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PERFORMING MUSIC BY A LIVING COMPOSER:
UNDERSTANDING THE MUSICAL INSPIRATIONS
OF RAZAK ABDUL AZIZ IN SELECTED
PIANO WORKS



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MOHD FAIRUZ BIN ZAMANI

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CREATIVE WORK DISSERTATION SUBMITTED FOR THE REQUIREMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS
SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

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had lasted since our days at the secondary school, Malacca High School; it all begins with our mutual interest in music.

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ABSTRACT



Razak Abdul Aziz (1959 -) has been inking down his music from the early 1980's. Still writing new works, he had composed music for various medium of instrumentations – giving special attention to the piano either as a soloist or a collaborator. Although this composer has been in the contemporary music scene for nearly 40 years, scholarly writings on his compositions are extremely scarce. His works were only actively performed in the early 1990s and only starting to regain attention in the recent years, locally and abroad. This practice-led research focuses on my take as a co-creator of the selected piano works of Razak Abdul Aziz, viewing it using Rosenblatt's three principles of Transactional Theory, while quoting examples of inspirations in works by other composers to set the tone of the theoretical frameworks of this dissertation. The research findings show that I, as the co-creator of these chosen pieces, was able to document the journey of performing these works in an 80-minute recital of solo and collaborative piano music of Razak Abdul Aziz, with prior discussions with the composer and intensive preparation with other musicians and production team. The finding also demonstrates how the inspirations of the selected works are being translated sufficiently into music notation, without being too technical with the music analysis. Music of Razak Abdul Aziz deserves more attention from both academics and performers, as this composer is regarded as one of the earliest Malaysian contemporary music composers. It would be a great loss to the nation should his works be continually neglected, causing them to possibly fall into oblivion.





MEMPERSEMBAHKAN KARYA KOMPOSER YANG MASIH HIDUP: MEMAHAMI INSPIRASI MUZIK RAZAK ABDUL AZIZ DALAM KARYA PIANO TERPILIH

ABSTRAK



Razak Abdul Aziz (1959 -) mula menghasilkan karya sejak tahun 1980an. Beliau masih lagi menghasilkan karya-karya baharu untuk pelbagai bentuk instrumentasi hingga ke hari ini, dengan memberi tumpuan istimewa kepada piano sama ada sebagai alat solo atau kolaborator. Walaupun komposer ini sudah berada dalam arena muzik kontemporari hampir 40 tahun, tinjauan yang dibuat menunjukkan kajian ilmiah terhadap karya beliau amat kurang dan karya beliau hanya aktif dipersembahkan pada awal tahun 1990an dan 05 mendapat semula tempat pada beberapa tahun kebelakangan ini di pentas tempatan dan antarabangsa. Kajian *practice-led* ini memberi fokus kepada kaedah saya selaku pencipta bersama (*co-creator*) karya terpilih Razak Abdul Aziz menggunakan tiga prinsip Teori Transaksional Rosenblatt. Di samping itu, contoh-contoh inspirasi dalam karya komposer-komposer lain juga diambil bagi menentukan halatuju kerangka teori yang digunakan. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa saya, selaku pencipta bersama karya-karya terpilih, mampu mendokumenkan perjalanan dalam mempersiapkan persembahan resital yang berdurasi 80 minit. Persiapan yang dimaksudkan termasuk perbincangan dengan komposer, sesi latihan intensif bersama pemuzik lain, dan persiapan bersama kumpulan produksi. Dapatan juga menunjukkan bagaimana inspirasi karya-karya yang dipilih diterjemahkan dalam bentuk notasi muzik, dengan menggunakan kaedah muzik analisis ringkas. Karya Razak Abdul Aziz seharusnya mendapat lebih perhatian daripada ahli akademik dan pemuzik kerana beliau ialah antara komposer muzik kontemporari Malaysia yang terawal. Sekiranya karya-karya beliau terus diketepikan, besar kemungkinan kewujudan beliau akan dilupakan sama sekali pada masa akan datang – suatu kerugian besar terhadap khazanah negara yang tidak ternilai ini.





