RICE UNIVERSITY
The Flawed Beauty and Imperfections of Nature: A Distance Voice of the Rain Forest by
Chong Lim Ng

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Musical Arts

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HOUSTON, TEXAS
April 2023
ABSTRACT

The Flawed Beauty and Imperfections of Nature: A Distance Voice of the Rain Forest by Chong Lim Ng

by

Hui Shan Chin

Chong Lim Ng (b.1972) is one of the most prominent Malaysian pianists and composers. His solo piano work “A Distance Voice of the Rain Forest” is adapted from a portion of his larger chamber work, Rimba, for fourteen musicians, consisting of two groups of four string players, 3 woodwind instrumentalists, 1 pianist, and 2 percussionists. Although this piece is not well known internationally, it has garnered the interest of many Malaysian pianists who performed it both locally and abroad since it represents Malaysia’s diverse culture very well. An artistic masterpiece focusing on controlled improvisation and freedom of interpretation, this work exemplifies Ng’s unique methods and approaches to composition, and is inspired by his performance background. The extensive use of gamelan modes interwoven with pitch-class sets and various rhythmic intricacies highlight a current and ultimately successful artistic approach to resolving the timeless idea of “East Meets West”, wherein cultures coalesce and blend together to create a new and exciting music. Given Malaysia's diverse yet unified society, this idea of combining the traditional with the experimental is a fairly common technique of Malaysian composers, allowing them to incorporate and integrate international and modern techniques into their musical creation without completely losing their native perspectives.
In addition to detailing the composer’s background, my work will include in-depth personal interviews with Ng, allowing him to speak directly on his inspirations, influences and philosophy of music composition. My document will also include a detailed theoretical analysis of the work, examining its form, pitch-class sets, and rhythmic complexity, in the service of a well-informed performance model. Given the similar background that I share with Ng, as well as my close connection with him (he was my piano teacher for more than a decade), I believe I can interpret his piece in a most ideal and just manner. Importantly, this piece is of significant significance to my growth as a musician. Before learning this piece, I had no prior experience with extended techniques or controlled improvisation. Looking back, the anxiety mixed with excitement of dealing with something so unfamiliar helped release me from being such a restrictive and rigid performer. The close-mindedness of being a correct and perfect performer at any given moment had always confined my artistic freedom. Now that I am a more multifaceted musician, I think I can finally begin to understand the essence of this masterwork.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to apologize in advance, for perhaps I might have left out names of people that I truly treasure in this specific acknowledgment, but that does not mean that you are forgotten.

First and foremost, I want to thank my loving family, my parents specifically, for their unwavering confidence and support for as long as I can remember. I want to thank my father for working hard to send his three daughters to pursue higher education. The decision to pursue music making as a profession was never easy. To my mother, thank you for insisting that you wanted one of us to be a doctor, so here I am! Also, thank you dear sisters, for your mockery and cynicism, which inspired me to work harder and to graduate.

To my musical inspirations in life, though I can only fit in a few here, thank you for enriching my sound world and opening my mind to its endless possibilities. I want to take this opportunity and thank some of my role models that significantly changed the course of my life: Chong Lim Ng, Peter Serkin and Dr. Robert Roux. To Chong Lim, thank you for writing this amazing piece, and being the kindest and gentlest soul that has walked this earth. To Peter, I want you to know I kept my promise and still am playing the piano. To Dr. Roux, the past decade has been quite a wild ride and I thank you for being the best mentor I can ever ask for.
To my advisor, Dr. Arthur Gottschalk. Thank you for your patience and understanding, from dealing with my scattered writings to horrendous time organizations. I cannot thank you enough from the bottom of my heart.

To the members of Shepherd School of Music, thank you for an amazing decade of friendship and comradery. Ciao for now, Houston.
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INTRODUCTION to

*A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*

In March 2007, I was fortunate to attend the performance of Chong Lim Ng’s *Rimba*, which was selected as a finalist in the Composer’s Forum hosted by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra. Ng later extracted an excerpt from *Rimba* and adapted it for the piano, titling it *A Distant Voice in the Rain Forest*. The piece was part of the compulsory repertoire in the 2008 H.S.B.C. Classics Piano Competition in Malaysia. There was a total selection of five modern pieces written by Malaysian composers, and I chose this particular work because it was interesting at first sight. That was actually my first attempt to perform any type of contemporary work, as I had been “classically” trained and worked mainly on conventional repertoire. During the preparation process, I found myself often confused and uncertain, as there were few instructions given. The only information I was given by the composer, Chong Lim Ng, was that he drew inspirations for the work from his love for nature, specifically the sounds of the rainforest. Apart from that, he gave very little input because he did not want to influence my artistic decisions. He told me that he wanted me to explore the possibilities and focus on the “what could be” instead of the “what should be.” I remember Ng emphasizing enjoying the process of preparation, to trust my musical instincts and knowledge, and letting the outcome be a natural result that blossomed from my inner self. As a performer, that became unnaturally stressful, as I was used to being given a solid framework. Until the very end, and even after the performance, I still had endless questions about the piece. Most of them were unanswered, and my ideas were never confirmed. The bizarre sense of uncertainty, though causing unease and discomfort,
was also unexpectedly refreshing and left a lasting impression. This indeed marked my first “real” experience with modern music.

Initially, my decision to make this piece part of my thesis and of my lecture recital leaned towards more of a moral righteousness, or patriotism, a wish to introduce my culture and fellow countrymen to the rest of the world. Until today, Malaysia is still under-represented in music, even though we have many talented musicians. However, the more I got to know this piece and understand Ng’s philosophies of life, my appreciation of this piece grew deeper. I never understood that this piece would clarify many of the issues I have with classical music. Revisiting this piece at this point in my life, and knowing that I gave the very first performance of this piece in 2008, my first contemporary work, greatly increases its significance. An advantage of this piece may be that it is not yet widely performed. When we learn conventional pieces, we cannot help but “mimic” an “ideal” version that already exists. With this piece, I feel like I could shed the burden of “perfection”, and release myself from the idea of shouldering responsibility for representing myself, or my culture, or my country properly in front of a new audience each time. It has been my ongoing quest to make every performance, and not just this specific piece, a little different each time, like conducting an experiment. Nonetheless, I find that to be challenging with conventional classical repertoire. For me, this piece has become an escape route, the means to re-embrace originality. The performer of this work need not worry about adhering to a particular tradition because none has been established. In addition to the freedom of indeterminacy, and the clever blend of both Eastern (gamelan modes) and

\footnote{1 The official debut performance of \textit{A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest} was given by Soo Yeon Lim in the Tongyeong International Music Festival, Korea in 2009.}
Western (set theory and major minor modes) musical ideas, there is added the visceral Buddhist thinking that Ng practices in his daily routine, which revokes the invisible boundaries of being exclusive to a single of reality. It reminds me that there is no single, absolute “truth”. Because we are alive, everything is possible. Therefore, in many ways, I have found a deep and personal connection with this piece.

In January 2021, I had the privilege of sitting down with Ng, amidst his busy schedule, for a one-to-one interview at his house in Malaysia where we used to have our piano lessons. I learned about his childhood and education, and I found myself inspired, encouraged and enlightened by his wisdom and words. All the information in the following chapter dedicated to Ng’s background, is taken from this interview.
Born August 14, 1972, in Kuala Lumpur, Chong Lim Ng is one of the most prominent musicians in Malaysia today. A committed pedagogue, Ng is much sought after by major universities in Southeast Asia. Some of his teaching posts include Visiting Lecturer at University Malaya (Malaysia) and at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Singapore). Ng is actively involved in charity work and spends most of his time in the Himalayas of Nepal, rebuilding communities, and building schools for less fortunate children. Nonetheless, he continues to perform and compose whenever possible. He remains one of the most renowned and celebrated pianists in Malaysia. In 2011, Ng was awarded the STM (Pingat
Setiawan Tuanku Mukhriz - Associate-Order of Loyalty to Tuanku Mukhri) by the Yamtuan Besar of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia for his contribution to music education in Malaysia. But despite his popularity, Ng has maintained a simple and humble lifestyle. Most of his earnings are spent either on his family or donated to charity.²

Ng’s early music education began when he was 4. He attended the Yamaha Junior Music Course (J. M. C.) - a group lesson for young and musically gifted kids which remains popular in Southeast Asia. Ng was among the inaugural batch of students who joined the J. M. C. course when it was first introduced in Seremban, since his aunt was the first person to introduce the Yamaha system to Seremban, the city just south of Kuala Lumpur where he grew up. Three years later, he started taking individual piano lessons “just so because” he had an upright piano at home.³ Subsequently, he took up electone (electronic organs produced by Yamaha) lessons. Ng’s early music influence was his father, who loved jazz, latin and “oldies” popular music. He stated that his most personal work was written for his father (Xiang 祥). He views that as his personal collection, which reflects how he sees death and acceptance in life. Ng explained in his interview that his father’s death became the main reason he took up the position as head of the family, shouldering the responsibilities of caring for his mother and two older sisters when his father passed away when he was so young. But it was while engaged in the JMC program that Ng became increasingly interested in composition. His first composition, “Spring Rhapsody,” was written for solo electone. However, this music, along with his piano, was lost when his house flooded. His works were

² In-person interview with Chong Lim Ng, January 2021 at his house in Malaysia.
³ Interview with Ng.
later selected to represent Malaysia, twice, in the Yamaha International Junior Original Concert in Tokyo, in 1986 and 1988. That is probably the first sign that composing would become a significant aspect of his future life.

Ng’s pianistic talent proved immense. In 1993, he was awarded first prize in the Malaysian National Piano Competition. The year after that he was the winner of the Philip Crashaw Memorial Prize for Outstanding Overseas Musician at the Royal Overseas League Competition, and he received Second Prize at the AT&T Istel Young Musician Award Piano Competition, both in the UK. This led to a full scholarship for Postgraduate Diploma studies at the Royal College of Music, London, under Professor Frank Wibaut from 1994-97. Ng’s journey did not end there, however. He continued his piano studies under Elza Kolodin at the Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst, Graz, Austria in 1997-98, and also studied composition under Beat Furrer for a year. But it was in 2000 that Ng started to take music composition much more seriously. Though always majoring in piano performance, Ng continually found himself going back to composing. He recalled that in his teenage years, he watched videos of piano competitions from around the world. He was drawn to the works of Rachmaninoff, as well as Prokofiev, particularly his Third Piano Concerto. He remembered that the first orchestra concert he ever attended was of the Korean Philharmonic at Universiti Malaya, and that he was mesmerized by the program they presented. Ng had always wanted to be a composer, but for financial reasons he had to set aside that dream. Fortunately, he furthered his music education at the Royal College of Music in London when he received an invitation from the chairman of the jury, Frank Wibaut, after winning a major competition in Malaysia, and pursued studies there in 1993.
and 1994. There, Ng was able to attend more music festivals and events. This broadened his horizons and opened his ears to new music, especially minimalism and pointillism. These experiences kept his creative drive alive. A few years later, Ng met the Swiss-born Austrian composer, Beat Furrer, who became his composition professor in Graz. Their meeting was unplanned and serendipitous. Professor Furrer overheard Ng practicing the piano and asked if he was interested in new music. While conversing, Professor Furrer found Ng’s music education in Malaysia fascinating. He extended an invitation to Ng to study with him whenever he felt ready, which Ng eventually accepted. During our interview, Ng shared his admiration and gratitude for Beat Furrer. He recalled that most of their lessons involved discussions about art and life, and rarely focused exclusively on music. In fact, Ng states that his teacher never “taught him any compositional methods, but merely talked about ideas, concepts and influences in life, and helped encourage him to find his own voice”.

His freedom of spirit and form is often heard in Ng’s musical works, such as Dragonfly for solo piano, Three Sketches for two pianos, and Shadows for piano, and traditional Malay gamelan instruments. Ng saw the potential for assisting the younger generation of aspiring musicians in his home country to discover themselves as well. After completing his studies, Ng returned to Malaysia so that he could pursue that ambition and also to be closer to his family.

Despite not being a practicing Buddhist, Ng is yet very much influenced by Buddhism. His philosophy of life is to lead a simple life and to strive for simplicity in everything he does. Ng talks about how Buddhist teachings, especially those of Gandhi, the

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4 Interview with Ng.
Dalaī Lama, and acclaimed Vietnamese monk and peace activist, Thich Nhất Hạnh, inspired his outlook. When I asked about his current identity, Ng laughs and says it changes from time to time, from being an educator, to a performer, to a composer (he calls it a “hobby composer”), and to a social worker. When meeting him, it is easy to tell that he is very happy and satisfied with his current state of being. One thing that struck me was his idea of “living in the moment.” I was fascinated by the livelihood he maintains, with his minimal lifestyle and donating most of his earnings to various charities. During the interview, Ng shared his insight on the ideas of impermanence, simplicity and moderation. He also explained why he is so heavily involved in charity. For him, the act of giving brings him great joy. Ng co-founded the H.E.A.R.T. Foundation to help build schools for kids in Cambodia, and more recently for children in Nepal. He has been spending three to four months of every year in Nepal, helping rebuild communities there. He showed me pictures of the children he lived among, and showed me how he built schools with other volunteers, and started various self-sustainable projects, farms, libraries, houses, plants, and fish ponds, etc. He was very proud that he now knows how to do these things. At the end, he told me how lucky he was to have met these kids, and that because of them he learned so much more, and developed a deeper connection and understanding with the people surrounding him and with his own life. Occasionally, Ng raises funds through benefit concerts, either as a solo recital or with student performances. When I was young, I often participated in these events. This left a positive impact on my being, and I now continue to strive to be a more socially aware and responsible person. I felt tremendous gratitude towards Ng for stressing the importance of kindness and modesty since the day we met. And on a more personal level, I benefited directly from his generosity, studying piano with him free of charge for
almost a decade. My father took an early retirement due to poor health, but his continuous support of music education for his three children quickly became a financial burden. Ng agreed to give me free lessons, since he felt that I was very serious and dedicated to practicing. For as long as I have known him, he has been my role model for living and thinking.

Apart from his philanthropic identity, Ng’s Buddhist leanings are often manifested in his musical works, such as Xiang, Rimba, and in A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest. Most of his works reflect his love for nature in their titles, such as Rimba (Rainforest), Khatulistiwa (Equator), and Daun (Leaves). Ng’s inspiration is drawn from the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Robert Schumann, Franz Schubert, György Ligeti, Pierre Boulez and György Kurtag. Influential pianists include Arthur Rubinstein, Dinu Lipati,
Vladimir Horowitz and Glenn Gould. Yet when asked about his own compositional approach or style, Ng states that “I won’t say I have found my own voice or style yet. Each work I compose feels different in both approach and idea, but I continue to take risks in search of something close to my heart.”

