

## **Sedap Cycle: A Multi-Movement ‘Compositional Tour’ of Malaysian Cuisine**

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### **Abstract**

*Sedap Cycle* is a composition inspired by the author’s interaction with Malaysian cuisine. The culture surrounding each meal, the food’s components and author’s background and experience with the food inspired the musical output. The music is drawn from music connected to a food’s culture and the interpretation of tastes as musical characteristics. The creation of the music used some quantitative methods to survey Malaysians about which local foods are well-known, but largely several categories of qualitative methods to create the music, such as practice-based, practice-led and autoethnographic research. The result is a six-movement composition based on six meals in a day (four main meals and two ‘teas’) with each major movement containing a title of well-known Malaysian food (‘Nasi Lemak’, ‘Nasi Campur’, ‘Char Kuey Teow’ and ‘Roti Canai’). This piece combines Western classical and avant garde styles with traditional and popular Malaysian, Chinese, Indian and American music. While a new musical work is the primary goal, other goals include the creation of a musical form inspired by Malaysia that composers could use and the ability to relate concepts of music and composition in the Western idiom to Malaysian composers, performers and educators.

*Keywords:* autoethnography, postmodern music, Malaysian food, music composition, popular music

### **Background**

The composition of *Sedap Cycle* is completely inspired by my experience with food in Malaysia. When I first arrived in Malaysia, the most common question I was asked (following ‘Where are you from?’, ‘How old are you?’ and ‘Are you married?’) was ‘How do you find [like] Malaysian food?’

My main exposure to the food culture of Malaysia was the various seminars at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). Breakfast, usually *nasi lemak*, would commonly be served during a morning meeting or break. However, my first full immersion occurred when our Faculty of Music and Performing Arts conducted a series of workshops away at a resort. Each meeting would be followed by a break

for a meal or a ‘drink’ (which usually included food). In the course of a day, there were six times set aside for food and drink: breakfast (*sarapan* or *makan pagi*, ‘morning meal/food’), morning tea (*minum pagi*, ‘morning drink’), lunch (*makan tengahari*, ‘midday meal’), afternoon tea (*minum petang*, ‘afternoon drink’), dinner (*makan malam*, ‘night meal’) and supper (*minum malam*, ‘night drink’).

This meal structure contrasts to the American meal structure with which I had grown up: breakfast, lunch and dinner/supper with an occasional snack that was never consistent. This difference inspired the idea for a song cycle based on the six meals, each movement inspiration of a Malaysian food or music of the cultures within Malaysia. The resulting composition is titled *Sedap Cycle*, as *sedap* means ‘delicious’ in Malay (and one of the first words I learned in Malaysia). Through a combination of personal experience and research, the cycle is constructed with a food associated with a meal and a generic title for the two ‘tea’ movements.

In addition, because I am from the United States, my experience in Malaysian culture pales to Malaysians. I wrote the piece with the same approach as the food: as an outsider adjusting to a new culture, using my own background and interaction with food to approach the composition. Since I am not Malaysian, the compositional approach is similar to my personal life in Malaysian culture—a sort of ‘compositional tourism’ or ‘compositional expatriate’ approach. Both terms apply because even as a resident, there are still many places unexplored and a foreign resident can still easily fit into the role of tourist.

## Review of Musical Works

### International Compositions

Composers writing works that are influenced from music outside their culture is a very old practice. A famous example is Mozart’s ‘Rondo Alla Turca’ (1784) from *Piano Sonata No. 11*. At the time, Austria was very close to the Ottoman Empire, and composers were influenced by the then ‘exotic’ nature of the music from across the border (Okan, n.d.). Debussy was influenced by the Javanese gamelan he heard at the Paris Exposition in 1889 and 1900 (Howat, 2014). One example of a more direct inspiration from Southeast Asia came from Colin McPhee, who transcribed and arranged Balinese gamelan textures for symphony orchestra in *Tabuh-Tabuhan* (1936) derived from his interest and time living in Bali (Keillor). Since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mixing ‘East and West’ in composition has been a common theme. Dvořák’s *Symphony 9* (1893) was composed while directing the National Conservatory of Music of America, hearing Native-American and African-American music, deeming it vital for the future of American music (Snyder, 1993). John Cage’s *Sonatas and Interludes* (1968) inspired by gamelan and Indian classical music (‘How the piano came to be prepared’). Cage’s *4’33* and the use of silence was a combination of the influences of silence and stillness from the *I-Ching* and the local American culture of constant popular music playing in public places in the 1950s, as four and a half minutes was the length of ‘canned music’ at the time (Pritchett & Kuhn, 2001). Tan Dun’s *Water Concerto* (1998) for water and orchestra

inspired by his “early life, living with water, having fun with water, and playing ritualistic music with water...” as a ‘recomposed memory’ (Tan, 2007).

An early example of music connected to the time of day is the ‘Liturgy of the Hours’ in the European (Catholic) church where music set to the texts for each time of day are repeated daily. Song cycles concerning time of day are found in Schumann’s *Liederkries* (1842) which contains movement titles such as ‘Mondnacht’ (‘Moonlit Night’), ‘Zweilicht’ (‘Twilight’) and ‘Frühlingsnacht’ (‘Spring Night’). Benjamin Britten’s song cycle *Evening, Morning, Night* (1944) consists of three movements about the time of day based on three texts by Ronald Duncan.

