

Maria Zaitun: The Journey from a Novel to Razak Abdul Aziz's Opera

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Maria Zaitun: The Journey from a Novel to Razak Abdul Aziz's Opera

The aim of this article is to analyze Western and Asian cross-cultural trends in music on the example of compositions by Razak Abdul Aziz (Abdul Aziz Razak) and Maria Zaitun's opera. The main idea of Maria Zaitun's opera is to explore the aesthetic cross-cultural issues and musical elements, as well as to redefine the role of the modern composer in the multiracial society of the 21st century. As a Malaysian composer, Razak is particularly interested in combining together various different musical practices in order to create composition combining contemporary techniques with his own personal style.

Razak obtained his idea from a few short novels by Fatimah Busu titled "Perkembalian Seorang Maria Zaitun," which was then transformed into an operatic work titled "Maria Zaitun's Opera," a chamber opera for 8 singers with 6 violins, 3 violas, 3 cellos, 2 double-basses, harps, 2 pianos, celesta, glockenspiel, vibraphone, xylophone, marimba and a set of drums. Additional percussion instruments include triangle, temple bell, bell tree, finger cymbals, hand cymbals, suspended cymbals, Malay gongs, tam-tam, glass chime, sand blocks, slapstick, wood block, temple blocks, are drum, tambourine, tom-toms and bass drum. There are eight types of choral sonorities: namely, 1st soprano, 2nd soprano, 3rd soprano, 1st alto, 2nd alto, 1st tenor, 2nd tenor and bass. Razak made a study of every page contained in Fatima Busu's short novels in order to choose which sentences from the number are to be included into the libretto of his work.

Keywords: Razak Abdul Aziz, Fatimah Busu, Short Novels "Perkembalian Seorang Maria Zaitun," cross-cultural issues, libretto.

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**«Мария Зайтун»: путь от романа к опере
Разак Абдул Азиза**

В статье анализируются западные и азиатские кросс-культурные тенденции в музыке на примере произведения «Опера Марии Зайтун» Разак Абдул Азиза (Абдул Азиз Разак). Основная задача «Оперы Марии Зайтун» заключается в исследовании эстетических межкультурных проблем и музыкальной стороны, а также пересмотре роли современного композитора в многорасовом обществе XXI века. Малазийский композитор Разак особенно заинтересован в сочетании различных музыкальных традиций для создания композиции, сочетающей современные техники с его собственным стилем.

Разак пришел к замыслу оперы, ознакомившись с рядом повестей писательницы Фатимы Бусу под общим названием «Perkembalian Seorang Maria Zaitun» («Возвращение Оливковой Марии Зайтун»), которые затем были преобразованы в произведение «Опера Марии Зайтун» – камерную оперу для 8 певцов с 6 скрипками, 3 альтами, 3 виолончелями, 2 контрабасами, арфой, 2 фортепиано, челестой, гlockеншпилем, вибратоном, ксилофоном, маримбой и набором ударных. Дополнительные ударные инструменты отличаются большим разнообразием: треугольник, храмовый колокол, колокольчик, пальчиковые тарелки, ручные тарелки, подвесные тарелки, малайские гонги, там-там, стеклянный колокольчик, песочные блоки, хлопучки, вуд-блок, темпл-блок, малый барабан, тамбурин, том-том и большой барабан. Существует восемь партий хоровой партитуры: 1-е сопрано, 2-е сопрано, 3-е сопрано, 1-е альты, 2-е альты, 1-е тенора, 2-е тенора и басы. Разак изучил каждую страницу повестей Фатимы Бусу, чтобы выбрать из них подходящие фрагменты для либретто своей оперы.

Ключевые слова: Разак Абдул Азиз, Фатима Бусу, новеллы «Возвращение Оливковой Марии Зайтун», кросс-культурные вопросы, либретто.

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Introduction

The creation of a musical composition requires fortitude, strength, broad knowledge and experience, in addition the presence of the creative process. Each composer has a different understanding of the subject of his or her musical work and a unique way of interpreting his or her ideas. The creative process is carried out by analyzing the cultivation of novel musical techniques used in contemporary works. Continuing the process of musical experimentation means finding ways of choosing, considering, creating and contrasting in order to achieve integrity and unity in the various undertaken attempts. This is followed by deduction of the musical innovations, paying close attention to the musical compositions which would be created and enhancing them in the composer's own work. It is important for a composer to succeed in the creation of his or her musical work.

