

# An Introduction to Malaysian Music

Second Edition



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# **An Introduction to Malaysian Music**

**by**

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# Preface

Publications on Malaysian music often focus only on what is commonly known as “traditional” music. The aim of this book is not to limit our scope in this manner, but instead to attempt to present a brief yet comprehensive introduction to all types of music found and practised in Malaysia. In view of this aim, the introductory chapter provides a framework for what follows by presenting the historical and social context for music in Malaysia.

Categories of music in Malaysia are discussed based on a classification method developed by the present author. It is hoped that this classification outline will provide a clear and logical approach to the various sub-topics within the broad topic of “Malaysian music”.

The content contained in this book was compiled through personal research as well as through cross-references. Where such references are used, these are cited within the text. The content of this book was originally organised for publication on the Internet as a World Wide Web site, and may be found online at the *Musical Malaysia* website at [http:// www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/)

This second edition contains updates based on feedback received from readers of the Internet website, which has been online since 1997, originally located at a different host site from its present one. The author extends thanks and acknowledgment to all who have contributed towards this edition in this manner.

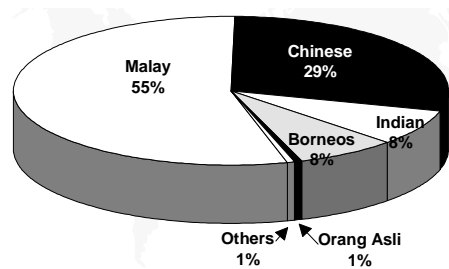
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# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiracial country and as such any description of Malaysian music should describe the music of the various major ethnic groups (Jayatilaka 1976), which according to statistics compiled by the Malaysian Department of Statistics (1993) comprise of Malays (54.5%), Chinese (29%), Indians (8%), indigenous peoples (8%, the largest groups being the *Iban* of Sarawak and the *Kadazan* of Sabah with the *Orang Asli* of the Peninsula comprising only 0.5% of the total population of Malaysia) and others (0.5%, mainly Arabs, Sinhalese, Eurasians and Europeans). (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Pie Chart showing Racial Composition of Malaysian Population in 1993**

*Culture* may be narrowly defined as the aesthetic or intellectual achievement of a group of people, in a designated area, within a specified time. To define an integrated Malaysian culture is not easy as Malaysia's multiethnic community maintains a diversity of artistic tradition that interacts and yet remains tangential to one another (Rahmah Bujang 1987). The *Information Malaysia 1994 YearBook* (1994) describes Malaysia as having 5 different cultures within its boundaries - Islamic, Chinese, Indian, Western and Indigenous (which includes Malay and various other indigenous minorities) - and argues that the very existence of these 5 cultures and the fact that in their existing and growing they have assimilated characteristics among each other and have evolved to generate a distinctly Malaysian culture.

To understand the rich diversity of musical tradition that exists in Malaysia one must first become acquainted with how this relatively young nation evolved into its present multi-racial state.

## Social and Political Background

Milne (1994) states that lack of documentation has resulted in little being definitely known in concrete terms about Malaysian history prior to the 15th century other than that, like surrounding areas, Hinduism was a dominant influence on the locals, being brought to the region by traders from India. Chinese sources also record early contact between traders from China and the Malay peninsula. Straits Settlement Chinese or the *Peranakan* arose from this period.

With the conversion of the Malay prince Parameswara to Islam in 1414 (Kennedy 1993) and his founding of the Sultanate of Melaka, Islam spread rapidly throughout the region as Melaka expanded her territories. In 1511, the Portuguese successfully conquered Melaka only to be faced with constant battles with neighbouring Malay states until they too were conquered in turn, this time by the Dutch in 1641. The Dutch succeeded in holding on to Melaka and some parts of Johor until 1824 when the British arrived to buy over portions of the peninsula. Up until this time, the northern Malay states were predominantly under Thai control. These were eventually bought over by the British in 1909, as were territories in present day East Malaysia bought over in 1882 by the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company from various Europeans who had gained them as gifts from the Sultans of Brunei and Sulu in the 19th century (Milne 1994).

The mid 19th- to the mid 20th- centuries saw the influx of a large number of immigrants from China and India, encouraged by the British to man the growing tin and rubber industries. By the mid 1940s, the population of the Malay states was about 50% Malay, 37% Chinese and 12% Indian, with deep division between the groups resulting from religious, linguistic and cultural differences. (Choo 1985).

The hallmarks of a *plural society* (Furnivall 1939) were thus firmly entrenched, and the diversity of music in the country as described by Rahmah Bujang (1987) and the *Information Malaysia 1994 YearBook* (1994) can be seen to be a mere reflection of this state of events.

The past 3 decades has seen the Malaysian economy undergo significant structural transformation from a mainly primary commodity producer to an increasingly diversified economy with an expanding industrial base (The Economics Department 1994). This broadening domestic base as a result of diversification and industrialization has created a resilient economy capable of withstanding the destabilizing effects of cyclical economic fluctuations commonly found in industrialized nations. The Gross National Product (GNP) rose at an average of 8.9% per annum between 1988-1992 (The Economics Department 1994). This rapid economic growth in an environment of relative price stability (the average rate of inflation between 1957-1992 was only 3.2%) resulted in an increase in private consumer spending by 11.2% per annum between 1988-1992 as well as in private investment which rose by 22.3% during the same period. In line with this, all households, irrespective of ethnic origin, stratum or income group, registered

an average monthly gross household income growth rate of 9.5% per annum between 1990-1995 (Prime Minister's Department 1996). This improvement in general living standards and quality of life has resulted in greater levels of racial integration and harmony than ever before, which in turn promotes peace, stability and further economic prosperity. The Malaysian government recognizes that rapid economic growth must be accompanied by social, cultural and psychological progress for a truly improved quality of life (Prime Minister's Department 1996). Where in the past, encouragement of the arts and more specifically of music has been sporadic at best, recent developments have shown that the government is indeed serious in its campaign to promote serious music among the general public. Concrete steps that have been taken include the introduction of music into the New Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum 1994) by the Ministry of Education in 1995, as well as the setting up the National Arts Academy, National Symphony Orchestra and National Choir by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism in 1993. The government has also in recent years approved the setting up of several new degree programs in music at the various local universities. Many corporate based orchestras as well as private colleges that offer a variety of music certificates, diplomas and twinning degrees have also recently sprouted up under the auspices of the present conducive environment.

## **Trends and Developments in Music**

Malaysian music is still in a state of evolution. It is the hypothesis of the present writer that a truly Malaysian music, one in which various elements of the various local cultures are merged and blended into a uniquely distinguishable musical style, has only just become attainable with the current peace, inter-racial harmony and prosperity experienced in the country. This is reflected in the relatively recent emergence of various Malaysian contemporary composers, be they from the classical or popular music traditions, who consciously strive to achieve this blending of cultures in their work.

## **Music in Multicultural Societies: Malaysia and the USA**

The evolution of Malaysian music may be compared with the evolution of American music. Both the United States and Malaysia were former colonies of the United Kingdom and both nations emerged from this era with plural societies that were reflected in their music. Having said this, the music of America has since developed its own unique and instantly recognizable identity that blends elements from its various component cultures: White-American, including both British and European traditions; Afro-American; Afro-Caribbean; and Native American. Music in America has often been used as a tool for social integration - Afro-Americans and Euro-American ethnic groups often use music as a major symbol of group identity as well as an expression of central social values in a more general way (Nettl 1993).

The birth of a genuinely American music was the result of a conscious effort on the part of certain composers who deliberately included elements from the various musical cultures in their compositions. The pioneer in this respect, sometimes called the “Father of American Popular Music” was Stephen Collins Foster (1826-64), an early songwriter who combined Anglo-Irish and Afro-American idioms with Italian operatic song forms (Tick 1993). The first great American classical composer, Charles Ives (1874-1954), combined quotations of gospel, ragtime and parlour music with complex symphonic and chamber structures, while jazz music evolved through the pioneering efforts of the great jazz composers Louis Armstrong (1900-71), Jelly Roll Morton (1885-1941) and Duke Ellington (1899-1974) who combined catchy syncopated Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean rhythms with European melodies and dance rhythms (Tick 1993). George Gershwin (1898-1937), who drew on black folk music, jazz, tin pan alley and European classical traditions, and Aaron Copland (1900-90), who blended American folk music, pop, jazz and blues in his classical style compositions, are two other instantly recognizable American composers who consciously strived to create an American musical identity. Many others have followed and today American music’s unique identity is firmly established on the world music scene.

