Electroacoustic music studies: some thoughts and possibilities

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Electroacoustic music is relatively new and something of an experiment in Malaysia. Involvement in various technology- and art-related performing and composing activities has nurtured my interest, particularly with reference to electroacoustic music.

Unlike visual art, it is not known exactly where and when our historical perspectives in sound art originate, and I would suggest that no electroacoustic music or pieces are known to have been performed or presented in Malaysia since the art form was first pioneered in the West more than fifty years ago.

This paper introduces some thoughts and possibilities relating to electroacoustic music from the Malaysian perspective.

1. INTRODUCTION

The integration and multidisciplinary nature of electronic and digital technology has sparked new creative experiments and explorations in art practice in Malaysia. As a result, defining and marking the territorial boundaries between arts disciplines in the country has become a complicated issue.

Our current exploration in art and technology flowed from the first exhibitions of our nation's interest in art and technology convergence through the 1st Electronic Art Show, pioneered by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and held at the National Art Gallery in 1997 with Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjah Rajah as guest curators. It also marked a historical review and our current practice in electronic media in Malaysia. The show also served as a platform and catalyst for our growing new media scene, as well as to engender public awareness about creative activities in the new media, from visual and sonic perspectives.

The UNIMAS Electroacoustic Group (EAG) was later formed in 1997 as a platform for experimental research engagement which focuses on the merger between traditional and electronic-based modern music. The convergence of sonic and visual art practices has been our main focus and was later translated through our pioneering research into the holistic integration of picture recitation and performance of *Wayang Kulit*, a research project conducted since 1996 until the present.

Our exploration of many forms of art and technology convergence later gained further public appreciation in Malaysia, through the establishment of E-Art ASEAN Online in 2000, piloted by Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Niranjan Rajah and Gerard Driessen as the founding members. This interactive resource of electronic art was described by the founders as a platform for any form of art that uses technology. It aimed to nurture a discourse on electronic art in the Southeast Asia region. Establishment of E-Art ASEAN Online has also extended the aims of the 1st Electronic Art Show, namely to examine the current state of technology in the art applications and practices of Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

2. MUSIC AND TECHNOLOGY IN MALAYSIA

Unlike the case of visual art, it is not known exactly where and when Malaysian's historical perspectives in sound art originate. However, the usage of technology in music does exist, but only in commercially driven forms, such as in 'popular music'. At the point of writing this paper, it seems that no electroacoustic music or pieces are known to have been performed or presented in Malaysia, although the art form was first pioneered in the West more than fifty years ago.

Music and technology-related courses were first seriously established in Malaysia at higher institutional levels as part of music modules through UNIMAS in 1995 and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) in 1996. These were claimed by Ang (2001) as 'the only' music technology degree-level programme in Southeast Asia. In the year 2000, the first ever music and technology-related conference was successfully organised by UPM. This is considered to be one of the milestones in the Malaysian electroacoustic and music technology scene.

A few decades ago, in Malaysia, music lessons were only available for children and young people who enrolled in government-funded schools in the town areas. In most cases, music was taught in theoretical practice only. Possible reasons include: the fact that there are not enough grants available towards purchasing musical instruments; lack of expertise (qualified and experienced teachers); and lack of supporting materials for the teachers. The best way to learn music is therefore only through private music schools, and consequently

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only a certain group of people are privileged to learn, enjoy and appreciate music.

Music in Malaysia is regarded as no more than one form of entertainment. Ang (2001) suggests that the nation's opinion towards choosing music as a career, specifically in the Malay community, is 'disproportionately low'. She also notes that people's daily activities are strongly influenced by religious beliefs. However, I would have to disagree with her, as her opinions would only hold true from the 'conservative Malay-Muslim' point of view.

In Malaysia, Islam is the dominant religion of the majority, and as a result, music in general faces difficulty in gaining acceptance as a viable of career choice. This is due to conflicting views and debate on music among Muslim Scholars. However, at present things are changing, and among those significant changes is the introduction of the so-called 'Islamic music' known as 'Nasheed', a form of vocal group performances. In its early form, 'Nasheed' was only accompanied by percussion instruments, but later these were combined with electronic musical instruments. The genre was widely accepted and received a lot of attention, especially from the 'conservative Malay-Muslims'. Efforts have also been made to introduce electroacoustic music as an alternative form of 'music' from Islamic perspectives in Malaysia.

