

## EXPLORING MALAY ART SONG: A MUSICAL AND TEXTUAL STUDY OF KORBAN TANAH AIR BY YUSRAN YUSOFF

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**SUMMARY.** Malay art songs remain an underexplored yet significant genre within the classical vocal tradition. This study examines *Korban Tanah Air*, a Malay art song composed by Yusran Yusoff with lyrics by Usman Awang, through textual analysis, musical composition analysis, and performance practice. The song's patriotic and melancholic themes are deeply intertwined with its harmonic and melodic structures, reflecting a fusion of Western classical and traditional Malay musical elements. The analysis highlights the integration of Malay poetry into art song, demonstrating how the poem's imagery and emotional depth are musically interpreted. Additionally, the study explores the challenges of performing Malay art songs, particularly in terms of lyric diction, rhythmic nuances, and expressive delivery. Through this examination, the research emphasizes the artistic and cultural significance of Malay art song and advocates for its recognition within contemporary classical vocal performances.

**Keywords:** Malay Art Song, Text and Music Analysis

### Introduction

The art song is a genre that merges poetry and classical music, evolving significantly from the German Lied in the 19th century to various national adaptations worldwide. Western composers such as Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Hugo Wolf were pivotal in shaping the genre, using poetry as a foundation for their musical expressions.<sup>3</sup> Over time, this tradition

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expanded beyond Europe, influencing composers in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, where art songs began incorporating local poetry and traditional musical elements.<sup>4</sup>

In Indonesia, the art song tradition emerged in the form of Lagu Seriosa, which served as a nationalistic and poetic form of vocal music. Scholars have documented how Western harmonic influences merged with Nusantara (Malay Archipelago) musical traditions, resulting in a unique blend of Western and traditional aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> While Lagu Seriosa has received academic and artistic recognition, the Malay art song repertoire remains underexplored, largely due to the dominance of Western classical music in vocal training institutions.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have emphasized that more research and composition efforts are necessary to develop a strong foundation for Malay art songs in classical performance settings.<sup>7</sup>

The integration of Malay poetry into art songs is a defining feature of the genre in Malaysia. Traditional poetic forms such as pantun and syair have been adapted into structured musical compositions, reinforcing their lyrical beauty through melodic expression.<sup>8</sup> This process can be observed in *Korban Tanah Air*, a Malay art song composed by Yusran Yusoff, based on Usman Awang's poem. The song embodies themes of patriotism and sacrifice, with the melancholic tonality of C minor reflecting the deep emotional impact of its text. Its piano accompaniment plays an essential role in reinforcing expressive nuances, merging Western classical harmony with traditional Malay melodic inflections.

Despite its artistic depth, Malay art song performance presents unique challenges, particularly in terms of lyric diction and pronunciation. Malay and Indonesian languages, though related, exhibit significant phonetic differences, which can affect articulation and interpretation in singing.<sup>9</sup> To address these issues, researchers have suggested the use of International Phonetic Alphabet

<sup>4</sup> Yunita, Anindita Trika. "Kebangkitan Nasionalisme Eropa dan Pengaruhnya terhadap Perkembangan Lagu Seriosa di Indonesia" ["The Rise of European Nationalism and Its Influence on the Development of Indonesian Art Song"]. *Resital: Jurnal Seni Pertunjukan*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 159–165.

<sup>5</sup> Nurkholis. *Lagu Seriosa sebagai Lagu Seni Indonesia: Pengaruh Musik Barat dan Musik Etnis Nusantara* ["Lagu Seriosa" as Indonesian Art Song: Influence of Western Music and Nusantara Ethnic Music]. Thesis, Institut Seni Indonesia Padangpanjang, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Proehoeman, S. C. "Lyric Diction of Indonesian and Malay Art Songs for Singers." *International Journal of Arts, Culture & Heritage*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 101–106.

<sup>7</sup> Yusoff, Mohd – Yasser, Mohd. "The Creation of a New Anthology of Malaysian Art Songs Utilizing Malay Poems and Text." *Proceedings of the Fourth Music and Performing Arts (MusPa) Research Colloquium*, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Kimball, Carol. *Art Song: Linking Poetry and Music*. Hal Leonard, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Proehoeman, op.cit., pp. 101-106

(IPA) transcription systems, which help singers achieve accurate diction and expressive clarity in their performances.<sup>10</sup> The application of linguistic precision ensures that Malay art songs maintain textual and musical integrity, making them accessible to both native and non-native performers.