Despite his classical training, Ng rarely uses strict structures or fixed forms. His emphasis on giving musicians “a lot of freedom” is his signature scoring technique. One of the biggest challenges in the interpretation of A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest is the lack of specificity as to how much freedom should be given to its performance. As a classically trained pianist, I generally find myself feeling more comfortable working within a predetermined concept. While working on this piece, I began to question whether my initial responses might be a trickle down effect from how societal lives are organized. We are born into a culture with set rules and expectations, and so we often find ourselves at ease when we understand those boundaries. The unease caused by the unspecified elements of this piece made me question each judgment I was forced to make, from determining the order of performance of the eleven fragments, to the placement of my fingers on the strings while striking the chords, and to the speed and the amount of silence between each note or section. I asked Ng for his advice, but he told me that there is no absolute answer, and I should try to find my own voice and “create a new piece” using the materials he had provided. Ng wants the performers of this piece to create their own imagery of nature, and let their “voice” come through. He said that the reason he used the word “voice” instead of

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5 Interview with Ng.
6 Interview with Ng.
“sound” in the title is because he does not like the meaning attached to the word “sound.
He feels that using the word “sound” would limit the imagination, because it represents an
exact thing that must be achieved. He also stressed that he does not want to impose his will
on his own music, for that would be his “voice” instead of mine. Looking back, my
unsuccessful attempt at getting a definite answer is what led me to thinking more deeply
not only about this piece, but my personal approach towards all music and, moreover, life in
general. Ng’s affection for nature, and his persistence in moderation and simplicity, have
had a deep and lasting effect on my musical ways of thinking and upon my personal being.

Ng is not the first composer to infuse his Euro-Western training into his cultural
identity. Cultural syncretism has been a longstanding trait in Malaysia, owing to the history
of colonization (Portuguese, Dutch and British), and can be seen in its food, festivities, and
spiritual practices, as well as in its art and music. There are three main racial groups in
Malaysia: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. It is very common for Malaysians to be able to
converse, read, and write in multiple languages at a young age. For instance, I can speak
fluently in 4 languages: Mandarin (our native tongue), Cantonese (our ancestral heritage is
from Guang Dong, China), Malay (our official national language) and English. In our
educational system, the offering of language classes depends primarily on the specific
public or private school to which one applies. Nonetheless, most citizens have a basic
command of Malay and English. The blending of cultural elements is also a strong
characteristic of the Malaysian contemporary music scene. One of the more common
practices is the incorporation of Gamelan music. The modes and microtonal harmony of
Malaysian gamelan music are transposed or overlapped with other practices to evoke a local flavor within a more universal context. Other exotic musical effects may be created by combining Malaysian with Western instruments and techniques.

In *Rimba*, which prompted the creation of *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, Ng combines the Gamelan *pelog* mode with set theory and extended techniques, to devise a new voice for the modern piano. He enjoyed mimicking traditional instrumental sounds in earlier works, but now states that he has “moved on”. Ng identifies three components of his creative flow:

1) Being in the moment
2) Loving simplicity and valuing simple feelings
3) Acting on intuition

This compositional method runs parallel to his performance point of view, for Ng constantly emphasizes on the importance of curiosity and exploring possibilities. He often advises students to be courageous and to try different things, to use their knowledge and to be as faithful to the music as is possible without following blindly. He worries about the current Youtube music-streaming culture, because he worries that younger students tend to embrace this “convenience culture” and mimic existing interpretations. Though this may lead to consistency of performance, there are too many similar versions as a result. So the music becomes uninteresting and unoriginal. This may be why Ng finds comfort in Nature, as its impermanence and imperfection is an expectation of its ever shifting disposition.

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7 Interview with Ng.
Ng helping to build self-sustainable gardens to grow food

Ng’s latest work is *Fireflies*, commissioned by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, and written for a chamber ensemble consisting of strings, oboes, bassoons, and trumpets in pairs, and three percussionists. This work was set to premiere on March 28th, 2020 but was postponed due to the pandemic. The title, *Fireflies*, has a double meaning. In Nepal, where Ng spends most of his time, the kids call their homes “*Junkiri*”, or firefly, as a firefly is seen as a beetle that self illuminates and thus symbolizes “making things happen”. The work was inspired by his experience of seeing fireflies as he was young, as he was riding on a motorbike with his father. There is also a prayer and a chant at the end of the piece. I imagine that this piece might represent his current focus in life, education, and social work. Ng is not an ambitious person, and never expects things in return for all the good deeds he
has done for the many people in his life. He does not plan to expand his career beyond the scope of his own passions. Ng repeatedly laughs at himself, saying that he is a “lazy hobby composer who does not work hard.” However, I think it may be quite the opposite. Ng is capable of making a good living for himself, yet he rejects the vanity of the world, and works instead to make positive changes for the people around him. By living simply, letting go, and accepting, Ng feels that he attains both his freedom and his happiness.

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8 Interview with Ng.
Music in Malaysia: Gamelan Melayu

Brief Introduction and Background

Located in the heart of Southeast Asia, my homeland of Malaysia comprises two regions separated by the South China Sea: West Malaysia (or Peninsular Malaysia) and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). One of the major attractions of Malaysia, aside from its beautiful landscape, is a multi-ethnic country, whereby the demographic composition comprises three main races: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Malays make up the majority and they are predominantly Muslim. A fairly young country, Malaysia gained its independence from Britain on August 31st, 1957. Although we are still in the midst of gradually developing our own cultural and artistic identities, the existing musical genres found in the country are rather diverse, due to past colonizations. Music can be categorized into five general types: classical, folk, syncretic, popular and contemporary art music. Both classical and folk music are now known as the “traditional arts.” As ethnomusicologist Patricia Matusky notes,

In Malaysia the folk music traditions still exist in the rural areas as an expression of rural peoples, who are essentially farmers, fishermen, or skilled craftsmen. The various kinds of folk music in Malay culture often occur as an integral part of some

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10 Matusky and Tan, 5-8. Classical music is associated with the learned, aristocratic classes and royal courts, and is usually taught with a theoretical and historical base as opposed to folk music which is often found in the rural areas and passed on in an oral tradition; Gavin Douglas, *Music in Mainland Southeast Asia*. (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010) 37. Douglas points out that the terms “classical music” can be problematic in the context of Southeast Asian music as it differs from the Western understanding of associating “classical” with elitism. Similarly, this applies to “folk music” as well. Hence, the definition for both classical and folk music forms are to be more flexible in this case.
kind of theater such as dance, dance drama, shadow puppet theater, or various ceremonies and rituals connected to healing ceremonies or to various aspects of the traditional Malay belief system. It is the rural folk music that often provides the basis and content of a classical music tradition in a given culture, and in Malaysia those musics that can be considered "classical" have developed in the rural areas of the country but in the context of royal patronage in court-based environments.\textsuperscript{11}

The performances usually consist of a musical ensemble, notably featuring Gamelan instruments (in Malaysia this is likely to be the Gamelan Melayu, which differs slightly in instrumentation from the Javanese or Balinese Gamelan). Examples of a classical music form might include the \textit{tari asyik} from Kelantan and the \textit{joget gamelan} from Pahang and Terengganu.\textsuperscript{12} Besides that, Matusky also points out the possibility of a "transculturated" or "syncretic" music in the urban areas of East and West Malaysia as a combination of foreign elements such as Arabic, Persian, Indian, and Western music and theater.\textsuperscript{13}

Given Malaysia's geographical location, it is no surprise that we share similar musical instruments with our neighboring countries, the most prominent being Indonesia. Cultural assimilation gives us access to the Indonesian Gamelan, mainly the Balinese and Javanese (of which there are two types: the central Java and western Java Sundanese). From there, through efforts of the royal family of Terengganu in 1913-1942, Gamelan Melayu, or \textit{Joget} Gamelan, was developed in order to differentiate it from the original Javanese model.\textsuperscript{14} The Indonesian Gamelan and Gamelan Melayu may share similar instruments, but they differ in performance styles and practices.

\textsuperscript{12} Matusky and Tan, 107.
\textsuperscript{13} Matusky, 122.
\textsuperscript{14} Matusky and Tan, 108-109. Not only were there changes in costumes and dance movements, as well as instrumentation, tuning system and using melodies not originating from Javanese tradition.
To understand the appropriate tools to analyze *A Distant Voice of the Rainforest*, we have to familiarize ourselves with the Gamelan tonal system, which consists of two basic scale patterns: *pelog* and *slendro*.\(^{15}\)

![Pelog (in Western notation)](image1.png)

*Pelog* (in Western notation)\(^{16}\)

![Slendro (in Western notation)](image2.png)

*Slendro* (in Western notation)\(^{17}\)

In general, the *pelog* is a heptatonic scale whereas *slendro* is pentatonic consisting of 5 pitches that are tend toward equidistance.\(^{18}\) Although the *pelog* scale has 7 pitches, most of the time gamelan ensembles often utilize only a subset of 5 pitches. There are three basic tones and two or four secondary tones in the gamelan tonal system. As Donald Lentz explains,

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\(^{15}\) Lentz, Donald A., *The Gamelan Music of Java and Bali, an Artistic Anomaly Complementary to Primary Tonal Theoretical Systems.* Donald A. Lentz. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) 39-42.

\(^{16}\) Lindsay, Jennifer, *Javanese Gamelan : Traditional Orchestra of Indonesia.* (Singapore; Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993) 39.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 39.

The main tone, called *dong* in Bali, is supported by two tones, one a fifth above (called *dang*) and the other a fifth below (called *dung*). The secondary tones are a fifth above (*dèng*) and a fifth below (*ding*) the supporting tones. By bringing the five tones within an octave, the following scale results: *dong, dèng, dung, dang, ding*.19

![Diagram of Balinese-Javanese scale]

*Lentz, The Gamelan Music of Java and Bali*20

The *pelog* scale is more popular in Balinese music. It allows for two additional tones within the octave, and is often presented as a 5-tone scale for the full 7-tone range scale is considered archaic and “old style”.21 It also allows half tones as opposed to the *slendro* which avoids it. In *The Evolution of Javanese Tone-Systems*, Manfred Bukofzer suggested the

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19 Lentz, 33.
20 Ibid., 34.
21 McPhee, 257.
half-steps or leading tones of the pelog scale causes “alteration of suspense and relaxation, making the pelog melody more emotional than the salendro (slendro).”

Each scale system has three modes: The slendro has patet nem, patet sangha and patet manyura; and pelog has patet bem or nem, patet pelog or limo and patet barang. In this document we will devote our focus to the pelog scale, specifically the patet barang.

Patet Barang

Similar to the Western method, where certain tones are prioritized, such as the tonic, dominant or subdominant of any given key, the Balinese-Javanese 5-tone scale also has a similar hierarchy. Lentz provides an illustration of the functions of tones with the ‘dong-dang-dung method’ as follows:

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24 Lindsay, 39.
Suborder of functions in every patet

From here, we can see that *dong* is the tonic, and the subsequent important tones would be *dung* (subdominant) and *dang* (dominant). The fixed pitches are on each designated key-plate on the idiophone instruments. The names of each of the key-plates, moving from left to right on the *slendro* instruments are: *gulu, dada, lima, nem, barang.* Therefore, placing the *dong* (tonic) on different key-plates changes the *patet.* In *Javanese Gamelan: Traditional Orchestra of Indonesia,* Jennifer Lindsay points out that,

In Javanese, the word *patet* means “to restrain”. Musically, *patet* refers to a subdivision of the tones of *slendro* or *pelog* into three groups, very much like modes in medieval Western music, each group differing from the others in the way the notes are treated musically. Each group, or *patet,* will consist of five tones, but these tones are given different hierarchical prominence in each of the *patet.* *Patet* is therefore a limitation on the player’s choice of variation, so that while in one *patet* a certain note may be prominent, in another it must be avoided, or used only for special effect. Awareness of such limitations, and exploration of variation within them reflects a basic philosophical aim of gamelan music, and indeed all art in central Java, namely, the restraint and refinement of one’s own behavior.

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25 Lentz, 35.
26 Ibid., 36.
27 Ibid., 36. *Patet* (or *Pathet*) is the Javanese term meaning “harmonious” and refers to the location of the principal tone and its related tones on the bars of an instrument.
28 Lindsay, 40.
If the main tone is placed on the fifth key plate, it is identified as *patet Lima*, “the mode of the fifth plate”. Similarly if the main tone is placed on the sixth plate, it is named *patet Nem*, “the mode of the sixth plate.” The emphasis of the main tone becomes an important point in this document, which will be discussed in the later chapters.

One of many interesting aspects about the Gamelan system is its lack of theoretical consistency, for most of it is passed on through oral tradition. Similar to a dialect, where it becomes adapted and localized, we often find that the tones of the *slendro* or *pelog* scales differ slightly depending on the region. The *slendro* scale is particularly varied. On the other hand, the general consensus of the *pelog* scale is that it usually incorporates two intervals of greatly varied sizes: the small and the large; where “each of these sizes was apt to be without uniformity.” Lentz summarizes that the idea of duplication is the core of the gamelan system, that “the early forms of the gamelan were ingeniously evolved and the better ones were duplicated through centuries by a process that has insured artistic diversity and vitality in the music itself, not fettered by any theoretical rigidity, yet subject to the disciplines of traditional forms.”

Another reason for the differences in pitches for the Gamelan scales was also due to the crafting of the key-plates. These instruments are mostly handmade and the materials varied, for example the resonators are made of bamboo or metal tubes, wooden troughs or

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30 Ibid., 42.
31 Ibid., 45.
inverted kettles while the key-plate is made of wood or metal.\textsuperscript{32} Lentz explains the variation of pitch between key-plates as follow,

Many of the single key-plates showed variation of pitch at times when the key-plate was struck in different spots. There was deviation frequently between two tones an octave apart on the same instrument. No particular interval size was characteristic, standardized, or dominant, with the possible exception of the octave and of a variable fifth which seemed to identify itself somewhat to a theoretical conception. The relationship of three fifths, considered important in some regions, did not exist in others. Few instruments had multiple intervals of consistent sizes, and this situation was evident even between the different instruments within the same gamelan. Great diversity was found in the sequence of intervals from one gamelan to another. Also, the number of key-plates was not uniform in the same type of instrument between gamelans.\textsuperscript{33}

Therefore we should bear in mind that although there is still a system, the Gamelan scales incorporate flexible tones and intervals as opposed to a fixed-tone system.\textsuperscript{34}

The ideas of duplicating, adapting and localizing are the main factors for the development of Gamelan Melayu. The basic Gamelan Melayu ensemble consists of eight different instruments with two main categories: the idiophones: \textit{saron barung, saron panerus (peking), gambang kayu, kerumong (keromong), kenong, gong suwukan} and \textit{gong}

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{34} Detailed discussions can be found in \textit{Javanese Pélog Tunings Reconsidered} by Jay Rahn, \textit{The Gamelan Music of Java and Bali} by Donald A. Lentz and \textit{Traditional Music in Modern Java} by Judith Becker.
agaeng; and the membranophones, which have only the gendang, which is a double-headed barrel drum.\textsuperscript{35}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{saron_barung.png}
\caption{Saron Barung\textsuperscript{36}}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{saron_panerus.png}
\caption{Saron Panerus (Peking)\textsuperscript{37}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{35} Matusky and Tan, 108-109. \textit{Saron Barung} is a medium size saron and \textit{Saron Panerus} is a small size saron. Unlike the musical ensemble in Wayang Kulit, a shadow puppet theater which is popular in Kelantan, Malaysia, membranophones instruments also includes two other drums, the gedumbak and geduk; Sheppard, Haji Mubin, “Joget Gamalan Trengganu.” \textit{Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society}, vol. 40, no. 1 (211), (1967) 151. In Terengganu, Malaysia the Gamelan consists of 7 instruments instead, where two are xylophones (\textit{gambang} and \textit{sarun}), four are groups of gongs of varying shapes and sizes (\textit{keromong} and \textit{kenong}), and a large cylindrical drum.

