

Music of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) Forum 2 Finalists: Reflections on Malaysian Multiculturalism

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) Forum for Malaysian Composers 2 signifies the multicultural vibrancy of Malaysia. The finalists respectively promote cultural elements in their works. The appropriation of Eastern aesthetics, philosophy and cultural heritage into Western musical ideology are some of their compositional approaches. Moreover, various elements of Malaysian traditional art forms ranging from dance rhythms to ritual concepts and practices often emerge as an integral compositional component in their works. This article attempts to identify the compositional styles of Mohd Yazid Zakaria, Ng Chong Lim, Teh Tze Siew and Yii Kah Hoe by means of critical analysis on their selected works and interviews. This comprehensive investigation shows that their stylistic trends can be classified into two main categories, i.e., music influenced by Malay art forms, and music influenced by Chinese aesthetics. Mohd Yazid's works embody various aspects of Malay traditional art forms, whereas Teh and Ng's music demonstrate their affinity with Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. Straddling between these two categories is Yii's music that illustrates both Malay and Chinese elements with equal importance. In the light of their diverse musical styles in

keeping with a multicultural concept, these four composers have much to contribute to the shaping of Malaysian art music of the 21st century. Malaysia as a multicultural society is clearly reflected in the works of these composers which this article further substantiates based on critical readings of the composers' works.

Keywords: *Malaysian composers, Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO), Malaysian culture*

INTRODUCTION

Two years after the inaugural Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra International Composers Award (MPOICA),¹ the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) Education and Outreach Program, Encounter, presented the MPO Forum for Malaysian Composers 2. This forum was geared towards the second MPOICA. On 4 March 2006, a concert for Phase I of the MPO Forum 2 was held to premiere original works by six semi-finalists.² At the end of that concert four composers were selected to proceed to Phase II of the Forum. A year later, on 31 March 2007, art music enthusiasts in Malaysia once again had the opportunity to witness a much awaited competition between these finalists. In this concert, MPO premiered two original works each by Mohd Yazid Zakaria, Ng Chong Lim, Teh Tze Siew and Yii Kah Hoe. Yii Kah Hoe emerged as the winner of the forum. Yii's win granted him automatic entry into the second MPOICA.³

Although they initially entered the Forum as fellow competitors, these four individuals eventually became the best of friends. Off stage they often compare notes, share ideas and discuss current issues concerning the development of art music in the country. Frequent performances of their compositions in Hong Kong, Korea, Iceland, Germany and the US,⁴ and numerous on-going international commissions⁵ testify to their outstanding accomplishments.

THE COMPOSERS AND THEIR WORKS

Since the turn of the 20th century, Western art music has experienced major development as a result of cultural reciprocity between the East and the West. The impact of the Javanese *gamelan* on the French composer Claude Debussy at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889 is a well known example that indicates East-West cultural influences. With the advent of the technology and aviation industry, cultural exchanges have since expanded on a global scale thus providing unlimited resources and information for musical creativity and innovation. Philip Glass, Terry Riley, John Cage and Morton Feldman are among the prominent Western composers who are influenced by Eastern elements, whereas Toru Takemitsu, Toshi Ichianagi, Chou Wen-Chung and Tan Dun are some of the Eastern composers influenced by Western musical ideology. Globalisation of art music has given composers the opportunity to appropriate cultural elements of "the other" into their works. Therefore, the ever narrowing of cultural proximity globally has influenced composers to not only reflect one's own culture but instead to embody multicultural elements.

This kind of influence is evident in the works of the finalists of the MPO Forum for Malaysian Composers 2. Moreover, their works are multicultural in two aspects. First and foremost, their respective ethnicity coupled with their acquired Western musical ideology reflect a multicultural constitution. Secondly, varying approaches to appropriate differing cultural elements into their works further enhance their intercultural characteristics.

The following subsections trace the compositional styles of Mohd Yazid, Ng, Teh and Yii by means of critical analysis of their selected works as well as providing biographical backgrounds to give a better understanding of their cultural standing in the context of their music.

Mohd Yazid Zakaria

A Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) graduate Mohd Yazid Zakaria (b. 1968) of Klang, Selangor, is a versatile composer whose music often features Malay traditional musical instruments with Western instruments. In 1999 he was invited to serve as music director for the production of *Puteri Gunung Ledang*. Mohd Yazid's musical theatre production *Indraputra* won him the Cameronian Arts Award 2002 for Best Original Composition. His compositions *Satu Rentak*, *Cak Pak Ting Doh*, *Tari Sembah Warisan* and *Angin* among others were performed at Istana Budaya and Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, Malaysia. Currently, Mohd Yazid serves as the conductor of Orkestra Traditional Malaysia at Istana Budaya, Kuala Lumpur.

