

STRING QUARTETS AND PIANO TRIOS BY TWO MALAYSIAN COMPOSERS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the chamber music compositions of two of the more prominent composers in the Malaysian music scene, Dr. Chong Kee Yong and Dr. Tazul Izan Tajuddin. This will give an insight into these compositions while at the same time allow the reader to have a clearer insight into their chamber music and the impact on the Malaysian contemporary music scene with their fusion of Western and Asian elements. These two composers have been chosen as they have both composed the two important genres of the traditional chamber music, namely the string quartet and the piano trio. The research was conducted in a qualitative manner through interviews, discussions and technical analysis. The research will be useful to performers, educators and researchers who are researching the Malaysian chamber music. The findings and discussions of this will be a good starting point for further research into chamber music of Malaysian composers as there is currently a lack of research material in this area with very few known research papers currently on Malaysian contemporary music. This study is part of the LESTARI research grant from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

Keywords: Malaysian composers, chamber music, contemporary music.

INTRODUCTION

Western Art Music has been around in Malaysia before independence since the early days of the British colonial masters in Malaya. In those days, members of the middle and higher classes of society acquired western musical instruction through the system of music examinations pioneered by Trinity College and ABRSM (Tye, 2005, p.5). Completing the graded examinations was considered both a status symbol and a sign that the student was at a reasonably musically competent level.

After independence, a small group of Malaysian composers and arrangers started to emerge. These were usually highly trained in Western Art music (Matusky and Tan, 2004. p.7) mostly through a combination of local music teachers and some music education in foreign countries of which Britain was considered a preferred destination. In the early days of independent Malaysia, there was a focus on composing popular, patriotic music and music with traditional elements as the country searched for national identity and music that would reflect this in the early days of Malaysia's history after independence. Many of the early composers including Jimmy Boyle (Chan, Lee & Boyle, 2015) and Tan Chong Yew (Bahizal, 2006) were associated with Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) where the main focus of their music compositions were involved in composing patriotic music and music for national occasions. In this context, it was preferable to compose for larger ensembles leaving music for smaller chamber ensembles to be neglected. This was inevitable as the focus at that time was more on nation-building and at that time, it was not feasible for any composer to devote himself or herself entirely to composing western art music for chamber music.

As universities spearheaded by Universiti Institut Teknologi MARA (UiTM) started to develop and expand their music programmes in the 1990s, a new generation of Malaysian composers started to emerge including Mohd. Adam Masumi and Tazul Izan Tajuddin. With the development of the composition programme in UiTM and the subsequent government funding for these students to complete their postgraduate degree overseas, this new generation of Malaysian composers could now devote themselves fully to composing. For students who were unable to enroll in UiTM due to the affirmative action policy, the offering of music programmes in private institutes such as UCSI University was a boon to the local music education.

Malaysian composers received a boost with the establishment of the Forum for Malaysian Composers by Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) in 2003 (Gan, 2014, p. 14). However as the focus was more on orchestral music, there was less creative push for the composition of chamber music. The Malaysian Composers Collective was then formed in 2008 followed by the Society of Malaysian Composers (SMCC) in 2010. During this period, many of them experimented with new innovative combinations; preferring to compose for a new combination of instruments or making use of traditional Asian instruments or new mediums such as the electronic music medium. As such traditional chamber music genres such as the string quartet or the piano trio remained as isolated works that were occasionally composed.

This research serves several purposes. Chamber musicians who are exploring the field of Malaysian chamber music will be able to have a look at what some of these notable Malaysian composers have written and if they wish to proceed with further research from there, they will at least have a starting point. Scholars and musicologists will also have important reference material available if they should decide to do further research in this area.

In addition, Malaysian composers might be inspired to compose more pieces in the chamber music genre as interest and demand for these pieces grow. This is so when upcoming Malaysian composers become more aware of the creative opportunities in these areas.

Background of Chamber Music in Malaysia

While the string quartet and the piano trio are generally considered the most important genres in the history of chamber music, the compositions of string quartets and piano trios have not been as commonly written amongst Malaysian composers. This is despite the fact that there have been several prominent Malaysian composers since the early days of Malaysia's independence. This is because these mediums are considered too much in the mold of traditional Western Art Music with limited potential to display either cultural or contemporary ideas. Therefore the traditional genres of string quartet and piano trio music were often overlooked or used in combination with other non-traditional medium such as multimedia and electronic music.

