the composer in examining the interaction of the micro elements within the macro of the composition. It determines the final form of the composition as perceived by the composer. The objective of the paper is to demonstrate the process of planning or structuring a particular piece of composition based on the actual experience of the composer. In this article, the structuring of *Taming Sari*, a composition for Trumpet, Oboe and String Quintet, is traced through an analysis of the composition process. The emphasis is on the complementary roles of both the technical and non-technical elements in producing and projecting a lived experience of the composition. It is hoped that via sharing of an emic view of the planning process of a composition, it would assist learners in better understanding the process from the perspective of the composer.

Keywords: Structure, pre-compositional overview, creative process, musical sketches

Introduction

This article is a description of the structuring process of *Taming Sari*, an original composition for an ensemble which was composed by the main author. A premier of *Taming Sari* was held in November 2015 at Royal Holloway University of London, United Kingdom by Chroma Ensemble UK. It was also selected to represent Malaysia for the Asian Composers League 2016 in Hanoi, Vietnam. The compositional piece was written for six types of musical instruments: trumpet, oboe, two violins, viola, violoncello and double bass.

The analysis of *Taming Sari*'s structure is based on four main compositional processes: (1) inspiration and imagination, (2) determining materials and limitations, (3) sketching and exploration, and (4) making choices. The last three compositional processes are based on Freund's (2011) three stages of composition, except for the first which has been included to suit the composer's style of structuring a composition. Although the compositional process is described in succession, the actual process of composing the piece does not strictly follow a specific, sequential order. This is because the process of structuring a musical composition is a recursive process whereby the composer goes back and forth from one compositional process to another. In some instances, these compositional processes may occur simultaneously as each process is interrelated with the other processes.

In going through the process of structuring *Taming Sari*, performers and composers would have an insight on the stages of planning a composition. The process reveals the practice of transforming imagination and ideas into a more concrete form – that is, from imagined sounds to a musical score.

Defining Musical Structure

A musical structure plays an important role in the process of composing music. Howard (1990) asserts that the act of structuring a musical composition is an activity whereby composers think from inside out and vice versa in terms of the design or architecture of the composition. He adds that the act of structuring in music is the mixture of “musical architecture”, “musical drama” and “psychology” (p.84). According to Wilkins (2006), the musical structure of a composition is akin to a building plan for an architect in which without proper planning, the building may collapse. Similarly, a musical composition with a compositional structure provides the music with a strong sense of direction. Therefore, as much as an architect needs his blueprint to build a building, a composer likewise requires his musical structure to compose his music.

Before the 20th century, composers used limited traditional forms in structuring their compositions, however, composers today are beginning to invent their own structures for every composition that they create (Wilkins, 2006). This suggests that every composition has its own unique structure. In traditional western music culture, a musical structure is mainly associated with descriptions of musical forms such as binary, ternary, sonata and other related musical forms. These forms illustrate the sections and simple details of the music.

This traditional perspective of form in musical structure as perceived in western music culture is seen as restrictive, as the new century composers incorporate more details in a musical structure. For example, in *Taming Sari*, the structure indicates more than just divisions of the compositions into sections. Its structure includes other elements such as timbre, mood, texture, and techniques. It is also possible to have a specific structure for every element mentioned, rather than confining one structure for the whole composition.

Cope (1997) states that a musical structure or what he terms “pre-compositional overview” is an important way to start a composition (p.1). This pre-compositional overview helps composers to address problems with a composition that has not gone through a pre-structure process. In creating a compositional structure, the composer must first have a subject or concept that serves as the main base for the structure. In other words, the composer must initially have an inspiration, a storyline, and a concept. An example of the overall structure of *Taming Sari* is displayed in Figure 1 in which the composer builds the compositional overview based on the story/inspiration of *Hang Tuah*, *Hang Jebat* and *Taming Sari*. A complete pre-compositional overview is often created once the composer has determined the initial choices of compositional processes such as inspiration, materials to be used, and smaller scale compositional sketches.