### Postmodernism in music

*Sedap Cycle* largely fits into the postmodernist idea of music composition. Modernism generally follows the philosophy that as music progresses and becomes more complex, the quality of output progresses. Postmodernism in music takes the approach that no music is superior to another, and thus all genres can mix without compromising the other’s integrity. Kramer (2002) noted certain compositional practices among postmodernism music, such as not respecting “boundaries between sonorities and procedures of the past and of the present” and challenging “barriers between ‘high’ and ‘low’ styles” (p. 16). Kramer also noted that postmodernist music can also include “quotations of or references to music of many traditions and cultures” (p. 17).

An example of a postmodern song cycle is William Bolcom’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1984), setting of William Blake’s poetry. In this song cycle, because of the wide variety of topics in the original text, Bolcom uses not only full orchestra, but popular instruments and infuses elements of classical tonal music and other styles such as folk, bluegrass and reggae.

### Malaysian Compositions

Within Malaysia, there are many examples of Malaysian composers mixing influences. As much of Malaysian culture has influences from Malaysia, India, China, the Middle East, Europe and America, it could be argued that composed music inspired by Malaysia is already a mixture of influences, or syncretic music (Tan and Matusky, 2017), so the notable examples listed here are a small sampling that deliberately mix distinct styles. Various performance groups take a postmodern approach such as Hands Percussion Malaysia (Chan, 2012) and Rhythm in Bronze, which use gamelan as the basis for new music performance in Malaysia (‘Rhythm in Bronze: Our journey’, 2014). New song creation among the Orang Asli also follow the postmodern trend (Chan, 2016).

Jazz arranger Alfonso Soliano’s composition *Asli Abadi* uses Malay folk rhythms. Johari Salleh’s *Simfonieta Cempakasari* and *Symphony ASEAN* mix Western and Malaysian instruments (Lam, 2001). More recently, Kee-Yong Chong has elements of Malaysian gamelan in *Moondrama* (2004). Aubrey Suwito’s ‘Malacca Sun’ (2011) incorporates *lagu asli* flute with the smooth jazz genre.

Ainolnaim Azizol's *Badang!!!!* for string quartet and electronics is inspired by a Malay legend and television adaptation the composer saw while a child ('Of superheroes, tempoyak and singing in the shower'). Tazul Tajuddin's *Opera Puteri Saadong* (2015) mixes the contemporary atonal while also including a *gamelan* and *makyung* ensemble.

Valerie Ross not only uses multicultural influences, but multicultural notation systems in her score to be multilingual across the musical cultures. *Cycles* is for piano, oboe and *tabla* or *mridangam*. Her work *Bourne* combines music, dance and film with recordings of horn, flute, violin, Balinese gamelan, piano and Indian flute and *veena* (Lam, 2001).

*M! The Opera* (2006) by Saidah Rastam is a Western style opera that incorporates *lagu asli* singing. Saidah's general body of work encompasses the rojak nature of Malaysian influences, writing also Chinese opera, theatre, dance, film and television. She is also a founding member of the gamelan group 'Rhythm in Bronze' which itself mixes genres using several varieties of gamelan and percussion (Toh, 2015).

A Malaysian work similar in topic to *Sedap Cycle* is Ken Hor's *Let's Go Mamak (The Cultural Common Ground)* (2008), which is a larger-scale musical event by the group 'Inner Voices'. Comprised of 13 pieces, the experience mixes influences from Malay, Indian and Chinese traditional music combined with some popular and experimental elements.

## Music and Food

Several connections have been made between the creation and consumption of food and music, such as Ruhlman (2012) commenting on the similarities between eating a meal prepared by chef Thomas Keller and an orchestral performance:

[A] meal at that level is a performance. [The chef's cooking] was a performing art and it shared many qualities of an orchestral performance. There were themes and movements, a narrative arc, the pleasures experienced were sensory, non-verbal. And when it was done, it was gone. I had only the memory of it. I couldn't relive it, as I could a book or a film or a painting or a sculpture. The art had vanished and I was left with an experience and a memory, and the pleasure of having experienced a virtuoso performance.

A collection of quotes (Frühalf) found on RILM (Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale) lists many connections between composition and food. "Someone who is well-versed in technology may have a good chance to be a good cook. Based on this hypothesis the methods of cooking and composing electronic music are compared" (Frühalf, n.d.). In the same list is also the use of food itself as instruments: "Performers have had a direct connection to the food world: Nut shells have been used as whistles in Peru and coconut shells as ocarinas in Africa" (ibid.). There are also scientific studies concerning the behavioural connection of food and pitch or sounds (Eplett, 2013).

Rossini himself was known as a food connoisseur (and has a dish, *tournedos Rossini*, possibly named for him) and visualised his love for food in musical terms:

I know of no more admirable occupation than eating, that is really eating. Appetite is for the stomach what love is for the heart. The stomach is the conductor, who rules the grand orchestra of our passions, and rouses it to action. The bassoon or the piccolo, grumbling its discontent or shrilling its longing, personify the empty stomach for me. The stomach, replete, on the other hand, is the triangle of enjoyment or the kettledrum of joy. As for love, I regard her as the prima donna par excellence, the goddess who sings cavatinas to the brain, intoxicates the ear, and delights the heart. Eating, loving, singing and digesting are, in truth, the four acts of the comic opera known as life, and they pass like the bubbles of a bottle of champagne. Whoever lets them break without having enjoyed them is a complete fool. (Huizenga, 2010)

In the European classical tradition, J.S. Bach's *Schweigt stille, plaudert nicht*, BWV 211 (1735), is also known as the *Coffee Cantata* in which the main character sings an ode to coffee in 'Ei! Wie schmeckt der Kaffee süße'. Rossini's 'Sarò zeppo e contornato' from *La Cenerentola* (1817) contains an aria in which the Don Magnifico imagines all the food he would have eaten has his daughter married the prince. Leonard Bernstein's *La bonne cuisine: four recipes* (1960) is a song cycle in which the text is recipes.