This observation of the evolution of American music is a useful one. Malaysian music, and in fact the musics of all developing nations, can be said to be on a similar evolutionary pathway. Part of this journey involves the transition from an orally or aurally transmitted folk music to a notationally transmitted music that may be reproduced upon demand. Robert Redfield in his work on culture theory (1973) defined the “great tradition” of the reflective few as one which is consciously cultivated, refined and handed down in a formal learning situation and the “little tradition” of the largely unreflective many as one which keeps itself going, is taken for granted and is not put under much scrutiny or deliberate refinement and improvement. While it should be understood that Redfield’s definition is by no means clear cut and that many grey areas exist, it is nonetheless useful to define *traditional* or *folk* music as music created within the little tradition while the great tradition may be said to encompass within its boundaries both *popular* music as well as *classical* or *art* music.

While it may seem a straightforward task to distinguish between folk, popular and classical or art music, the boundaries that separate each from the other are seldom clear cut. One broad definition of popular music includes

... music that is generally listened to and performable by persons with little or no musical training, that is commercially marketed and disseminated by mass media, circulating primarily by sheet music, recordings, and broadcasts, thus being reproducible upon demand (Root 1993).

The same encyclopaedia states that folk music is

...usually disseminated non-commercial, is transmitted orally as well as orally, is composed by individuals who remain anonymous and

performed by persons who are not highly trained musical specialists, undergoes change arising from creative impulses, faulty memory, the aesthetic values of those who learn and teach it, and the influence of the styles of other musics, develops variants and exists in many forms (Nettl 1993).

Classical music is described as

...music usually performed by trained musicians, often non-commercial and occurring where an educated, economic, political as well as musical elite exists, and is also reproducible upon demand being circulated primarily by printed music (Root 1993).

It has already been mentioned above that it is not a straightforward task to distinguish between folk, popular and classical or art music as the boundaries that separate each from the other are seldom clear-cut. Certainly, the above definitions cannot be taken as absolute as areas of overlap do occur, rather they can be seen as guidelines for categorization of information.

Both folk and popular music are described as being listened to and performable by non-specialist musicians, both popular and classical music are described as being reproducible upon demand, albeit in different ways. Much classical music and a certain amount of folk music is also today disseminated by means of mass media such as compact disc recordings and radio broadcasts. Other areas of overlap may also be identified.

The first step in building a well-structured body of knowledge involves defining a first level of information categorization. For this purpose, music commonly known as “traditional” or belonging to the little tradition as described by Redfield will be termed *folk music* while music which is or has been consciously developed and cultivated deliberately will be classified as belonging to the great tradition, a definition which we shall adopt for our purposes from Redfield’s culture theory. Great tradition music will be further subdivided into three main categories: *contemporary art music*, which encompasses notationally transmitted music composed by specific individuals as an expression of their artistic creativity; *classical music*, which is defined here as traditional classical music developed as palace traditions such as gamelan Melayu and Nobat, consciously cultivated as a high art form but not primarily notationally transmitted; and *popular music*.

## **Types of Music in Malaysia**

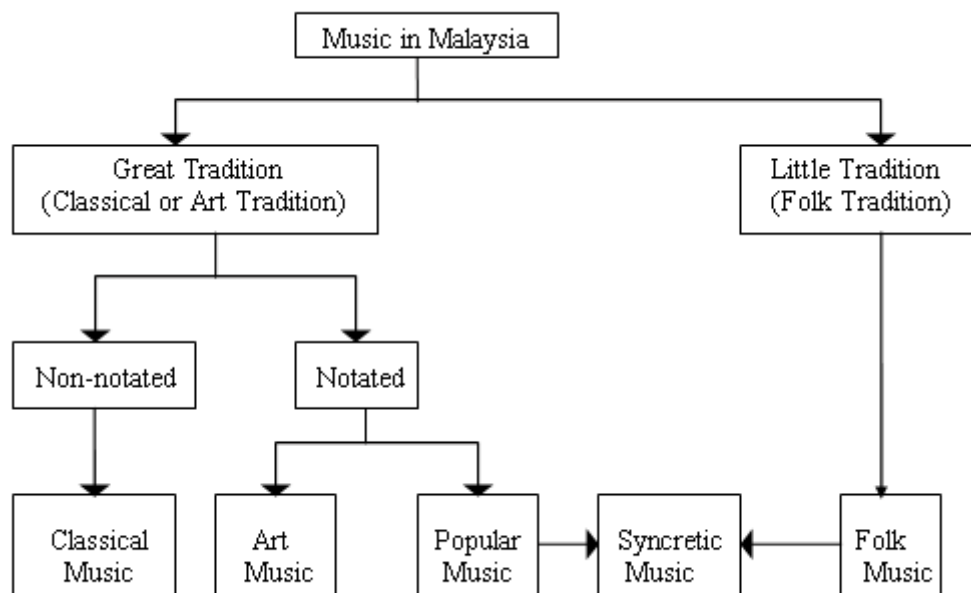
Mohd. Ghouse (1992) categorizes Malay music from the perspective of ritual presentation and comes up with 4 main types: music of the shadow puppet theater, dance music, music brought over from Indonesia from the 14th century onwards, and Islamic religious music. The *Information Malaysia 1994 YearBook* (1994) also presents Malay music as being of 4 main types: traditional music forms, traditional dance forms, music for traditional dance drama, and music for

traditional drama. Chinese music generally falls into 3 main categories: art music, theatrical or operatic music and religious music (Hansa 1989). The music of the Indian community falls into 2 main categories: art music, which includes dance as well as pure music forms, and folk music. These spring from 2 main traditions: those originating in South India or Carnatic music and those originating in North India or Hindustani music. Most Indian music generally has religious overtones regardless of its categorization. In Malaysia, all these types of music exist, though Carnatic music is by far the most common (Narayanan 1985). The music of the Orang Asli is generally tied to various religious rituals, though music is sometimes used for purely personal entertainment (Roseman 1991). The Orang Asli as well as the indigenous races of East Malaysia generally do not have any music which can be categorized as art music, though they do have a rich tradition of folk music.

From the above, two things can be deduced: firstly, most music in Malaysia generally reflects a pluralistic society, and secondly, no standard way of classifying Malaysian music exists at present.

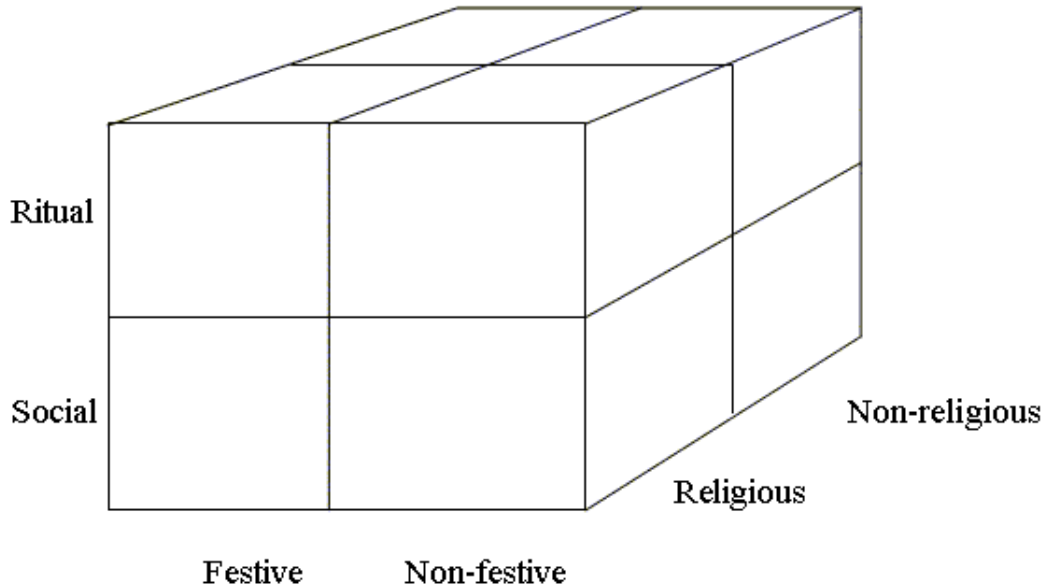
## A Proposed Classification Method

It may be easiest to start by describing the musics unique to the various ethnic communities, as most material published at present is available in this format. However, to do so would be to further emphasize the artificial division of Malaysian society created by former colonialist policies. Perhaps a better way of classifying and categorizing Malaysian music may be seen as seen in *Figure 2*.



**Figure 2. Diagrammatic Representation of Types of Music in Malaysia**

In addition to these categories, folk music may be further subdivided into various overlapping subcategories, as represented in *Figure 3* which shows a conceptual view of the first three of these overlapping subcategories, all of which include functional subcategories of music for dance or theatre or independent songs.