Writing a composition depends not only on natural talent, instinct and spontaneity but also on the process of working on a musical work in any form, involving thought process and energy and the accumulation of experience. In addition, it involves the ability to develop ideas and insights or intellect, accuracy, and perseverance in concentration or in contemplation [6, pp. 72–73].

There has been a considerable amount of absorption of the aesthetics of cross-culture of Western and Eastern musical traditions in many musical works. According to Suka Hardjana [7, p. 215] in his book titled *Music: Between Criticism and Appreciation* the approach to music composition in the West generally involves meeting between ideas and conceptions which are then streamed into structures or forms and transformed into musical techniques.

Cook [4, p. 3] comments that cross-cultural trends in music provide a foundation for contemporary culture, and the elements contained in a musical composition must be based on the semantic meanings derived by the composers themselves. Many composers have embraced a cross-cultural approach to creating a musical composition, as has especially been shown by Western composers, thereby demonstrating their opposition to the hegemony of Western culture.

Michael Asmara, Indonesian composer from Yogyakarta has composed musical works by combining elements of traditional Javanese music with elements of the Western atonal musical system. He expressed an opinion, namely that, “the use of atonality turns the Javanese and the Western musical tradition into equals, and with its use both of which are able to stand alone.” This may be demonstrated in his composition titled *Symphony No. 1*, where he compiled a set of pitches each of which is joined with particular rhythmic patterns, such as, for instance, C# from the equal-tempered chromatic scale is aligned with quarter notes, the *slendro siji scale* – with sixteenth notes and the *pelog scale* – with 32nd notes, then combining the *slendro & pelog scales* by means of serial techniques, such as the prime, inversion, retrograde and retrograde inversion. In his work he combined 10 pitches such as: C# as an equal-tempered chromatic pitch, D from *siji slendro*, E from *pelog*, and others, where each pitch is ordered in such a way that the equal-tempered chromatic, *slendro* and *pelog* pitches were interspersed among each other (from an interview with the composer, dated November 17, 2010).

According to Yang [15, pp. 395–396], in the 20th century Asian musical traditions played an important role



in Western musical art as a source of inspiration for contemporary composers. A considerable number of discussions of Asian musical influences has demonstrated the incorporation of elements of Oriental melodies formed from the pentatonic scale. Composers have brought in Asian percussion instruments, as well as particular references and titles originating from ancient philosophies and religions from Asian countries, adopting them to a Western context. The most obvious manifestation is the use of the pentatonic scale and the gong to demonstrate an abundance of musical practices, as found in Lou Harrison's work titled *La Koro Sutro* or *Heart Sutra*, which made use of the Oriental pitch scale and also combined chorus, organ and musical collections of *gamelan* instruments from the Javanese tradition, which, albeit, were built in the United States (Coal. 2013, pp. 16–17). Another composer who combines Western musical traditions with gamelan instruments is Steve Reich, as demonstrated in his work *Mallets, Voices and Organ*, in which he uses Balinese gamelan instruments which delineate a peculiar pentatonic scale, namely C, Db, F, Gb, A (Batubara, 2013: 22). Benjamin Britten also created a cross-cultural musical environment in his opera *Death in Venice*, where he brought in a twelve-tone series by mixing different sound-related styles, patterns and techniques derived from the Balinese *gamelan* tradition [3, p. 334].

Contemporary composer Jack Body is well-known for his involvement with the culture of Asian countries. According to him, the transcription of music and the musical transformation of Asian countries

has influenced an entire generation of composers in New Zealand. In addition to the traditional appeal of Asian countries and non-Western music for Westerners, particularly the use of abstract sound with the intention to dissipate and explore the inner human condition has become the principal theme of many of his works (from an interview with the composer, May 14 2011).¹

Jack Body's practice regarding the transformation of sound in musical instruments may be distinguished from his response to the original approach, which allows the examination of certain musical techniques. He has also composed an opera titled *Alley*, based on the life of Rewi Alley, performed at the New Zealand International Art Festival 1998. According to Jack Body, the process of writing the opera was carried out in various different ways, one of which was that Chinese musicians were trained in music schools and hence have learned to read Western notation easily. They were invited to perform contemporary music in *Alley* (from an interview with the composer, May 14, 2011).

Alley is represented by two characters, one of them being young and one in his old age. In *Alley* the main protagonist sings in English, whereas the other three characters are Chinese and sing in Chinese. The work also includes a chorus which also sings music to Chinese texts. A number of Chinese songs that use pentatonic scale are included in the opera. The other relevant musical elements of the opera are the diatonic and chromatic scales. The full score of *Alley* includes Chinese (sheng, gaohu and di) and Western musical

¹ The interviews were carried out by e-mail to obtain information on the interpretation and use of musical instruments in the composition of the opera titled *Alley*.

instruments (oboe, clarinet, trombone and percussion).