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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASWARA Akademi Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan

ITM Institut Teknologi MARA

PBR Practice-based research

PLR Practice-led research

SOTA School of The Arts



USM Universiti Sains Malaysia





LIST OF APPENDIX

- A Concert Posters
- B Photos from fieldwork
- C Malay poems and lyrics (with English translation)
- D Programme notes
- E Music score



*to watch the videos of Recital 1 and 2, please go to this link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/d1o8mlgxzogimmb/AACGt5yH8HuLTrbKzA5JWXf2a?dl=0>





CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION




This chapter begins with a discussion on motivation and inspiration of myself as the artist-researcher, followed by three (3) performance objectives. The discussion is then continued with programmes for Recital 1 and 2, stating the significance of the performance to justify the proposed set of repertory. The chapter ends with three (3) significant limitations of the study.

1.1 Motivation/Inspiration



The motivation behind this study comes from my experience in the world of piano repertory. In the Malaysian landscape, composers, with their wide-ranging backgrounds, have coloured the trajectory of musical composition. Razak Abdul Aziz (1959-), Marzelan Salleh (1982-), and Sonny Chua (1967-) – among others, have penned their musical tapestry, either commissioned or personal. In an interview with one of these prominent music pioneers/makers, Razak Abdul Aziz laments that, “...many Malaysians are very much interested in writing papers and dissertations on Western composers instead of writing on our own composers.” (Razak Abdul Aziz, 5 May 2018), signaling a dire need for an intervention on harkening back to local, multi-faceted music scene. It is this lack of study and performance opportunities featuring local composers generally and specifically the works of Razak Abdul Aziz, in comparison with the Western

 05 counterparts, which has primarily motivated me to investigate further on this issue. From my personal observation, Malaysian composers are starting to gain recognition in the local academic and music scenes in recent years. Various platforms such as Society of Malaysian Contemporary Composers, Malaysian Composers Collective, Soundbridge Festival, and Free Hands Piano Anthology, MPO Forum for Malaysian composers (a short-lived forum, unfortunately) are providing the performance opportunity for the works of local composers. However, our music fraternity still has a lot of catching up to do especially in terms of existing academic studies and performance opportunities that give emphasis to local composers compared to their Western counterparts. I believe, as an academic, this is a matter to be looked into seriously. Should it be left untouched, it will be forgotten and deemed undesirable by our own audience.



Because of this lacuna, I choose to focus on Razak Abdul Aziz in this doctoral study. As a former academic at Jabatan Muzik, Institut Teknologi MARA (ITM) and retiree academic of School of The Arts (SOTA), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), many of his works have been performed both locally and internationally. Razak Abdul Aziz has been composing music since the 1980s (Hall, 1988, p. 30). His compositional creativity utilises various mediums of instrumentations, amongst which are vocal ensemble (e.g. *The Fisherman*, 2007), art songs (e.g. *10 Pantun Settings*, 1981-1990), and solo piano (e.g. *Etudes for Piano Solo*, 2009). He received his academic training at Skidmore College in the United States of America (USA) as an undergraduate, and from Columbia University in the USA and University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom at the Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy levels, respectively. Formerly a tenured senior lecturer at SOTA, USM, Razak Abdul Aziz is very passionate about composing music and has his most recent premiere of *10 Pantun Settings* in May 2018 at Akademi Seni Budaya and Warisan Kebangsaan (ASWARA) and recorded this cycle in July 2018.

I have had the opportunity to collaborate with him, particularly in the world premiere of his work *The Fisherman* in 2015, which sets the scene of this study. Additionally, in May 2018, I received the invitation to play at the world premiere of Razak Abdul Aziz's *10 Pantun Settings*, which further solidified my interest to study his works. His works, particularly, the amalgamation of local and global essences, give fresh, reinvigorating insights into musical composition which can provide a clear perspective in our local issues. Further, an interview conducted on 5 May 2018 at ASWARA with





Razak Abdul Aziz finds that he is still producing new works and revising existing compositions. When speaking of his piano works, he also expresses his hope to have pianists working with him, as his existing and future compositions require challenging degree of virtuosity, knowledge, and musicality.

