

RAZAK ABDUL AZIZ: THE FORGOTTEN COMPOSER

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Abstract: Razak Abdul Aziz is one of Malaysia's earliest contemporary music composers. Started to ink down his music in the 1980's, he saw being labelled as a composer is tough as the need to display works is a burden [1]. The review finds that he actively performed his compositions in the late 1980's and early 1990's. However, over the years, his name had faded in the music society. His works were not included in many contemporary music concerts and recitals. Almost none had performed his compositions from mid the 1990's until early 2010's. The study finds that only six concerts in the recent years that had included works by this composer, either as part of the concert programme or full programme on this composer. It would be a great loss if works by this composer are being kept in a closet, falling into oblivion as they are being forgotten by the music community and the world. Hence, performers like Ranko Kurano and Fairuz Zamani are promoting Razak's works through performances, recitals, and academic studies. This is hoped to enhance visibility of the composer and his works, therefore triggers interest among musicians and academics to include Razak's music in their future performances and research.

Key words: *Razak Abdul Aziz, contemporary music, Malaysian composer, compositions, performance*

INTRODUCTION

Razak Abdul Aziz is Malaysian contemporary composer, arguably one of the earliest in the nation. He received his academic training at Skidmore College in the USA as an undergraduate, and from Columbia University in the United States and University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom at the Master of Arts and PhD levels, respectively.

As an academic, he served as a lecturer at Music Department Institut Teknologi MARA from 1986 to 1993, teaching music theory, composition, and piano courses. He also formed a vocal group consisted of undergraduate students at this department – ITM Singers, where Razak assumed the role of its conductor. At the same time, he was also the resident conductor for a prestigious children choir in Kuala Lumpur – Suara Mas, serving from 1989 to

1993. He was also an active music critic for News Straits Times in 1986 and from 1992 to 1995. This will be further mentioned in details in the next part of this paper.

He then made the decision to tenure at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Pulau Pinang in 1993, responding to an offer made by a renown ethnomusicologist, Tan Sooi Beng, at the same time, returning to his hometown to be close to family. Razak has ended his tenure at this establishment in November 2019 as a full time academician due to retirement age, though continues serving at this institution as a part-time lecturer.

As a composer, many of his works have been performed both locally and internationally. Razak Abdul Aziz, a composer from Penang, Malaysia, has been composing music since the 1980s

[2]. His compositional creativity utilizes various mediums of instrumentations – solo piano, vocal works, ensemble, piano duo, etc. The composer has strong leaning towards composing works for voice, perhaps due to his past experience serving as the conductor for Suara Mas and ITM Singers.

This paper will be discussing on past premieres and performances of the works by Razak Abdul Aziz, investigating existing mentions in the literature (online and printed), and reviewing the recent performances on works by this composer, proving that this composer does not get sufficient attention, risking this precious gem to be forgotten by the local and international music arenas.

PAST PREMIERES AND PERFORMANCES

Razak Abdul Aziz's works span various decades. His compositions - at times, receiving world premieres, and at other times, recognized on world performance platforms. The followings are the details of the works premiered/performed on local and international platforms over the years, with the dates and venue included:

1) *The Wedding* by the Shinsei Nihon Symphony Orchestra at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space (20 November 1986)

2) *For Violin and Piano* at the Asian Contemporary Music Festival in Seoul, Korea (20 October 1993)

3) 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)

4) 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).

5) *The Fisherman* for voice ensemble and 2 pianos (reduction score). Performed by ASWARA voice ensemble (led by Ranko Kurano) and pianists Fairuz Zamani and Samuel Tan at Orchestra Hall, Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (ASWARA) (24 November 2015).

6) 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 at Orchestra Hall ASWARA (4 and 5 May 2018).

7) *Buat Kuih* from *10 Pantun Settings*, performed by Ranko Kurano, Fairuz Zamani, and Jason Chua at Piano Duet Gala Concert (24 November 2018)

8) 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 at Pesaban Agung USM (8 December 2018).

9) *Etude No. 5* from *Etudes for Piano Solo*, performed by Fairuz Zamani at Piano Solo Recital at Pelinggam Cahaya USM (30 April 2019).

10) Full recital on the work of Razak Abdul Aziz in *Fairuz Zamani PhD Recital 1 – Music of Razak Abdul Aziz* at Orchestra Hall ASWARA (26 July 2019)

Besides these premieres and performances, I was informed by the composer that his works did receive other performances given by university students as part of the courses they were undertaking, namely ASWARA and USM. However, the composer does not parade this as these performances were not at professional standard.

From the review on past premieres and performances, it could be observed that the works of

this composer had an active hiatus of approximately 11 years (circa from 1996 to 2007) and passive one around 17 years (1993 to 2010), before becoming regaining its pace from 2010 onwards, with an exponential increase in 2018 and 2019.

