

Patterns of Transformation: *Linangkit*

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Abstract: Formed by different layers of patterning of knots with colours and shapes, *Linangkit*¹ refers to one of Sabah's traditional Indigenous forms of embroidery. This paper discusses how these patterns are being transformed into musical materials as a way to extend my compositional practice to develop ideas for pitch and rhythmic organization and formal ideas, and as the basis for my fourth collaboration with the dancer Tang Sook Kuan building on the earlier experiences with gongs described in my earlier project called *Interbreathment*².

1 INTRODUCTION: THE *LINANGKIT* PROJECT

Meaning is not produced by grammatical structures and formal codes, though they have important roles to play; it is created through individual action [as] a part of cultural process. (Morphy, 1998, p. 6)

Linangkit is a collaborative project comprising a music-dance installation involving a dancer (Tang Sook Kuan) performing within a sculpture of elastic string and an oboist (Howard Ng), as well as a stand-alone work for oboe solo (performed by Peter Veale) extracted from the larger work called, *The Project of Linangkit*. The collaboration, in terms of its working modality, began as an e-mail discussion before a meeting in Sabah and proceeded in a similar way to my previous project, *Yu Moi* in terms of modelling, observing, and realizing the changing process of its becoming to access a world (in-)between participants, and between sound and movement, music and choreography.

The word 'pattern', in Western music compositional history, has often been characterized as a somewhat solid, concrete, organized musical idea functioning, more or less, as a form. As a musical idea, it has functioned as a key element in defining a musical entity including style, meaning, and

aesthetic. Pattern-making is highly associated with musical elements such as rhythmic impulses, gestures, and modes of organizing, building, and expanding one's musical vocabulary or syntax through repetition. Examples from composers such as Morton Feldman (*Why Patterns?*), Arvo Pärt (*Fratres*), Philip Glass (Violin Concerto no.1), Terry Riley (*In C*), Steve Reich (*Clapping Music*), Bryn Harrison (*Repetitions in Extended Time*), and Matthew Sergeant (*bet denagel*) illustrate the power of patterns in dialogue to form, deform, and reform processes of structural transformation. Against this more architectural/structural use of patterns and in response to the idea of grammatical structure expressed by Morphy, I started thinking of patterns and pattern-making itself as a somewhat malleable, tractable, and pliable entity, as a trigger to accomplishing a piece of work through movement, action, and integration instead of thinking pattern itself as a single unit, form, or musical element within a certain musicological specification (system, framework, or theory). That is, in researching *Linangkit*, my focus is not merely on patterns as a musical form (or material) but looking for the holistic perspective within the performative aspects of the making of embroidery, thinking about what is behind

¹ Named differently amongst the *Kadazandusun* for example, *linangkit* in *Lotud* tribe, *rangkit* in *Rungus*, and *berangkit* in *Bajau*.

² Lee, C.T.I (2018). 'Inbetweenness: Transcultural thinking in my compositional practice. *Malaysian Music Journal*, 7, 134-158.

the embroidery and to look for analogous ways of organizing the temporality as well as the relationship between the materials. I wanted to find translations to the aesthetic through collaboration and was interested in looking at the process of how the patterns and pattern-making might be experienced as a form of self-communication.

Tang Sook Kuan is a practitioner of *linangkit* and hence this opened up the choreographic as well as musical element of sewing, which proved to be a key point of discussion in the collaboration. This, again, connects with the underlying theme of all of my explorations into non-Western and so-called traditional practices, which is how the process of transmission and translation between cultural forms can lead to a form of ‘inbetween-ness’, that is, an experience of emergent creative energy in which one sees a dynamic relation between the positive aspect of something coming into being as well as the negative ground from which it arises. In order to

The video I received from Sook Kuan is a ten-minute documentary film with interviews, portraying

connect to such a concrete cultural relic in this preliminary stage, my strategy was to find a practitioner with whom I could learn the embroidery technique and to experience the process of the creation of making a piece of *linangkit* myself.

