

## Musical Narrativity in Wong Chee Wei's *Poetic and Pictorial Splendor*

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### Abstract

Research on selected contemporary piano solo works composed by Malaysian composers has been conducted to display the musical narrativity of the works through interpretation. Malaysian contemporary piano compositions are burgeoning, yet the recognition of Malaysian composers and the accessibility to local compositions still need improvements. Hence, this paper aims to share applicable theories and potential schemes of analysis, to enable multi-angle interpretative analysis to be done to reach out to wider audience. Main methods employed were textual analysis, music scores analysis, and interpretation as a hermeneutic approach recommended by the concept of musical narrativity suggested by John Rink, which includes views from that of a composer, as well as creativity and ideas from a performer. We argue that any analysis or interpretation should not be based on a single viewpoint but should integrate and consider the perspectives from multiple positions. Through examining the musical narrativity of a selected piano work *-Poetic and Pictorial Splendor*, composed by Wong Chee Wei, the meaning of the music from the perspective of the composer and the performer is displayed.

**Keywords:** Malaysian composer, Malaysian local piano compositions, musical narrativity, contemporary piano works, interpretation

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## 1. Introduction

With the burgeoning of works composed by Malaysian composers, events involving performances of local contemporary compositions are gaining more popularity. However, the said works are yet to reach the status of standard repertoire among students, teachers and most of the musicians in Malaysia. This is due to music teachers and students in Malaysia heavily depend on the British music examination syllabus, which has been the major sources of exposure for them (Zaharul Lailiddin Saidon et.al., 2014). These music examination boards, such as Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), Trinity College London, and London College of Music, hardly feature works by Malaysian contemporary composers. Thus far, only a limited number of Malaysian piano solo works were published by the ABRSM, which include *Sebuah Pantun* by Tazul Tajuddin in Spectrum 4 (Tazul Izan Tajuddin, 2002), *The Swing* and *Jester's Jig* by Chee-Hwa Tan (Piano exam piece ABRSM grade 1, 2020; Piano exam piece ABRSM grade 5, 2022).

In comparison to the western art music of traditional style composed in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the new composition style in contemporary art music requires a more creative approach towards the works in order to achieve an interpretation that truly reflects its meaning, as well as a playing technique that complies (Tham, 2019). Meanwhile, limited research on Malaysian contemporary piano solo works provides little help on understanding the meaning of the works, emphasis was given on the structural analysis. These research includes Siagian's (2007) study on Malaysian and Indonesian composers; Lie's (2013) discussion on music of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) Forum 2 Finalists; Khoo's (2014) analysis of selected solo piano works by contemporary Malaysian composers, and an article by Tham (2019) about a Malaysian contemporary composer's piano solo work written in 2018-Tazul Izan Tajuddin's "Kabus Pantun".

Furthermore, there is no guidance on how to approach Malaysian contemporary works. This problem is not only occurring in Malaysia, contemporary classical music advocators in other countries are facing the same problem. Elgersma (2012) revealed her own piano learning experience as well as the situation of the piano students in the United States, they were not exposed to the present contemporary compositions. The works are not included in the piano examination syllabus and competition repertoires. Hence, the works are always labelled as "difficult to understand" or "difficult to approach". These are the main factors that refrain the public from a nearer draw towards the said works.

## 2. Malaysia Contemporary Art Music Status Quo

The scene of contemporary music is constantly growing and changing with a broad spectrum of development. However, research on Malaysia contemporary music is scarce. Many are facing a lack of information and guidance on how to interpret contemporary works that are always being labelled as difficult to understand. There is a wide gap on acceptance of contemporary music among the public. A study conducted by Emerson (2020) shown that audiences had difficulties accepting contemporary classical music as a result of the advanced and progressive musical elements employed in the composition techniques, causing aloofness in audiences' acknowledgement of contemporary works. Ross (2010) explained that human are more favoured towards consonance than dissonance; nevertheless, contemporary music is still being promoted and performed frequently, as an effort to get more acceptance from the public. As discussed in research by Phang (2016), the status quo of bel canto activities among Chinese population was investigated, several Chinese composers were featured, ranging from those who were active in the 1960s to composers nowadays, however, Phang highlighted the disintegration in the bel canto training of Chinese and non-Chinese. Consequently, the said composers and some of their works are only known within small clusters of Chinese community, and might not be recognized nationwide.

Similar situation happened to the prolific patriotic composer, Jimmy Boyle. His compositions such as Tanah Pusaka, Putera-Puteri and Kemegahan Negaraku are performed nationwide but not many realised that Boyle was the composer. The Jimmy Boyle Young Talent Jazz Competition is one of the programs featured in the Penang Island Jazz Festival, a local event that put Penang on the international jazz map (The Star, 2008). But sadly, the most ironic part of the situation is that although the competition is named after Jimmy Boyle, it did not bring much recognition about Jimmy Boyle to the public. Lee (2017: 41) reported that during the said jazz festival which featured Jimmy Boyle, the younger generations were said to have limit knowledge about the home-grown composer.

In the current situation, little attention is given to local compositions. The repertoire that a Malaysian pianist would choose to learn, or a Malaysian piano teacher would teach, is mostly the standard classical pieces from the western countries over our own Malaysian compositions, as the British's post-colonial influence is still shadowing our music education till now. The choice of repertoires and methods of teaching in most of the private music teachers and music centres in Malaysia are catered to fulfil the requirements of the music examinations set according to British's standard (Tye, 2005). This clearly unveils that the examination syllabus is an important factor that affects the choice of repertoire. Further, Malaysian contemporary composition is not a compulsory repertoire in Malaysia's undergraduate music education in local varsities. It is not

compulsory to include a work by Malaysian composer in students' performance or examination. The lack of said works being featured in the examination syllabus has indirectly reduced the importance of Malaysian contemporary works.