Frequently, popular music directly about food is for humorous effect. In the United States, 'Weird Al' Yankovic has many novelty songs about food. Some examples include: 'Eat It' (1984), 'Fat' (1988), 'Waffle King' (1993) and 'Grapefruit Diet' (1999), 'Coconut' (1971) by Harry Nilsson or 'Junk Food Junkie' (1976) by Larry Groce are more popular songs but generally considered humorous or off-beat.

## Methodology

Generally, composing (in the Western classical idiom, specifically) uses a combination of mostly qualitative and some quantitative approaches. The composer's individual style and effort for self-expression uses mostly established, existing sources (voices, instruments, techniques, concepts, theories) to create a new work of sound. In this particular composition, autoethnography, a type of qualitative research is heavily used. Autoethnography relies on the expertise in the personal background of the researcher (composer) as the source material.

### Composition Methodology of *Sedap Cycle*

When composing *Sedap Cycle*, I took a varied approach, depending on the movement, intending to provide a variety for the different movements (Figure 1). The entire composition derived from the single idea of music based on Malaysian cuisine, and the rest of the process unfolded with a goal in mind, which is practice-based approach. I chose this over a more 'sonic' approach where I would imitate the sounds specifically associated with food, similar to eliciting the sound of trains in

Steve Reich’s *Different Trains* (1988) or the many bird call imitations found in pieces such as Messiaen’s *Catalogue d’oiseaux* (1964).

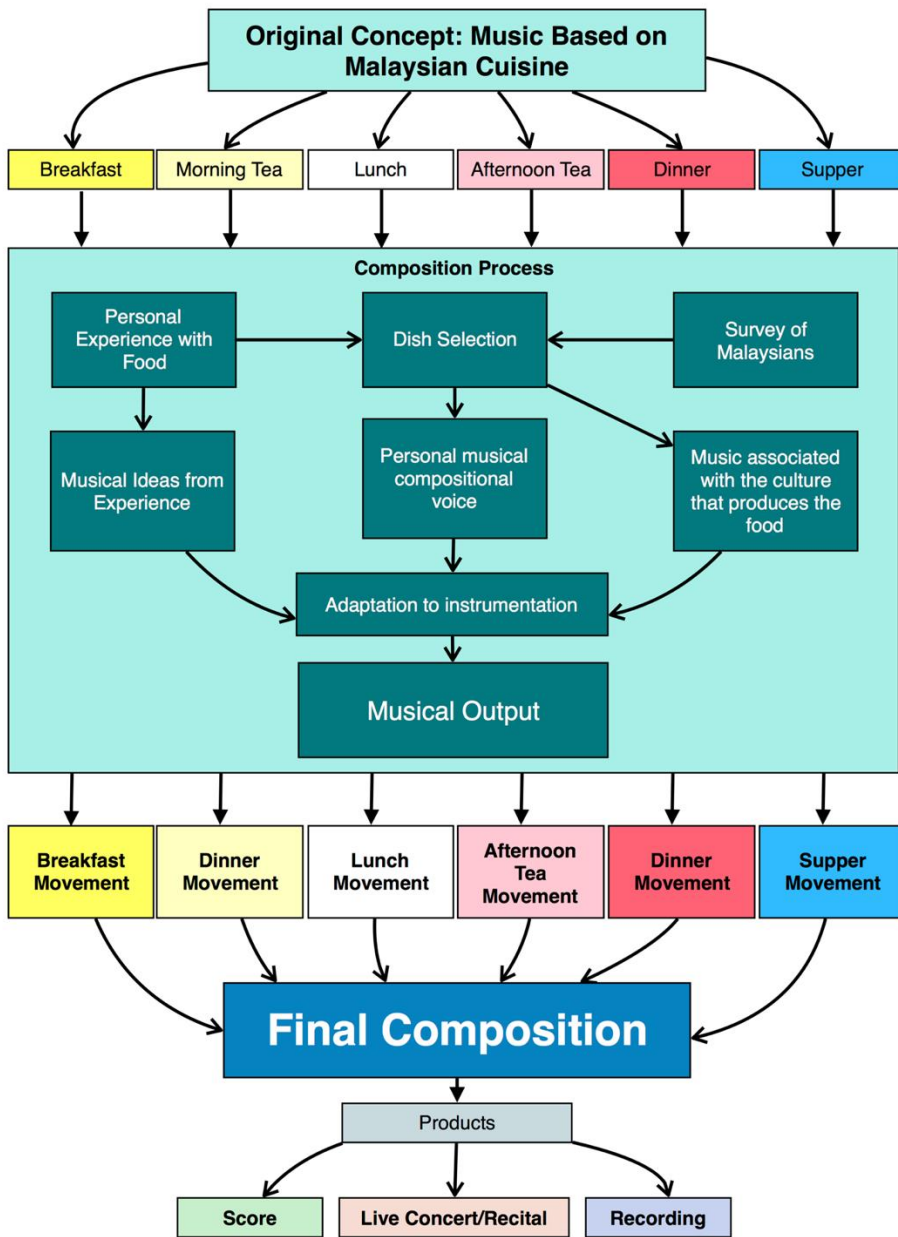


Figure 1. Diagram of the composition process.