On the whole, Mohd Yazid's works have a strong musical presence. Thematic lyricism, rich harmonies, energetic rhythmic motives and vibrant orchestration which are typically found in his music echo Hollywood film soundtracks. Interestingly, Mohd Yazid always never fails to incorporate Malaysian traditional dance elements thus creating his signature Malaysian charm within a highly vibrant and pompous musical canvas. In many of his works Mohd Yazid seems to tap the traditional art forms of the Malay culture and heritage, hence the musical elements of traditional music and cultural practices play a dominant role in his works. Besides using Malaysian traditional dance rhythms as one of his major compositional concepts, traditional musical instruments are also incorporated to create new sonorities of East meets West.⁶ This writing approach reveals the composer's keen interest in Malaysian traditional music. Mohd Yazid's music is tonal, uncomplicated, exciting and rhythm-driven. These characteristics are clearly demonstrated in *Mahsuri* and *Heritage*.

In *Mahsuri* for orchestra, Mohd Yazid uses brass calls and the metallic resonance of the *bonang* to create a pastoral mood evoking the tranquil atmosphere in the open plain of a *padi* field. The oboe which reflects the sound of the *serunai* is entrusted with the main theme of the piece. Although traditional instruments are not widely applied, the overall

presentation still brings out an unmistakable Malaysian flavour. Mohd Yazid's fondness for Malaysian traditional dance rhythm may be exemplified in the ensemble piece *Heritage*. The predominant characteristic in this piece is none other than the *Joget* dance rhythm. Mohd Yazid employs this particular Malay musical heritage in a contemporary way as this piece opens with a melodious brass ostinato that introduces the main theme played by wind instruments. These two components, the ostinato and the main theme, soon summon the *joget* dance rhythm to join in a musical fanfare. The ostinato rhythm initiated by the brass eventually travels from one instrumental group to another, thus creating a colourful orchestration that aptly represents the inherent pluralistic cultural heritage in Malaysia. Mohd Yazid also utilises framed drums to mimic the sound of *kompang* and *kendang* riffs which are commonly found in the traditional music of Malaysia. *Heritage* is practically based on a tightly woven texture crafted with *joget* rhythm and horn ostinato.

By drawing ideas from the order of "inner knowledge" in the Kelantanese traditional performances, the orchestral piece *Angin* was conceived. *Angin* is another composition that is built on an ostinato rhythm. This piece opens with a broad dynamic presence; subsequently a mysterious and lyrical section played by the oboe in *piano* ensues. The primary theme in *legato* enters as the music develops and picks up volume. This theme, presented by the brass, and high strings successively, is accompanied by a straight eighth-note ostinato played by low strings. As simple as it may be, this ostinato is essentially the main motive in *Angin*. In the middle of the piece, castanets usher the music into a section that is characterised by a series of overlapping melodic materials and rhythmic motives. After a long pause, the main motif is repeated incessantly in variations. At this juncture, the tempo appears to have accelerated thus making the music sound almost trance-like. This trance-like mood seems to resemble the metaphysical elements in the Kelantanese traditional performances.

In general, Mohd Yazid prefers brass instruments to winds or strings for climactic sections. He often reserves the oboe and the high strings for lyrical lines. His tutti sections are often presented with the main rhythmic motif of the piece. Another prominent characteristic in

his musical style is vigorous rhythmic motives which may be derived from Malay traditional dance rhythms that never fail to generate remarkable energy and momentum in his music. These compositional traits mark Mohd Yazid's music with forceful, pompous, and arresting qualities.

Ng Chong Lim

Winner of the Malaysian National Piano competition 1993, Ng Chong Lim (b. 1972) of Kuala Lumpur humbly describes himself as a "hobby composer." Ng, a seasoned concert pianist, studied piano performance at the Royal College of Music in London (1994–1996) and in Graz, Austria (1996–1998). Subsequently in 1999 he was awarded a full scholarship to study at the Hamamatsu International Piano Academy in Japan. In 2000, Ng went back to Graz to study composition with Professor Beat Furrer. And in the same year he was commissioned to write *Two Preludes* for piano solo for the National Piano Festival Malaysia. His *Sonata for Cello Solo* and *Khatulistiwa* for two pianos and two percussionists were premiered in 2001 in Kuala Lumpur and in Graz, Austria respectively. Ng's interest in combining electronics and Western musical instruments is clearly reflected in his piece, *Daun* for piano and electronics which was premiered at the HSBC Piano Festival at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre in 2005.