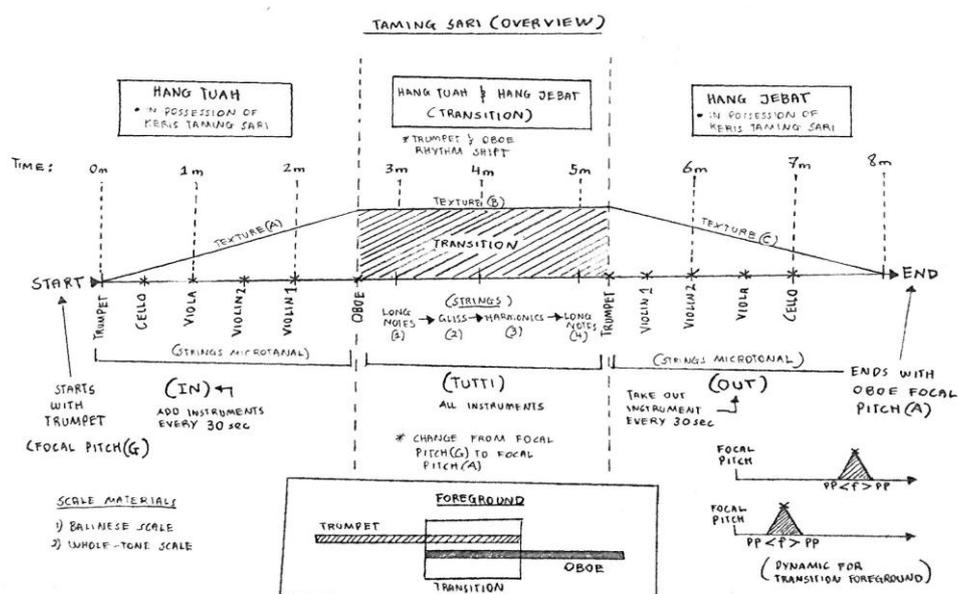


Figure 1 First draft of completed sketch overview of Taming Sari's structure

Inspiration, Imagination, and Creative Ideas

Inspiration is defined as a general construct “characterized by evocation, motivation, and transcendence” (Thrash & Elliot, 2003, p. 871). To produce a creative musical composition, every creative composer requires an impetus that triggers or his or her mental power to understand a particular idea. Tchaikovsky (2004) asserts that “The only music capable of moving and touching us is that which flows from the depths of a composer's soul when he is stirred by inspiration” (p.280). An inspiration is that small spark in a car engine, which burns the fuel and moves the car. For a composer, an inspiration can originate from various contexts such as the visual arts, sciences, literature, mathematics, architecture, history, and spiritual domains.

In addition to inspiration, creative arts practitioners need an extensive range of imagination. Similarly, Johnson (2009) stresses that compositional techniques would be useless without having an imaginative journey. These imaginations are usually stimulated by the composer’s inspirations (Wilkins, 2006). Oleynick, Thrash, LeFew, Moldovan, & Kieffaber (2014) likewise state that inspiration is a motivational process derived from creative ideas. This suggest that creative ideas evoke inspirations which in turn stimulate imagination. In contrast, the composer of Taming Sari believes that creative ideas evolve from his imaginations which were stimulated in the beginning from his inspirations. Furthermore, his creative ideas are not only in the form of musical notations but are also in the form of ideas that are non-music related or what composers refer to as extra-musical elements. These extra-musical elements are then used to develop distinct concepts for the composition.

It should be noted that the task of searching for an inspiration and the use of subsequent creative imagination are not often accomplished in the initial stage of structuring a composition. In truth, it is an ongoing task which requires incorporation in all other structuring processes: determining materials and limitations, sketching and exploration, and making choices. However, it is advisable to begin with a search for an inspiration before embarking to other compositional processes.

Inspiration and Concept for Taming Sari

In Taming Sari, the main inspiration is the legendary Malay dagger named Taming Sari. The mystical dagger belonged to the historic Malay warrior named Hang Tuah. The concept of the piece is based on the idea of the

inheritance of the dagger from Hang Tuah to his childhood friend Hang Jebat. Figure 2 depicts a sketch of the main concept and ideas in the composition of Taming Sari.

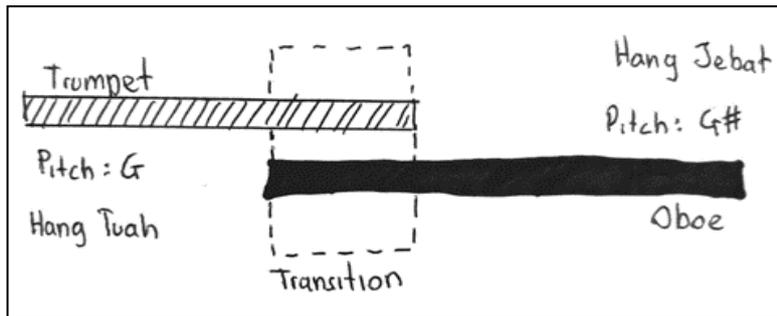


Figure 2: Sketch of the main concept and idea for Taming Sari.