At present, research by Siagian (2007), Lie (2013), Khoo (2014), and Tham (2019) are among the limited studies on Malaysian contemporary works. Analysis conducted in these research, as any other musical analysis, based mainly on the musical structure - the idioms, intent, and expressive devices, but did little in examining the discourse surrounding the work. By discourse, we refer to the way a work is being understood and interpreted by different stakeholders such as the composers, performers, and audience. We believe that the discourse elements in analysis could contribute to a wider acceptance of the local works as it presents narratives in context and in an interactive way. As such a Malaysian local work becomes an invitation to participate in musicking, rather to be a mere object in piano lesson and examination. However, we do not have enough or proper references on how to interpret and understand the meaning of the works composed by Malaysian composers. If this situation prevails, it will bring negative effect to our music industry, as the recognition of local composers will decline, and this is a huge demotivation to all musicians, killing creativity at the same time.

### **3. Musical Narrativity**

This paper reports the application of "musical narrativity" as a method to interpret local contemporary piano solo composition. According to Byron Almén (2008), musical narrative is a hermeneutic approach to study musical elements and their connotations in the context of culture and structure. Narrativity has been always linked with storytelling to most of the people, with the assistance of language and semantics. When narrativity is applied on music, there tends to be underlying presumptions on the works, such as they do not comply with the usual traditional composition form; narrative music is always related to programmatic titles or lyrics; the musical ideas are usually derived from literature or drama.

This misconception is subverted in a journal by Almén, proving the connections between musical narratives and topics in his analysis. Topic, construed as a synchronic static expression, refers to the style presented by the music through its usage of harmony, rhythm, tempo, motives and many more. On the contrary, musical narrative, construed as a diachronic dynamic expression, refers to the identification of musical elements, understand each narrative trajectory expressed by the elements, and to relate the interactions between musical elements to create narrative archetypes (Almén, 2004). Hence, narrativity is a temporal process where the musical narrative is gradually unfolded through time.

This concept is also advocated by John Rink. In his essay “The Work of the Performer” (2018), he engages with the idea that the performer’s creative role acts as a huge influence in display of musical narrativity to the listeners through performative process, which is a dynamic and ever-changing continuum through time and space. According to Rink, a live performance, is described as “evanescent”, “ephemeral” and “elusive”, not even recording could perfectly capture the moment of the exact identical condition. In addition, under current circumstances, live performances also include online sessions which do not necessarily display the audience while being hosted online. The aura of a live performance is bound to several factors, such as, the acoustic design of a venue, the quality of the instrument, performer’s mental as well as physical condition, and all other components that contribute to the formation of a performance. Performer plays an important role to magnify and bring alive composer’s ideas written on the scores and thereafter transform the ideas to musical narrativity perceive by listeners.

In the context of musical narrativity, different elements that constitute the narrativity - including motives, phrasing, structure of the music is not a simple  $1+1=2$  equation, in which it is shown as fully intuitive; it leads to a bigger image, which instead of being a definite answer like 2, is instead replaced with the phrase “greater than 1” as explained in mathematics. Under this circumstance, since contrasting ideas cannot be simply explained, it is allowed to be seen as a bigger picture. If we add on the different variables which stem from personal opinions and experiences of a performer, it allows even more flavor and creativity to be added to the performance which formulates a unique personality while performing, allowing a particular piece to have different narratives and interpretations, in which this is the attraction point of musical narrativity.

Quoted from Rink’s essay, “musical structure” is a fundamentally synchronic notion valorized by analysis but at odds with the diachronic process of music-in-sound. Having only structural analysis without musical narrativity presented through time is not enough to represent the meaning of the music. A performance is way beyond a synchronic process could explain, it encompasses everyone at the current location, giving the most comprehensive description possible, as it is shown through the music itself, unfolds through time and space, travels through different era, expressing musical narrativity as perceived by different individual.

There are two types of narrative happening at the same time during a performance: from the performer, known as poietic and from the listener, known as esthetic (Rink, 2018). These two terms can be traced from Nattiez’s semiology of music, which he based on Jean Molino’s theory, developed a three-dimension of analytical level - the tripartition, which consists of poietic, neutral/trace, and esthetic levels (Nattiez, 1990). The poietic level includes all processes leading to the creation of the composition, from the sprout of an idea to writing it down as notes. Molino borrowed the term “poietic” from the French

philosopher, Etienne Gilson. “Poietic” from the Greek word “ποιεῖν” carries the meaning of “to make”. The neutral level or the trace refers to the physical traces that are produced through the poietic process, such as, the music scores, the printed version of scores, the performance of the music, and the recording of the performance. The esthetic level relates to how one perceives the music, which is also an empirical process that involves understanding, interpretation and aesthetic judgement. The word “esthetic” was coined by the French poet and philosopher, Paul Valery, as distinct from “aesthetic” to avoid confusions. From “αἴσθησις”, esthetic contains the meaning of perception from the senses, which is more suitable and closer to the act of interpreting (ibid).

From these two theories of interpretation, Rink referred poietic narrative to the music performed or created by the performer through performer’s interpretation; Nattiez referred poietic narrative to the music written or created by the composer through composer’s intent. Hence these theories could be correlated to analyse the piano solo composition of Wong Chee Wei-“*Poetic and Pictorial Splendor*”, through the framework of musical narrativity.

#### **4. Brief Biography of the Composer: Wong Chee Wei**

Born in Sibuluan, Sarawak, Wong is an active composer, arranger as well as a choir conductor in the classical music scene in Malaysia. He graduated from Department of Music in Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA), majoring in composition and minor in piano. Later, he furthered his studies and achieved his Degree in Music in Xi’an Conservatory of Music in China, under the guidance of Professor Rao Yu-Yan. In 2014, Wong was granted with a scholarship from Nanjing Normal University, and he obtained his doctorate award in 2018, under the tutelage of Professor Xu Yuan Yong.