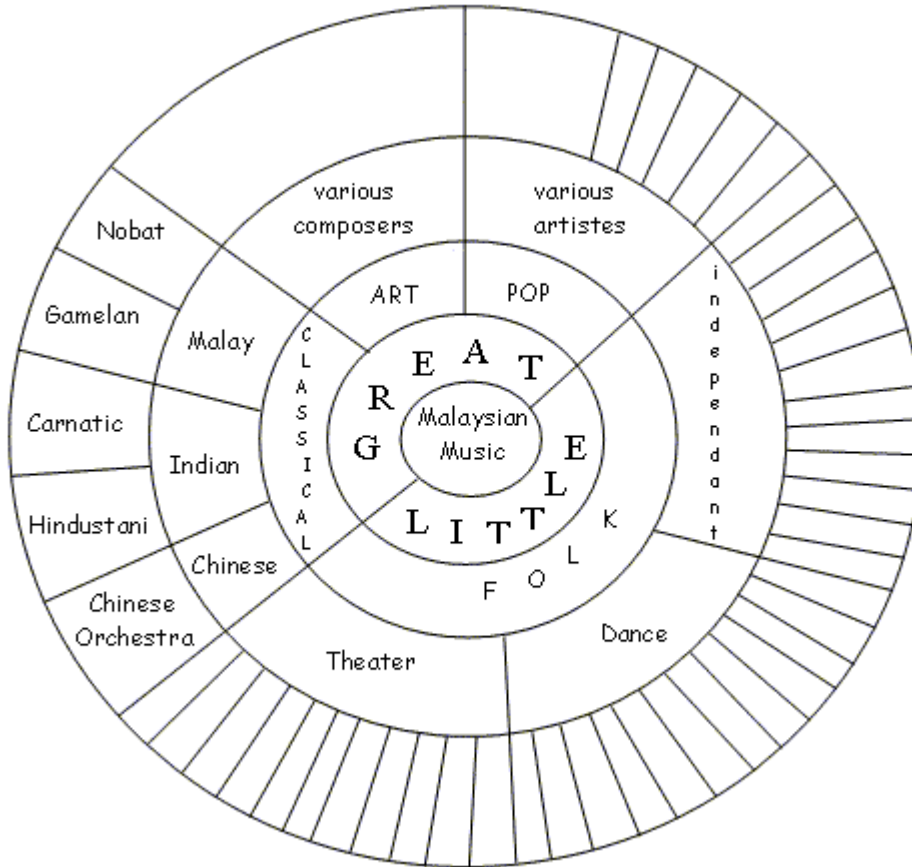


**Figure 3. Conceptual View of Overlapping Folk Music Sub-Categories**

“Religious” and “ritual” music are distinguished under the main headings “spiritual” and “individual” respectively. “Religious” music is defined as music that is used in conjunction with religious worship or religious services, while “ritual” music is defined as that which is used in conjunction with secular or social rituals such as Malay weddings. Music listed under the category “Non-religious” and “social” includes music that is used in a social context, though not in a ritualistic sense. Examples of this sort of music include children’s songs. “Festive” music is defined as music that is associated with, and usually only performed during, specific festivals that occur at specific times of year, such as Hari Maulud Nabi, Chinese New Year and Deepavali. Independent songs as opposed to “dance” and “theatre” music is defined as any music, including vocal song, which is sung or performed independently of dance or drama.

The reader is reminded at this point that any specific song or piece of folk music may be described as belonging to any or all of the subcategories listed, (i.e. the subcategories are not mutually exclusive): spiritual, individual, community or function. For example, a religious song which is sung only in a social context, though not part of any set ritual, during a specific festival each year might be categorized as “religious”, “social”, “festive” and “independent song”. The reason for these additional levels of sub categorization is in order to provide for alternative search criteria.

Figure 4 below provides yet another abstract way of looking at the various types of music found in Malaysia. Perhaps this “onion skin” approach provides the clearest picture of the different kinds of music and how each are related to the other.



**Figure 4. Summary Overview of the Classification Scheme, including the Types of Music in Malaysia.**

## Conclusions

This chapter has presented a conceptual overview of the types or genres of music found in Malaysia. The following chapters are organised according to the classification scheme proposed here, and present an introduction to each of the different types of music.

# Chapter 2

## MUSIC IN THE CLASSICAL OR ART TRADITION

### Malaysian Popular Music

Pioneered by *bangsawan* musicians in the 1890's (Tan 1993), popular Malaysian music in its truest form is made up of a fusion of various elements from the various musical cultures in the country. This role was continued by Malaysia's most well-known musician to date, Tan Sri P. Ramlee, in the 1950's and until his death in 1973 (Chopyak 1985, Lockard 1991, Ang 1996). P. Ramlee began composing music at the age of 17, in the 1940's, in order to fill the gap that he perceived existed in Malaysian popular music at the time. P. Ramlee's vision was to create a uniquely Malaysian style, based on Malay folk music but infused with elements from the various local<sup>1</sup> musical cultures. His over 250 songs reflect the influence of Malay syncretic<sup>2</sup> music forms, especially the inang, zapin, masri, asli, boria and joget forms, as well as Western dance rhythms (rhumba, slowfox, waltz, cha cha, mambo and twist), and Hindustani and Arabic melodies and rhythms. (Arkib Negara 1986).

The *Pop Yeh Yeh* era between 1965 to 1971 was dominated by Western pop star imitators, although the uniquely Malaysian style of blending local musical cultures continued in some quarters with some singers using *asli* or traditional Malay vocal techniques and others including elements of Indian film music (Lockard 1991). This merging of cultures continued in the 1970s, although not on a conscious or focused level, with western jazz, rock and pop, and Indian film music or *irama Hindustan* being the major influences on local pop musicians. Indonesian *dangdut* musicians also gleaned a large following with some local singers adopting this style. Ahmad Nawab is the significant composer / songwriter from this period writing local pop songs influenced by Western, Indian and *asli* styles. (Lockard 1991).

The 1980s were dominated by the soft rock group the Alleycats with the most consistent record sales. Their music blended elements of Western folk and pop music with local asli rhythms. Non-Malays recorded, wrote, produced and performed increasingly in the Malay language. Songwriters began consciously incorporating elements from the various musical cultures in an effort to encourage a true integration of local musical cultures (Chelliah 1988, Lockard 1991). Significant songwriters from this period are M. Nasir, Manan Ngah, Zubir Ali and S. Amin Shahib. (Lockard 1991).

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<sup>1</sup> "local" as used here is defined as that which is found or exists and is practised in the country.

<sup>2</sup> "syncretic" - involving a change of value and form resulting from the blending of elements of two or more cultures.

Several contemporary popular Malaysian artistes continue to carry this vision of a uniquely Malaysian music. Artistes such as Mukhlis Nor, M. Nasir, Jenny Chin, Mac Chew, Michael Veerapan, Zahid Ahmad, Samuel Dass and Lewis Pragasam all strive to fuse various elements from the various musical cultures in their music, either from a compositional viewpoint or from the combined use of musical instruments, themes, styles and rhythms derived from the different cultures in Malaysia.

## **Contemporary Art Music in Malaysia**

Other than the work of Lam Ming Huey and my own research for this website, there has been a lack of research into music composed by Malaysian composers trained in the Western classical tradition. Study of western musical instruments is common in urban areas, with the piano being by far the most commonly studied instrument with high levels of achievement obtained by students assessed through the British international music examination boards such as the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music and the Trinity College of Music of London. The electronic organ is also popular, mainly through the efforts made to promote study and sales of these instruments by various Japanese companies such as Yamaha Music, which also conduct their own music examinations. Some schools, especially those in urban areas, have also started their own school bands resulting in a rise in numbers of school children playing wind band instruments such as instruments of the brass family, the flute and the clarinet. However, the actual numbers of those playing such instruments is small, and qualified teachers are few and far between. Double reed instrument players and teachers are virtually non-existent. String players are still relatively uncommon, though the violin and cello are gaining some popularity among the upper middle class. Instruments commonly found in popular music, such as the guitar, bass guitar, electronic keyboards and drum set, however do have a relatively large numbers of players, students and teachers.

