



Review Article

Composing Music for Puisi Melayu: Exploring the Music Composition of ‘Prosa Air Mata’

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ABSTRACT

The aesthetic science of human ecology constantly attempts to find the perfect balance of the current dynamic human environment. In the quest for balance, contemporary ideas have taken over traditional thoughts and identity issues arise in the community, for example in the arts. The art of music and *puisi Melayu* (Malay poetry) have always strived on the quest for aesthetical beauty. Therefore, the intent of composing music for ‘*Prosa Air Mata*’, a poetry written by Dato’ Usman Awang, is justifiably appropriate. The combination of two different art forms - music and poetry - into a single artwork embodies the creativity and emotive qualities of music and text. Responding towards the issues of identity, the prominence of a Malay theme, especially in the choice of a Malay language source of text, is juxtaposed with a contemporary music ensemble not found in Malay culture. The resulting vocal composition of ‘*Prosa Air Mata*’ shows the composer highlighting Malay literature into a more contemporary idiom of music and arts.

Keywords: Contemporary music, Malay poetry, music, music composition, music and text

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INTRODUCTION

Malay Theme, Western Idiom

The spirit of tradition and cultural identity brought about the intent of having a Malay theme highlighted into an otherwise non-traditional Malay or non-traditional eastern music idiom. A Malay source of text was chosen, as it is the most direct way of instigating the Malay identity, and

language can be the most profound tool of identity clarification of a culture or country. The contradicting elements of both text and music deepen and their anticipated musical result becomes even more curiously attractive.

Puisi Melayu is a traditional Malay art form (Osman, 1987) and has endured the path of modernization and still striving through the creative works of its poets such as the late Dato' Dr. Usman Awang (1929-2001), Malaysia's National Laureate. However, in a pursuit for *puisi Melayu* to achieve more successful acclaim internationally and to prove its flexibility and longevity, the music composition of *Prosa Air Mata* is put on a different platform. This will showcase the *puisi Melayu* in a different form of music composition with instrumentation not from the Malay culture. A juxtaposition of Malay text with Western contemporary music is also an innovative way to start expending the resources of Malay literature.

In the current situation, continuous efforts are being done nationally to promote Malay literature, for example by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka's (DBP) annual competition, *Sayembara Mencipta Lagu Puisi*, which is a competition for composers to create songs for *puisi Melayu*. The singers will then perform the songs with lyrics from the words of the *puisi Melayu*. Normally 2-4 instruments, or a medium sized ensemble, or a small orchestra will accompany the singers. Typically the genre of this competition is the popular music (pop music) style. For example, local pop composers such as the late Ibrahim

Bachik wrote a number of *lagu puisi* and his most famous one is titled *Kekasih* from Dato' Dr. Usman Awang's poetry of the same name. Ibrahim Bachik composed *Kekasih* also in the pop genre. Otherwise, in intimate settings, there exists poetry clubs in Malaysia such as Seksan Gallery, and Gaslight Café, by poetry enthusiasts wishing to renew poetry appreciation in the society. Acoustic instruments such as guitar or flute sometimes accompany poetry readings with simple music in the background to highlight the atmospheric experience. Other than music, Dato' Dr. Usman Awang's poetry has also been staged in 2015 for a theatre performance called *Dari Bintang Ke Bintang*, organised together by Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia (ITBM), Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), and Yayasan Usman Awang (Usman Awang Foundation). Besides that, obviously there has not been an attempt to physically bring on *puisi Melayu* to a bigger and wider contemporary classical music scene and justify its aesthetic values.