Wong is an active advocator of Malaysia’s new music through organising concerts, talks, workshops, and through publishing music scores and producing recording. His effort to promote Malaysian new music has started as early as year 2009, where he was one of the invited participants to take part in “Forumplus”, a local composer music concert organized by Malaysia Philharmonic Orchestra. In year 2011 and 2016, Wong was commissioned by Malaysian famous contemporary dancer Lee Swee Keong, as the music director and the pianist of a dance performance-“Butterfly Lovers for Music, Dance, Video Art”. In year 2012 and 2014, he was one of the featured local composers in Chin Yong Music Festival, together with other local composers, their new art songs for solo and choir were published in an anthology named “Hark! the songs of homeland”. He is actively engaged in Society of Malaysian Contemporary Composers (SMCC) and he premiered several works in SoundBridge music festival organised by SMCC. Wong’s compositions have been performed in many countries, such as, China, Taiwan, Hong

Kong, Japan, and many more. Wong is currently a full-time lecturer in MIA. His list of works for piano is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: List of Wong Chee Wei's Works for Piano

Title	Year	Approximate Duration (minutes)	Remark
Variations on a Theme of Malay folk song, Op.1	2001	14	Piano solo
Music For 2, Op.3	2007	4	Two pianos
Poetic And Pictorial Splendor, Op.31	2013	7 ½	Piano solo
Let's Have Fun, Op.32	2013	6	Piano solo
Crystal Mountain, Op.38	2016	14 ½	Piano solo
Celebration Overture, Op.43	2017	4 ½	Piano solo
Serenade, Op.61	2021	3 ¾	Piano solo

### 5. Analysis of Musical Narrativity in Wong Chee Wei's *Poetic and Pictorial Splendor*

This research approaches for this work intends on having the ends of being able to uncover the aesthetic quality, as well as its cultural significance. Besides composer's intent, the work is examined from different perspectives that involves the performer's interpretation, a step that displays deeper appreciation of the performer's role as a storyteller in exploring the structural and cultural context of the work.

The research design of this study is musical analysis that is based on the framework of Rink's "Musical Narrativity" that accommodate the performative aspect that represents the performers' interpretation in analysis (Rink, 2018). Table 2 displays the framework of musical narrativity derived from Rink's theory. Methods used are intertextual comparison that utilises structural analysis of musical work, textual analysis of written as well as interviewed text of performers, and applied hermeneutics for the construct of musical narrativity. Through this research design, the musical structure of the compositions, the composers' intent, as well as the interpretation of the performances will be investigated. Data is collected through obtaining the music scores, composer's prologue, performer's program notes, and video of performance for reference.

The analysis is supported by studying the music scores of "*Poetic and Pictorial Splendor*", understanding composer's prologue, and performer's program notes. The scores and composer's prologue were obtained through contacting the composer in person, and the program notes were written by the researcher for her performance on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2019 at SGGI College Subang Jaya Recital Hall. To gain insights and to draw parallels from an alternative interpretation, an unstructured interview was conducted

with the pianist-Chee Su Yen, who premiered this work. A summary of the interview is attached in the appendix.

The analysis applied in this study is mainly based on the analysis of text and to investigate the narrativity of the collected data. First, the prologue written by the composer is analysed to find out the intent of the composer and the meaning of the work. Secondly, analysis was done on the program notes written by the performer who is also the researcher of this study, in order to understand the interpretation of the performer towards the work. This step is verified by using the recording of the performance played by the researcher and by examining the structure of the work as notated in the score. Finally, inter-item comparison will be conducted to all the above data and the relationships among them will be described as a form of narrative, also known as 'Musical Narrativity'.

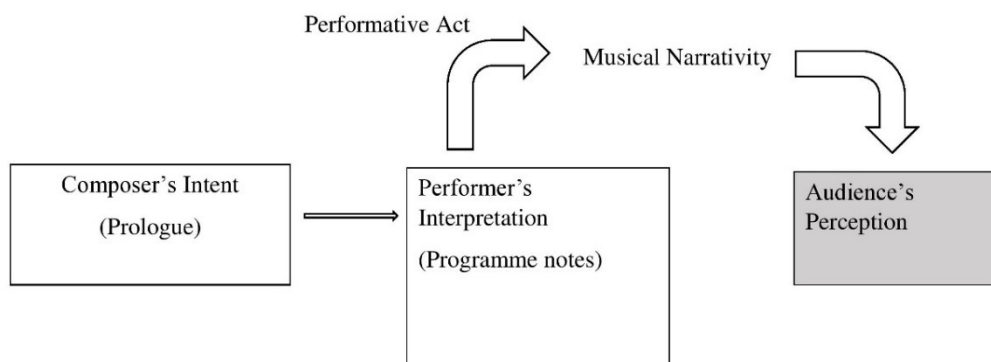


Diagram 1: Framework of Musical Narrativity (Rink 2018)

### • *Composer's Intent*

The composer encodes the piece with conscious meaning, which is intended to convey a solid message that is clearly seen-it is explicit, allowing the audience to view it in the clearest way possible, sometimes even shown clearly in the title of the work. However, there are circumstances where the meaning is encoded with subconscious meaning, reserved to one who observes closely, where this meaning is not shown in a clear light, it is hidden and coated into the piece, where under some circumstances the composer might not even realize said meanings themselves. Composer's intent in this research refers to the composer's perception of the selected solo piano work by Malaysian composer Wong Chee Wei. The prologue of the said composition written by the composer is analysed to obtain the intended meaning of the work.

### • *Performer's Interpretation*

The performer could be known as someone who decodes the sign encrypted in the music score. With certain level of music education, a performer understands the notes and the performance directions written on the score, but the way of interpreting it depends on the knowledge background, personal experiences and aesthetic values of the individual; and finally resulting in producing different tone colours, dynamics, contour of the melody, and projecting a story or images to the audience through performance. Performer's interpretation in this research refers to program notes written by the performer who is also the researcher.

### • *Audience's Perception*

Audience's perception is shaded because audience's point of view is not considered in this research as the reliability of the feedback is not convincing enough. It is shown in the theoretical framework as a representation to fulfil the concept of the tripartition that consists of composer's intent, performer's interpretation, and audience's feedback.