Ali & Ja'afar (2013) points out that the dagger Taming Sari was a mystical dagger possessing magical powers. Whoever wields it is deemed unbeatable. In the well-known history book *Sulalatus Salatin Sejarah Melayu*, (Ahmad, 2003), Hang Tuah was sentenced to death after being incorrectly accused of adultery by the Sultan. He escaped his execution when his executioner hid him in a remote village. The initial owner of Taming Sari was Hang Tuah, but was later given to Hang Jebat (Razak, 2015). Hang Jebat being a loyal friend of Hang Tuah then took revenge by killing everyone in his path in the Sultan's court ("Hang Tuah", nd.). The Sultan summoned Hang Tuah back to the palace to confront Hang Jebat (Ahmad, 2003). The duel between Hang Jebat and Hang Tuah lasted over a long period of time. In the end Hang Jebat surrendered the Taming Sari to Hang Tuah which latter used to end his loyal friend's life.

The name Taming Sari is accustomed to Malaysians and has been used often to name entities from buildings to even missiles. The composer thought that it would be a good main concept for his composition as he could share to the world his culture through sound. Furthermore, the composer also thought that the story of changing hands of the dagger from the two warriors would be a great representation of his perception of music itself. He believes that music is dynamic, and each composition would always give different experiences to different listeners through time. Even if the composition comprises of only a single musical note for the whole duration of the composition. That having been said, the composer imagines the dagger as music and the two warriors as time.

Extra-musical Elements in Taming Sari

As mentioned earlier, the concept of the piece is based on a specific scene in the legendary story between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat. The composer divides the extra-musical elements from that specific scene into 3 main sections with subsections for each one of them. The main sections are 1) Characters and figures, 2) Ambience and mood 3) Actions and activity. Table 1 below shows a table of the main sections, subdivisions, and a partial list of elaborations.

Table 1 Main section, sub-section and 1st elaboration of extra-musical elements.

Main Sections	Sub-sections	1st Elaboration
Characters and Figures	Hang Jebat	Strong, Red, Aggressive
	Hang Tuah	Strong, Blue, Vigorous
	Taming Sari	Metal, Yellow, Sharp
Atmosphere and ambience	Calm	Spacious, Slow, Monotonous
	Tense	Complex, Rich, Fast

	Suspenseful	Dark, Dull, Empty
Action and activity	Fighting	Rhythmic, Hard, Irregular
	Argument	Stiff, Edgy, Shaky
	Shifting	Movement, Continuous, Full

Each sub-section is elaborated into three other ideas than could be elaborated further into more ideas. This is how the composer develops ideas for extra-musical elements that will later on guide the composer to compose the music using musical notations. The elaboration process usually goes through each of the four processes of structuring a composition but usually starts in the sketching stage. Figure 3 below shows an example of an extra-musical element from its initial idea to its final form which is in the form of musical notations. The final musical notation decided was to have a string instrument playing the same note on different strings and having one note being a half sharpened in pitch. This creates a slight dissonance as each string is vibrating in different frequencies.

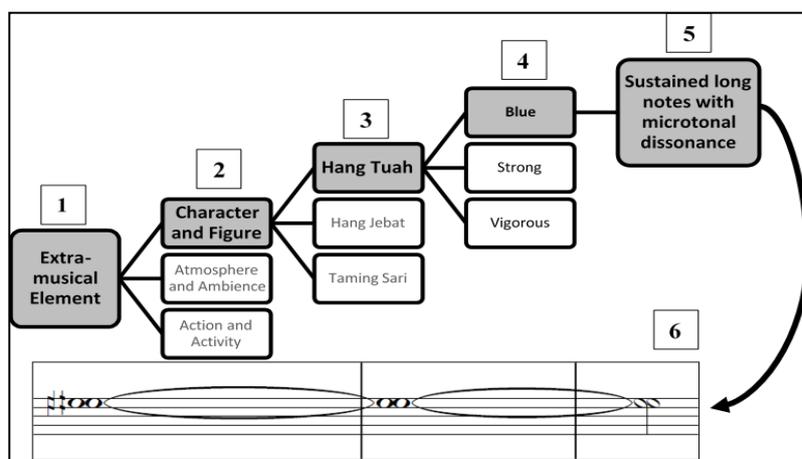


Figure 3: The flow of ideas for extra-musical elements in Taming Sari.

Determining materials and limitations

In the process of creating a composition, one of the early steps is to decide the materials that will be used and their functions in the composition to be composed (Freund, 2011). As Johnson (2009) suggests, the most unfavourable approach in the initial step of composing would be to confine and restrict the free development of materials by something that is “extra musical” (p.240). We would argue that this does not apply to every composer. By restricting materials to specific extra-musical ideas, it can be beneficial in which by establishing boundaries, the composition will be more focused and will have a clearer sense of direction. One way of achieving this is by limiting the composition to selected materials derived from an inspiration and developing those ideas. In other words, limitation is a strong tool for a composer. Compositions that uses few ideas and develops them comprehensively is more successful than those that elucidates a lot of ideas but does not develop them well enough (Cope, 1997). A simple example would be where a composer chooses 3 techniques from a bunch of other techniques that could be executed by a single instrument. This selection process will further be explained in the ‘making choices’ section of this article.

