

RHYTHM IN BRONZE, NEW MUSIC FOR THE MALAYSIAN GAMELAN (2001)

Five Arts Centre & The Actors Studio, Kuala Lumpur

A concert entitled 'Rhythm in Bronze' took place in the mid-1990s in Kuala Lumpur and featured pieces for the Malay *gamelan* by various artists, principally Sunetra Fernando who trained the gamelan and prepared several pieces for that performance. I had the pleasure of writing about the gamelan in the program booklet for that first 'Rhythm in Bronze', produced by the Five Arts Centre.

The present compact disc of concertised pieces is based on a concert of gamelan music at the Kompleks Budaya Negara in 1999. It was released in 2001 (with a CD-launching concert in October of that year) and features new works for gamelan, but with the same concert title, 'Rhythm in Bronze', implying a continuity of creative effort from the mid to late 1990s into the 21st century on the part of the artistic and musical director, Sunetra Fernando, and others. Once again, the Five Arts Centre and Actors Studio appears as the sponsor of the concert and of this compact disc.

As the subtitle indicates, this recording brings us "new music for the Malaysian gamelan". We are further informed in the CD's folder notes that this album brings to the fore new combinations of instruments and musical collaborations that reflect the cultural diversity and musical heterogeneity of Malaysia. We hear 'complex rhythms' from Kelantanese drumming as well as the use of the rebab from that state, Chinese *shigu* drums and the Malay *asli* singing style. These and other musical characteristics are heard in 10 works by composers from diverse backgrounds, including Balinese music, jazz, Javanese gamelan and contemporary art music.

The heterogeneity of the musicians and the musical styles on this recording are evident from the onset of the pieces. The CD begins and ends with two pieces by the Balinese musician and composer I Wayan Rajeg who has spent many years in residence in Malaysia, teaching gamelan and performing in Kuala Lumpur and at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. His pieces, *Kembang Kasturi* and *Lagu Sekar Anyar*, are both distinctly Balinese in style. The composer calls for the use of the slender, hardwood or buffalo horn mallet of the Balinese gamelan to be used on the Malay gamelan instruments, and he maintains the typical linear structures of Southeast Asian gamelan music. The melodic motion is generally fast, as in the Balinese tradition, and we even hear rhythmic figuration (*kotekan*) from time to time, most probably played on the small *kerumong* knobbed gongs. Often one gets the feeling that metallophones

such as the *gender* are also present, but the instrumentation of these pieces is not given in the program notes.

In Tan Sooi Beng's *Perubahan* heterogeneity in musical style is evident in the use of Chinese and Malay melodic and rhythmic elements. The tunes and motives played on the gamelan instruments carry Chinese melodic structures, sometimes played in a heterophonic texture. The rhythmic patterns in this piece feature the typical interlocking playing style on the Malay *gendang* drums, while the rhythms on the *shigu* drums are distinctly Chinese in character with fast drum rolls interspersed with strokes on the drum's wooden body. The rhythms of the two types of drums are superimposed upon one another. The program notes on the CD folder tell us that this piece was written during 'a time of great social and political change in Malaysia', but we are not given the year of composition for this piece nor the complete instrumentation for the piece.

Wishes by Michael Veerapen is written in a distinctly Western idiom reflecting his background in popular music and jazz. A colotomic structure is not present in the hanging gong parts, but rather the focus of the piece is on syncopation in the melodic line with a running-note pattern beneath it, all clearly based in a harmonic framework (as are many other pieces on this CD). A calm, quiet opening section is strongly contrasted by a short, loud, upbeat passage, then a return to soft dynamics but with a fast-paced melodic line featuring running-notes once again. A short conclusion returns to the calmness of the opening music as the final cadence brings the piece to a close. The program notes tell us about dynamic drumming in this piece, but it is difficult to hear in the recording.

The piece entitled *Suasana* by Suhaimi Mohd. Zain is a nice, easy-listening piece drawing mainly on the Malay musical heritage. Here we find contrast within the Malay milieu with an introductory opening by the *serunai*, the gamelan with female chorus, a *rebab* passage with *gendang* drumming and singing clearly from the *Makyung* repertory, sung sections in pop Malay, *keroncong* and folk dance styles and *kompang* drumming. The program notes tell us that the composer also mixes Western instruments into the ensemble, using percussion such as timpani and cymbals. Like the Veerapen piece noted above, many of the passages of the music are harmonic in texture.

