

DEVELOPING A COMPOSITIONAL STYLE INTERGRATING
PATAH LAGU MELAYU AND A WESTERN APPROACH
TO MUSIC COMPOSITION

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ABSTRACT

The author is a Malay student of music composition who researched his personal development as a composer by bringing together the traditions of his own Malay culture and traditions of Western composition techniques with his personal philosophical world-view. To represent the Malay-ness of his voice, the author examined and identified examples of *patah lagu Melayu*, the ornamentation employed in *lagu asli*, a type of Malay syncretic music. The examples of *patah lagu Melayu* were uncovered through score analysis, aural analysis and personal one-to-one interviews. The author's philosophical world-view is Muslim. The daily practice of being a Muslim, which acknowledges a power greater than him, Allah S.W.T, is a guiding force in the author's life. To grow the author's artistic voice, the identified elements of the *patah lagu Melayu* and the sacred text of Islam were then interpreted and embedded into five new music compositions: *Pujian*, *Dhikr Asli*, *Asli Row*, *Saxoasli* and *Takdir*. These pieces harness many of the Malay and Muslim characteristics, whilst at the same time using Western compositional techniques to produce a neoteric music. The characteristics of Malay and Islamic philosophies can be clearly heard in the composition created. A collection of audio files and hard data in written form is part of the research findings. The author's compositional voice has evolved and expanded as an outcome of the research.





MEMPERKEMBANGKAN GAYA KOMPOSISI DENGAN MENGINTEGRASIKAN PATAH LAGU MELAYU DAN TEKNIK KOMPOSISI BARAT DI DALAM KOMPOSISI MUZIK

ABSTRAK

Penulis adalah mahasiswa Melayu di dalam bidang komposisi muzik yang meneliti perkembangan peribadinya sebagai komposer dengan menyatukan tradisi budaya Melayu dengan teknik komposisi Barat serta pandangannya terhadap falsafah dunia. Untuk menzahirkan ciri-ciri kemelayuan di dalam suara hati penulis, beliau telah mengkaji dan mengenal pasti contoh-contoh patah lagu Melayu iaitu ornamen yang digunakan di dalam lagu asli, yang dikategorikan sebagai muzik sinkretik Melayu. Contoh patah lagu Melayu diperolehi melalui analisis skor dan pendengaran terhadap lagu-lagu Melayu asli dan wawancara secara individu. Pandangan falsafah penulis adalah melalui kacamata seorang Muslim. Hal ini adalah kerana amalan harian penulis sebagai seorang Muslim yang mengakui bahawa tiada tuhan yang maha berkuasa melainkan Allah S.W.T telah menjadi asas petunjuk di dalam setiap perbuatan penulis. Begitu juga apabila penulis ingin berkarya, penggunaan teks suci Islam bersama elemen patah lagu Melayu yang dikenal pasti telah digarapkan semula untuk menghasilkan lima komposisi muzik baru: Pujian, Dhikr Asli, Asli Row, Saxoasli dan Takdir. Karya ini menampilkan karektor Melayu dan Muslim dengan menggunakan teknik komposisi dari Barat. Ciri-ciri seni muzik Melayu dan falsafah Islam jelas kedengaran di dalam komposisi yang dihasilkan. Dapatan penyelidikan terdiri daripada koleksi audio dan data dalam bentuk penulisan. Implikasi kajian ini, kemahiran penulis untuk mengubah karya-karya kreatif telah berkembang dan berevolusi.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



1.1 Introduction

This research arose from the author's exploration of his personal compositional voice and his musical, philosophical, cultural and religious background. The author is a jazz saxophonist and composer. The starting point of the research was the existing jazz expression of his musical voice. The original intent was to use patah lagu Melayu found in lagu asli music in the creation of new music with a jazz emphasis. However, the nature of the research led the researcher in another direction. The author's philosophy deemed this to be his responding to the will of Allah SWT. In this research project, the author researched and identified examples of patah lagu Melayu, which were then used as a main element in the creating of the author's compositions.





It was hoped that each of the compositions would carry the sound and flavor of the Malay nuance. This Malay musical element, the patah lagu Melayu, would be extensively used to explore the conventional and unconventional Western composition theories and styles, such as choral writing (with traditional cadential points, four and five-part harmony and Western voice-leading), serialistic and atonal techniques and music of indeterminacy.