Among the influences of Eastern musical aesthetics, the Malay culture is especially prominent. In Malaysia composers turn to the genre of opera rather seldom, in comparison to works in instrumental genres. Composition of opera in the form of an academic genre based on Western musical traditions is also still very rare, as are cases of combining Western musical styles with those of Malay music. The opera *Maria Zaitun* was written in 2004 by Razak Abdul Aziz from Malaysia [8, p. 464]. The composer stated that the rhythmic ideas contained in the opera were based on the rhythmic subtleties of the Malay language. In addition, the influence of Islamic aesthetics such as the concept of geometry also inspired him in the form of introducing particular structures and harmonies, using a variety of different techniques connected with the language of atonality. He has also carried out preliminary investigations of rhythm in his musical composition titled *Nelayan* (1999), as well as an in-depth investigation of rhythm, harmony and structure in the work titled *Five Piano Etudes* (2002). This article examines the opera *Maria Zaitun* composed by Razak Abdul Aziz in terms of the mastery of musical elements, as well as the sound and rhythm of the Malay language spoken in the text set to music in the opera.

According to Theodore K. Rabb [9, pp. 321–330] in *Opera, Musicology and History*, it is known as a formula that in the 20th century various forms of opera were created by composers, such as epic opera, tragedy, expressionist opera, naturalist opera, fantasy, allegorical opera, grotesque comedy, patriotic, irony, and political satire. The definition of opera is found

in Copland's book [5, p. 174], according to which opera contains characters and a storyline which are expressed through music, and not the usual dialogue found in drama.

The opera consists of a combination of purely orchestral and vocal sections accompanied by the orchestra. The vocal sections consist of choral numbers, duos and solos, whereby the chorus contains the usual contrasting textures of soprano, alto, tenor and bass. Especially prominent in the opera are the vocal duos sung by contrasting voices. The costumes and props for the opera are adapted to the storyline. Steib [10, p. 387] states that in an opera, music is always associated with singing, and this vocal element is formed from the storyline narrated in the *libretto* (which, incidentally, in Italian means "little book"), and each libretto differs to a certain degree from the synopsis or scenario of the storyline.

Razak Abdul Aziz is a composer from Penang, Malaysia. He has written numerous musical works in instrumental genres and for chorus, the latter include such a substantial work as *The Fisherman* for SSATB and string orchestra. A number of his works contains cross-cultural elements, expressed in the combination of Western and Malay musical traditions. In his opera *Maria Zaitun* he stresses the importance of organically combining a Western musical style with an approach emphasizing the rhythmic expression of every word or sentence from the Malay language, best defined with the term "hook-shaped." He mixed and matched the "hook-shaped" attributes of the Malay language with Western musical techniques. Razak asserts that expressions were based on his own views (from an interview with the composer, July 24, 2013).

Methods

The research method used by the writer is the descriptive qualitative method [11, p. 2]. According to Strauss and Corbin [12, p. 19], this method is best expressed when several theories are used to apply an approach related to a particular discussion. Following them, Octavia [13, p. 98] asserts that to carry out research by using the method of qualitative research presents the most viable musicological approach. In this article the author describes the data and facts connected the original literary novel which is adapted into a compositional work in the genre of opera. The goal is to be able to find new perspectives which were previously known only by a very small group of people.

The Idea and Concept of Creation of the opera *Maria Zaitun*

According to Annisa and Lusi [1, p. 70], the idea itself can be created through popular culture. Popular culture, similar to movies, has been known as one of the most influential mediums to spread views or beliefs. According to Nalan [14, p. 13], the conception of theatrical music may be contained in either a short illustration or complete musical composition demonstrated in a complete performance. *Maria Zaitun* was derived from a short story by Fatimah Busu, *Perkembalian Seorang Yang Bernama Maria Zaitun (The Return of a Woman Named Maria Zaitun)*, which was printed in several literary journals in Indonesia and Malaysia in 1980. In her short story, Fatimah Busu presented a scathing criticism of her community in the 1970s. This short story depicts the absurd aspects of society to which Fatimah Busu belongs. It demonstrates the deception, loss of belief and injustice that occurs

when moral values are misinterpreted or distorted.