Given the limited academic focus on Malay art songs, this article aims to analyze Korban Tanah Air through three perspectives: textual analysis, musical composition, and performance practice. By examining the relationship between poetic imagery and musical structure, this study highlights the artistic depth of Malay art songs while advocating for their recognition in contemporary classical vocal performance. Moreover, this research underscores the broader cultural significance of Malay art songs in shaping a national musical identity, ensuring their preservation and development for future generations.<sup>11 12</sup>

### **Analysis of poem of Korban Tanah Air**

Biar dia telah pergi  
Atau gugur ke persada ibu  
Yang takkan kembali  
Meninggalkan bakti dan jasa

Dia hanya seorang mata mata  
Atau perajurit yang berbakti  
Meninggal bingkisan jasa  
Pada bangsa dan ibu pertiwi

Dia gugur di medan perjuangan  
Di tengah-tengah hutan belantara  
Atas kuburnya ditabur kembangan  
Disiram dengan airmata

Kekasih yang menunggu dia  
Putus cinta  
Bisikan jiwa

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<sup>10</sup> Collins, James T. *Malay Dialect Research in Malaysia: The Issue of Perspective*. 1989, <http://sabrizain.org/malaya/library/dialectresearch.pdf>. Accessed [date of access].

<sup>11</sup> Yusoff, Mohd – Yasser, Mohd. "The Creation of a New Anthology of Malaysian Art Songs Utilizing Malay Poems and Text." *Proceedings of the Fourth Music and Performing Arts (MusPa) Research Colloquium*, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Proehoeman, S. C. "Lyric Diction of Indonesian and Malay Art Songs for Singers." *International Journal of Arts, Culture & Heritage*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 101–106.

The poem *Korban Tanah Air* by Usman Awang is a deeply evocative reflection on sacrifice, patriotism, and loss, portraying the emotional weight of a soldier or spy who gives his life for his homeland. Through vivid imagery and poignant language, the poem captures the tragic yet noble essence of selfless devotion to the motherland.

The first stanza immediately introduces the central theme of irreversible departure. The phrase *Biar dia telah pergi* (Even though he has gone) establishes a sense of finality, reinforcing the idea that the soldier's sacrifice is absolute. The line *Atau gugur ke persada ibu* (Or fallen on the motherland) connects his fate directly to the nation, implying that his death is not in vain but rather a form of service. The final two lines, *Meninggalkan bakti dan jasa* (Leaving behind his service and merit), elevate the fallen soldier's legacy, positioning him as a figure of honor whose contributions persist beyond death. This opening stanza sets a somber yet reverent tone, emphasizing remembrance and respect.

The second stanza further explores the soldier's duty and anonymity. The phrase *Dia hanya seorang mata-mata* (He was just a spy) or *perajurit yang berbakti* (a soldier who served) emphasizes that the individual identity of the fallen is secondary to his role in the greater mission. By not naming a specific soldier, the poem universalizes the act of sacrifice, making it applicable to all who have given their lives for their country. The idea that he has *Meninggal bingkisan jasa / Pada bangsa dan ibu pertiwi* (Left a gift of merit to the nation and motherland) reinforces a collective sense of gratitude, portraying his actions as a selfless contribution to a larger cause.

The third stanza shifts to a visual and emotional depiction of loss. The line *Dia gugur di medan perjuangan* (He fell on the battlefield) situates the reader in the heart of the conflict, while *Di tengah-tengah hutan belantara* (In the midst of the jungle wilderness) evokes the imagery of Malaysia's war-torn landscapes, possibly referencing historical battles fought within dense rainforests. The soldier's final resting place is described with the touching image *Atas kuburnya ditabur kembang / Disiram dengan air mata* (Flowers are scattered over his grave / Watered with tears), a poetic representation of both honor and grief. The act of scattering flowers and watering the grave with tears signifies a ritual of remembrance, suggesting that while the soldier's body may rest in solitude, his sacrifice is deeply mourned and revered.