The composition of each individual movement followed a practice-led approach, where the knowledge and experience of composing a piece related to a

food and a culture might lead the final musical composition away from the result I first envisioned and influence the composition process of other movements. The depth within each piece is achieved with singular ‘verse’ or a motive that is developed throughout. This allows for the near absolute freedom of composition while still maintaining the focus of initial idea of the meal structure.

### Quantitative Approach

In *Sedap Cycle*, some quantitative research was conducted to gather statistical information of what foods Malaysians commonly eat and think are associated with certain times of day. This information helped determine which foods on which to base each movement and in what order they would be presented (Table 1). Because I am a lecturer at a university, the respondents are students aged 18-25 and are small sample size (40 respondents). This composition will most likely be played by people this age demographic, so while the survey is not fully representative, it has enough respondents to hint at a trend among a largely Malay population. The respondents were those whom with I interact; they would be both potential performers, audience and future educators.

Table 1

*Results of the question ‘What meal do you associate with these foods?’ Responders had the option to choose more than one food per meal. Bold highlighting indicates the most selected food per meal, outline indicates the most selected meal for each food and dark shading indicates the final selection for the composition.*

Food	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner	Supper	None
Roti canai	80.56% 29	8.33% 3	16.67% 6	<b>44.44%</b> <b>16</b>	2.78% 1
Char kuey teow	13.89% 5	27.78% 10	63.89% 23	25.00% 9	<b>13.89%</b> <b>5</b>
Mee goreng	50.00% 18	33.33% 12	55.56% 20	22.22% 8	5.56% 2
Nasi lemak	<b>94.74%</b> <b>36</b>	15.79% 6	15.79% 6	10.53% 4	2.63% 1
Tomyam	0.00% 0	44.44% 16	61.11% 22	11.11% 4	8.33% 3
Nasi goreng	27.78% 10	58.33% 21	<b>72.22%</b> <b>26</b>	11.11% 4	2.78% 1
Nasi campur	5.41% 2	<b>89.19%</b> <b>33</b>	32.43% 12	2.70% 1	5.41% 2

Before this question, the students were asked to write in common foods that were not listed in the survey. Certain responses, such as chicken rice (*nasi ayam*)<sup>2</sup> or

chicken *rendang*, can be covered under *nasi campur*. Other foods such as fried noodles (*mee goreng*) and burgers were occasionally mentioned, but most written-in answers to questions, matched the foods I had selected from my experience.

In selecting pieces for inclusion on the final composition, the survey served as a guide more than as a directive. *Nasi lemak* and *nasi campur* were easy choices for the subject of the breakfast and lunch movements respectively, but the other two were not as obvious. *Roti canai* was the most common choice for the subject of the late meal as it was second behind *nasi lemak* for breakfast. However, even though the most common food associated with dinner according to the survey was *nasi goreng* (fried rice), I chose *char kuey teow* as the subject for the dinner movement. *Nasi lemak* and *nasi campur* both are connected to the Malay ethnicity, and *roti canai* is connected to the Tamil ethnicity in Malaysia. The Chinese demographic could have been represented in the form of fried rice, but *char kuey teow* is not only a Chinese dish, but it was specifically invented in Malaysia. It was also second behind *nasi goreng* for dinner. Thus, the final order selected for the specific meals are:

1. Nasi Lemak
2. Morning Tea
3. Nasi Campur
4. Afternoon Tea
5. Char Kuey Teow
6. Roti Canai

*Nasi lemak* is a rice dish typically served with *sambal* (spicy chili paste), peanuts, *ikan bilis* (anchovies), cucumbers and a boiled egg. It is largely considered the ‘national dish’ of Malaysia (Lee, 2014; Rules, 2011). *Nasi campur* (‘mixed rice’) is a buffet-style display of food found at numerous places throughout Malaysia (‘Nasi Campur (Malay Mixed Rice)’). *Char kuey teow* is a Chinese-Malaysian fried noodle dish mixed with meat and vegetables (Mok, 2014). *Roti canai* is a Malaysian Indian flatbread developed in served with dipping sauces (Yoshino, 2010).

### **Autoethnography**

In *Sedap Cycle*, the inspiration of the composition itself arose from my personal experiences in Malaysia. Rather than assume the position of composing ‘Malaysian Music’, I chose to approach the composition of this piece the same way I approach the food: from my personal perspective. I am a U.S. citizen who lived in Japan as a child and now live and work in Malaysia. This combination of factors means I am accustomed to being an outsider in the surrounding culture.

Food is frequently my main interaction with local culture. I will eat the same food as Malaysians, but I will experience it differently. Conceptually, when I eat Malaysian food, it is still relatively new and novel to me, so my experience will be fresh but inexperienced. I come from a perspective of eating mostly American food. Because of this, my approach to composing the music is similar to that of my



personal status in Malaysia: an expatriate. I am somewhat familiar with the culture, customs and languages, but I did not grow up with them and am not completely immersed in culture at all times, so I will be seen as closer to ‘tourist’ than ‘native’. This approach to composition could have the name ‘expatriate composition’ or ‘compositional tourism’.