This discussion will continue with the existing mentions of this composer in the literature, ranging from academic writings, books, magazines, and newspapers in the form of online and printed publications, proving my argument on how much this composer is being neglected and not receiving adequate attention.

MENTIONS IN LITERATURE

From the preliminary review on mentions on the composer, I found that a scholar from USM, Yumi Yoshioka [2], had presented a paper at International Music and Performing Arts Conference 2018 (IMPAC 2018) at Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris (UPSI) on Razak Abdul Aziz's *10 Pantun Settings*. Therefore, to claim that no work has been done on this subject is largely understatement, although it is still extremely scarce.

As for printed publications, I have found a few mentions of the composer. In *The Music of Malaysia* by Matusky and Tan [3], it is said that *10 Nyanyian Settings* (now renamed as *10 Pantun Settings*) uses the lyrics of Malay children's nursery rhymes in all the songs (p. 394). The composer has Kelantanese *wayang kulit* and *makyung* theatre influences in his compositions (*Maria Zaitun* opera). The composer also has interest that spans both Western and Eastern musical worlds, as seen in one of his more recent work, *Etudes for Solo Piano*. However, these authors did not elaborate further about the composer.

Mentions about the composer have also been published in magazines (printed and online). Among them is *Dewan Sastera* in June 2004 [4], in which the author, Fatimah Busu, gave credit to the composer for adapting her short story *'Perkembalian Seorang Maria Zaitun'* into an opera *'Maria Zaitun'* (p. 12). In another article, *'Malaysia Ada Dalam Rasa Saya,'* in *Majalah Seni Budaya – Gong* [5], it is claimed that Razak Abdul Aziz utilized mathematics

and geometry integrated into his compositions and explicitly stated that *Maria Zaitun* was composed using these elements.

Other mentions of Razak Abdul Aziz involve his profession as a choir conductor during his early years in academia. He was first attached to Jabatan Muzik Institut Teknologi MARA (now Universiti Teknologi MARA), Shah Alam from 1986 to the early 90s, when he returned to Malaysia after completing his Master's degree at Columbia University. He took the opportunity to get involved in the music scene around Klang Valley and later became the conductor of Suara Mas Kuala Lumpur in December 1988 [6]. Suara Mas consisted of children between 8 and 13 years old. A prestigious choir group of its time, they often received press coverage when Razak Abdul Aziz lead Suara Mas as the conductor. Among notable newspaper articles are *Choral Music Special* [7], *Tudung Periuk Penambat Selera* [8], and *Gem concert from Suara Mas* [9].

Razak Abdul Aziz was also a conductor for another notable vocal group – ITM Singers. As Razak Abdul Aziz served ITM as a music lecturer, he, together with few other academic staff in the department, formed this ensemble. Described as 'a man who wear several hats' [7], Razak Abdul Aziz had conducted both groups - ITM Singers and Suara Mas Kuala Lumpur, in a same concert at Balai Seni Lukis Negara on 4 November 1989 [6]. Under Razak Abdul Aziz, ITM Singers became a prominent vocal group and had given many concerts. Honourable mentions include performance with Carl Orff Choir, *Lumpurnya Kuala* operetta, and ITM concert at National Art Gallery. They had also received performance invitations. Perhaps, Penang Arts Festival in December 1988 was their peak, had received significant media attention, as many reporters wrote articles about this event.

Razak Abdul Aziz was also an independent music critique. He actively wrote critics for New Strait Times from 1992 to 1995. In these newspaper articles, Razak Abdul Aziz had shown great interest towards writing performance critics on concerts of Western Classical music that took place in Kuala Lumpur and Pulau Pinang, ranging from solo performances (piano, cello, guitar, vocal) to ensembles (guitar duo, violin and piano, choir). He

had also written critics on Malaysian traditional music concerts; amongst were the closing concert for *Seminar Keroncong Serumpun* [10] and *Laras Bunyi*, an experimental performance using Malay traditional instruments by School of The Arts Universiti Sains Malaysia [10].

After doing some search on filmography and discography on works by the composer, only a few recordings have been found. I was fortunate to be given the chance to premiere two of his compositions, *The Fisherman* in 2015 and *10 Pantun Settings* in 2018, both at Orchestra Hall ASWARA. These premieres were recorded using video and audio means (though only the latter was published on Youtube as the previous was kept by the composer as personal collection). Although the recordings were not professionally recorded, they serve as important guides to future performers and audience for these important elements shape the direction and nature of these filmographies.

