

A Comparative Study of Trill Ornamentation in Malay Traditional Music and Western Classical Music

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Abstract

This article examines the similarities and differences in trill ornamentation between Malay traditional music and Western classical music, particularly during the Baroque period. Utilising a comprehensive literature review of historical treatises, including works by Johann Sebastian Bach and François Couperin, alongside ethnographic fieldwork involving live performances, the study highlights the cultural significance and technical nuances of trills in both traditions. The findings reveal that Western trills are defined by specific technical guidelines and harmonic functions, while Malay *grenek/gerenek* trill emphasises improvisation and personal expression. This comparative analysis underscores the role of ornamentation as a vital component of musical storytelling, contributing to a deeper understanding of the universal nature of ornamentation in music and enriching the appreciation of diverse musical practices.

Keywords: Trill Techniques, Ornamentation, Malay Traditional Music, Western Classical Music, *grenek/gerenek* trill, Cultural Comparison

Introduction

Trills are a vital ornamentation technique in both Malay traditional music and Western classical music. While the term “trill” is widely recognized in Western music, its application and interpretation can vary significantly across different cultures. This article seeks to analyse the function of the trill in Malay traditional music, commonly referred to as the '*grenek/gerenek* trill' as described by Awang Hassim & Mohamed Karim (2023) and compare it with the Baroque trill, which is characterised by its specific execution and stylistic conventions. Understanding these differences not only enriches our appreciation of each musical tradition but also underscores the universal nature of ornamentation in music.

In Western classical music, particularly during the Baroque period, the trill emerged as a fundamental ornamentation technique that added expressiveness and complexity to musical phrases. Defined as the rapid alternation between two adjacent notes, the trill serves both melodic and harmonic functions, enhancing the emotional depth of a piece. Robert Donington (1982) notes that trills were not merely decorative; they played a crucial role in shaping the musical narrative, allowing performers to convey a range of emotions through their execution. The Baroque trill is typically initiated from a note above the main pitch, a practice that was codified in the performance treatises of the time, such as those by Johann Sebastian Bach and Pier Francesco Tosi (Neumann, 1978).

Conversely, in Malay traditional music, the concept of “grenek/gerenek” embodies a similar ornamentation technique but is deeply rooted in the cultural and musical context of the region. The term grenek is infrequently used in Malaysia and is primarily recognized among Indonesians, particularly in the Medan region (Awang Hassim, 2024; Awang Hassim & Mohamed Karim, 2023; Rosny, 2017; Suflan, 2015; Rizaldi, 2010). Nonetheless, according to Awang Hassim & Mohamed Karim (2023), there exists a comparable term in the Malaysian dictionary with the same meaning, which is *gerenek*. *Gerenek* is defined as “(1) Small and beautiful/attractive; 2) low trilling (voice, etc.)” (Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat, 2017). Besides having nearly identical pronunciation, the definitions also share similar characteristics. Following Awang Hassim & Mohamed Karim (2023) research, the use of the term grenek/gerenek trill will be used in this study to differentiate between the concept of trill in Classical Western music theory and its application in the Malay traditional music. Grenek/gerenek trill is often employed in vocal performances and instrumental music, particularly in genres such as Melayu Asli, Dikir Barat and Ghazal. The execution of grenek/gerenek trill involves a series of rapid, decorative notes that embellish the main melody, similar to the trill in Western music. However, the stylistic conventions and cultural significance of grenek/gerenek trill differ markedly from its Western counterpart. In traditional Malay music, the ornamentation is often influenced by the emotional content of the lyrics and the overall narrative of the performance, reflecting the rich oral traditions of the culture (Ritawati, 2017).

The differences in execution and interpretation of trills in these two musical traditions highlight the broader concept of ornamentation as a universal element in music. While the technical aspects of trills may vary, their purpose remains consistent: to enhance musical expression and engage the listener. In both traditions, the ornamentation serves as a means of personal expression for the performer, allowing for individual interpretation and stylistic nuance. This is particularly evident in the improvisational nature of Malay traditional music, where performers often embellish melodies with grenek/gerenek trill in a manner that reflects their unique artistic voice (Awang Hassim, 2004; Awang Hassim & Mohamed Karim, 2023).