I had questions about how long it takes to complete a pattern, what sort of relationship exists between the embroiderer and the object, and how such a relationship might be carried over to and extended in my compositional practice and thinking. However, I was in the UK during that particular period and was not able to make a trip back to Sabah to meet up with Odun Lindu, a senior *linangkit* practitioner who is still actively preserving and practising this sewing tradition within the Lotud community in the Tuaran district in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. To break down the barriers, Sook Kuan agreed to pay a visit to the workshop given by Odun Lindu herself whilst making a live video recording for me as a way of starting to develop our work and exchange. the processes and the qualities of how a piece of Lotud-style *linangkit*³ is formed (Figure 1-3).



Figure 1: A moment capturing how Odun Lindu formed and sewed the knots and patterns on a traditional costume.

³ Formed and built by different various repetitive, symmetrical forms of crossed shapes and geometrical patterns (which is inspired by the melon seed) with colours, a piece of Lotud-style *linangkit* pattern whose motive and

its narrative are profoundly connected to the subject of nature expresses the beauty of flora and fauna of the Borneo rainforest.



Figure 2: An incomplete work with different patterns.



Figure 3: A completed patterning work.

My first impressions in encountering Odun Lindu's work from the video was that each pattern is sewn across the fabric, and whether complete or incomplete these patterns seem to project an illusion of movement. For me, it is as if the patterns and strings are waiting, vibrating, and contacting each other in a living way, even though physically they remain static. To me, they are not merely functioning as part of the traditional costume accessory but a quintessence of knowledge representing the liveness of something changing and the flow of time itself through transformation.⁴

According to Odun Lindu, it takes at least six months (or even longer) to finish a fully-completed

set of *linangkit* pattern work. This depends upon not only the level of the complexity or the size of the piece but also on the process of dialogue between the object and weaver. What fascinates me about this cultural practice is not only the physical pattern of the *linangkit* itself but the process and the action of the weaving. Each pattern is completed by a convergence of knots and lines and takes form through recursive interleaving between forces of tension and release, contraction and expansion, and augmentation and diminution of symmetrical and asymmetrically patterned surfaces. In the object, the patterned movement itself might be seen metaphorically as a meeting point in which cultures, dialogues, and

⁴ It is believed that this highly labour-intensive, customized, hand-made, traditional woven patterning work and skill was somehow passed down from the Philippines (where it is named *Langkit*) and started flourishing within the *Rungus* community in the Kudat district (the northern area of

Sabah). The meaning and the identity of the pattern has been extended over the years by the Indigenous people in North Borneo and been passed down from one generation to the next within local communities.

creativities are intertwined. This creates a sense of movement and temporalities through which one might sense the intimacy of how the weaver’s work reflects different emotional states as they bring about their creation.

2 A NEW FORM OF *LINANGKIT* PATTERN: SKETCHING THE STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATION OF THE OBOE PIECE

I started my compositional work by imitating the structural design of a Lotud-style *linangkit*, creating a replica version in musical form that I treated as a platform for generating and organizing musical material (Figure 4).