### • *Performative Act*

The term 'performativity' was coined by a linguistic philosopher John Langshaw Austin in 1955 (Schechner, 2013). 'Performative' is used as a contrast to the term 'constative' which describe utterances that only gives the information of true or false statements in language (Loxley, 2007). According to Austin, performative is a doing of an action where the utterance is inseparable from the situation of the action, thus "saying" comes with "doing" simultaneously. The term 'performativity' is also used in John Rink's idea of creativity in music playing. The performative process is an important underlying factor that aids in thorough comprehension of a music performance, and it is investigated from two different perspectives - performers and audiences (Rink, 2018). Here, Rink advocated Cook's theory that music scores should be attended as "scripts" that suggest creative approaches towards the music, discovering a unique performance each time through the performative process which is a dynamic and ever-changing continuum through time and space. Rink defined the combination of creative role of a performer with all other factors influencing the performance, as "total performance event" (ibid.).

### • *Musical Narrativity*

Musical narrativity is a hermeneutic approach to study musical elements and their connotations in the context of culture and structure (Almen, 2008). It is related to how

we interpret and understand the meaning of a composition, and it is highly dependent on the listener's observation or performer's aesthetic values, hence one's cultural background and music education background are the main influential factors.

## 6. *Poetic and Pictorial Splendor* (2013)

The three main elements that construct the piece are the ostinato figure that resembles the sound of angklung, the tone clusters and pelog scale, one of the scale systems used in the Balinese gamelan. Angklung, originated from West Java, is a traditional musical instrument that is made of bamboo (Saragih et al., 2020). It produces sound by shaking the bamboo pipes, generating repeated notes through vibration. The ostinato figure can be found throughout the piece. It is written in the form of reiteration of the same note or tremolo of different note.

诗情画意  
Poetic And Pictorial Splendor

黄志伟  
Wong Chee Wei  
Op. 31

Quiet and with a wealth of expressiveness

Piano

© 2013.12. Wong Chee-Wei

**Figure 1**

The piece can be divided into five sections. As shown in Figure 1, the absence of bar lines gives it a wider span of breadth to acquire the splendor of nature. There are places with commas to indicate slight breaks. The resemblance of angklungs and usage of pelog scale suggest an atmosphere of rustic and tranquil, fulfilling the ambience requested by the composer, “quiet and with a wealth of expressiveness”, to create a poetic scene with rustling leaves and gentle breeze as shown in the title. In the beginning, the accented ostinato figure that has a diminishing temporal interval, enhanced by the change of dynamics level decreasing from moderately loud to soft, gives an effect of the distant angklung sound, interrupted by some acciaccaturas and arpeggiated chords.

In Figure 2, the music proceeds with continuous ebb and flow of angklung in the piece, disrupted by some pelog scales in a descending manner at times.

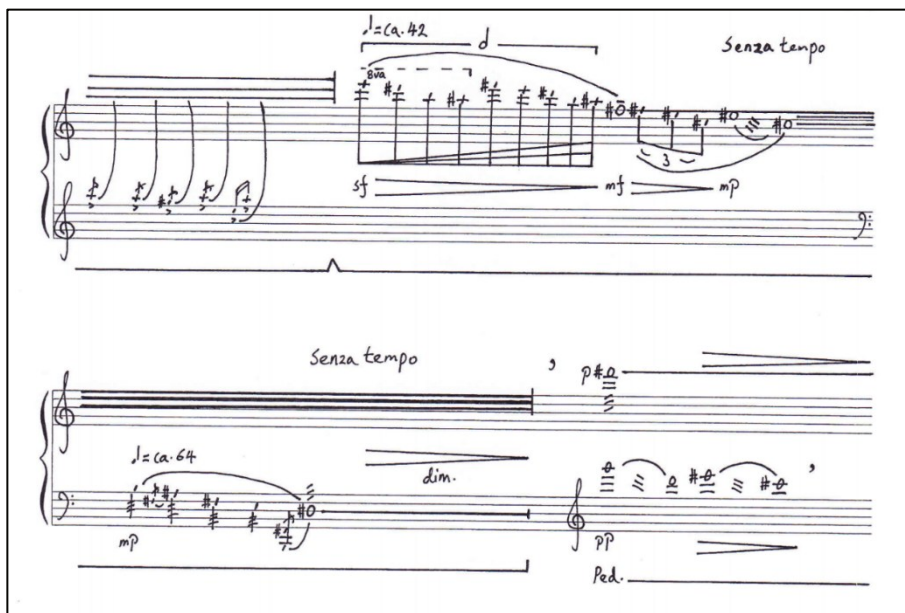


Figure 2

As shown in Figure 3, the second section commences out of the blue without any presentiment. The sudden change of tempo to 165 quavers in a minute, allure the undulating quavers in the left hand that form a horizontal linear wave that serves as the ground bass, while the right hand is still resembling the angklung. This results an oppositional sound effect as well as contrasting expression. The left-hand quavers provide a sense of mysterious vibes, suggesting the lurks of danger; but the right hand's angklung melody is simple and peaceful, with tremolos in interval of a major 3<sup>rd</sup>.



**Figure 3**

After a downwards arpeggiation (Figure 4), the flow of quavers has been shifted to the right-hand part. With the *una corda*, the threat is depicted as being far away, yet tension begins to build up in the left hand until a sudden pause, not long enough to ponder, the music thrust in, with continuous phrases one after another, by using the *pelog* descending scale-like motive.