\textsuperscript{36} Matusky and Tan, 111.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 111.
Gong Ageng, Gong Suwukan\textsuperscript{38}

Kenong\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 111.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 111.
Kerumong\textsuperscript{40}

Gambang Kayu\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 111.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 111.
Each instrument has its designated function. For instance, the _kerumong_, a gong-chime that is a set of 10 small gongs laid horizontally on a wooden rack, each gong suspended on a string or cord in arrangements of two parallel rows. These small gongs are to be struck with a pair of padded wooden stick beaters, _tabuh_, to produce a specific pitch within the 5-tone _joget_ gamelan scale. The _kerumong_ is similar to the Javanese _bonang._

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42 Ibid., 111.
43 Ibid., 112.
Both the kerumong and bonang are capable of playing elaborate melodies and are used to mark the time in a manner similar to the gongs.
THE TRENGGANU GAMALAN

Front. L. to R. Keromong, Gambang.
Second row. Kenong (on tall stands), Gendang (drum), Sarun (2).
Back row. Pair of hanging Gongs.


Trengganu Gamalan (Terengganu Gamelan)\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{45} Sheppard, 150.
The pentatonic *joget* gamelan scale consists of specific intervals and traces its history from the Javanese *slendro* tuning system.

![Pentatonic scale of the Malay Gamelan](image)

However, one special trait separates the Malay gamelan scale from the Javanese *slendro* which is the use of a neutral 3rd interval between pitches 3 and 5. In the *slendro*, the interval between pitches 3 and 5 is a minor 2nd and the interval of a 3rd is between pitches 2 and 3 instead. In fact, the *slendro* can be seen related to the Chinese pentatonic scale as well.

![Slendro scale using C as pitch 1](image)

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46 Matusky and Tan, 114.
47 Ibid., 113.
To the western trained ear, it seems that the Malay gamelan scale, with its altered 3rd pitch, favors the sound of a Major 3rd (pitches 1 and 3) while the Javanese slendro, although also having a similar Major 3rd (between pitches 3 and 6) favors the Perfect 4th (pitches 1 and 3). Using A as the reference note, if we are to label it using functional harmony, A would be the tonic for the A Major chord and is seemingly more pronounced in the Malay gamelan scale. On the other hand the slendro has more emphasis on the D Major harmony, hence D would be the tonic. Yet, if we revisit the ‘dong-dang-dung method’ from the Balinese-Javanese five-tone scale, the tonic or reference note in the slendro scale is pitch 5 (E) and the Malay gamelan scale would be pitch 2 (B).

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48 Ibid., 68.
The idea of a shifting pitch center, though not uncommon in the Western practice, is something to appreciate perhaps a bit more in music of the gamelan. In *A Musical Scales of the World*, Michael John Hewitt notes that the appreciation of Gamelan music often take some time due to the way the music tends to be organized in heterophony, hence there is “very little sense of the vertical element of the harmony.”\(^\text{49}\) It is suggested to the listeners

to “let go et go and surrender to the often-sensual interplay of shimmering tone colors, without any sense or expectancy that the music should be \textit{going somewhere}.”\textsuperscript{50}

Therefore, unlike the Western system with its tonal hierarchy, each of these tones in the pentatonic scale can be the tonal center.\textsuperscript{51}

Upon examining the linear qualities of \textit{A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest}, tonality is disestablished through this instability in the hierarchy of the pitches. However, this breakdown does open up a few more possibilities. The abolition of the tonic, coupled with the fragmented “ideas” in this piece seems to enhance and elevate the sense of freedom for the performer. The aural tendencies, perpetuated by habitual practices, of trying to emphasize certain harmonies fueled by the equal temperament tuning of the instrument should be minimized, in order to create a better “view” of the piece.\textsuperscript{52} This is another thing to consider while analyzing or performing \textit{A Distant Voice of the Rainforest}.

I am not necessarily suggesting that Ng has a preference for the Malay or Indonesian gamelan. The diverse cultures, music and arts that he experienced through extensive traveling weaves together to form his new and unique style. Adding this to his personal beliefs and principles, such as acting on intuition and simplicity, Ng has accumulated a multitude of identities that shifts from time to time, allowing him to breathe life into new creations time and again.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[50] Ibid.\item[51] McPhee, 258. McPhee points out that there are no names for the different modes caused by changing the tonal center, as musicians often just “take it from \textit{ding}”, whichever the tone begins on. Essentially, Gamelan music is considered monolinear.\item[52] Ng’s instructions on the score.
\end{footnotes}
Other aspects of the Gamelan, such as the rhythmic structure and musical form will be included in the analysis chapter.
"A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest"

Background

“The murmuring of insects, birds ...
rustling of falling leaves, water on rocks ........
the mystical sense of stillness and calmness ........
creation of balance, at times, silent, quiet and docile ...
at times, brutal, forceful and unpredictable ......
There are always changes in every movement, whether in a subtle or a drastic manner ......

Ng, "A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest" (score)

“A Distant Voice of the Rainforest” contains fragments from one of my chamber work, “Rimba” for fourteen musicians (two groups of string quartets, three woodwinds, one pianist and two percussionists). This composition is about the earthy simplicity of a tropical rainforest.

The murmuring of insects, birds ...
rustling of falling leaves, water on rocks.........
the mystical sense of stillness & calmness.........
creation of balance, at times, silent, quiet and docile...
at times, brutal, forceful and unpredictable......
There are always changes in every movement, whether in a subtle or a drastic manner.....

An important note for the pianist - this work will always sound different, as there are so many different possibilities for the pianist to create their own interpretation/version of the piece...

Title page, A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest
Picture of Belum-Temengor, a grouping of forest reserves in Perak, Malaysia. One of the world’s oldest rainforests estimated to be more than 130 million years old\textsuperscript{53}

\textit{A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest} was extracted from excerpts from Ng’s orchestral work \textit{Rimba} (which is the Malay word for Jungle). \textit{Rimba} was written for 14 musicians, consisting of 2 groups of four string players, 3 woodwind instrumentalists, 1 pianist, and 2 percussionists. Ng told me that some of the feedback he received from members of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as the judges, was that the piece seemed to be written with the piano heavily in mind. Ng was not selected as the winner of the composer

Ng is a highly intuitive musician. He often spends time observing nature and his immediate surroundings, paying close attention to their characters, the dynamic between people and nature, and finding inspiration in random sounds. In fact, many of his works highlight this aspect. In the title page of *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, Ng uses words such as “murmuring” and “rustling” to give us aural imagery of how being in a rainforest would sound. His description of “water on rocks”, his emphasis on “changes in every movement”, and the contrast he asks for between “silent, quiet and docile” versus “brutal, forceful and unpredictable” are the perfect descriptors for this piece. Much of this actually aligns with one of the main ideas of Taoism, regarding balancing forces, where there is always a push and pull of the yin and yang in nature. Matching pairs such as light and dark, hot and cold, stillness and movement, good and evil show how the universe is connected, and how nothing can make sense if depending solely on its own existence. Ng particularly emphasizes moments of silence, where he explains them as a time to “listen to yourself” between “the gap of the notes”. His use of words such as “atmospheric”, “distant” and “changing” make for vivid imagery, while words such as “spontaneity”, “intuition” or “used wisely” serve to remind performers of his underlying philosophy.

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54 Interview with Ng.
I asked Ng, why this specific title? Why use the word “voice”? Why not consider “sound”? He answered simply that he did not like the meaning attached to the word “sound”. Ng wanted performers to create their own imagery of nature, and let their “voice” emanate from their own inspirations and ideas of life. He feels that using the word “sound” would limit the imagination, because it would represent an exact thing that would have to be achieved. He also stressed that he does not want to impose his “take” on his own music, for that would be his “voice” instead of the performer’s. This composition serves as a remembrance, a distant memory of not only the sounds he heard while being in the rainforest, but also the sounds of the gamelan. He said there was no particular piece that influenced him in the writing of this piece. Ng was traveling back and forth between Cambodia and Laos for charity work, so he might have become familiar with the traditional music he heard on those trips. He wrote this piece using his mind’s ear alone, without any specific procedure or theory in mind. By continuous effort of exploration, Ng tried to abandon his muscle memory and create this work without using the instrument. Ng said, “If I start with the fingers, it will naturally go to where we learned to go.”

Ng’s creation is based upon the imagination of what he remembers. He often writes that which he imagines, or “hears” in his subconscious sound world. The idea of “distant”, according to him, is 1) the distant layer of things, 2) his memory of being in the forest and 3) the sounds he remembers of the gamelan. The “voice” can not only be interpreted as

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55 Interview with Ng.
56 Interview with Ng.
the multiple voices of the composer and the performer, but also as the traditional music of Southeast Asia (as Ng frequently travels for charity work), and the gamelan sounds from not only Malaysia, but the Balinese and Javanese Gamelan from Indonesia as well. As he repeated, there were no particular pieces that influenced him.

Since his youth, Ng has been fascinated with the rainforest, mainly due to spending time on his uncle's farm in Seremban and on Tioman Island, Malaysia. He loves the humidity, the sound of nature and insects, and the feelings and sensations of being inside the forest. As a person who embraces the teachings of Buddhism on the idea of impermanence and being in the moment, Ng highly values capturing those fleeting, almost ephemeral memories with his own senses.

As mentioned previously, *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* was initially written for a chamber orchestra. Although Ng's piece was not chosen as the winning work, he appreciated the experience the competition gave him, because it allowed him to grow as a composer, and gave him the chance to determine what might be the missing element. Ng felt that he needed to work on understanding and knowing performers better; he sensed that merely understanding the capacities of instruments did not suffice. He felt he should have identified the type of orchestra he was working with, if they were prone towards conventional or new music. Some of the extended techniques he used were not easily accomplished by the orchestra, so their final performance fell short. Some of the major feedback he got from the orchestra members was that the piano took away the spotlight from the orchestra. Thus, Ng decided to extract the piano part and created this work, which
I consider a masterpiece. Most of the excerpts are direct quotations from the original work, and any additional materials or edits were done with the sounds and ideas from *Rimba* in mind.

Ng’s objective with *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* was not to create new sounds for the piano. In fact, he wanted it to be as natural as possible. Ng wanted to create his own idea of what nature is, to have what is as close to freedom within form. He hopes that the piece will undergo a transformation based on each performer’s individual journey with the piece, and that no performance will ever be identical. In our interview, Ng laments the limited value placed on originality, and our “convenience culture” with its access to huge collections of recordings online; he feels it is causing damage to the younger generation of music students. Ng was insistent on having the performer’s “voice” be of equal importance to the notes on the page. In our conversation, he emphasized the importance of making artistic judgments based on sound knowledge and with “good taste.” He is not pleased by the rising music streaming culture, and thinks that although there may be some benefits to it, it causes students to “mimic” what they hear, and to stop using their brains and ears to pay closer attention to the actual sound coming from their instrument. Most of all, it endangers a lack of curiosity. That is likely the paramount reason that Ng does not give exact answers to, or in any way influence the musical interpretation of, the performers of this work.

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57 Interview with Ng.
A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest

Analysis

This piece consists of eleven fragments, divided in individual boxes. These boxes are to be played in random order, and may be repeated more than once.

Ng clarifies that he wrote entirely by intuition based on what he “hears”, therefore there is no specific set theory or Gamelan modes that he had in mind. This is a direct reflection of Ng’s compositional style, opposing structured and organized compositional methods. In the beginning, the composer states

“...Atmospheric, ...distant...

This section is a “view” which keeps changing that gives the pianist (the freedom) to create their own music. The boxes should be played randomly without any restriction. Spontaneity and intuition play a very important role here. The sustaining pedal must be used wisely throughout the whole piece. The whole piece should be performed with continuity and it should last approximately 5'-8”.

This was the only guideline given in the piece. Some colored markings (in green) can be traced throughout the piece which are mainly suggestions by the composer as a point of reference. Again, words such as “atmospheric”, “distant”, “changing” makes the imagery ever so vivid, while words such as “spontaneity”, “intuition”, “used wisely” serves as an important reminder to performers.

58 Written on the first page of A Distant Voice in the Rain Forest.
Initial impressions

Upon first glance of the music, which has only two pages, one would think of it as a cellular structure, meaning that the decisions were intentional. But in fact it is an antithesis of structural composition because it was composed with a stream of consciousness intent. Due to its use of aleatoric cells, the performer is given free reign to be spontaneous and use intuition to “create their own music” as what Ng wants. There are eleven fragments, separated in individual cells or boxes. These fragments represent the “views” of the performer, and are to be played randomly in no specific order. They may be repeated and be played more than once. The only condition is that the fragments should be played continuously, and flow from one idea to another seamlessly. Specific instructions are marked in black, while other musical suggestions given by the composer are indicated in green. Ng notes that “All indications marked in green are for reference only (composer’s suggestion). Pianist is allowed to apply his/her own interpretation.”

My first impression of this piece was the amount of freedom and trust given to the performer. This work, though compact, is constructed with many technically challenging moments: the wide contrast in spatial registers in both volume and color, the play of sounds and timbres, such as the Gamelan sounds, the gong-like resonance from the extended technique, as well as mimicking the sounds of the celesta and the mandolin with quick tremolos. This piece tests not only the finger agility, but also the spontaneous combustion of the power and emotions of the performer.
Although there are no set rules (with the exception of the guideline in the title page), there are still expectations to fulfill. For instance, the performer must be flexible and spontaneous, have good intuition and decisions should be backed with intellect. To summarize, the performer should be highly specialized and creative with the instrument. Ng reiterates the importance of having good musical taste (in order to pedal appropriately). Most notably, the piece must be performed with continuity, with no gaps between the cells.

At this point, I would like to re-emphasize that the composer had written this piece with no specific set theory or Gamelan modes in mind. He merely materialized his “subconscious sound world”. Therefore, how can we make sense or organize these musical materials within this “stream of consciousness” creation?