Moreover, the cultural context in which these ornamentations are situated plays a significant role in their interpretation. In Western classical music, the trill is often associated with the formal structures of the repertoire, serving as a means of highlighting cadences and transitions within a piece. In contrast, the grenek/gerenek trill in Malay music is more fluid, often adapting to the emotional landscape of the performance and the interaction between the performer and the audience. This dynamic relationship underscores the importance of context in understanding how ornamentation functions within different musical traditions.

The study of trills and their cultural significance not only enriches our understanding of Malay traditional music and Western classical music but also fosters a greater appreciation for the diverse ways in which musicians across the globe express themselves. By examining the similarities and differences in the execution and interpretation of trills, we can gain insights into the broader principles of ornamentation that transcend cultural boundaries. This exploration ultimately highlights the universal nature of music as a form of human expression, capable of conveying complex emotions and narratives through the art of ornamentation.

The trill, whether manifested as “grenek/gerenek” in Malay traditional music or as a Baroque ornament in Western classical music, serves as a testament to the rich tapestry of musical expression found across cultures. By analysing these ornamentation techniques, we not only celebrate the unique characteristics of each tradition but also recognize the shared human experience that music embodies. As we continue to explore the intricate world of ornamentation, we deepen our appreciation for the artistry involved in both Malay and Western musical practices, fostering a greater understanding of the universal language of music.

Methodology

The methodology for this comparative study of trills in Malay traditional music and Western classical music involved a multi-faceted approach, integrating both qualitative and analytical techniques. First, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to gather existing research on trills and ornamentation in both musical traditions. Key texts included treatises from the Baroque period, such as those by Johann Sebastian Bach and François Couperin, which provided insights into the technical execution of trills in Western classical music (Donnington, 1982; Neumann, 1978). Simultaneously, ethnographic studies of Malay traditional music

were undertaken to understand the cultural significance and execution of grenek/gerenek trill. This involved attending live performances and conducting semi-structured interviews with musicians to capture their perspectives on improvisation and emotional expression in their art (Rizaldi, 2010; Rosny, 2017).

The data collected from both sources were analysed thematically, focusing on the similarities and differences in execution, cultural context, and emotional significance. This comparative analysis not only highlighted the unique characteristics of each tradition but also emphasised the universal nature of ornamentation in music, contributing to a deeper understanding of global musical practices.

Result and Discussion

Historical Context of Trills in Western Classical and Malay Traditional Music

In Western classical music, particularly during the Baroque period (approximately 1600-1750), trills emerged as a fundamental technique for embellishing melodies. This era was characterised by a heightened emphasis on ornamentation, which served to enhance the expressiveness and complexity of musical compositions. Musicians such as Johann Sebastian Bach played a pivotal role in documenting and codifying the various forms of trills. In his *Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach* (figure 1), Bach provided detailed instructions on the execution of trills, highlighting the significance of both preparation (prefix) and termination (suffix) in their performance. This meticulous attention to detail underscores the technical precision required in Baroque ornamentation, where the execution of a trill could dramatically alter the character of a musical phrase (Neumann, 1978).

