

EXPLORING MALAYSIAN MUSIC: ANALYSIS OF *BERLAGU SEMALAM* BY ALWAGERA

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SUMMARY. The composition titled “*Berlagu Semalam*” created by Alwagera, gained widespread recognition via social media in April 2023 and was prominently featured in the Malaysian *Petronas Raya* advertisement. Observing social media platforms reveals that the song received positive and uplifting feedback from most of the public, who emphasized its profound and emotionally stirring impact. This article critically evaluates the distinctive and impactful elements of the composition, encompassing aspects such as lyrics, song structure, musical instruments, melody, and the singer’s vocal performance. The song’s primary uniqueness lies in its adept fusion of traditional elements (*langgam asli*), employing authentic stylistic elements, with contemporary music, specifically in the form of a pop ballad. The song carries implicit values beneficial not only for the younger generations but for individuals across various age groups.

Keywords: music art, musicological analysis, *langgam asli*, traditional music, contemporary music, Malaysian music

Introduction

The evolution of Malaysian music, particularly the amalgamation of traditional and pop genres, has been a dynamic process. Over the years, artists and musicians have creatively blended elements of traditional genres such as *Malay Asli*, *Joget*, and *Dikir Barat* with contemporary pop music styles

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(Ismail & Fung, 2023). This development has been influenced by a desire to connect with diverse audiences, both domestically and globally. Notable examples include the incorporation of traditional instruments like gamelan and angklung into pop arrangements, creating a unique sonic identity.

Blending Malaysian traditional and pop songs is a unique musical trend that showcases the country's rich culture. This combination has evolved over time, creating a distinctive style that helps preserve and promote Malaysian heritage. The appeal of this fusion lies in its smooth integration of diverse musical elements. Traditional arrangements including melodies and rhythms are paired with modern instruments, beats, and genres. The result is a lively and dynamic sound that connects with listeners from different musical backgrounds. Aesthetic choices, such as blending traditional lyrics with contemporary themes, contribute to the accessibility and relatability of the music, appealing to a wide demographic (Ismail & Fung, 2023).

The uniqueness of this musical fusion is rooted in the synthesis of Malaysia's diverse cultural heritage. Traditional instruments like the *rebab*, *kompang*, and *sape* find themselves coexisting with electric guitars, synthesizers, and drum machines. Lyrics often draw inspiration from folklore, local customs, and everyday life, creating a narrative that bridges the old and the new. This uniqueness lies not only in the sonic landscape but also in the cultural narratives conveyed through the music. The combination of traditional and pop songs contributes significantly to upholding Malaysian culture. It serves as a means of cultural preservation by infusing new life into traditional forms, preventing them from fading into obscurity. This fusion also fosters a sense of national identity and pride, reinforcing Malaysia's multicultural ethos. Moreover, by reaching a broader audience through contemporary musical mediums, the fusion contributes to the global recognition of Malaysian culture.

A song titled "*Berlagu Semalam*" was successfully produced and released on April 15, 2023, accessible through YouTube (<https://youtu.be/ZUCLOqA6zG4>). This song, created by Amanina Alwani, also known as Alwagera, features lyrics co-written Hyrul Anuar, and is performed by Edie Nazrin. Alwagera, a Malay composer, also serves as a lecturer at the Conservatory of Music, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia. Among her notable compositions are "*Hujan*," "*Senja Raya*," "*Janji Manismu*," and many others. Alwagera is also a vocalist and has contributed her voice in a collaboration titled "*Lepaskan Aku*" with the rap Malaysian artist Rudy Ivannie and had scored for a Malaysian movie; "*Tiga Janda Melawan Dunia*" directed by Hyrul Anuar.