Ng mentioned that most of the deductions can be done by analyzing the biggest component of the piece which is the last cell, Cell 11. It is also the main source of musical quotes extracted from *Rimba*. The core ideas are also presented in the first three cells. However, it is critical to analyze each individual cell in order to deconstruct and identify the key elements, then subsequently cross reference it with Cells 1, 2, 3 and 11. To begin with, I will first compare Cells 1, 2 and 3 using set theory to get a sense of the tetrachord motif that permeates the entire piece.
Cells 1, 2, 3
Set Theory

Cells 1, 2 and 3 begins with the same trichord (D, G#, A) followed by four whole notes in the treble register, some embellished, and ending with a gong-like cluster at the lower bass either by damping the strings with the fingers or playing the keys very quietly. One may note that the first D note in both cells 1 and 2 stands alone and is not embellished.
The four successive whole notes in both Cells 1 and 2 are written in the same register as well as pitch collection \([D\ E\ A\ G\#]\) or set \([0\ 1\ 5\ 7]\). On the other hand, Fragment 3, though having a similar contour, is \([0\ 1\ 3\ 5]\) with pitches \([A\ B\ D\ C\#]\).

The trichord \(DG\#A\ [0\ 1\ 6]\) is derived from the whole note motive, and consists of a minor 2nd, tritone and Perfect 5th. Both \([0\ 1\ 5\ 7]\) and \([0\ 1\ 3\ 5]\) contain pitch-class intervals of 1 and 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fragments</th>
<th>Pitches in Whole Note Tetrachords</th>
<th>Pitch-Class Set</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box 1</td>
<td>D E G# A</td>
<td>[0 1 5 7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 2</td>
<td>D E G# A</td>
<td>[0 1 5 7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 3</td>
<td>A B D C#</td>
<td>[0 1 3 5]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure Pitch Content for Fragments 1, 2, 3
Both sets are thus partially related by transposing their subsets: \([E, G\#, A]\) or subset \([4, 8, 9]\) and \([A, C\#, D]\) or subset \([9, 1, 2]\). Subset \([4, 8, 9]\) maps onto \([9, 1, 2]\) at \(T5\), or concurrently \([9, 1, 2]\) to \([4, 8, 9]\) by \(T7\).

Transpositional Relationships between Fragments 1, 2, 3 with C=0

Another striking observation is the absence of embellishments on the Treble D, which is the 1st whole note on both Fragments 1 and 2. The intervallic span of D-A as a Perfect 5th (the 1st and 3rd note of the tetrachord) is then inverted in Fragment 3 as a Perfect 4th: A-D (although D is embellished this time). In addition to that, a common thread that holds together these 2 tetrachords are the Major 2nd interval between the 1st and 2nd notes as well as the minor 2nd interval between the 3rd and 4th notes.
However, given the nature of this piece, one cannot be certain that set theory would be the best route to take. Perhaps we can also consider Gamelan modes as Ng’s main vehicle of expression. The tetrachord [0 1 5 7] motif happens to be identical to the Patet Barang mode (pitches 2356 on the pelog).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fragments</th>
<th>Major 2nd (1st and 2nd notes)</th>
<th>minor 2nd (3rd and 4th notes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 and 2</td>
<td>D-E</td>
<td>A-G#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A-B</td>
<td>D-C#</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gamelan Mode

Upon first hearing it is hard to distinguish which mode is used in *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*. Although it is not as easy as identifying the distinction between a major and minor mode, yet we are able to pinpoint the minor 2nds and Major 3rds presented which are of the *pelog* scale. Given the emphasis of pitches D and A in the piece, which are pitches 2 and 6 on the *pelog*, and the use of pitch 7 (B) in Cell 3, we can then identify the main idea D E A G# as *patet barang*. In *Old Modes and New Music*, Judith Becker identifies

Patterns ending on pitch levels 2 and 6 are stressed in strong position in *pélog barang*. Because of the use of pitch level 7, *pélog pathet barang* is the easiest of all *pathet* to identify visually and aurally. In addition, some patterns not involving pitch level 7 are indications of *pélog barang*, such as those ending on the contour 6 3 2.59

Although the pitches shown in the example are Eb F A Bb, yet they are transposable and pitches are adapted to the preferences of the performers. For instance, the Balinese *pelog* scale, without considering the actual pitches, can be presented as

Ex. 1

Example from *The Five-Tone Gamelan Music of Bali*60

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60 McPhee, 257.
On the other hand, the Gamelan gong of the village Pliatan is found to be tuned to these specific pitches,

![Ex. 2](image)

Example from *The Five-Tone Gamelan Music of Bali*\(^6\)

The reason D-E prevails is simply because the composer likes the sound of D and E played together. In fact it can be seen as a signature of his as he also uses this as a head motive for his other works as well, such as *Fireflies*, written for solo piano. Although the pitches are transposed, yet the intervallic relationship is preserved. A direct quotation of these specific pitch contents (Eb F A Bb) can be located in other cells later, the most noticeable being the end of cell 8.

\(^6\) Ibid., 258.
Excerpt from *Fireflies*
Ng enjoys experimenting with various combinations of instrumentations, such as traditional Malay instruments which are typically played during royal occasions or can also be found in a Malaysian traditional form of puppet-shadow play called Wayang Kulit. This is where Ng draws his inspiration for one of his compositions, Shadows, written for solo piano and traditional Malay instruments.

Ng is the pianist in this picture, and the Gamelan ensemble consists of the Gedumbak/Gendang (Drums), which I believe in this specific performance the Gedumbak is used, then Gongs (which is not shown in the picture), and a set of Kerumong. Judith Becker explains that the six modes (patet) allow for differentiation in compositions musically and are
associated with various mood and time for the *Wayang Kulit* performance. They also imply a certain range or register of the *dhalang*, the puppeteer.

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62 Becker, *Old Modes and New Music*, 78-79.
63 Ibid.
It is highly possible that due to Ng’s familiarity with the Malay gamelan, its music might have affected his choice of pitches especially in Cell 11, where it becomes vague to both the performer and listener if it calls for D Major harmony in the first two measures (the G# contributes to the A Major tonality which remains debatable) or the malay gamelan mode due to the Major 3rd interval between pitches 1 and 3.

Malay Gamelan 5-tone scale with D as pitch 1

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66 https://i.ytimg.com/vi/sDPMqzG_2kw/hqdefault.jpg
Malay Gamelan 5-tone scale with A as pitch 1

Malay gamelan scale present with F# as pitch 3

Similarly with Cell 3, instead of considering it as A Major we can also see that as a mixture of both the slendro as well as the Malay Gamelan modes.

Cell 3 treble register
**Slendro with A as pitch 1**

To see if this four notes D E G# A, either as set [0 1 5 7] or *patet barang* is the primary idea of this piece, let us further deconstruct each individual cell.
The prominent intervals in Cell 1, based upon the main motif D-E-A-G# [0 1 5 7], is as follows:

1) minor 2nd (A-G#) as a result of the clash between Tritone and Perfect 5th
2) Major 2nd (D-E)
3) Perfect 4th (E-A)
4) Tritone (D-G#)
5) Perfect 5th (D-A)

The absence of tertiary harmonies highlights the quartal chords (4ths, 5ths and tritone), thus creating a mixed palette of modal and quasi-tonal harmonies. Although Major 3rd is present in E-G#, the interference of A causes a disruption as the ear becomes more attuned to the minor 2nd crunch as well as the tritone effect caused by the held D in the trichord on the bass. The tritone is a game changer for this main motif. For one, it keeps the motif more...
tonal sounding as opposed to atonal for the ear leaned towards the perfect 4ths and 5ths.\textsuperscript{67}

Yet on another level, the same Western music trained ear demands a resolution from the tritone. Although there might be room for debate that there are three concealed resolutions,

1) within this tetrachord motif, if we consider E as the bass and A resolves to G#, creating a E Major sounding cadence, and

2) If we take G# from the motif and consider that as a leading note of A which is in the low bass at the open Perfect 5th at the end of the cell,

3) D from the opening trichord as well as the tetrachord motif creates a Perfect 4th to Perfect 5th resolution with the A-E Perfect 5th at the end.

The aural prominence of the unignorable D-G# tritone from the opening trichord on top of the ringing D bass that persists throughout the cell due to the sustenance of the pedal keeps it grounded modally rather than tonally.

In this cell, A is present in both chords as both the highest and lowest note, as well as being the highest note in the main theme. It also makes a minor 2nd with the highest note Bb, creating a dissonant sound that is noticeable to the ear due to the wide spatial register. Upon initial observation, we might speculate if A can be, or should be even considered, to be labeled as tonic or dominant due to the open 5th chord in the lower bass. Although the

\textsuperscript{67} Lentz, 33-34. Lentz points out that the oriental fifths are variable in size and in all probability will not correspond to a Western fifth. Therefore the Perfect 4ths (perfect 5th by inversion), tritone and Perfect 5ths can be a result of the Oriental 5th.
missing 3rd in the open 5th can be either C or C#, there seems to be a tendency to identify A Major as the “tonic key” as opposed to a minor despite the C natural grace note at the end of the treble line right before the chord due to the remnants of the E Major chord (possible dominant) in both 2nd and 4th grace+main notes in the theme. 7 pitch classes are present in this cell, with the missing pitches being C#, D#, F, F# and G. Besides A, G# is repeated more frequently and spread out on different registers.
Similar to Cell 1, this cell repeats both chords (the tenuto D-G#-A trichord and the short detached open 5th A-E). However, though with the same exact tetrachord in the theme, the ornaments are different and consist of 2 notes with wide leaps.

1)  G#-B (minor 10th)  
2)  C#-D (minor 9th)  
3)  Bb-F# (Augmented 5th + 15ma)  
4)  C-G-C  (Perfect 4th/Perfect 5th) same as the bass A-E

Note that the same C natural grace note is present again, and this time also as the highest note of this cell. This time, A-Bb is inverted as a Major 7th instead of minor 9th, still with the emphasis on the minor 2nd. 10 pitch classes are present with D# and F missing. The occurrence of E Major chord surrounding the 2nd main note, C# in the ornament, as well as Major 3rds in G#-E and C#-A helps solidify the consideration of A Major as the tonic key.
Cell 3

It is not until Cell 3 that we are able to validate the A Major harmony for finally the C# is present in the main tetrachord motif. Unlike Cells 1 and 2, Cell 3’s theme consists of A-B-D-C# [0 1 3 5]. Although it has the same opening chord, this time it ends with an extremely soft cluster of white keys. In the tetrachord theme, A and D are reversed in order and hierarchy.\(^{68}\) One visible trait of this cell is the aural prominence of C# and Major 3rd quality, whereby in the theme we have a minor 2nd D-C# that resolves a 4-3 suspension, and the dynamic swell towards the high C# grace note right before the D.

In this cell, the 8 pitch classes are present, with D#, E, F and G missing. Although this is debatable due to the white notes cluster, but D # is definitely out of the picture. There is a cluster of minor 2nds surrounding the 4th main note (Bb-B-C-C#).

\(^{68}\) Although the outline of the A-D perfect 4th interval remains an inverted 5th.
Comparing Cells 1, 2, 3

Comparing Cells 1, 2 and 3 side by side,

Highest note:
   Cell 1 - Bb
   Cell 2 - C
   Cell 3 - C#

Lowest note for all cells:
   A (common tone)

Common missing notes:
   D# (most prominent), F (2nd common)

Common grace note:
   C

There can be two theoretical approaches to analyzing this piece: either tonally or modally (Gamelan modes). If we are under the assumption that there is a tonic key present, then it is possible that A might be the tonic. First, there is a constant low bass note of A in all cells; the E Major sounding E-G# Major 3rds in Cells 1 and 2 can serve as the dominant; and the main notes of the tetrachord themes in Cells 1, 2, 3 forms an A Major scale yet missing the F#. It is possible that the missing F# is to make it less western sounding. Although D Major is a possible tonic, yet due to the persistence of G#, it is out of the race. E Major is also not a consideration as the most prominent missing note is D#. Furthermore, though seemingly an echo of the A-G# resolution in Cells 1 and 2, the D-C# resolution can be viewed as a delayed gratification for the Perfect 4th resolves properly to Major 3rd, creating an A Major sounding cadence. At this point A Major seems to solidify its status as the tonic key for the highest note (C#) and the lowest note (A) is a Major 3rd. Yet, we could
play the devil’s advocate and point out the suggestion of A Major as the tonic becomes opaque due to the bass clusters that do not accentuate A as a clear bass in Cell 3. The subtle intervention of the C grace notes in each cell also can be quite misleading.

From the modality point of view, these three cells contain elements which bear resemblance to the colotomic unit of Gamelan that is rather cyclical in nature. In *A Concept of Time in Music of Southeast Asia*, ethnomusicologist José Maceda notes that one musical element concerning time in Southeast Asia is the concept of a “vibrating medium which, in the suspended gong, the metallophone, the whole gamelan ensemble and other gong ensembles, is allowed to vibrate freely with one stroke, without further control of the fingers, the hands or human volition.”69 This new aesthetic value - the freedom of vibration in instruments with short decays and longer duration, was highly favored in the court societies.70

The trichord, gong-like bass 5ths and the white key cluster resembles the gong unit that signifies the time division. In the Gamelan ensemble, specific gong tones are sounded on specific beats. For instance,

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70 Ibid.
The musical form and excerpt of the melody from the piece *Perang*.

In this example, the *kenong* and *gong suwukan* signify the gong unit. Usually, the gong with the lowest tone (*gong agaeng* in this piece *Perang*), will signify the end of the piece and played as the final gong unit. Contrary to Western music where downbeats are emphasized, the Gamelan rhythmic stress is end-weighted. Another gong unit example can be shown with the Javanese Court Gamelan piece, *Puspawarna*.

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71 Matusky and Tan, 117.
72 Ibid., 117. The length or number of beats of the gong units are always a multiple of two, and each unit is underpinned by a 2-beat stress unit (weak/strong stress).
EXAMPLE 2–1. One gong in ketaucang form and slendro manyura mode from “Puspawarna” from the Nonesuch record Japanese Court Gamelan (H 72044), side 1, band 1, from the third sound of the gong just before the chorus entry. Used by permission of Nonesuch and Robert E. Brown, field collector.

Puspawarna page 173

73 Malm, 39.
*Puspawarna* page 274

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74 Ibid., 40.
"Puspawarna page 3\textsuperscript{75}\)

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 42.
Puspawarna page 476

Ibid., 43.
In this case, the trichord serves as the drone played by either the *kenong* and *kempul gong* in the opening, the gong at the end is the bass 5ths and white key cluster. Each cell is a *gongan*.