As a closest comparison of music and poetry in the region, the example of art song in Indonesia is taken in view. Indonesian composer Mochtar Embut is a prolific figure of music in Indonesia, composing more than a hundred Indonesian art songs, otherwise known as *lagu serius* in Indonesia, during his lifetime (Syed Mohammed, 2017). He composed music for texts of the Indonesian language or *Bahasa Indonesia*. His texts came from the literature of Indonesian poets such as WS Rendra, Chairil Anwar, and Usmar Ismail. Mochtar Embut's *lagu*

seriosa compositions include *Diwajahmu Kulihat Bulan*, *Di Sudut Bibirmu*, *Tiada Bulan di Wajah Rawan*, *Irama Desa*, *Malam Menara*, *Setitik Embun*, *Senyum dalam derita*, *Aku Ingin*, and *Kasih dan Pelukis* just to name a few.

Music and Text

Mode of Expression. Music is a natural outlet for expressive communication. However, text or words, as we know is one of the most direct forms of communication as it uses human language. As long as humans understand a common spoken language, survival and sustainability of an individual or a community is feasible. Poetry on the other hand is an art form manipulating the aesthetic qualities of the human language in addition with its semantically charged meaning.

There are many considerable considerations and compositional issues to negotiate before actually turning text into music. In music especially in the case of vocal music, the correlation between text and music is strongest and inseparable. Unavoidably and quite naturally, composers will at most times associate the intended music with meanings of the words.

Poetry and music are two forms of art that have lasted over the centuries much to their aesthetic and expressive qualities, very much inclined towards the emotional and soulful needs of humans. Their emotive capabilities have an outstanding communicative power that has transcended human civilizations. Music's enduring power may be because humans have constantly found solace in

music, as music can be a place for reflection and contemplation. Therefore, music does suggest an extra-musical meaning beyond itself.

Art Song, Lied, Vocal Chamber Music.

Art songs, often considered a genre of music, flourished during the European Romantic period of the 19th century, are commonly performed by solo voice and piano accompaniment. These through-composed songs are usually set to a poem with interdependant vocal and piano parts. Art songs have been composed in many languages, and are known by several names. While in France it is sometimes known as *Melodie*, in Germany in particular, art songs developed in the 19th century and are known as *Lied* or *Lieder* in its plural form. Well-known composers of the *Lied* are mainly Johannes Brahms, Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Hugo Wolf. Franz Schubert is considered the greatest *Lied* composer as he wrote over 600 songs such as, *Death and the Maiden*, *Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel*, *Little Heath Rose*, *The Erlkönig* and *The Trout*. High literary and artistic qualities in written verses of love, beauty, and nature by notable German poets such as Goethe, Schiller, and Heine, ignited composers to transform these poetic images into creations of songs and the use of piano enabled them to enhance and intensify the literary meaning.

Vocal chamber music on the other hand is songs composed for solo voice with the accompaniment of other solo instruments in various combinations of a chamber

ensemble and not restricting to standard ensembles such as a string quartet. The accompanying instruments in vocal chamber music are manually and decidedly chosen by the composer hence the unconventional mix of instruments. These songs composed for voice and instruments (e.g. clarinet and violin) are referred to as vocal chamber music, and are usually not considered as art songs. This speaks the same for songs originally written for voice and orchestra where they are called as orchestral songs and not considered art songs as well unless their original version was for solo voice and piano. The characteristic of a vocal chamber music work involves musicians keeping the balance between separate and secure instrumental parts but in the meantime not being isolated from others in terms of non-verbal communication and moving focusing attention in the same rhythmic impulse, colour, dynamics, and articulation especially on dramatic or intimate moments. The interplay between vocal and instruments is on many levels. The instrumentalists actually provide the harmonic significance of the sung melody both horizontally and vertically, and are not merely acting as the background to support the vocalist. Some examples of vocal chamber music works by Romantic composers include Johannes Brahms's Opus 91 for voice, viola and piano; Franz Schubert's *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* for soprano, clarinet and piano & *Auf Dem Strom* for tenor, horn and piano; Camille Saint-Saens's *Violons dans le soir* for voice, violin and piano; and Alexander Borodin's *Songs* for voice, cello and piano.

