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# ***A Review on 'Experimentation' and Exploration on Installation Electroacoustic Work in Malaysia***

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The last sixty years has witnessed an enormous development with regard to electroacoustic music in the west. I would suggest that rapid changes in technologies in the last decade have made it easy to gain access to things that we have never get to approach before. As the result, 'technology' has always seems to be the 'tools' of trade, particularly in electroacoustic music composition. At present, there is a progressively growing of interest on electroacoustic music in Malaysia, among those significant factor contributed towards the interest, are the accessibility of the 'tools'.

This paper will discuss some of the issues resulted from a creative process in electroacoustic music as well as art and technology related experiment in Malaysia.

## **Introduction**

It is difficult to trace our point of entry, from historical perspectives in Malaysia, on discussing who's who were involved in using computers to compose music in particular electroacoustic music. However , from Malaysian perspectives, I would suggest that our discussion should begin with the technological advancement offered by Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) to the music industry in the early 1980s.

After being extensively exposed to electroacoustic during while studying in England in a concert organised by the music department at York university, in the mid 90s, I was later fascinated by how manipulated and synthesized sounds were distributed through multiple array of speakers in the concert hall, This initial experience somehow nurture my interest in electroacoustic music, and later I began to explore hardware, such as revox magnetic tape machine, processing sound on Composers' Desktop Project (CDP) suite on Atari machines, and software, available in the electronic music studio.

## **Exploring Medium**

Our early exploration on experimental music, for public presentation, started as early in 1996. Among the well-established pioneering work was a collaborative project entitled '*Jambori Rimba*', initiated by Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Mohd Fadzil Abd Rahman together with the McLean's Mix. This research project was also part of the motivation towards the realization of Unimas's state-of-the-art MIDI studio, with its early set-up includes the state of the art, digital audio workstation which we believed to be the first of its kind in a public university. The research project, '*Jambori Rimba*' as described by the artists was an extension of a successful collaborative project earlier in 1992 with The McLean Mix, '*The Rainforest Images*'.

Most of the materials used for '*Jambori Rimba*' as depicted by Rahman et al (2000) was documented through a series of expedition to Borneo rainforest. The recorded sounds such as soundscape from the field trip, including insects, birdcalls and others, were then composed by the McLean Mix with Hasnul J Saidon as the video artist

'*Jambori Rimba*' was premiered at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) Experimental Theatre in 1996. A gamelan and dance group from Unimas also complemented the concert. The research project can be considered among the most significant contributions towards the establishment and development of electronic art in Malaysia, particularly in Sarawak. It somehow introduced a sudden desire into considerable exploration of electronic art and media at Unimas and Malaysia in general.

Another significant research project established by Hasnul J Saidon and Niranjan Rajah was the 1st Electronic Art Show held at the National Art Gallery in 1997. The event may be regarded as , our first large public showcase on exploring art from the technological perspectives and also, attempt at documenting and bringing together electronic and new media artist as well as establishing historical perspectives on new media practices in Malaysia.

Our experimentation on Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) technology for interactive music in 1997 probably may be view as our early form of exploring performing arts and multimedia in Malaysian context. Among the, significant research project in utilizing MIDI as an interactive tool, was '*Wayang Kulit Virtual*' instigated by Khairul Aidil Adzlin and Hasnizam Abdul Wahid as the sound artist. The research project was about exploring the oldest form of traditional entertainment, the '*Wayang Kulit*', with adaptation into technological perspectives. In this project, a computer with real time MIDI sequencing were used together with live performance of traditional '*Wayang Kulit*' ensemble. The idea of the project was to explore the arts and multimedia technology and at the same time preserving traditional culture and identity.

Presented together with '*Wayang Kulit Virtual*' during the first Electronic Art Show, was an electroacoustic piece entitle '*Solemn*', in which may be considered as one of the earliest electroacoustic work known presented in Malaysia. The piece was an exploration of the native rhyme sung by the *Kayan* people, an ethnic people from the island of Borneo. The raw materials were recorded during a research trip to the Borneo highlands in 1994 before it was later composed in 1997 on Composers' Desktop Project (CDP) software, a sound-processing suite designed specifically, for sound manipulation. '*Solemn*' has somehow introduced new perspectives in the exploration of technology in music delve into the domain of sound, away from the realm of notes. '*Solemn*' also explored, frequency modulation synthesis technique through *Yamaha SY35* synthesiser as well as *CSound*. Both works, have not just introduced new approach in musical research particularly in Malaysian electronic music scene, but also opened up more possibility in the development and interest of electroacoustic music in Malaysia.

