

## Ulasan / *Reviews*

### Satu Rentak

*Petronas Performing Arts Group,*

*Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, April 28, 29, 2004*

Petronas Performing Arts Group's (PPAG) latest offering, *Satu Rentak*, was performed recently at the Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, directed by Mohd. Yazid Zakaria, winner of the best composition award in the Cameronian Arts Award 2003. *Satu Rentak* represents a first for PPAG in its concert-hall style staging of musical excerpts from the dance-dramas it has produced over the last six years since the group's debut as the DFP's resident cultural body. It also appears that with the emerging presence of Ahmad Muriz Che Rose, finalist in the MPO Forum for Malaysian Composers and the programming of the concert to highlight compositions by PPAG's composers, this musical team is actively taking stock of its musical output.

The first half of the concert featured music from the *mak yong*, *mekmulung*, and *joget gamelan* traditional Malay theatre forms. PPAG's strategy for this concert setting of traditional Malay music was essentially that of a cultural show with its emphasis on display. The use of their well-trained and highly accomplished dancers maintained the traditional link between music and the more theatrical aspects of Malay performing arts. It was good to see younger musicians play some of the traditional and sophisticated repertoire, for example Mohd Yusni Mohd Yusof on *serunai* and Mohd. Isyam Swardi on Kelantanese drums. *Ayak-Ayak* from the *joget gamelan* repertoire was beautifully played, judiciously amplified by instrumental duplications on the gamelan. *Asyik*, from the Kelantanese court dance also displayed some innovative re-crafting



with the addition of voice and a more developed melodic use of the gamelan to amplify *Asyik*'s distinctive melody. For the concert, PPAG used their relatively new chromatic gamelan set commissioned in 2002 with some additional instruments (the *bonang barung* and *bonang panerus* gong-chimes) from their older Malay-style 5-note gamelan.

Yet, some of PPAG's choices in this staging of traditional repertoire were problematic. For example, *mak yong*'s great opening piece, the *Lagu Menghadap Rebab*, whose power resides in the unfolding qualities of dance, music and performance energy, had its musical structure awkwardly cut, leaving out the beautiful and difficult first verse. For sure, the translation of this complex and obscure piece onto the contemporary stage necessitates some crucial artistic decision-making. However, this structural change, not without precedence, coupled with an emphasis on the more visual aspects of the piece, only served to reinforce the notion that the current national-level cultural trajectory is only concerned with the visual glamourisation of these ancient forms as they are brought to the contemporary stage. Does PPAG really intend to privilege dance and theatrical visuals over music? Is this the only dialogue that exists in the traditional/modern artistic dialectic?

By the size of the almost full house, PPAG clearly have a regular and enthusiastic following. The aura of politeness and formality held by the audience and performers gave way to a palpable sense of relaxation as the audience gave the biggest claps of the whole night to *Kendara*, a piece by Shamsul Kamal Abdul Rahman which ended the first half of the programme. This composition featured the male PPAG musicians clowning around "Stomp"—like with *kualis* (frying pan), chopsticks, plastic tubs, *tikar* (mat) and *lidi* (veins of coconut palm) brooms, complete with carrots and *kangkong* (type of vegetable). There weren't any sizzling rhythmic virtuosics. Yet, audiences love to see performers enjoy themselves, and this was certainly the case.



Istana Budaya's orchestral musicians joined the traditional ensemble of gamelan, traditional Malay percussion and chorus in the second half of the programme. This instrumental combination performed arrangements of excerpts from the musical scores of previous and upcoming dance-dramas. PPAG's line-up of composers included Mohd. Yazid, Ahmad Muriz, Faizal Uzir, Mohd Husin Osman, Muhammad Rajab Md. Dali, Syed Sharir Faisal Syed Hussain, Shamsul Kamal and Yuzaifullah Mohd Yusof.

The highlight of the evening for this writer was undoubtedly *Resah*, by Faizal Uzir, with lyrics by Zahari Hamzah, whose delicately scored song for the ensemble brought out the passionate yet contained outpouring of the heart's restlessness so true of the *asli* vocal style, powerfully conveyed by one of Kuala Lumpur's most unsung divas, Juanita Ismail. As a piece, what worked was that its compositional structure was based on song, which is one of the most powerful forms of old and new Malay music. Another lovely musical moment was again a song with text written and performed by Juanita Ismail in the *Nasibku* portion of *Puteriku/Nasibku* by Yuzaifullah with its quasi Sundanese scale and dramatic vocal rendering.

In general, the other pieces felt less compositionally cohesive and secure. The act of translating music for theatre into a musical score to be performed concert-style does tend to require more structural revision and re-crafting than usually anticipated. It also seemed that where the compositions were not grounded in a negotiation with the strengths of great Malay/Malaysian music or any other particular kind of style, that was where the evening's music was the weakest and structurally diffuse.

