

Artist Project

Music of Razak Abdul Aziz: Preparing Chosen Solo and Collaborative Piano Works for Two Academic Recitals

Mohd Fairuz Zamani^{1,2}

¹*School of The Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Pulau Pinang, MALAYSIA*

²*Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 35900 Tanjong Malim, Perak, MALAYSIA*

Email: fairuzzamani@usm.my

Published online: 27 December 2021

To cite this article: Mohd Fairuz Zamani. 2021. Music of Razak Abdul Aziz: Preparing chosen solo and collaborative piano works for two academic recitals. *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 20: 79–85. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2021.20.7>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2021.20.7>

ABSTRACT

For the first time in history, full-scale performances on musical compositions by a Malaysian composer, Razak Abdul Aziz, were presented through two academic recitals—27 July 2019 and 6 February 2020—at Orchestra Hall, Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (ASWARA). These recitals consisted of solo and collaborative piano works, performed by me and a team of music collaborators that were specifically selected for this purpose. Razak Abdul Aziz, who is still actively composing, spent most of his career life as an academic, first serving for Institut Teknologi MARA (ITM), then Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) until his retirement in November 2019. Besides fulfilling the academic requirements set by Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) for my doctoral degree, I had chosen to perform works by this composer as he is generally known to the local music community as one of the earliest contemporary composers in the country (started composing in the 1980s). Yet, a full-scale performance of his works was long overdue, though he had the opportunities to have some of his works premiered and performed on local and international platforms as part of concert programmes. This artist project talks about the preparation I made for both recitals, briefly explaining the creative process I journeyed through and the challenges I faced during this time span, discussing each work I had selected for these academic recitals. These recitals could, perhaps, be the pioneers in studying and performing works by Razak Abdul Aziz, hoping to expand this effort to national and international levels.

Keywords: *academic recital, Razak Abdul Aziz, piano works, composer, performance*

On 27 July 2019 and 6 February 2020, I performed a full recital of 60 minutes and 80 minutes, respectively, consisting of solo and collaborative piano works of Razak Abdul Aziz at Orchestra Hall, Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (ASWARA). These events were historical to the composer, specifically, and local contemporary music scene, generally, as these were the first recitals consisting of works solely dedicated to a Malaysian contemporary composer. Razak Abdul Aziz last served at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) as an academic, spending major part of his career life in this varsity as an academic and a composer. He has been composing since the early 1980s and had the opportunities to have his works premiered and performed on local and international platforms. Despite the many premieres and performances, there was none with a full concert programme of his compositions. These recitals were dedicated entirely to his works; being the first among Malaysian contemporary composers.

RECITAL PROGRAMMES

The recitals were parts of the academic requirements of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) as a PhD candidate in music performance I undertook. 60-minute programme for Recital 1 and 80-minute for Recital 2, I integrated solo and collaborative piano works of Razak Abdul Aziz into the recital programmes, as follows:

Table 1 Programmes for Recital 1 and 2

Title of Work	Solo/Collaborative Piano Work	Recital 1 and/or 2
<i>Etudes for Solo Piano</i> (i, ii, and v)	Solo piano work	Recital 1 and 2
<i>Pepatah Episodes</i> (i, ii, iia, iii)	Solo piano work	Recital 1
<i>Pepatah Episodes</i> (Complete)		Recital 2
<i>Prisms</i> (i)	Collaborative piano work	Recital 1
<i>Prisms</i> (i and ii)		Recital 2
<i>5 Early Songs</i> (Complete)	Collaborative piano work	Recital 2
<i>For Violin and Piano</i>	Collaborative piano work	Recital 1 and 2
<i>10 Pantun Settings</i> (i–v, ix, x)	Collaborative piano work	Recital 1
<i>10 Pantun Settings</i> (Complete)		Recital 1 and 2

PREPARING CHOSEN SOLO PIECES

Preparing the chosen solo piano works had proven to be a monumental task. Of these works, only *Etudes* ii and v had received world premieres in the past by Matthew McCright in 2007 (according to the composer Razak Abdul Aziz via WhatsApp communication on 21 November 2019). As a pianist, I always listen to recordings of other pianists playing similar pieces I work on to spark interest, to get ideas and, perhaps, to obtain different perspectives. However, due to unavoidable circumstances, Razak Abdul Aziz did not keep the recording of the premiere of these etudes. Nevertheless, the composer tried to compensate the misfortune by providing me the audio MIDI files of the work, which, unfortunately, did not help much because they sounded very mechanical and lifeless as they lacked human touch. Therefore, I treated the music sheets as my “holy” text, trying to stay as true as possible to each detail inked down. Spending hours every day learning the complex rhythms and understanding the music materials used in the solo works became a routine for me, while keeping the composer a phone call away, contacting him whenever I had doubt or questions about these works.

