
From soundscape to motives; the process of creating art songs inspired by the Malaysian urban soundscape.

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Abstract: The art song is a genre performed mainly by piano and voice. This paper is about the process and the inspirational factor of creating art songs based on the Malaysian urban soundscape. The composer talks about the understanding of the sound and the process of recording certain inspirational sound, transcribing it and creating it into a motive. The soundscape chosen by the composer is also a contributing factor of the whole structure and meaning of the song. These motives that has been interpreted based on the recordings are then expended and made into an art song. There are a few important features that triggered the interest of the composer upon choosing certain sound as the main inspiration. Besides that, the paper also talks about how these sounds affected the composer's understanding of music and surrounding. In order to write art songs inspired by the urban soundscape in Malaysia, there will be recording sounds of the surroundings and events that the composer feel is appropriate. The composer also includes the interpretation of sound from a certain buildings or atmosphere. From these recordings or interpretations, notes are taken out to create a new motive or a short melody from it. The paper includes the process of the creating the motives from the recording into a song.

Key words: *Art Song, Malaysian Art Song, Urban soundscape, song transcription, motives, Malaysian urban soundscape, song motives, creating art song, song composition, art songs composition*

INTRODUCTION

Soundscape means the surrounding sound. However, my focus will be the urban soundscape in Malaysia. It is quite impossible for me to record and highlight all the urban areas in Malaysia. Thus, I mainly record sound from the city area that are nearer to me. However, there will also be some sound or motives created based on my interpretation of something; for instance, the sound of Kuala Lumpur City Centre. The art song is not a well-known genre in Malaysia unlike other popular songs that we hear in the radio of national television. Personally, I think, the reason to this lack of popularity for this genre is due to the lack of exposure and understanding of this genre. There is also a shortage of repertoires composed by the Malaysian composer in this genre. After attending a few series of concerts and listening to many art songs performances, I become attracted to write songs in this genre. The simplicity of the instrumentation; mainly

written for piano and voice also became the main reason that fascinates me into writing this genre. However, in order to bring something different to the scene, and to preserve my identity as a Malaysian, I choose to write this art song based on the urban soundscape in Malaysia. I decided to write art songs based on the urban scene due to my background. I grew up in the city area and never had the experience of living in the outskirts area. Hence, the urban soundscape I choose is also a reflection of my identity as someone who lives in the urban area and used to the urban lifestyle. In this paper, I will mainly be talking about the process that I use in order to create these art songs. Art songs are basically songs made from piano and voice. However, the singer needs to sing the song in an operatic manner. In Germany, these art songs are called *lieder* and in Indonesia it is known as *seriosa*. These art songs were gain its popularity during the late Classical period (1750s) and all the way till Romantic period (1850s). Among the art songs known among the

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listeners today are songs composed by Franz Schubert like The Erlking. Besides that, an art song's lyrics are mainly taken from a poetry. Most of Franz Schubert's art songs, the poetries are taken and written by Goethe. "*Lagu seriosa* or the art songs sung in the Malay and Indonesia language is not a well-known genre compared to other forms of music such as the *keroncong*." Mohammed, Sharifah Faizah Syed [1]: The History and Development of Lagu Seriosa in the Context of Musical Nationalism in Indonesia.

THE URBAN SOUNDSCAPE

In order to compose the songs, I will be taking the inspiration based on the Malaysian urban soundscape. The urban soundscape is basically the sound that is produced around the main city area in Malaysia. Due to my location which is in Shah Alam, I choose to take the sound from the forest around the city area. Among the forest areas that I choose are; Bukit Sapu Tangan, Bukit Gasing, Bukit Saga and Bukit Wawasan. These forests or hills (*bukit*) are also among the jungle areas that are left in the city area. These places are also a very common spot for hiking. Bukit Sapu Tangan is the one and the only forest left in the city of Shah Alam. It is part of the Taman Botani Negara, a place where they preserve all the trees and animals. However, Bukit Sapu Tangan is no longer an available place for access due to the recent deforestation. Hence, I choose to record the soundscape in this place- mainly because these places are among the few forest that are left in the city area. I choose to record the sound from these forests is mainly because from the recordings, there are still sound from the city that could be heard even in the forest. Besides that, this is also to show how the soundscape in the forest around the city area are not 'pure' - due to the urbanization.



Fig 1 The entrance to Bukit Saga

Figure 1 is a picture taken during a hike to Bukit Saga in to record some soundscape in that area. The entrance of Bukit Saga has been cleared to make way for the new highway. The entrance can only be found behind the construction work.