The song *Berlagu Semalam* has been selected as the soundtrack for a Petronas festive advertisement titled "*Dilema Irama*," widely broadcasted through social and electronic media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook,

Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Spotify. The composition runs for 3 minutes and 45 seconds, delivering a heart-touching Malay melody. It has garnered various comments from the public like, *“Every time I hear this song, it truly stirs the soul,”* *“Good job to the composer, singer, and everyone involved in creating this song. The melodic voice and Malay rhythm are delightful,”* *“Beautiful language, full of implied meanings. The lyrics are poetic with a well-structured language that penetrates the heart,”* and *“This is the best song... meaningful lyrics... the language of Malay art... perfectly aligned with the Malay melody... excellent music arrangement.”*

Analysis of Song Lyrics

The lyrics of this song are crafted to align with the storyline of the festive advertisement, where a son who is also a famous pop composer returning to the village unintentionally hurts his father by refusing to play the gambus in a musical group during a Ramadan gathering because he saw his college friends and was ashamed to play Malay traditional music at a dinner. The song resonates when the son realizes that his actions, stepping out of the performance stage, have wounded his father and affected the whole performance as shown in Figure 1. Consequently, the lyrics are composed using metaphorical phrases that depict themes of sadness, disappointment, and realization.

Fig. 1



The Sad Father Scene (source: YouTube)

The song's structure encompasses an Intro (*Gurindam*), Verse, Chorus, Bridge, and Chorus (ABCDC). Below are the lyrics organized within the structure of the song *Berlagu Semalam*.

Intro

*"Oh...di mana... Jiwa yang dulu..hilang.
Buta hatinya.. Dengan dunia...
Bintang di langit boleh dibilang...
Resam jiwanya, lenyap tak nampak..."*

Verse

*"Anak... Renunglah raut wajahku
Tangisan dalam kesunyian
Rintih di dalam sukma
Hasrat di cita berlagu semalam"*

Chorus

*"Kasih yang tiada tandingan
Ku curah dan aku tatang
Tinggi bebas dikau terbang
Tidak sekali pun aku menentang"*

Bridge:

*"Hari kian Sunyi
Senja pun menyepi
Renungan jauh tapi tiada isi
Jangan tunggu nanti
Rasanya kan pahit
Sehingga air mata tiada lagi
Sia sia
Oh renunglah..."*

Chorus

*"Kasih yang tiada tandingan
Ku curah dan aku tatang
Tinggi bebas dikau terbang
Tidak sekali pun aku menentang"*

The use of evocative language and vivid imagery contributes to a poignant and reflective atmosphere throughout the song. The whole message of the lyrics and song is from the father's point of view.

Intro (A): The opening lines set a contemplative tone with phrases like “*Oh... di mana... Jiwa yang dulu... hilang*” (Oh... where... is the soul that was once lost). The metaphor of a blind heart and disappearing star adds to the sense of longing and introspection. The use of celestial imagery, such as stars and the disappearing soul, creates a poetic and ethereal atmosphere. The word “*Resam Jiwanya Lenyap Tak Nampak*” depicts the culture’s fundamentals within one soul slowly erased in his heart. This particular line suggests that the son had been neglecting his roots and to be relevant in the latest pop musical trends. The music score of this part is shown as Figure 2.

Fig. 2

A ♩ = 64 Rubato
Gurindam

Oh di ma - na ji - wa yang du - lu hi - lang bu - ta ha - ti - nya de - ngan

du - ni - a bin - tang di - la - ngit - bo - leh - di - bi - lang

re - sam ji - wa - nya le - nyap - tak nam - pak

Introduction of *Berlagu Semalam* (source: Author's collection)

Verse: The verse explores deeper into introspection, expressing emotions of solitude, silent tears, and desires that linger from the night before. The phrase “*berlagu semalam*” (singing last night) suggests a yearning for a past moment, enhancing the melancholic theme.

Chorus: The chorus presents a powerful declaration of unmatched love and support. The repetition of “*Kasih yang tiada tandingan*” (Love that is unparalleled) emphasizes the strength of the emotion. The lines “*Tidak sekali pun aku menentang*” (Not once have I opposed) further reinforces a commitment to unwavering support.

Bridge: The bridge introduces a shift in tone, emphasizing solitude and the approaching sense of bitterness. The lines “*Jangan tunggu nanti, Rasanya kan pahit*” (Don’t wait, it will taste bitter) create anticipation and a sense of impending sorrow. The plea in “*Oh renunglah...*” (Oh, contemplate) adds a poignant touch, inviting reflection.

