



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**ART MUSIC COMPOSITION IN MALAYSIA: A FOCUS ON THREE
COMPOSERS**

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By

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March 2000

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Most researches conducted on Malaysian music thus far concentrates on the area of history and development of traditional music and popular music. There has been a lack of research in art music composed by Malaysian composers trained in the Western art music tradition. The objective of this research is to present the contribution of three Malaysian art music composers and the role they play in the formation of a Malaysian identity in the world of art music composition.

This research systematically documents the work of three Malaysian composers, namely, Minni Ang, Chan Cheong Jan and Valerie Ross. These composers were chosen to represent different styles of art music composition in Malaysia. The musical backgrounds of the composers are studied in order to understand the processes that led them to art music composition. A few compositions that reflect their compositional styles are chosen and analysed.

The research methodology used in this work begins with the collection of data and information on the background of the composers and their compositions. A few analysis methods are used to analyse the compositions. These include chord analysis, formal analysis, and twelve-tone analysis.

The result of this research indicates that the three composers presented in this thesis compose in different styles. Ang uses various composition styles in different works. Chan quotes Malay folk tunes or Malay dance rhythms in his music and presents them in Western classical style. Ross prefers to include traditional instruments in her compositions and composes in cross-cultural fusion style. Although the composition styles of these three composers are different, their aims to assert their own identities in the world of art music composition are similar. As indicated by the three different compositional styles of the above composers, it is assumed that there is yet no common direction or trend that exists in the field of art music composition in Malaysia. As a result, it is still hard to define what stage the development of art music composition in Malaysia is at, today. With the establishment of tertiary programs in music and support from government and private sector, more Malaysian art music is projected to be composed in future, leading to a trend that should slowly emerge in the field of Malaysian art music composition.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**KOMPOSISI MUZIK SENI DI MALAYSIA: FOKUS KEPADA TIGA
ORANG KOMPOSER**

Oleh

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Kebanyakan penyelidikan yang dijalankan mengenai muzik di Malaysia tertumpu pada sejarah dan perkembangan muzik tradisional dan muzik popular. Didapati masih kekurangan penyelidikan dalam muzik yang digubahkan oleh komposer yang dilatih dalam tradisi muzik seni barat. Tujuan penyelidikan ini adalah untuk mengemukakan sumbangan komposer muzik seni dan peranan mereka dalam pembentukan identiti Malaysia dalam bidang muzik seni.

Penyelidikan ini meliputi secara sistematik, dokumentasi mengenai tiga orang komposer, iaitu Minni Ang, Chan Cheong Jan dan Valerie Ross, dan komposisi mereka. Komposer ini telah dipilih untuk melambangkan gaya komposisi berlainan yang terdapat di Malaysia. Latar belakang muzikal mereka telah dikaji untuk memahami proses yang telah mendorong komposer ini ke arah komposisi muzik seni. Beberapa komposisi mereka yang menbayangkan gaya komposisi spesifik setiap individu telah dipilih dan dianalisis.

Metodologi penyelidikan yang digunakan dalam tesis ini termasuk pengumpulan data dan maklumat mengenai latar belakang komposer dan komposisi mereka. Beberapa kaedah analisis telah digunakan untuk menalisis komposisi diatas. Ini termasuk analisis kord, analisis *formal* dan analisis dua-belas nada.