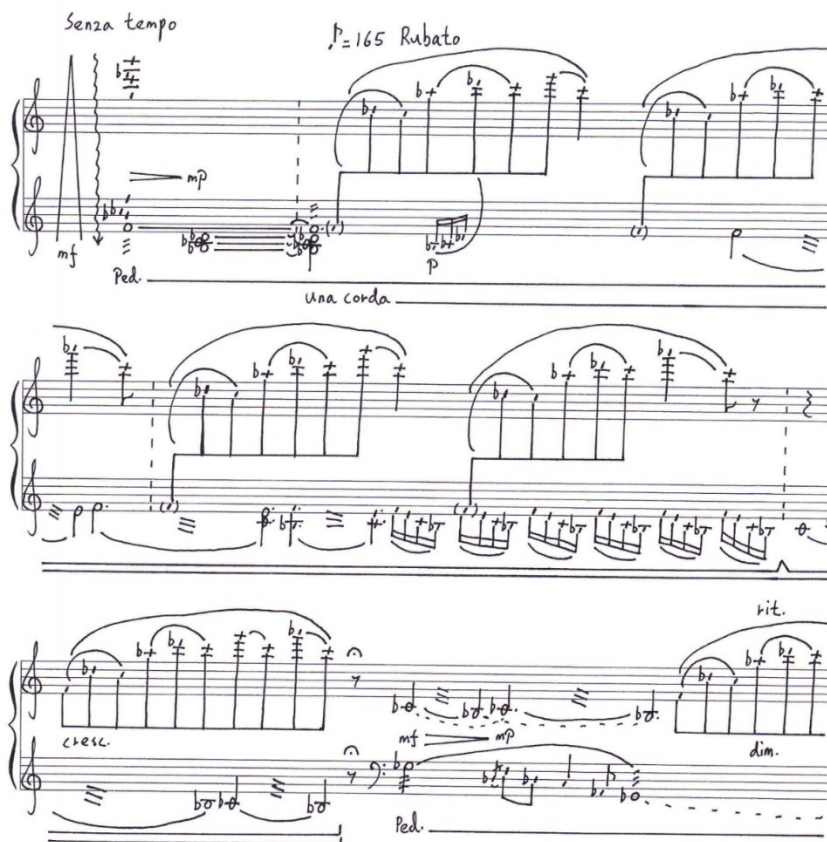


Figure 4

Unanticipatedly, it subsides to the reminiscence of the beginning, but striving upwards again after three occurrences of acciaccatura in the left hand, pairing with three groups of tremolos in the right hand, following by three groups of gradually amplified tremolos in the right hand again, as to welcome the entrée of the third section after the slight break indicated by the comma.

The third section consist of eight groups of loud and bold accented notes preceded by acciaccaturas and proceeded by strong tone clusters, instructed to be played with a gradual change from a relaxed to compact manner (Figure 5). There are usage of acciaccaturas in both hands, which are in the interval of a falling semitone-falling perfect 4<sup>th</sup>-a rising semitone, and an exact inversion form of this; each hand playing in extreme high and low register, and dive in to the tone cluster. The rise of tension is enhanced with added tremolos and finally push the tension to its boiling point depicted by repeated inversion motive between hands from slow to very fast.

Gradually from relaxed to compact

*f* *ff* *f* *ff* *f* *ff* *mf*

I.V. I.V. I.V. I.V. I.V. I.V. I.V.

Ped. Ped. Ped.

Figure 5

This added intensity allows the piece to proceed to its fourth section with an indicated tempo of 240 quavers in a minute (Figure 6). The undulating quavers based on pelog scales re-occur, this time in both left and right-hand part, interlocking each other.

from slow to very fast

*mf* *cresc.* *mf*

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 240 \text{ Rubato}$

\*

\* Using the pedal determined by the pianist.

Figure 6

The change from quavers to semiquavers to trills create a gradual compressed feeling in the rhythm. This chaotic rise of waves displays the tension at its climax in a cross-rhythm of two quavers against triplets. The melodic contour looks like a roller coaster that dives down to the lowest point and ascend to the peak; at the same time subsiding by slowing down and getting softer, as shown in Figure 7.

Finally, the 5<sup>th</sup> section is a reprise of the opening by using fragmentation of elements from the 1<sup>st</sup> section. Similarly, it should be played as “quiet and with a wealth of expressiveness”. In this piece, the pianist is given the freedom to determine on the duration of the notes at the places indicated “senza tempo”. Here, at the end, it is up to the pianist to display the musical narrativity that he or she could feel in the phrases in order to give length to it to create the yielding effect. At the end, the G sharp in the bass and the paused G sharp in the upper part form a dominant to tonic-perfect cadence effect with the final C sharp note, giving the piece a rare sense of tonal centre.



Figure 7

• *Composer's prologue (Composer's intent)*

'*Poetic And Pictorial Splendor*' is a piano solo piece which showed the reflections of my childhood's village lifestyle in Nanyang (Southeast Asia). While the unique instrument 'Angklung' sounded from time to time, it makes me think of the nature village of my homeland and this always recalls my childhood memories. This unique sounds effect of piano playing always represents the traditional instrument of 'Angklung'. The sound always keeps recalling and to remind us to 'Save our nature world'.

There are four main ideas found in the prologue: "*Poetic and Pictorial Splendor*", "reflections of childhood" or "recalls of childhood memories", "village lifestyle in Nanyang southeast Asia" which is the composer's homeland, and "save our nature world".

• *Program notes (Performer's interpretation)*

This piece gives a cultural feeling of nostalgia, explaining the simple, traditional 'kampung' lifestyle of the composer when he was small, without the dominance of pollution. However, after many decades, pollution has grown more prevalent, slowly turning the Earth into a wasteland.

The memories recalled beautiful days. It was always breezy, beautiful days beginning with the calls of birds and swaying coconut trees, alongside with the sound of the angklungs, without hesitation the beginning was an abstract scene, filled with serenity. Yet no one realized the dangers lurking about, trees slowly disappearing from the surface while toxic emissions filled the air.

Mother Earth began feeling distressed and angered, sending out many warnings to mankind. But mankind, turning a deaf ear, continued destroying the Earth.

The middle section of the piece made me felt like I was in the sea, inside the spinning undercurrent, while a storm was approaching from the far tides, slowly coming towards me while dissipating at the same time.

Mother Earth was enraged!