Ng's early works explore elements of *gamelan* music. Modes and microtonal harmony of the Malaysian *gamelan* music are transposed or overlapped to evoke a local flavour in his works. Flutes and various instrumental combinations are some of his other methods to achieve such exotic musical effects.

As a practising Buddhist, Ng's philosophy of life is to lead a simple life and to strive for simplicity in everything he does.⁷ This belief has far reaching implications in his writing style. The opening of *Xiang*⁸ clearly demonstrates the inherent aesthetics of simplicity. This piece begins candidly with only two long held notes, C-sharp and D, played by the strings. After a substantial ten measures, these two notes ascend a perfect fifth to G-sharp and A, and

are held for four measures. What follows is another 10 measures of sustained C-sharp and D. The austerity in these 2 minutes and 15 seconds is further reinforced by its *pianissimo* dynamics. Tubular bells, timpani and piano are heard sporadically throughout this long opening thus relieving it from a sense of monotony. Ng's scoring techniques and his choice of instrumentation have created a delicate mix of timbral colours. This quiet and deceptively inconsequential tranquillity slowly guides the listeners through a mysteriously peaceful realm towards a climax where an outpouring of sentiments is heard. At this juncture three *fortississimo* chords are played over three measures. As these cluster chords disintegrate and the music relaxes back to its quiet vein, the orchestra splits into six parts, each of these parts is entrusted with a set of selected pitches to be played *ad libitum* (Figure 1). After approximately 30 seconds of *ad libitum* as instructed by the composer, C-sharp and D return to end the piece in *pianissimo*.

In spite of such simplicity, *Xiang* showcases a myriad of tone colours and scores of delicate instrumental nuances made possible by novel performance techniques and meticulous ordering of instruments. To produce specific orchestral colours, Ng divides the strings into two groups, A and B; each of these groups is then combined with a specific combination of winds, brass and percussions. By subdividing these instruments into even smaller units as in the *ad libitum* section, Ng has created a palate full of colours at his disposal. The overall texture of this piece is light and transparent owing much to the composer's scoring techniques. The winds, brass, and percussion complement each other by dropping in and out of the entire musical canvas thus creating an almost pointillistic soundscape. Hence, even at the densest section, the music maintains a clear texture.

In general, Ng's music follows a light, free, and highly expressive scheme. His harmonic style straddles two systems, modality and atonality. The concept of freedom may be viewed as an important element in his works. This compositional idea is evident in the *ad libitum* sections often found in his music, for example in *Rimba* and *Xiang*. In these *ad libitum* sections, several designated orchestra players are instructed to play freely within

a suggested timeframe. The last section in *Rimba* gives the conductors and performers an opportunity "...to create their own music"⁹ using pitches selected by the composer (Figure 2). This section lasts for about three and a half (3.5') minutes. The orchestra is instructed to "fade off gradually" at approximately two and a half (2.5') minutes after the onset of this *ad libitum* section. As remarked in the score, "Spontaneity and intuition play a very important role..."¹⁰ at the closing of *Rimba*. Ng attributes his musical style to Buddhism and the concept of "living in the moment." Impermanence, simplicity and moderation are three basic principles in Buddhism that has influenced Ng's fundamental conceptual framework and musical aesthetics.

TEH TZE SIEW

Penangite Teh Tze Siew (b. 1971) is a pianist and an erhu player. Teh received her music Diploma in composition from Malaysian Institute of Arts in 1992. Subsequently she embarked on a degree program at the Xian Music Conservatoire, China where she graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in composition in 1994.