As far as instrumental ensembles in the western art music tradition go, the only orchestra comparable in standard to those in developed nations in terms of repertoire or ensemble technique is the Kuala Lumpur based Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra. The National Symphony Orchestra set up by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism in Kuala Lumpur was the former standard bearer for Malaysian orchestras, comprising a small group of about 30 full time musicians, augmented by various freelancers for their classical concerts conducted some 4 times a year. The *Orkestra Kuala Lumpur* set up by the Kuala Lumpur City Hall is another full time orchestra based in KL. Their repertoire consists mainly of pop music, though they do also sometimes perform concerts of serious music. The amateur Kuala Lumpur Symphony Orchestra and PJ Youth Symphonic Band as well as the university based Putra Symphony Orchestra all hold art music concerts about twice or three times a year. In northern Malaysia, the amateur Penang Symphony Orchestra and Penang State Orchestra provide the main focus of art music ensemble activity. Other existing professional orchestras include the Radio

Television Malaysia Orchestra and other ad-hoc orchestras formed from time to time that play mainly non-classical music. Radio Television Malaysia also has an orchestra based in Kuching, Sarawak, which also houses the amateur *Orkestra Kuching*. The state also sponsors an orchestra in Sibul, Sarawak. Other than the MPO, none of the above-mentioned orchestras have a full set of full time players in all sections. In general, there is a lack of trained and qualified Malaysian musicians in all sections of the orchestra and until the value of such musicians is recognised and amply rewarded, the present writer feels that to aim to achieve standards common in the West may be but a far fetched dream.

Chamber music groups are as few and far between as full size orchestras. Various temporary chamber groups are formed for specific performances by the MPO. Other ensembles are the Camerata, which in 1995 was made up of a sub-section of players from the National Symphony Orchestra but which has since been disbanded, the Kuala Lumpur Chamber Players which consist of a few local musicians who team up with various foreign invited musicians to give concerts from time to time, and the Baroque Choristers which as their name suggests focus on western baroque vocal music. None are full time professional bodies. Besides these, the amateur Selangor Philharmonic Society organizes large-scale choral based productions comprising classically trained as well as untrained local singers from time to time.

In conclusion, on the whole, the state of western art music instrument study in Malaysia can be said to be still backward and underdeveloped.

## **Malaysian Art Music Composers**

Several serious classically trained Malaysian composers also have conscientiously strived to achieve a uniquely Malaysian identity in the ever-evolving world of 20th century art music by infusing their compositions with elements derived from the various musical cultures present in the country (Lam, 2000). The most notable of these is Valerie Ross who has succeeded in making a name for Malaysian composers through the publication and performance of her works in the West. Other Malaysian composers who have succeeded in gaining international recognition through the winning of international composition competitions or national recognition through the performance of their works by leading local art music ensembles include Tan Su Lian, Raymond Kong, Razak Aziz, John Yong, Fauzi Musib, Chan Cheong Jan, Martha Lee, Johari Salleh, Tan Chong Yew and Alias Arshad. Still others such as Ariff Ahmad<sup>3</sup> have succeeded in carving a niche for themselves by specializing in a particular genre of music such as Malay Gamelan.

Whether or not these composers have succeeded in synthesizing a uniquely “Malaysian sound” in the same way that composers such as Ives, Gershwin and Copland, or Richard Rodgers in the American music arena, have succeeded in

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<sup>3</sup> Ariff Ahmad is also well known in Malaysia as an authority on *ghazal*, although his recent efforts have been to promote the Malay Gamelan, and especially the writing of new and original music for this medium.

creating that special “American sound” remains to be determined. As yet no concentrated effort has been made to catalogue or study the works of Malaysian composers as a whole. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to attempt to exhaustively identify all Malaysian composers or even all prominent Malaysian composers<sup>4</sup>. It is also beyond the scope of the present paper to conduct any sort of analysis of the works of those composers chosen to be presented here. For the purpose of this project, a random representation of Malaysian art music composers will be selected. One of the major limitations of this study is the lack of published compositions by Malaysian composers. This is due in part to the fact that there are no music publishing houses based in Malaysia at the present time<sup>5</sup>.

Information on the composers included here was obtained through field research. It was found that certain composers were hesitant to release scores due to the fact that their work remains largely unpublished (fear of plagiarism). An advertisement put out by the present researcher seeking Malaysian composers received no response at all although this advertisement was posted for several months on the UPM Music Department Web Site which receives several hundred accesses from hosts outside UPM everyday. The same advertisement was also posted to various Malaysian Internet newsgroups and posters sent to various local centres of music study, but zero response was received.

The composers listed here were selected mainly for their accessibility, having had works performed publicly or having won national or international composition competitions. A very few have also succeeded in publishing and / or in having their compositions performed abroad. Only a brief description of their work is given here, with further details obtained through field research, including sound samples, available from the Malaysian music web site (Uniform Resource Locator or URL references given below).

**Valerie Ross<sup>6</sup>**. Valerie Ross compositions are mainly for small ensembles comprising a few instruments and voice. She also writes incidental music for theatre and art dance. Valerie incorporates elements derived from local folk culture into western atonal style compositions. She has had her compositions performed and published in the West and is probably Malaysia’s most well known art music composer at the present time.

**Tan Su Lian<sup>7</sup>**. Tan Su Lian is currently a faculty member at Middlebury College in the United States of America. She studied composition at Princeton University, Julliard School of Music and Bennington College. Her works have been performed publicly in the United States and Europe.

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<sup>4</sup> “Malaysian composer” is defined here as someone who is either a citizen or a permanent resident of this country.

<sup>5</sup> There exist a few publishers of music books in Malaysia and Singapore, though all these are mainly geared towards preparing students for the external British music examinations. None of these publishers publish sheet music or original compositions.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/composers/valerie/>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/composers/Tan\\_Su\\_Lian.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/composers/Tan_Su_Lian.html)

**Razak Abdul Aziz**<sup>8</sup>. Razak Aziz teaches composition at Universiti Sains Malaysia. He writes mainly choral works and has drawn on material from local sources in his works, which have been performed only locally.

**Chan Cheong Jan**<sup>9</sup>. A recognizable characteristic of Chan's compositions is his ability to take a local folk music motif and develop it beyond its original simplicity according to western art music style. Chan's music is primarily tonal. He writes mainly for small instrumental ensembles, though he has one piece for full symphony orchestra.

**Martha Lee.** Martha's compositions may perhaps best be described as experimental in style, utilizing MIDI and computer-generated tones, sometimes in conjunction with live musicians on various instruments. Martha has also written for orchestra and smaller ensembles, mainly in an atonal, experimental style. She also several (tonal) popular style songs to her credit, as well as choral arrangements of folk tunes.

**Raymond Kong.** Raymond Kong has had several of his compositions for chamber orchestra and symphony orchestra performed by the National Symphony Orchestra and the Camerata chamber music group. He writes in the western art music style.

**Ariff Ahmad.** Ariff Ahmad writes for Malay Gamelan, utilizing cipher notation. His compositions are performed regularly by the Universiti Malaya Gamelan group.

**Saw Boon Kiat.** Saw Boon Kiat writes for Chinese Orchestra. His compositions, which are generally melodious in style and based on a use of folk melodies, are performed by various local Chinese Orchestras.

Much research still needs to be carried out into who our Malaysian composers are, what they have written, how significant any specific individual may be and numerous other questions. There are many other upcoming contemporary art music composers in Malaysia as evidenced from the wealth of talent displayed in local composition competitions as well as in original pieces the present researcher has heard and / or seen by various individuals, however hardly any opportunities comparable to those in the West exist for this talent to flourish. Many more opportunities for performance and publication of new music must be made available before the state of art music composition in Malaysia can mature and emerge from its present infancy.

Besides music of the Western classical tradition, music of the Eastern classical tradition exists in Malaysia in the form of classical Malay, Indian and Chinese music.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/composers/Razak\\_Aziz.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/composers/Razak_Aziz.html)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/composers/chan/>

## Malay Gamelan<sup>10</sup>

The Malay *Gamelan* was described in an interview with Dr. Ariff Ahmad of Universiti Malaya as being distinctly different from the Javanese or Balinese Gamelan, not so much in the instruments used but rather in the music played. The *gamelan* was brought over to Pahang in Malaysia in 1811 from Riau-Lingga (Zakaria Ariffin, 1990) and spread to Terengganu shortly afterwards through a royal marriage. Ariff stated that from the over 60 songs initially brought over, about half died with the original players and of the 30 remaining only about 12 are regularly performed today. The Malay *gamelan* music is described as very simplistic in that nearly all instruments play the melody, unlike the intricately locked parts of the Javanese gamelan. There is currently a revival of interest in Malay gamelan music, led by Ariff, with many new pieces being written out for the ensemble. Cipher notation, common to Javanese gamelan and Chinese music, is used. Zakaria Ariffin (1990) lists out the instruments used: *saron* (a metallophone), *gambang* (a xylophone), *keromong* or *bonang* (sets of small kettle gongs), *kenong* (larger kettle gongs), *gong* and *gendang* or drums. As is customary in gamelan performance, players move around between instruments from piece to piece. Zakaria Ariffin also states that Malay *gamelan* music is usually played during royal and formal occasions and that performers are specially trained in royal palaces. Ariff however would like to see *gamelan* music being performed more frequently for all occasions and has expended much effort in promoting and writing music for the Universiti Malaya gamelan troupe which performs regularly for various occasions. Besides Universiti Malaya, various other local institutions of higher learning have set up their own gamelan troupes, the most prominent of these being the Universiti Sains Malaysia group in Penang, which in 1995 performed the *Concerto for Piano and Gamelan* by Lou Harrison.