Besides that, the smallest colotomic unit in Gamelan music consists of 4 beats as illustrated in both examples. The melodic line, known as the *balungan*, played by the Saron on *Perang* and the Saron Peking on *Puspawarna* corresponds with the tetrachord motif in Cells 1 to 3 serves as the musical counterpart of the drone. In fact, the musical forms in the Malay gamelan repertory are based on the structure of the gong unit. Matusky and Tan talks about

A strong possibility that the forms in the gong units reflect the structure in the dances of the joget gamelan repertory, although no published documentation is available to support this observation. The polyphonic stratification in this music gives great importance to the melody, which is always symmetrical and balanced in structure, and always underpinned by a colotomic unit. The melody occurs in a basic, unornamented rendition simultaneously with an ornamented version, thus producing a heterophonic texture. The percussive rhythmic patterns are played on the gendang drum. These rhythms follow the structure of the dance steps, gong unit and melody, while the musical form or gong unit is marked in the music by the knobbed gongs in the ensemble.

Up to this point, although the Gamelan seems to be a plausible primary influence due to pitches derived from the *patet barang* tonal system as well as the colotomic unit of *gongan*, yet that is only evident in Cells 1 and 2. The dilemma lies within the C# pitch in Cell 3 which does not belong to the *patet barang*. Instead, A Major tonality is suggested. It is possible, given Ng’s musical globality to integrate and assimilate both the Western and

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77 Malm, 38. Gongan is the fundamental unit consisting of all the events that occur between one stroke of the largest gong and the next.
78 Matusky and Tan, 116. There are also many different 8-beat rhythmic patterns but usually structured in two short, contrasting 4-beat phrases.
79 Matusky and Tan, 120.
Eastern sound world to blend both tonality and modality in one work. However, I would like to propose two bold propositions: 1) that the tetrachord motif in cell 3 is a hybrid of both the Malay gamelan tonal system as well as the *patet barang* and contains pitches 3 of both system;\(^{80}\) 2) that the emphasis of the minor and Major 2nd intervals prevails, for both tetrachord motif is constructed upon the basis of having the first and second note being a Major 2nd apart (D-E and A-B) then the third and fourth note a minor 2nd apart (A-G# and D-C#). Both propositions mutually influence each other for the *patet barang* scale contains both minor and major 2nd intervals. Besides that, the minor/Major 2nd is a result caused by the quartal harmonies, which is essentially the by-product of the *pelog* scale as the interval of a 5th is a leading characteristic of the gamelan system. Lentz explains the differences between the Eastern and Western conception of a fifth as follow,

The Western conception of a fifth is simple in that our diatonic scale of seven tones within the octave permits recognition of the interval as being the number of tones removed from a reference tone. This is also possible in Javanese *pelog*, which has seven tones, and this approach was used to explain the interval by several musicians. In the case of the *slendro*, with only five tones to the octave, this approach does not hold. It would seem that the “natural” sound of a fifth would be paramount guiding the conception of size in many instances. This “natural” sound, heard as a second overtone of a fundamental, is apparent in many places in nature, such as when overblowing on a bamboo tube.\(^{81}\)

In similar fashion, the tritone becomes the sub-product of the 4ths and 5ths interval by alteration of a minor 2nd. Given the “imperfect” quality of the varying tones of the key-plates, as some of the pitches could not be distinctly established, we can also argue that the

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\(^{80}\) Becker, Judith. “Earth, Fire, Śakti, and the Javanese Gamelan” *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 32, no. 3 (1988) 389. Malaysia gamelan has less carefully tuned pitches than do contemporary Javanese ensembles. Note that *patet barang* does not have C# as pitch 3 but the Malay gamelan system does. Similarly, the Malay gamelan system does not have D as pitch 3 but the *patet barang* does (using A as reference tone).

\(^{81}\) Lentz, 51.
tritone mimics the indeterminate pitches of the gamelan instruments. Variation of pitches is almost unavoidable as it depends heavily on not only the material but also the workmanship in constructing the parts for the instrument. On top of that, we will discover sub-roles of the minor/Major 2nd intervals in the following cells when minor/Major 9ths are superimposed to create a more dramatic and dynamic effect.

For the above reasons, although it might be too early to draw a conclusion if tonality or modality is preferred in this analysis, the equilibrium seems to tip towards the dominance of the Gamelan influences. That being said, we continue to look at the following cells to consider other possibilities.

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82 Ibid, 48. Lentz points out that this condition is acceptable to the Indonesian performer.
Cell 4

Upon first glance, although it seems that the alto has the main theme, it is only an outline with a similar 4-note theme B#-C#-F#-E# [0 1 5 6], also a subset of the pelog scale (pitches 5612). The main theme is actually in the lower staff (labeled in purple). This momentary entanglement of two themes, with the actual theme disguised for it is no longer presented as a clear linear melodic line, is a wonderful illustration of the subtle “changes in movement”, as if the small changes in nature where the dynamic between the two “voices” is as if being in the midst of the rainforest, where things are foggy and unclear. The uncertainty of whether the alto line is more important obtains its answer through the repetition of the statement, allowing the listener to pick up on the minor 2nd B#-C# and realize that it is an illusion. It could also be Ng trying to capture the fleeting moment of the flawed beauty in nature, where nothing is absolute. As a performer, I treasure the freedom Ng has given us to either bring out certain voices, such as the D-E-A-G# tetrachord motif in the left hand at the beginning, or to blur the lines between that motif and the deceptive alto

83 Refer to composer’s introductory notes.
line to create an impressionistic effect, especially added with his instructions to create a “celeste like” sound and to play it “irregularly”.

There are two main components in this cell, separated by a fermata. In the first component, separated by the dotted bar line into two boxes, traces of A-D-C# [0 1 5] from Cell 3 are detected in the soprano (highlighted in green). The missing pitches are C, G and A#. The most frequent pitches are F#, E# and G# (especially the prior 2 pitches). The second box repeats the first box entirely with the exception of changing the last note from E# to a high G# (in blue). Both pitches (span of Major 3rd) happen to be the last note of the two 4-notes theme as well.

In the 2nd component, we have two occurrences of the patet barang in both the soprano and alto lines: a clear delineation of the accentuated patet barang Eb-F-Bb-A with an additional minor 2nd interruption by D or E between the repeating motives in the upper register; as well as the B-C #-F#-E# [0 1 5 7] set in the lower layer, but played faster. The second set of pitches are seen as a minor 2nd alteration of the first segment where B# is replaced by B (labeled in red).

Cell 4, B C# F# E# pitches
Contrary to the first segment where the minor 2nds were the main focus, we see an increase on Major 2nds in the second segment presented in the alto line as pitches F G C# B [0 2 6 8] (labeled in green).

The appearance of the E natural at the end of the first of the couplets (labeled in green) signals for the immediate re-entrance of the main theme, causing a quasi-overlapping effect, making it cyclical.\textsuperscript{84} Also note that the first couplet ends with E and the second with F (labeled in blue). The minor 2nd alteration can either be seen as an attempt to rectify the intervals to the proper \textit{patet barang}, or it could be mimicking the actual sounds of the gamelan ensemble where the size of the intervals vary and changes the timbre thus producing a slightly “incorrect” pitch.

These two distinctive segments can be seen as a sort of \textit{yin-yang} balancing play. While the first segment has more rhythmic flexibility and irregularity as well as overlapping registers, the second has not only more rigid rhythms, but also specified accented notes as well as

wider registers separating two hands. This idea of expansion and contraction runs parallel with the Gamelan practice for it allows for individual variation within a cyclic nature.  

After performing this piece several times, I quickly realized that this cell has more room for experimentation than the others. The bending of the tempo (irama levels), rubatos and liberties, combined with the acoustics of the hall, creates a different sound effect every time. This cell resembles the formation of rain in the rainforest, for the first segment sounds like water droplets from drip tips, and gently intensifies to a rain pour. The rainforests in Malaysia are so densely packed, with the crowns of trees side by side, often intermingling. This not only causes slow rain, but rays of sunshine can barely reach the floor of the forest.

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85 Lindsay, 53.
86 Refer to footnote 111 regarding irama.
87 https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/rain-forest
88 Seddon, George. “Characteristics and Classification of a Rainforest.” Landscape Australia, vol. 6, no. 4, (1984) 276. Rainforest is typically “closed-forest”. Slow rain happens due to dense vegetation so rain droplets falling from the forest’s emergent layer can take up to 10 minutes to reach the floor of the forest.
Dense vegetation of the rainforest\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 280.
Cell 5

We can perhaps catch a glimpse of Ng’s subconscious sound world in cell 5. The most Gamelan sounding cell, this cell features the *patet barang* scale in its authentic form - Eb-F-Bb-A (Major 9th and minor 9th couplet). This creates an opposition to cell 4 where the *patet barang* scale is slightly concealed amongst cluttered chords and other materials. Similar to cells 1, 2 and 3, cell 5 begins with the same trichord [0 1 6] - just inverted and transposed.

The insertion of D in the middle of the cell (look for the arrow) is significant on multiple levels. First, D signifies an intrusion, as if recalling the true “distant voice” of the main theme. However its presence is quickly denied by the obnoxiously loud intrusion of the Eb. Although it can also be considered as being within the *pelog* scale (23561) yet the authentic *patet barang* would contain a C instead of D. Also, the assembly of all the pitches in this cell constitutes a Bb Major scale, although due to the wideness of register it is barely
recognizable without close observation. We could also consider the possibility of a mixture of multiple pelogs, which in this case would be pelog selisir.

![Diagram of Balinese Patutan]

Complete Chart of Balinese Patutan

**Figure 10: Selisir, 123(4)56(7)**

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<td>1</td>
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<td>5</td>
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Selisir consists of pitches 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 of the pelog (C#-D-E-G#-A)

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This could possibly be one of those instances that Ng is writing from the recollections of those familiar Gamelan sounds that he heard from past experiences. The pelog selisir is usually described as having a “high, light, graceful and brilliant quality”. Customarily speaking, the mixture of patets are to be avoided unless wanting to create a special effect, for each patet has a designated function and a “different associations of mood and time of performance”. It is highly possible for the composer to want to create a special effect, by subconsciously blending together two different patets- patet barang and patet selisir purely by aural recollections. Another theory is that he could be creating a new scale, where he divides the octave into 6 pitches, consisting of two groups containing a minor 2nd followed by Major 2nd separated by a Major 3rd, which would still contain the essential elements of a pelog of having varying size of small and large intervals (especially with the 3rd involved).

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92 McGraw, 71.
93 Becker, “Old Modes and New Music” Traditional Music in Modern Java: Gamelan in a Changing Society, (University of Hawai’i Press, 1980) 78. Becker describes patet as the profile of the use of characteristic contours on particular pitch levels (patterns) in particular position within a composition.
Bukofzer explains that the *pelog* is basically a tetrachordal, not a pentachordal system.

There is reason to believe that tone-systems based on the fourth are generally older than those based on the fifth. The fundamental tetrachord is divided into a descending major third (\(e'-c'\)) and minor second (\(c'-b'\)). It should be kept in mind that either interval can be somewhat larger, so that the whole tetrachord may cover nearly a tritone. The main point is the succession of a large interval and a small one. As a matter of fact the size of the individual intervals is of secondary importance, provided that they are kept in the proper proportion to each other.94

Tonality-wise, D is also surrounded by a c minor pentascale, which arguably can be seen as being a portion of the *pelog* scale if G is replaced by G#. The minor 2nd alteration of G to G#, which can be enharmonically respelled as Ab heightens its importance for it would equate the cell into consisting of Eb Major scale instead of Bb Major. On top of that, the main pitches in Cell 5, D-Eb-F-A-Bb is \([0 \ 1 \ 3 \ 7 \ 8]\). If we use D as the divider, D-Eb-F is \([0 \ 1 \ 3]\) and D-A-Bb is \([0 \ 1 \ 5]\), both subsets of \([0 \ 1 \ 3 \ 5]\).

Another thing to pay attention to is the extreme dynamic contrast of Eb (\(sffff\)) and the almost muted A (\(pp\)) in the opening D-Eb-A trichord which signifies to the performer to

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94 Bukofzer, 243-244.
emphasize the prior. Using the Gamelan scale derivation method, Eb would be the *dong* and A is the *dung* (fifth below), both the basic tones of the *pelog selisir*, and D is *ding* (fifth below supporting tones), the secondary tone.\textsuperscript{95}

![Diagram of Eb as reference tone]

Looking at the first and last note of this cell (including grace notes), Ng is able to highlight the prominence of the minor 2nds, with the D grace note accompanying the Eb main note as well as the A grace note against the Bb main note; as well as 5ths, noticeably the Eb and Bb main notes and subtly the tritone of Eb-A in the opening.

\textsuperscript{95} Lentz, 33.
How would this affect the performer? Experience tells us to immediately identify core ideas, such as identifying the key signature, time signature, dominant or tonic, etc. Such “natural” inclinations, through repetitive habits, creep in quietly and cuff us to thinking inside the box. To be able to let myself go, I feel like I have to go against my instincts and just go with the flow instead of holding onto the “properness” of being aware and organized, having a thorough understanding of the structure of the piece. That being said, the opening tritone Eb-A serves as an instant reminder that this is not a typical, conventional tonal piece. Instead of being hung up on the above mentioned elements, I felt that I should focus more on grasping the expressivity and emotions that flows through, like the grandiose of the Gamelan instruments in a traditional or royal ceremony. The act of striking encapsulates the essence of the Gamelan, for the Javanese word gamel refers to a type of hammer, and the word gamelan refers only to the instruments themselves.96

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96 Lindsay, 10. The act of playing gamelan instruments is karawitan, derived from the word rawit which means “intricate” or “finely worked”.

Minor 2nds (green), 5ths (red)
Cell 6

Cell 6 is the only cell where the opening [0 1 6] chord is reversed in order and placed at the end of the cell. With the order flipped around, this time the gong-like ring signifies a change in scenery with the lowest note, B, being repeatedly struck at the beginning, paying homage to the original work, *Rimba*. This cell can be considered as a *pathetan* (transition). Benjamin Brinner explains the functions of a *pathetan* in his research, *At the Border of Sound and Silence: The Use and Function of Pathetan in Javanese Gamelan*,

*A pathetan* serves as a transition: it bridges the gap between silence and the sound of the full gamelan; preceding and following lengthier compositions played on the whole gamelan, *pathetan* occur at the border between silence and sound, and then again sound and silence. The looseness of coordination, the unarticulated form and the soft sound of *pathetan* provide an effective means of leading into and out of the metrical, rhythmically regular, structure of the larger compositions which they frame. *Pathetan* functions as a sort of framework or envelope, ensuring a smooth transition from one state to another. They serve a number of other purposes central to the structuring and appreciation of gamelan music: they provide tonal and temporal orientation on several planes for performer and listener; they demarcate

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97 Refer to footnote 48.
sections in the structure of the musical program; and they delineate the modal framework.  

The difference being that in *Rimba* the pianist strikes the key loudly for 7 times while holding the \([0\ 1\ 5\ 7]\) motif on the right hand and the lowest A on the left hand, while in *A Distance Voice of the Rain Forest*, the performer damps the strings with the fingers. This is the original score for *Rimba*.