Discussion / Analysis

Maria Zaitun is an opera set for 8 voices accompanied by 6 violins, 3 violas, 3 violoncellos, 2 double-basses, harp, 2 pianos, celesta, glockenspiel, vibraphone, xylophone, marimba and percussion. The latter includes triangles, temple bells, bell tree, finger cymbals, hand cymbals, suspended cymbals, Malay gongs, tamtam, glass chime, glass, sand blocks, slapstick, wood blocks, temple blocks, *geduk*, snare drums, tambourine, tomtoms and bass drums. There are eight vocal textures, namely, 1st soprano voice, 2nd soprano voice, 3rd soprano voice, 1st alto voice, 2nd alto voice, 1st tenor voice, 2nd tenor voice and bass voice.

With the approval of Fatimah Busu, a number of sentences contained in this short story has been adjusted to form the libretto for Razak's opera. One of them is the very final section of the Fatimah Busu's short story, and it becomes the initial section of Razak's libretto. This can be seen in the example below:

'Tepat pada waktu yang saat di pinggir hutan Beringin berhampiran dengan Lebuhraya Timur – Barat, Maria Zaitun sedang diturunkan perlahan-lahan ke dalam liang lahad. Beberapa orang pekerja perempuan yang pekak, bisu dan buta sedang bekerja dengan bersungguh-sungguh menyempurnakan pengkebumian tersebut dengan tertib dan hormat di bawah pengawasan malaikat-malaikat'

(translation into English)

"Precisely in due time, at the edge of the nearby forest, close to the East-Coast Highway, Maria Zaitun is being lowered slowly into the pit. A number of deaf, dumb and blind female employees are working earnestly to ensure that

the funeral rites are carried out in order under the supervision of the angels.”

The quotation above is the final section of the short story by Fatimah Busu which was adjusted by Razak to present the introduction of Scene 1.

‘Di pinggiran hutan, sekumpulan wanita yang pekak, bisu dan buta sedang memperkebumikan Maria Zaitun. Wanita-wanita ini terdiri daripada koir Soprano 2, Soprano 3 dan Alto 2. Untuk memenuhi jumlah pekerja-pekerja ditapak perkebumian, ketiga-tiga penyanyi lelaki (Tenor 1, Tenor 2 dan Bes) juga berada di pentas. Namun mereka tidak menyanyi’

(translation into English)

‘On the edge of the forest, a group of women who are deaf, dumb and blind are burying Maria Zaitun. The ladies form Soprano 2, Soprano 3 and Alto 2 of the chorus. To bring in the required number of workers at the burial site, three male singers (Tenor 1, Tenor 2 and bass) are also present on stage. However, they do not sing.’

From the two lines above Razak has demonstrated that he had changed the placement of the lines at the end of the short story into the introductory section in Scene 1 of his opera. The final section of the short story, which was considered especially important by Razak, becomes the main subject matter of his opera, the theme of the funeral and the burial. The following example is a phrase spoken by the people who admit that they drove Maria Zaitun from the mosque. This is found very close to the end of Fatimah Busu’s short story:

“Perempuan yang kami halau dari masjid satu waktu dulu, sewaktu dia ating hendak semayang berjemaah!”

(translation into English)

“The woman who we drove away from the mosque, when she came to pray during the congregation!”

The above sentence was revised by Razak in his libretto:

“Siapakah yang mereka sedang memperkebumikan?”
(dinyanyikan oleh suara alto 1)

“Agaknya perempuan yang telah dihalau dari masjid itu”
(dinyanyikan oleh suara soprano 1)
(kalimat kedua-dua di atas terdapat pada bar 41 hingga bar 46)

(translation into English)

“Whom are they burying?” (Sung by alto 1)
“Presumably the woman who was driven out of the mosque” (sung by soprano 1)
(both of these lines are located in mm. 41-46 of the musical score).

The aforementioned line has been incorporated with elements of the music sung by the narrator in the score of Razak’s opera. This can be seen in the musical example listed below:

Example 1 Scene 1, mm. 41–46

41 *mp*
Narrator's friend
Si - a - pa - kah yang me - re - ka se - dang mem - per - ke - bu - mi - kan?

43 *mp*
Narrator
A - gak - nya pe - rem - pu - an yang to -

45 *mp*
Narrator
lah di - ha - lau da - ri mas - jid i - tu.