## Nobat<sup>11</sup>

Ku Zam Zam Ku Idris (1994) describes the Malay *Nobat*, a court music genre originating in the Malay Peninsular from the days of the Melaka Sultanate. Mohd. Ghouse (1992) explains that *nobat* music is played to accompany religious as well as royal ceremonies, by 6 musical instruments played in ensembles: 2 wind instruments, 2 types of drums and, only in the state of Kedah, a gong. Malm (1974) suggests that the *nobat* was brought over to Malaysia by Indian-Muslim traders in the days of the Melaka Sultanate. He also states that 4 types of instruments were used: the *serunai*, the *nafiri*, a small kettledrum and two-barrel drums.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/classical/gamelan.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/classical/nobat.html>

## Carnatic Music<sup>12</sup>

The Tamils originating from South India and Sri Lanka form the largest group among the Indian population in Malaysia, with Malayalee, Sikh, Sinhalese, Telegu, Bengali and Pakistani minority groups (Abdul Rahman Ismail 1994). It is not surprising therefore to find that South Indian Classical or *Carnatic* music predominates (Narayanan 1985) with Tamil being the preferred medium for songs, although students of Carnatic music in Malaysia do also learn songs in Telegu and Sanskrit. Lack of proficiency in the Tamil script has also meant that most Malaysian students of Indian classical music study English language transcriptions of the notes and words rather than the original scores (Narayanan 1985), with many others merely memorizing pieces, thus reducing this music of the Great Tradition to the realm of folk music especially when faulty memory or sheer laziness produces inaccurate renditions. Much teaching material still comes from India with little being produced locally, though some effort is being made in this direction through renowned Malaysian teachers of classical Indian music such as S. Apeetha Narayanan and Kanagami Vijeyendra.

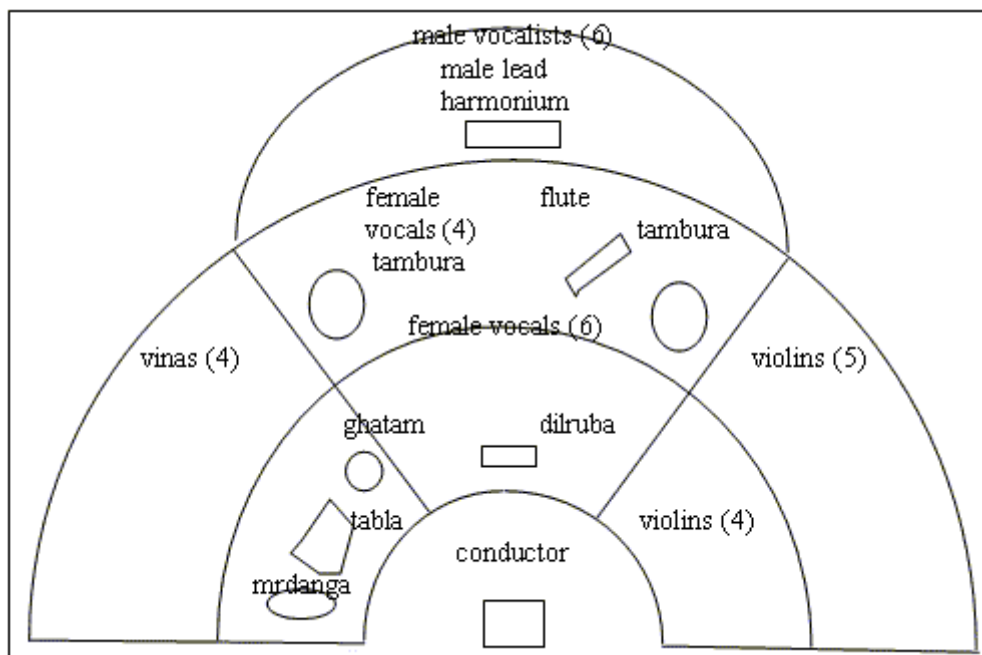
The *Temple of Fine Arts* in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur is the main centre of learning in Malaysia for classical Indian music, though some teachers prefer to teach privately. The most popular areas of musical study include the *vina*, *tabla*, *mrdanga*, violin and voice. Students may enrol for formal lessons, obtain resource materials and attend performances by expert musicians, dancers and singers at this authoritative centre of Indian music. Students of Indian classical music in Malaysia are mainly of Indian ethnic origin, though some non-Indian Malaysians do also take up serious study of this music.

The music itself remains largely true to its origins, absorbing very little if at all the music of the surrounding cultures. One of the primary reasons for this is the maintenance of strong links with experts from India who regularly come to conduct classes and performances in Malaysia.

The *Temple of Fine Arts* also has an orchestra that performs under the baton of Suresh Ramachandran, music director of the *Temple of Fine Arts*. Lavish and polished musical productions in the form of dance dramas incorporating instrumental ensemble music, vocal music, dance, acting and sophisticated stage lighting are held.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/classical/carnatic.html>



**Figure 5. Diagrammatic Representation of Carnatic Indian Orchestra**

Figure 5 above depicts the layout and instruments used in the orchestra of the *Temple of Fine Arts*. The violins used are ordinary western violins, but with a unique tuning<sup>13</sup>. The Indian classical instruments used are imported from India - instruments are not made locally. The orchestra is made up of amateur, semi-professional and professional musicians, all of whom are Malaysians. The orchestra meets to rehearse daily after office hours during the period prior to a performance, but does not otherwise meet and rehearse regularly.

## **Hindustani Music<sup>14</sup>**

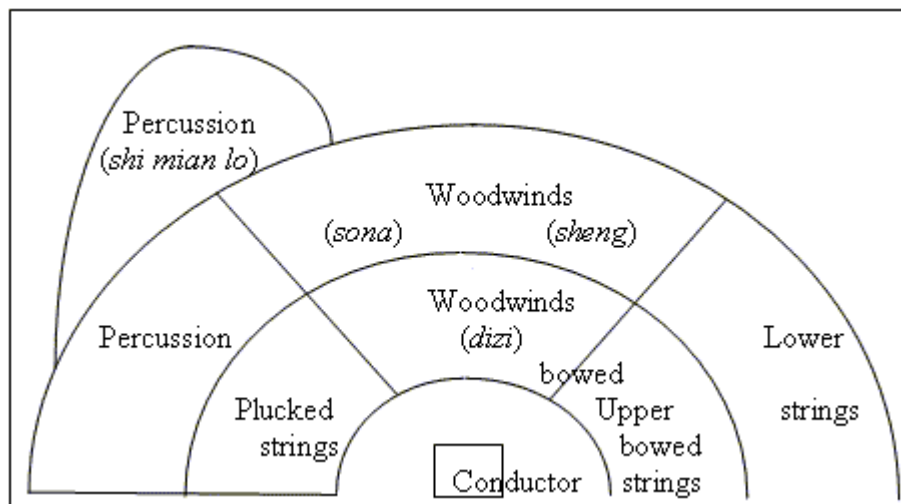
North Indian classical or *Hindustani* music is much less commonly found in Malaysia than Carnatic music, though it is taught by certain teachers, the leading one being Samuel J. Dass. The main areas of musical study are the *sitar*, *tambura*, *tabla* and voice. Small ensembles of 2-3 players are the norm as opposed to the large orchestras of Carnatic music. Samuel Dass is currently making a conscious effort to produce a “Malaysianized” Indian classical music and has composed, released albums, and regularly performs new pieces in the classical Indian style that incorporate elements from other cultures in Malaysia in various and often subtle ways.

<sup>13</sup> the 4 strings are tuned to E (a third lower the usual G), A, A an octave above the other A, and E, a fifth higher than A.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/classical/hindustani.html>

## Chinese Orchestra<sup>15</sup>

Figure 6 illustrates the modern Chinese Orchestra or *hua yue tuan* in Malaysia, which is documented by Tan Sooi Beng (1983). As in China, this orchestra is made up of a blend of western and traditional Chinese musical instruments. The music itself combines western polyphony with Chinese melodies and scales. Although the bulk of its repertoire consists of music imported from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China, many local Chinese orchestras also regularly perform Malay folk tunes with various local composers making a definite effort to absorb elements of surrounding musical cultures, especially Malay, into their compositions. In Malaysia, Chinese orchestras exist nationwide in urban areas that have large concentrations of Chinese Malaysians. Sponsored largely by various Chinese organizations including schools and Buddhist societies, a typical orchestra consists of between 12 to 50 members.



