

NEW MUSIC CREATION, DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCES

UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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Research Group

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Abstract

The *New Music Creation, Development and Performances* project investigates a journey, from concept to realization, of electroacoustic music exploring cross cultural ideas in Malaysia. Through creation, development and performances of works for flute with electronics, processes are observed and analyzed, and experiences documented. This research is taken from the perspective of the performer, with contributions from composition and sound technology experts. The project, constructed around three main phases of investigation, is centered on three works. The first, [seruling perak], an improvisation for alto flute and computer exploring connections between Western and Malaysian cultures through nose flute melodies and gesture capture; the second work, Taman Malim (composer, Robert Burrell), a notated composition constructed from natural environmental sounds (birdsong) from Malaysia and Western flute with electronic sound processing; the third work, an improvisational re-imagining, is a comparative study with the first, using different technology and expanding musical material. This project is practice-led, based on the processes of music creation, development and performance. A multifaceted methodological approach includes aspects of ethnography and auto-ethnography, performance analysis and reflective narrative. Questions addressed include the role of the electronics in revealing information, the influence of different cultures on aesthetic understanding, the cyclical processes of work development and flautist approaches to learning and performance.

Synopsis (Extracts from research report)

Phase 1 [seruling perak] for alto flute and electronics; a structured improvisation using Plogue Bidule with video capture.

Studies of nose flute playing centred around one performance captured in an Orang Asli village outside Tanjong Malim in 2012. This performance, which occurred on the verandah of a house in the village, demonstrated techniques (blowing and finger), tone colour, and melodic style and gesture. Numerous villagers gathered around to listen, and then talk. The expression on the villagers' faces during the music showed an immense pride and love of the playing – although, we were told, nose flute playing is a music skill that few, if any, of them now have. The nature of the performer – a very quiet, modest man who showed a great deal of happiness in sharing his music – was an important aspect of the occasion, giving us a strong impression of the place of music in this society.

The information from this performance was later assimilated and trialled in concert flute playing. During this period, comparisons of tonal colour, the gestures of breathing, and the motivic nature of the melodies occurred. The process of working with this material was strongly influenced by memories of the village setting and the obvious high regard of the people for the music. Personal documentation of the music made was modified through the introduction of extended flute techniques that reflected and extended moods and colours, and gesture capture sound technology that added a new environment and sound structure to the fundamental sounds.

These ideas were extensively developed in the studio and became a structure for the improvisation in performance. Fragments of melodies and unconventional flute sounds became a basis for electronic timbral manipulation and sound spatialisation. New ways of hearing the traditional sounds, and a new synthesis of old and new occurred, generating a unique soundscape and performative experience.

The relocation of acoustic sound into an electroacoustic setting framed the investigation, and forged a new aesthetic grounded on a distinctive melding and transformation of cultural perspectives. In [*seruling perak*] two, or maybe three, traditions (Orang Asli, Western instrumental performance and global electronic technology) came together as a culmination, an integrated artistic statement that emerged from knowledge and application. Knowledge can be gleaned from the processes, but also as a result of experience in creation, development, performance and receipt of the music – the artistic practice.

Phase 2 Taman Malim, a notated work for flute solo, using fixed sound and live electronics. Composer, Robert Burrell.

This work explored the synthesis of Malaysian birdsong, Western flute playing and electronic sound treatment, or DSP (Digital Sound Processing). For the first version of *Taman Malim*, the sound manipulations were activated through *Morphology* in Protools. Subsequent versions trialled the use of *Alchemy* and *Plogue Bidule*.

Four versions of the score illustrate a process of continual refinement of the musical notation and expression, resulting from rehearsal and performance experience, reflections and collaborative development sessions. Score annotations showed alterations in the flute line, initiated by the flautist and written up by the composer, the placement of sonic units within the recorded track, and the time scale of the recorded sound track, stretched considerably to build spaciousness into the work. This piece was written from the computer, with synthesised flute sound, and the notation reflected a somewhat mechanical hand. Changes sprang from ideas to improve the clarity and musicality of the flute writing, allowing space to shape and colour sounds in a way that reflected the aesthetic of the work, or, perhaps, the flautist's perception of the work.