Lastly, Mother Earth has faced major destruction. It was as if the apocalypse was here, only the faint sounds of the angklungs could be heard, slowly healing the Earth.

The four main ideas from the prologue are also echoed in the program notes written by the performer, with different weight given. “*Poetic and Pictorial Splendor*” is more related to the description of scenery in the performer's interpretation, with words such as “breezy”, “beautiful”, “calls of birds”, “swaying coconut trees”, “abstract scene”, and “filled with serenity”. Secondly, in the prologue, the composer gave more emphasis to the reflection and recalls of his childhood memories, but here only one word is found- “nostalgia”. Thirdly, the homeland presented by the composer is different from the performer. The composer refers his homeland as Nanyang, but the performer portrays it as the traditional kampung. Finally, the last idea is related to environmental issues, written by the composer: Save our nature world. This idea is given most weight in the performer's interpretation, most of the second half of the program notes is about her detestation of pollution.

• *Inter-item comparison*

Comparisons were made between the four ideas in the prologue and the program notes. In the first idea, there is certain level of convergence in the two texts, presenting the scenes and pictures with catharsis of emotion in it. A lyrical and imaginative melody is expressed; scenes could be pictured in mind while listening to the music or by looking at the scores; the glory and great beauty of the nature is commemorated.

The examples of musical narrativity found in some excerpts from the score are shown in Figures 8, 9, 10. Figure 8 shows the beginning of the piece where the sound of angklung is setting a tranquil scene of a village by using an accented ostinato figure, that has a diminishing temporal interval, enhanced by the change of dynamics level decreasing from moderately loud to soft, gives an effect of the distant angklung sound. It is interrupted by some acciaccaturas and arpeggiated chords, picturing some unexpected calls of the birds and wooden wind chimes dancing in the breeze.

诗情画意  
Poetic And Pictorial Splendor

黄志伟  
Wong Chee Wei  
Op. 31

Quiet and with a wealth of expressiveness

Piano

Ped.

**Figure 8**

Figure 9 displays the absence of bar lines that gives a wider span of breadth to acquire the splendor of nature. There are places with commas to indicate slight breaks. The resemblance of angklungs by playing rapid reiterations of notes, and usage of pelog scale suggest an atmosphere of rustic and tranquil.

Figure 9 is a handwritten musical score for piano, consisting of three systems. The first system features a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 64$  and the instruction "Senza tempo". It includes dynamic markings of *mp*, *dim.*, *pp*, and *dim.*, along with a circled fermata. The second system has a dynamic marking of *mp* and a circled section with a *f* dynamic. The third system includes a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 42$ , the instruction "Senza tempo", and dynamic markings of *sf*, *mf*, and *mp*. Pedal markings ("Ped.") are present throughout.

Figure 9

Figure 10 is a handwritten musical score for piano and voice. The top system shows a vocal line with lyrics "spornu sicut lo veng jast" and a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 240$  Rubato. Dynamic markings include *mf* and *cresc.*. The bottom system is a piano accompaniment with various chordal textures and melodic lines.

Figure 10

In Figure 10, the melodic shape in the score resembles an image of reflection in the water. Music scores are not delimited to notation on the staves but expanded to manifestation of narrativity and hidden images.



The second idea is about childhood memories and nostalgia. Comparatively, the composer gives it slightly more weight than the performer but eventually they still portray the same idea which conveys representation and reproduction of the past, with sense of retrospective and reminiscence of the good old days.

The third idea leads to a bigger contrast. The composer refers his hometown to Nanyang, which is from the Chinese word “南洋” meaning Southern Ocean. This is a sinocentric term for the geographical region of Southeast Asia, a strong connotation of diaspora background. Through conversation with the composer, Nanyang also represents the culture of the region, not just Malaysia, but with the influence of the present Indonesia. But for the performer, her village refers to local Malay kampong, with no hints of diaspora. Hence, different life experiences and background, different homeland, leads to different point of view towards the word “village”.

The last idea is about environmental issues. Compared to the composer, the pianist shows sharper and stronger expression of criticism on human’s act of causing pollution and harm to the environment. Being born and grew up in the city, Kuala Lumpur, she might have witnessed a lot of pollution issues that leads to her strong critics.

The rage and chaos are shown in Figure 11 that displays an image of a rise and fall or a pattern of ebb and flow. This chaotic rise of waves displays the tension at its climax in the music by using cross-rhythm of two quavers against triplets. The melodic contour looks like a roller coaster that dives down to the lowest point and ascend to the peak. And at the end, it slows down and gradually subsides.