Razak Abdul Aziz's works span various decades. His compositions – at times, receiving world premieres, and at other times, recognised on world performance platforms – further buttress the need for further investigation, particularly in the intersection of world musical scene. Among others, his works with premiere/performance dates included, but not limited to:



- (i) *The Wedding for Orchestra* performed by the Shinsei Nihon Symphony Orchestra at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space (20 November 1986)
- (ii) *For Violin and Piano* at the Asian Contemporary Music Festival in Seoul, Korea (20 October 1993)
- (iii) Selections of the *10 Pantun Settings* by the Zelanian Ensemble in Wellington, New Zealand (2 December 1992), by Atsuko Nishioka, Hanae Inuma, Hiroko Shimada, Hiroshi Shimada, Mika Ishimaru, Naoko Sano, Yoko Inagaki and Yuko Takemura in Kochi, Japan (16 August 1996), by Siti Chairani (soprano) and Muzaffar Abdullah (piano) in Czech Republic (2013)
- (iv) Selections of the *Etudes for Piano Solo* by Tuyen Tonnu at Churchill College, Cambridge University, UK (4 August 2007), by María Inés



Caramello at Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina (2 September 2010), and by Matthew McCright at Universitas HKBP Nommensen, Medan (17 March 2011) and Kasetsart University, Bangkok (19 March 2011).

- (v) *The Fisherman* for voice ensemble and 2 pianos (reduction score). Performed by ASWARA voice ensemble and pianists Fairuz Zamani and Samuel Tan (2015).
- (vi) Complete *10 Pantun Settings* for vocal soloists, voice ensemble, and 2 pianos. Performed by ASWARA soloists and Senzoku Gakuen voice ensemble and pianists Fairuz Zamani and Takako Maeda (2018).

Neglecting his work, specifically not paying attention to its well-thought-out inspiration can do a great disservice to the field of music compositional and performance values. As a researcher trained in music composition, the values and inspiration derived from his work could shed light on interpreting other, home-grown Malaysian musical works. Numerous rhythmic, harmonic, and structural attributes in Razak Abdul Aziz's works, for instance, can encourage us to examine and retrieve inspiration from Malaysian musical works differently. Whether collaborative pieces or compositions for solo instrument, his works have left a profound sense of curiosities, to which, if scrutinised, can be understood as magical and avant-garde. In fact, it can even be comparable to his Western counterparts, such as Godowsky's *Java Suite*, Ligeti's piano etudes, Barber's *Excursion*, or Liebermann's *Gargoyles*. Through these issues, selected works of Razak



Abdul Aziz will form an important principle and inform the trajectory surrounding my study.

1.2 Performance Objectives

In my preliminary reviews, I have provided telling illustrations that Razak Abdul Aziz's works are not yet comprehensive for academic discussion and that only a relatively small number of pianists have played his piano works. This lack of attention to his works allows me to press this issue further. This gap, which I intend to pursue relating to his creative works, has the following purposes:

- (i) To understand the inspirations of six (6) chosen piano works

I have worked closely with the composer as the analysis process is not limited to only understanding the materials. It also involves understanding the inspiration(s) behind each work.

- (ii) To analyse the selected piano works





Understanding the inspiration and compositional elements used in his piano works is crucial for analytical processes, as every composer has their own individuality and style in expressing their musical ideas. Explanation on how these inspirations were translated into the music would also be included, whenever necessary.

(iii) To perform six (6) selected piano works of Razak Abdul Aziz

Performing the selected piano works of the composer in two (2) recitals (60 minutes and 80 minutes programmes for Recital 1 and Recital 2, respectively) is what I aim. The journey in preparing these recitals would be documented, highlighting the groundwork involving discussion with the composer and preparation process. These recitals would be recorded (audio and visual) for documentation purposes together with this creative work dissertation.

1.3 Recital Programmes for Recital 1 and 2

The study focuses on selected solo and collaborative piano works of Razak Abdul Aziz. This is to showcase my versatility in performing solo piano works which requires high technical fluency and performance calibre. In addition, it also demonstrates my ability in performing collaborative works that involve verbal and non-verbal interactions with other





musicians in the ensemble during rehearsal sessions and performances; portraying the works as a cooperative effort rather than separate entities.