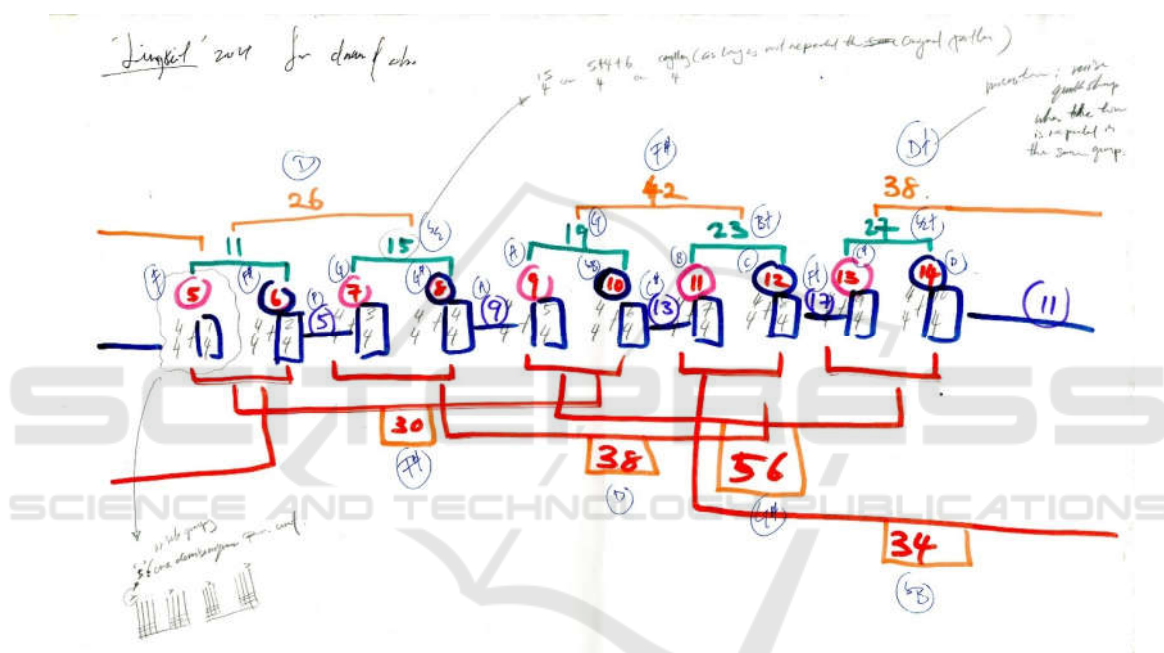


Figure 4: Marked in colours, letters (representing a central pitch/mode), numbers (the total accumulative number of beats), lines, and brackets, this replica of the *linangkit* in musical form is formed by layers of patterns, creating an entangled, interlocking set of relationships.

The first layer of this replica, which, in terms of its structural formation, was started at the middle ground, is formed of ten pairs of time signatures. Each pair consists of two different meters grouped by one common time and with different numerators ranging from one to ten, regarded as the basic pattern. I then increased the number of layers by joining and re-joining the basic patterns to form new pairings and layers (expressed as brackets in different colours).

Seeking a different structural form and working modality, I also assimilated the way in which Sook Kuan translated and remodelled the musical notation and its material that I created in the previous project, *Interbreathment*. By transferring each pattern and layer that I had built into a more extended rhythmic notation, the relationships between the patterns and the layers from the replica were distorted and adjusted (Figure 5).

'Linangkit' (2014) Chie Tsang LEE

Figure 5: Patterns were mixed, relocated, and resituated in different measures to create the ‘skeleton’ of the rhythmic structure of the oboe solo piece.

3 RHYTHMIC PATTERNING

Inspired by Odun Lindu, the rhythmic patterning design and the process of its formation inherited the

spirit, mode, and action of weaving. Taking the first ‘basic pattern’, for example, I treated the total accumulated beats (4+1=5) as a ‘needle’ and used it to organize the space and the spacing within the measures (4/4 and 1/4) (Figure 6-7).

Figure 6: The notes have been subdivided into demi-semiquaver note values and grouping them with five demi-semiquaver notes as a unit marked with an accent.

Figure 7: Each unit (marked with accent) is transformed into different note values including quaver, semi-quaver, and dotted semi-quaver by tying all the accented notes under the common time framework, giving rise to a new rhythmic surface.

This new rhythmic surface became the platform I used to organize register, in which the distance between accented notes was highlighted by replacing each accented note with pitches based on a pentatonic

scale. This approach can be seen, for example, in figure 8, which eventually became the first page in my oboe solo.

