

## **Teaching and Learning Musical Composition at Universiti Sains Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the issues involved in the teaching and learning of musical composition in one of the universities in a country which is dominated by various ethnic and religious groups. The discussion warrants an overview of the historical backdrop of Malaysia, its people, heritage, and the resultant types of music. The paper will also trace the aims of music education in schools and in Universiti Sains Malaysia, the role of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra and its outreach program, the effects of Western compositional styles, classical or popular, and the impact of Islamic influences, imported or homegrown, on music making. It will include a brief study of the musical preferences of Malaysian students.

**Keywords:** Teaching and Learning Musical Composition, Ethnicity and Musical Preference, Multicultural Country, Balance between the study of Malaysian and Western music, Open and Liberal Approach towards Learning of Musical Composition

### **Introduction**

Strategically located in maritime Southeast Asia, present day Malaysia consists of two non-contiguous areas - the Malay Peninsula or West Malaysia which forms part of mainland Southeast Asia has a landmass of 131,573 sq km, while Sabah and Sarawak or East Malaysia which forms part of the Malay Archipelago has a landmass of 198,160 sq km<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Sabah has an area of 73,711 sq km while Sarawak has an area of 124,449 sq km.  
<http://allmalaysia.info/2011/01/01/malaysia-general-info/>. (accessed 7 July 2013).



Map of Southeast Asia

<http://www.chinapage.com/map/map.html> (accessed 24 October 2013).

West Malaysia is dominated primarily by the Malays, Chinese, Indians and a small number of Eurasian, Thai, and Portuguese descendants. East Malaysia, which is separated from West Malaysia by 640 km of the South China Sea is populated by numerous indigenous groups such as the Ibans, Bidayus, Kelabits, Melanaus and Penans in Sarawak, and the Kadazandusuns, Bajaus, Bisayahs, and Muruts in Sabah.

A government website lists the following population breakdown by ethnicity for the year 2010. Out of a total of population of 28.3 million, 91.8% were Malaysian citizens while 8.2% were non-citizens. And out of the Malaysian citizens, 67.4% comprises of the Malays and the various indigenous groups, collectively known as Bumiputera, 24.6% were Chinese, 7.3% were Indians, while the remainder ethnic groups consisted of 0.7%

(Department of Statistics, Malaysia Official Website. Ethnic Composition: 2011).

The population breakdown by religion, while differing a little from website to website, is just as disparate with 61.3% Muslims, 19.8% Buddhists, 9.2% Christians (Catholics and Protestants), 6.3% Hindus, 1.3% Confucians, Taoists and other believers of traditional Chinese religion, and the remaining 2.1% listed as people without religion or with unknown or other religions (Department of Statistics, Malaysia Official Website. Religion: 2011).

While other countries may have similar numerous breakdown for their own ethnic groups and religions, the main difference is, although Malaysians adhere to a shared tradition, most practice their own beliefs, speak their own language and participate in their own cultural activities.

This paper discusses the issues involved in the teaching and learning of musical composition in one of the universities in a country which is committed to upholding the notion of diverse ethnicities living together.

The discussion warrants an overview of the historical backdrop of Malaysia, its people, heritage, and the resultant types of music. The paper will also trace the aims of music education in schools and in Universiti Sains Malaysia, the role of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra and its outreach program, the effects of Western compositional styles, classical or popular, and the impact of Islamic influences, imported or homegrown, on music making. It will include a brief study of the musical preferences of Malaysian students.

### **Historical background of Malaysia**

The west coast of the Malay Peninsula straddles the Straits of Malacca which is one of the more important trade routes in the world. The Peninsula has witnessed the arrival of South Asian and Middle Eastern traders who brought goods from their exotic homeland in exchange for the much needed aromatic spices from the Malay Archipelago since the 1200s. At the same time, Muslim missionaries from the Arabian Peninsula, in particular Yemen as well as Gujeratis from Western India plied the Indian Ocean. Along with the introduction of Islam, a myriad of external cultures began to infuse the vocabulary of local practices.

But even before this, with the establishment of Buddhist (2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century) and Hindu (6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century) civilizations in Southeast Asia, their respective religions and traditions had already permeated the entire region. The thousand of years of a blending of histories resulted in a continual amalgam of beliefs and values, dramatic at times and imperceptible at others.