The process of determining materials and limitation could be seen in the process of structuring Taming Sari as the composer starts with determining specific ideas/materials based on the inspiration mentioned in the previous section of this article. Selection of instrumentation, possible techniques to achieve timbre and the determination of the overall structure of the musical texture are among the steps decided by the composer to confine and restrict elaboration of possible materials. For the instrumentation, the composer used the trumpet to depict Hang Tuah; Oboe to depict Hang Jebat; string section treated as a single instrument to depict the dagger Taming Sari. Trumpet having a strong and clear tone was selected to illustrate Hang Tuah’s characteristics of being a strong

warrior and a loyal person to the Sultan. The composer imagined Hang Jebat as being an aggressive warrior with a guttural and nasal voice which he thinks oboe would be most suitable. The string section comprising of 2 violins, viola, cello and double bass depicts the Taming Sari dagger as it is created using several types of iron. All 5 string instruments acts as a single instrument which has the ability to change its character following the characteristics of Taming Sari being a dagger with various mystical powers and ability.

In selecting specific instruments, the composer has limited his options and possibilities of techniques, timbre and range. This may seem as an inefficient idea, but it is actually the opposite as it narrows down the direction of the composition to be created. Every possible technique in which creates contrasting timbre for each instrument was first listed and later specific techniques from the list was chosen accordingly. This process is considered the next step in confining and restricting the free flow of elaboration of materials. Having a list of techniques and timbre differences would be very beneficial for a composer in the early stages of composing - it is like a painter having a full set of paint before starting to paint an artwork. The structure of musical texture from start to end was then determined following the characteristics of 3 sections: 1) Taming Sari in the hands of Hang Tuah, 2) Changing hands of Taming Sari and 3) Taming Sari in the hands of Hang Jebat. From here, a vision of the musical form and its related emotion for each section has already emerge in the composer's mind. It is then easier for the composer to sketch ideas accordingly as the whole composition plan has been divided into smaller sections.

Sketching and exploration

Another important compositional process would be the process of sketching. Sketching is usually associated with the act of drawing, but it could also mean a lot more than the visual domains. According to Healy & Thiebaut (2007), music is the only creative arts practice that is not naturally a visual domain but uses sketching as tool in its creative process. The word "Sketch" can be defined as "a rough drawing, a tentative draft, a brief description, a short literary composition, a short instrumental composition and a slight theatrical piece" (Sketch, nd). The act of sketching in music is a part of the initial phase of designing a "global structure" for a composition (Healy & Thiebaut, 2007). It also helps composer to enhance their skills and expands fundamental ideas to more complete ideas for new compositions (Cope, 1997). As music is always moving in time and space, visualizations could help composers to see an overall view of the composition by aligning "sonic space" to "Cartesian space" (Gerber & Brown, 2006, p.1). The process of sketching can sometimes take a long time before a composer goes into the actual process of composing (Johnson, 2009). Thus, it is important for a composer to sketch a simple overview of the whole composition first before sketching any other details. This 'big picture' will then become the main guideline for further developments in the compositional process.

Sketching the 'Big picture'

According to Johnson (2007), there is no specific way of sketching but not sketching at all is uncommon for a composer. As in Taming Sari, the composer first sketched a line with the word "Start" at one end and the word "end" at another. This simple line is an important initial process as it will be the main structure (backbone) of the piece. The time, sections, overall texture and other elements will be mapped into this particular line. This does not mean that every composition must start with the same sketch the composer of Taming Sari has done but this would be a good start in structuring a composition. Graphic depictions can help in portraying pre-compositional components that will later facilitate the creation of a musical work (Evans, 1992). As for non-composers, a blank paper with only a line that needs to be filled with creative ideas may seem as daunting task but for a composer it should evoke a lot of creative ideas. At this stage, the composer should not be thinking about any technical aspects such as musical notations. The task to be done is to imagine how the composition will start and end while having in mind the extra-musical elements or inspiration in mind. This stage requires the ability to think in sound and all experience of past listening will be the main sources of the musical creativity the composer will build upon.

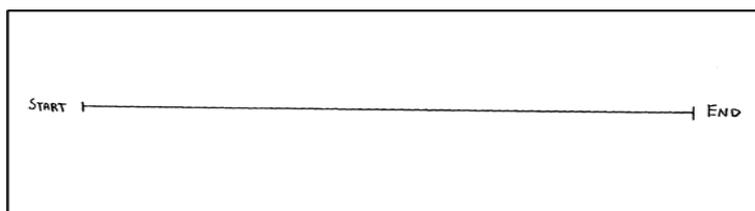


Figure 4: First sketch for the piece Taming Sari – Main line with “Start” and “end”.