A very sensitive, cheerful and nature-loving person, Teh describes herself as a slow worker. Teh frequently draws her inspirations from her own life experiences and her surroundings. For example, the orchestral piece *Temple of Heaven* was inspired by a visit to a temple in a small town in Gansu Province, China. Having lived in mainland China for more than 10 years, Teh has gained invaluable knowledge of the Chinese culture which clearly becomes an important source of reference for her works in general. Her interests in the Tibetan culture, religious ceremonies, native activities and the overall Tibetan environment have exerted a strong influence on her works as well.¹¹

*Bamboo Forest*¹² and *Temple of Heaven* were composed for the MPO Forum 2. In these pieces, Teh conjures up a musical festivity of Chinese aesthetics out of a Western orchestra. Although Teh's works are not based on any modes or the pentatonic scales which are often associated with Oriental sounds, *Bamboo Forest* and *Temple of Heaven* are unmistakably Chinese in flavour. The harmony, melody and rhythm have a strong Chinese inflection. Despite relying solely on Western musical instruments, Teh is still able to create a convincing exotic Chinese sonority in her works. She has successfully achieved this objective through her creative compositional techniques. Teh understands that the essence of exotic and

ethnic elements in the music of a culture is not so much based on the musical instruments of that culture but rather its ethnic cultural traditions and general musical aesthetics. Hence, she simulates Chinese melodic lines and harmonic qualities by utilising certain interval contents. The angular lines in these works are shaped with augmented fourth, major and minor second intervals. These intervals are also the basis of her harmonic language. Teh's rhythmic attributes reminiscence the incessant rapid strokes of the woodblock in Beijing operas. The characteristic percussive rhythmic riffs played by 5 woodblocks in *Bamboo Forest* reflect the sounds of the *myu* in Beijing operas (Figure 3). Teh taps the lower register of the horns and the trombone glissando to recreate the deep, haunting roar of the Tibetan *dungchen*/long trumpet. Tubular bells, xylophones, vibraphones and chimes are used to evoke bell-like sonorities of Chinese metallophones. This distinct Chinese flavour in Teh's works has stirred up undertones of public sentiments on the un-Malaysian-ness of her writing style.

Teh prefers small pieces as opposed to large orchestral works. She considers herself an ensemble composer who is always striving to achieve harmonious ensemble sonority. This is true even in Teh's orchestral works. Her soft, oriental personality is often reflected in the texture, rhythm and melodies in her music. While wind and upper string instruments are reserved for long flowing melodies, brass and percussion are utilised sparingly for support. Teh's other prominent musical characteristic is the frequent adaptation of tight Chinese operatic rhythm in her works. This rhythmic element that sets momentum and heightens energy level in her works is often accentuated through the percussive sounds of woodblocks and castanets.

Being a very perceptive person, Teh has a natural connection with her environment and things or events in her daily surroundings. *Bamboo Forest*, *Temple of Heaven* and *Maze* were written when she was residing in China. These works with the exception of *Maze* that has some jazz elements showcase endless influences of Chinese culture. In 2007 Teh left China to return to her hometown in Kulim, Malaysia. Since her return, Teh has enthusiastically immersed herself in the local culture. She is currently working on a project, *The East*,¹³ commissioned for the KL Contemporary Music Festival 2009.

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X ----- 30" approx. -----

1 distant & atmospheric

12" approx. ----- off stage (left) -----

off stage (right) -----

hold 2" - 3" in between each note - repeat the fragment 2 times

9" approx. ----- off stage (right) -----

off stage (left) -----

hold 4" approx. in between each note - repeat the fragment approx. 3 times

(Crystal glass)

(Microphone with bow)

approx 4" in between each note - ad lib. throughout the entire 30" approx.

5" approx. -----

Remarks for all string players:
Only section leaders are required to play
approx. 3" - 4" in between each note,
dynamic range from PPP to P, ad lib. with various bow speed and slight pitch fluctuation

9" approx. -----

Figure 1 Xiang. The orchestra splits into six parts, each of these parts is entrusted with a set of selected pitches to be played *ad libitum*.

Fl. (J. 100 approx.)
 Ob. 45" approx.
 Cl. (very distant) ppp
 Perc. 1 (Congas) (with soft sticks) ppp mf ppp molto rit.
 Perc. 2 (Bongos) sf mf pppp
 Pno. 15^{ma} 15^{ma} mf fade away ppppp
 String quartet 1 Canon 1 Pattern I
 String quartet 2 Canon 2 Pattern I

Instructions for Strings Quartet 1
 (Pattern I) (Pattern II)
 Violin I
 Violin II
 Viola
 Violoncello

Instructions for Strings Quartet 2
 (Pattern I) (Pattern II)

Rehearsal marking [6] the conductor gives the cue for the musicians to start. Each player/group is then independent from one another. This section is a "view" which keeps changing that gives the performers/conductor to create their own "Music". Spontaneity and intuition play a very important role here. This section is approximately 3 - 3½ minutes.