### **Individual Movement Methodology**

I frequently compose multi-movement works out of order: specifically, the middle movements first, then the final movement and lastly, the first movement. The purpose of this is so that I can shape the direction of the first movement and the conclusion based on ideas from the middle movements. However, in the case of *Sedap Cycle*, the order was as the ideas came to me. The idea for ‘Roti Canai’ came first, followed by ‘Char Kuey Teow’, then the two ‘tea’ movements, then ‘Nasi Lemak’ and lastly, ‘Nasi Campur’. This order (Tables 2 and 3) was more connected to the comfort and previous knowledge I had of the external source of the music and food (India, China, European classical) before becoming more familiar with Malay music (and food).

## **Results**

### **Musical Elements of Individual Movements**

‘**Nasi Lemak**’. The music of the ‘Nasi Lemak’ movement (Table 4) is inspired by *joget* and *zapin* (two folk dances of Malaysia) and my personal perception of the food. *Joget* is a compound meter dance adapted from Portuguese music when the Portuguese established settlements in Malacca (‘*Joget*’, n.d.). The melody of a *joget* is played by several instruments with various embellishments and an optional tonal harmonic accompaniment (guitar, accordion). *Zapin* is a slower dance in 4/4 and is originally from Arabia or Persia (‘*Zapin*’). From my observations of performances, the characteristics I noticed in *joget* (and used in the composition) were distinct percussion rhythms that outline a ‘3 against 2’ feel in a 6/8 meter, and a single high gong typically strikes on the downbeat of each bar. I noticed *zapin* music consists of a heavy use of ornamentation largely on strong beats or long notes and is quasi-improvisatory, somewhat reminiscent of Arabic music.

The sharp ‘attacks’ in Part 1 (Figure 2) after the slow-moving opening is inspired by the first time I tried *nasi lemak* (Figure 3). I had used a lot of the sambal, which I did know was extremely spicy. This ‘hit’ of spice surprised me and caused a very intense feeling and uncomfortable reaction. I am rather sensitive to spicy food, and I had used as much (if not more) sambal as Malaysians who had been eating it their whole lives. My first impression of the food was not very good, and it took me several attempts (with less sambal and more cucumbers and peanuts) to slowly become acclimated to the taste, which is musically reflected in the gradual shift from the intense musical hits to the softer volume and slower tempo in Part 2.

Table 2

*Outline of the first three movements of Sedap Cycle*

<b>Meal</b>	<b>Breakfast (sarapan / makan pagi)</b>	<b>Morning Tea (minum pagi)</b>	<b>Lunch (makan tengahari)</b>
Food	nasi lemak		nasi campur
Food description	Coconut rice, sambal, cucumber, peanuts, anchovies and egg.	Tea or coffee, food may include sandwich, curry puff, sausage, Malaysian sweets	Mixed rice, typically served buffet style, typically consists of rice, meat and vegetables
Musical inspiration	Malay dances (joget, zapin)	Slow, stately chamber sound (similar to symphonic second movement), gradually incorporating Lagu asli techniques	Mixture of traditional, classic and modern popular influences along with Chinese and Indian
Additional features (added by composer)	Pandiatonicism, salsa music	Theme-and-variation form	Variety of choices inspired aleatoric elements, 'Musical Dice'

Table 3

*Outline of the final three movements of Sedap Cycle*

<b>Meal</b>	<b>Afternoon Tea (minum petang)</b>	<b>Dinner (makan petang)</b>	<b>Supper (makan / minum malam)</b>
Food		char kuey teow	roti canai
Food description	(same as morning tea)	A spicy fried flat noodle dish created in Malaysia by Chinese.	An Indian flatbread (can be mixed with other items) adapted to Malaysia
Musical inspiration	Minuet, chamber sound (similar to symphonic third movement), joget 3/4 6/8 ambiguity	Hokkien folk song, general Chinese music elements, Malaysian Gamelan	Indian Classical Music raga structure and improvisation, makyung, Malaysian Gamelan
Additional features (added by composer)	5/8 fast ending with ambiguous tonality	Blues and swing, polytonality, Latin American music	Occasional 'blue' notes, atypical time signatures

Table 4

*Outline of the sections of the ‘Nasi Lemak’ movement*

Section	Introduction	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4 (Part 1 reprise)
Elements	Slow, ambiguous, hints of following themes	Sharp ‘spicy’ attacks with tone clusters with main melody slightly clearer over joget-inspired rhythms	zapin theme, more traditional ‘melody and harmony’ section	The more fun ‘spicy’ section heavily inspired by Caribbean rhythms, slowly getting faster and more out of control	Sharp attacks, faster, more chaotic, more restless until the ‘relief’ of the end.



Figure 2. The tone clusters of the ‘spicy’ attacks in part 1.

Part 2 starts very straightforward, with a tune (Figure 4) in E-flat major. The three iterations of the melody inspired by the zapin style can be described as a simplified melody without ornaments, a more conventional zapin melody with ornaments and harmonies (Figure 5) and a minor variation with more ornaments and an almost Romantic-era style to provide further variety (not found in traditional zapin music).

In something of a transition between the zapin and ending sections, the melody is placed a fourth time over a quasi-salsa musical rhythm. This is to reflect growing panic that I am running out of drink while there is still spicy food left. In my background, I think of music from the Caribbean or Latin America to reflect ‘spiciness’ or ‘heat’. In addition, the usage of syncopation and Western instruments like the accordion and bass guitar in the modern usage of zapin remind me of various Latin American and Caribbean genres.