One of the earliest composers of traditional chamber music in Malaysia would be Tan Chong Yew who was the Director of Music for Film Negara in 1957. He was also the pianist/arranger of Radio Orchestra from 1958 to 1983. He composed the *Intisari* string quartet which was for the Konsert Perdana by Radio Television.

The next generation of composers included music faculty at the Malaysian composers. Dr. Valerie Ross who is well known as a music researcher and educator composed her String

Quartet No. 1 in 1991 in South Korea. It was performed by the Arditti String Quartet and was written when she was the resident composer for the Darmstadt Institute for New Music (Ross, 1991). She also composed her String Quartet No. 2 in Stockholm, Sweden in 1994. This was for the ISCM World Music Days. Sharifah Faizah Syed Mohammed who has been on the faculty of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) for two decades composed a string quartet entitled *Storm Clouds* in 1994 in London under the request of the City University String Quartet.

This was followed by Dr. Chong Kee Yong and Dr. Tazul Izan Tajuddin who manage to successfully put Malaysian compositions on the world map. They will be discussed in more detail later.

Since the beginning of this century, many new Malaysian composers have emerged on the international stage. Some of them are mostly based in Malaysia. They include Mohd Adam bin Masumi who is currently the coordinator of the composition programme in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and CH Loh who founded the Malaysian Composers Collective to promote Malaysian contemporary music. Ainolnaim bin Aziz who is currently a faculty member at UiTM combined his string quartet with live electronics to create the composition *Badang!!!!* to win third place at the Acht Bruecken Music for Cologne Festival. Zihua Tan who is currently based in Canada has also written three string quartets. Fung Chern Hwei composed *Get in Line* for the Sirius Quartet while in Germany. In addition, Adeline Wong who is based in Singapore very recently composed *Interweaves* for the string quartet.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There is currently a lack of research material on Malaysian composers (Gan, 2015) and even less specifically on the chamber music by Malaysian composers. What are available are merely a few journal articles and papers. Therefore the only effective way to collect data would be through the qualitative method and through the assistance of the composers themselves.

It has generally been a staple of major composers to compose some chamber music especially in the genres of the traditional string quartet and piano trio. Some of the most successful composers in the history of Western Art Music ranging from Mozart to Beethoven and Brahms have generally composed all kinds of genres with chamber music being included. The last three decades have seen the emergence of a new generation of Malaysian composers who have made an impact both locally and internationally. While many of them have written in various genres, the actual number of composers who have composed in the traditional chamber music genres of the string quartet and piano trio has been few.

The research chooses to focus on these two composers because they represent two of the most successful composers from Malaysia and are well-represented on the international stage. As Malaysia is a multi-racial country consisting of various races such as Malays, Chinese, Indians, Kadazans, Ibans and other ethnic minorities, these two composers represent two of the two largest ethnic groups and because of their different ethnic background and religion, they represent two different ethnic spectrums of Malaysian composers.

The string quartet and piano trio represent two of the most important genres in the field of chamber music. This is also a major contributing factor to these two composers being chosen

for discussion because there were very few Malaysian composers to compose for both these genres.

This research project was conducted through a series of interviews, e-mails and questionnaires with the composers. Visits were made to the Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) and Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) offices to collect archived information.

In the interviews, the composers were asked comprehensive questions about where, when and why their compositions were written. They were also asked about the compositional styles, influences and innovative features of their compositions featured. The important information about their works by these composers was able to contribute significantly to the academic content of this research.

DISCUSSION

Dr. Chong Kee Yong

Dr. Chong Kee Yong who is currently residing in Singapore is probably one of the most prolific of the Malaysian-born composers. His early music education was in the Malaysian Institute of Arts. He proceeded to study at the Xian Conservatory and the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels. The awards he has won include the Prix Marcel Hastir Award by the Belgium Royal Academy of Sciences, Letters and Dine-arts, the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra International Composer's Award (MPOICA), the Grand Prix at the 2nd Seoul International Competition for Composers, 2nd Lepo Sumera International young composer prize, Lutoslawski Award and the BMW Award in the International Isang Yun Music Prize in Korea. His work mixes his Chinese and Malaysia multi-cultural heritage richness with his music.