**Figure 6. Diagrammatic Representation of a Chinese Orchestra**

The orchestra itself is made up of 4 sections: bowed string instruments, plucked strings, wind and percussion. The bowed strings comprise the largest section and include the following instruments: *er-hu* with its range of 3 octaves which plays the same role as the western violin, *pan-hu* which can be thought of as a piccolo *er-hu* with only one per orchestra, usually played by the concert master, *gao-hu* which sounds a fourth higher than the *er-hu*, *zhong-hu* which is like a tenor *er-hu* similar in role to the western viola, *ge-hu* which plays the same notes as the western cello and indeed is sometimes replaced by that instrument, and *bei-da-ge-hu* which is a modern Chinese instrument modeled after the double bass and in the *hua yue tuan* often played alongside those instruments which occasionally replace them altogether.

Plucked strings make up the second group of instruments in the Chinese orchestra. These comprise various sized lutes ranging from the highest pitched *pipa* through

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/classical/chinese.html>

the *liu-yue-qin*, *yue-qin*, *zhong-ruan*, *da-ruan* and the *san xian*. Two other instruments are also included in this family of instruments, the *gu-zheng* or zither, and the *yang-qin*, which is a dulcimer, played using bamboo beaters.

The wind section is smaller than is usual in western orchestras, consisting of variously sized *di-zi* or Chinese transverse flutes, *xiao* or vertical flutes, *sheng* which is a mouth organ and *sona* or Chinese double reed aerophone. All these instruments possess a far more piercing and brilliant tone than their western counterparts. A large variety of instruments make up the percussion section of the orchestra, including the following: double headed Chinese drums (*gu*), two-plate cymbals (*po*), a hand held tam-tam (*lo*), frame mounted tam-tams consisting of 10 small tam-tams mounted on a special stand (*shi mian lo*), a bell (*ling*), a bell tree consisting of 5 suspended bells (*ma ling*), and variously shaped wood blocks (*shuang yin mu*, *bang zi* and *mu yu*).

There is no lack of virtuoso performers in the Chinese classical tradition in Malaysia. Advanced training is however not presently available with most Malaysian virtuoso musicians obtaining their advanced training either in China or Singapore. Various professional and semi-professional Chinese orchestras are in existence. Malaysian western trained classical conductors are employed full time. Two of the more prominent ones include Khor Seng Chew of the *Dama Chinese Orchestra* who received his training in London and Chew Hee Chiat of the *Zhuan Yi Chinese Orchestra* who received his training in the USA.

Much of the music played is brought in directly from China. There are however a few accomplished Malaysian composers for this medium such as Saw Boon Kiat and Chew Hee Chiat.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has looked at Malaysian music classified under the Art or Classical Music Tradition, as explained in Chapter 1. The following chapter presents the various folk musics practised in Malaysia.

## Chapter 3

# MUSIC IN THE FOLK TRADITION

### Music for Dance

The **joget**<sup>16</sup> dance is a good example of how elements from various cultures can merge together into a single form in the Malaysian setting: a dance form with Portuguese roots, its music uses the Western violin, the Arab rebana, the Southeast Asian gong and a Northeast Malaysian style of singing (Malm 1974). Several other dance music forms are also syncretic in that they use western instruments alongside traditional instruments. These include the **canggung**<sup>17</sup>, a dance popular in the north Malaysian states of Perlis, Kedah and Penang, accompanied by singing and music played on a violin, a gong and 2 barrel drums (Ariffin 1990); and **ulek mayang**<sup>18</sup>, a dance accompanied by song and music in Terengganu, originating from an unknown nearby island in which the Malay orchestra, comprising drums, gong, violin and accordion is used (Shafiee Ahmad 1992). Daud Hamzah (1965) produced a small booklet on how to dance the **ronggeng**<sup>19</sup> and the **inang**<sup>20</sup>, including simple sample scores of the music of the 2 genres, but no further documentation on these 2 forms. The inang is a fast paced social dance accompanied by the violin, Malay frame drum or rebana and Malay barrel drum or gendang. (TDC Malaysia, 1996). The ronggeng dance is a social dance in which mixed sex couples dance and exchange verses to the accompaniment of a violin, frame drums and a gong (Goldsworthy, 1979).

**Tari asyik**<sup>21</sup> is a classical dance originating from the Kelantan royal courts, usually used as folk entertainment but also occasionally as a ritual dance during official ceremonies at royal courts, during festivals and weddings. It uses 3 gongs, drums, a large hanging gong and reflects gamelan-type song (Malm 1974). **Kuda kepang**<sup>22</sup>, a hobby horse trance dance popular in the state of Johor, is accompanied by a percussion ensemble consisting of 2 drums, a hanging gong, a pair of knobbed gongs (*kenung*) on a rectangular wooden frame, and 5 *angklung* or bamboo tubular chimes (Mohd. Ghouse 1992). **Barongan**<sup>23</sup> is a processional and dance drama form that is closely related to kuda kepang (Mohd. Ghouse, 1992). The instruments used here are similar, with the exception of 2 *angklung* being used instead of the 5 in the kuda kepang, and the addition of the *selumprit*, a reed instrument similar to the *serunai*.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/joget.html>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/canggung.html>

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/ulek\\_mayang.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/ulek_mayang.html)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/ronggeng.html>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/inang.html>

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/tari\\_asyik.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/tari_asyik.html)

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/kuda\\_kepang.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/kuda_kepang.html)

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/barongan.html>

The **zapin**<sup>24</sup>, a traditional dance accompanied by music and singing, uses the voice, the *gambus*, violin, harmonium and accordion. Two types of drums are also used, the *marwas* and the *dok*, both double headed and cylindrical with the *dok* having a much longer body than the *marwas*. Mohd. Anis (1993) states that the *zapin* originated from the Middle East and that it is preserved in Malaysia in both its original form, called *Zapin Arab* and as *Zapin Melayu* which was adapted through the ages by the local Malay community.

The **dabus**<sup>25</sup> ensemble, used primarily to accompany Islamic religious praise singing and originating from the Arab world, is made up of 8 to 10 musicians playing various sized *rebana* or frame drums and a gong. The musicians, all male, also function as singers. The remainder of the *dabus* troupe is made up of 8 dancers. These troupes usually perform during weddings, coronations, religious and national holidays (Mohd. Ghouse, 1992).

**Gendang Tari Inai**<sup>26</sup> (also known as **gendang keling**) troupes used to accompany the *Tari Inai* dance are found mainly in Perlis and Kedah, and consist of a *serunai* or oboe-like instrument, 2 gongs and 2 barrel-shaped drums. The main difference from other drum ensembles is that here the drums are played not by hand but using sticks and rattan coils in both hands (or in only the left hand in certain groups). The *serunai* plays a scale closer to the western scale than the microtonal music characteristic of much Malay music. (Malm 1974, Mohd. Ghouse 1992).

**Kenyah dance** is accompanied by a combination of indigenous and western instruments, including the *sape*, *enkluri*, guitar and harmonica. Formerly ritual and non-ritual but now primarily demonstrating hospitality, it is an integral part of Kenyah life. Dances are spontaneously choreographed from an inventory of dance movements. (Seeler 1975).

**Gendang silat**<sup>27</sup> is played to accompany the Malay silat or fight dance (Malm, 1974). Pairs of *gendang Melayu* or double-headed barrel drums, one larger and one smaller, play rhythmic patterns in interlocking style. (Matusky, 1985).

**Tarian Saba** is a set of healing songs, performed in conjunction with a dance to celebrate the recuperation of an ill person. (Chan, 1998; Mohd Yusof, 1983).

**Chinese Lion Dance**<sup>28</sup> troupes are accompanied by the incessant beating of large Chinese drums and a single tam-tam. One, two or even more drums may be used. The musical form begins with an introductory section in which the main rhythm is stated, embellished with single stroke rolls. A pulsating duple rhythm is then played repeatedly until the end of the dance.

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/zapin.html>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/dabus.html>

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/tari\\_inai.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/tari_inai.html)

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/silat.html>

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/lion\\_dance.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/lion_dance.html)

## Music for Theater

Several forms of *dance drama* are found in Malaysia. Several writers document **boria**<sup>29</sup>, a traditional song and dance sketch found mainly in Penang and originating from India. It is described as a traditional quatrain song form or *pantun* which is performed in a western music style and with dance forms such as quick-step, rhumba or soul, although it was probably brought in by Indian Muslim traders of long ago, it has today come to be identified mainly with the Penang Malay community (Rahmah Bujang 1987). The violin, maracas and tabla are used to accompany the singing (Asmad 1990, Shafiee Ahmad 1992), although the western pop band may also be used.