In promoting more experimental study, particularly on the integration of traditional and mainstream contemporary 'electronic based music', Unimas Electroacoustic Group (EAG) was also established in 1997. The core members were formed earlier as part of a creative team for '*Wayang Kulit Virtual*'. The members of the group came from a multi-disciplinary capability with lecturers and students from various disciplines in the art. Among their major public performances, include '*Ruhai Anak Watan*' (1997), and '*Antologi La...*' (1999) in Unimas and international appearance during the Rainforest World Music Festival at the Sarawak Cultural Village in 1998. EAG is fundamentally a contemporary performance group, with technology as its main medium of exploration.

At present, we could see how much technology influenced music practices; with the advent of

MIDI, composers can now explore their creativity in front of a computer. Notation software such as *Sibelius* and *Encore* for example, had made composing in particular for non-trained musicians much more unsophisticated. With the advent of this software, composer may now compose and listen to their arrangement immediately after or at the time of composing.

However, if we look further beyond MIDI, utilizing and exploring programming language such as C language for interactive music for example, are no longer impossible. Besides mastering the 'technical skills' and knowledge on music, the need to learn and the ability to understand not only the aesthetical issues but the technicality behind hardware and software as well its applications in the future would be an important skills, however these are the areas which we at FACA, are being left behind. At present our investigation and exploration either technical or aesthetical exploration are focused on commercially available tools such as MIDI software and hardware.

Art in 21<sup>st</sup> century in general as we are aware of, have initiated exploration of art and technology. We could see the beginning of a 'new art' form. Artists or composers are no longer confined within their domain.

At present, at FACA, there has been a change towards exploring 'new art' form, and such example can be seen clearly translated through our student's final year project, these projects comprise collaborative and integrated research projects among the students, regardless of their area of studies either, music, cinematography, fine art, animation or drama and theatre. Some of the examples by our student-artist include, an interactive installation artwork utilizing MIDI keyboard, exploring three dimensional (3D) visual manipulating seven contrasting colours effects entitle '*Timbre – Colour of Sounds*' (2006) by Hwong King Hien, '*Water Reflection*' (2008), by Tan Choon Siew is another interesting audio-visual installation work, experimenting on 'natural' water reflection with lights from day to night in a 'glass-cube', with recorded sound from a <http://www.mcn.cnwaterfall>.

### **Exploring Electroacoustic Music on Multichannel System.**

In electroacoustic music, composition and concert presentation are regarded as two related process. Unlike typical contemporary composition approach, this genre focuses more towards the notion of sound rather than notes. In presenting electroacoustic music, as noted by many eletroacoustic scholars as well as composers, multi-channel delivery approach has its own history and references. The role of space in composers' intentions and compositional decisions in the studio and during later presentation to the public via a diffusion play a critical role on audiences' reception, particularly in electroacoustic music.

A good stereo piece performed through multiple pairs of stereo speakers, for example could be damaged if the performer fails to diffuse the piece well during concert performances, on the other hand diffusion may also enhanced a 'bad' piece. Sound diffusion can be referred to as one of the 'aesthetic components' of an electroacoustic music. According to Wyatt et al (2000), this notion will also enhance the spatial components of an electroacoustic music. In elaborating this further, Wyatt et al (2000) suggested, that diffusion may have the role of 'delivering musical gestures, phrases or sending sounds or different location', and in this context will have the function of delivering sonic quality and will make it as impressive as possible within a given space.