The exploitation of the spice trade by the Portuguese during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the conquest for mineral and agricultural products by the Dutch during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and British from the 18<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, saw an imposition of Western ideas on local governance. And as they vied to expand their colonial powers in the different centers that were the fulcrum of trade in the area, the British in particular brought migrant workers from India to work in the rubber plantations while the Chinese coming on their own in search of better fortune drove the economy from the tin mines. Up until the 1980s and 1990s, Malaysia was the leading exporter of tin and rubber respectively. A further kaleidoscope of cultural *mélange* occurred when many of these workers stayed on to become the new immigrants.

The countries that constitute Southeast Asia today were essentially derived by the colonial powers. With the exception of Thailand which was never under any colonial rule, these countries are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. Basically over the last 600 years, the Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, French, British, Japanese and Americans had occupied Southeast Asia

The 11 states of the Malay Peninsula that constituted the Federation of Malaya gained independence from British rule in 1957. Six years later in 1963, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore teamed up with Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia. However, in 1965 Singapore ceased to be a member of the Federation and became a fully independent republic.

### **Music in Malaysia**

The musical genres found in any mosaic society can be multitudinous and wide ranging. The music of the Malays has been influenced by hundreds of years of layering of cultures ranging from that of the Portuguese and Arabs to the Thais and Indians. The local musical ingredients have been blended by, assimilated with and adapted from sources that were seemingly richer and more complex. The end results however, are musical forms that are distinctive in that while they bear the influences of

outside sources, the accepted influences had been negotiated into the framework of what was acceptable within the boundaries of the Malay tradition at that particular time.

Among the existing musical forms are the Asli (Original) genre songs that portray the heart and soul of Malay sentiments to the accompaniment of Malay and Western instruments. Punctuated by the Malay drums which play specific rhythmic patterns the music uses Western harmonies that is inflected with Malay aesthetics and sensitivities in form and substance.

Keroncong is another popular song genre which has its roots in Indonesia. The form contains a more obvious hybrid of elements; Malay inflected melodies accompanied by Western instruments which historians claim to have been introduced by the Portuguese.

More often than not, the tunes would be laced with ornamentations by the flutist or violinist, and the characteristic keroncong rhythm would be strummed and plucked by the double bass, violoncello, guitar, and cak and cuk (a pair of ukulele-like instruments).

The harmony is obviously based on Western chord progressions.

Considered to be of Malay Classical tradition and with variants widespread in many parts of Southeast Asia, the Gamelan is an orchestra of metallophones, xylophones, drums and gongs; while the Malaysian version of the shadow puppetry Wayang Kulit draws its stories from the Hindu Ramayana epics. Another form, the Mak Yong is an ancient courtly dance drama of Thai and Malay influences.



Keroncong



Keroncong



Mak Yong



Wayang Kulit



Gamelan



24 Seasons Drum Ensemble

Different genres of Malaysian music. Photographs by Mohd Zamri Salleh  
 Photograph of 24 Seasons Drum Ensemble by Razak Abdul Aziz

The majority of the Chinese and the Indians made Malaysia their homeland from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and as such their music have for the most part retained their distinctive flavor from their original home country, However, one particularly Chinese musical form the 24 Seasons Drum Ensemble though drawing aesthetics from China in terms of its philosophy and musical structure, was borne in Malaysia during the late 1980s.

As with other countries, importation of popular music from the West has also given birth to Malaysian music of the popular strain. While quite a few songwriters and pop music composers

write in a totally western popular style, some have successfully meshed musical ideas ranging from the various modes and scales, rhythms and meters, and genres and instruments of the different ethnic groups with that of their Western counterpart.

Musical synthesis between the West and the non-West appears as strange bedfellows in the form of an Islamic popular trend known as *pop nasyid*. The genre which has been developing over the last two decades amalgamates Arab, Malay and Western melodic modes, rhythms and percussion instruments with popular Western boy band styles such as those of Westlife and Backstreet Boys. With musical text sung in two or three-part harmony, and to the background of video imagery depicting Allah's creation, groups such as Raihan, Hijjaz, Rabbani, Hawa and Mawaddah aim to disseminate a global Islamic message to their listeners. The modern, Islamic, yet Malaysian appeal of the *pop nasyid* makes it popular among younger Muslims (Tan Sooi Beng, 2007).