Kesimpulan yang dicapai menunjuk bahawa ketiga orang komposer yang dikaji dalam penyelidikan ini mencipta dalam gaya yang berlainan. Ang menggunakan pelbagai gaya penciptaan dalam komposisi beliau. Chan menggunakan muzik rakyat Melayu atau rentak tarian Melayu dalam komposisi beliau. Ross menggunakan alat-alat muzik tradisi dalam komposisi beliau. Walaupun gaya komposisi ketiga orang komposer ini adalah berlainan, tujuan komposisi mereka adalah sama iaitu menunjukkan identiti mereka dalam dunia komposisi muzik seni. Dari tiga gaya komposisi berlainan yang digunakan oleh komposer diatas, boleh dikatakan pada masa kini muzik seni di Malaysia masih tidak menunjukan satu arah aliran yang jelas. Oleh demikian, tahap perkembangan muzik seni di Malaysia masih sukar ditentui. Dengan pewujudan program pengajian tinggi dalam bidang muzik dalam universiti dan sokongan dari kerajaan dan private sektor, lebih banyak muzik seni akan dicipta dikalangan pemuzik Malaysia. Saya yakin bahawa satu arah aliran yang jelas akan wujud dalam bidang muzik seni di Malaysia.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is rapidly moving towards becoming a developed country, in line with the country's Vision 2020. Malaysia has enjoyed political, economic and social stability, despite the recent slowdown. The country still remains relatively stable, evidenced by the increase in income per capita, the sufficiency of goods and services the country provides, and most importantly, the peace and harmony among all the races that live in the country.

Although recently Malaysia has experienced economic turmoil, Malaysia is looking upon the financial and stock market crisis as an opportunity to improve financial management (NST, March 19, 1998). With many new economic strategies implemented by the Malaysian government, it is believed that Malaysia will possibly become one of the first countries in the region to recover from the turmoil.

At the same time, the area of the arts and music are flourishing, with the appreciation of arts and music becoming an important part of life. The government has taken steps to improve the standard of music education and performance in the country. In the area of music education, the Ministry of Education has been conducting a pilot music project involving twenty secondary schools in the country.

since December 1995. The aim of this project is to develop students who are creative, able to appreciate the beauty of music, and are sensitive towards the artistic values of their own culture. The curriculum includes Malaysian music, contemporary music, traditional music, and music from other cultures as well. If this project receives a positive response from students, parents, and participating schools, then music will be included in the secondary schools' curriculum in the year 2000 (*Mesyuarat Jawatankuasa Perancangan Pendidikan Yang Ke 127*)

At the tertiary level, five local universities, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas), Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris (UPSI) and Universiti Malaya (UM) are offering various tertiary music programs such as music education, music technology, music performance, and ethnomusicology. In addition to the government's effort, a number of private music institutions have been set up in recent years also. These institutions offer twinning programs [Malaysian colleges in partnership with foreign Universities, whereby part or all of the degree programs is done in Malaysia] in music, which create more opportunities for students to pursue a tertiary music education. These institutions include Sedaya College and Yamaha Music.

In 1993, the Malaysian Ministry of Culture and Tourism set up the *Orkestra Simfoni Kebangsaan* [The National Symphony Orchestra] under the baton of Mr Takahisa Ota. Since then, they have performed regularly at the *Panggung Eksperimen, Kompleks Seni Kebangsaan* [Experimental Theatre National Art Complex]. From 15th September 1999, with the official opening of *Istana Budaya*,

Orkestra Simfoni Kebangsaan as part of *Panggung Negara* will transfer their concerts to these newly built premises. The private sector is also moving into sponsoring the arts movement. *Petronas* [Petroleum National Berhad] has set up the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra which is based in the new *Dewan Filharmonik Petronas*, located in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. The Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, with Mr. Kees Bakels as the music director and Miss Chean See Ooi as the resident conductor, is the first fully professional orchestra to be set up in Malaysia. Since its formation, they have performed a series of concerts, which have received excellent response from the public. Many international artists and musicians are invited to perform in Malaysia at the *Dewan Filharmonik Petronas*. Aside from art music, the hall also caters for drama and traditional music performances. These developments point towards a progression of art music, adding to a tradition that is already rich in culture, art, music and theatre. As stated by Dato' Seri Dr. Siti Hasmah at the launching ceremony of the *Petronas* concert hall, the formation of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra and the establishment of the *Dewan Filharmonik Petronas* will serve as a catalyst to further enrich the development of the fine arts and culture of our multi-racial society.

