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Tradition and Concert Music in Malaysia, 2002

Carleton Macy

This is a summary of one person's foray into pockets of a young, contemporary concert music scene. I focused upon finding composers of what is best called "concert music," in contrast to composers of commercial music designed for popular consumption, commercial ads, movies, or videos. The goal of my search was to discover how a composer's professional existence in Malaysia affects the music he or she writes.

I first set out to hear and understand the many rich Malaysian music traditions so that I would be able to hear the works of the contemporary composers in a Malaysian context. After an exploration of traditional music genres, I endeavored to meet as many composers as possible and to hear recordings of their music. During the three weeks of my stay in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, I was privileged to meet eight composers and heard of a few more. My research led me to some observations, which I will present as a conclusion to this essay.

Because of Malaysia's geographic location at the crossroads of many cultural and economic paths, there is a rich variety of musical traditions shared by composers, and it is fair to assume that every educated composer is well aware of all of the traditions. The deepest traditions include, among others, *Wayang Kulit* and *Mak Jong*. Both of these are dramatic forms using music with text sung in *Bahasa Malayu*. Although the Islamic government does not identify with these Malay traditional forms, and their general popularity is far less than it was in the past, they are "from the earth" and, from what I saw and heard, they exist as

more than museums of the past. These musical forms contribute instrumental sounds and vocal styles that remain very important elements of Malaysian musical identity.

Both *Wayang Kulit* and *Mak Jong* use the *rebab* (2-string fiddle) and the *surunai* (oboe), along with various drums, all of which are particular to the peninsula. The vocal style is similar to the instrumental style: both use long sustained lines with abundant, florid ornamentation, and with a highly focused, nasal tone quality. Since neither of these particular styles is prominent in the music of Malaysia's neighbors, Thailand and Indonesia, it seems appropriate to suggest that their cultural role is of greater real importance than presently evidenced by the lukewarm support from the government and the public. A third traditional music, the Malaysian *gamelan*, is also identified with the *Bumi-putera* (people of the earth). As explained to me, the Malaysian *gamelan* is a close cousin to the Javanese *gamelan*, with some simplification in the tuning and the music. As in Indonesia, *gamelan* music may well have been the court music of the sultanates and thus has been accorded special status and function.

The most popular form of Malay music, *Asli*, is a hybrid style that features pleasantly harmonized, sung, or played melodies that are accompanied by drums and gongs. This music is performed on Western instruments such as the violin and accordion as often as it is on the *rebab*. While the drumming seems to be Malay, the melodies, to my ears, seem to be highly influenced by the Western colonial cultures of the past 400 years. Presently, *Asli* is being adapted to the popular music scene and is often performed by singers with electronic instrument ensembles. In my attempts to find recordings of "traditional Malaysian music" in music stores, I was consistently led to a section that featured such performances.

Three additional cultural musical styles that play important roles in the total background scene are Chinese, Indian, and Arabic. The Chinese and Indian cultures were present prior to the arrival of Western colonialists. The Chinese have a strong tradition of classical music for small and large ensembles of traditional instruments. Perhaps most importantly, the Chinese culture reserves a strong place for youth education in the arts, which ensures the continuation of the tradition. In the Indian community there is a strong presence of *raga* as well as popular forms of Indian music performed on sitar and *tabla*. Over the past decade, there has been a rising interest in Arabic music, mostly experienced electronically through recordings.

The foregoing description of music traditions in Malaysia is not complete, but it does demonstrate the richness of a Malaysian musician's background. Combine this background with other traditional forms not mentioned, with the obvious popular music scene that emphasizes local bands as much as international bands, and with the iconic Western classical music background (Beethoven and company), and the complexity of the educated musical life is multiplied.

Who are the Malaysian composers of "concert music" and where do they live? The answer is much the same as it is in the United States. Most are academics, working in a university setting, and living in the major metropolitan areas, in this case, Penang and Kuala Lumpur. Although all of the composers that I contacted write music because they want to compose (a good definition of a composer), only two of the eight were willing to claim "composer" as one of their primary professional identities. Of these two, only Valerie Ross would be considered successful in garnering performances, and those performances are almost exclusively produced outside Malaysia.

It is obvious that the academic and social setting does not support the composer as a "composer" unless there is a direct commercial link to the music, such as its use in film or radio ads. Viewed as a microcosm, the scene in Malaysia is not greatly different from that in the United States. The perspective changes when, as in the United States, one can belong to two major national support organizations for composers, each with about 1,500 composer members.

What is important, however, is that composers do exist and are supported by the national government as educators. Composers are generally writing for themselves, a small audience of friends, and a very small, but aware, public (including many expatriates). As yet, there is no network of composers within Malaysia, although Johan Othman of the Universiti Sains Malaysia spoke of his desire to create such a network so that they might share with each other. The performance of traditional music forms does not fare much better than concert music. Both are largely relegated to the academic setting in Malaysia as they are in the Western world. Music is composed for the few available ensembles or for electronic realizations, either in the form of real electronic music or midi realizations of notated scores.