Figure 2 Rimba. Ad libitum section at the closing of the piece.

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Bamboo Forest". The score is arranged in a system with multiple staves. At the top left, a box labeled "B" contains the tempo marking "Leggiero" and a quarter note followed by "= 100". The instruments listed on the left are Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Horn (Hn.), Trombone (Tbn.), Percussion (Perc.), Piano (Pno.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The Percussion part is specifically marked "5 woodblocks (use soft mallet)" and "mf". The woodblock part features a series of rapid, rhythmic strokes. The Oboe part has a dynamic marking of "mp" and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The other instruments (Fl., Bsn., Hn., Tbn., Pno., Vln., Vla., Vc.) have rests throughout the visible measures.

Figure 3 *Bamboo Forest*. Rapid strokes of five woodblocks is reminiscent of the music in Chinese operas.

YII KAH HOE

Hailed from Sibuan, Sarawak, Yii Kah Hoe (b. 1970) is a multidisciplinary musician.¹⁴ Yii is a winner of several international composition awards, among them are the MPO Forum 2 and the International Composition for Chinese Orchestra organised by Singapore Chinese Orchestra.¹⁵ Yii received his Diploma in Fine Arts from the Malaysian Institute of Arts in 1991. His sojourn at Xian Conservatory China earned him a Bachelor of Music degree in 1997. Although Yii majored in ethnomusicology, he also took some composition lessons with Professor Zhou-Xi Qian and Professor Yu-Yan Rao. Upon returning to Malaysia, Yii worked as a researcher and lecturer at the Eastern Arts Research Centre from 1998 to 2000. His interests in ethnic and traditional music have prompted him to embark on an ongoing research project to collect folk music and ethno musical materials of the regions. In 2007, Yii was granted a three-year research fellowship by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. With the Nanyang Music Research Trip (2007–2009), Yii has been travelling to Indonesia, China, Singapore, East Malaysia and various regions in West Malaysia to conduct extensive fieldwork on ethnic music traditions of the indigenous peoples of these countries.

Yii's principal research objective is to explore traditional music in search of new ideas for his compositions. Over the years Yii has collected a large amount of data which he uses as an important source of inspiration for many of his projects.¹⁶ An overview of his major works such as *Buka Panggung* for Chinese Orchestra, *Bayang* for *Wayang Kulit* and Chinese Orchestra and *Inner Voices II* for flute and *dizi* substantiates traces of ethnic elements in his overall musical style. In general, Yii pools Western and non-Western music aesthetics as resources to create a harmonious union of musical sounds.

Yii's works are very well received in the South East Asian region and beyond. His ability in incorporating the concepts of ethnic music into a purely Western genre is commendable. Yii blends Western and non-Western aesthetics, concepts and traditions together to create his own sound which he categorises as conceptually traditional in every

sense.¹⁷ In most of his compositions, major emphasis is given to tone colours, performance techniques and ethnic elements. Many of the unusual performance techniques in his works are designed to exploit the potentials of an instrument in timbral production and to challenge the performer's technical virtuosity as well. Hence, extraordinary sound effects are abundant in Yii's music. These stylistic traits may very well provide the main impetus for his flourishing career as a composer of international reputation.¹⁸

Gongan for oboe and piano is a piece of few pitches generated from one single pitch in the oboe line. Starting with B-flat that is repeated for four bars, the music moves swiftly to include C which together with the former becomes the nucleus for development. Varied tone colours are achieved via specific articulations, subtle dynamics mutations and demanding performance techniques. The piano is somewhat prepared with the placing of a glass rod or a metal ruler over the strings covering the range from A to E1. By pressing down the prepared keys C1 and B-flat, metallic sounds imitating the *canang* and *kesi* of the *wayang kulit* are created (Figure 4). The rhythmic pattern between these two pitches also mimics the smallest unit of the *gongan* temporal cycle represented by the eight-beat rhythmic structure played by *canang* and *kesi*. The *gongan* temporal structure of the *wayang kulit* has provided Yii the means to evade Western compositional procedures.