If we take the lowest B, plus the C#-E and D# that bookends the treble register, 0135 is present. The missing class pitches in the treble register (D-G#-A) are the exact pitches of the bass chord at the end. The 2nd cluster after the first fermata is \([0\ 2\ 5]\), a subset of \([0\ 1\ 3\ 5]\) (with a missing A). Following the 3rd fermata is a \([0\ 1\ 5\ 7]\) ascending run (B-C-E-F#). In this cell, there are more silences between each group of notes. The treble staff is

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split into 4 distinct groups, mimicking the 4-notes main theme from cells 1-3 except the long notes are replaced by fermatas. It is more atmospheric with the tremolos mimicking the rustling of leaves, the quick grace notes like droplets of water or rain, and the fleeting runs either inspired by insects or animals gliding and scurrying around the rainforest. I can imagine this cell mimicking sounds of the gambang or the sarun. By maximizing the various registers on the instrument, Ng managed to capture the different layers of the rainforest: the emergent, canopy, understory and forest floor. Each layer has unique characteristics based on differing levels of water, sunlight, and air circulation. While each layer is distinct, they exist in an interdependent system: processes and species within one layer influence those in another. This might explain the independence of the D-G#-A [0 1 6] trichord that stays within the given register. The proportionate layering of sound is common in Gamelan music. The general principle is the larger and lower in pitch the instrument, the more infrequent are the notes played on that instrument in relation to the others, and vice versa.

Personally, I think this cell best represents Ng’s prologue and is one of, if not the most, picturesque.

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100 Lindsay, 47.
Startling the listeners with a jarring D-E-G#-A [0 1 5 7] Major 9th and minor 9th cluster, widely spaced and re-emphasized at the end, cell 7 is definitely the most intense and dramatic passage. The minor 2nd clashes are found in the F-F# dichotomy followed by an evident tritone between the bass G and soprano C# (which also creates another layer of minor 2nd clash with the D in the chord prior). A [0 1 5 7] cluster (Bb-Cb-Eb-F) in the lower bass piles another violent Major 9th-minor 9th clash (with defined Major 3rds in the Augmented G chord in the bass) like two worlds colliding. The resolution (marked by the composer) is perhaps the most intriguing. Putting into account the bass D and the top note of the C#-D#-E#-G# [0 2 4 7] chord G# resolving to A, that would be a Tritone-Perfect 5th resolution. However, if we add the proper execution of the pedal marking into the equation, then do we eliminate bass D and consider C# as the base? In this case, it would be a Perfect 5th-Augmented 5th resolution, which is unconventional based upon western standards. The added diminuendo helps clarify the composer’s intention, because if we choose to do
the opposite, it could intensify the expression of the chord instead. I believe Ng made an excellent artistic decision here, for the resolution could also be justified by the changes of register, by resolving the passage from a wide to narrow register.

Besides the minor and Major 2nd intervals, minor and Major 9ths also play a significant role in this piece, proving especially necessary for expressive purposes, such as intense and climactic moments. Significantly, when Balinese Gamelans are played in pairs, they are tuned slightly apart (which is where the major and minor 2nds come into play) to produce interference beating, eventually creating stretched octaves and compound intervals which have an agitated and shimmering quality.  

Hewitt writes that the Dutch writer Leonhard Huizinga described Gamelan music as comparable to only two things: moonlight and flowing water. He also points out that

The Balinese practice of tuning pairs of instruments slightly different so that when played simultaneously, they create a beautiful shimmering effect. Although this adjustment amounts to a tiny increment, the effect it has on the resultant sound is noticeably significant.

These interference beats can bring listeners into a meditative state, bringing us closer to rasa. As gamelan is often used in sacred rituals and ceremonies, it can also give the listener a feeling of God’s presence. This might be another reading of why the major and minor 9ths intervals (minor 9ths especially as it sounds like a pseudo-octave) are used

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101 Hewitt, 184.
102 Ibid., 184.
103 Ibid., 185.
104 Walton, Susan Pratt. “Aesthetic and Spiritual Correlations in Javanese Gamelan Music.” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, vol. 65, no. 1, (2007) Walton discusses the concept of rasa (meaning ‘feeling’ as it refers to the physical senses of taste, touch and emotional feelings as well as ‘meaning’, such as the essential, often hidden, significance of something obscure). Rasa is integral in Tantric Shaivism, Mahayana Buddhism as well as mystical Islam (Sufism) in Javanese mystical traditions.
extensively throughout this piece. It is not, however, the composer’s intention to mimic the sound of the instrument, nor create new sounds for the piano. Another aspect to be thankful about is the composer’s pianistic considerations to keep the span of the chords within a comfortable reach considering the extreme dynamic level we have to achieve in order to make an impact. The major and minor 9th dichotomy, proceeds with even more clusters at both lower and higher registers, then quickly resolves with an ascending minor 2nd on the top note from G#-A. The intensity is heightened not only by the emphasis of the 9th intervals, as well as the distinctive Tritones present on the 2nd chord at both ends of the spectrum (indicated in red, G-C#).
There are 3 segments in this cell. The first contains the D-E-G#-A pitches embellished by minor 2nd grace notes. The repeated notes, emphasizing the [0 1 5 7] tetrachord, is to be played expressively. Although the second segment also contains the D E G# A pitches, also embellished by minor 2nd grace notes, this time G# is only presented as a grace note. So if we focus mainly on the main notes, excluding the D pitch, the remaining pitches E A Cb F (indicated in blue) is also a [0 1 5 7] set. We can either view this as a transposed set, or see the intervention of F as a promissory note that foretells the actual patet barang that immediately follows after. Further, the ascending scale is the prime form 01368 of the patet barang (56723). As noted above, in the 3rd segment, the patet barang gets its actual quotation with the ‘correct’ pitches (Bb A Eb F). I asked Ng, since he has perfect pitch, if he purposely strayed away from the “actual Gamelan pitches”, to which he answered simply that he just likes the sound of D-E played together.

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105 Cone, Edward T. “Schubert’s Promissory Note: An Exercise in Musical Hermeneutics.” *19th-Century Music*, vol. 5, no. 3, (1982) 235. Cone describes a ‘promissory note’ as a note that has strongly suggested an obligation that it has failed to discharge.

106 The interview was done prior to extensive research of the Gamelan modes, which later is found to be transposable and variable depending on contextualization.
This cell is my personal favorite fragment as it resembles a string instrument, like the Chinese Guzheng or Mandolin 柳琴, as well as the traditional Malay instrument gambus.

![Gambus Image](https://www.dreamstime.com/royalty-free-stock-image-gambus-image26317766)

*Gambus*

The shimmering quality of the *patet barang* tremolos that swell then gently fade away resembles the sun light that tries to break through the dense canopy layer of the rainforest, as if a ray of fleeting sunshine cuts through the dark and humid environment, giving us momentary hope. Also in both the first and second segments, the minor 2nd was given more emphasis, the friction caused by the brushing of chromatic half steps changes from a darker tone to a brighter one instantly with the appearance of the Major 2nd in the 3rd segment (Eb-F).

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Lind National Park, East Gippsland, Victoria\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{108} Seddon and Cameron, 141.
Cell 9

Similar to the expressivity in Cell 7, Cell 9 bursts forth with a combination of two Major 9ths (two stacked Perfect 5ths in the lower bass), minor 2nd and Major 2nd plus a [0 1 3 5] tetrachord B-C#-D-A. This cell has one of the most technically challenging parts with the broken minor 9ths passages. The intensity created by the compound 9th interval, where the lowest note of the piano (A) is juxtaposed with a high B, a minor 2nd shy from the highest note. Towards the end of the cell, there are 4 pairs of minor 9ths interval connected by a minor 2nd of C#-D. The trichord of D#-E-B [0 1 5] in the treble register is a variation of the original D-G#-A [0 1 6], for it still contains both the minor 2nd and Perfect 5th intervals. Not only that but it is also a subset of [0 1 5 7], as well as a subset of the patet barang (transposed by a tritone).
Interestingly, the tone quality of the trichord sounds brighter due to the outward expansion of 5th to a minor 6th.

This succession of minor 9th passagework reminds me of the shrills and screeches of animals I heard that cut through the dense vegetation of the rainforest in one of my trips to Taman Negara Rainforest when I was young. This passage is a quote from Cell 11, derived from the original work *Rimba*.

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109 National Park in Peninsular Malaysia.
Ng continues to exhilarate both performer and listener as Cell 10 takes off with a flourishing ascending run of the same opening notes as cell 9 except arpeggiated and ingeniously changing the bass A to A# (minor 2nd alteration). Once again, the most prominent intervals in this cell are minor 2nds, Major 2nds, minor 9ths and Major 9ths, with minor 9ths being the most apparent interval scattered throughout. It is also used as sound effects in the Bb-A and D-Eb tremolos. Although there is an exact quotation of Cell 9 inserted in the middle, yet again with a minor 2nd alteration, D#-E is altered to D-Eb instead. This bears close resemblance to the *patet barang* (1256) as opposed to the prior. If we consider the cell to be spliced in two, where we take the cascading run as the 1st part up until the first breath mark, and the tremolo and run remnant as the 2nd part (which is to be played repeatedly), both sections begin and end with the same A#/Bb and G# note.
Cell 11 (direct quote from *Rimba*)

Cell 11 can be described as the essence of a tropical rainforest for it resembles the biologically diverse terrestrial ecosystems in many ways. Not only is it the biggest cell, and can even be treated as a movement on its own, multiple quotations are taken from this cell to supply nutrients to other cells, such as cell 4 on the 2nd and 3rd line (marked in orange and light blue), as well as cell 9 on the bottom towards the end (marked in purple).
The DEG#A motif (indicated in red) is played irregularly at first, then rhythmically and almost forcefully at the very end of the cell. This bears resemblance to Cell 4, portraying a *yin-yang* contrast. The free and irregular rhythm at the 1st half gets replaced with a highly rhythmic segment on the 3rd line. The DEG#A motif is slightly altered by a minor 2nd where D# replaces D (highlight in pink) to create a completely different character.

![Diagram](image)

**m2 alteration: D to D#**

**Cell 11**

The minor 2nds are juxtaposed with Major 2nds presented in the Alto and Bass voices. The harmonic crunch is intensified due to overlapping registers between all voices and compound intervals of minor/Major 9ths as well (indicated in blue and yellow).

The *yin-yang* concept is a great tool for creating changes whether “in a subtle or drastic manner”.\(^{110}\) There are many examples in this cell, for instance the F# note on the upper staff (indicated in yellow in figure below) serves as a promissory note that later

\(^{110}\) Refer to composer’s notes.
blossoms into B C# E# F# which is a transposed [0 1 5 7] subset of the main D E G# A motif. Oftentimes we find that the minor alterations of a single note can overturn the character completely.

Another example of how Ng layers the minor/Major 2nds to create harmonic clusters to build towards the climax in this cell is shown below.
Now let’s return and take a look at the quotation from Cell 4. The first quotation indicated in orange is not a direct quotation, but slightly altered and expanded.

Comparison of Cell 4 and Cell 4 quote in Cell 11

Once again, we have a minor 2nd alteration where E natural (bottom example) replaces E# (top example from cell 4). Similar technique is also used in the 2nd quotation from the latter half of cell 4 (refer to analysis of cell 4).
After a thorough and extensive deconstruction of each cell, evidence shows that the
gamelan influence is indeed the fundamental essence of *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*.
Similar to a gamelan composition, this piece is essentially monolinear despite the complex
weaving of multiple parts. McPhee discusses the idea of *pokok gending*, a “source- or root-
tones from which everything else germinates,

(Gamelan composition) is in principle a number of variations on a basic theme,
occuring simultaneously at different pitch levels. All can be referred to a simple
melodic base compressed within the range of an octave. This is the *pokok gending*,
the source- or root-tones from which everything else germinates. Thus the whole
elaborate superstructure, while remaining idiomatically traditional, is fluid, and in a
state of continual stylistic change, so that there are “old” styles, “dated” and “new”
styless or orchestration and figuration.¹¹¹

Therefore, the method of procedure can be understood as follows in this piece: The
*gender* (*pokok gending* or *balung gending*) is the D E A G# tetrachord motif (*gatra*). This
motif is paraphrased in different registers and transpositions of the *patet barang*.¹¹² Each
‘instrument’(line) has its own *irama*, starting with a more irregular pattern to a rapid and
more syncopated rhythm that is notated.¹¹³ From there, embellishments and figurations
spiral as variations of the *gender* while the *gatra* is punctuated by accents, at times
emphasizing the minor 2nds, and others the Major 2nds. The forceful white key clusters is

¹¹¹ McPhee, 259. *Pokok gending* is the Balinese term, in general it is known as the *gender* (*gendhing*), or
in Javanese it is called the *balung gending* or *balungan*, which is the underlying melody (framework) of the
Gamelan composition. Also refer to Malm, 38 and Sutton, 67.
¹¹² For a detailed discussion of the method procedure, see McPhee, *The Five-Tone Gamelan Music of Bali*,
pp.259-260.
¹¹³ Lindsay, 53. *Irama* refers to the proportionate distribution of notes of the *saron* line (the *balungan*) to all
the instruments that play more notes than this line. Basically, it represents the different tempo relationships in a
*gongan*. 
the *gongan* signifying the end of the rhythmic unit, then we are presented with a *pathetan* that serves as a transition with the recurring *gatra* on both staffs, pulsating rapidly and slowly dies down with the decaying timbre of the *sarons*. Then we are left with not only the tetrachord *gatra* resonance, but also the collective sounds of the entire ensemble coming together as a drone. As explained by José Maceda in *A Concept of Time in a Music of Southeast Asia*,

Drone may be understood to be not only a sustained sound, a continuation of the long vibration of gongs, but also a constantly repeating phrase of one or more pitches played by one or several instruments for the duration of the music. The continuous and repeating sound may be an identifiable pitch or not, a series of pitches making a phrase, or it may form a group of repeating sounds. Moreover, several instruments may each play a repeating sound, and together they constitute a drone. The repetition may form irregular or regular beats, a sound or sounds grouped into one, two or four beats.

Contrary to ostinato in Western music, the pulse and the timbre creates the drone, marking time and not pitch. The pitches are often lost in the timbre of the Gamelan ensemble as the indefinite pitches interrupt each other, then blend together to create a homogenous sound as a collective.

Unlike the Western musicians where markings are required to indicate for them to repeat certain passages, Javanese musicians “assume repetition until an aural signal is

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114 Brinner, 2. *Pathetan* indicates and affirms musical mode as well as serves as a transition. *Pathetan* is often played by a group of three to four musicians, weaving together a “loosely defined texture of melodies which diverge from and then converge on each of a series of pitches” after the final big gong. The music is a-metric and has irregular rhythms without a common pulse, “hovers somewhere near the edge of perception, insignificant in length and sound when compared with the main components of the program” but is performed frequently, creating an ethereal sound similar to certain cells in Ng’s *Distant Voice*.