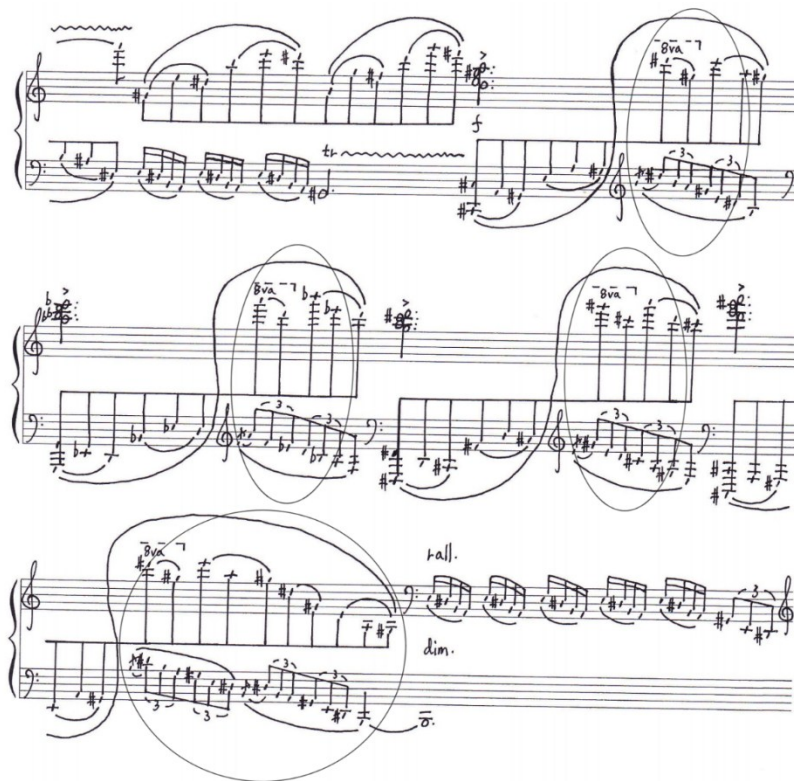


Figure 11

• *Embodiment of angklung*

The four ideas are portrayed in the music through engaging the embodiment of angklung to act as a bridge to link up the ideas. The embodiment of angklung is situated in a genre mainly focused on the 70s and 80s in Sibul, Sarawak. This timeframe is deduced from the year of birth of the composer-1975, where late 70s and early 80s were his childhood. During this period of time, Sibul was mostly dominated by the Chinese populace and names of shops were mainly in Chinese (Sarawak Broadcast, 2020). Sibul's economic activity is mainly based upon selling wood products and pepper. The Rajang River, being the longest river in the entirety of Malaysia, has no doubt been an important influence for transportation for residents in Sibul.

The angklung was used as the main medium to reflect the social context in Sibul. It reminds the composer of the nature in the village of his homeland, in which the angklung brings the feelings of bamboo, wood, forest and nature. It is not just an instrument, it's also a representation of the closely intertwined relationship between humans and nature, where life has close relations to the forest, river streams, flora and more. All these details are represented and brought out through the tone color of the angklung.

More so, the angklung reminds the composer of his childhood memories as well. Although not having concrete evidence as to whether or not the composer has seen the angklung during his childhood days, it still acts as a representative of his living environment in the childhood years. Sibuloh, being a scene dominated by Chinese population, is perfectly reflected through the word "Nanyang" - a word originated from the Chinese term which literally means Southern Ocean. The region of Malaysia and Singapore is often referred as "Nanyang" by the Chinese (Wang, 2018). This term carries sense of sinocentrism, as well as a strong connotation of diaspora background. Through conversation with the composer, Nanyang also represents the culture of the region, not just Malaysia, but with the influence of Indonesia, as orang Iban in Sarawak originated from Indonesia. The combination of these different cultures is presented through the usage of repeated notes resembling angklung, with the notes having a gradual speed increase, similar to the effect often used in the Chinese music, known as "慢起渐快", which means starting from slow speed and gradually getting faster.

Moving on, angklung also allows us to take a brief respite and remember to save the world of nature. Here, the angklung plays a role that juxtaposes nature with human activities. The angklung, being an instrument built entirely out of natural products, generates a firm link between human conscious and the beauty of nature, intertwining together to create music and bring us joy.

In the aforementioned program notes written by the performer, the angklung is related to the recollection of memories, hence the main factors affecting the setting mainly revolve around that of birthplace as well as the place of nurture of the performer. Being born and nurtured in Kuala Lumpur, the performer lives in a place where people from different ethnicities and cultures exist more closely, shaping a more diversified population. The intended scene in mind is that of a Malay village set in the 80s. The sound of the angklung represents and resembles the picture of a scenic, agrestic and tranquil village, stored in the form of memories. Through this representation, albeit not being direct, it still presents that of a more culturally diverse and harmonious life among people from different ethnicities. Angklung in this case, represents the pure and simple village life, a stark contrast to modern life in a city.

Strong detestation on pollution is presented in the program notes, the sounds of angklungs have been acting as a means of remedy and comfort for earth. The term "Mother Earth" is that of an anthropomorphized being that represents the Earth as a loving and caring mother, complemented by the angklungs that are also anthropomorphized, serving as a healing process which assists Mother Earth, thus representing an intertwine between Mother Earth and itself, forming a mutually assisting and natural conversation.

## 7. Discussion

In order to have a better understanding on Wong's *Poetic and Pictorial Splendor* (2013), an approach through musical narrativity is a credible method to interpret the work in terms of the structure as well as the cultural social dynamics. As advocated by Rink, performer's interpretation and creativity plays an important role in presenting the meaning of the work (2018). In the meantime, performer's interpretation is not a direct mapping from the composer's intent, but instead a projection which has semblances and contrasting points as the performer's interpretation is juxtaposed onto the work. Analysis of musical narrativity from these two different perspectives opens more possibilities to analyse music from a more holistic manner. This is closely related to Peirce and Nattiez's theory of semiotics where music comprises of signs that bring vast layers of meaning, including representative and eclecticism (Atkin, 2013; Nattiez, 1990). While interpreting signs, one has to understand that an interpretation is not a direct reflection of an object, but instead contains added experience from that of the interpreter - what this also implies is that a lot of implicit beliefs and norms, with the added toil of time, creates a deeper degree of meaning than what was initially provided.

Hence, the act of transvaluation is proceeded, by comprising various perspectives from the composer and the performer. This provides different context that generates more insights and discussion which encompasses the following factors. First, there are elements in the music that are more prominent and carry more important meaning. The elements include some motifs, rhythmic patterns, or harmonies. In Wong's *Poetic and Pictorial Splendor* (2013), the elements that display highest markedness are the tremolos and the pelog scales. These two items represent the epoch and the location. Both composer and performer's viewpoints are quite similar, suggesting the period of the 80's and took place in a rustic area.

Secondly, musical narrativity is a hermeneutic approach that highly depends on the interpreter or observer. The evaluation and weighing of the importance of a meaning is based on one's personal experience and background, hence choosing a meaning which pertains to one's condition is rendered. Due to different upbringing and different hometown, the composer shows sense of diasporic social phenomenon; as a contrast, this is not presented in the performer's program notes.