I have been rehearsing the selected solo pieces intensively since March 2019 in preparing for Recital 1 and started again in September 2019, gearing up for Recital 2. *Etudes* and *Pepatah Episodes* were and are still very challenging, even for the best of pianists, in my opinion. These works require extreme sense of pulse and mastery of the keyboard, besides great musicality and virtuosity, which were the qualities the composer had in mind when composing the pieces. As a pianist who had been working in the industry and various academic establishments for over 10 years, I always thrive for excellence. I believe that finding interesting features in music sheets, especially the contemporary ones, is the key motivator to learning any work and performing them the best I possibly could.

Etudes i, ii, and v tackle different angles of pianism; the first etude is about agility and keyboard familiarity; the second gives concentration on voicing out various lines, inspired by gongs and contrapuntal music, creating layers of sound (sound veils); the last one focuses on creating different harmonic sonorities, imitating the gong colotomic system. Though the composer did not obey to the convention of etudes (where they were supposed to be written to overcome certain pianistic issues, whereas Razak Abdul Aziz wrote these etudes to solve a compositional problem like a mathematical equation), I found these etudes to be unusually challenging. The sudden shift of piano technique in the first two etudes is uncommon, as a typical etude usually focuses on one or two technical difficulties in the piece. As someone who had been working on these etudes, I observed that the most challenging part was the sudden technical shift that happens at the beginning of almost every page (except for *Etude* v, which was mostly written in chordal pattern). This entailed swift adjustment of hand position and flexibility, which I found exhausting at the beginning. Nonetheless, with constant practice, custom-made all things easy (rather, less difficult). Slow practice, “polishing” notes on separate hands, and starting from various spots in these pieces would do the trick, although it is still a challenging set of work to date.

Pepatah Episodes offers a different angle of pianism. Preparing this piece proved to be a challenge, as Razak Abdul Aziz incorporated complex rhythms in many parts of the work. For instance, right hand could be playing rhythm of three-against-four, while left hand plays a five-against-six. This was thought to be unplayable at first. However, over time, I began to understand these complex divisions by learning it separate hands and slow practice, listening to the different lines written. Yet, not all parts of this work incorporate complex rhythmic division. Some parts have squarer rhythm and simpler note values (crotchets, quavers, just to name a few). This somehow lightens the burden of learning the piece from playing technique perspective, shifting the focus to shaping musical direction with lesser notes, which requires great musicality. I understood the pressure of performing this work as it was specially written for my academic recitals. Hence, the expectation from the composer was high, considering these recitals were at doctorate level. As I was the first to perform this work, the composer gave me the liberty to determine its musical direction through the use of dynamics, articulation, phrasing, and other concerning musical aspects. I experimented with various dynamic combinations when learning this work, besides analysing the musical shape and phrases to achieve this. The work also requires the performer to read the *pepatah* aloud. To fulfil this requirement, I had made various trials on pronouncing the *pepatah* to get the right volume and intonation during the rehearsals, fitting organically with the music set to it.

PREPARING CHOSEN COLLABORATIVE WORKS

Choosing musicians for collaborative works was among the first steps in preparing this part of the programme. As these works require teamwork, I had chosen music collaborators who I believed suit my musicality best at the time. I retained all music collaborators from Recital 1 in Recital 2, with exception to *For Violin and Piano*. Descriptions on the preparation could be read further down this artist project.

Dedicated to me as a gesture of appreciation by the composer, *Prisms I* is written for one piano four hands. To perform this work, I have engaged with my pianist friend from Tokyo, Japan, Takako Maeda on 16 May 2019 to play the *secondo*, and she instantly agreed to become my duet partner for this piece. The biggest challenge preparing this piece was the distance. As Takako resides in Tokyo, we had to prepare this new work separately and only managed to rehearse together about a week before Recital 1. A task that seemed impossible in the beginning, as we rehearsed on, we found that adapting to each other was easier than we both first thought. I believed this was due to the chemistry we both had established over the years as we both had worked together in the past for another work by this composer, *10 Pantun Settings* (included in the recitals).

For *For Violin and Piano*—a collaborative work, I have chosen Azlan Che Othman, a music lecturer from ASWARA to play his major instrument—the violin. He had agreed to it on 10 May 2019 and had started his practice sessions, before meeting up for our rehearsal sessions, which was scheduled to take place once a week starting from 20 May 2019 onwards till nearing Recital 1. As this is one of his early works, Razak Abdul Aziz felt the need to revisit the piece as he had matured up over the years as a composer and decided to review this violin and piano piece as his present self. Though the composer initially thought he was able to finish going through this work in time for preparing this recital, workload as an academic staff had caught him up, and hence he was only able to partially revise it for the first recital. Fortunately, the composer managed to fully revise this work in time for preparing for Recital 2. The full revised version of this piece was given to me on 14 October 2019 through email. It could be observed that the final version has the same compositional body with the partially revised score. A few extra bars were added, and the note arrangements were embellished, while keeping the main structure intact and near similar to the previous version. This had me and the violinist musically and technically challenged because the risk of confusing ourselves with the previous score is high. To solve this problem, I engaged a different violinist, Izzywan Musib, a musician from the National Symphony Orchestra. On my part, I rehearsed this latest version intensively, I almost knew the collaborative part by heart. This proved to be the right solution as Izzywan had never heard or play other versions of this work before, and hence he had a fresh take on this piece. This allowed me to easily collaborate with him, and we managed to perform this piece wonderfully together on the recital day.