The main inspiration for all the author's composition in the research comes from genre lagu asli, specifically patah lagu Melayu. Lagu asli has existed for a long time. It has been classified as Malaysian syncretic music because the music elements contained in the Malay traditional songs already existed in the music of other cultures, such as the Portuguese, Arabic, India and European—all of whom have colonized Malaysia at some time (Mastusky, 2003). Other rhythms belonging to Malay syncretic music are *inang*, *masri*, *joget*, *ghazal*, *zapin* and *keroncong* (Ibid, 2003). When the listener hears Malay music, though it contains elements and influences from other cultures, as a syncretic art form, it has its own individuality that is readily identifiable as Malay.

In summary, lagu asli have melodies filled with melismatic decorations. Malay traditional musicians identify these elements with the terms patah lagu Melayu or *bunga melodi*. Lagu asli employs Western scales such as diatonic major and minor, *maqams* (the Arabic word for scale) from Arabic and Persian influences and those of Asia such as the Chinese pentatonic scale.





The rhythms used to accompany lagu asli are called rentak asli. Just as a jazz musician knows the difference between various jazz styles, so do Malay traditional performers of lagu asli know that a rentak asli groove is different from various other traditional rhythms, such as inang, masri, joget, keroncong and others. These rhythms are performed on membranophones and idiophones such as *rebana* (hand-held one-faced drum) and gong (Mastusky, 2003).

These multiple influences and elements that are evident in lagu asli music are indicative of its continual evolution; a growth that ensures the ongoing life of the music. Therefore, it is appropriate for the author to contribute to this evolving expression of Malay culture.



which is another mix in the complexity of the composer's voice. This is an Abrahamic Arabic influence, descending through the Prophet Muhammad, 'Peace be upon Him' (PBUH). This guiding philosophy affects all aspects of the author's life: how he sees reality, how he 'walks in the world' and how he chooses to express himself, which in this research is through music. This musical statement and communication is deemed to be an expression of personal spirituality.

Therefore, he desires his music compositions to not only express lagu asli elements and recent Western music theory breakthroughs, but also the mystical spirituality of the teachings in Islam. The author's personal self-discipline and daily practice comes to the fore in the music, through the integration of the Malay Muslim





practice of sacred chanting (dhikr) after the daily prayer and praise of Allah SWT that occurs in the Mosque and in the author's personal devotions, as well as the author's *sunnah* of the Nabi Muhammad PBUH. This metaphysical component of the research was not initially intended but surfaced as the research unfolded and it became more apparent that this was an integral part of his artistic voice.

1.2 Definition of Terms

Several Malay terms cannot be translated into the English language such as patah lagu Melayu, rentak asli, lagu asli and dhikr, or need clarification such as *Malay asli music*. In Malay culture, 'lagu melayu asli' refers to all Malay syncretic music.

However, in this research, the author uses the term lagu asli, which contains a style of rhythmic pattern called rentak asli.

1.2.1 Malay Asli Music

Malay asli music refers to the traditional Malay syncretic music that contains elements of classical Western music, Malay folk music, Arabic, Persian, Indian and Chinese music. According to Matusky and Tan:

Syncretic music is a combination among classic music and folk music as well as external elements such as Arab, Persian, India, China and Western. This



music has evolved through various stages of presentation by the ‘joget’ dancers and members of the ‘bangsawan’ (aristocracy) and also through the mass media. The genre consists of vocal music, dance music and music for stage (theatre) that employs rhythms derivative of Malay asli music and the ‘’, ‘joget’, ‘ghazal’, ‘dondang sayang’, ‘zapin’ and ‘keroncong’ are all present in the genre in one guise or another (1997, p.3).

1.2.2 Patah Lagu Melayu

Patah lagu Melayu refers to a style of ornamentation employed by Malay traditional musicians (Example 1). This is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Example 1.1. A typical ornamentation around the principal notes of a melody.

The uniqueness of lagu asli music lies in the beauty of its melismatic melody and the use of various ornamentations. In the Malay language, the term for these decorative melodies is known as patah lagu Melayu, *bunga-bunga melodi*, *lenggok melayu*, *grenek* and among others. There is no universally agreed upon term for this form of melodic decoration. The use of the terms patah lagu Melayu, *bunga-bunga melodi* and *lenggok melayu* is subject to the location of the traditional elders, the living heritage of Malay asli music. It differs from place to place. Therefore, the

author uses the term *patah lagu Melayu* to represent the entire tradition of melodic decoration.