Next, the composer adds in instrumentation and duration of the piece. This can be seen in the composer’s sketch (Figure 5) below in which the composer divides the whole piece into three sections of instrumentation: (A) Six instruments, (B) Seven instruments and (C) Six instruments. From the same sketch we could see that several questions appeared in the composer’s mind concerning the texture, duration, contrast between sections and also the balance of the sections (symmetrical or asymmetrical). This affirms that visual representation of the ideas makes the structure clearer and aids the composer in further developing the composition.

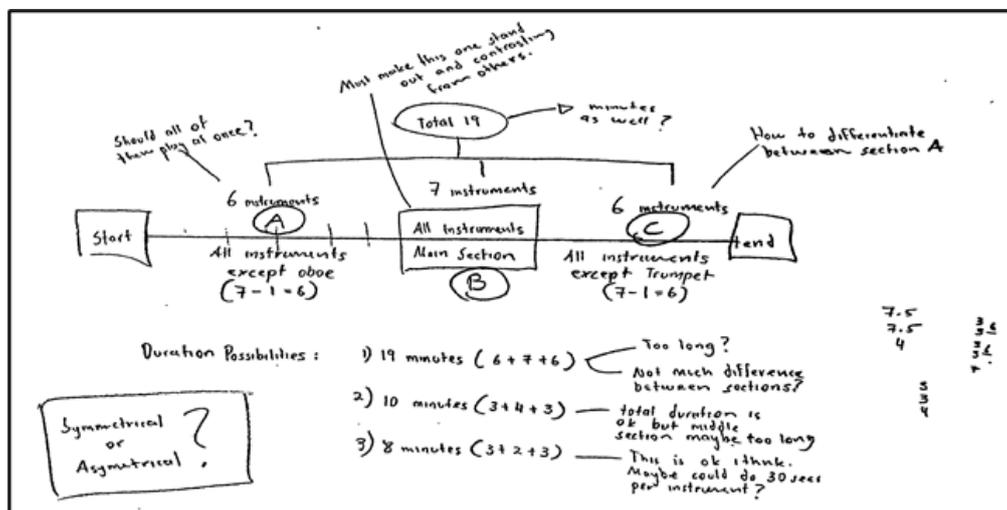


Figure 5: Initial sketch with duration.

A more complete sketch answering the composer’s earlier questions could be seen in Figure 6 below, where the sketch is more structured which includes the duration and texture. Here the sketch illustrates how one instrument after another will be added and removed, creating a gradual change of texture. For section (A), each instrument will play for 30 seconds before another instrument is added. Section (B) is where all of the instruments will play at once and section (C) is where instruments are removed consecutively in 30 second intervals.

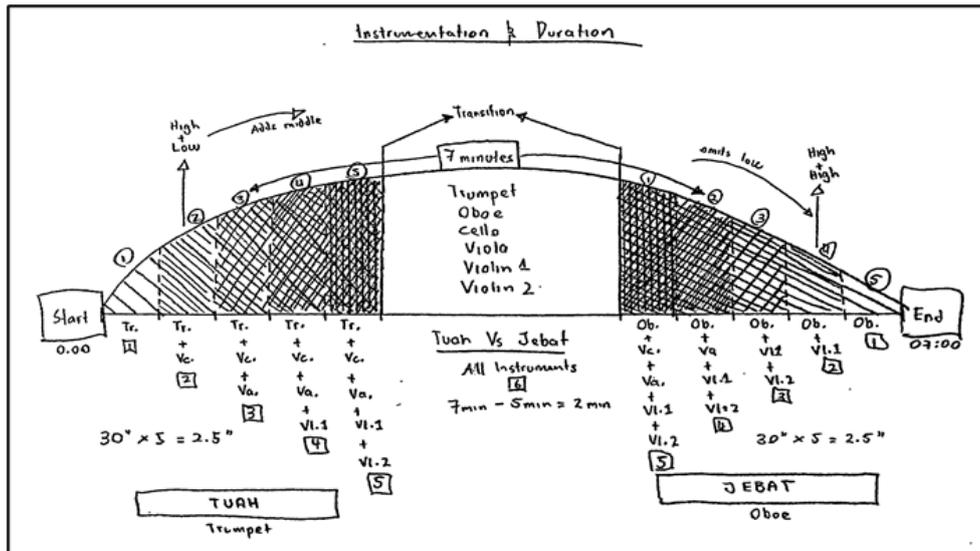


Figure 6: A more complete sketch of Taming Sari's Structure.

