

Multicultural Approach in Composing for Malay Gamelan in 21st Century

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Abstract: This study was carried out to compose new music for Malay gamelan using combinations of traditional Malay gamelan elements and Malay folk tunes with Western composition techniques (multicultural approach). Three original compositions, *Khabar Angin Tenggara* (2014), *Adiwira dalam Bb* (2015) and *Jong* (2017) highlighting Malay gamelan has been composed for this purpose. They feature the Malay gamelan as an ensemble itself, sape, and four voices orchestrated with Malay gamelan ensemble, and a bonang played with four hands. Elements of aleatoric, unconventional instrumentation in the context of the traditional Malay gamelan setup and Malay folk tunes have been incorporated into these new works. This paper will illustrate the creative process and related issues of these compositions with the aims of attaining the multicultural elements that can be incorporated into future works. These multicultural composition techniques will perhaps encourage the development of captivating aesthetic appeal for a new composition for Malay gamelan and promote the elements of local Malay folk tunes to a wider audience.

Keywords: multicultural, music composition, Malay gamelan, Malaysian traditional music, 21st century

Introduction

Malay gamelan is an ensemble of gongs, gong chimes, metallophones and wooden xylophone. Traditional Malay gamelan repertoire maintains musical structure and forms emphasize distinctive character—a gong cycle and stratified polyphonic quite unlike the typical forms of classical Western art music. For more pronounced descriptions and discussions of Malay gamelan music and instruments see, for example, (Hermantoro, 2010); (Matusky & Tan, 2017); (Jalal, 2008).

Malay gamelan is the most common gamelan ensemble featured in Malaysia. Gamelan music has a 200 years history in Malaysia (see e.g. Matusky & Tan, 2017; Jalal, 2008). Having arrived from Riau-Lingga in 1811, the ensemble has since become an integral part of Malaysian traditional music. Started from the exclusively-performed in the royal court, now Malay gamelan has reached the wider audience since the discovery of the original set by Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard in 1966 at Istana Jalan Kolam, Terengganu (Jalal, 2008).

In recent years, Malay gamelan has been going transformation in terms of the development of its instrumentations, original music compositions and performance practice. Apart from its original repertoire which is limited to accompanying dances (Jalal, 2008), there are growing numbers of original music composition that are using Malay gamelan either directly or indirectly. Composers, particularly in Malaysia has started to use Malay gamelan in their contemporary art music composition since the 1970s (Matusky & Tan, 2017). Compared to the more popular Javanese or Balinese gamelan, the Malay gamelan is less known globally but has gotten a big transformation throughout the years.

In addition to Malay culture, Chinese, Indian and Arabic music elements play an important role in reviving the art of music in Malaysia (Macy, 2002). Malaysian cultural diversity has created generations of (part-time) composers who are mostly academicians. The music of Sunetra Fernando, Valerie Ross, and Tan Sooi Beng is consistently composed in the cross-over aesthetic such as portrayed in *Sembuh Sudah*, *Karma* and *Perubahan*. (Macy, 2002).

Composers has been composing new works incorporating non-Western musical elements into their music. Multicultural composition technique, although is not new, has staged a big platform for Malay gamelan to be the frontier in promoting Malaysian traditional music to larger audience. This paper will be divided into 4 sections; multicultural approach in music composition, creative process on composing new Malay gamelan compositions, reflections on creative process and conclusions.

Multicultural Approach in Music Composition

Increased interest in multicultural approach in the music composition is a proof that the rapid growth in the development of music and symbolizes the multiculturalism phenomenon that characterizes life in the 21st century. Esy Maestro in his article entitled *Fenomena Multikulturalisme Dalam Musik: Sebuah Telaah Elemen-Elemen Musikal Non Barat dalam Karya Komposer Musik Barat*, have dealt with this issue extensively. Maestro discussed the differences between European and American composers' approach of multiculturalism in music. Three major European composers were discussed such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Claude Debussy and Olivier Messiaen. Where American composers tend to be more open to multiculturalism in music, Stockhausen has stressed that only European culture is entitled to incorporate elements from other cultures for European music had reached its peak level. (Maestro, 2009). There is obviously a disagreement about the incorporating of non-Western elements into the Western music by composers from the two continents of Europe and America.