His *Huang Tu* (Yellow Dust) String Quartet was composed in 1994 and dedicated to Professor Rao Yu Yan. After being revised in 2002, the work was premiered in the 19th of July, 2003 for the Finland Kuhmo Festival. The composition was performed by the Danel Quartet of Belgium and the piece won the Prix Marcel Hastir of 2003.

His *Scar* String Quartet was written in 1999 and again was dedicated to Professor Ran Yu Yan. It was performed at the ceremony of the Prix Marcel Hastir at the Belgium Royal Academy of Sciences, Letters and Fine-arts and won the Prix Marcel Hastir 1999. Subsequently, the string quartet was performed the Warsaw Autumn Festival in Poland at Frabryka Trcziny Arts Centre.

Dr. Chong composed the *Silence Cosmos* String Quartet in 2005. The world premiere was at the Warsaw Autumn Festival in Poland at Frabryka Trcziny Arts Centre. The composition was performed by the Kairos String Quartet.

The *Inner Mirror* String Quartet No. 3 was composed in the year 2006. It was commissioned by the Spielgel Quartet of Belgium with financial assistance provided by Vlaamse Gemeenschap. The world premiere was held on the 8th of February, 2007 at DeSingel Concert Hall in Antwerp, Belgium.

The *Yun Yong (Clouds Surging)* String Quartet No. 4 was composed in March 2011. It was commissioned by the Serge Koussevitzky Foundation for the Momenta Quartet. The work

was for the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Music Library of Congress and is dedicated to the memory of Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky. The world premiere was on the 13th of May, 2011 in the Museum of Chinese in America in New York City.

A look at the music scores for his string quartets show that his early works are still somewhat conventional in the contemporary sense. There are some complex rhythms and the music is somewhat atonal in texture. The later works become increasingly avant garde.

While Dr. Chong has a prolific output of string quartets, he has also composed a solitary piano trio. He composed *Epitaphe Sans Mots* for piano trio in 2003 and had its world premiere on 19th September, 2004. The composition was dedicated to the Jean-Paul Trio of Germany who gave the premiere at the Max-Reger-Tage Festival 2004 at the Max Reger Concert Hall in Weiden, Germany. The composition won the first prize at the Max-Reger-Tage Internationaal Composition Competition of 2003. In his programme notes, he describes the three different instruments of this piano trio as representing three different characters.

When asked to describe the influences and style of these compositions, Dr. Chong Kee Yong said:

My music style lies in the way in which I have activated the legacy of my multicultural Malaysian heritage and combined a strong focus on Chinese cultural traditions with a wider Malaysian context that involves theatre, philosophy, rituals, and spirituality. My key compositional roles played by elements such as sonic mobility and spatialisation, the interplay and interchange of roles in instrumental writing, and the concept of "living ornamentation" in creating heterophony and vocalisation. Sonic mobility and spatialisation, as realised through unique instrumental layouts in my compositions, are deeply informed by my childhood experience of listening to the acoustics of nature in the woods. The interplay and interchange of roles between instruments through their alternations of similar passages in an improvisational style are inspired by oral traditions in the teacher-student mentorship relationship in the study of music.

Dr. Tazul Izan Tajuddin

Dr. Tazul Izan Tajuddin is probably one of the most influential and important Malaysian composers who has made it big internationally. He received his early education at Universiti Institut Teknologi MARA (UiTM) before doing his Master's Degree in Composition at Carnegie Mellon University and Doctorate Degree at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom.

Amongst the many awards he has won include 1st prize in the prestigious Toru Takemitsu Composition Award 2002, 1st prize in the 8th Tokyo International Competition for Chamber Music Composition 2003 (Joji Yuasa as jury), 1st prize in the 2nd Molinari Quartet Composition Competition 2004 (Canada), 1st prize in the 21st Japan Society of Contemporary Music Award for Composers 2004, 1st prize in the Lutoslawski Composition Award 2005 (Poland) and winning the New Millennium Composition Commission Award (UK) 2005. In 2015-2016 he was the visiting scholar at the prestigious Harvard University.

Having served as the Composition Coordinator at Universiti Institut Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Dr. Tazul has been responsible for bringing up and influencing a whole new generation of Malaysian composers. Through his enterprising initiatives, he was responsible

for starting the Malaysian Composers Concert Series which gave a platform for these young performers to expose their works to the Malaysian public.