Figure 2. Left: a typical, basic nasi lemak dish. Photo by Craig (username Pizzaboy1) 2007, via Wikimedia Commons. Used under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported.



Figure 3. The simple melody in part 2.



Figure 4. The ornamented melody in part 2.

As the ‘Latin/Caribbean’ iteration dissipates, the music returns to the joget-inspired rhythms, but only faster and off balance with shifting meters. The inspiration behind this is my experience toward the end of eating nasi lemak currently. I frequently run out of drink and the spiciness has been building up the entire time to the point where my tolerance is brought to its maximum. There is a sense of joy and exhaustion when I finish the dish.

**‘Morning Tea’.** The music in ‘Morning Tea’ (Figure 6) is intended to be in direct contrast to the largeness of the first movement. The melody is a tune I composed inspired by several British folk songs, hymns and the second movement of a symphony. The tune begins in homophony with a harmony reminiscent of Classical or Baroque era (Figure 7). The movement uses the idea of a European ‘theme and variations’ with the ‘variations’ slowly adopting the quasi-improvised ornaments and rhythmic patterns played by a *rebana* that are an important part of Malay lagu asli (‘original songs’) (Hood, 2016). Each variation is inspired by the idea of the outside food being adapted to a new location and tastes as time goes on



Figure 5. Example of a ‘tea’ meal (curry puff, steamed bun, tea). (Photo by Johnson, year).

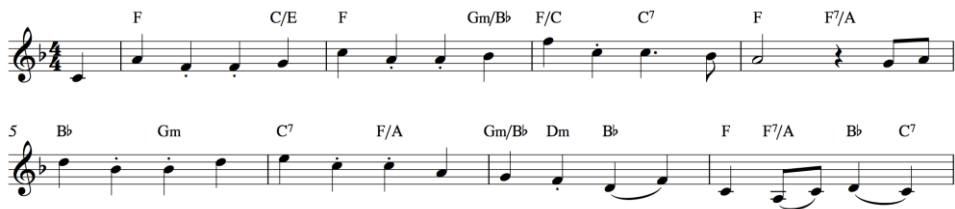


Figure 6. The opening melody of ‘Morning Tea’.

The first variation is a more classical variation with slight embellishments of the melody with a classical texture inspired from Mozart and Haydn. The third variation is a minor variation maintaining the *lagu asli* ornamentations and displaying some of lagu asli’s Arabic origins. The fourth and final variation (Figure 8) is a transposition of the second variation with busier ornamentations percussion patterns.

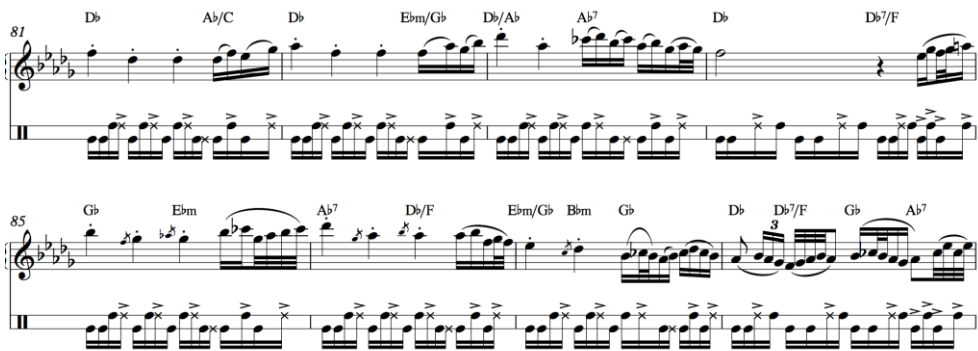


Figure 7. The final variation of the melody with Malay ‘lagu asli’ inspired ornaments.

**‘Nasi Campur’.** ‘Nasi Campur’ is inspired by the variety of food available at mixed rice restaurants. These include anything from chicken, fish, beef, lamb or other seafood and a variety of vegetables. These dishes are a mixture of the several cultures, with meat flavours ranging from curry to soy sauce to rendang.

The music of ‘Nasi Campur’ is highly inspired by the food in that it includes many varieties and possibilities. Each time it is played, it has a slightly different sound. The unifying factor is the harmonic progression that is the same regardless of ‘dish’. The choice of ‘dishes’ in the melody has a range of traditional and popular music, just like a nasi campur place can have chicken rendang or deep-fried chicken. The melodies and countermelodies are inspired by *rock kapak* (literally, ‘axe rock’), a type of glam rock popular in the 1980s onward in Malaysia (Chapman, 2016, p. 239). This style is the music I heard frequently on buses or places where nasi campur is served. Some of the inspiration also comes from the music of P. Ramlee, which itself is a mixture of popular and traditional Western and Malaysian music.

‘Nasi Campur’ has an aleatoric nature. The piece can be as short as three minutes and nearly infinite in length but I suggest a few (2-3) dishes, which comes out at around six minutes. There is a fixed short introduction and ending that frames the work, but most of the movement is indeterminate. Each ‘food’ is the same length so that any combination may work musically. The specific food can be distributed via a menu to the audience, and the performers may choose ‘dishes’ to their liking or randomly select them.