By contrast, musical moments that stood out for me had the distinctive flavour of the idiosyncratic, multi-faceted, and hybrid popular Malaysian musical style, for example, in the expressive structure of the Malay song as previously mentioned, or in the beautiful *asli* violin





Kendara

playing in *Resah*. In this second part of the programme, the *Satu Rentak* instrumental combi including chorus and gamelan evoked the sound of early Orkes RTM which had as its precedence the hybrid musical ensembles of *bangsawan* popular urban opera in the 1920s and 1930s that combined a core group of western instruments with local instruments and styles, complete with the languorous and slightly out-of-tune violins, and more linear heterophonic textures, with the prominence of melody. Shades of this were apparent in *Istana Menanti* by Muhammad Rajab and *Uda dan Dara* by Syed Sharir Faisal although it is not clear that this was by deliberate choice. The precedence for good writing and arrangements for this kind of orchestral combi has already been set by Orkes RTM's greats such as the late Gus Steyn and Jimmy Boyle dating from the 1960s onwards. A more inclusive sense of history and musical reference would definitely serve the musical development of groups such as the PPAG.

Some of the compositions also featured a structural style normally associated with music for the creative choreographies generated by the National Dance Competition and Festival, where different musical pieces based on different Malay rhythms are strung together to provide a linear continuity to the dance narration. This was apparent in Mohd Husin's *Sri Dayu & Sri Bayu*.



Ahmad Muriz must also be noted for attempting to bring a more filmic reach to the orchestra/gamelan combi in his *Payung Mahkota Overture* as his was possibly the most harmonically ambitious score for the gamelan which was otherwise generally limited to the few diatonic scales the five-tone Malay-style set can support harmonically. Incidentally, the general use of the large gamelan forces in *Satu Rentak* tended to be supportive as opposed to being structurally integral to the compositions. This appeared to be due to the fact that the PPAG's compositional strategy was primarily harmonic. Scoring for gamelan in a contemporary context gains from being aware of its traditional heterophonic and modal possibilities. Thus, limited to supporting the overriding harmonic structures in place in most of the compositions, gamelan's presence in *Satu Rentak's* combi felt colonised.

In general, the big traditional percussive force in these compositions was not used to full effect in the utilisation of the wide range of traditional Malay drumming styles and potential contemporary rhythmic usage. Mohd. Yazid's impressive musical score and ensemble-making for the dance drama *Malim Deman* performed at Istana Budaya some time ago brought together a huge Malay traditional percussion section in combination with chorus and western percussion. *Malim Deman* was in effect a very successful large-scale modern reinvention of the traditional Malay orchestra based on traditional percussion instruments. This set a precedence that was not met in *Satu Rentak*.

Apart from this, the triumphant endings of *Payung Mahkota Overture* by Ahmad Muriz, *Uda dan Dara* by Syed Sharir Faisal and *Finale* by Mohd Yazid also did not quite reach the intended grandeur and optimism. The chorus fell into singing empty "ah"s and "hah"s such as in *Istana Menanti* by Muhammad Rajab and *Trajedi* by Mohd Yazid in contrast to the more effective vocal setting for *Inderaputera* which had a text, written by Roslee Mansor. The use of traditional instrumentation in the introduction of *Uda dan Dara* by Syed Sharir Faisal tended to be atmospheric and exotifying rather than substantial to the composition's structure.



Ensemble-wise, PPAG is one of the many active Malaysian music groups whose musical output underpins the creation of effective musical ensembles based on recombining traditional and modern instruments. For this, their work must be acknowledged. Of note also were the ensemble musicianship of young gamelan-player Shamsul Zin and some beautiful singing by soloists Zuliana Zainal Abidin, Kahiraniwati Rosli, Farazila Abd. Jabar, Juanita Ismail, including the expressive and talented Md. Eyzendy Md Aziz, last seen in Namron's *Gedebe* (theatre and film).

However, the *Satu Rentak* ensemble lacked tightness and musical flair. In other words, it failed to groove. Neither did the virtuosity and slickness of traditional Malay theatrical drumming come through, nor the showmanship of a modern popular orchestra. The nitty-gritty of building up ensemble and musicianship particularly in the area of transforming traditional Malay (or other) arts onto the contemporary Malaysian stage is a task impossible to avoid. This is an activity in itself, which requires conscious exploration by a group of committed and like-minded musicians and composers. This must be a conscious part of the process.

Yet, to call the concert musically mediocre without due qualification, is to dismiss the significance of the work that PPAG's musical team did in *Satu Rentak*. Apart from engaging with and developing their own creative sensibilities, they dealt with getting this particular musical ensemble to work as effectively as they could within the traditional/modern trajectory, and on top of this, wrote for a community of musicians from diverse musical backgrounds, traditional and modern. Artistic unfolding, particularly on such a visible platform as the DFP's is daunting. PPAG's *Satu Rentak* is a positive and important step in bringing to the forefront musical composition, alongside artistic self-declaration and accountability. And with this, the hope of a more self-aware and self-reflexive Malaysian music-making.

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# Contributors

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Sunetra Fernando lectures at the Universiti Malaya, teaching ethnomusicology and music-culture courses. In various capacities as artistic director, musical director, composer and musician, Sunetra's work with new music for *gamelan* has involved several major concerts such as *Rhythm in Bronze: Wujud Antara* in the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas's International Series for Jazz/World Music, *Laras Gong* (Kuala Lumpur, Penang YTL-Arts Festival 2003), and the *Rhythm In Bronze* concert series (1997, 1999, 2001).

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