Two pieces in this collection are adaptations from the old Joget Gamelan dance tradition from the Pahang and Trengganu courts of the 19th and 20th centuries. The piece entitled *Timang Burung* was traditionally programmatic instrumental

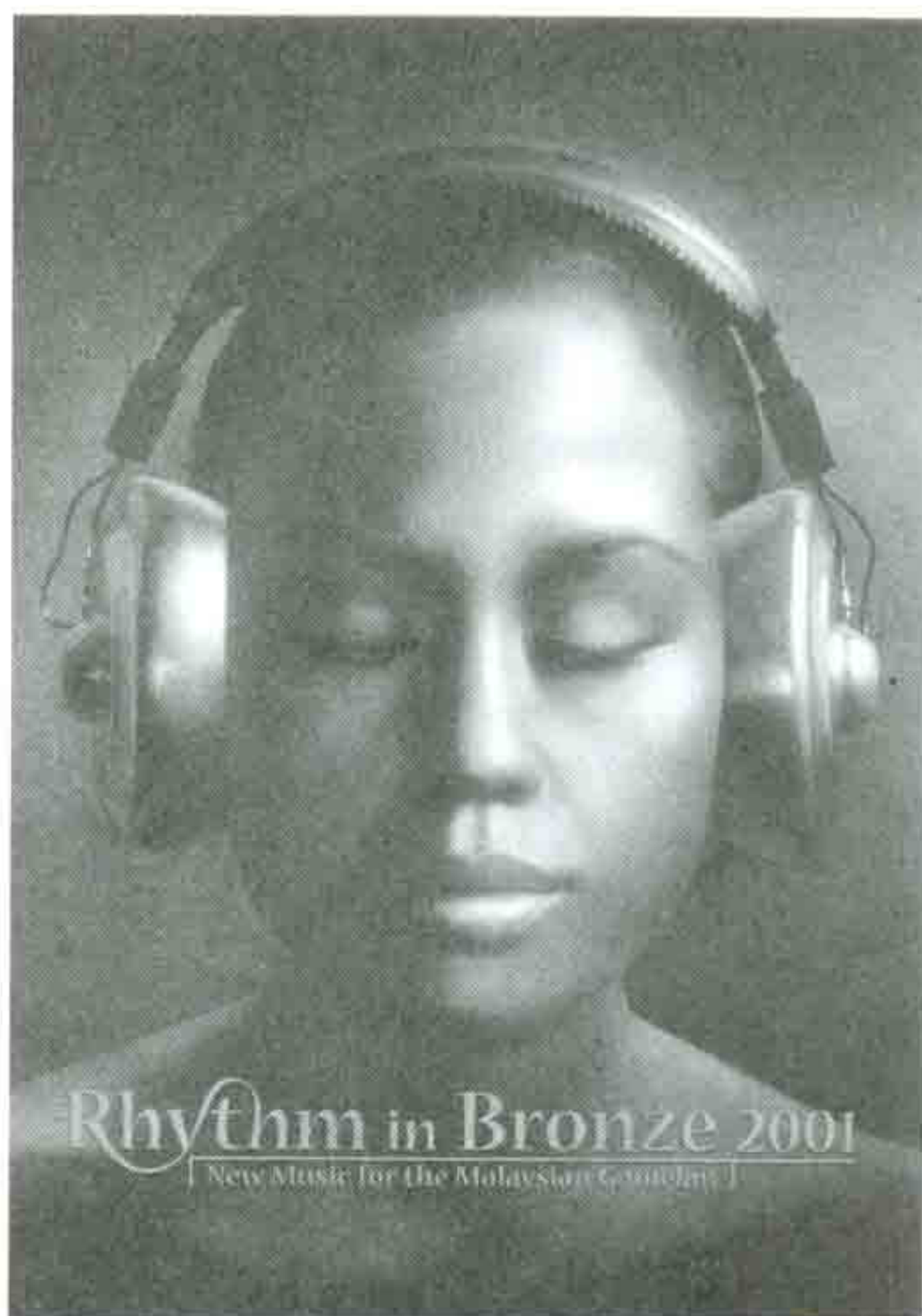
music with the dancers imitating the posture and movement of birds in a garden-like setting. Here song lyrics are added and sung in the Malay *asli* singing style by a female vocalist, but with the familiar linear texture and colotomic units of traditional gamelan music. Another piece, *On Ayak-Ayak*, also adds the female voice and chorus. 'Ayak-ayak' is the title of a musical form (and not a specific melody or tune) used in the Javanese *wayang kulit purwa* [shadow puppet theatre]. In the Javanese tradition, the melodies used for the 'ayak-ayak' are many, but the formal structure of this name never changes from one rendition to the next. The piece of this title in the Malay tradition uses a similar formal structure, but without the *ketuk* part (there is no *ketuk* gong-chime in the Malay gamelan). The arrangements of these pieces is presumably by Sunetra Fernando (although the arranger of *Timang Burung* is not indicated in the program notes).