3. A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

New music of the twentieth century in Malaysia, from my point of view, has gone down complicated paths in term of definition and practice, involving the standard conflicts and tensions between 'old' and 'new', between 'establishment' and 'alternative' forms, and becoming even more complicated when it comes to discussing the word 'experimental'. In Malaysia, all music, regardless of genre as long as it is in 'abstract' form, is termed 'experimental'. This was shown to be the case through the informal surveys carried out during the D'NewArts-Hybrid exhibitions held at the National Art Gallery between 6 and 21 August 2005. The exhibitions demonstrated diverse approaches to new media, ranging from fine arts in the multimedia domain including sound art and film.

4. GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES – LOCAL CONTENT (GLOCAL)

In our development from an era of small industrial or small-scale primary production into the high-tech information age, Malaysia has embraced multimedia technology and computer-mediated communications. As in many other countries, conflicts and tensions have occurred, particularly on the issue of the convergence of traditional art forms, either in sonic or visual practice, with state-of-the art technology. Nonetheless, the conflicts have also introduced creative approaches in the presentation of works.

Many sonic or visual artists in Malaysia have exploited the use of technology as a tool and established new perspectives, including re-establishing local traditional art content, resulting in new art forms. Some of the works produced reflect our tendency towards the 're-presentation' of local traditional materials through the use of technology.

Unlike Western music practice, communal, participative and lively performing qualities have always been amongst the strengths and prominent features of our performing art practices, specifically in the Malaysian folk tradition. Examples can be seen in the *Wayang Kulit* (shadow play) performances, where the integration of 'picture recitation and performance', as well as the ability to deploy a combination of well-trained musical skill with sufficient creative improvisation and spontaneity are important.

Our exploration of electroacoustic music is often through traditional folk music, such as the use of Gamelan instruments in the *Tales of Whispering Bonang* (2006), and the use of the Wayang Kulit instruments in *Mystic Shadow* (2005), both by Affendi Ramli, as well as the use of rainforest materials in my piece, *One Silent Night* (2006); these are just a few of many examples of our current tendency towards an ethnocentric or 'glocal' approach to exploring electroacoustic music through utilising local materials.

5. THE IDEA OF '*WAYANG KULIT VIRTUAL*'

In 1996, a research project known as *Wayang Virtual* with Khairul Aidil Adzlin, was established at the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, UNIMAS. *Wayang Kulit Virtual* was a project inspired by the traditional *Wayang Kulit*, a form of storytelling in Southeast Asia using puppets and shadows. The aim of the project was to explore the idea of combining the traditional *wayang kulit* with a 3D model running on a Silicon Graphics computer, together with a real-time Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) performance and live traditional music performances.

6. PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES

Involvement in various technology and art-related performing activities has nurtured my interest in the pedagogical issues in music technology, particularly with reference to electroacoustic music. Among those pedagogical issues are: What is the best way to accommodate students with no musical background whatsoever but with a strong interest in electroacoustic music? What are the prerequisites in understanding electroacoustic music? How can I introduce electroacoustic music where the compositional approach is not immediately obvious? What are the technical and

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aesthetical modules? How can I teach my students to learn about those sounds that we as sound artists define as 'good sounds'? Will the ability to understand software and hardware application manuals, as well as coping with the latest gadgets, be the best solutions to more creative explorations?

At the moment, Endrich's approach to teaching electroacoustic music composition has been adapted and incorporated into the teaching module. Most of the basic teaching materials from the *Sound Design Illustrations* CD-ROM,[1] prepared by Archer Endrich, were used as references, with some changes and adaptations to suit our students' level of musicianship.

Upon completing the Electroacoustic Music Composition module, students are encouraged to present their work. Most of our current research on composition reflects our aims to experiment with our local performing art resources, such as traditional folk music and dance, and re-represent them from new perspectives through electroacoustic music.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Although the current situation regarding twentieth-century music in Malaysia is still far behind the Western world, significant changes and progress are already being made. Our future work in electroacoustic music will be to further develop this area, and make the resources accessible. With the advent of technology in the arts, Malaysian traditional composers and musicians have to redefine themselves and adopt technological ways of doing things, eventually resulting in a fusion of local 'classical' flavour traditional music with new technological perspectives.

I would contend that the establishment of the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, UNIMAS, in Malaysia will be the creative hub in the convergence between traditional and technologically oriented art practices in Malaysia in the near future, and research collaboration with other creative institutions should be enhanced as a result.

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[1] *Sound Design Illustrations* CD-ROM by Archer Endrich (2003), HITHER GATE MUSIC, Chippenham, Wiltshire, England, available with Composers' Desktop Project softcopy manual.

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