Closing Chorus: The repetition of the chorus in the end reinforces the theme of unparalleled love and unwavering support. The use of “*tinggi bebas dikau terbang*” (soar freely high) paints an uplifting image, contrasting with the introspective moments in the previous sections. Overall, the lyrics demonstrate a well-crafted balance between introspective reflection and declarations of love. The poetic language and emotional depth create a compelling narrative that could be enriched further with a complementary *musical arrangement*.

Analysis of Music Composition

From a musical perspective, the uniqueness of this song stands out in the fusion of authentic Malay traditional music with Pop Ballad. The Malay traditional elements are distinctly audible at the beginning of the song, incorporating the rhythm of “*gurindam*”; “an irregular-verse form of traditional poetry” (Silahudin (2023)). This “*gurindam*” was also unaccompanied where it is taken in its purest form. In the past, Silahudin (2023) mentioned that, Malay literary authors use vocal music to focus on use of musical references and musical imagery in illustrating culture, community and expressing values as shown in Figure 3.

Fig. 3

A ♩ = 64 Rubato
Gurindam

Oh di ma - na ji - wa yang du - lu hi - lang bu - ta ha - ti - nya de - ngan

Introduction of the piece with gurindam singing (source: Author’s collection)

After the intro, the music moves on starting with the original “*Langgam Asli*” style from the second stanza until the third stanza, specifically in the line ‘*Tidak sekali aku menentang*’. It is evident that the overall melody is being sung in a specific and unique melodic embellishment. In traditional

Malay singing, the term "*patah lagu*" means the singer needs to embellish it in a certain way so that it can connect leaps and big intervals from one note to another and provide a softer and stylized method in *asli* music singing.

There are differences between the full version of "Berlagu Semalam" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUCLOqA6zG4>) and the ones that are used in the Petronas Raya 2023; Dilema Irama (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llQnF45k2_k&t=453s). The bridge; which is the D section, is not used in the short film. The director had requested the composer to create a more contrasting feeling compared to the *asli* music section, resulting in a more pop approach melody and harmony overall. The melodies are more straightforward; starting off the bridge section with an arpeggiated melody underlining the E Major 7 chord then followed by A minor chord marks an unconventional approach used in Malay Traditional music. Not to mention, the use of the "slash chords" approach, which is closely associated with jazz music, and the ii-7(b5) to V7 chord progression are other contemporary elements included in this composition, especially in this bridge section in Figure 4.

Fig. 4

D

Ha-ri ki-an su - nyi sen-ja pun me - nye - pi re-nu-ngan ja-uh ta-pi ti - a-da i-

si Ja-ngan tung-gu nan-ti ra-sa-nya kan pa- hit se-hing-ga a-ir ma-ta ti - a-da la

Bridge section (source: Author's collection)

In the closing part of the song, the original rhythm is played again with the singer reiterating the chorus in a pop style. Particularly at the line "*Ku curah dan aku tatang*", the *langgam asli* embellishments felt diluted and more pop tones are implemented here. The use of original and ballad rhythms played at a slow tempo is found to be suitable for evoking a sad expression, aligning with the perspectives of Hervina et al. (2021), Ayderova et al. (2017), and Husna & Rinjani (2022). In the combination of traditional and modern elements, this song has the potential to captivate the interest of both young and old listeners.

motifs, lacking a dominant motif but showcasing noticeable rises and falls throughout the song's phrases. The progression of the song is clearly audible, transitioning from the verse to the chorus. Diverse musical variations are evident in each section, with the most pronounced changes occurring from the chorus to the bridge, marking a shift in mood from traditional to modern styles. This illustrates the song's extensive variation, reflecting the composer's astuteness in composing this piece as Figure 6.