Most of the composers are very aware of their place in the larger view of cultural history. They perceive the decline of the popularity and presence of traditional Malaysian music and take it upon themselves to include elements of the tradition in their compositions. Such

inclusion is done with such frequency that it is appropriate to describe many new compositions as “cross-over” pieces, that is, music that crosses the boundaries that separate one style from another. The music of Sunetra Fernando, Valerie Ross, and Tan Sooi Beng is consistently composed in the cross-over aesthetic. While their music can be described as more or less political in nature, each piece that I heard also stands on its own artistically.

Sunetra Fernando and Tan Sooi Beng collaborated in the production of a concert composed for Malaysian *gamelan* with additional instruments and singers. The production also resulted in a self-published CD titled *Rhythm in Bronze* (2001: Five Arts Centre and The Actors Studio). Two of the most striking pieces on the CD combine various cultural elements to create statements about change. Although words cannot adequately describe music, the descriptions written by the composers for the CD liner notes clearly identify the various musical influences and compositional intentions:

“Sembuh Sudah” by Sunetra Fernando, with text by Latiff Mohidin

In this piece, the poet comments on the lament for the dying of tradition, and sees its replacement with a new, and ambivalent energy. The poem inspired the use of Southeast Asian structures such as the *ostinatos* of the Sulu Seas’ *kulintang* (indigenous gong-chime and gong ensemble), traditional heterophonic textures of *gamelan*, at times a harmonic base, and song. Here the singer draws on the Malay *Asli* style integrated within a contemporary ethos.

“*Sembuh Sudah*” uses the sounds and performance styles of the above-described sources while creating a powerful lament that would be understood by most musical audiences around the world. The composer uses traditional Malaysian elements and textures as compositional means to an end. I suggested to Sunetra that I could hear strong elements of Indian music in the vocal lines, and her response was that I could be observing that the singer was Indian! This is indeed one more form of cross-over to be found in a multicultural setting.

“Perubahan” by Tan Sooi Beng

Using western-style motivic development, Malay and Chinese Rhythms, and the linear-heterophonic structures based on the gong-cycle found in Malay shadow-puppet music and Southeast Asian gong music. “*Peruba-*

han" (Change) was written during a time of great social and political change in Malaysia.

In "*Perubahan*," the composer places two musical cultures in opposition. The piece begins with somewhat traditional *gamelan* music in a setting of a popular *Asli* melody. The popular tune and the *gamelan* give way to music for a Chinese *shigu* drum ensemble. The conclusion of the piece finds the two styles (cultures) existing together through the use of *shigu* drums as accompaniment for the *Asli* melody.

I listened to "Karma" by Valerie Ross. "Karma" is for *rebab* (Malaysian 2-string fiddle), flute, oboe, Malaysian gongs and little cymbals (*canang*), drum and *tabla* (Indian). Ross described her aesthetic approach as simply using the sounds that she hears to be appropriate for her aesthetic goals, and that those goals are "purely musical and expressive of an emotional mind-set." Although she discourages the "cross-over" categorization of her music, I cannot help but hear it in that vein.

The score for "Karma" is extremely contemporary, using a mixture of graphic indications, rhythmic cells, and suggested pitches. The instrumentation itself crosses the boundaries of Malaysian, Indian, Indonesian, and Western instruments. I heard in the melody lines the long, florid melody of *Mak Jong*. The music has great affinity with contemporary concert music styles found in the Western world where performances have in fact been produced. Ross has scored the piece in such a way that it can be performed with Western instruments substituted for the *rebab* and the traditional percussion instruments.

In conclusion, there seem to be two artistic aesthetic directions being followed by Malaysian concert music composers. A few, mostly younger composers believe that change is inevitable and that it is not important to hold on to tradition. This group composes largely for Western music forces and electronics. The larger and older group of composers views tradition not as historic but as vital although repressed. This group desires to keep tradition alive and integral to the new directions. Once again, there is a parallel to the "new-music" scene in the United States, a parallel that can be simplified as the Avant-guardists and the Traditionalists. Any progressive music scene needs both groups to reflect off of each other. In Malaysia, as the educated audience grows, both will be needed and appreciated.

In the musical products of each group, elements of the local traditions are evident. Although the sound of the music is far different from concert music being written in the Western world, the aesthetic of cross-over is the same. Ever more frequently, Western concert music of the last two decades has emphasized our own form of cross-over, often combining our own “traditional” elements—such as jazz, rock, folk—with late 20th century compositional language and techniques. In this period of great change, the essence of Malaysian traditional music may survive only in the newly composed music.