Smaller scale sketches

Sketches may also go through permutational process similar to other musical elements. From simple and smaller scale sketches to larger and complex sketches. The composer usually expands his ideas by looking at the smaller scale sketches from a wider perspective. This process is similar to the action of 'zooming-in' and 'zooming-out' of a picture on a computer or mobile device. By zooming in, more details of the picture are visible and when zoomed-out we could see the whole overview of the picture. Figure 7 below shows a sketch of a zoomed in section of the full structure. The sketch illustrates the first section of the piece in more details compared to the full pre-compositional overview.

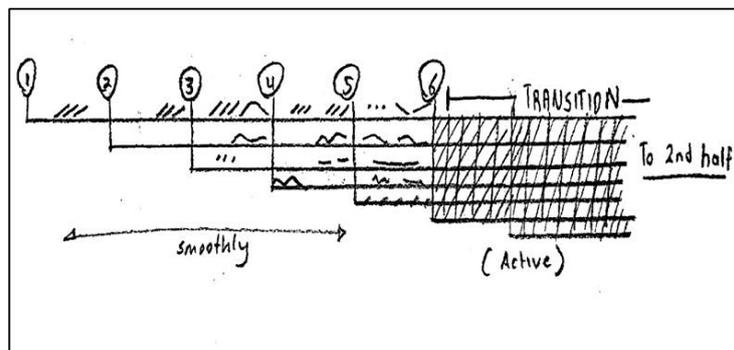


Figure 7: Sketch of first section for the piece Taming Sari.

These smaller scale sketches may or may not be used for the composition but at this stage the composer would sketch out any interesting ideas he has in mind that he thinks could be incorporated in the composition. By way of explanation, the sketching stage is where the composer retains ideas for current or later use. These sketches are usually very simple and does not have to be followed precisely. Additionally, each of these smaller scale sketches are not bound to a specific timeline in the music and could be use anywhere in the composition.

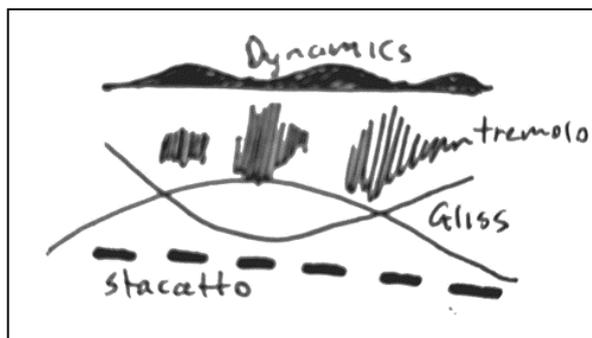


Figure 8: Sketch of five instruments playing different techniques simultaneously.

Figure 7 above is a small-scale sketch which indicates an idea of five instruments to be played simultaneously using different techniques. The top wavy line indicates the idea of dynamics where the instrument will be playing crescendo and decrescendo creating a pulsing sound. The doodle below it indicates an idea where the instrument will be playing tremolos. The bigger the scribble, the faster or intense the tremolo would have to be played. The curved lines indicate the idea of two instruments playing glissandos in opposite directions. If one of the instruments is ascending in pitch, the other would be descending in pitch. The final dashed line indicates the idea of an instrument playing short and detached notes, preferably staccato notes.

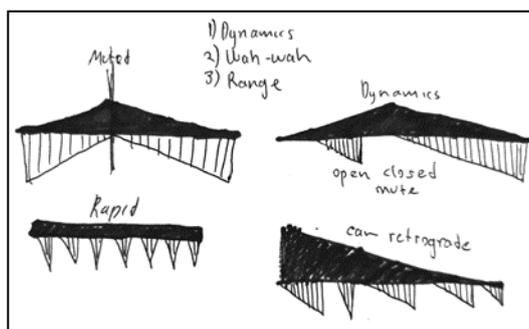


Figure 9: Sketches of 4 different musical ideas for trumpet.

Figure 8 above is a sketch illustrating ideas for trumpet where the filled shapes indicate dynamic levels and lined filled shapes indicating open and closed wah-wah effect using trumpet mutes. The combination of the open and closed mute effects combined with different dynamic levels could produce different colouristic effects which will be useful in depicting extra-musical elements during the actual composing process.

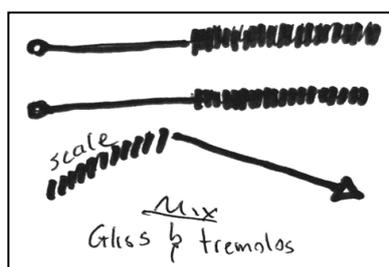


Figure 10: Sketch of three string instruments playing different techniques simultaneously.