5 *Early Songs* was only included in Recital 2. The decision to include this work as part of the recital was almost impromptu, considering the second recital required longer duration than the first. A substantial song cycle, I had contacted a soprano singer Rabiatal Raba'ah Baharudin to collaborate with. Despite her busy schedule, she agreed to this collaboration almost instantly. I believed she liked challenges and working on new songs, specifically by living composers. Though the cycle was not her typical musical preference,

she loved discovering new things while working on the piece. I met her in person on 13 September 2019 at Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara to pass her the music sheet and to briefly discuss our rehearsal schedule. Through our weekly rehearsal which began in November 2019 at SeVoce Studio, Bandar Tasik Selatan, we found the most challenging part in preparing this cycle was finding togetherness in the music. The sung melody and collaborative piano part were first thought to be unconnected. At many instances, the melodies were at non-related pitches to the harmony on the collaborative part, as if these two were separate entities. Nonetheless, as the preparation went along, we discovered the connection in this separation, where the solo and collaborative parts must rely on each other for musical gestures. Therefore, we both found joy working on these songs, feasibly adapting to each other's musicality.

The last collaborative work for this recital is *10 Pantun Settings*. The songs in this cycle have either one of these instrumentations: (1) one voice and one piano two hands, (2) one voice and two pianos four hands, (3) one voice, one violin, and one piano two hands, (4) one voice, SATB choir, and two pianos four hands, (5) two voices, SATB choir, and two pianos four hands, and (6) SATB choir and two pianos four hands. To obtain distinctive voice colours, I chose to collaborate with two soprano singers. Rabiatul Raba'ah (soprano) sung songs i, iii, v, vi, and x, Nurul Nadieya (soprano) sung songs ii, iv, vi, vii, and ix. For Recital 1, I had weekly rehearsals with these singers beginning from 10 May 2019 until nearing the recital date at SeVoce Studio, Bandar Tasik Selatan, where I guided the singers on the interpretation and the pronunciation of the songs. Song iii (*Mandi-Mandi*) requires the violin to be a collaborative partner. For practical purpose, I chose to retain the same violinists for *For Violin and Piano*, Azlan Che Othman and Izzywan Musib for Recital 1 and Recital 2, respectively, and had separate rehearsals at ASWARA and Istana Budaya. We took a break after Recital 1 and resumed rehearsing in November 2019 in preparing for Recital 2, learning songs we did not include in the previous recital, completing the song cycle, while refining the details of the songs in the prior recital. I chose to retain most music collaborators from Recital 1 for Recital 2, with addition of SeVoce choir (an SATB choir), consisting of 12 singers (three singers each voice) to help performing songs vi, vii, and viii.

RECITALS OUTCOME

After months of preparation, the time to perform the programme finally came. The 60-minute performance of Recital 1 received positive comments from the internal examiners from UPSI, composer Razak Abdul Aziz, and the audience. A success at first seating, this academic recital was awarded with pass by the examiners, allowing Recital 2 to take place the following academic semester.

Longer than the previous programme, Recital 2 had 80 minutes of playing time. As this was also the final presentation of my research, this performance was immediately followed by a Viva session. Another success at first seating, the internal and external examiners awarded the recital with pass without having to re-perform the programme (in partial or in full). The examiners were generous enough to give constructive comments for the purpose of improving future performances of the chosen works. Positive feedbacks were also given by the composer who attended both recitals, as well as by the general audience who came to support this performance.

I hope to perform the chosen works again in the future, be it on academic platforms or concert stages. Works by Razak Abdul Aziz need more attention from local academics and performers, as scholars studying and performers performing his works are extremely scarce. This effort could perhaps be the pioneer in studying and performing works by Razak Abdul Aziz and should be taken to national and international levels.



Figure 1 Recital 1 poster.

Source: Author's collection.