For instance, in *10 Pantun Settings* uploaded by nico0121 (days 1 and 2) [11], it could be observed that these performances had a Malay village-like setting to create the ambience and geographical texture in order to enhance the performance. As the texts used in this cycle were taken from old *pantun*¹, having it set to this kind of setting helps the audience to have familiar association. This is important because the compositional materials used by Razak Abdul Aziz in this work were semi and non-functional harmonies, which I found to be complex for general audience.

From the review made, it shows that mentions on Razak Abdul Aziz Abdul Aziz as a composer in academic and non-academic publications (online and printed) are indeed scarce for someone who had been in the scene for nearly 40 years, indicating that he does not receive adequate recognition as ‘an old hand’ in the field.

CONCERT OBSERVATIONS IN RECENT YEARS

I have made observations on recent concert programmes consisting works by Razak Abdul Aziz. From this, I found only six performances of works by

this composer in recent years, with three consisted of performances of complete work(s) while the other three having partial performance of a work. The order of the observation is chronological for the readers to have better engagement, relating it with time.

The first is *Citra Seni: Contemporary Music* hosted by ASWARA on 24 November 2015. In this lecture-recital, Razak Abdul Aziz was invited to give a lecture on this topic, collaborating with other musicians to perform works in the lecture (Razak himself played his own collaborative work, accompanying a singer). The programme featured works by three Malaysian composers, Razak Abdul Aziz, Johan Othman, and Ramlan Imam, alongside their Western and Japanese counterparts. Razak took this chance to premiere one of his works, *The Fisherman* for solo soprano, voice ensemble, and 2 pianos, together with presenting his older works at this lecture-recital. To date, *The Fisherman* never receives further performances after its premiere. In this lecture-recital, his early vocal works, *Grace for A Child* and *Jangan Tengok Kami* were also included as part of the concert programme.

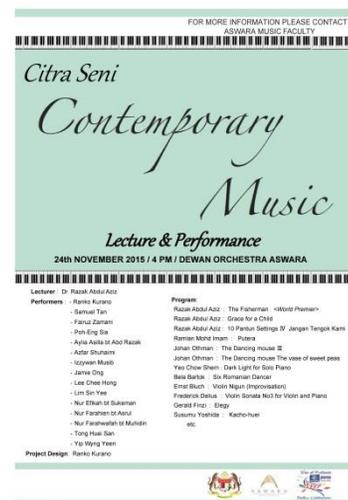


Fig. 1 Citra Seni 2015 poster

The second concert that consists of works by Razak Abdul Aziz is ASWARA Opera Season 5 on 4 and 5 May 2018, led by Ranko Kurano. His *10 Pantun Settings* received its world premiere in this concert, being the first half of the programme, while the second half is another premiere by a Japanese composer, Atsuhiko Shiraiishi. Though a selection of songs from this cycle had been performed in the

¹ Rhyming poems written in couplets or quatrains

previous years, only in this concert the complete cycle received its first performance. During this premiere, the performers chose to act on a stage and to use props to make sense of the direction. As this work uses semi-functional harmony and partially tonal, this decision was deemed vital to enhance the engagement of the audience towards the performance, as these music materials are something the public is yet to be familiar with. For record, Razak Abdul Aziz was actively involved in this premiere as the music director and rehearsal conductor.



Fig. 2 ASWARA Opera Season 5 poster

Following this premiere, *10 Pantun Settings* has also been recorded in studio in July 2018, with my role as a pianist in this project. Expected to get published in early 2020, this project, at the time of writing, is still in-progress. Nitty-gritty processes such as editing and mixing are currently being applied to this recording.

The third concert that has works by Razak Abdul Aziz is Piano Duet Gala Concert, hosted by School of The Arts (SOTA), USM on 24 November 2018. Once again, I was invited to perform *Buat Kuih* from *10 Pantun Settings*. This time, Ranko Kurano (the same person who had led the premieres of *The Fisherman* and *10 Pantun Settings*) assumed the role of the solo singer while a pianist from Penang, Jason Chua became my duet partner (this song has a solo singer and two pianists playing on either one piano or two pianos). Razak Abdul Aziz attended supervised our rehearsals and gave pointers and comments on our take on the song, considering that it was the first time Chua played this piece and had me as his duet

partner. Adapting was difficult in the beginning as Chua had his own ideas interpreting the collaborative part. However, after a couple of times playing through for the composer, we managed to come to an agreement on the interpretation, having the composer as the authority while allowing the performers to explore individual musicality as an ensemble.



Fig. 3 Piano Duet Gala Concert 2018 poster

The fourth concert that had included woks by Razak Abdul Aziz is Festival Seni Suara at Peseran Agung, SOTA, USM on 8 December 2018. In this concert, the complete *10 Pantun Settings* received another performance, at the same time, being its Penang premiere. I was once again invited to be a collaborative pianist, together with Takako Maeda as my duet partner. The composer decided to keep the same collaborative pianists from the world premiere and recording session for practical purpose. Another practical consideration - the composer had also invited Ranko Kurano to lead the performance, with her selection of similar singers from the premiere for this concert. The chorus parts were sung by USM students who were undertaking choir course with the composer. Razak Abdul Aziz conducted most of the songs in this performance, while some songs were conducted by his students who were taking conducting lesson from him.