An installation work, "The Tales of Whispering Bonang" by Ramli, may be regard as one of the experiment on exploring sound and space and was presented during the "Hybrid + Ism Exhibition 2007" Sabah Art Gallery on the 12<sup>th</sup> June 2007, organized by the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts. The electroacoustic work used eight speakers with the intention of

eight channels output. Through his work, the composer explored a surrogate environment, and mystical state as well as an attempt to introduce the impact of appreciating electroacoustic music through multichannel listening to the audience in Malaysia. Our early attempt in presenting electroacoustic music to the public, was in Hilton hotel, Kuching, Sarawak during International Conference on Applied and Creative Arts (ICACA05) conference in 2005, with Jonty Harrison, Neil Rolnick and the writer himself presenting our works during a formal gala-dinner together with a fashion show with multichannel output!

### **Exploring Technology and its Applications on Visual Culture at FACA**

Most of our early exploration and experimentation on technology and its applications are focused within the visual arts practices at FACA. Among issues and discussions are, the convergence between discipline and practices. Among those early exploration on electronic medium in particular, from electronic art perspectives include works by Ling Siew Woei entitle '*Mondrian in Action*' (1998), '*Rambo Tiga*' (1998) by Anuar Ayob and '*Meriahnya Kemerdekaan*' (1998) by Mohd Zulwawi. In '*Modrian in Action*', Siew Woei explored internet as a virtual space for presenting information as well as creative medium. In her work, she questioned the validity of 'traditional aesthetics' in comparison to technology and the function of viewers from interactivity point of view. Rather sinister and 'deconstruct' approach, Anuar Ayob experimented with some of the clips from '*Rambo I*' film and 'deconstruct' the main character, 'John Rambo' and present it from our local perspective. Meanwhile Zulwawi's '*Meriahnya Kemerdekaan*', explored the negative aspects of exploitation, manipulation and 'deconstruction' of advertisement during religious festive season. Those above mentioned works, are considered as few of many early exploration on abstracted visual or electronic art and as well as internet as medium of communication.

Most recent exhibition of art and technology related works by FACA was through the D'NA – Hybrid, hosted by our National Art Gallery in 2005. 'Hybrid exhibition', as it was called, acted as a platform specifically for FACA academic members or 'teacher-artist' to explore their ideas and creativity with most of their works based upon technological and aesthetical issues. The exhibition has successfully display the infinite nature of creativity on multi platform, from fine arts to any possible media, ranging from sound to visual art. Among those well-presented works includes 'Virtual Reality – The Hybrid Domain' by Zulkalnain Zainal Abidin and 'One Step Journey to Virtual Space' by Musdi, in which both explored the idea of virtual space.

Hybrid exhibition also reflect, our infinite exploration on art, technology as well as creativity and through series of exhibition, our exploration on 'old' and 'new media' technology continues with 'investigative' artwork focusing on the exploitation on local materials through sound, photography, video as well as digital media.

It is also important to note in this article that, our response to western 21<sup>st</sup> century art practices, such as electronic art, digital arts, electroacoustic music or other form of art and technology related experimentation, may not display similar profile to western practices, but may offer distinctive unique approaches, such as materials from sacred, court or folk traditions as our medium of exploration. In fact most of the works mentioned in this article, have not just explored the creative use of technology from visual perspectives but also explored sound in a very minimal approach. This due to the fact most of the artist mentioned throughout this paper are trained visual artist particularly in electronic art, with sound as their secondary consideration.

### **Conclusions**

Most of the experimental works discussed throughout this paper resulted from ‘new media’ development and as the technology are getting advance, ideas and creativity however becoming more important and pertinent. The future, from our technological perspectives, may suggest exciting opportunities for artist not only to integrate but also finding new ways to disseminate. It is now depends on artist’s creativity and innovation as well as on how to correlate media or medium, in proposing new ideas.

At present, it might not be obvious to see works or concerts on electroacoustic music however there are tendency towards exploring it further and Experimental Musicians and Artists Co-operative Malaysia (EMACM) are one of the known organization which offer legitimate platform for facilitation, publication and exposure of creative and experimental works in Malaysia.

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## Note

‘UNIMAS Computer-Related Experiments in Art and Technology Studio (c.r.e.a.t.e.s)’ was initiated and labelled by Hasnul J Saidon and was firstly used in his article entitle UNIMAS c.r.e.a.t.e.s (Universiti Malaysia Sarawak Computer-Related Experiments in Art and Technology Studio, in Leonardo, Vol.31, No.3 (1998), pp.234-235

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