Thirdly, according to Rink, musical narrativity is a diachronic and temporal process, where meaning of the music is unfolded through time (Rink, 2018). It is a synthesis of physical and emotion of the performer, as well as a combination of structural and cultural meaning, encoded in the music. Alongside with social dynamics and different context, the meaning might change, develop, and evolve.

## 8. Conclusion

Wong's *Poetic and Pictorial Splendor* could stimulate diverse imaginations among the audience, but the connotations of emotional bonds to composer's home town are not self-explanatory. Signifying an imagined Nanyang, a sinocentric view of Southeast Asia through *angklung*, and further explicated in the sound of piano, presents a challenge for the interpreters and audience. Without supplementary materials such as a narrative, whether written in the form of program notes, or an elaborated analysis like this article, people would find it hard to connect to the message of the work. It goes without saying that an art work, piano work included, is freed from any extra-musical restrictions and audience are freely to conceive a work in anyway. However, our concern has been about the relevance in understanding the work, as appreciation is meant to be relative to individual, but one that of the depth of impact created through performance and appreciation.

A session on interpretation conducted previously (Wong, 2022) received feedbacks that the expression of *angklung* in Wong's work were not noticed until being told, and some were surprised that the work offers a platform for discourse, meaning the exercise of the minds of the players and listeners to participate in dialogue in search of meaning. Others admitted they could derive much meaning from the work after listening to the talk. By applying the framework of musical narrativity on Wong's *Poetic and Pictorial Splendor* (2013), this study presents that by examining and comparing the two different texts of the composer's prologue and the performer's program notes, the composer's intent and the performer's interpretation were deduced.

Through studying the markedness of the musical elements and inter-item comparison, the relationship of the two texts and their connotations in the context of culture and structure were investigated. It is apparent that the results do not necessarily come to a convergence. Instead, when the role of the performer is taken into account, it counterbalances the meta-narrative projected by the composer; or serves as a form of supplementary that enriches the narrative, considering the two different perspectives might have different outcome, such as, total contradictory, both contrasting and coherent, harmonise but not identical, or with compound of meaning. From the analysis of Wong's *Poetic and Pictorial Splendor* (2013), the outcome demonstrates different meanings are rendered from the musical narrativity of the composer and performer. However, they still display certain level of coherency. Musical narrative is a temporal and dynamic concept, especially when it is placed in different context, a corollary to the hermeneutic approach. This can only be achieved through a performative process which is unique and irreplaceable.

Differ from the performance in 2019 (Wong, 2019), the narrative presented in 2022 has developed a discourse of the embodiment of *angklung*, as a result of integrating the

interpretations of composer and performer, presented as a change of epoch. In this case, performer's interpretation has contributed in presenting a dynamic view that changes according to time in contrast to the more static connotations of the composer. We believe that this, has brought a more potent presentation in explaining the work to lay audience. More cases of musical narrativity shall be examined to confirm and clarify the position of such approach in musical analysis and its role in advocacy of Malaysian works among piano teachers and students.

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## Appendix

### *Summary of unstructured interview with Chee Su-Yen-the pianist who premiered Wong Chee Wei's Poetic and Pictorial Splendor*

As a pianist who has worked with several Malaysian contemporary composers and performed local contemporary works as well as works from other countries, Su-Yen enjoys working closely with composers as it also allows for the included perspective and a diverse view from both the composer and performer. Nevertheless, she still finds contemporary compositions vastly different from what we have from the traditional classical works. She would describe the new music style as “a whole different language with many extended techniques and very time-consuming to learn”.

*Poetic and Pictorial Splendor* was premiered by Su-Yen. The score was the first medium that she was exposed to, not that of the composer's prologue. This is an advantage as the pianist had more freedom to choose how she wanted to interpret the piece instead of needing to follow a set of specific guidelines, in which she also mentioned that her interpretation is free flowing without restraint, mostly due to this fact. She met the composer once or twice to discuss on some details, especially with more spacing and timing were emphasized in certain sections of the music.

From the technical perspective, she did not find too many challenges in learning or understanding the piece, as it was not too avantgarde. However, maintaining evenness in the repeated notes is quite challenging as it highly depends on the sensitivity and agility of the fingers. From an interpretative perspective, the music is not too difficult to understand even without knowing the prologue in the first place, this is because it reflects a certain atmosphere in different sections. For Su-Yen, the beginning of the piece expressed a calm scene and the beauty of nature. To be more specific, the music gives a heavy sense of traditional flavor that reminds her of sceneries in China with mountains and lakes. Instead of limiting the repeated notes as the resemblance of *angklung*, it could be the imitation of *pipa* or some other Chinese instruments.

Her favourite part of the piece is in the 3<sup>rd</sup> page where the left hand introduces a wave-like pattern with ups and downs that gives a feeling of rising and falling of the water. She also found that the composer created an interesting juxtaposition of right-hand and left-hand in the notation, for example, the usage of sharps in the right-hand and flats in the left-hand added jests to the notation; the left-hand wave-like motif is flipped to the right-hand part in the 4<sup>th</sup> page; the left-hand's semiquavers in the 4<sup>th</sup> page is flipped to the hand-right in the 7<sup>th</sup> page; the grouping of 4 semiquavers against 3 quavers are not creating cross-rhythm effect but somehow created a hemiola effect in the grouping.

Su-Yen also tried to portray the changes of meaning and characters in different sections of the piece. The beginning was more spacious, freer and with more openness. Then it became steadier with quaver pulse in the next section, creating a flowy and flexible wave-pattern, but getting gradually more complicated until it came to the chordal section, which was more intense, and led to the *rubato* section with a stormier mood, as well as a busier rhythm in both hands. At the end it subsided to the reprise of the 1<sup>st</sup> section. The form was like an arch with ABCBA form and clear separate sections.

Besides, she felt that the piece was mainly about the nature and description of the landscape. The title gave an impression of a Chinese painting. As a performer, her interpretation is closely related to her life experience and background, even the images she had seen before or experiences she had in the past or the present affect her expression of the piece. The feeling could be so abstract, and it gives a wide space of imagination to the listeners.