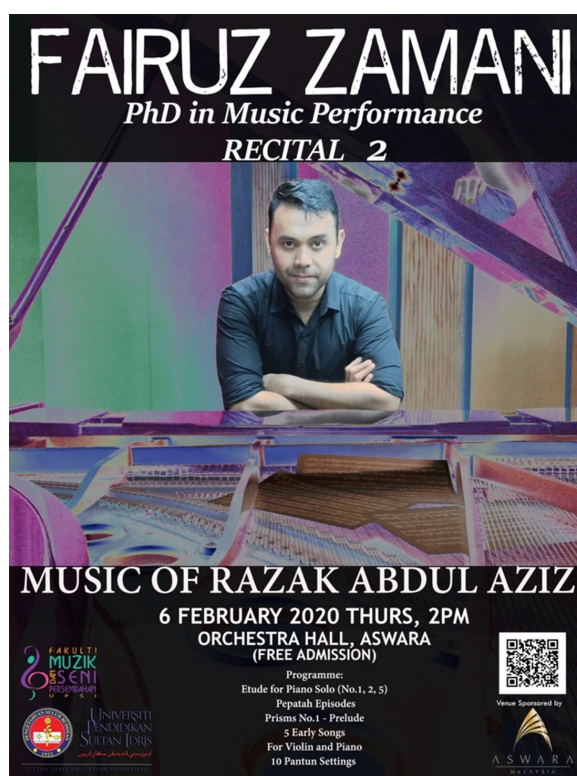


Figure 2 Recital 2 poster.

Source: Author's collection.

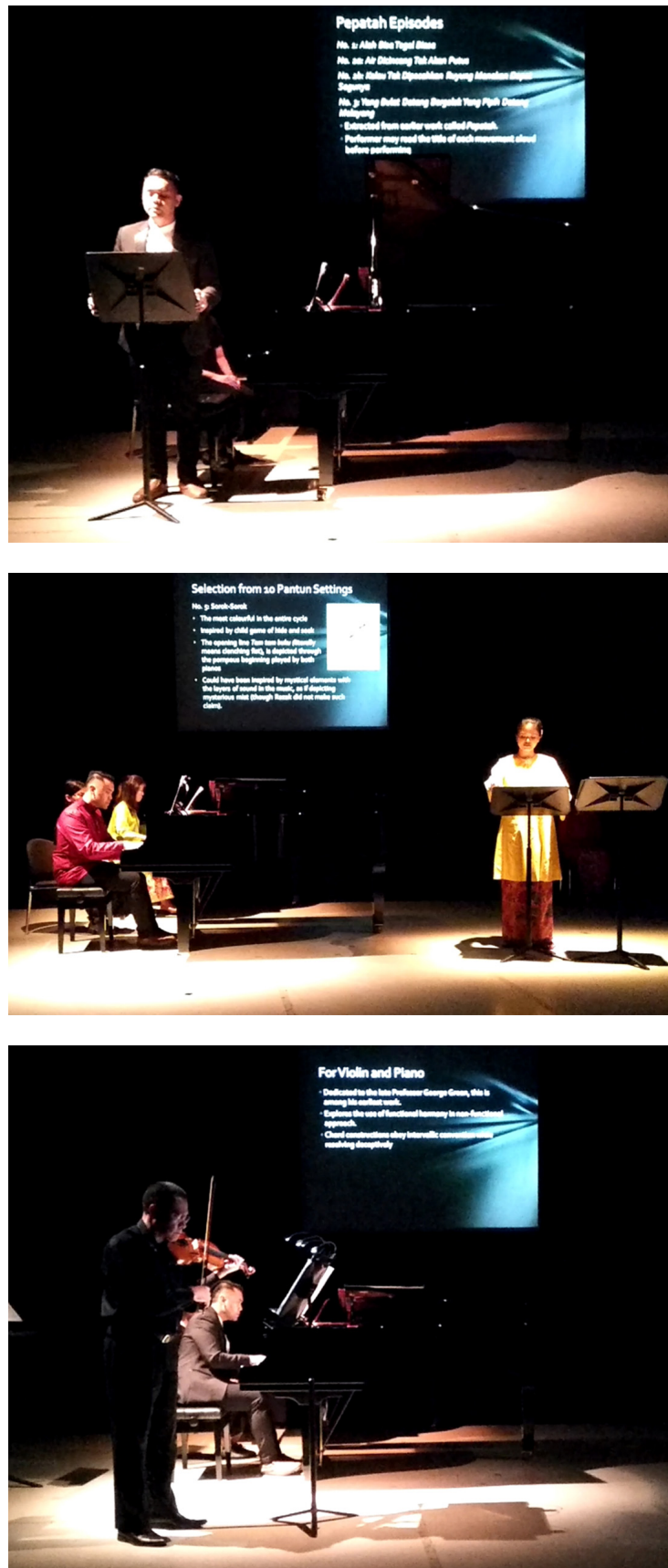


Figure 3 Photos from Recital 1.

Source: Author's collection.



Figure 4 Photos from Recital 2.
Source: Author's collection.