Yii's music is technically demanding, it requires the performer to depict a certain state of mind or atmosphere through sounds. For instance, in *Drunken Madness* (酒狂)¹⁹ for tenor trombone and piano, ingenious performance devices are scored for the portrayal of the drunken Ruan Ji drinking wine, singing and dancing. Yii uses the main motive of Ruan Ji's original piece written for *gugin* to construct this original work. To realise Ruan Ji's drunkenness and unruly behaviour in the music, the trombonist is required to execute musically and visually enthralling feats. Humming a melodic figure into the mouthpiece, producing the sound of hiccups by voicing two consecutive pitches while inhaling and exhaling respectively (Figure 4), and improvising on the main theme without the slide are some of the instructions printed on the score.

Gongan

for Oboe and Piano
Dedicated to McCarthy, Keri

Yii Kah Hoe

Senza Tempo

Pl. sempre

- * Completely silent about 30" then gradually insert oboe into piano.
- ** The glass rod will produce a percussive, "jangling" sound.
Alternatively, placed metal rulers laid over the strings near the damper to produce a distinctive metallic effect.
- *** Start the next bar when the resonant sounds are almost inaudible.

5 $\text{♩} = c.52$

* Kesi is metal percussion instrument of Malays shadow puppet (wayang kulit). It looks like small Chinese cymbal.

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Figure 4 *Gongan*. A glass rod placed over the strings of the piano evoking metallic sounds of the *canang* and *kesi* of *wayang kulit*.

This piece is divided into seven sections which are based on the seven stanzas of the poem.²⁰ A long trombone soliloquy (bar 166–bar 213) "Drunken Monologue," is designed to convey the mood of a drunken poet revealing his unenthusiastic reaction towards the royal summon. To deviate from perfect or accurate intonation synonymous with Western music, the trombonist is instructed to play without the slide at the end of the piece. The resultant blurry sound effects also depict a drunken, sleepy Ruan Ji roaming further and further away.

Yii's fascination with traditional theatre genres and ritual ceremonies found in multi-ethnic Malaysian culture is manifested in *Bayang* for Chinese Orchestra and *Wayang Kulit*.²¹ The entire piece from its commencement to its final phrases is nothing less than captivating. Yii not only creates an atmosphere typical of this traditional theatre through sound but also integrates a *wayang kulit* performance into the music proper. Complete with a *dalang* dan lighted *kemenyan* (incense), *Bayang* begins with the traditional *wayang kulit* ritual ceremony of opening of the stage to bless the performance. There are six sections in the music and the middle ones are reserved for dramatic engagements between the orchestra and the *wayang kulit* ensemble. The storytelling element in *wayang kulit* is incorporated in the third section with the *dalang* relating a story and waving the *Pokok Beringin* while the ensemble plays. In the last section the conductor is instructed to go behind the *wayang kulit* screen, and from there he conducts the last eight phrases of the piece. These dramatic effects parallel the fundamental nature of shadow play in *wayang kulit*. Spatial separation is a prominent feature in *Bayang*. The composer specifies that the opening of the stage ceremony be accompanied by two *sheng* positioned at different corners of the concert hall. The final phrases of the piece are played by *dizi* and *sheng* on the left balcony of the concert hall, and the percussion instruments on stage. Thus, three-dimensional sound effects are produced by placing specific groups of instruments around the concert hall and off-stage.

A somewhat self-taught composer who studied the scores of the great masters of the 20th century such as Ligeti, Xenakis, Ferneyhough, Lachenmann and Berio, Yii has created a whole new world of music through his adaptation of traditional musical concepts in his

compositions. His motto of "think globally and act locally" has subconsciously compelled him to focus on "...my (his) own cultural roots." His works are essentially based on the musical styles that he encounters in his fieldwork. Although Yii is still searching for his sound, his accomplishments thus far are truly admirable. The unique local flavour in his music has attracted significant international attention. This may be substantiated by a list of impending concerts and premieres in the coming months.²²

CONCLUSION

These four composers consistently reflect multicultural elements in their works especially through encompassing the essence of Malaysian cultural plurality. Various local musical characteristics ranging from dance rhythms to ritual concepts and practices are skilfully integrated into various Western-based musical genres in which Western and non-Western elements are organically fused into an aesthetic whole. Such exotic musical language is reflected in Mohd Yazid's *Mahsuri*, Teh's *Temple of Heaven* and Yii's *Opening of the Stage*. However, regardless of the influences they may have been subjected to, it is interesting to note that these composers appear to always maintain their ethnic identity and individual musical characteristics in their works.