With the advent of Western trained musicians many of whom are now teaching in private as well as public institutions of learning, many young Malaysians are able to pursue their education in music composition at home. As with composers elsewhere, these aspiring composers are all aiming to express their own personal aesthetic expression.

### **Music Education in Primary and Secondary Schools in Malaysia**

A standardized music curriculum based on the National Philosophy of Education (NPE) which is geared towards developing the intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical domain of the pupil has been implemented in all government primary schools since 1983 (PPK:2004). This curriculum has been revised in 2011 to include specially designed core modules which emphasize musical experience, music making, music appreciation and music notation.

While pupils aged 7-12 have benefitted from the program, music is only offered in selected schools for lower secondary pupils aged 13-15, and for upper secondary students aged 16-17. For the selected schools, the Ministry of Education stipulates that the subject must be taught in specified music rooms equipped with traditional (gamelan, caklempong and kompong) as well as western instruments (keyboard, drum set and percussions) by teachers who possess at least a bachelor's degree in music (Bakhtiar Mohd Salleh:2007).

The music syllabus in the Integrated Secondary School curriculum is categorized into four aspects:- (1) aesthetic perception includes teaching of musical concepts such as rhythm, melody, texture, expression and timbre; (2) musical experience includes playing of instruments such as the recorder and singing for pupils in primary schools, and traditional ensembles such as caklempong, kompong, gamelan and brass band for students in secondary schools; (3) creative expression includes creating music, simple rhythms to accompany melodies for pupils in primary schools, and applying musical concepts into creative compositions for students in secondary schools; and (4) aesthetic appreciation includes introducing selected traditional ensembles from the home state to pupils in primary schools; and from other states as well as Western music to students in secondary schools. These students are also taught some cursory musical analysis (PPK: 2002, 2003, 2004).



Music in Schools. Photographs by Razak Abdul Aziz

### **Music Program in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)**

Universiti Sains Malaysia is among one of the 20 public universities, 37 private universities and 27 Teachers Training Institutions that award certificates, diplomas and degrees in music.

In their pursuit to address the preponderance of materials and literature on Western music as compared to Malaysian music, Patricia Matusky, a former associate professor with USM and now a professor at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, and Tan Sooi Beng, a former associate professor and now a full professor of USM, wrote a comprehensive book on Malaysian music. Entitled *Muzik Malaysia: Tradisi Klasik, Rakyat dan Sinkretik*, the book was published in 1997 by The Asian Centre in Kuala Lumpur in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism.



An English version of the book was published in 2004 by Ashgate under the title *The Music of Malaysia – The Classical, Folk and Syncretic Traditions*. A revised copy in Malay with an accompanying CD was issued by Universiti Malaya in 2012.

As unsurprising as it may sound, the systematic and analytical description of the various musical genres in the book and the presence of the co-authors firmly established the Music Department as a leading research centre in ethnomusicology, so much so the department continues to be reputable even after Patricia Matusky's return to the USA.

With the publication of the book and an academic staff comprising of researchers and doyens of traditional music as well as a team of American, European and Japanese trained educators, the USM Music Department offers a considerably balanced musical curriculum of Western as well as Malaysian music. Alongside subjects in Western music history and music theory, undergraduates take courses on Malaysian as well as World music. Undergraduates are also required to enroll in ensembles ranging from choir and jazz to gamelan and wayang kulit. Apart from following lessons in aural training, conducting and score reading, undergraduates are taught research methods in ethnomusicology (USM, Hal Ehwal Akademik dan Antarabangsa:2009).



Music at USM. Photographs by Mohd Zamri Salleh

All students regardless of their area of specialization will therefore have to undergo the necessary grounding in the musical traditions of Malaysia and the West. A major drawback for students and teaching staff alike is the three-year timeframe for students to complete their degree. With so many courses and so little time, some parties may yearn for a longer time allocation to improve upon their

existing ideas and to reflect upon new ones. It must be stressed that the department will be expanding the duration of study to 4 years in 2014.