Figure 10 above is a sketch illustrating combination of techniques for three string instruments. Lines with a circle at its end indicate artificial or natural harmonics while the horizontal scribbled lines indicate the tremolo technique. The ascending scribbled line indicates any chosen scale and the arrow line indicates a glissando. For this combination, the composer is trying to experiment with sustained sounds against more active sounds. Having contrasting rhythm and timbre being mixed together can create interesting sounds.

Making choices

According to Freund (2011), the decision-making section of the composing process involves the action in which the composer will be choosing and assembling ideas together by carefully considering the progress, development and relation of the ideas. For the composer of Taming Sari, this section is where all the sketches are realized into more definite form of music. Furthermore, all the possible techniques that were listed during the determining material process will also be selected accordingly and used in the composition.

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), and Viola (Vla.). The score is written in treble clef for the violins and alto clef for the viola. It features a series of notes with various dynamic markings and performance techniques. The dynamics include *pp* (pianissimo), *ff* (fortissimo), and *pp* (pianissimo) again, often with arrows indicating crescendos or decrescendos. Performance techniques include *molto pont.* (molto ponticello), *molto tasto* (molto tasto), and *nat.* (natural). The notes are connected by slurs, and there are some accents over certain notes.

Figure 11: Continues sound with changing and mixture of timbres.

Figure 11 above is an example of the choices made by the composer in illustrating a sustained continuous sound with changes in timbre. The idea was to create progression without using any pitch changes. In order to make this possible, the composer has chosen to use techniques such as *molto tasto*, *molto ponticello*, crescendo and decrescendo. The mixture of different timbres along with dynamic changes creates a sense of progression even though all the pitches remain the same.

From Sketches to musical notation

The transformation of ideas from sketches to musical notation requires imagination, creativity and technical knowledge of composing music. This process is where the sound imagined in the composer's mind is translated into written form with the help of visual representations (sketches). Details in the sketches are only guidelines and does not have to be strictly followed. There are instances where the composer will go back to the sketching process to refine his ideas or when the initial ideas are not suitable. In Taming Sari, sketches such as "Shifting" which represents the changing hands of the dagger from Hang Tuah to Hang Jebat is now represented in the form of musical notation. This can be seen in figure 12 showing how the Trumpet, Oboe and Violin illustrating the 'shifting' idea in which they alternately play the same motive throughout the section.

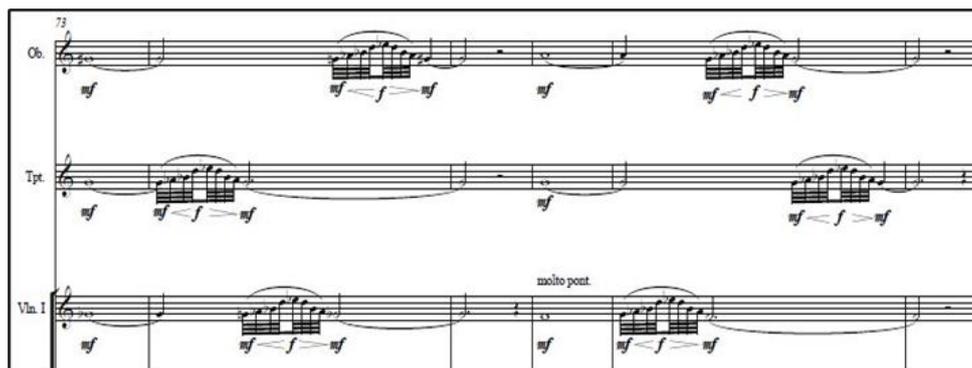


Figure 12: Example of Trumpet, Oboe and 1st Violin shifting.

Some ideas from the sketching process – which has a more straightforward meaning such as ‘Glissando’ – is easier to transform to musical gestures but still requires the process of making choices. Choosing which instrument to play the glissando, the direction of glissando, duration of glissandos are a few choices from a vast possibility of choices to be made to illustrate the idea of glissando. Choices made are then considered according to the progress, development and relation of the ideas to the main structure of the composition. In this case, having glissandos played one after another in an unstructured manner would be more suitable to the main idea of ‘transition’. Based on the composer’s interpretation, the ‘transition’ section of the piece should have a more complex and chaotic feel to it, thus requires a more unstructured gesture of music. Figure 13 below shows the glissando section in Taming Sari where the string instruments play glissando lines in different ranges, directions, timbre and dynamics which gives different sounds for every bar. This creates a more chaotic feel as the timbre and texture constantly change.