Each component of music represents a typical component of nasi campur. The rice, as foundation of nasi campur, is represented in the bass line. The melody represents the meat, the accompaniment represents the vegetables, the countermelody represents the drink and the tempo represents the sauces. The harmonic progression is fixed throughout so that any melody, countermelody and harmonic accompaniment will fit together.

The choices made as to what ‘chicken’ (Figure 9) or ‘beef’ (Figure 10) sounds like were generally arbitrary, and were assigned different melodies to distinguish between them. Plain rice was given a simple bass line and other types of rice have more movement in the bass line (Figure 11).



Figure 8. The beginning of the ‘chicken’ melody.



Figure 9. The beginning of the ‘beef’ melody.



Figure 10. The ‘White Rice’ and ‘Coconut Rice’ bass lines.

**‘Afternoon Tea’.** The fourth movement, ‘Afternoon Tea’, is somewhat similar in concept to movement 2 in that they both begin like a European classical form that slowly integrates a style found in Malaysia. Where the second movement begins like a classical-era second movement of a symphony, the fourth movement is an inspirational mixture of a Baroque minuet and a third movement from a Classical-era symphony in triple meter (Figure 12). As with the second movement, the piece slowly adopts Malay joget drumming rhythms, which shifts the meter from 3/4 to 6/8 (Figure 13). The harmonic progression changes from continually shifting like Baroque music to a more popular folk accompaniment.



Figure 11. Minuet melody with chord symbols from ‘Afternoon Tea’.



Figure 12. Minuet melody superimposed over joget accents regrouped for 6/8 emphasis.

The end of the movement concludes with a brisk ‘5/8 joget’ of the main theme (Figure 14). In contrast to the previous tea movement, which served as a transition from the Western form to the Malaysian form, the fourth movement contains a departure from both genres for the sake of compositional variety.



Figure 13. Minuet melody in 5/8 with different harmony.

**‘Char Kuey Teow’.** In searching for musical inspirations from the Malaysian Hokkien culture that produced char kuey teow (‘Char Kway Teow’ 2014), I did not feel comfortable emulating Hokkien music without sounding generically Chinese, so ‘Char Kuey Teow’ derives its melodic material from a little-known (according to informal surveys of Malaysian Chinese of Hokkien descent) Hokkien *jin’ge* opera song, 寻祖 (‘cui zoh’, or ‘chuey zaw’) (Figure 15), which

means ‘searching one’s roots or ancestors’. This movement is largely a ‘fantasy’ on this theme.



Figure 14. The melody of 寻祖 (‘searching roots/ancestors’), transcription by author.

The opening of ‘Char Kuey Teow’ contains a slow polytonal statement of the melody (Figure 16) based on the music of the *sheng*. The middle section is a near reproduction of the melody but with a gamelan-inspired accompaniment (Figure 17). By continuing the melody in the second section and changing the accompaniment to a blues swing, the piece adds another layer through my perspective as an American (where blues forms one of the bases of most American popular music since the 1950s). An American writing music inspired by a Malaysian Chinese style is comes from the idea of an American eating a Chinese Malaysian dish.



Figure 15. Melody with quartal harmony inspired by the *sheng*.



Figure 16. Melody with gamelan-inspired accompaniment.



Figure 17. Samba rhythm inspired section with melody adjusted to fit chords.

In the third section, the piece reflects another of my perceptions of the noodle dish. When I had first eaten it, it was not spicy. However, occasionally, it was prepared with chili flakes, and the spiciness surprised me (but was not as intense as nasi lemak). As in ‘Nasi Lemak’, I adapted the melody to a somewhat samba-like rhythmic accompaniment (Figure 18). When I would eat the spicy version of the food and the spiciness would start to build up. This is reflected in the louder, faster, more chaotic ending with the first few notes of the Hokkien folk song repeated until the end.

**‘Roti Canai’.** The form of ‘Roti Canai’ is borrowed from the structure of Hindustani and Carnatic Classical Music: a slow first section, a medium tempo second section with percussion accompaniment and a third is a fast, lively section.

Throughout the entire movement is a two-note motif—the minor seventh to the perfect fifth—which is inspired by approximate interval of the two gongs’ pitches found in the Malaysian traditional music and dance *mak yung*. In the first section, the motif serves as a steady, repetitive marker to the freer sounding melody. In the second and third section, the motif serves as the starting point of the melody.

The first section is two iterations of an ornamented melody loosely inspired by a Carnatic *ragam* (scale). There was not a specific scale in mind when composing, but there is a resemblance to the *dhatuwardhani ragam* (Figure 19). The texture of the *tampura*, the drone instrument in Carnatic music, is perpetuated throughout the first section.

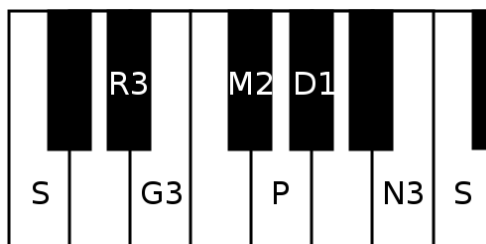


Figure 18. Scale of the dhatuwardhani using C as a tonic. Photo by VasuVR. Used with permission under creative commons license 3.0.

The second section (Figure 20) introduces a medium tempo, with a syncopated rhythm across two 5/4 bars (similar to a 12/8 + 4/4), loosely inspired by tala (rhythm/meters in Hindustani and Carnatic music).