1.2.3 Lagu Asli

Lagu asli is one of the sub-styles within the greater genre of Malay syncretic music. It has its own rhythmic pattern called *rentak asli*. In this document, every time the author refers to *lagu asli* he is referring to the *rentak asli* version of this style of music.

1.2.4 Rentak Asli

Rentak asli is one of the rhythmic patterns that occur in *lagu asli* music. The rhythm generally employs a pattern of eight (8) beats in a slow tempo (crotchet equals 50 – 60 beats per minute). When a *rentak asli* is performed, only the first statement of the first bar and first, second and third beats of the second bar are predetermined (Examples 2). All else is usually improvised (Examples 3). (Matusky, P., 1997, p.331)

The image displays two musical examples of the *rentak asli* pattern. Each example consists of two staves: the top staff for the Rebana and the bottom staff for the Gong. The first example is in 4/4 time, with the Rebana part starting with a 'tak dung' pattern. The second example is in 3/4 time, also starting with a 'tak dung' pattern. The notation includes various rhythmic symbols such as notes, rests, and bar lines, with some notes marked with accents or slurs.

Example 1.2. A *rentak asli* pattern performed on a rebana, a one-skin membranophone.



Example 1.3. A transcription of a typical improvisation with an interlocking polyrhythm performed by rebana players

1.2.5 Dhikr

According to the Oxford Dictionary, *Dhikr* is a form of devotional chant, chiefly associated with Sufism, in which the worshipper is absorbed in the rhythmic repetition of God’s name and attributes”. (Oxford Dictionary, 2016) In the author’s

experience, Dhikr is a simple repetitive devotional chant performed both as individual ritual meditation and as a congregational ritual.

CHAPTER 2

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

2.1 The Significance of this Research

The significance of this research is the development of the artistic voice of the composer through a combination of:

- 1) the use of patah lagu Melayu ornamentation.
- 2) the use of Western music theory as applied to the craft of composition.
- 3) the Malay spirituality of the traditions of Islam.

The research questions that arose are:

- 1) How much can patah lagu Melayu be expanded and developed? Will it still be recognised as patah lagu Melayu?
- 2) How does Western theory help develop patah lagu Melayu?
- 3) How does a Malay Muslim compose with Western theory and philosophy while retaining his identity and worldview?

The practice-led method will be used in researching these three criteria stated above. Practice-led method is also known as action research where the author will keep on improvising and creating new ways in composing a piece. The hope is that through this practice-based and practice-led pathway of discovery, the author would create new music that contains a synthesis of the aforementioned influences.

Combining Malay and Western theories rarely found in Malay music is important because by integrating and experimenting with these concepts, it ‘breathes new life’ into Malay music. This new music would be understood to be a form of communication, a form of understanding and as such it represents new comprehension, a new truth—a contribution to the ‘wealth of knowledge’.

Music is research ... Writing music is research. Practice-based and practice-led inquiry brings new understanding and ways of perceiving the world. New comprehensions are made, fresh insights uncovered. (Burrell, 2013, p. 44)

In current popular Malaysian music, there is no or little evidence of the influence of Malay Asli ornamentation because of the influence of popular culture

through the media (Shahanum, 2013). There is a popular music genre referred to as ethnic creative which does exhibit some Malay Asli elements, but this research project is endeavouring to create art music, not popular music. This is important because this research will not only save the Malay Asli elements, but it will also promote the element to be instilled into current popular Malaysian music. This will also make other composers to fully understand the elements of Malay Asli in their composition and they can also apply this into their popular music or art music.

Through the review and readings of the literature surrounding Malay asli music and the observations made through the analysis of music recordings and aural data, the author has concluded that the Malaysian music industry uses very little lagu asli elements in their works. Tan S.B. (1997) states;

Paradoxically, while the new *ronggeng* becomes national, the folk form is fast disappearing. Today, new styles of recorded ronggeng music, *Irama Malaysia*, and other types of Malay pop music are more popular at weddings and social functions. The predicament of the performers is indicative of the state of the folk ronggeng. Many of the veteran ronggeng musicians are old. They find it difficult to survive on live performances and have had to find other means of earning a living. (p. 307)

During the course of this research, it was found that there was not much literature or documentation about patah lagu Melayu, so the author took this