Henry Cowell was an important figure in the development of American music (Maestro, 2009). Among the works that reflect Cowell use of non-Western elements in his works are the *Persian Set* (1957) for chamber orchestra, and two concertos for the instrument koto (1961-1965). Cowell has been a major influence for the young American composers known as the third generation like Lou Harrison (1917-2003), Colin McPhee (1900-1964) and John Cage (1912-1993) (Nicholls, 1999). Another American composer that have been discussed in depth by Maestro was Vincent McDermott. McDermott have produced a multicultural work titled *The King of Bali* (1990), an opera. Multiculturalism clearly shown in this work where the composer has combined the concept of Western opera with Indonesian traditional shadow play. Unlike the opera, which had all the scenes are sung or chanted, McDermott has used a Javanese master puppeteer (dhalang). Western orchestra instrumentation has also been added to the Javanese gamelan music accompaniment. Gamelan ensemble has been introduced with vertical harmony like a Western orchestra. (Maestro, 2009)

The mixture of the Western musical instruments and gamelan ensemble by composer Lou Harrison (1917-2003) was discussed by Henry Spiller in his article entitled *Lou Harrison's Music for Western Instruments and Gamelan: Even More Western than It Sounds* (Spiller, 2009). The focus of the article is rhythmic treatment portrayed by Harrison in his *Main Bersama-sama* (1978) for Gamelan and French horn and *In Honor of the Divine Mr. Handel* (1991) for harp and Gamelan. Spiller discussed about Harrison's sensitivity in composing *Main Bersama-sama* with rhythmic pattern in accordance with the figuration of Western music while maintaining the traditional pitch formation of Gamelan Degung. It is important to discuss Harrison's compositional approach as the title *Main Bersama-sama* specifically address metonymy; compromising between East and West (Spiller, 2009).

Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996) was also a composer that uses multicultural elements in his work. Lewis Cornwell has discussed one of the important most work of Takemitsu multicultural approach, *November Steps* (1967) for biwa, shakuhachi and orchestra (Cornwell, 2002). In this work, Takemitsu clearly communicates its strategy to emphasize cultural differences and at the same time display unity under the supervision and control of human (Cornwell, 2002). The use of Japanese elements is not limited to only musical instruments such as biwa and shakuhachi but Takemitsu also uses the concept of *ma* in the work. *Ma* in Japanese is defined as gaps or intervals. This concept is applied in the performance of *November Steps* where biwa and shakuhachi player must interact with the orchestra to ensure the start of any particular sections in the music (Cornwell,2002). Cornwell quoted Takemitsu as saying traditional Japanese music cannot be mixed up thoughtlessly with any

music, therefore he created space through the concept of ma, whereby harp act as a mediator to Japanese traditional music and Western in November Steps (Cornwell, 2002).

Creative Process on Composing New Works for Malay Gamelan

Through this section, I will discuss the creative process on composing three new Malay gamelan works that I have composed in the past 5 years. This section could be a specific case study of composition for Malay gamelan. Many other prominent Malaysian composers—such as Tan Sooi Beng, Sunetra Fernando, Ahmad Muriz and Yazid Zakaria, to name a few—have composed for Malay gamelan instruments, over the years.

There are a variety of compositional strategies in writing new works for Malay gamelan. The gamelan ensemble could be approached traditionally; specifically, as it is conventionally regarded in the authentic Malay gamelan practice. Through this approach, the saron instruments will play the main structural melody, while the elaborating instruments (e.g. bonang and gambang) will play musical patterns on top, and the colotomic instruments (e.g. kenong and gong) will punctuate the composition's formal structure. This practice is common in some of the works by important American gamelan composer, Lou Harrison. In such works, the players will perform musical patterns as they would usually, within the context of performing conventional gamelan music. This would mean that they were actually realizing a traditional Malay gamelan piece from typical cipher notation. This approach is more or less, like composing for conventional traditional Malay gamelan music.

There are also many other compositional strategies for composer to choose in creating multicultural works. Composers could integrate folk tunes or compose new melodies based on the folk tunes in the style of Western music. Ahmad Muriz, through Bertabuh Kala Senja (2002) integrated Malay syair melody into the composition (Lie, 2003) while Tazul Tajuddin through his Sebuah Pantun series of works implemented the elements of Malay pantun in his music.