The musical elements contained in the music score above are as follows: (1) By use of the subdivided chromatic pitch scale C, C# / Db, D, D# / Eb, E, F, F# / Gb, G, G# / Ab, A, A# / Bb, B, (2) by use of a changing time signature, i.e. 3/4, 1/8, C or 4/4, which is adjusted to Razak’s Malay language pattern

expression, (3) by use of different note durations, such as eighths, sixteenths, 32nd and 64th notes arranged in such a way as to support the chromatic pitch spectrum and transform it into a melodic arrangement, which semantically expresses the text of the libretto, (4) by use of irregular rhythmic patterns, such as triplets and quintuplets with the intention of matching each word expression with a rhythmic unit and a chromatic pitch, (5) by means of a dynamic sign which is aligned with the lines by the narrator.

In m. 71 there is a dialogue between the narrator and his friend, whereby the two men want to reveal the name of the woman who was driven away from the mosque. Razak arranges 4 words, namely “What is the woman’s name?” in a particular way. They are pronounced by the narrator’s friend, who sings them in one melodic phrase containing the pitch series D, D#, C#, E, F, F#, G, A, B, with the use of triplets and quintuplets brought in for the sake of supporting the four words comprising the question. Then the narrator pronounces two words: “Maria Zaitun,” which are placed into a melodic phrase consisting of pitches D, Eb, F, G#, A and two triplets brought in to support the words of answer. This can be seen in the example below:

Example 2 Scene 1 mm. 71–72

By setting to music the Malay text presented in Example 2, Scene 1, mm. 71–72 in this fashion, Razak has demonstrated a Malay style of musical expression, as shown by the pitches selected by him matched by different durations (eighth, sixteenth

and 32nd notes), the dynamic signs and the metric changes between 2/4, 3/4, 1/4, 4/4 and back to 2/4. Thereby, the selected pitches, as shown above, are arranged into series of melodies to express the intonations of the questions and answers.

The next example is demonstrated by the words contained in Fatimah Busu’s short story incorporated by Razak into the libretto of his opera. The words contained in the short story are:

“Tidak tahu dari mana bermulanya wabak kebencian kepada Maria Zaitun itu....”

(translation into English)

“I don’t know when the hatred for Maria Zaitun began...”

The words above, as used by Razak in this section of the opera, are presented in mm. 353–357, sung by soprano:

Tidak tahu dari mana bermulanya wabak kebencian kepada Maria Zaitun itu....

(translation into English)

“I don’t know when the hatred for Maria Zaitun began...”

Example 3 Soprano 1 begins in the passage on mm. 353–357

The first two words, which mean “I don’t know” are sung to 4 pitches: C, D, Db, E, matched to different durations, such as fourth, eighth, sixteenths and 32nd notes. The affirmation of the words “I don’t know” is also followed by dotted rhythms on the

syllables “ti” and “ta.” This is followed by an extension of the notes by means of ties on the syllables “no” and “hu.” This can be seen in the example listed below.

Example 4 m. 353

The musical instruments accompanying the words “I don't know when the hatred for Maria Zaitun began” are from the string section: 6 violins, 3 violas, 3 violoncellos and 2 double-basses. Each string instrument is endowed with its own melodic line and is played one after the other successively with the use of the angular bowing technique, applied for the sake of producing the impression of a chaotic background. During the vocal pause between the phrases “I don't know” and “where” there is a short instrumental interlude played by the string instruments angular bowing techniques. The purpose of placing the string instruments between the two phrases is to express the chaotic atmosphere created by the words. This lasts from m. 353 to m. 357.

Example 5 The passage of the string instruments in mm. 353–355

Conclusion

Most operas are set to librettos which depend on adaptations of the available literary sources, such as dramatic plays, novels, short stories, chronicles, and fairy tales, rather than the sources in their original forms, and therefore depend on the writers of the librettos, who demonstrate the skills of shortening and summarizing the original texts. From the examples above it becomes possible to understand the mechanisms used by Razak to adapt Fatimah Busu's short story “The Restoration of Maria Zaitun” into an opera. Razak made a thorough study of virtually each word of the short story, in order to be able to choose the particular sentences which would become parts of the libretto in his opera.

However, Razak wished not merely to compose an opera which would contain elements of the main plot of the short story, but, instead, he desired to focus on the in-depth message the short story had to offer, in his effort to create the opera “Maria Zaitun,” which stresses on what words are the most appropriate for the libretto and the best equipped to be set to the vocal lines. Fatimah Busu never even thought of creating music for expressing every word contained in her short story. With the appearance of the opera “Maria Zaitun” composed by Razak, she was given the opportunity of witnessing her short story transformed into an operatic performance.

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