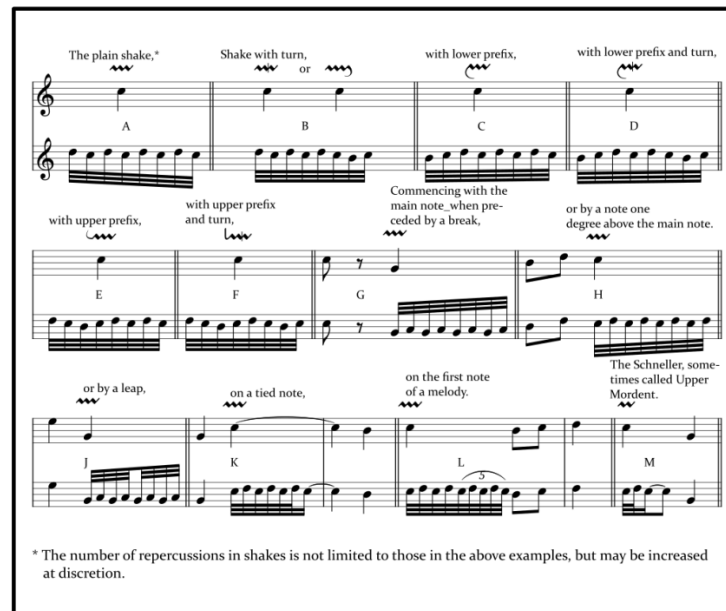


Figure 1. Variations of trill ornaments listed by Johann Sebastian Bach based on the compilation *Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*

The ornamentation techniques of the Baroque period were not merely decorative; they were integral to the musical language of the time. Trills, along with other ornaments such as mordents and turns, were employed to add expressiveness and to convey the emotional depth of the music (Donington, 1982). The practice of ornamentation was deeply rooted in the performance traditions of the time, where musicians were expected to embellish written music according to their interpretative choices (Neumann, 1978). This practice was influenced significantly by the Italian vocal traditions, which emphasised expressiveness and virtuosity. Italian singers, renowned for their technical prowess, naturally incorporated a variety of vocal decorations into their performances (Tosi, 1723). This practice was not merely a stylistic choice but a reflection of the cultural values of the time, which celebrated expressiveness and emotional depth in music (Neumann, 1978). The influence of Italian vocal traditions on the development of trills cannot be overstated. Composers such as Giulio Caccini and

later figures like George Frideric Handel were instrumental in shaping the ornamentation practices of the Baroque period. Caccini's writings in *Le nuove musiche* introduced the concept of “shake,” which is now more commonly referred to as trill (Caccini, 1970). This term evolved over time, with the Baroque trill becoming a standardised ornamentation technique. Handel, whose operas featured intricate vocal lines, relied heavily on the ornamentation styles of Italian singers, further popularising the use of trills in his compositions (Donington, 1982; Tosi, 1723).

Bach's *Klavierbüchlein* serves as a crucial document in understanding the execution of trills during the Baroque period. In this work, Bach categorised trills into various forms, emphasising the importance of preparation and termination. The preparation, or prefix, could be executed from above or below the principal note, while the termination, or suffix, provided a resolution to the ornament. This structured approach to ornamentation reflects the Baroque aesthetic, which valued clarity and expressiveness in musical performance (Donington, 1982). The ability to execute trills with precision was seen as a mark of a skilled musician, and the ornamentation became a means of showcasing technical prowess and interpretative depth (Donington, 1982).

As the Baroque period progressed, the role of trills evolved. By the late 1600s, the harmonic function of trills gained prominence, with musicians often beginning trills with an additional note from above. This shift in practice was indicative of the changing musical landscape, where harmonic complexity became increasingly important. The writings of contemporaneous musicians such as François Couperin and Joachim Quantz further elucidate the stylistic nuances of trills during this time. Couperin, in his *L'Art de toucher le clavecin*, emphasised the importance of expressiveness in ornamentation, while Quantz's treatise on flute playing provided insights into the execution of trills in instrumental music (Quantz, 1752).

In contrast to the formalised approach seen in Western classical music, the use of trill, or “grenek/gerenek trill,” in Malay traditional music has its roots deeply embedded in the oral tradition (Awang Hassim & Mohamed Karim, 2023; Rosny, 2017). Unlike the structured ornamentation of the Baroque period, the execution of grenek/gerenek trill is characterised by a high degree of improvisation and personal expression. Musicians often embellish melodies spontaneously, drawing upon their emotional responses and the lyrical content of the songs (Awang Hassim & Mohamed Karim, 2023; Rizaldi, 2010). This improvisational aspect allows performers to infuse their interpretations with a unique personal touch, making each performance distinct.