Later in the 20th century, other composers such as Gyorgy Kurtag (*Kafka's Fragments* for soprano and violin, and *Scenes from a Novel* for soprano, violin, double bass and cimbalom) and Charles Ives (*Sunrise* for baritone, violin and piano) continue to compose vocal chamber works.

Malay Vocal Chamber Music - *Puisi Melayu*. Therefore, this paper intends to show that *puisi Melayu* could be brought on to another degree of performance and artistic value. *Puisi Melayu* compositions can be performed in international concert halls to an international audience, and even be performed by international musicians, which fortunately has been done recently. This paper then describes the compositional methods and considerations employed by the composer in composing *Prosa Air Mata*. *Prosa Air Mata*, a composition by Camellia Mohamed Razali is determined by the composer to be written as vocal chamber music, which means will include a vocalist and a chamber ensemble of various instruments. A specially commissioned work, *Prosa Air Mata* received its world premiere performance at Bristol, United Kingdom by *Ensemble Variances* (France) and baritone Tom Niesser (United Kingdom). *Prosa Air Mata's* composition is scored for baritone, flute, clarinet in B flat, piano, violin, violoncello and double bass. The musicians are French, the baritone is from United Kingdom including the conductor, Dr. Neal Farwell also from United Kingdom.

Influences

A number of influences from Eastern and Western composers or artists encouraged the initial idea of writing music for text, which includes composers Gyory Kurtag (Hungary), Kaija Saariaho (Finland), and visual artist Xu Bing (China). Kurtag's vocal compositions such as *Kafka-Fragments* (1985-1987) for soprano and violin, and *Scenes from a Novel* (1982) for soprano, violin, double bass and cimbalom; were very much influenced by 19th and 20th century Hungarian and Russian poetry and literature (Williams, 2002). Saariaho's opera, *L'amour de loin* (Love from Afar) (2000) is a five-act opera with a French libretto (Anderson & Saariaho, 1992); (Anderson, 2003). These two works displays two contrasting styles of vocal compositions from two different language text sources, but nevertheless successfully aesthetically creative and innovative art for its time.

Another non-musical influence for the composition of *Prosa Air Mata* is a visual artist from China, Xu Bing, who is well known for his artwork and installations revolving around language, words, and text. Xu Bing's famously known 'Square Word Calligraphy' technique is a camouflage of Chinese characters, *hanzi*, 'Square Word Calligraphy' simply uses normal English words written into the style of Chinese characters known as *hanzi*. Therefore, what appear to resemble Chinese characters are actually just English words. By doing so, Xu Bing has brought together two separate cultures, which are Western and Eastern into one through his manipulation

of two different types of communication and languages of English and Chinese. By fusing written English with Chinese calligraphy technique, he has created a hybrid calligraphy merging art from two different cultures. Similar to what is happening in the composition of *Prosa Air Mata*, a controlled and directed method of composition according to Western compositional techniques is worked out to produce a balanced relationship between voice (Malay) and instruments (Western). Xu Bing sought to create a work that would expose Chinese calligraphy in a new light and also delightfully reward audiences when they discover they can decode the text, and so does *Prosa Air Mata* intend to reward audiences by revealing Malay text in a new setting and new sounds foreign to the origin of text.

Composing Music for *Prosa Air Mata* Rhythm. Compared to other verbal communication, poetry has the ability to transfer powerful notions across to its listeners and readers, whether it is directly or figuratively. Likewise in music, poetry possesses a certain rhythmic quality. Poets consider poetry as literature with a metric structure, whereby words written out has a rhythmic rhyme or pattern as each and every poem holds a degree of calculative flow within its structural entity. For example, a poem's rhythm can be regular or irregular. When it has regular rhythmical sound patterns, we say the poem has a certain metre. The type of metre is based on the number of syllables per line and how many

unstressed or stressed syllables there are (Lotman, 1976).