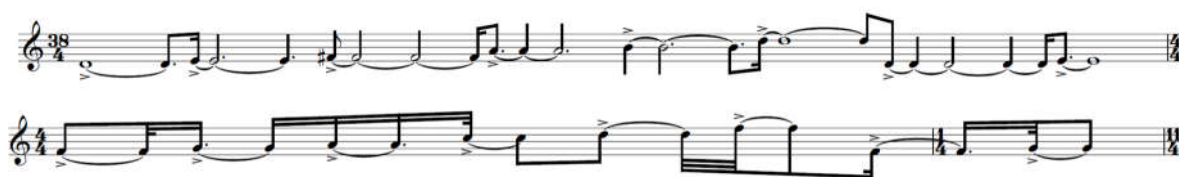


Figure 8: An earlier sketching of my register organization across the first two ‘basic patterns’.

As shown in figure 8, each accented note from the patterns (within 3/8 and 4/4+1/4) has been replaced and substituted by a specific pitch based on a pentatonic scale determined by the alphabets taken from the earlier sketch (see Figure 4). Here, the distances between the pitches within the first measure (3/8/4) have been repeated within an octave after a cycle, when the accented notes within the first pattern (3/8/4) are replaced by a D pentatonic scale, whereas the accented notes within the second pattern (4/4+1/4) have been substituted with pitches based on the F pentatonic scale.

These chains of pentatonic scales, however, operate not only at a local level in terms of decisions as to the note-to-note content of the work but are also used as focal points at a larger structural level at

which the rhythms have been further developed in a rather abstract, subjective, and intuitive way. I borrowed several modes including different types of raga, maqam, and pentatonic-scales to reinforce the potential of the material. These materials were injected between the notes to create different forms of phrases so that the basic patterns gradually become more encrusted and ornamented. This approach can be seen in the following musical example (Figure 9) in which the materials of each measure – such as the meters, pitches, registers, and rhythmic patterns, including phrases and rests and including the secondary subdivisions [4/4/1/4] in bar 6 and 7 – have been completely changed for practical reasons depending on the musical context as well as the connectivity between the sounds.

Linangkit (2015)
for solo oboe
Dedicated to Peter Vols, Tang Sooh Kuan, and Howard Ng Chie Tsang LEE

♩ = 42

Figure 9: A diagram shows the outcome of the first page of the music in which, for example, instead of using thirty-eight beats as a unit, the first pattern’s time signature within the measure has been subdivided and reassigned into five new individual measures (10+10+10+4+4).

Each measure's material has been further developed by adding new rhythmic elements (such as triplets and septuplets) and decorative figures between the notes and the patterns onto the previous rhythmic layer I had built (see Fig. 4.6). These additions create a complex, repetitive, fragmented form of musical language formed by embedding various micro-intervals and ornaments including appoggiaturas, upper/lower mordents, and trills to create a recursive, recitative-like, vocalic contour of musical gestures and textures, offering me a sound world which related to the Sabah Indigenous ritual form of chanting, called '*rinait*' and sung by the *bobohizan* (the priest).

4 '*SILING*': FABRIC AS A TEMPORAL SPACE CONTACTING SOUND AND SILENCE

One of the important elements influencing the rhythmic drive of the piece is the way in which I approached the temporal fabric by using rests to create dialogues between sound and silence. This musical idea was actually inspired by one of the stitching techniques used to form a pattern called '*Siling*' (Figure 10).