Fig 2 The path towards the entrance of Bukit Saga



Fig 3 Another view of the entrance of Bukit Saga

The sounds recorded from these forest are always accompanied with other urban or city sounds like ambulance, cars, car honk, motorcycle, helicopter and airplane. From these recordings, taken from Bukit Sapu Tangan, Bukit Gasing, Bukit Saga and Bukit Wawasan are the transcribed. These sounds are then being put into notes.

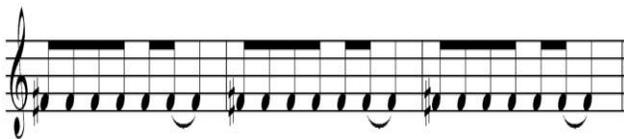


Fig 4 A transcription of the sound of the birds recorded in Bukit Sapu Tangan

Figure 4 is an example of a transcription of a bird. The sound was recorded using a phone. The reason I choose to record the sound using a phone is because it is the fastest way, and the sound doesn't need to be very precise as it is recorded just for my own transcription. These transcriptions are not exact too. It is mainly transcribed based on my interpretations. Most of the time, the transcriptions are done based on the most obvious sound heard. In this recording, the most

obvious sound heard was the bird. However, in the background, there were also some sound created from the crickets that were quite prominent.



Fig 5 The transcription of the bird and the crickets

Figure 5 is an example of the transcription of the birds and the crickets. It is shown that the birds were in F sharp. However, to be exact, the pitch of the birds were in between F sharp and F. But, it was nearest to F sharp, so I choose to use F sharp as the repetitive sound. The bird was making the sound in a very repetitive manner and it was in a stable pulse. Interestingly, the sound of the bird always ends with a longer note, before it repeats again. It is as if the bird is indicating it is a start of a new cycle. The sound of the crickets was all in between F sharp and E flat. It compliments the sound of the bird which is prominently in the key of F sharp. E flat which is basically D sharp, making the distance between these 2 notes a minor 3rd apart. These 2 notes may be minor, but they are pleasant to be together. In other words, these 2 notes do not create a clashing sound against each other.

Besides the forest, there are also other soundscape that are taken. The sound of the hipster cafés are also being recorded and transcribed. 'Hipster' according to the Cambridge Dictionary [2] means someone who is very influenced by the most recent ideas and fashions. According to the urban dictionary online, hipster means;

"Hipsters are people that try too hard to be different (and genuinely do think that they're being different), by rejecting anything they deem to be too popular. Ironically, so many other people also try too hard to be different that they all wind up being the exact same, so hipsters aren't actually different at all, they're just people that are snobbier and more annoying about their

taste in "alternative" things, which are all popular now thanks to the other hipsters. Hipsters pride themselves on liking things that no one else likes, and normally only really like them because they think no one else likes them and that they're being unique. This is being delusional because all the other hipsters also like the same things."

Based on these meanings, it is known that 'hipster' is terminology that indicates the recent trend or idea based on fashion that people think are popular and different. Hence, the popularization of the terminology has heavily influenced the cafes around the city area. To prove my 'urban' influence in my soundscape, I decided to record sound from these hipster cafes that are blooming around the city area. I choose to be the one hipster café that is the nearest to me; he and she café which is right inside of UiTM or Univeristi Teknologi Mara. The café is recently opened in the year 2019. It is a new hang out place for the students and staffs in UiTM. The café has proven its environment and atmosphere to be nothing similar to the existing cafes in the UiTM area. The sound from this café are then recorded and transcribed. The sound recorded from this café are basically the sound of people chatting, the sound of people walking in and out of the café, and the pop song that were played in the café. At the moment of recording, the song played was from Rihanna, Shine Bright Like a Diamond. The song, even though it is at the back ground is quite prominent in the recording, due to this, the transcription also includes some part of the song.