Form and Phrasing: Predisposition of Text. Before achieving the aesthetical goal of the final musical composition of *Prosa Air Mata*, the pursuance of balance between two different elements of music and text, is ensuring and defining ways in which the poetic text may possibly move and interlace through the music (Lotman, 1976). Composing music for an already pre-determined text also means studying and reading the poetry out loud to familiarize the rhythmic pattern and the rhythmic pace of the words, thus determining the cadential points in the music. Language is another important factor of composing according to text. Human language is made up of thousands of spoken language in the world. Various and contrasting accents, rhythms, patterns, gesture, flow and tone, different languages may call for a different compositional style and musical result. The

sound and speech rhythms of the Malay text, particularly used in Usman Awang's *Prosa Air Mata* highly influenced the resonance of the composed music. With its open vowels and strong consonances, along with its flexible range of colours and tessitura, the Malay language is naturally good for singing. As was observed in preparation for the performance, after an explanation and a guiding list of pronunciations of the Malay vowels and consonants during rehearsals, the baritone singer was able to deliver the words correctly.

There actually is the combination of the intellectual and intuitive in creating both music and poetry. Even when music and poetry are two different elements, systems and forms of art, both are created within a pre-determined shape or form (Lentsner, 2002). The layout of Usman Awang's *Prosa Air Mata* for instance, is a division of phrases and lines, which are formed semantically according to its text pattern (Table 1).

Table 1

Original poetry, Prosa Air Mata, by Dato' Dr. Usman Awang; text translation by Camellia Mohamed Razali

Original text	Text translation
Bahawasanya air mata tiadalah ia memilih tempat untuk jatuh... tidak pula memilih waktu untuk menitis...	Tears neither do they choose a place to fall... nor will they choose a time to drop...
Air mata adalah kepunyaan bersyarikat... dipunyai oleh orang-orang melarat yang tinggal di dangau-dangau yang buruk oleh tukang sabit yang masuk ke padang yang luas dan ke tebing yang curam,	Tears are owned by corporations owned by the impoverished living in small broken down huts (Tears) are owned by the man with the sickle who enters the wide field and goes on to the steep edge,
dan juga oleh penghuni-penghuni gedung-gedung yang permai dan istana-istana yang indah.	and also (tears are owned) by occupants of lovely buildings and beautiful palaces.

Table 1 (Continued)

Original text	Text translation
Bahkan di situ lebih banyak orang menelan ratap dan memulas tangis.	Even there, more people swallow their laments and wring their tears.
Luka di jiwa yang mereka hidapkan, dilingkung oleh tembok dinding yang tebal dan tinggi, sehingga yang kelihatan oleh orang luar atau yang mereka ketahui hanya senyuman saja, padahal senyum itu penuh dengan kepahitan	The wounded soul that is suffering, is circled by the thick and high walls until, what is seen and known by the outsiders are only their smiles. whereas that smile is full of bitterness

The musical score is for the beginning of *Prosa Air Mata*, which imitates the pentatonic scale. It is written for a full orchestra and includes a double bass line. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 60. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes parts for Flute, Clarinet in Bb, Baritone, Piano, Violin, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The second system includes parts for Flute, Clarinet, Baritone, Piano, Violin, Viola, and Double Bass. The score features various musical notations including notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as *p*, *mp*, *mf*, and *f*.

Figure 1. Beginning of *Prosa Air Mata*, imitating the pentatonic scale

Pitch and Melodic Materials

The melody for *Prosa Air Mata* derives mostly from the pentatonic scale, which develops or dissolves between the instruments and voice through arpeggiated harmonies. Pentatonic scale is a 5-note scale possessing a distinctive Eastern-Oriental sound much associated with traditional Chinese music. Also, the melody of *Prosa Air Mata* derives nuances from Malay *asli* music using major scales, which are then intertwined with pentatonic scales and ornamentations. In *Prosa Air Mata*, the airy pentatonic quality is then sometimes assimilated into upwards or downwards movements of diminished scale qualities to produce vast expression, intensity and drama (Figure 1).