**Mak Yong**<sup>30</sup>, a dance drama originating in Kelantan, is performed by all women troupes, accompanied by all male musicians who play the *rebab*, *serunai*, 2 gongs and 2 drums (Zakaria Ariffin, 1990). From time to time an additional drum, gong or serunai may be added. The music itself comprises 3 layers: the melody, rhythm and musical form. It is documented in detail by Ghulam-Sarwar (1976), Matusky (1994) and Mohd. Ghouse (1992), and in passing by Zakaria Ariffin (1990), Shafiee Ahmad et al. (1992), Malm (1974) and the *Information Malaysia 1994 YearBook* (1994).

**Mekmulung**<sup>31</sup> is a dance drama form very closely related to Mak Yong. Found in the Malaysian state of Kedah, it incorporates elements from other musical forms found there, especially the *gendang tari inai*, *menora* and *hadrah*. Instruments used include the *serunai*, 2 frame drums, a small knobbed gong, cymbals and bamboo or wooden stampers. (Mohd. Ghouse 1992).

**Menora**<sup>32</sup> is another dance drama form. It is of Thai origin and is practised mainly in the Malaysian states bordering Thailand: Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis. It is also known as *Nora* or *Lakon Chatri* and is performed as entertainment, in conjunction with religious rituals and on Buddhist holidays, especially Wesak Day. Instruments used include a pair of hand cymbals, a pair of small knobbed gongs, a pair of wooden sticks, a barrel-shaped double-headed drum, a reed instrument and a single headed vase-shaped drum. (Tan 1988).

**Hamdolak**<sup>33</sup> is described as traditional theater found in Johor, originating from the Middle East. It is performed during weddings and festivals, and includes the use of other Malay dance forms, especially the *zapin* and *inang*. Instruments used include the gambus, tambourine, maracas and conga drums. (Asmad 1990).

**Jikey**<sup>34</sup> is a popular traditional northern Malay and southern Thai theater form involving comic dialog, music and dance. The music in jikey consists of both purely instrumental music and music as accompaniment to singing. A form of

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/boria.html>

<sup>30</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/mak\\_yong.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/mak_yong.html)

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/folk/mekmulung.html>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/folk/menora.html>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/folk/hamdolak.html>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/folk/jikey.html>

leitmotif is involved as various characters in the drama are identified with specific elements in the music. A typical jikey musical troupe includes a violin, 3 drums or *rebana*, and 2 *cerik* or bamboo stampers. (Mohd. Ghouse 1992).

Two types of theatre related forms are the **hadrah**<sup>35</sup> and **rodāt**<sup>36</sup>, which use drum ensembles primarily as accompaniment to Islamic religious praise singing. The **hadrah** drum ensemble consists of frame drums and a gong. 8 to 10 *rebana* are used with one *gendang peningkah*, the main difference between the two being the absence of jingles in the *gendang*. A specific repertoire of rhythmic patterns, different from those of the *kompang*, is played to accompany the singing of texts (Matusky 1994) which may be in Urdu, Arabic or Malay (Mohd. Ghouse, 1992). The **rodāt** ensemble, found in Terengganu, consists of *tar* drums that are similar to the *rebana* only smaller and use jingles inserted into the frame. The *rodāt* musicians accompany male and female dancers any of whom may double up as singers. *Rodāt* originally consisted only of religious songs, but was also expanded to include love songs in an effort to attract a younger following.

The **Malay Shadow Puppet Theater**<sup>37</sup> has been extensively documented by Matusky (1974-1993). Of the four types of *Wayang Kulit* found throughout Southeast Asia, the most widely performed in Malaysia is the **Wayang Siam** (also known as **Wayang Kulit Kelantan**) originating from Kelantan. Its musical repertoire numbers 35 pieces, performed by a percussion dominated ensemble of up to a maximum of 10 players. The melody is provided by the *serunai*, with various types of drums providing rhythmic textures of various timbres and various types of gongs marking time.

The **Chinese Glove Puppet Theatre**<sup>38</sup> uses music as accompaniment, to announce the start of a show and changes of scene, as sound effects and to mark entrances and curtain changes. It accompanies speech and vocal melodies. The music itself is heterophonic and is learnt by rote without using written scores. Instruments used include a drum, two woodblocks, clappers, cymbals, two gongs, 2 to 3 stringed instruments (the *pan-hu* and the *yueh chin* and sometimes also the *ji-hian* or large *erhu*) and the *sona*<sup>39</sup>. (Tan 1984, 1981).

Music plays a significant role in **Chinese Opera**<sup>40</sup>, which is primarily associated with Chinese religious festivals. Elaborate costumes and make-up are used to portray stories of ancient China or religious legends. Unlike Western opera, musicians are often up on stage with the actors and singers. Instruments used are those found in the Chinese orchestra<sup>41</sup>, although the number of instruments used may only be a subset of these.

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/folk/hadrah.html>

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/folk/rodāt.html>

<sup>37</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/wayang\\_kulit.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/wayang_kulit.html)

<sup>38</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/glove\\_puppet.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/glove_puppet.html)

<sup>39</sup> The *sona* is never used to accompany sung melodies.

<sup>40</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/chinese\\_opera.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/chinese_opera.html)

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/chinese.html>

Music for popular Malay opera or **Bangsawan**<sup>42</sup> is detailed by Tan (1988). Entertainment oriented and commercially motivated, its popularity reached its peak in the 1920's and 30's. Its orchestra is a mix of Indian, Western, Latin American and indigenous Malay musical instruments, combined in a number of different ways. Its music is a fusion of Malay and Western elements. Malay features include singing style, vocal ornamentation, emphasis on the last beat of the phrase, linear texture, cyclic drum patterns and the use of Malay texts. Western influence includes harmony, music related to the text and orchestration. Some songs adopt Middle Eastern, Chinese or Indian rhythms and modes. Others omit Western elements altogether. In summary, bangsawan can be said to be highly syncretic in nature.

## Song Based Forms

Folk music not tied to external mediums of expression such as dance or theatre is classified here as Song Based Forms. Although much of the music found under this section is vocal, non-vocal music is also included here.

**Zikir**<sup>43</sup> is found mainly in rural areas. It is the choral singing of Arabic language texts in praise of the Prophet Mohammed, accompanied by *rebana kercing* or shallow frame drums. (Matusky 1985).

**Nasyid**<sup>44</sup> is a form of Muslim religious song, sung in harmony to the accompaniment of local and Middle Eastern frame drums played in interlocking rhythms. National level nasyid competitions are held frequently in Malaysia and there has been a recent revival of interest in the form, which is also packaged and marketed as a popular music form. (Zainal Alam Kadir 1997).

**Dikir barat**<sup>45</sup> is a style of call and response singing originating in Kelantan (Malm 1974). It is well known throughout the Peninsular through local television and performing groups. A *dikir barat* group, which may be of any size, is led by a *tukang karut* who makes up poems and sings them as he goes along. The chorus echoes in response, verse by verse. *Dikir barat* groups usually perform during various festive occasions, and their poems are usually light entertainment and may be about any topic, but are not religious in nature. The chorus traditionally consists of all men, but modern groups, especially those performing on television, often include women. Traditionally, no musical instruments are used, the singing being accompanied instead by rhythmic clapping and energetic body movements. Some groups however do use a pair of frame drums or *rebana*, a shallow gong and a pair of maracas, for accompaniment. (Aziz & Wan Ramli 1994).

**Bhajan**<sup>46</sup> is a form of Hindu devotional call and response singing. It is usually sung in Hindu temples, mainly by the Indian community, all over Malaysia. In

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/bangsawan.html>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/zikir.html>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/nasyid.html>

<sup>45</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/dikir\\_barat.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/dikir_barat.html)

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/bhajan.html>

*teen tal* (16 beat) or *keharwa tal* (8 beat) rhythm, it is accompanied by the *harmonium* and either the *tabla* or the *mrdanga*, as well as miscellaneous percussion instruments such as the tambourine and the *manjira* or *jaldra* (antique cymbals). Other instruments may be freely added, such as electronic keyboards, acoustic guitars, the sitar, vina, or tambura, depending on what is available.

**Tumbuk kalang**<sup>47</sup> is a ceremony associated with the pounding of rice, originating in Negri Sembilan. At least six players stamp mortar pestles into wooden troughs in specific timing. The rhythms are used to accompany singing. Stamped idiophones are also found among various other indigenous groups in Malaysia, the most common type being tuned bamboo tubes or poles, and are called by various names.

**Indung** is a set of 36 songs sung by women at paddy harvest time. It is documented in detail by Chan (1998). This unaccompanied call and response form has each song associated with a specific poem, and is practised in the rural Ulu Tembeling area of Pahang.