The final stanza personalizes the loss by introducing the figure of a lover left behind. The phrase *Kekasih yang menunggu dia / Putus cinta* (The lover who waited for him / Love is broken) conveys the emotional devastation experienced by those who remain. This transition from nationalistic

tribute to personal grief adds depth and universality, showing that beyond the soldier's heroism lies a profound sense of personal loss. The concluding line, *Bisikan jiwa* (Whispers of the soul), carries a haunting quality, symbolizing either the lingering pain of love unfulfilled or the voice of the fallen soldier echoing in memory. This ending highlights the human cost of war, grounding the poem in both national and personal dimensions.

Overall, *Korban Tanah Air* is a powerful meditation on the price of patriotism. It balances public honor and private sorrow, illustrating how sacrifice for the nation is both a heroic act and a personal tragedy. The poem's structure, moving from a national perspective to an intimate emotional loss, reinforces the duality of remembrance—the soldier as a symbol of national pride and a beloved individual mourned by those left behind. Through its carefully chosen words and poetic imagery, Usman Awang's *Korban Tanah Air* serves as a timeless tribute to the bravery, loss, and enduring memory of those who have laid down their lives for their country.

### **Analysis of Music Composition**

The composition of *Korban Tanah Air* by Yusran Yusoff is carefully structured to reflect its poignant theme of sacrifice and patriotism. The song follows a binary form (A-B) with a D.C. al Coda, which reinforces its cyclical nature, symbolizing the ongoing remembrance of those who have given their lives to their homeland. It begins with an eight-bar piano solo that establishes the solemn and reflective atmosphere, setting the foundation for the melodic and harmonic motifs. Section A introduces a lyrical yet solemn melody, divided into two subsections (A(a) – A(b)), where the harmonic and melodic materials are first developed. In contrast, Section B introduces a shift in emotional intensity, utilizing an agitated rhythmic drive and dynamic variation to express the struggles and urgency of the song's message. This section reaches a climactic moment before transitioning into *morendo*, signifying a moment of reflection and mourning. The return to Section A via D.C. al Coda emphasizes the thematic material of devotion and sacrifice, leading to the song's ultimate climax in the Coda before settling into a quiet resolution.

**E.g. 1**



**Subsection (a) in Section A of Korban Tanah Air**

**E.g. 2**



**Subsection (b) in Section A of Korban Tanah Air**

Melodically, *Korban Tanah Air* is tailored for the soprano voice, ranging from C4 to G5. The melody primarily moves in stepwise motion, interspersed with occasional leaps that heighten expressive moments. The song is firmly rooted in the C minor scale (natural and harmonic forms), avoiding excessive chromaticism to maintain its lyrical quality. The use of triplet figures and semiquaver ornamentations reflects influences from Melayu Asli, a traditional Malay musical style known for its intricate melodic embellishments. These elements provide fluidity and expressiveness to the vocal line, with rhythmic augmentation in climactic moments adding contrast. Notably, the highest note (G5 in the Coda) is placed strategically on a climactic word, reinforcing the emotional weight of the lyrics. The descending motion in the closing section further enhances the song's narrative, portraying a sense of loss and reverence.

The harmonic framework of the piece revolves around C harmonic minor, with functional progressions emphasizing minor, diminished, and dominant qualities. The use of I (C minor), iv (F minor), V (G major), and vii° (B diminished) forms the harmonic foundation, with additional chromatic passing chords and suspensions to heighten tension and resolution. A secondary dominant (D9#11 as V9/V) in bar 20 momentarily shifts harmonic focus, creating a sense of harmonic expansion before returning to the primary tonal center. Another notable harmonic feature is the Eb augmented chord (III+), which appears exclusively in first inversion, providing a subtle yet effective harmonic color. The cadences play a significant role in structuring the piece, with half cadences sustaining momentum, while authentic cadences (V–i) establish strong resolutions, particularly in the Coda. The harmonic treatment balances traditional functional harmony with expressive dissonances, effectively complementing the song's themes of patriotism and sacrifice.