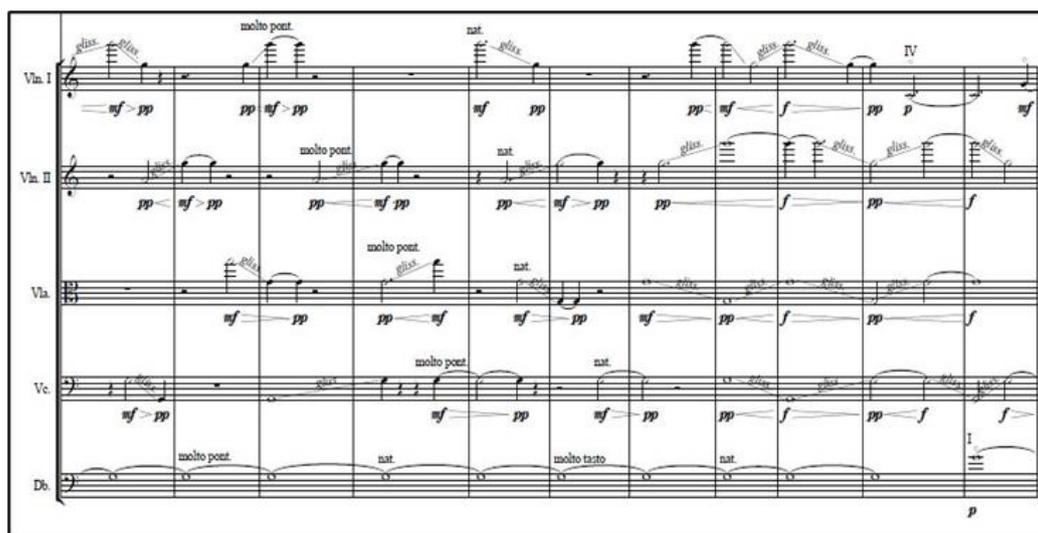
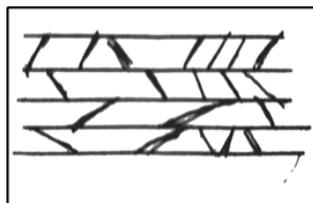


Figure 13: Strings glissando section in musical notation (below) and its initial sketch (above).

Another example of the transformation of sketches to musical notation can be seen in Figure 14 below. The sketch indicates an idea of using microtones playing simultaneously with sustained notes to create a timbre change. This is also an example of how sometimes the decision making of creating the musical notations does

not always precisely follow the initial sketch. From the figure below we could see that the composer used glissandos and timbre effects such as changing the bowing position (Gradual change from ponticello to natural and vice versa) to enhance the timbre shift.

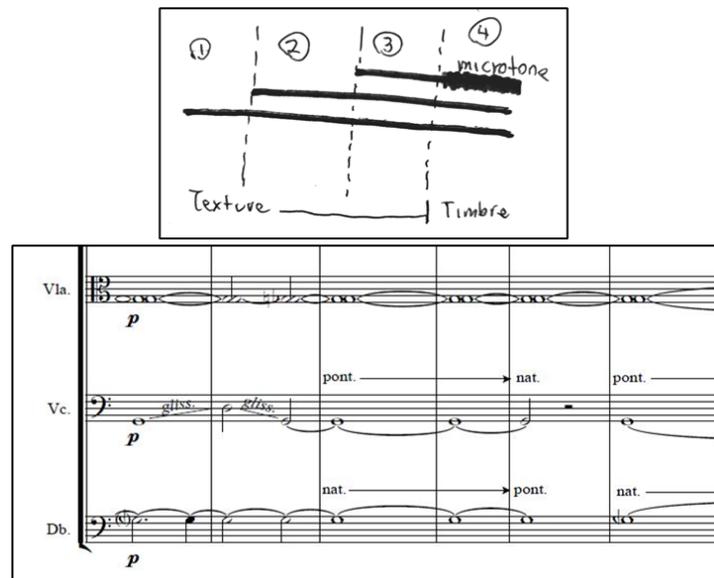


Figure 14: Examples of the use of microtones in the piece (below) and its initial sketch (above).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article demonstrates the importance of constructing a musical structure before going into the actual composing process. A composition that does not go through any structuring process may lose its sense of musical direction and may also present technical difficulties. Similar to other creative arts practices, the creative process in structuring a musical composition has no specific approach. Thus, a composer's creative process tends to be different from one another which makes information on this process could not to be obtained from common music theory books. The only way to achieve such information is to analyze a composition and the composer's creative process. The deconstruction of Taming Sari's structure gives an insight to the composer's creative process and provides a step by step approach in planning a musical composition. A limitation of this study is that the analysis in planning of a structure is based on a single musical piece created by the composer. At the same time, it is an anomalous strategy in the sense that the focus is on a particular piece which may not be able to be generalized. However, in doing so, learners are exposed to an insider's view of how a composition is structured. It is suggested that for future studies on planning/structuring compositions, the analysis of the process may involve multiple musical pieces to identify a common ground for structuring compositions.

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