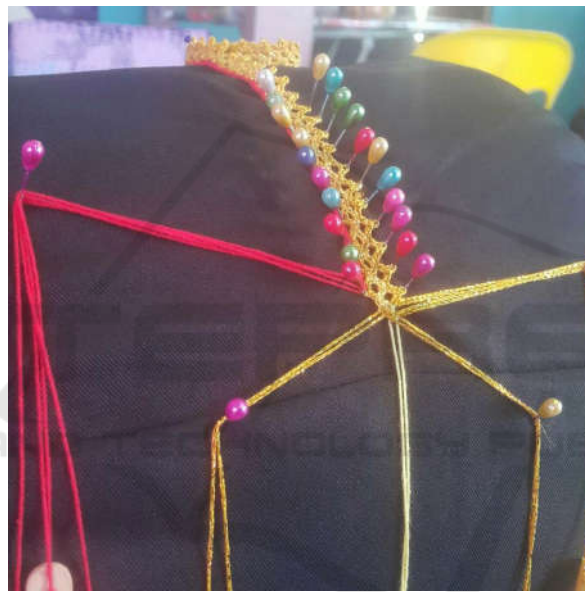


Figure 10: This kind of pattern is normally sewn at the surrounding edge of the *linangkit* pattern, with the weaver using needles as a support to create points across the fabric at different positions across which the knots and patterns are formed.

Using the previous 'accents' to reinterpret the injection of this needling work, I find ways of highlighting new layers by de/re-constructing the rhythmic material within the patterns themselves. I try to recreate a piece of *Siling* as a background to my music by capturing the interweaving movement and action to evoke the way the weaver uses needles to

create points across the space of the fabric upon which the strings move and crisscross. For example, in figure 11, taking and treating the rests as an imaginary needling work, I used them as a way to create points from bar 9 to 11 from which the material has been filtered by substituting notes with rests.

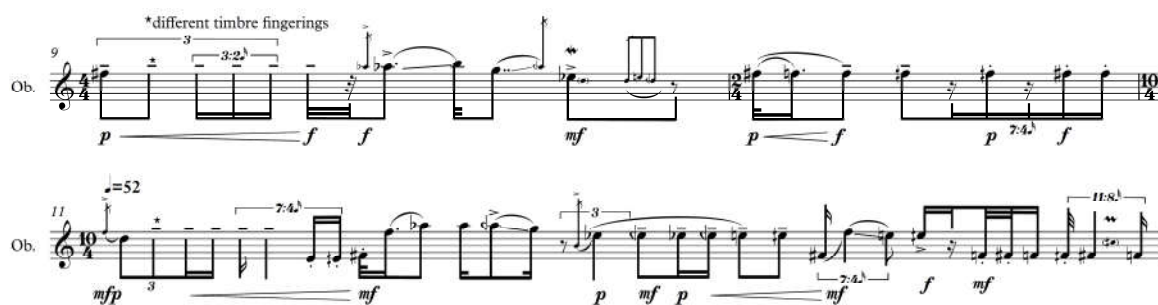


Figure 11: Some of the rests, interjected throughout the measures, were then further altered to unlock the spaces between them, creating different repetitive forms of musical gestures, patterns, and articulations across the measures.

Such rest substitution techniques have been explored extensively with methods across many contemporary music repertoires notably including *Music for Eighteen Musicians* (1976) by Steve Reich, *Music in Fifths* (1969) by Philip Glass, and *In C* by Terry Riley. In Reich’s *Drumming* (1971), rests at the end of each section are substituted for notes, finally resulting in a single note per rhythmic cycle; however, the rests will be gradually substituted by the notes when the music builds up again. My way of approaching rhythm to such substitution technique

differs, however, in that it is not meant to be operated and developed specifically under a certain mechanism but rather, works flexibly without being limited to a specific framework, so that the development of the material can flow even more organically.

Another musical element I have applied to broaden the spatiality can be seen in the following diagram (Figure 12) in which I added another temporal surface by adding a fermata on the semi-quaver rest at the end of the passage in bar 19.



Figure 12: The use of fermatas to expand the temporal identity of the semi-quaver rest creates an element of tension as it increases the degree of vagueness and uncertainty as to the impact of its temporal value, allowing the performer to re-adjust their energy whilst anticipating the next passage.