Dr. Tazul composed *Gamelbati III* for string quartet between August and October 2005. This was written during the period Dr. Tazul was living in London as a freelance composer. The composition was premiered in Warsaw in as the first prize for the Lutoslawski Composition Competition 2005. It was performed by The Polish String Quartet during the XII Lutoslawski Forum at the Filharmonia Narowoda, Sala Kamelrana, Warsaw, Poland on the 15th of February 2009.

Dr. Tazul describes *Gamelbati III* as being composed using the extended technique which is a style developed in post-World War II Europe with experimentation on sounds. This genre includes musique concrete and electronic music.

According to Dr. Tazul, the word *Gamelbati* describes the integrating of Western and Eastern music. He describes *Gamelbati* as being as coming from the word *Gamelan* which means “to play” and *Bati* which means “united” or an integration of elements. In this context too, he uses *Bati* as a combination of *barat* (west) and *timur* (east).

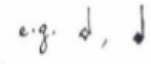
Dr. Tazul has this to say about the composition:

In this composition, the focus is not on the exact pitch, interval or melodic frame but on the sound, textures and sonority (as described above) combined with normal note playing. It is a ‘sound based’ composition. Some sounds are reminiscent of the pelog mode used but the sound is individually tailored and breaks away from the norm of traditions. By breaking away from traditions it will give a new perspective on integration. The tempo, time, cyclic structure, the phrases and the organisation of the notes do not follow tradition but rather follow other strict rules: my compositional method.

The piece is constructed around 7 series of notes (based on Andhong-andhong gendhing pelog pathet nem; a Javanese gamelan traditional piece) and 7 series of numbers. These series of notes and numbers are distributed throughout the piece and are woven and connected to 7 sections. Each of these sections consists of a further 7 small sections with a violin I solo as an introduction. These small sections are like a series of small patterns which are connected to each other like broken tiles being placed next to each other. However, the sound should always be continuous and in constant flux, and the string sonority is delicate and evanescent. The violin I is always in one key and based on the traditional Javanese gamelan melodic framework (balungan) and is the central (not necessarily main) line. For violin II, viola and cello, the series of notes is transposed from the low to the high register and some are dislocated in register. There are also chromatic gestures and selected intervals (particularly minor 2nd) used as decoration and embellishment. They are supporting sonorities surrounding the Javanese gamelan traditional framework played by violin I. The pedal pitch is D sharp throughout the piece. Repeat only once of each selected passage with the repeat sign. Any tie sign should be played when the passage continues. The word ‘merong’ and ‘ngelik’ are technical terms for Javanese gamelan phrases or sections and used here only for a approximate guide.

The rhythmic patterns are arranged in a random manner. Dr. Tazul also says that the work is influenced by Indo-Malay culture and Islamic architecture and geometric art.

Performance Remarks



Played as natural harmonic touch but not specifically harmonic sound. The sound produced is sometime a greasy, silky, 'dirty' tone, sometimes clear harmonics. The idea is to create in between noise and harmonics effects. Please note throughout the piece this sonority is the main characteristic of the work, occasionally combined with 'normal' sonority. Another way of describing this is for each player to rehearse the line as normal notes but then using the same fingering playing the line with a light touch on the string rather than pressing it.

Figure 1: Sample performance remarks for *Gamelbati III* (With permission from the composer)

Dr. Tazul Izan Tajuddin also composed *Sebuah Pantun IV* for piano trio between January to August 2011. It was premiered in Nicosia, Cyprus during the 3rd International Contemporary Music Festival 2011. The Pharos Arts Foundation brought in Dr. Tazul as the invited composer and the piano trio was dedicated to the artistic director Evis Sammutis. The performance was at the Shoe Factory, Nicosia Cyprus on 15th September, 2011 and performed by the Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble. At the time this composition was written, Dr. Tazul was an Associate Professor at Universiti Institut Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

Similar to *Gamelbati III*, this piano trio composition is described as a sound-based composition where pitches and notes only serve as a guide for the sound production. Dr. Tazul has this to say about the composition:

Sebuah Pantun IV is written using gamelan numbering and the numbers were transformed into sounds and notes in trio. *Pantun* is a Malay traditional poem that can be in 2, 4, 6 (etc), phrases. In 4 phrases *pantun* I am using, there are 4 short sections but played continuously. The sections are like the *pantun* one the shadow (*pembayang*) and the meaning. In this piece, verse 1 and 3 are the *pembayang* using extended techniques and verse 2 and 4 using the actual notes. In the fourth set for trio, the verses are interchanged from previous *pantun* where verses are arranged in this order: verse 1, 3, 2 and 4. It is a short piece based on my *gamelbati* ideas and using *pantun* as structural base.