Imitations of tone colour or musical structure of non-Western music could also be an option for composers to explore. This type of strategy could be seen in Colin McPhee's works titled Tabuh-tabuhan (1936). McPhee's commentaries on the work and his choice of title reveal his intent to associate the music of Tabuh-Tabuhan with the music of Bali, and each of his "recreated" effects represents an interpretation of the Balinese aesthetic. (Mueller, 1991). Gyorgy Ligeti in his later works such as Piano Concerto (1985-88) portrayed much of his love for African polyrhythm (Baumann, 2003). Yazid Zakaria's Mahsuri (2006) and Heritage (2006) is practically based on a tightly woven texture crafted with joget rhythm and horn ostinato (Lie, 2013).

Composers could also write new works for the non-Western instrument in combination with Western instrumentation/ensemble in the style of Western art music. This is one of the most popular approach for most of composers when dealing with multicultural compositions. Ahmad Muriz's Bertabuh Kala Senja (2002) was scored for bonang (chromatic & pentatonic) with chamber orchestra and Toru Takemitsu's November Steps (1967) was scored for biwa and shakuhachi with orchestra are just two of many more instances that can be discussed under this category.

On the other hand, composers could also create new works for non-Western instruments, may or may not be in combinations with Western instruments in the context of the traditional non-Western music, or heavily inspired by authentic traditional performance practice as can be seen in the works of Lou Harrison such as Main Bersama-sama (1978) and In Honor of the Divine Mr. Handel (1991).

Another approach would be composing for non-Western instruments/ensemble in the context of the traditional ensemble itself but blended with style from other culture. For example, Dwiono Hermantoro through his works such as Dami (2007), Tabalu (2003) and Lancaran Kertuk (1999) clearly combined Javanese gamelan style into the works that were scored for Malay gamelan. Such approach can also be heard in Sunetra Fernando's Sembuh Sudah and Tan Sooi Beng's Perubahan (1998). Sembuh Sudah featured mixtures of Javanese gamelan

instrumentation such as siter and Malaysian music elements such as ostinatos, varied melodic lines reminiscent the gong-chime music from Sabah and Sarawak. Perubahan on the other hands, featured a fusion of Chinese melodic and shigu drumming structure with Malay gamelan instrumentations (Matusky, 2002).

Contemporary composers could also include sound recordings of non-Western music in an electroacoustic composition such as in Tazul Tajuddin's *Gamel-Rawak II* (2015) and Jack Body's *Arum Manis* (1991). Appropriating non-Western material for a Western art music piece through transcription techniques could also be done by composers. In Tazul Tajuddin's solo violin's piece, *Sebuah Pantun II* (2009), he incorporated not only the elements of Malay pantun, but also transcriptions of Javanese gamelan pieces in his work.

The table below is to generalise my compositions instrumentations and approach in the context of writing new multicultural works.

Table 1 Multicultural Approach and Instrumentation of The Works.

Composition Title	Instrumentation	Multicultural Composition Approach
Khabar Angin Tenggara (2014)	Malay gamelan, sape, four voices	Composing for non-Western ensemble with mixture of style from other culture
Adiwira dalam Bb (2015)	Malay gamelan	Composing for non-Western ensemble with mixture of style from other culture
Jong (2017)	Four hands bonang, solo soprano	Incorporating folk tunes into new works, composing for non-Western ensemble with mixture of style from other culture

KHABAR ANGIN TENGGARA (2014)

This piece was commissioned for the 30th Anniversary Celebration Concert of UiTM Faculty of Music. It was premiered on 21st December 2014 at Dewan Filharmonik Petronas by UiTM Faculty of Music Gamelan Club. The work was scored for Malay gamelan, sape (a Bornean lute) and four voices. This piece used unconventional Malay gamelan instrumentation with additional of sape and also a choir of voices.

I took this strategy in composing this piece because the piece was not to be written 100% in the style of authentic Malay gamelan. It was a mixture of traditional Javanese and Malay gamelan gong cycle and Western-style orchestration. Instead of only using the authentic Malay gamelan formal colotomic structure, Western orchestration style is applied through which I treated each instrument independently and not as a layer of stratified polyphonic. However, I still didn't apply any form of vertical harmony to be played by the gamelan instruments as my intentions in composing the piece was using multicultural approach. The authentic Malay gamelan doesn't have any vertical harmony involved. The harmony parts in this piece were played by the sape and sung by the four voices.

The initial idea was based on intersection in mathematical set theory. Title of the piece, *Khabar Angin Tenggara* was planned based on this concept and similar to the popular gameshow, *Wheel of Fortune's* category of *Before & After*. *Khabar Angin* is the first word and *Angin Tenggara* is the next one. Figure 1 shows the draft of the plan.