This fermata, conceptually, allows the performer to enter into an abstract space of being. The pause is a crossing point and here the performer acts to transmit something across the negative space between sounds. However, although the rests may appear as moments of silence in the music, to me, they are not meant to

act passively. In fact, they are not static but are highly mobile. They add a moment of performative attention or liveness to the music. This notion of mobility in silence can be seen, for example, in figure 13.

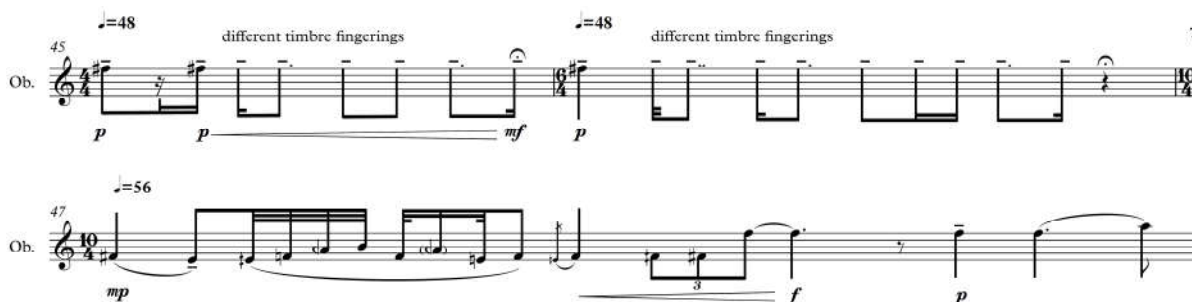


Figure 13: Whilst engaging the temporal identity on the last beat in bar 45 and 46 that have been affected by the fermata, the musician, rather like the weaver making and adjusting the patterns on their fabric, has to constantly readjust the time and space of their performance based on their musical sensitivity.

This spatial idea has been further extended by using different forms of triplets grouped with different values of rest and notes, including quaver, semi-

quaver, and demi-semiquaver, to form a larger phrase structure (figure 14).

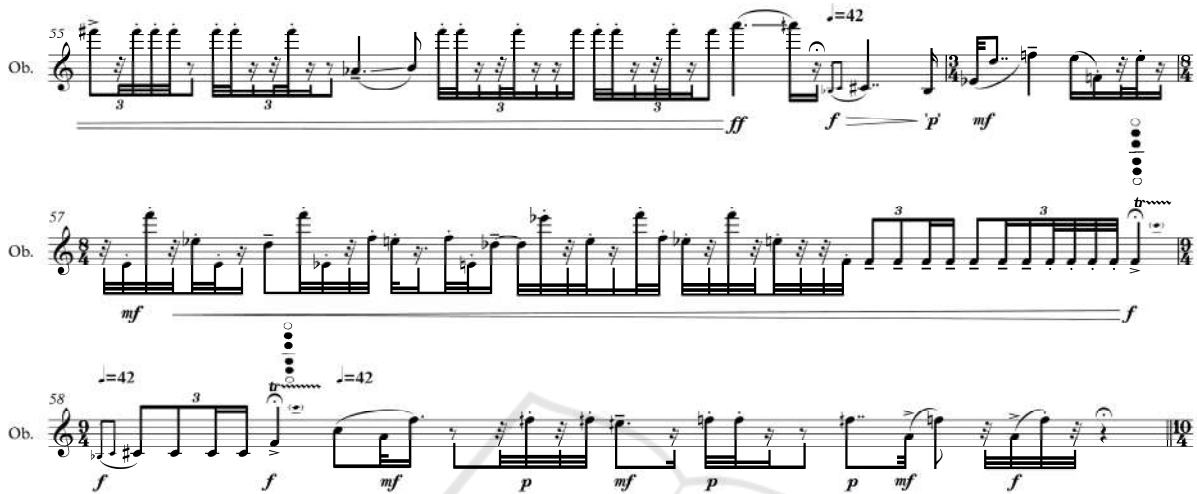


Figure 14: Starting from bar 55, the dialogues between phrases as well as the dialogues between the pitches and rests within the rhythmic pattern are interrupted by the fermatas.