115 Maceda, 12-13.

116 Ibid., 13.
given either to end or proceed to a second passage. Individual variation is acceptable and in some ways unavoidable. Sutton talks about the idea of individual variation within repetition in *Individual Variation in Javanese Gamelan Performance*.

What are Javanese conceptions concerning individual variation of a repeated passage? First, they do not consider exact repetition to be possible. While two passages may sound identical to a careful listener, they will differ in some minute detail of performance, whether or not any difference is intended by the performer. Thus, a subtle and perhaps subliminal degree of variation is taken for granted. Beyond this level, however, one’s part is expected to reflect something of one’s self and of the moment. If one individual performs a repeated passage, his playing on certain instruments may vary according to his mood and in response to his fellow performers. The same passage performed on two occasions by two different musicians is expected to reflect differences between their personalities.

Unlike a Gamelan ensemble, *A Distant Voice* consists of only one instrument and one performer. Although Gamelan playing is “not a soloist’s art” and “no one melodic line can be singled out and played alone”, the advantage of the piano is the ability to layer many voices at the same time, and perhaps imitate the effects of *karawitan*. It is then up to the soloist to create elements of unpredictability or immediacy while maintaining an extent of integrity in honoring the creation of the composer. Given that the soloist has complete reign over artistic decisions, flexibilities for self-expression such as dynamic level, rhythmic structures as well as melodic phrasing compounds onto the notion of freedom in this specific piece. For instance, one of the most interesting interpretations of this piece was by Haozi Yoh, a Malaysian pianist based in London. In her recording, with the composer’s

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117 Sutton, 170.
118 Sutton, 171.
119 Lindsay, 56.
permission, she not only included other extended techniques such as strumming the strings as well as knocking on the metal bar of the piano, but also included singing.

As a matter of fact, for my lecture recital, presented in November of 2022 at Duncan Recital Hall, Rice University, I made several amendments to the piece with the composer’s permission. Not only did I include the original opening motivic fragment of *Rimba*, I also added the ending part of the piano cadenza as well, which was not incorporated in Cell 11 but found in the beginning of cell 9 instead. Therefore, I experimented with playing cell 9 right after 11 and really enjoyed that particular heightened dramatic element that it brought to my performance.

120 Interview with Haozi Yoh over email correspondence, December 2019.
As a rule of thumb, I do not pre-plan the order of performance for the cells. However, I do have my personal preferences when it comes to matching certain pairs of cells. Besides sewing cell 11 and 9 together, I also like pairing cells 5 and 9 together, because of the minor 2nd alteration in the highest note where cell 5 has B-flat and cell 9 has this repeated high B notes. I also find it rather effective when I pair cell 6 with 11 because the trichord at the end of cell 6, together with the effective use of the pedal, brings us into this almost mystical beginning of cell 11.
That being said, the freedom of expression has to be executed within a controlled environment. Much like the Javanese admiration for the “control exercised by a musician with the potential to refrain from what might be perceived as excessive show”, Ng expresses similar feelings when reminding the performer to “make artistic judgments based on sound knowledge, and with good taste.”121 The idea of moderation without sacrificing excellence in quality pervades not only this musical work, but also Ng’s personal life, as we have seen.

In all, Cell 11 expresses a different concept of time, seemingly unstructured, the idea of timeless beauty and of liberating oneself in this secular world. It becomes the seed that blooms and forms a tropical rainforest where the scenery transforms with each individual’s experience, creating their personal memories, their own “voices”.

121 Sutton, 177; Interview with Ng.
Reflections

This thesis research has been an astonishingly overwhelming and emotional journey for me. While going through the piece again and again, not only for this document, but my lecture recital as well, the preparation has allowed me to sharpen my thoughts and feelings. What I thought was a definite answer was endlessly overwritten by constant findings of new facts, refreshing my search results. The temporal essence of my reality, my immediate truth, was stymied due to new input and findings. The endless effort to do justice to the interpretation of the piece, to honor the wishes of the composer to keep “freedom” in mind, though not futile, remained unfruitful because of the contamination of certain exterior elements. At times I find myself consciously pairing certain cells together or bringing out the gatra motif, but that often causes me to lose spontaneity. It seems rather ironic that the more I deconstruct and analyze this piece, the further I get from freedom (free or void from freedom). This leads me to think about the freedom of interpretation. Similar to the philosophical world where much of the foundation has been rooted deeply upon the Western teachings of Socrates and Plato or the Eastern thoughts of Confucianism, Lao Tzu or Taoism, we often are influenced by a specific recording that is to our liking, then reinterpret it and find new perspectives. These self-imposed limitations are almost unavoidable, for we are cuffed by other elements such as the correct performance practice or mindset of the composer at the time of creation. For example, it remains a popular question if we should play Bach, on a modern piano, as if on a harpsichord or clavichord, or just adapt it for the modern piano. I guess this runs parallel to our current world, where science and technology urges some population to advance forward while some, perhaps
voluntarily, chooses to continue at a more gradual pace. So if I am to circumscribe myself to the expectation of others, then I lose my freedom; that I might be doing the right thing, but not do justice to the self I am, at least the self I am in that present moment.

During our interview, in which Ng was very generous with his time, I had the luxury of discussing this dilemma that I face when exploring unfamiliar music. This is not directed towards solely modern music, but any piece of music that I am learning for the first time: to find a balance between honoring the music and yet still having freedom of my expression.

To date, I have spent three decades working on mastering the instrument, and specializing in classical music. While immersed in this process of concentration and adaptation, I became increasingly skeptical of the choices I have made along the way. Through filtering and abandoning other choices in order to pursue my “truth”, do I feel comfortable admitting that I am making the correct decision, at the expense of other truths that I consider less than mine? For isn’t it worrying though, if down the road I find myself startled and awakened to the fact that I took the “wrong” path and accumulated bad habits?

Personally, although it is key to first master the instrument, for it opens up possibilities, my mastery sometimes restricts me when tackling certain music, especially the conventional and over-popularized pieces. It seems that there is a pre-fixed mold that I have to fit into as there already exists the “ideal rendition”. Right at this time, I wonder if my sense of satisfaction derived from what I consider a successful performance is due to my
understanding of what the expectations are for that piece, similar to an Olympian athlete knowing that their end goal is crossing the finishing line, or sailing through a math test at school. And the definition of success does not apply uniformly to every field, as art is subjective. In art, even flawed beauty is beauty, or at least a manifestation of beauty. The amount of time spent on practicing the piano translates into amassing an endless, cyclical process of selections and eliminations. As I ascend to a higher level, I am binding myself with accumulated knowledge while creating a musical microcosm of natural selection. The invisible limitations that I have unconsciously set beg the question, is there only one single truth, or the absolute “way” 道 as discussed in Taoism? That is something I struggle with, the idea that my truth may be as valid as another person’s truth, that my interpretation is as valid even if denied by some. On another note, the goal of specialization is perfecting your craft. In spite of that, if nature is imperfect, then the idea of perfection goes against what is considered natural. Having an objective, an attainable goal collides with the idea of subjectivity being part of the beauty of our art, for it takes away the wonderment of the unknown.

Ng agrees with me, and pointed out that he intentionally started his compositional process without using the piano to avoid having the fingers go to the “natural habits or inclinations” 122. The piece is undoubtedly well written and fits the fingers comfortably due to Ng’s masterful skills at the piano. However, although I find myself being able to quickly adapt to the notes written on the page; the amount of time, the gap between the notes, silences, and the freeform writing is something I found very challenging to master. This

122 Interview with Ng.
reminds me of the initial steps when I first learned the instrument, finding the approach to the keys rather unnatural as I had to curve the fingers in a particular manner and use only the little muscles to lift and play every single note, then coordinating every part of your body to materialize the thoughts into auditive sounds. The ultimate goal, to be one with the piano and to have ease in technique and have absolute command over every single action down to the smallest details to create nuances and colors, goes through a cycle of developments from an unnatural stage to a natural one. This process of naturalization occurs in every waking moment, even for A Distant Voice of the Rainforest. Upon first reading, I was quick to catch on the minor/Major 2nds and minor/Major 9ths because it sounded so “wrong” to my ears. These dissonances that never get “resolved” were initially so foreign to me, yet gradually became the new norm and soon taken for granted. At last, I found myself embracing and appreciating this unknown sound world created by these intervals. What was considered extraneous became intrinsic, what was “wrong” became correct, it became natural.

Similar to Ng’s younger self, I too went through the Yamaha system, attending group classes as well as individual lessons which involved composition. I have experienced the sense of liberation while composing, besides finding pleasure while performing because music makes no sound unless played. When I revisit my old compositions, my thoughts and emotions have changed significantly at this point. I am reminded of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who described the two selves of an individual thusly:

In order to move the first self to this withdrawal, the deeper self lets the surrounding world become what it is - become doubtful. The world around us is
unstable and, at every moment, can be changed into the opposite. And not one person can be found who, by his power or by his wish's incantation, can force this exchange. The deeper self now shapes the deceitful flexibility of the surrounding world in such a way that it is no longer desirable to that first self. The first self, then, either must look to kill the deeper self - to have it forgotten, whereby the whole thing is dropped - or it must concede that the deeper self is right. For to want to predicate constancy about that which constantly changes is indeed a contradiction, and, as soon as one confesses that it changes, it admittedly can change in that same moment. However much that first self shrinks from this, there has never been found any chatterbox so clever or thought-forger so cunning that he can invalidate the deeper self’s eternal claim. Only one way out is given; to bring the deeper self to silence by letting the voice of inconstancy drown it out.123

Hence, if I, as the creator of my own works, experience a multitude of truths between my “first self” and “deeper self”, why can’t others as well? By accepting the reality that nothing is finished or perfected, that we are part of an ongoing evolution, that impermanence is given in nature and expected in life, only then will we be able to move forward with a healthy and happy mindset while enjoying the process.124 Although it is rather hard to surrender ourselves to reality, without resistance nor judgment.

What does it mean to be true to yourself, if the self you are is always shifting?125

The idea of the shifting self is definitely one of many acquisitions I have benefited from this piece, that the self I am is constantly evolving.

124 Lao Tzu talks about life as a series of natural and spontaneous changes which should not be resisted for it only creates sorrow. Hence, let reality be reality.
125 Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi : The Japanese Art of Impermanence (Boston: Tuttle Pub, 2003) 27. Juniper discusses the four tenets of Wabi Sabi 1) Everything in the universe is in flux, coming from or returning to nothing; 2) Wabi sabi art is able to embody and suggest this essential truism of impermanence; 3) Experiencing wabi sabi expressions can engender a peaceful contemplation of the transience of all things; 4) By appreciating this transience a new and more holistic perspective can be brought to bear on our lives.
By comparison, modern music is still rather “new” to Southeast Asia. In fact, I would say that it is still in its infancy. Therefore, although it is challenging, the biggest benefit to this is that there are less stereotypes, and we are able to keep an open mind to new ideas and experimentation. The freedom to explore, to eliminate the boundaries of exclusivity and infuse contrasting cultures to create new sounds are our strengths. I am sure that others share my insecurities as an Asian approaching Western music, for too often have I received comments such as “not born into the respected culture and hence does not fully embrace the essence of the music”. I beg to differ, considering the current landscape of Asian musicians dominating the Western music scene. That being said, this trauma continues to haunt me till this day. Ng was able to utilize his Euro-Western education, then return to his native country, blending the voices of Southeast Asia, his personal Buddhist principles and Taoist beliefs into his musical world. As a matter of fact, this pluralistic nature is embedded within Malaysian culture. This collision of worlds deeply resonated with me, specifically with the concept of time in A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest - either with the Gamelan colotomic unit or the idea of using pulse and timbre as a time marker. Brinner delineates the idea of a drone as a unifying factor in the music of Southeast Asia.

One unifying factor in the music of Southeast Asia is the element of repetition which has become a musical form itself, one which may be called drone, ostinato or punctuation in solo instruments as well as complex ensembles including the gamelan and the phi phaad. Repetition and pulse, an element of drone, are measures of time which are anchored in most instrumental musical forms in Southeast Asia. While in India, drone is a tonal center, in Southeast Asia, drone is a pulse, a regular repetition of percussion instruments, principally gongs, drums and

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126 Van der Heide, William, Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002) 23. Van der Heide explains that Malaysia is a society crossed by lines of voluntary and forced connectedness due to geographic location and historical consequence.

127 Refer to footnote 47.
cymbals. Drone is a center of time which controls melody and the space around which melody moves. It is a pillar which supports music itself, like a law of nature, and equilibrium between man and nature. Drone expresses notions of infinity with an inner life made alive by simple beats and timbres, colors of indefinite pitches of low-sounding bossed gongs and diffused, scattered sounds of flat gongs, bamboo and wooden percussions.128

The art of bending and varying time in Gamelan exemplifies the individualistic approach of Javanese musicians to the music despite its pluralist nature for the gendhing (essence) is never lost.129 Unlike Western music where time is often dictated, Gamelan music focuses more on being present in the moment. Sutton describes the Javanese gendhing as a sketch rather than a fully outlined work.

The Javanese idea of a piece (gendhing) is an outline which is to be filled in by musicians with similar but not identical sensibilities. If Beethoven's score is a blueprint which the players must follow in detail to build their structure of sound, the Javanese gendhing is more a sketch which may serve as the basis for varied interpretation. This sketch, moreover, usually resembles others in a clearly perceivable manner- both in form and content. The traditional Javanese composer, far from being encouraged to create anything “completely original”, is expected to build a new piece by the centonization method described by Hughes above. His new composition must be familiar- a variation of what already exists.130

Another example of individualism, highlighted by Lindsay, applies to the tuning of the instrument as well.

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128 Brinner, 45.
129 In fact the act of individual variation is considered to be honoring the spirit of Gamelan.
130 Sutton, 67. Hughes describes the technique used in Gregorian chants as “centonization”, meaning patchwork as most of the material would be selected from the stock repertoire with free bits of material to effect the connections.
Javanese tradition ruled that the ancient, sacred gamelan sets could not be copied exactly. The same ruling applied (and to some extent still applies) to the tunings of the palace gamelans. Even today it is considered impudent and something of an insult to an old, revered gamelan set for someone ordering a new gamelan to deliberately copy exactly the older tuning. The tuning of a gamelan set must be understood as part of its own identity, together with the actual sound quality of the bronze itself. In the same way, as Western concert musicians seek out the special quality of, say, a Stradivarius violin, so too does a Javanese musician appreciate the individual tone and tuning of a particular set of gamelan instruments.131

If I am able to embody the spirit of the Javanese masters, as well as Taoism, perhaps I can be more at peace with my decisions.