The piece entitled *Kasatriyan* is identified in the program notes as a traditional Javanese piece adapted for the Malaysian gamelan. The arranger or adapter is not identified. While the melodic phrases are punctuated by certain gongs, those hanging gongs designated to play the *kempul* part in the gong unit ultimately produce a short melodic motif in this piece that is repeated within each colotomic unit, a highly uncharacteristic feature of *kempul* playing. The highly resonant Javanese *gendang* are played by Djamal Bakir in this adaptation, and the lyrics are sung by a female chorus but in a distinctly non-Javanese singing style. The program notes acknowledge the thick, dense sonorities of the Central Javanese gamelan, but this kind of sonority is difficult to reach on the Malaysian gamelan, probably because of the use of fewer metallophones and hanging gongs. In many passages the resonance of an instrument like the Javanese *slentem* seemed to be present, but we are not given the instrumentation for this piece in the program notes.

Two pieces in this CD collection that present new organic development in gamelan music are by Sunetra Fernando — *10-Sen* and *Sembuh Sudah*. The piece *10-Sen* is scored for gamelan, Malay rebab, Javanese *siter* (a plucked zither) and female voices. The program notes inform us that the piece is harmonically structured, however, there is no clear harmonic base or tonal centre. Melodic motives dominate the piece, and when the rebab enters, its part picks up bits of melodic passages and motives from previous sections in the piece, which leads to the entrance of the voices. A female chorus sings only syllables and eventually these voices declaim or speak various monetary values. Throughout the piece there is no discernible gong unit, yet low-pitched gongs (*kempul*?) are used to play an ostinato at times. Just as in the piece *10-Sen*, the piece *Sembuh Sudah* is scored for gamelan, female voices and Javanese

siter. There is no rebab in this piece, which takes its lyrics from Latiff Mohidin's *Jauhi Bibirmu Sayang*. The program notes tell us that the poem itself "laments the dying of tradition and its replacement with an... ambivalent energy". The music that accompanies this poetry is anything but ambivalent. It is filled with dynamic ostinatos in the gamelan part that accompany highly fluid melodic lines in a wide range sung by a female vocalist. Clearly, Malaysian elements tend to dominate this piece with the use of ostinatos, repeated and varied melodic lines reminiscent of the gong-chime music of Sarawak and Sabah, linear textures of traditional gamelan music and the asli singing style in ornamented melodic passages. One also hears, interspersed in this music, harmonized melodic lines, but no clear, sustaining harmonic base throughout the piece.

While the pieces described above clearly show a great heterogeneity of styles, these pieces also show an effort at forging a Malaysian style and identity in gamelan music. While the brief program notes on the CD folder give us an introduction to the various pieces, we are never informed of the full instrumentation of the 'Malaysian' gamelan. What instruments, for example, have been added to the original Pahang and Trengganu gamelan? Another issue to emerge from this collection of pieces is the lack of male voices in any of the pieces that utilize vocal parts. The Javanese gamelan tradition incorporates male voices (*gerong bedayan*), however, in the single piece based on a Javanese work we hear only female voices. All the vocal pieces in this collection utilize only female voices. Surely Malaysian males can sing and surely composers today know that they can sing!



Finally, the Five Arts Centre and Actors Studio is to be commended for producing this album of new works. It is, overall, a quite good recording and an excellent representation of the efforts by today's composers of gamelan music.

Patricia Matusky
Elk Rapids, Michigan, USA