For the following composition, I will be doing a song cycle. The main theme of the song cycle is "*Malam*" (translated as night-time). This particular composition created based on my interpretation of the night-time. Warm, pleasant, harmonious, but at some point, the nights can be melancholic and silent and some other nights can be mysterious and dark. Because of that, this song cycles are created to show the different mood of the night-time. The song cycle is created in 3 sections. Besides night-time, the next song was composed based on my experience of going to a market place. The soundscape of the market place (*pasar malam*) was transcribed. The transcription is then analysed, and made into short motives. These short motives are taken, combined, and made into a song. However, the song was not composed only based on the combination

of these motives. These motives are developed and some variations are added into it. The motives of the art songs are also made up of sounds recorded from *mamak* restaurants. The reason I choose *mamak* restaurant to represent the Malaysian urban soundscape is because, *mamak* places are very common in Malaysia. The idea of hanging out in the *mamak* places as a place where all the Malaysians go to to have their *roti canai* and *teh tarik* and to socialize. I also choose to record the sound of the school children in schools in the city area. This sound is recorded to present the environment of the school in Malaysia. I feel that the soundscape of the schoolchildren is an important element to be in my composition. This is because; they are the image of the next generation and future leaders. Besides recordings, I will also be doing my own interpretation of sound based on certain area. In order to do this, I will be going to the particular place to get in touch with the environment and atmosphere. I will be doing my interpretation of sound from KLCC or Kuala Lumpur City Centre. In order to do this, short motives will be created based on the atmosphere perceived by me. These motives will then be expanded and made into a song. In conclusion, these art songs compositions are made based on the ideas and inspirations taken from the urban soundscape of Malaysia. Some are take solely on their soundscape while some are taken based on my interpretation of the environment.

COMPOSITION PROCESS

Motives are basically short melodies. "A motif is a short musical idea—shorter than a phrase—that occurs often in a piece of music. A short melodic idea may also be called a motif, a motive, a cell, or a figure. These small pieces of melody will appear again and again in a piece of music, sometimes exactly the same and sometimes changed." Lumen, [3] *Music appreciation*. For these art songs, they are mainly derived from a motive. These motives may either be a transcription from the soundscape that was recorded or an interpretation of sound of certain buildings. In order to write these art songs, I choose to record the sound first. After recording the sound, I will then transcribe the sound in a score. The transcription will then be taken and made into a short melodic line. This melodic line is known as a motive. The motive is then being expanded and made into a longer melody and into an

art song. Figure 6, 7 and 8 is an example of a composition called *Seindah Lautan*. This art song is inspired based on the sound of the sea. In Figure 7, bar 24 (B section) the sound of the wind is depicted in the melody and the piano part in bar 26 is answering. The piano part in bar 26 is depicting the sound of the waves hitting the shores. The free time (piano part) at the beginning of the melody is trying to depict the sound of the breeze in the sea which is uneven. The melody and the lyrics are representing the sound of the sea, the breeze and the wave. However, there are parts where the melody of the song because even again. This is in bar 34. During this part, the melody needs to be strict and in time because it is trying to show the peak or the highlight of the song.

Seindah Lautan

Composer: AF Wah
Lyricist: Siti Hajar Azma

Fig 6 Art Song: *Seindah Lautan* (page 1)

Fig 7 Art Song: *Seindah Lautan* (page 2)

Fig 8 Art Song: *Seindah Lautan* (page 3)

CONCLUSION

In order to compose these art songs, I used the approach of analysing, capturing and recording the sound that I have encountered. The sound is analysed based on the location and interest. Among the approach that I used for this art song is to record the existing soundscape and transcribe the sound recorded. From the transcription, I then create a short motive. Some transcriptions may produce more than one motive, while others may have more. However, these motives are created and written based on my interest and vocabulary on melodies and sound. This soundscape is mainly taken from the environment area (mainly forest area) around the city area. Among the forest are Bukit Sapu Tangan, Bukit Gasing, Bukit Saga and Bukit Wawasan. Another method that I choose to write my motives is based on autobiographical. Among the approach that I used to write the art songs, this approach is possibly the most personal of all. "In Schumann's time, however, many considered his compositions too unconventional, too personal. Schumann admitted that his works were autobiographical; "I am affected by everything that goes on in the world- politics, literature, people- I think it over in my own way, and then I long express my feelings in music" [4] and another technique that I choose to write my composition is known as analysing and creating. Analysing and creating is an approach of composition that is inspired by things that do not have sound. For example, buildings, surroundings and things that is concrete. The song cycle that I composed is using the theme of a "night" time. As we all know, "night" is not a sound. Therefore, this composition is created based on the interpretation that I get after analysing what night sounds like.

PRESENTATION IDEA

For the presentation of these art songs, it will be performed in a concert hall using piano and solo voice. However, there will be some additional instrumentation added in some of these songs to depict the sound of the nature, buildings or mood. There will be other instrumentation like flute and strings that will be added during the performance. The strings line will be based on the performer's interpretation of the piece based on

the performer's understanding and knowledge of the piece

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