Fig. 6

B Moderato ♩ = 64

1 Am Dm E
A - nak re-nung-lah ra - ut wa-jah- ku ta - ngi-

3 Am A/C# Dm7 G E/B
san da - lam ke-su- nyi - an rin - tih di da-lam suk-

***Berlagu Semalam* Melody Line (source: Author's collection)**

The performance of the song undoubtedly must be successfully delivered with a singer's melodious vocal style that aligns with the genre of the song. The singer possesses a tenor voice in the key of A minor and adeptly blends the rhythm of the original style with pop ballad. Clear articulation and pronunciation are evident, with emphasis placed on the initial phrases of each line in the song. Vocal techniques such as vibrato and rubato in specific lines are applied according to the phrases, enhancing the overall beauty of the song. Davids and LaTour (2020) state that a singer should be skilled in practicing vocal techniques to produce an impactful interpretation of the song, thus highlighting its uniqueness. Additionally, the singer of *Berlagu Semalam* demonstrates proficiency in delivering the song's rhythm with precise intonation aligned with the chords used.

However, there is a slight imbalance in the mood of the song in the closing chorus section when the original music is played, and the singer adopts a pop style. It is not clearly audible, but the singer should exercise caution as this pop style could diminish the emotional depth and aesthetic of the song. On the other hand, the infusion of a pop style brings a fresh and

contemporary twist that has the potential to broaden the song's appeal and engage a wider audience, adding a dynamic layer that complements the overall composition beautifully. Figure 7 shows the sample of the lead sheet of *Berlagu Semalam* by Alwagera.

Fig. 7

Berlagu Semalam

Alwagera & Hyrul Anuar Alwagera

A $\text{♩} = 64$ *Rubato*
Gurindam

Oh di ma-na ji-wa_yang du - lu hi - lang bu-ta ha-ti- nya_de- ngan
du__ ni-a bin-tang di-la- ngit__ bo- leh_ di- bi- lang
re-sam ji - wa - nya__ le - nyap__ tak nam- pak__

B *Moderato* $\text{♩} = 64$

A - nak__ re-nung-lah ra - ut wa-jah- ku__ ta- ngi-
san__ da- lam ke-su- nyi - an__ rin- tih di da-lam suk-
ma has-rat di-ci - ta__ ber - la - gu se-ma-lam Ka

C $\text{♩} = 64$

sih yang tia-da tan-di-ngan ku - cu - rah dan a-ku ta-tang ting - gi be-bas di-

Berlagu Semalam lead sheet (source: Author's collection)

Conclusion

This study holds significant importance as it sheds light on the transformative impact of a contemporary Malaysian musical creation. The widespread recognition and positive reception on social media platforms highlight the song's cultural and societal relevance. Understanding the critical elements contributing to its success allows for a deeper exploration of how Malaysian music evolves, resonates, and connects with diverse audiences in the digital age. This study also highlights the power of social media as a platform for the dissemination and appreciation of Malaysian music. The positive feedback reflects the emotional resonance of the song, suggesting that it has successfully struck a chord with listeners. Moreover, the study unveils the potential of contemporary compositions to bridge generational and cultural gaps, as evidenced by the broad appeal across different age groups. The implicit values embedded in the song contribute to a shared cultural understanding and appreciation.

Additionally, this study illuminates how "*Berlagu Semalam*" contributes to the molding of Malaysian music and culture. By adeptly fusing traditional elements with contemporary pop ballad style, the composition represents a dynamic evolution in Malaysian musical expressions. It showcases the adaptability of traditional motifs and styles in a modern context, preserving cultural heritage while appealing to current tastes. The implicit values within the song become a cultural bridge, fostering a sense of identity and shared understanding among Malaysians.

In conclusion, the composition of this song, with its exceptionally unique and soul-stirring style, has been driven by several factors. These include the lyrics, song structure, musical instruments, melody, delivery, and the singer's vocals. The beauty and uniqueness highlighted in this song have breathed new life into the music scene in Malaysia by combining traditional and modern elements. It has also added aesthetic value to the music, providing listeners with an opportunity to sing along and appreciate the lyrical artistry, thereby connecting the meaning of the song to real-life experiences. The values emphasized in this song are not only beneficial for the younger generation but for all age groups. In essence, this study unveils the cultural impact of a single composition, illustrating its ability to transcend traditional boundaries and resonate widely in a contemporary context. *Berlagu Semalam* emerges not just as a musical piece but as a cultural phenomenon that contributes to shaping the narrative of Malaysian music in the modern era.

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