Figure 19. The 5/4 rhythmic accompaniment in section 2.



Figure 20. Melody in the third section with the 5+5+5+11 pattern.



Figure 21. The 'gamelan' inspired adaptation of previous melody.

The third section is a very fast section also inspired by the odd-numbered *talas* possible in Hindustani and Carnatic music (while not directly using a specific pattern). The recurring rhythmic pattern is 26/8, or 5+5+5+11 (Figure 21 above), retaining some of the scalar elements from the first section, but eventually changing into the standard pentatonic scale found in Malaysian gamelan (among many other types of music). The third section ends with a coda in 4/4 inspired more directly by the Malaysian gamelan (Figure 22 above).

## Discussion

### From notes to performance

When first composing, I wrote down the notes in categories of musical elements: melody, countermelody, harmony (high and low), bass line and percussion parts (Figure 23). The idea is that they need to be adaptable to a variety of ensembles and can be orchestrated and rearranged as such. The first live performance of *Sedap Cycle* was for piano four hands (Figure 24).

♩ = 132 Rhythmic and Energetic

The figure shows a musical score for 'Nasi Lemak'. It consists of seven staves. The top five staves are for a piano four-hand arrangement, with the top two staves for the right hand and the bottom three for the left hand. The bottom two staves are for a vocal line. The tempo is marked '♩ = 132 Rhythmic and Energetic'. The score shows a series of chords and rhythmic patterns, with a final section marked 'f' (forte) in the vocal line.

Figure 22. Sample of sketch score of 'Nasi Lemak' from which all orchestrations and arrangements (present and future) are derived.

Figure 23. The piano four-hands version (same passage as Figure 2) of 'Nasi Lemak'.

Naturally, each future orchestration or arrangement will provide different challenges. For example, as the piano duo version has no percussion, clusters are used in its place to create the rhythmic accompaniment in bars 26-28 of the above figure. With much less variety of timbre available in the piano than in an ensemble, the range was slowly shifted from extreme high to high from bars 18-25. In 'Roti Canai', the original version was written out (Figure 25), but in the piano duo version, there are instructions for extensive improvisation, which may also be used in future iterations of the piece (Figure 26). The performers may also choose to use a different scale to correspond with a *raga*'s time of day.

Figure 24. Ensemble rendition of the first section of 'Roti Canai'.

**repeat (suggested 3-4 times, but not strict)**  
Last time only

Occasionally use parallel 5ths for longer notes

**A** RH: *Improvise Using Scale (any octave)*

Pno. *ascending* *descending* *example*

LH: *Improvise Using C and G in very occasional accompaniment or in breaks from phrases in right hand*

Figure 25. Piano four-hands version of 'Roti Canai' opening section with instructions for improvisation.

Going beyond the contemporary classical world, within each movement is a tune that follows various traditional practices. It is possible to extract each tune into a more conventional presentation with the potential for lyrics. The tunes from 'Nasi Lemak', 'Morning Tea', the multiple tunes from 'Nasi Campur', the original tune from 'Char Kuey Teow' and various fragments from 'Roti Canai' could be rearranged or 'reverse engineered' into popular style songs.

## Conclusion

The ideal result of this composition is an idea: a postmodern form that is distinctively Malaysian in use. There is a great potential for this concept and form particularly for composers but also for performers and educators of Western classical music in Malaysia, who normally deal with centuries-old European works. Composers could create their own composition using the same structure and end up with a completely new composition. Much like people's food preferences, there are near infinite combinations using this idea. Within Malaysia, a Malaysian Malay, Chinese or Indian would have a different perspective and would produce a piece more suited to his or her background. Outside of Malaysia, if a composer is searching for an inspiration that reflects his or her culture, something as simple and present as the meals of the day and the variety within a theme it creates can be an option. Food is something which every person needs and can connect to if linked to music. Performers in Malaysia could relate to food-inspired pieces more if they immediately understand the meaning behind the music personally. Educators can teach musical composition, concepts such as programmatic music or postmodernism and Malaysian genres using the food of the local culture that ties into the music. In

the end, if a musician is searching for an inspiration that reflects his or her culture, something as simple and present as the meals of the day and the variety within a theme it creates can be an option. Food is something which every person needs and can connect to if linked to music.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> This paper is expanded from the proceedings of the Music and Cultural Studies Conference in May 2016 (MUSICULT '16) entitled 'Sedap Cycle: Creating a Malaysian Multi-Movement Work Based on Local Cuisine' (Johnson, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> References to the food itself is not capitalised (char kuey teow), and references to the musical movements are capitalised and in quotation marks ('Char Kuey Teow').

### **Acknowledgements**

The production of the music stemming from this research is funded by a University Research Grant (GPU) from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. In general, there are so many in Malaysia I have met who contributed to the inspiration behind this project. While all colleagues at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris would introduce me to various foods, in particular, Dr Clare Chan Suet Ching, Dr Christine Augustine, Dr Colleen Wong and Dr Mayco Axel Santaella were my first 'portals' into Malaysian cuisine. They ordered for me a roti canai and *teh tarik* for my first supper in Malaysia. The university's various seminars and training where food was always provided also inspired the music. Various friendly people across Malaysia who I cannot name such as taxi drivers, passengers on the train and other encounters across Malaysia were vital in my informal research. The students at UPSI also played a role in not only filling out my surveys, but in turn teaching me about Malaysian food in our café.

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