In his compositions, Dr. Tazul gives meticulous instructions on how the composition should be performed (figure 1). He is rather particular on the type of sound that is produced as he composes this as a sound-based composition. For him, the type of sound that is produced is more important in effect than individual pitches.

Some further comparisons

Dr. Chong Kee Yong was a product of the private music education through the Malaysian Institute of Art before going to China and Belgium through his self-funding. From what we see, partially through his ethnic Chinese background and his education, he clearly was influenced by both Chinese and Western culture. Dr. Tazul Izan Tajuddin on the other hand was educated through government funding in the government Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) before completing his education in America and Britain. With his Muslim

background, it is clearly that he is influenced by a fusion of Islamic and Western influences. Despite their diverse backgrounds, both composers have been successful, albeit in different ways and career paths. While Dr. Tazul is based in Malaysia currently being the Deputy Dean of Music in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) , Dr. Chong Kee Yong is based in Singapore while being the visiting professor at Shanghai Conservatory of Music in China.

Both composers composed these chamber compositions both when they were still studying and also when they were established composers. In spite of the differences in the periods of composition, their early works already display musical maturity.

Performance issues

It can be seen that Dr. Chong Kee Yong's works are technically demanding at every level. Performers are asked to utilize all kinds of technical devices from glissandi to artificial harmonics. The sense of a melodic pitch is not as important as the rhythmic aspect which is difficult to put together as an ensemble. The String Quartet No. 4 does away with bar lines and the players need to rely strongly on cues from each other. Dr. Chong gives clear indications on the type of sound that he requires with instructions such as "wind-like murmur sounds" or breathing sounds. Dr. Chong has stated that he frequently requests of the performers to vocalise the music without Western bel canto type of singing.

While Dr. Tazul Izan Tajuddin gives clear instructions on his musical scores on how to interpret his pieces, they are just as difficult to perform. The performers have to make extensive usage of tremolo. He does not require actual singing melodic pitches but he emphasizes more on the noise effects that are produced. *Sebuah Pantun IV* is especially difficult to put together by amateur ensembles.

The Fusion of Eastern and Western Elements

Dr. Chong Kee Yong has said that in many of his compositions, he has tried incorporating Asian musical practices such as Hakka storytelling and mountain songs, Gamelan music from Indonesia, ancient Chinese court music, classical Chinese poetry, Korean Pansori music and Japanese gagaku music. The String Quartet No. 1 and *Yun Yong* string quartet are clearly derived from Chinese elements and background. In his chamber music compositions, Dr. Chong has stated that he incorporates Asian vocal and instrumental techniques into Western musical languages. He has stated that the vocalization of the music is supposed to be reminiscent of untrained Asian villagers.

Due to his Malay ethnicity and Muslim background, Dr. Tazul Izan Tajuddin's music is more influenced by the Malay-Indonesian musical surroundings. According to Dr. Tazul, he uses the Asian ideas and incorporates them in such a way that performers of Western Music playing Western musical instruments will be able to perform them. For example, his *Gamelbati III* makes use of Gamelan numberings but the composition is composed in such a way that performers who are well grounded in Western musical techniques will be able to perform them using the string quartet medium which is a traditional Western musical concept.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is hoped that this will lead to further and more detailed research on chamber music by Malaysian composers. With this research material, many more Malaysian composers may be encouraged to compose for the string quartet and piano trio medium. In the long term, this might result in the composition of music from the chamber music genre and it may not be too long before more Malaysian composers start to devote themselves to extended cycles of string quartet or piano trio composition the way that earlier composers of centuries ago like Beethoven did. In addition, this may directly lead to both local and international piano trio and string quartet ensembles performing works by Malaysian composers.

The Malaysian compositional scene is still in the early stage. With stimulus and interest in this area, there can only be a bright future for Malaysian composers.

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BIOGRAPHY

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