This dialogue of crossing and integrating two distinctive territories between sounds and silence is

presented in a completely different manner in later passages, starting from bar 59 (figure 15).

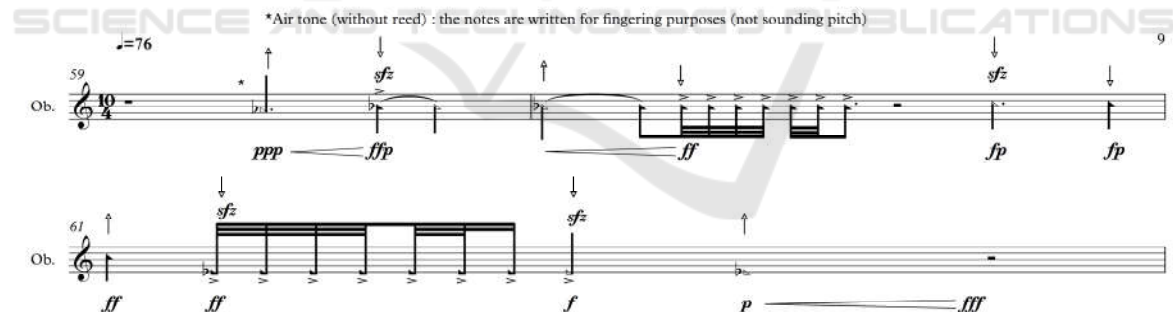


Figure 15: Timbral shifts emphasize the transformation of clear pitches from a solid to a fairly loose quality in bar 59 by decreasing the stability of the resonances of notes.

5 MOVING AWAY FROM AN EMBROIDERY FORM

In the collaborative process with the dancer and the oboist, we drew upon metaphors from weaving and sewing to spark ideas about a choreography of making, forming, and joining. At the end of the workshop session I decided to include a live performance along with an elastic string installation

in which I wanted to create a similar sense of foreground and background of objects embedded in physical layers. I was interested to recreate the experience from the gong project, *Interbreathment*, of musical textures in which the progression of events is multi-layered and irregular, multidimensional rather than only occurring on a single plane. Part of this sense of re-creating a multidimensional fabric or ‘embroidery form’ meant working closely with the dancer so that there was interplay between musical

patterns and the patterning of movements and gestures from the dance.

In the live performance, the stage is treated as a fabric upon which sounds, movements, and expressions, are woven and sewn, with the score acting as a trigger for the musical activity. An important aspect driving the overall live performance was the creation of a sense of ritual ceremony through the organization of spatial formations that coordinated the musician and dancer. Throughout the events, the musician continually shapes and re-interprets the musical material, including the tempi, dynamics, and articulations from the score according

to his musical sensibility and in response to the dancer's movements and expressions. This performative manner became a strategy I used to open, extend, and organize the creativity between the performers and I invited the dancer to join in this re-creation process of various structures as a way to contribute her creativity.

The nature of this project was to treat it as an unfinished patterning work. In general the music and the staging atmosphere were presented in a rather unstable, loose, fragile manner and situation (Figure 16).



Figure 16: The performance begins with a short, ceremonial opening in which the oboist, imitating ritual chanting, moves from perfect fifth interval of G to D to a slow augmented fourth glissando passage from G to C# and ends with a multiphonic, whilst the dancer responds to the music through her listening, creating a series of repetitive weaving-like gestures and movements.

This notion of reciprocal relationship was used to drive the entire work, resulting in an unpredictable outcome based on the 'mode' of how the performers received, perceived, and responded to the changing situations of their environment. Interestingly, what I have observed and visualized through the experience

of such an approach is that the overall collaborative performance seemed to be hybridizing the experiences inherited from the past. This was especially so when the dancer moved to the back of the stage, and started preparing her next performance (Figure 17).