Alongside the development of music in Malaysia, research has been conducted on Malaysian music. Much of this research concentrates on the history and development of traditional music and popular music. There has been a lack of research into the area of art music [notationally transmitted music composed by specific individuals as an expression of their artistic creativity] composed by Malaysian composers trained in the Western art music tradition. Such composers

include Razak Aziz, Minni Ang, Chan Cheong Jan, Raymond Kong, Martha Lee, Fauzi Musib, Valerie Ross, Johari Salleh, Tan Su Lian, John Yong, and others

Some of these composers have developed their own distinctive style by infusing various Malay, Indian and Chinese traditional music elements in their composition. These elements include motives, rhythms, and the utilisation of traditional instruments in their compositions. Several of these composers have been able to establish themselves in countries other than Malaysia by winning international composition competitions or having their works performed abroad. The most notable of these is Valerie Ross, who has succeeded in making a name for herself through the publication and performance of her work in the West (Ang, 1997). These composers are beginning to make a mark in the world of art music composition.

Since published works on art music composers were quite limited, a questionnaire (Appendix A) was designed and sent to various Malaysian art music composers through electronic mail and regular mail. Those who have received the questionnaire include A W Nizam, Saidah Rastam, Raymond Kong, John Yong, Fauzi Musib, Martha Lee, Razak Aziz, and others. Not all the composers responded to the questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire are presented in Chapter II. This research focuses on the study of three Malaysian art music composers and their compositions.

The three composers who were selected from these composers include Minni Ang Kim Huai, Chan Cheong Jan, and Valerie Ross. These composers were selected for their unique style of composition, as well as their accessibility. As mentioned by Chopyak in his article 'The Role of Music in Mass Media, Public Education and the Formation of a Malaysian National Culture', Malaysian art music composers employ a number of techniques to compose art music that may be perceived as Malaysian. The three selected composers, Minni Ang Kim Huai, Chan Cheong Jan, and Valerie Ross, all utilise in their compositions, some of the techniques stated in Chopyak's article, such as, the use of various musical elements from traditional music of different ethnic groups, the use of traditional folk music rhythms, and the combination of traditional and Western orchestral instruments.

Accessibility means that the composers above have consented to having their works studied. Due to the fact that copyright protection for compositional works in Malaysia is not well enforced, many composers refused to allow their scores to be studied. This is evidenced in the results of the questionnaires sent out to the composers. Only four composers returned the questionnaires answered. Furthermore, the compositions of Minni Ang and Chan Cheong Jan were performed at public concerts, which I was able to attend, while most of the performances of Valerie Ross's compositions are available on tapes.

The musical background of the three composers mentioned above is studied in order to examine the effect of their musical training on their music composition output. By this it means the effect of their musical training on their notation and their

ability to voice their inner thoughts that are culturally influenced by their Malaysian background. A number of the compositions that reflect the composition styles of each of these composers were chosen and analysed. The reason for choosing these pieces will be discussed later.

Significance of Study

Art music has long been appreciated in the Western world. In Malaysia, however, art music is new, needs to be encouraged and preserved in order for the high culture of the country to be further developed. Until now, little has been written on the development of art music in Malaysia (Ang, 1997).

Although most Malaysian art music composers go through a Western based training, the preferred compositional style each chooses to explore is very often different. Further more, these composers work independently of each other. Their contribution to the development of Malaysian art music is essential because these composers are the pioneers in the field of art music composition in Malaysia. They are part of an evolving process towards establishing a uniquely distinguishable musical style, which integrates the instrumentation, themes and rhythms of the local cultures, such as Malay, Chinese, Indian or Asli, into the Western art music culture in which they have been trained. This evolution is similar to the pathway in which many well-known composers in the world of Western art music have experienced, for example, Charles Ives of the United States, a country with a multiracial background like Malaysia.