This concert also had other songs performed, amongst were by Bizet, Verdi, and Japanese traditional songs. A delegation of singers from Tokyo came to perform at this concert, showing

support for their fellow Japanese musicians and their love of performing on concert stages.



Fig. 4 Festival Seni Suara poster

The fifth concert with works by Razak Abdul Aziz is my own solo piano recital on 30 April 2019. Initially, two etudes from *Etudes for Piano Solo*, nos. 2 and 5, were included in the programme and had been printed out on the poster. However, due to the concert duration, I had to drop *Etude No. 2* out, as I planned not to exceed 70 minutes concert time, inclusive of 10 minutes intermission. This recital was initially planned to take place at Peseban Agung SOTA, USM. However, due to unseen circumstances, the organizer had to move the venue to Pelinggam Cahaya which had an upright piano. As a performer, I had to adapt to the change, compensating with the piano I had to play on (Peseban Agung has a grand piano and it is constantly maintained due to the frequent use for concerts and recitals, unlike the piano in Pelinggam Cahaya). Nonetheless, it was a new experience for me playing in a different setting, with my back, instead of my right side, facing the audience.



Fig. 5 Piano Solo Recital poster

The sixth concert is the only concert that was solely dedicated to this composer. It was my first academic recital to partially fulfil the requirement for my doctoral degree in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). The recital that took place at Orchestra Hall ASWARA on 26 July 2018, it consisted of solo and collaborative piano works by Razak Abdul Aziz. As the subject matter of my doctoral study, I was required to perform a 60-minute programme of works entirely by this composer for this first recital. The solo works I included were *Etudes No. 1, 2, and 5* from *Etudes for Piano Solo* and excerpts from *Pepatah Episodes. Prisms No. 1, For Violin and Piano*, and selection from *10 Pantun Settings* were my choices for collaborative works for this recital. A concert dedicated to this composer such as this one had never been done in the past [12]. I was very fortunate to have the composer in attendance during this eventful day. He flew from Penang that morning and went back the same day, right after this performance, showing his support for my study and the recital.



Fig. 6 PhD in Music Performance Recital 1 poster

From the observations made, there were only six concerts that had included works by this composer in the recent years (2015-2019) - three concerts included one or two pieces by this composer, two had big works premiered, and one was on his works entirely.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Though Razak Abdul Aziz had been composing music for nearly 40 years, his works are rarely performed. Many are still quite sceptical with the works by this composer, as the works are not purely tonal in nature, as what they are used to. This is, in my opinion, alarming as I believe the same fate is what many Malaysian contemporary composers face at present. Inadequate exposure is the main contributor to this situation. Specifically for Razak Abdul Aziz, academic research and performance opportunities should be good measures in increasing awareness among academics and musicians of the existence of this composer, only to later expand it to the general public.

Existing performance and study on Razak Abdul Aziz are extremely scarce. According to the composer himself, there were a few performers who had performed his works in the past (as detailed earlier in this paper). However, none of them were interested to investigate his works deeper, being a

specialist and authority, like Perlemuter on Ravel's works or Richter on Prokofieff's. Further into my observation throughout this study, finding an academic who is well-versed with the works by this composer is more difficult than I would have imagined. To date, only Yumi Yoshioka had presented a paper on Razak Abdul Aziz's work at IMPAC 2018 (Yoshioka, 2019). Although this composer was mentioned by some scholars in their papers, I find that the existing mentions on Razak Abdul Aziz are still a rarity.

As a performing researcher, I would suggest giving more performance opportunity to stage works by this composer for better visibility among the music community. During this study, I found that the composer had stopped having his works performed in the early 1990s, taking a long hiatus (nearly 15 years) before having his works performed again on concert stages in the 2010s. Only in recent years, performers like Ranko Kurano and myself had taken initiative to perform works by Razak Abdul Aziz. This initiative must continue and be expanded to a bigger cycle, for more performance means more exposure, possibly sparking interest among existing or future musicians who wish to learn and perform music by a local composer, directly contributing to gaining more followers among music enthusiasts and concert goers alike.

In a nutshell, more academic studies on this composer and performance opportunities for his works are needed to increase the visibility, aiming to promote them to various platforms, locally and internationally, possibly extending this effort to other local composers. If we as Malaysians do not begin the effort to write about our home grown contemporary composers and perform their works, the entire world might not know of their existence, making them falling into the abyss of oblivion.

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