Figure 17: A moment when Tang were slowly tying the elastic string to her body.

During that particular moment of separation in the performance, an atmospheric dialogue of crossing different temporalities was created that I connect with the previous temporal idea articulated in my music of silence punctuating sound. This notion of preparing, waiting, and anticipating during the changing progression of the work again resonates with my experience of Odun's unfinished work as a way of showing how static situations punctuate moments and events.

6 THE GIRING⁵

One further aspect of the work that entered relatively late in the project was the use of *Kadazandusun* bells called *Giring*, or *Giring-giring* (Figure 18).



Figure 18: The *Giring* used in the collaborative session.

These bells function as ritual instruments and are used by *Kadazandusun* priests (*Bobohizan*) to accompany their chanting. What so fascinated me about this ritual instrument is that it contains two distinctive sound worlds. Its unmuted sound has a rippling, shimmering

quality, whereas the muted sound has by contrast a rather mellow, dark timbre and can create textures like speaking. In my work, this instrument became an essential element for signaling, directing, and accompanying the action. The function and the

⁵ A popular traditional costume accessory which can be found in most of the *kadazandusun* community as well as functioning as a ritual instrument used by local priests

(*Bobohizan*) during ritual performances together with their chanting.

identity of the bells, however, is changed in the latter section in which the dancer uses it as a musical

instrument or sound generator to extend her physical language through hearing (Figure 19).



Figure 19: The oboist has moved his position to the front of the stage to play a long, breathy, recitative passage without reed, whilst the dancer has taken the *giring* to use to extend her choreographical vocabulary, by constantly translating and re-translating the music from the oboe, which she expresses with both her body and the bells.

7 FURTHER FORMATS OF THE PIECE: VIDEO AND OBOE SOLO

I further developed the project by creating a video based on the recording of the live performance. I filtered the background colour throughout the video

(only black and red), adding different layering effects that mimic the fabric of the *linangkit* pattern (Figure 20).



Figure 20: The constantly changing shapes merge with the images of musician and dancer, creating a rather abstract visual translation as if the performers were becoming veiled within a piece of *linangkit*.

Finally, I decided to complete this project by creating a stand-alone oboe solo called *Linangkit*. One of the

major adjustments to this final version is that I wanted to reconstruct the previous dialogue between the

dancer and musician in the bell section. However, instead of having a two-person event, I created a ‘monologue’ by resituating the material in different spaces. I took the rhythmic material from the passage where the musician performed the breathy passage

(see Figure 15) to create a short opening passage (Figure 21) that functioned like a ritual ceremony in which the musician performs the rhythmic passage with *giring*, so recalling the interactive dialogue between the dancer and the musician (see Figure 19).

The musical notation for the *giring* solo consists of five staves. The first staff is a whole rest with a 'Silent 8'' marking above it. The second staff begins with a tempo marking of ♩=66 and a 10/4 time signature. It features dynamics from *ppp* to *ff* and includes *sfz* markings and a triplet. The third staff continues with dynamics from *f* to *fff* and includes *sfz* markings and a triplet. The fourth staff features dynamics from *f* to *fff* and includes *sfz* markings and a triplet. The fifth staff concludes with dynamics from *fff* to *f* and includes *sfz* markings and a triplet. The piece ends with a 10/4 time signature.

Figure 21: The *giring* solo musical notation.

Such a ‘dialogue’, however, will be suspended and will not be revealed until the section when the

musician starts playing the long, breathy, recitative passage.

8 CONCLUSION

This investigation exploring cultural objects addressed the core of my compositional aesthetics in cultivating a practice of exchange by highlighting the power of resilience to deepen my cultural understanding as well as my compositional knowledge. This movement of exchange, involving

a complex transformative activity that constantly and continually signifies and shifts between closing and opening, reestablishes the interconnectivity and the identity of the music, helping me to recognize a deep understanding of the interrelationship that has been intertwined and hybridized.

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