KOTAK 3

Figure 3: 8-beat gong cycle element in *Khabar Angin Tenggara*, bar 78 – 89.

Authentic Malay gamelan style is nowhere to be seen in Kotak 5 and Kotak 6 as my approach in composing these sections are based on melodic writing for bonang, saron 1 and saron 2. Interactions between the 3 instruments to this extent in these sections are not common in Malay gamelan. Figure 4 below shows the excerpts of melodic interactions between saron 1, saron 2 and bonang.

KOTAK 5

Figure 4: Melodic interactions between saron 1, saron 2 and bonang, *Khabar Angin Tenggara*, bar 136 – 150.

ADIWIRA DALAM Bb (2015)

This piece was premiered by UiTM Faculty of Music Gamelan Club for the inaugural International Gamelan & Caklempong Festival 2015 on 12th September 2015 at Panggung Sari Kompleks Kraf Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. The work was scored for traditional Malay gamelan setup with additional instrument like kempul and bonang penerus. However, this piece is more experimental compared to *Khabar Angin Tenggara*. The alternate title for this piece is *badiwira*.

This composition is built around a narrative of a man from a small Malay village who desired to be a superhero or adiwira. He was inspired to save his village from a supposed group of villain created by himself imaginatively. At the end of the day, it was he himself who in reality, ruined the congruence amongst the villagers. Thus, he's known as the man of evil influence or badi thereafter hence the alternate title, badiwira.

Notation for this piece is a mixture of cipher notation, Western conventional notation and set of instructions purposely written in Malay as to portray the Malay village. Excerpts of the score (section called Perang Adiwira) are as follows in Figure 5.

Perang Adiwira

Kempul akan memulakan bahagian Perang ini dengan memainkan melodi di bawah secara berulang. Tempo adalah tempo asal lagu iaitu sekitar 80-90. Ulangan adalah sebanyak 10-12 kali.



Saron, Slenthem dan Bonang pula akan memainkan keratan di bawah secara bebas. Bebas bermaksud tidak terikat antara satu sama lain.

J 1 5 1 6 1 5 1 1

Bahagian ini akan terus bercambah menjadi sebahagian daripada bahagian seterusnya iaitu bahagian Puing Adiwira. Pada ulangan terakhir, dinamik suara setiap alat beransur perlahan sehingga senyap lantas terus disambung dengan *cue* gendang (. t . t . t . d d).

Gong ditabuh pada d yang terakhir gendang. Semua alat memainkan nota 1 pada detik tersebut.

Figure 5: Notation sample from Adiwira dalam Bb, page 3.

For this piece, I treated the instruments of gamelan not only as it is but also as tools of sound. In the same context of John Cage's prepared piano pieces, I purposely wrote special instructions for the kempul. This teased unconventional sounds out of the kempul by requiring the instruments to be placed flat on the floor rather than hung traditionally at their rack (refer Figure 6). Such a compositional approach embraces an exploration of the instruments that 'moves beyond traditional cultural practices (Johnson, 2014).



Figure 6: Kempul on the floor during performance of Adiwira dalam Bb

The nature of this piece required a conductor, but I replaced it with the gendang player as the main idea for this piece was theatrical elements. Elements of aleatoric were also put into the mix of this piece as the score for Adiwira dalam Bb was just a set of text instructions with some traditional cipher notations rather than a normal traditional notation style for Malay gamelan. In one of the sections, performers were asked to play phrases of written music with free rhythm and dynamics. The gendang player would then be the one who cues the ensemble for the next sections by shouting ‘Diam!!!’ which is Malay word for shut up. For me, the idea behind the piece is to add a theatrical element, that of a Western-style conductor, into the context of Malay gamelan.

JONG (2017)

The composition was part of an innovation project titled Malay Folk Tune to New Music which won Gold Medal Award at the International Innovation, Invention and Design Competition 2017. It was premiered on 25th November 2017 at the 8th UiTM-klpac Malaysian Composers Concert Series at Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre. Jong was scored for bonang barong (played with four hands) and solo soprano voice.