The emotional expression conveyed through grenek/gerenek trill is closely tied to the cultural context of Malay music, where the lyrics often reflect themes of love, nature, and social commentary (Suflan, 2015). The use of ornamentation like grenek/gerenek trill serves not only to embellish the melody but also to enhance the storytelling aspect of the performance. This connection between ornamentation and emotional expression highlights the importance of context in understanding the role of trills in different musical traditions. In Malay traditional music, the ability to improvise and embellish melodies is seen as a vital skill, allowing musicians to connect with their audience on a deeper level (Awang Hassim & Mohamed Karim, 2023; Ritawati, 2017).

The cultural significance of grenek/gerenek trill in traditional Malay traditional music can be observed in various genres, including folk songs, traditional dances, and ceremonial music. The ornamentation is often employed to convey the emotional weight of the lyrics, allowing performers to express their feelings and interpretations of the song. This practice is particularly evident in the performance of Malay traditional songs, where the use of grenek/gerenek trill can evoke a range of emotions, from joy to melancholy. The flexibility of grenek/gerenek trill allows musicians to adapt their performances to the context of the occasion, whether it be a festive celebration or a solemn ceremony.

Moreover, the oral tradition of Malay traditional music fosters a communal approach to performance, where musicians learn from one another and pass down techniques through generations (Awang Hassim & Mohamed Karim, 2023; Rizaldi, 2010). This contrasts with the more formalised training seen in Western classical music, where musicians often study written scores and adhere to established performance practices. In traditional Malay music, the emphasis on improvisation and personal expression encourages a dynamic and evolving musical landscape, where each performance is a unique interpretation of the tradition.

While trills in Western classical music were codified and influenced by Italian vocal traditions, the use of grenek/gerenek trill in Malay traditional music is rooted in improvisation and personal expression. Both techniques serve to enrich the musical experience, yet they reflect the distinct cultural values and practices of

their respective traditions. The historical context of trills in Western classical music reveals a structured approach to ornamentation, emphasising technical precision and emotional depth, while the practice of *grenek/gerenek* trill in Malay traditional music highlights the importance of improvisation and personal interpretation. By examining these historical contexts, a deeper appreciation for the diverse ways in which ornamentation functions in music across cultures, showcasing the universal human desire to express emotion and creativity through sound.

Technical Execution of Trills in Western Classical Music and *Grenek* in Malay Traditional Music

In the realm of Western classical music, the trill is a fundamental ornamentation technique that adds depth and expressiveness to melodic lines. Typically executed by alternating between the principal note and the note above it, the trill is governed by specific rules regarding its initiation and conclusion. The technical execution of trills involves a combination of precision, speed, and interpretative choices that can significantly affect the overall musical expression.

Trills in Western Classical Music

The basic execution of a trill in Western Classical music involves alternating between the principal note and the note immediately above it. This alternation continues for the duration of the ornament, creating a rapid, oscillating effect that is characteristic of Baroque ornamentation. The speed of the trill can vary significantly depending on the tempo of the piece being performed. In slower tempos, performers may choose to execute the trill more deliberately, allowing each note to be clearly articulated and enhancing the expressiveness of the performance. Conversely, in faster tempos, the trill may be executed more rapidly, resulting in a fluid and seamless effect that contributes to the overall momentum of the music (Donington, 1982).

The initiation of a trill is often marked by a specific note, which can either be the principal note itself or an additional note above it. This choice can greatly influence the character of the trill. For instance, starting with the upper note can create a sense of anticipation and tension, drawing the listener's attention and heightening the emotional impact of the passage. In contrast, beginning with the principal note may provide a more grounded and stable feel, establishing a solid foundation for the melodic line. The conclusion of a trill is equally important; it can be resolved in various ways, such as by returning to the principal note or moving to a different note, thereby creating a sense of closure or continuation in the melodic line. This flexibility in resolution allows performers to shape the musical narrative according to their interpretative choices (Neumann, 1978).