At the postgraduate level, students have the option of pursuing the mixed mode Masters program in Pedagogy and Performance, or of following the research program in ethnomusicology, musicology, or musical composition at the Masters and the PhD levels. The USM Music Department began accepting qualified applicants for the MA and PhD programs in Musical Composition since 2007. According to Mr Aizat Hisham, Assistant Registrar of Data and Records at USM's Institute of Postgraduate Studies, the accepted local as well as foreign candidates had obtained their Bachelor's or Master's degrees from Malaysia, Britain, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the USA. The supervisor may therefore encourage non-locally trained Malaysian students who are deemed to have insufficient knowledge of their traditions to follow undergraduate courses on Malaysian music. They may also be asked to follow a number of electives such as *Aesthetics of Contemporary Music* and *History of Music Technology*. Postgraduate research students in musical composition work to discover and develop their own thought process and aesthetic approaches with their supervisors on an individual basis. The department is flexible in allowing students to develop their own personal, cultural and religious musical expression.

Composers in USM however face a major hurdle. While there is a sprinkling of singers, the small student body of the music department is mostly pianists, and while USM has a jazz band, nearly all of its members are non-music majors. Composers writing for individual instruments and voice may quite easily find musicians to perform their work. However, for larger works USM composers may have to scout around the island or the mainland for musicians to play his or her piece. Fortunately there are individuals, small ensembles and large orchestras elsewhere who are open to new experiences.

### **Music Preferences of Malaysian Students**

A research done by Shahanum Mohd Shah, an associate professor from UiTM, among secondary school students and university undergraduates indicates that subjects within each ethnic group preferred music of their own culture over music of another culture. The results revealed a direct correlation between ethnicity and music preference (Shahanum Mohd. Shah, 2006:107).

Shahanum Mohd Shah indicated that the Malays have the highest mean scores for Malay popular music and art styles; the Chinese and Indians also have the highest mean scores for their respective popular music and art styles.

The findings by the researcher reinforce the multiple considerations the composition teacher needs to take into account when faced with students who wish to express themselves creatively in accordance with their own cultural affinities. At times though, the interest of the same student would progressively widen to include the aesthetics of the other cultures.

### **Promoters of Contemporary Western Music**

Malaysia's first renowned international orchestra, the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) was established in 1996. Housed in the Petronas Twin Towers which was at that time, the world's tallest buildings, MPO hosted its inaugural performance on August the 17<sup>th</sup> 1998. Apart from performing their regular symphonic and chamber concerts in the world class concert hall which was designed by Cesar Pelli & Associates, the orchestral members who are from all corners of the world contribute towards the nurturing of Western classical music among young Malaysians through the MPO Education and Outreach Program. Particularly designed to instill awareness of the Western musical form, the activities of the program include teaching of instruments, performing in school concerts, and presentation of workshops.

Formed in 2003, the MPO Forum for Malaysian Composers consisted of two phases. The competition which was adjudicated by three established composers was open to Malaysians of all ages. In Phase 1, six selected candidates worked on a six minute piece for a specified group of musicians. Candidates could include indigenous musical instruments with the consent of the Forum administrators. Each candidate was guided by a mentor throughout a four month period. A concert showcasing all six new works in the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas determined which four composers got to move on to the next phase (MPO:2003).

In Phase 2, the four successful candidates worked on a 10-12 minute full symphonic composition under a similar mentoring scheme. The winning composition showcased during a performance of

all four works would then be entered into the biennial MPO International Composers' Competition which was open to composers from all over the world (MPO:2004).

The Forum was halted after Phase 2 of its second season in 2006. However, MPO which had been instrumental in encouraging hopeful local talents to compose still continues to selectively accept and commission new works, chamber or orchestral, which will then be performed in special programs. MPO thus serves as an avenue for Malaysian composers to have their works performed by a world class orchestra in a world class concert hall.