Several songs forms specifically associated with children are also practised. **Lagu Dodoi** and **Lagu Bercerita** are songs with story texts, sung in rural Malay households, especially in the Ulu Tembeling area (Chan 1998). **Lagu Permainan** are specific folk songs associated with children's games, sung mainly in rural communities.

Roseman (1995, 1991) documents in detail what she terms **Temiar Dream Songs**<sup>48</sup> which basically consist of primarily vocal chant song of the Temiar indigenous peoples accompanied by simple percussion rhythms played by bamboo stampers or *awer* and one or two Temiar frame drums or *batak*, sometimes punctuated by a single gong. Oesch (1974) describes a similar situation among the **Senoi** of Melaka.

The **kompang**<sup>49</sup> is a traditional frame hand drum played in ensembles using an interlocking technique to produce various composite rhythms (Matusky, 1994). The instrument is of Arab origin, being brought into Malaysia either with Indian-Muslim traders during the days of the Malay Sultanate (Asmad, 1990) or through Java in the 13th century by Arab traders (Shamsiah Shamsuddin et al., 1993). Kompang groups usually perform during all sorts of processions: religious, at weddings, on National Day, and even during football matches. Kompang groups are also popular among the Sabah Muslim indigenous peoples where they are often accompanied by other drums or *gendang* (Department of Sabah Museum and State Archives, 1992).

**Chinese Drum Ensembles**<sup>50</sup> are popular in Chinese medium National Type schools. Consisting of 20-40 drummers playing various interlocking rhythms, inter-school competitions and festivals are quite common within this circle.

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<sup>47</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/tumbuk\\_kalang.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/tumbuk_kalang.html)

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/temiar.html>

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/kompang.html>

<sup>50</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/chinese\\_drum.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/chinese_drum.html)

**Rebana ubi**<sup>51</sup> are very large cone shaped drums, at least 1 meter high and 70 centimeters in diameter. *Rebana ubi* ensembles compete with one another in post rice harvest festivals, playing interlocking rhythmic patterns. (Matusky 1985).

**Kertok kelapa**<sup>52</sup> is a type of xylophone found in Kelantan. Single slabs of wood are placed over coconut shell resonators and struck by wood mallets. Small wooden boxes are also sometimes used as resonators, and sometimes the slabs of wood are fastened to a rope frame and hung vertically. When only wood is used, these xylophones are called *kertok kayu*. Specific interlocking rhythms are played on a number of these instruments, which are used as music for entertainment.

**Caklempong**<sup>53</sup> is found in Negri Sembilan, on the west coast of the Peninsular. It is believed to have originated from Sumatra, being brought to Negri Sembilan by Minangkabau immigrants. A complete *caklempong* group is made up of 5 sets of *bonang* or small tuned knobbed gongs (2 sets of 15 *bonang* arranged in 2 rows and 3 sets of 8 *bonang* arranged in a single row), a *rebana* as for *hadrah* and *dabus* described earlier, a *seruling* or wooden flute, 2 long drums with either one or both sides with heads, and a 15 inch diameter gong. *Caklempong* groups commonly lack some of the above instruments, especially the full complement of *bonang*. Originally, the pentatonic scale, each of which is very close to the western notes of C, D, E, F and G, was used, but that now all notes of the tempered scale have been included. He states that originally there were 12 pieces, but now the repertoire includes many more new and arranged pieces. (Mohd. Ghouse 1992).

**Bongai**<sup>54</sup> is described as very similar to *caklempong*. The instruments used here include the *serunai* or *salung*, which is sometimes replaced by a violin, 2 *rebana* or drums, 1 set of *bonang caklempong* consisting of 7 knobbed gongs, and one circular knobbed gong. The repertoire consists of instrumental as well as accompanied singing music and that the group consists of 6-8 male musicians and female singers. Both *bongai* and *caklempong* groups usually perform during festivals, celebrations and other formal occasions. (Mohd. Ghouse 1992).

## Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the various forms of folk music practised in Malaysia, including those associated with dance, theater and those that exist independently of these visual elements. The following chapter considers syncretic forms of music practised in Malaysia.

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<sup>51</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/rebana\\_ubi.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/rebana_ubi.html)

<sup>52</sup> [http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/kertok\\_kelapa.html](http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/kertok_kelapa.html)

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/caklempong.html>

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/folk/bongai.html>

# Chapter 4

## SYNCRETIC MUSIC

“Syncretic music” is that which has evolved involving a change of value and form resulting from the blending of elements of two or more cultures. In Malaysia, this sort of melding has occurred among the musics of the different ethnic groups settled in the country such as the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians, the Portuguese and the various other indigenous peoples.

### Keroncong

Keroncong<sup>55</sup> is a syncretic form which originated and developed in Java, with great Portuguese influence, using the ukelele and other stringed instruments. It was brought to Malaysia in the fifteenth century. One style of keroncong that developed is called “langgam jawa” which uses many of the rhythmic patterns heard typically in gamelan music along with the pelog scale (Matusky, 1998). Keroncong is sung with to accompaniment of the Indian sitar, the *rebab* or bowed chordophone, the *suling* or bamboo flute, the *gendang*, *kenong* and *saron* of the gamelan ensemble, and a gong. These instruments are sometimes replaced by the guitar (for sitar), violin (for *rebab*), modern flute, cello (which takes on the role of the gamelan instruments) and the bass (which substitutes the gong). Modern keroncong groups may even include the accordion and the vibraphone to add extra colour. The vocals however still remain traditional, based mainly on the Javanese *pelog* or *slendro* scales. Keroncong style music is also found among the repertoire of nationalistic Malaysian songs, as well as modern day popular tunes.

### Ghazal

A genre popular in Johor, but found also throughout the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, is the ghazal<sup>56</sup> or love poem, which came to Johor from Riau-Lingga before the 1870s. *Ghazal* is sung in Malay, but its songs reflect much Hindustani and Persian influence. It was originally sung in the Hindi language, accompanied by the *sharinggi* a traditional chordophone, the Indian *sitar*, *tabla* and *harmonium*, and is still publicly performed in its original form within the Malaysian Indian community. The violin and the *gambus* (Malay lute, originally Middle Eastern ‘ud) have since replaced the *sharinggi* and the sitar. Today, modern *ghazal* groups also use such instruments as the mandolin, guitar, flute, Japanese drum, accordion, clarinet and ukulele. *Ghazal* music is non-notational and based on the Indian *tal*,

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/keroncong.html>

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/ghazal.html>

which basically means that it is built from blocks of rhythmic patterns<sup>57</sup>. (Mohd Ishak 1978).

## **Dondang Sayang**

The *dondang sayang*<sup>58</sup> or love ballad, originated in Melaka sometime in the 15th century. A typical group is made up of 4 musicians who perform on the violin, 2 *rebana* and a gong or *tetawak*. The chief musician is usually the violinist who plays a primary role in *dondang sayang*, providing a counter melody to the vocal melody. Musicians may switch instruments in between performances, but the violinist seldom does, although this is permitted. If there are musicians to spare, up to 5 *rebana* may be used. Sometimes, the *rebana* may be substituted by the tambour and barrel drum or even the *kompang*. The music is slow, and a song usually consists of 32 bars, beginning with a violin introduction, with the *rebana* and then the gong entering, and the voice finally entering in bar 5. Its style is somewhat informal and its lyrics usually consist of love poems. (Ahmad Usop 1984). The musical instruments may also be augmented with an accordion (Shafiee Ahmad 1992).

## **Dangdut**

Dangdut<sup>59</sup>, a popular song based form originating from Indonesia, is rapidly gaining popularity in Malaysia. It consists of a fusion of the *Orkes Melayu* or popular Malay ensemble music, popular Indian film music and Western popular music styles. Indian tablas and flutes are featured prominently in dangdut. (Lockard 1991).

## **Asli**

Asli<sup>60</sup> is another syncretic song based form. (Lockard 1991). It is characterized by unique Malay vocalizations and specific rhythmic patterns. It uses a combination of western and eastern instruments including the *rebana*, gong, tabla, harmonium, violin and bass guitar, to accompany a solo singer who uses specific asli vocalization techniques.

## **Conclusion**

Syncretic song based forms are widely practised and relatively popular among the Malaysian public, and some of it is available as commercially produced recordings. Much Malaysian pop music also displays syncretic characteristics.

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<sup>57</sup> Van der Meer (1980: 6) states that a *tal* consists of a fixed number of *matras* repeated in a cyclic manner and that a *matra* is the unit of time division, which can mean a beat or the duration between 2 beats.

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/dondang-sayang.html>

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/dangdut.html>

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.musicmall-asia.com/malaysia/asli.html>

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