In this instance, I can deduce that there will never be a single, ideal rendition for A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest. Perhaps that is the answer that Ng is searching for, a Zen view of the world we live in. The illusion of perfection is a beautiful thought, but unrealistic, for we will never be content with the present. I think I begin to understand Ng’s way of living, to understand that the art of living is a flawed beauty, that we must accept the flow of life for no person holds all the knowledge of the universe. So we have to choose to accept and acknowledge that our finite life can only hold a finite amount of knowledge. In the end, through endless trials and errors passed through several generations, the essence that survives becomes the new truth, although that is already a delayed judgment. As Jordan Peterson points out, we “live within a framework that defines the present as eternally lacking and the future as eternally better” for we “always encounter the world in a state of insufficiency and seek its correction.”132 It makes me realize how small I am in this infinite

131 Lindsay, 41.
132 Peterson, 104.
world. Therefore I will be at peace with my decisions, and realize that this research is only a temporal truth in my shifting world.

From where I stand, I too am working on acknowledging and appreciating the ideas of Impermanence, Imperfection and Incomplete in Buddhism. I guess this piece came at the perfect time. I find it ironic yet comforting that at the end of my studenthood, I am still finding new ways to improve my relationship with this lifelong companion, with music as well. Not only did this piece challenge me in multiple ways, pianistically and musically speaking, it also became somewhat of an interactive art form that inspires me to look at life differently. Though the main vessel is the piano, a Western creation, the Southeast Asian elements (rainforest and gamelan music) from this piece bridges my roots and makes it more relatable. It is a consummation of cultural exchanges between both worlds. This feeling of *deja vu*, of adapting and becoming more comfortable with something, from feeling highly unnatural to letting it flow instinctively, seems slightly bizarre as it is more pronounced than before if I were to learn another piece by Chopin or Rachmaninoff. It is as if I’m treading on unknown yet familiar territory. Although I am considerably more accustomed with traditional Southeast Asian music, yet the open-endedness of having no conceivable target makes this journey exciting but worrying. On another level, although I have aural recollections of the Gamelan timbre, yet I was clueless when it comes to the theoretical concepts as well as modes. Frankly, I am feeling so at ease with the Western analytical methods (such as set theory or functional harmony) that I question whether I

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133 Becker, “Earth, Fire, Śakti, and the Javanese Gamelan”, 388. In Java, the Indic idea of *sakti* becomes inextricably fused with indigenous intuitions about the transformed earth that becomes a gong ensemble. Over layered meanings form a rich net of relationships between the gamelan ensemble, the music of the gamelan, and the spiritual force of the natural world.
have somehow lost my roots. Now, I find myself standing at the crossroads of being somewhat acquainted with both sides, as if I’m hearing the distant voices of both East and West. I know as a fact that I am not, and never will be perfect. In this fashion, my saturated imperfections are ever present in my piano playing. Nonetheless, one might argue that these blemishes are what makes the performance part of the human experience. In this world of logic, as Juniper points out, we live in a "world that is constantly being analyzed and explained by intellectual machinations, a world that no longer is in direct contact with the present." From time to time, I fear that by becoming a learned musical intellect, I might have left behind curiosity and open-mindedness along the way. The only way to mediate appropriately between chaos and order, between the wandering self is to have the awareness that you are always inadequate, always insufficient. That is the human desire, that we will always be a minor 2nd away from “perfection”. Juniper points out, 

To Taoism that which is absolutely still or absolutely perfect is absolutely dead, for without the possibility of growth and change there can be no Tao. In reality there is nothing in the universe which is completely perfect or completely still; it is only in the minds of men that such concepts exist.

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134 Juniper, 50.  
135 Ibid., 24. Juniper talks about how education and devotion to science leads us towards leaving behind the ideas that “the world may hold a little more magic than we suspect”.  
136 Peterson, 62. Peterson about how we “eternally inhabit order, surrounded by chaos”, that “we eternally occupy known territory, surrounded by the unknown” and so we experience ‘meaningful engagement when we mediate appropriately between them.”  
137 In the Western history of the minor 2nd/semitone trajectory, it was first seen as something which requires resolution in a tonal harmonic framework, and later utilized by composers such as Chopin and Liszt became a useful tool for producing character, then 20th century composers such as the Second Viennese School did not attempt to resolve this caustic dissonance. What seemed to be initially at opposite ends with the Gamelan practice became analogous.  
138 Juniper, 17.
The collaboration between the dreamer (composer) and the doer (performer) allows both Ng and I to inch closer to the desired goal despite our different musical inclinations. Surprisingly, the idea of having multiple truths consoles me. The idea that we, or our parallel truths can co-exist does not invalidate or eradicate the reality of the individual experience, for what we disagree with is as important as what we affirm. Living in this world amidst overloading information, confusions and chaos, we too are part of the human experience. Kierkegaard talks about how easily people forgets what it is to be a human being for we are so focused on the “dissimilarity between one person and another.”

As you can see, I do not merely see *A Distance Voice of the Rain Forest* as a musical composition, but more of an art that emanates the quintessence of Taoism, the art of being. In this profession, every live performance involves a sense of urgency and immediacy in facing the “unknown”. From the silence in the air to being in the present, our heightened senses magnify every minute, nuanced emotion. We almost forget the humane aspect, focusing mainly on the ingrained notion of accuracy and perfection due to our musical upbringing. Rather than focusing on what is “correct”, if we can center ourselves to being in the moment, we are alive. My favorite moment in this piece is the silence. It allows the music to breathe, for the performer to listen carefully and pay attention to the surroundings. One of my favorite books, *One Square Inch of Silence* by Gordon Hempton and John Grossman, which also talks about rainforests, depicts silence in a poetic manner.

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139 Kierkegaard, 146. Kierkegaard calls the phenomenon the “worried inventiveness of comparison”.

140 Gunkel, David J. *Deconstruction* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 7 Sep. 2021) 49. Being “correct” means we have created binary oppositions which essentially restricts us for it sets limitations, for “opposite push things towards the extremes”. Derrida also talks about how in a classical philosophical opposition, we are not dealing with “the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-a-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy.” in *Positions* (Chicago, Ill.: University Of Chicago Press, 1981) 41.
Silence is not the absence of something but *the presence of everything*. It is the presence of time, undisturbed. It can be felt within the chest. Silence nurtures our nature, our human nature, and lets us know who we are. Left with a more receptive mind and a more attuned ear, we become better listeners not only to nature but to each other. Silence can be carried like embers from a fire. Silence can be found, and silence can find you. Silence can be lost and also recovered. But silence cannot be imagined, although most people think so. To experience the soul-swelling wonder of silence, you must hear it.

Silence is a sound, many, many sounds. I’ve heard more than I can count. Silence is the moonlit song of the coyote signing the air, and the answer of its mate. It is the falling whisper of snow that will later melt with an astonishing reggae rhythm so crisp that you will want to dance to it. It is the sound of pollinating winged insects vibrating soft tunes as they defensively dart in and out of the pine boughs to temporarily escape the breeze, a mix of insect hum and pine sigh that will stick with you all day. Silence is the passing flock of chestnut-backed chickadees and red-breasted nuthatches, chirping and fluttering, reminding you of your own curiosity.\footnote{Hempton, Gordon, and John Grossmann. *One Square Inch of Silence*. (Simon and Schuster, 31 Mar. 2009) 9.}

Bringing back the idea of satisfaction as a possible hint of artistic boundaries, this does not mean that I am against satisfaction, for that would mean that we will feel emptiness if there is a void. If there is something I have learned through years of performing, we should strive to achieve the best that we could in that present moment and be satisfied with the imperfections. I believe that moderation is necessary for there will never be that “perfect” art form. In fact, in accordance with traditional Japanese aesthetics *wabi sabi*, beauty in nature is “imperfect, impermanent and incomplete.” Therefore, if the purpose of art is to express the individual's emotions, then we should engage fully in life as it happens.
In the spirit of *Wabi Sabi*, I am the *ishitateso* who builds my own microcosmic garden, *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, the *karesansui*.\(^{142}\) I am the craftsman who pieces back all 11 cells using *kintsugi*.\(^{143}\) Through *mushin* and *seishintouitsu*, I can “loose the dominance of (my) ego and become one” with each and every performance of this piece.\(^{144}\)

At the end of our interview, Ng advised me to transcend beyond the notion of “what it should be” and transform it to “what it could be”. One of the quotes I encountered during COVID, often attributed to Søren Kierkegaard, is that “life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced”. As the Buddhist master, Thich Nhất Hanh, reminds us,

> Letting go gives us freedom, and freedom is the only condition for happiness. If, in our heart, we still cling to anything- anger, anxiety, or possessions- we cannot be free.\(^{145}\)

The future is the “continual possibilization of possibilities” but these possibilities are “not homogenous and chronologically ordered in terms of successions of moments to come.”\(^{146}\)

For the future to come, we might have to lose our footing momentarily, even if it borders between chaos and order. By letting go, only then can we be free.

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\(^{142}\) Juniper, 68-73. *Ishitateso* is the “monks who place stones’ ’ and are given the task of designing temple gardens using large rocks as their primary mode of expression. *Karesansui* is the microcosmic garden.

\(^{143}\) Lomas, T., et al. “Zen and the Art of Living Mindfully: The Health-Enhancing Potential of Zen Aesthetics.” *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 56, no. 5, (2017) 1731. The art of *Kintsugi* involves mending broken pieces using gold lacquer. The fault lines are “not hidden, nor merely accepted as blemishes, but rather are accentuated and made beautiful”.

\(^{144}\) Juniper, 91. *Mushin* (無心) is a state of mind which could be “likened to a state of total absorption in a task” that helps “subdue the ego so that the mind and body can work in a free, natural, and uninhibited way”. *Seishintouitsu* (精神統一) refers to the “concentration of the mind and spirit on just one activity”.


Conclusion

Initially, I feel a sense of unease with my conclusion being an open-ended one. Yet my current state of mind sees vagueness as a positive term as well. In order to deconstruct my musical world, and by this I do not mean destruct, I have to equip myself to think outside the box, beyond binary oppositions. In order to present myself with more possibilities, I must continue the act of performing the piece over and over again. Similar to how Vladimir Horowitz’s performance of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto no.3 differs, from his 1951 recording with Fritz Reiner, and the 1978 performance with Zubin Mehta conducting the New York Philharmonic Orchestra; the later rendition does not invalidate the prior even if time has past and a new truth is established. To quote Søren Kierkegaard,

It is perfectly true that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it-backwards.

The cyclical concept is ever present as long as we are alive. Not only in the music of the Gamelan, but also in Buddhism as the endless cycle of samsara - the “beginningless and endless process of living-dying”. We are all passersby with our own passage and concept of time.

147 Derrida, Jacques, Limited Inc. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008) 147. Derrida explains that the “de-” of deconstruction “signifies not the demolition of what is constructing itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructivist or deconstructivist schema”.
The human being is consciousness, he is the place where the eternal and the
temporal touch one another; where the eternal breaks into the temporal. That is why
time can seem long to a human being, because he is conscious of the eternal and
measures the moments with it.\textsuperscript{150}

\textit{A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest} is a genuine representation of Ng’s way of living.

His humility and selflessness remains a constant even when his identity shifts from being
an educator or a performer to a social worker. He is the walking \textit{Tao}. As explained in
\textit{Taoteaching} 道德经, Laozi discusses the idea of selflessness,

\begin{small}

天长地久。天地所以能长且久者，以其不自生，故能长生。是以圣人后七身而身
先，外其身而身存。非以其无私邪？故能成其私。

- 老子

Translation:

Heaven is eternal and Earth is immortal. The reason they’re eternal and immortal is
because they don’t live for themselves. Hence they can live forever. Thus the sage
pulls himself back but ends up in front. He lets himself go but ends up safe.
Selflessness must be the reason whatever he seeks he finds.\textsuperscript{151}

The above is a literal translation of the text. However this passage can also be understood
as a reminder for us to pull back and be humble, as well as let go and be content.\textsuperscript{152} In a
similar manner, Kierkegaard points out we should learn “to be content with being a human

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\item[150] Kierkegaard, 174.
\item[152] Ibid., 14. Heaven can be understood as the “movement of time” and Earth the “transformation of form”.
\end{footnotes}
being, to be content with being the lowly one, the creature who can just as little support himself as create himself.”  

In the beginning of *A Distance Voice of the Rain Forest*, Ng wrote

“This section is a “view” which keeps changing that gives the pianist (the freedom) to create their own music.”

This unfiltered “view”, free from the limitation of words and constraints of language can only be seen by the individual for only we know our “full range of secret transgressions, insufficiencies and inadequacies”. This goes hand in hand with Zen’s dualistic view of life, as elucidated by Juniper,

*Zen maintains that our dualistic view of life means that whatever we perceive goes through our mental filtering systems before being cognitively understood. We use mental boxes for all our aspects of our daily lives so we can make sense of our world and interact with others. With the development of language, though, this cognitive group of reality means that everything we perceive is subject to these mental processes, and so from early childhood we lose the ability to directly perceive the world.*

Therefore, only we are capable of navigating our *Tao*, our shifting selves to decide what to let go (our unresolved *minor 2nds*) and what to pursue.

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153 Kierkegaard, 158.
154 Juniper, 26-27. In Zen philosophy, the mind “should be a window, rather than a mirror”. Juniper explains, so that the world is “seen directly and not through the filters of the intellect”.
155 Peterson, 70.
156 Juniper, 25.
Like a bird leaving its nest, my departure from studenthood, after being protected for many years by my professors, can be rather daunting. For it is now my turn to educate young and ambitious students, and I am not confident if I have already found my way. However, if I continue to embrace Nature as it comes, I too, will find my Tao some day. Even if my identity will shift and my thoughts will differ significantly, I will be able to accept changes without losing my inner Tao.
Complete List of Works by Chong Lim Ng

Orchestral


2. Amorphous for string orchestra (2009) - (premiered at “Streams” New Music Festival in Brauweiler, Germany, 2010)

3. 'Fireflies' for strings, double oboes, bassoons, trumpets and three percussionists (2020)- (commissioned by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, Malaysia, 2020)

Chamber

1. *Khatulistiwa* [Equator] for two pianists and two percussionists (2001)


4. ...Windows... for seven musicians (2007)- (premiered by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra in 2007)

5. Morning Mist for cello and piano (2009)


7. ‘Three Sketches’ for piano, cello and oboe (2012) - (commissioned by the Ernst von Siemens Foundation for Chambre d'écoute, Germany, 2012)
Solo Instrumental

1. Two Preludes for solo piano (1999)

2. Sonata for solo cello (2000)

3. ...Warna... [Colors] for solo piano (2001)


5. A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest (Fragments from “Rimba”...) for solo piano (2008, revised 2012) - (premiered at the “Tongyeong International Music Festival’ in Korea, 2009)

6. ...Footprints... for solo piano (2006, revised 2011) - (premiered at “John Donald Robb Composers’ Symposium, New Mexico, USA, 2011)

7. Dragonfly(s) for solo piano (2012)- (specially commissioned for the 5th ASEAN International Chopin Piano Competition, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2012)

8. Stillness... for solo piano (2015)
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