Robert Donington, a noted musicologist, defines the Baroque trill as serving two primary roles: melodic elaboration and harmonic emphasis. The trill enhances the melodic line by adding complexity and richness, allowing the performer to elaborate on the basic melody and infuse it with personal expression. Additionally, the trill can create harmonic tension, drawing attention to the underlying chord structure and leading to a resolution that enhances the emotional impact of the music. This dual function of the trill is essential in Baroque music, where ornamentation plays a crucial role in performance practice (Donington, 1982).

The complexity of trills can also vary based on the performer's interpretative choices and technical skill. Some performers may choose to incorporate additional embellishments, such as turns or mordents, into their trills, further enriching the ornamentation and adding layers of nuance to the performance. The ability to execute these variations requires a high level of technical skill and a deep understanding of the stylistic conventions of the period in which the music was composed. As noted by Neumann (1978), the ornamentation practices of the Baroque era were influenced by both instrumental and vocal traditions, and performers often adapted their techniques to suit the specific demands of the repertoire they were interpreting (Neumann, 1978).

***Grenek/gerenek* trill in Malay Traditional Music**

In contrast to the structured approach of Western trills, the execution of *grenek/gerenek* trill in Malay traditional music is characterised by a more fluid and improvisational style. *Grenek/gerenek* trill serves as an ornamentation technique that encompasses a variety of techniques, including rapid oscillations, slides, and other

embellishments that are often improvised. This flexibility allows performers to express their individual style and emotional connection to the music, making each performance unique.

The execution of grenek/gerenek trill is less rigidly defined than the Western trill, reflecting the cultural context in which it is performed. Malay traditional music places a strong emphasis on the performer's emotional expression and connection to the audience. As a result, the execution of grenek/gerenek trill can vary significantly from one performance to another, with performers drawing on their own experiences and interpretations to shape the ornamentation. This adaptability is a hallmark of Malay traditional music, where the performer's individuality is celebrated and encouraged (Rizaldi, 2010).

Rizaldi (2010) notes that the differences in melodic patterns between grenek/gerenek trill and other ornamentations highlight the unique characteristics of Malay traditional music. The ornamentation is not merely an embellishment but an integral part of the musical expression, allowing performers to convey their feelings and cultural identity through their interpretation. The use of rapid oscillations and slides in grenek/gerenek trill creates a sense of fluidity and movement, enhancing the overall musical experience. This contrasts sharply with the more standardised execution of trills in Western classical music, where specific rules and techniques govern their performance.

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Mak Inang Pulau Kampai'. It consists of three systems of staves. The top system is for 'Vokal' (Vocal) and 'Accordion'. The vocal line has lyrics 'Sung guh in' and 'dah si Pu lau Kam pai'. The accordion part has a trill marked with a red box and the word 'Trill'. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics 'dah si Pu lau Kam pai'. The third system continues the vocal line with lyrics 'sung guh lah in dah si Pu lau Kam pai'. The trill is specifically on the note 'Pu' in the second system.

Figure 2. Example of a trill in the song *Mak Inang Pulau Kampai*. Transcription by Rosny (2017)

The use of grenek/gerenek trill for singing and instrumental performance differs significantly due to the varying degrees of flexibility in each medium (Rizaldi, 2010). In singing, the grenek/gerenek trill involves shaking the sound in a close tone, akin to vibrato in Western music. Conversely, when performed on string instruments, the technique resembles the trill technique, where the fingers shake rapidly between two different tones in one tap or more (Rizaldi, 2010). Other scholars suggest that grenek/gerenek trill is an improvised technique that involves performing tone variations with small and closely spaced rhythmic values (tremolo) (Silitonga, 2011; Zulaikha, 2008), utilizing conjunct movement (Zulaikha, 2008). The note intervals typically range from a minor second to a major second, depending on the harmony of each song, with durations of either 1/32 or 1/64. There are two types of grenek/gerenek trills: “gerenek sekon” and “gerenek sekon bawah” (Rizaldi, 2010). Rosny (2017) defines the grenek/gerenek trill, referred to as “trill berirama”, as a decorative tone where the interval of the selected note is close to the main note (conjunct), with the interval distance being either a minor second or a major second based on the song's harmony.