Besides MPO, there has now developed in recent years, numerous platforms for composers to have their works heard. The Malaysian Composers Collective in partnership with non-profit institutions such as Goethe-Institut and education organizations such as SEGI Education Group held the 1<sup>st</sup> KL Contemporary Music Festival in 2009. Selected works by Malaysian and Southeast Asian composers were performed by reputable groups such as the Ensemble Mosaik from German and the Hong Kong New Music Ensemble from China (KL Contemporary Music Festival: 2009).

The HSBC Classics which is organized by the HSCB Bank Malaysia Berhad and the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Center (KLPAC) has been hosting its annual outstanding concert since 2005. Beginning with a Piano Festival that year, the HSBC Classics has played host to a Wind Festival the following year and a String Festival the year after. In 2008, HSBC Classics hosted a piano competition whereby contestants, apart from performing stipulated works by Western composers must also play a piece of their choice from among a set of works by Malaysian composers which were displayed in their website (HSBC Classics Piano Competition & Bursary Award 2008: 2008).

More recently, a composition symposium entitled *Eclecticism and the Compositional Voice: Pathways for the New Millenium* was organized by the Music Faculty of Universiti Teknologi MARA. Nicknamed *composium*, the event which took place in September 2013 featured talks and works by locals as well as expatriates working in Malaysian universities (UiTM Composium: 2013).

UiTM is also a front runner of contemporary music. Now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> series, the faculty is working with the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPAC) to produce its next Malaysian Composers Concert Series to be held on 30<sup>th</sup> November to 1<sup>st</sup> December (Malaysia Composers Concert Series 2013 – Call for Works: 2013).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Although the sparsely populated Malay peninsula of earlier centuries has had a long history, the Federation of Malaysia consisting of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak only came into being in 1963. By mutual agreement, Singapore separated from the Federation to become an independent republic in 1965. Tertiary education in Malaysia has had a relatively young history. Universiti Malaya (UM), Malaysia's oldest university was established in 1949 in Singapore under colonial rule while Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), the country's second university was founded in 1969.

A full-fledged Department of Music was set up at USM in 1993 with Tan Sooi Beng at the helm. With the advice of a board of university personnel, Tan who had just had her PhD in ethnomusicology from Monash University, and who would later go on to become a renowned ethnomusicologist in her own right created the syllabus for the Bachelor of Arts degree. Concerned that the department would end up with a curriculum skewed towards Western classical music, a program relevant to Malaysian students and the needs of Malaysia was suggested. Upon receiving consent from the University Senate, a program consisting of both Malaysian and Western components was implemented.

Prior to their admittance into the department, a large percentage of undergraduates had studied Western music under private teachers. Most had taken the graded music examinations offered by the London-based *Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM)*. However, although Malaysia is a multicultural country, most of these students had very little knowledge of the music of the people outside of their ethnic, racial and religious group. A research done by Shahanum Mohd Shah among secondary school students and undergraduates clearly indicates that subjects preferred the music of their own culture over music of another culture. All majors regardless of their area of specialization are therefore made to undergo firm grounding in the musical traditions of Malaysia and the West.

With the publication of *Muzik Malaysia: Tradisi Klasik, Rakyat dan Sinkretik* by Patricia Matusky and Tan Sooi Beng in 1997, and the participation of undergraduates in Malaysian ensembles, students are provided with the necessary theoretical foundation and experiential learning. And over the years, during curriculum change old courses may be dropped and new ones added, the underlying balance between the study of Malaysian and Western music however remains intact.

At the postgraduate level, the department began accepting qualified applicants for the MA and PhD programs in Musical Composition since 2007. Accepted candidates especially those from Malaysia with Bachelor's or Master's degrees from non-Malaysian universities may be encouraged to follow undergraduate courses on Malaysian music. They may also be asked to follow a number of electives such as *Aesthetics of Contemporary Music* and *History of Music Technology*.

The approach towards musical composition instruction at USM has to be flexible. Students work with their supervisors to discover and develop their own thought process and aesthetic approaches. The department while providing an array of musical courses is flexible in allowing students to develop their own personal, cultural and religious musical expression. An open and liberal approach towards the learning of musical composition, one that takes into account the lively mix of history, community and influences from within and without, is needed to cater to the varied stylistic tastes of both the undergraduates and the graduates.

### **Acknowledgement**

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