On the whole, the music of these finalists can be classified into two categories, i.e., compositions with influences of Malaysian traditional music, and compositions with influences of Chinese aesthetics. While the music of Mohd Yazid belongs to the first category, the music of Ng and Teh belong to the second. Yii's music interestingly belongs to both categories. These influences are present in the sound, rhythm and instrumentation of their music. Mohd Yazid's characteristic vigorous rhythmic motives are inspired by the rhythm of Malay traditional music. In *Opening of the Stage* and *Gongan*, Yii boldly integrates elements of Malay traditional theatre with Western musical concepts. Chinese literature and music aesthetics evidently play an important role in a number of Yii's music as well. This characteristic also

holds true for Teh's works. Ng's music on the other hand, is more abstract and often stems from the composer's interests in Chinese literature, his philosophy of life and the teaching of Buddhism.

In terms of orchestration, Mohd Yazid often scores for large and surging instrumental colours. His treatment of the "Malaysian" identity in his music is either by incorporating local instruments in a Western orchestra, literally simulating sounds of traditional instruments, or integrating Malay traditional dance rhythms. On the other hand, Teh's music generally portrays sonorities of a smaller ensemble. Even her orchestral pieces are never blaring. She often relies on conventional Western instruments to create non-Western sonorities. Yii, however, always tries to strike a balance between East and West. In *Bayang*, Yii takes this challenge one step further by juxtaposing a *wayang kulit* ensemble with a Chinese orchestra, hence emphasising his ethnic roots as opposed to Ng, who even though finds inspiration in Chinese literature and Buddhism, his orchestral sound is more akin to the Western idiom.

Mohd Yazid and Tehs' music are well structured with every section clearly marked by a specific musical event. On the contrary, Ng and Yii write music that is set on a loose scheme that demonstrates a certain degree of indeterminacy. While melodic lyricism and gracefully animated rhythmic motives are among the main musical features in Mohd Yazid and Teh's writing style, these characteristics are not the winning trait in the music of Ng and Yii as their works always express a different kind of musical language. While Yii tends to lean towards experimentation on different ethnic elements through adaptation and integration, Ng follows his intuition and steers clear from any literal ethnic appropriations. Despite all these differences, Ng and Yii share a common challenge to create a piece of music based solely on a minimal number of pitches, an approach that appears to be their principal concern.

In view of their varying musical concepts and the fresh sonorities created in their works through various compositional and performance techniques, these four composers are among the exponents of new music in the country. Multicultural elements which are evident as a characteristic component in their musical creativity duly illustrate their respective

reflections on culture whether in relation to their ethnicity or nationality in general. Regardless of their individual take on culture, Malaysia as a multiracial society with an abundance of multicultural elements is vibrantly reflected in the music of these finalists.

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NOTES

1. The inaugural MPOICA took place on 27 November 2004 at the Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, Kuala Lumpur. Chong Kee Yong won the competition with his orchestral piece *The Starry Night's Ripples*. Chong beat four other award winning composers from Mexico, Canada, Japan and Germany.
2. Phase I premiered original chamber works by Teh Tze Siew (*Bamboo Forest*), Yuzaifullah Yusof (*Apocrypha*), Ng Chong Lim (*Rimba*), Mohd Yazid Zakaria (*Mahsuri*), Yii Kah Hoe ("*A*" *Note Promenade*), and Syed Sharir Faisal Syed Hussain (*As-Saff*).
3. The Second MPOICA, originally scheduled for 2008, was still pending at the time this research and the writing of this paper were in progress.
4. Yii Kah Hoe's *Gongan* was performed by young Korean oboist Hwa Sil Kim, while Ng Chong Lim's *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* received its international premiere at the General Assembly

of the Asian Composers League in Tongyeong, Korea on 30 March 2009. Teh Tze Siew's *Bamboo Forest* received its international premiere in a chamber version in Reykjavik, Iceland.