During the years in which Ives started to compose, he was isolated from the rest of the music world and was relatively unknown, with none of his major works publicly performed. And yet it was probably due to this isolation that Ives developed a distinct style, largely free from the influence of other composers. He combined quotations of gospel, ragtime and popular music with complex symphonic and chamber music forms in his compositions. After 1921, Ives began to make his compositions known to the public. His compositions managed to attract attention among some of the young American composers. However, he still received many negative comments, and some thought his compositions were imitations and not worthy of study. It was during the 1960s that Ives' compositional technique began to be recognised, and he was later claimed to be the first and foremost American composer throughout the world (Morgan, 1991).

Keeping in mind the state of transition that this well-known composer underwent, it is clear that Malaysian composers are now going through similar transitions. Most compositions by Malaysian composers are unpublished, and most remain unperformed. Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to serve as archivists, as well as researchers, to collect and study Malaysian composers' works, and to present these works to the public. One day, the compositions of these Malaysian composers may be recognised as significant, making this research an important reference in the field of art music.

There are three ways in which this research is significant. First of all, the study brings forth Malaysian art music composers and their compositions to the

knowledge of the public. Secondly, Malaysian art music, which incorporates various elements of traditional Malaysian music and Western styles of composition, will enrich the existing school music curriculum. And finally, by documenting the works of these composers, the study will illuminate the development of the great tradition in Malaysian music.

Systematic documentation of these compositions and performances will increase awareness of art music composition activities, both locally and internationally. This research also further contributes to the study and appreciation of music at all levels. Other than studying music composed by foreign composers, Malaysians can now use Malaysian art music compositions as educational material, both in schools and universities. Most importantly, this research further affirms and defines the need to construct a Malaysian nationally identifiable music, which reflects the culture, as well as the progression towards high culture.

Definitions and Limitations

Art music is defined as music created, composed and written before it is performed. It can also be defined as notationally transmitted music composed by specific individuals as an expression of their artistic creativity (Ang, 1997). The point that has to be emphasised here is that art music is notationally transmitted, therefore it may be reproduced upon demand. This is the most distinct difference between art music and traditional music, or folk music, which is transmitted orally.

Malaysian composers are defined as people born in Malaysia, and active in composing

It is beyond the extent of this research to identify all Malaysian art music composers, or even all-prominent Malaysian art music composers. It is also beyond the extent of this work to conduct an analysis of all the works of the composers presented

The three composers presented in this study have been chosen to represent different styles of art music composition in Malaysia. Minni Ang and Chan Cheong Jan were selected mainly for their accessibility, and their works have been performed, published or recorded commercially or non-commercially. Valerie Ross was chosen as one of the few Malaysian composers who is established in the world of composition at an international level, with a uniquely distinctive style of composition. Selected works that represent the compositional style of each of these three composers have been analysed.

Hindrances encountered when conducting the research are discussed further. First of all, Malaysian art music composers do not belong to any kind of National association so that they can be assessed as a group or as individuals easily. Any contact has to be through electronic mail or personal interviews. Secondly, there is a lack of published compositions by Malaysian art music composers, with many works not yet widely performed in public. Although Malaysia now has a number of orchestras that perform regularly, the music performed is mostly standard repertoire.

by established Western composers, or Malay or Indonesian popular songs that have been arranged for orchestra. Thirdly, the art music composer survey form sent to various composers did not receive a good enough response. This made the compilation of data regarding local composers difficult. I have however produced a list of Malaysian composers along with some information on the respective composers, as well as the title of some of their representative works. These can be found in Chapter Two, under the subtitle 'Development of Art Music Composition'.

Problem Statement

Alongside the improvement of music education and art music performances in Malaysia, there has been a significant increase in the activity of art music composition.

No concentrated effort has been made to catalogue or study the works of Malaysian art music composers as a whole. Most of the research that has been done so far concentrates on the development of traditional Malaysian music and popular music. Much research still has to be conducted in order to identify the significance of these composers contributions towards art composition in Malaysia.. Many more performances and publications of new music by Malaysian art music composers must be made available in order for art music composition to flourish in Malaysia. There is also a lack of published compositions by Malaysian composers. This is partly due to the lack of music publishing houses in Malaysia.