As stated in the academic guidelines of the Doctor of Philosophy (Music Performance) programme, Recital 1 needs a programme of approximately 60 minutes in duration, while Recital 2 requires an 80-minute programme. These recitals would be inclusive of a brief presentation for each work. This is meant for the audience to enhance their understanding of the selected works, establishing a level of comprehension for better engagement before listening to the performance of these pieces.



Table 1.1

Title of Works (with Instrumentation) for Recital 1 and 2

Title of Work	Instrumentation	Recital 1 and/or 2
<i>Etudes for Solo Piano</i>	Solo Piano	
I – No. 1		Recital 1 and 2
II – No. 2		Recital 1 and 2
III – No. 5		Recital 1 and 2
<i>Pepatah Episodes</i>	Solo Piano	





I – <i>Alah Bisa Tegal Biasa</i>		Recital 1 and 2
IIa – <i>Air Dicincang Tak Akan Putus</i>		Recital 1 and 2
IIb – <i>Kalau Tak Dipecahkan Ruyung, Manakan Dapat Sagunya</i>		Recital 1 and 2
III – <i>Yang Bulat Datang Bergolek, Yang Pipih Datang Melayang</i>		Recital 1 and 2
IVa – <i>Kuman Di Seberang Lautan Dapat Dilihat, Gajah Bertenggek Di Batang Hidung Tiada Sedar</i>		Recital 2
IVb – <i>Hendak Seribu Daya, Tak Hendak Seribu Dalih</i>		Recital 2
V – <i>Kokok-kokok Berderai-derai, Ekor Bergelumang Tahi</i>		Recital 2
VI – <i>Ikut Resmi Padi, Makin Berisi Makin Tunduk,</i>		Recital 2





<i>Jangan Ikut Resmi Lalang, Semakin Berisi, Semakin Tegak</i> VII – <i>Postlude (1-5)</i>		Recital 2
<i>Prisms</i> I – No. 1	1 Piano 4 hands	Recital 1 and 2
<i>5 Early Songs</i> I – <i>A Song</i> II – <i>Dead</i> III – <i>Grace for a Child</i> IV – <i>[In Winter in the Woods]</i> V - <i>Requiem</i>	Solo Soprano, 1 Piano 2 Hands	Recital 2 Recital 2 Recital 2 Recital 2 Recital 2
<i>For Violin and Piano</i>	Solo Violin, Piano	Recital 1 and 2
<i>10 Pantun Settings</i> I – <i>Buai Adik</i> II – <i>Buat Kuih (version 2a)</i>	Soprano Solo, 1 Piano 2 Hands Soprano Solo, 2 Pianos 4 Hands	Recital 1 and 2 Recital 1 and 2





III – <i>Mandi-Mandi</i>	Soprano Solo, 1 Piano 2 Hands, 1 Violin	Recital 1 and 2
IV – <i>Jangan Tengok Kami</i>	Soprano Solo, 2 Pianos 4 Hands	Recital 1 and 2
V – <i>Sorok-Sorok</i>	Soprano Solo, 2 Pianos 4 Hands	Recital 1 and 2
VI – <i>Pinjam Dandang</i>	Soprano Solo, Alto Solo, SATB Chorus, 2 Pianos 4 Hands	Recital 2
VII – <i>Lumba Berkejar</i>	Soprano Solo, SATB Chorus, 2 Pianos 4 Hands	Recital 2
VIII – <i>Kalau Salah Jangan Malu</i>	SATB Chorus, 2 Pianos 4 Hands	Recital 2
IX – <i>Lan, Kula Inson, Lan</i>	Soprano Solo, 2 Pianos 4 Hands	Recital 1 and 2
X – <i>Ba Ba Cak!</i>	Soprano Solo, 2 Pianos 4 Hands	Recital 1 and 2

These works are selected due to their adequacy to represent Razak Abdul Aziz's inspirations and compositional styles over the years. From this early work *5 Short Songs* (written in the early 1980's) to the most recent *Pepatah Episodes* (2019), these recital programmes were designed to showcase sufficient representation of Razak Abdul Aziz's musical style.