5. Yii's *Drunken Madness* was commissioned by German trombone player Dirk Amrein and Swiss pianist Jürg Henneberger. Ng's *Armouphous* for string orchestra was commissioned for STREAMS – Festival of New Music 2010 in Brauweiler, Germany.
6. Interview with Mohd Yazid Zakaria on 19 May 2009.
7. Interview with Ng Chong Lim in Kuala Lumpur on 19 May 2009.
8. *Xiang* (2007) was written as a personal dedication to the composer's late father. Ng named this piece after his late father and the title page bears the Chinese character of his late father's name. He describes his emotions through pure musical means. The quiet and calm opening is a musical allegory of the character *Xiang*. As the sustained dyad develops, an orchestral outpouring of intense anguish ensues.
9. Composer's remarks as indicated at rehearsal G in the original manuscript of *Rimba*.
10. Ibid.
11. Interview with Teh Tze Siew in Penang on 25 July 2009.
12. *Bamboo Forest* was originally scored for a 13 piece Western ensemble in 2006. Subsequently Teh re-scored this piece for Heng Ee High School Chinese Orchestra in 2009. *Bamboo Forest* for Chinese Orchestra was performed at Dewan Sri Pinang, Penang in Mac 2009.

13. *The East*, scored for Chinese flute, oboe, clarinet, and cello, depicts sunrise and bird songs at dawn. The distinctive oriental sound may be an inspiration from a pre-existing oriental piece.
14. Although Yii has worked in the capacity of a conductor, an ethnomusicologist, a dizi performer, and a composer, he considers himself a composer. He has collaborated as a conductor with Malaysian Institute of Arts Experimental Group, MSC/SEGi Experimental Ensemble, New Era College Chinese Orchestra, and Professional Cultural Centre Orchestra. His research on ethnic music is geared towards his composition projects.
15. Yii's orchestral piece *Opening of The Stage* was the winner of the MPO Forum for Malaysian Composers 2 (2007). *Buka Panggung* for Chinese orchestra was awarded 3rd prize at the International Composition for Chinese Orchestra organised by Singapore Chinese Orchestra on 24 November 2006.
16. Interviews with Yii Kah Hoe in Kuala Lumpur on 17 May 2009.
17. In an interview with the writer on 17 May 2009, Yii commented that it was an irony that his writing style had been perceived as *avant garde* from a Western standpoint when in essence it was based on traditional elements.
18. Yii has been identified to take part in the Pianorama Project for The Commonwealth Resounds Festival in Trinidad in November 2009. His one-minute piano piece will be premiered in Trinidad in conjunction with the Commonwealth Peoples' Forum and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings. Additional performances in Tobago, London, Australia, Manchester and other parts of the Commonwealth are scheduled in 2010.
19. *Drunken Madness* (酒狂), written circa 200 A.D., is one of the most popular pieces in *guqin* repertoire. It was originally scored for *guqin* solo by a Taoist musician Ruan Ji (阮籍, 210–263

A.D.). Ruan Ji, one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, was known for his many talents as a musician and a *guqin* player. He possessed exceptional skills in whistling and took great delight in drinking wine. Ruan Ji despised the immoral and corrupted practice in the government of his time. *Drunken Madness* is viewed as a deliberate snub to the government.

20. The seven stanzas in the poem, except for the fifth stanza, are replicated musically into seven sections each bearing the same title as in the poem. (1. Enjoying wine and forgetting troubles; 2. Drunkenly dancing like a flying immortal; 3. Singing loudly to earth and heaven; 4. Loving wine and forgetting the body; 5. Dashing off calligraphy on art paper; 6. Bending over to exhale (The immortal exhales); 7. Holding the wine and roaming drunk.) In Yii's piece, "Dashing off calligraphy on art paper" is replaced with the title "Drunken Monologue."
21. *Bayang* was commissioned by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and was dedicated to Tsung Yeh, the Artistic Director of the orchestra. It was premiered by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra with the Malaysian Wayang Kulit ensemble *Istamuzika* at The Singapore Chinese Orchestra Concert Hall on 28 November 2008.
22. *How Crocodile Got His Teeth* for narrator and wind ensemble was performed by High Winds Ensemble at MPO on 14 October 2009, *Opening of The Stage* at Musicarama Festival 2009 in Hong Kong on 24 October 2009 and *Gongan* at the National Conference in Portland, US on 24 October 2009. A new piece for *shakuhachi* and percussion was premiered in Melbourne, Australia on 8 November 2009. Another ensemble piece for *zhongruan* and string trio was performed by Ensemble Mosaik from Berlin during The KL Contemporary Music Festival on 27–29 November 2009. Yii's one minute piano solo was premiered in the Pianorama project for The Commonwealth Resounds Festival in Trinidad 23–28 November 2009.

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