Harmonic Colours and Textures

There is expressive intensity and abundance of surface detail happening in *Prosa Air*

Mata with diverse stylistic and technical devices. Timbre or sound colour plays an important role of expression here in this piece. The harmonic texture of *Prosa Air Mata* is colourfully dense by the built up of polychords, intervallic layers (Figure 2), and transpositions of chord structures (Figure 3).

The music and the voice depend upon one another, and the more it becomes to be heard in terms of ideal sound and expression. *Prosa Air Mata* discovers the voiceless language of music at the same time as the voice expresses the meanings of the words. The essence of its music lies in its voice and music relationship. However, to gain interpolations between calmness and outbursts, parallelism and dovetailing, a disturbance in the relationship is emphasized through the nature of the baritone, who is mostly calm and subdued but interrupted by the instruments, who are more aggressive.

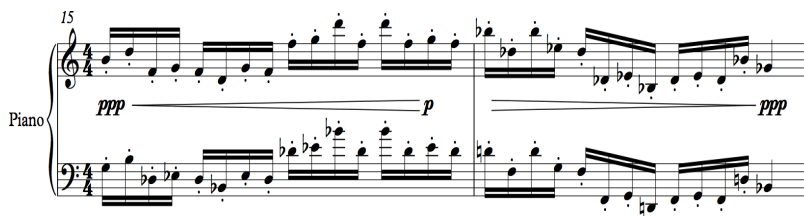


Figure 2. Intervallic layers

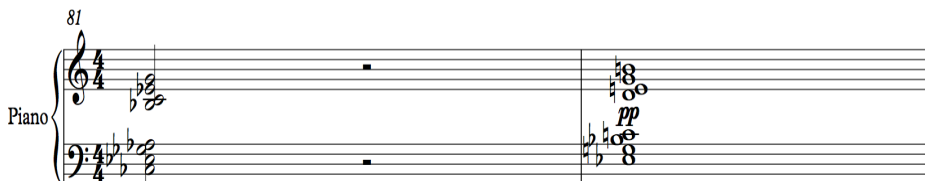


Figure 3. Transposed chords

CONCLUSION

Puisi Melayu and its authors can have an international platform to highlight their existence and to promote its longevity in the literary, music and arts world. Malay inspired or a Malay sound world identity is less represented in the contemporary music world and an abundance of traditional and local sources and materials are actually available for artists to create from. The Malay identity idea could be put forward and its lifespan could be extended as long as there are creative efforts to present them in a developed form or which have a degree of relevance in the society.

In terms of artistic value, as discovered through the effort of composing for poetry, the arising relationship from the combination of music and text is so effective artistically and the expressive content becomes even more descriptive, engaging and discernable, compared to just one of the art form functioning, as the voice (text) and music now depend on one another. The text of the poetry has become more expressively engaging than the text itself, although the text was originally the source for musical exploration and compositional possibilities. The composition of *Prosa Air Mata* reflects the mutual influences of music and literature, whereby the music composition of *Prosa Air Mata* is the musical representation of the poem. In the music composition of *Prosa Air Mata*, the composer, Camellia, shows sensitivity to the individual words, to the prosody, and to the overall character of the text, thus reflecting the original nature of the poem. But nevertheless, even through the

writing of the music, the composer depicted possible meanings that were not obvious in the text at certain parts for ambiguity and drama.

The reception before and after the performance by musicians and audience were very well received and very encouraging as the musicians were engaged into executing new ideas and open towards entering new territories especially for the vocalist. The performance of *Prosa Air Mata* in Bristol by international musicians for a foreign audience shows the relevance, success, acceptability and a promising future of the Malay art if put in accord with other contemporary art forms, while still maintaining its integrity and aesthetics. In this post-modern era, contemporary meaning current, strives on a different note, which in one way can be heard and observed in the contemporary music art scene, whereby instead of avoiding cultural context, composers are looking into ways of asserting tradition and at times personal cultural identity into contemporary music compositions.

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