Notation for this piece is Western music conventional. For this piece, it can be categorised as utilising a folk tune, Jong Jong Inai and combining Malay gamelan instrument with the Western style of playing (four hands) and also adding the soprano voice as the main melody line. The Malay gamelan instrument was not traditionally to be played individually. Bonang barong was also not meant to be played with four hands (2 people playing the same instrument) in traditional Malay gamelan performance practice. However, in order to extend the capability of the instrument, I as the composer decided to write for the instrument in that particular style of playing, the extended technique. I utilised the main motive of Jong Jong Inai as the main idea of the new composition. The motive was incorporated into gamelan instrument (bonang barong) playing ostinato and interlocking musical parts with quasi-minimalism approach. For the solo soprano voice part, I composed a new set of melody using the original lyrics of Jong Jong Inai.

The piece was divided into 4 short sections labelled as Jong Buka, Jong 1, Jong 2, Jong 3 and Jong Tutup. Those sections have their own characteristics in terms of motivic development and changes of tempo. For instance, Jong Buka and Jong 1 is played with tempo of $\text{♩}=150$, however the tempo is modulated to $\text{♩}=80$ in Jong 2. Without conductor, changes of tempo between this section is done by calculating the intersecting point of Jong 1 and Jong 2 with every accented notes from bar 60 to 64 are representing ($\text{♩}=80$). Refer to Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Metric modulation in Jong, bar 59 – 68.

Bonang 1 acts as the link to tempo changes by playing accented notes (boxed). The accented note is actually preparing the new tempo $\text{♩} = 80$ for Jong 2. The tempo is changed again going into Jong 3 with the soprano being the link as can be seen in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8: Metric modulation in Jong, bar 77 – 81.

Cultural Issues on Composing New Works For Malay Gamelan

21st century is the era of borderless, fully globalized world. This is the era of world “coming together” as of acculturation, enculturation and assimilation is becoming a norm. I recognized that there is a difficult ground in taking another culture’s musical ideas and superimposed them into new materials, nevertheless I believe that my discussion below shows that my adoption of Malay gamelan musical materials and concepts are with sensitivity and respect.

In previous sections of this paper, it has been discussed that composers are often inspired by the sounds of the music of other cultures. Western composers who worked with musical materials or instruments of other cultures, such as Javanese gamelan, Malay gamelan or who record or transcribe music of other cultures for use in their contemporary music composition, or who combine musical traits of different cultures together, are content that there is the important political and philosophical matter of cultural appropriation.

Cultural conventions of any non-Western materials that the composer intends to use should always be respected. In my case of composing for Malay gamelan, I have to respect the cultural background of the music instruments. For instance, in the piece Adiwira dalam Bb, I demanded kempul to be placed on the floor instead of

traditionally being a hung gong. Although this is not a normal performance practice, I clearly instructed the performer not to deliberately step over the instrument and also to put the gongs of kempul on a mat for the performance. This is also an important step to ensure that the instrument is not being damaged during rehearsal or performance.

Another issue that I encountered in composing multicultural music is intellectual property. For instance, during the composition process of Jong, my colleagues and I worked hard to ensure that the folk tunes that we were using is not under copyright of any other author as the outcome of our project would finally being published. The project's goal was to eventually make the folk tune sustainable for foreseeable future.

Conclusions

Composing music is a creative process prearranged by the traditions, values, intuitions, choices and beliefs of the composer. Multicultural composition is a specific practice that is engaged in by many contemporary composers. It offers new opportunities and possibilities. These possibilities include getting into new timbres, techniques, and other mediums of expression. The utilisation of non-Western musical instruments, the embracing of non-Western concepts of form and structure is opening path to the future for composers.

Music composition is a constantly changing artform and as globalisation continue, more non-Western elements will be presented in the compositions of future composers. Composers will never stop to develop and expand their range of compositional strategies, approaches or techniques as it is being discussed in this paper.

Sustainability of the traditional music instruments, in this case, Malay gamelan in order to survive 21st century rapid growth of technology is always the goal for me, as a composer whenever I compose music for the ensemble or the individual instrument itself. My three compositions can be considered as an act of preservation of Malay gamelan and also materials of innovation as Khabar Angin Tenggara and Adiwira dalam Bb still maintain some of structural form of Malay gamelan albeit with additional elements of Western art music in its style; Jong was created to completely abandon the authentic style of bonang playing.

By increasing the number of possibilities of writing new works for Malay gamelan, multicultural approach is not meant to overwhelm the authenticity of Malay gamelan but instead this could be the act of expanding the magnitude of Malay gamelan importance to Malaysian culture.

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