It is my intention to perform these works in the order as stated above. Building up the performance graph from piano solo to ensemble settings develops intensity; the direction towards the climax is heightened as the performance continues, with a song cycle to end this recital. To enhance the musical experience of the audience, all pieces will be preceded with a short presentation session, together with the use of presentation slides as an assisting tool during this presentation, having brief description of the selected works and related images that had inspired Razak Abdul Aziz during the compositional process.



1.4 Significance of Performance

The performance has significance in academia, among others:

- (i) To serve as a pioneer study of selected piano works by Razak Abdul Aziz

Studies on prominent composers have already been established. Composers from Western Classical Music such as Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) from the Baroque era, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) from the Classical era, Frederic Chopin (1810-1849) from the Romantic era, and Bela Bartok (1881-1945) in the 20th century (among other examples) have been studied quite comprehensively in the past by scholars



from around the globe from various perspectives, including compositional materials, interpretation, and inspiration (just to name a few). Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for works by its contemporary Malaysian counterpart, in which existing studies are seen as extremely scarce, though starting to slowly gain attention in academia. Only a handful of scholars such as Gan Peck Jin, Lena Hung, and Valerie Ross are notable in this field. Hence, by focusing solely on works by Razak Abdul Aziz, I hope to present an original contribution in the academic discussion, recognising the importance of composers like Razak Abdul Aziz towards the local music scene.

- (ii) To gather necessary information regarding the study as potential reference for future researchers of similar field

As the study is pioneer in nature, I gathered related materials such as music score, musical inspiration, and biography of the composer. What this achieved is an extensive field work involving interviews with the composer, getting the composer's opinion and ideas behind each composition, and referring to past studies on Malaysian contemporary music. The gathered information is then synthesised and used to the benefit of this study. Future research in the similar field could potentially be referring to this doctoral dissertation as a source.

- (iii) To promote selected solo and collaborative piano works of Razak Abdul Aziz through recitals and performances

Preliminary review and observation made had shown that many concert performers choose to play standard repertory of Western classical tradition. My speculation is that



performing works from the standard repertory attracts concert goers as these works are friendlier in nature to them. This situation, I believe, has caused the repertory to become stagnant. The lack of exposure towards contemporary classical works has often been overlooked by concert-goers, particularly to the existence of piano works of Razak Abdul Aziz. Had they been exposed more to such genre, I believe they would be able to be more accepting and bridge their knowledge in music with the works that are actually less known to them. Ultimately, I hope this will begin the endeavour to include works by this composer into standard music repertory.

It is my intention to bring selected piano works of Razak Abdul Aziz into the limelight by performing the works at various concert stages. This could be achieved by engaging in miscellaneous performances locally and abroad, whether in recitals or conferences. An ambitious goal to reach, I believe with adequate exposure of the composer's works through performances and this creative work dissertation, a pathway would be opened for these works to be included into the standard piano repertory, be it for performances or examinations.

1.5 Limitations of Study





I have identified three significant limitations of this study. The first is performance duration for Recital 1 and Recital 2. As Recital 1 allocates 60 minutes and Recital 2 requires 80 minutes, it is impossible to include all solo and collaborative piano works of Razak Abdul Aziz in these recitals. In an interview on 7 December 2018 with the composer, I found out that the composer has an opera, *Maria Zaitun* (originally orchestrated for a piano and a chamber orchestra) that lasts for over two hours (piano reduction was used during the partial premiere of this work). This situation has made performing complete works of the composer impossible because the duration will then exceed the amount of time needed for the recitals involved in this study. However, my plan is to serve as a pilot study by choosing the mentioned solo and collaborative piano works that are able to give appropriate representation of the composer's work as a whole. This study could be continued by future researchers from where this research had taken a halt, making the effort to study the complete works of Razak Abdul Aziz possible.

It must be taken into account that this research is only focusing on piano works of Razak Abdul Aziz. Therefore, other non-piano works by this composer (solo and collaborative) are not included in this study. Hence, the findings obtained through this research might not be applicable to such compositions, as his other compositions may have different performance approaches and inspirations.

Due to the nature of this research, the findings may or may not be applicable for works by other Malaysian composers. Within this parameter, I believe that inspirations of





and performing works by other Malaysian composers could probably be similar to the composer studied in this research, although it might require a different approach altogether, as these composers write in their own individual styles and idioms.