The timbral changes of the live electronics were devised over a long gestational period but were essentially conceived as an “add on” effect. A somewhat detached style was thus revealed, resulting in a rather objective performance – engaging, but always a little remote.

The meta-instrument referred to here is discussed at length elsewhere (Penny, 2009, pp. 180-181). This refers to the expanded performative entity that incorporates instrumentalist, technology, sound technologist and performance space. It is an “interface between human and computer technology” (Harris & Bongers, 2002, p. 239), and is created in all *musique-*

mixte (instrument plus electronics) works. The following mind map describes in linear fashion the elements of performance exploration and development, as undertaken by the instrumentalist in this environment.

These explorations pertain to the flautist's approaches to the work. Techniques and tonal explorations were also discussed within the Phase 2 group and attempts to write some of the sound effects into the score (for example, the repeated tongue rams) were made. This actually resulted in a stilted performative result, as the notation seemed to request an exactness and a tight framework that began to erase the inherent style of these sounds. They demand an intuitive shaping, and a solution was to avoid following the notation exactly, and to reclaim freedom of expression.

Phase 3 Improvisation 2, for flute and electronics, using *Cyclops*.

This structured improvisation sought to develop ideas from Phase 1 through the use of different digital technology. Intercultural explorations combined two indigenous pensol flute examples, contemporary Western extended flute techniques and the use of *Cyclops* as gestural capture sound manipulator. The ease with which the *Cyclops* plug-in worked was certainly a bonus, as, rather than having to contend with malfunctioning software, the focus could be on exploring sounds and responses. Artistic decisions thus became freed from practical functionality.

A period of experimentation with flute sounds and *Cyclops* occurred, leading to a final structure for the piece incorporating gestural movement converting to electronic elaborations of the melodies and sonic units.

The main question arising from this phase was: Can the technology be used as a mode for revealing information about performance, or culture? The technology, first and foremost, amplifies sound and action. Movements are transformed into sound, microsounds are captured and recast into characters, and melodies are shaped and performed in anticipation of metamorphosis. The result is a freedom to explore, to develop timbral diversity and to mold sonic units into unique musical forms. New textures and responses are found within these digital relationships, generating a setting for multiple dialogue and identity blurring. Flute sounds are converted into new shapes: breath tones, for example, are intrinsically grainy and indistinct and can be expanded into large enveloping sounds or become tentative wisps of sound. In combination with sound diffusion techniques the effects of these sounds can be intense and diverse. The very intimacy of the use of breath as a direct sound source places this technique in a different plane from normal resonant tone (Penny, 2009, p. 90). The effect is similar with other extended techniques, such as multiphonics (notoriously and wonderfully unstable), tongue rams (thuds that sound a ninth lower than pitched) and key percussion. The listener is drawn into an intimate sound world; expectations of sounds alter and new meanings and perceptions evolve as unusual sounds enable explorations of unusual ideas. The mix of cultural elements in this work was definitely unusual, and the resulting work created a new way of thinking about and knowing these styles.

Finale

As electroacoustic technologies forge new sounds, understandings and performances, performative identities shift and new interchanges develop through a fusion of practices and

cultures. Differences in the relationship of Eastern and Western musicians to their instrument, the diverse rituals of each and cultural meanings of bodily engagement provide a rich exploratory field, as do the spaces of performance, and the devised spaces of electroacoustic performance. Assimilation of Eastern and Western aesthetics, sounds, musical gestures, melody and effects is more than a blending of elements, or a simple interchangeability. It is more than the collection of exotic sonic materials, and more than an adoption of various performative presentation techniques. This research project has approached the study of indigenous music, environmental sounds, contemporary music technologies and performance from a performance perspective, grounded in the methodologies of practice-led research. As such, it was the first study of its kind completed within the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, UPSI.

Research group, Phase 2: Dr Jean Penny, Dr Andrew Blackburn, Dr Robert Burrell



This research project successfully produced three new musical works and scores, three performances (at Queens University, Belfast, UK; UPSI, Tanjong Malim, Malaysia; and UiTM, Shah Alam, Malaysia), performance videos, written papers and symposium presentations.