The improvisational nature of grenek/gerenek trill also allows for a greater degree of personal expression. Performers may choose to vary the speed, intensity, and style of their ornamentation based on their emotional response to the music and the context of the performance. This personal touch not only enriches the performance but also fosters a deeper connection between the performer and the audience, as the emotional nuances of the music are conveyed through the unique interpretation of each artist (Awang Hassim, 2024; Awang Hassim & Mohamed Karim, 2023). The execution of grenek/gerenek trill in Malay traditional music

exemplifies a rich tradition of improvisation and personal expression. This ornamentation technique serves as a vital component of the musical experience, allowing performers to articulate their cultural identity and emotional depth in ways that are distinct from the more formalised practices found in Western classical music.

Comparative Analysis

When comparing the technical execution of trills in Western classical music and *grenek/gerenek* trill in Malay traditional music, several key differences emerge. The Western trill is characterised by its structured approach, with specific rules governing its initiation, execution, and conclusion. This structure allows for a high degree of precision and clarity, which is essential in the context of Western classical music's emphasis on written notation and adherence to stylistic conventions (Donnington, 1982). For instance, Western trills typically begin on the note above the principal note and alternate rapidly between the two notes, often following a predetermined rhythmic pattern (Neumann, 1978). This adherence to form not only enhances the harmonic complexity of the music but also aligns with the Western tradition's focus on compositional integrity and the written score.

In contrast, the fluidity and improvisational nature of *grenek/gerenek* trill reflect the cultural values of Malay traditional music, where personal expression and emotional connection are paramount (Rizaldi, 2010). The execution of *grenek/gerenek* trill is less rigidly defined, allowing performers to explore their creativity and individuality. This results in a diverse range of interpretations, as each performer may employ different techniques, such as rapid oscillations or slides, to convey their emotional response to the music (Rosny, 2017). The lack of strict guidelines for *grenek/gerenek* trill enables performers to adapt their ornamentation to the context of the performance, fostering a deeper connection with the audience and enhancing the overall emotional impact of the music (Suflan, 2015).

Both ornamentation techniques serve to enhance the overall musical experience, but they do so in fundamentally different ways. The trill adds complexity and harmonic tension to Western classical music, often serving as a means to heighten the drama of a piece or to showcase the technical prowess of the performer (Lee, 2020). In contrast, *grenek/gerenek* trill provides a means for performers to express their emotions and cultural identity in Malay traditional music, allowing for a more personal and intimate connection with the audience (Rizaldi, 2010). This distinction highlights the rich diversity of musical practices across cultures and the ways in which ornamentation can shape the listener's experience.

The technical execution of trills in Western classical music and *grenek/gerenek* trill in Malay traditional music illustrates the diverse approaches to ornamentation in different musical traditions. While Western trills are characterised by their structured execution and adherence to specific rules, *grenek/gerenek* trill offers a more fluid and improvisational style that emphasises personal expression and emotional connection. Both techniques enrich their respective musical genres, showcasing the unique characteristics and cultural contexts from which they arise. Understanding these differences not only enhances our appreciation of the music but also deepens our insight into the cultural values and artistic expressions that shape musical practices around the world.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of trill techniques in Western classical music and Malay traditional music reveals distinct approaches that reflect the cultural, historical, and social contexts of each tradition. While Western classical music emphasises standardised notation, technical precision, and formal performance settings, Malay traditional music celebrates oral transmission, personal expression, and communal engagement. These differences underscore the rich diversity of musical practices around the world and highlight the importance of understanding the cultural significance of ornamentation techniques like trills and *grenek/gerenek* trill. As musicians and scholars continue to explore these traditions, it is essential to recognize the unique characteristics and values that shape the execution and interpretation of trills in each context. By appreciating the nuances of these techniques, we can foster a deeper understanding of the cultural heritage that informs our musical practices and enriches our collective artistic expression.

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