E.g. 3

|    |   |     |                |    |   |                |                       |
|----|---|-----|----------------|----|---|----------------|-----------------------|
| c: | c | d°  | E <sup>b</sup> | f  | G | A <sup>b</sup> | b° or B <sup>b</sup>  |
|    | i | ii° | III            | iv | V | VI             | <u>vii° or</u><br>VII |

Chords in the key of C harmonic minor

E.g. 4

|    |   |     |                |                  |    |   |                |                |      |
|----|---|-----|----------------|------------------|----|---|----------------|----------------|------|
| c: | c | d°  | E <sup>b</sup> | E <sup>b</sup> + | f  | G | A <sup>b</sup> | B <sup>b</sup> | b°   |
|    | i | ii° | III            | III+             | iv | V | VI             | VII            | vii° |

  = Chords utilised

Chords in the key of C harmonic minor that are used in Korban Tanah Air

The piano setting in *Korban Tanah Air* is integral to the composition, serving as more than just an accompaniment. The introductory piano solo presents thematic material that reappears throughout the piece, creating cohesion between the instrumental and vocal lines. The piano interacts dynamically with the voice, employing imitation and echoing techniques (e.g., bar 15, where the piano prolongs the vocal motif), reinforcing melodic ideas.

Throughout the song, the piano alternates between arpeggiated accompaniment, harmonic support, and counter-melodies, shifting roles seamlessly to enhance the musical expression. The textural contrast between block chord harmonization in Section B and the running sextuplets in the Coda highlights the changing emotional landscape of the piece. The climax is particularly emphasized by the descending arpeggios spanning five octaves, symbolizing the finality of sacrifice, before resolving to a subdued ending. The song's conclusion, with the lowest C on the keyboard, leaves a lasting impression of solemnity and reflection.

**E.g. 5**

13

tau gu-gur ke per-sa-da i - bu

ii° 65 ii° V7

### **Correlation between voice and piano part**

The integration of poetry and music in *Korban Tanah Air* showcases Yusran Yusoff's ability to translate thematic depth into musical expression. The slow tempo, minor tonality, and dynamic shifts mirror the dramatic progression of the text, capturing the essence of loss, reverence, and patriotism. The harmonic choices and melodic phrasing align closely with the poetic imagery, ensuring that the emotional weight of the lyrics is fully realized through the music. The piano's role as a collaborative voice, rather than a mere accompaniment, further enhances the storytelling aspect of the composition. Ultimately, *Korban Tanah Air* stands as a compelling example of Malay art song, merging poetry, melody, and harmony into a deeply evocative musical work that pays tribute to the sacrifices made for the homeland.

### **Performance Practice and Experience of *Korban Tanah Air***

The preparation for performing *Korban Tanah Air* by Yusran Yusoff, with poem by Usman Awang, required a rigorous and immersive process to capture both its technical demands and emotional depth. Over the course of

several weeks, approximately 25 hours were dedicated to understanding and mastering the piece. The initial phase of preparation focused on analyzing the score and text, where about five hours were spent studying the historical and emotional context of the song. Understanding how Yusran Yusoff musically translated the poetic themes of sacrifice and loss was crucial in shaping the interpretation. The piece's setting in C minor, known for its melancholic and solemn qualities, immediately established an atmosphere of reflection and reverence, which had to be conveyed effectively through vocal delivery.

Once the contextual analysis was complete, around eight hours were dedicated to melodic refinement. The melodic motion, primarily stepwise with occasional leaps of a perfect fifth, was carefully rehearsed to ensure its expressive integrity and connection to the song's narrative. Special attention was given to maintaining the lyricism and phrasing of the melody, ensuring that each note carried emotional weight. The harmonic elements, particularly the minor key inflections and chromatic tension, were explored in depth to maintain the song's solemn and reflective character.

Rhythm played a significant role in performance practice, particularly the influence of *Melayu Asli* rhythmic patterns. Over the next six hours, emphasis was placed on perfecting triplets and semiquavers, rhythmic elements that are deeply rooted in Malay traditional music. These rhythmic figures required precise articulation and control, as they not only contributed to the stylistic authenticity of the piece but also enhanced its expressiveness. The contrast between the steady pulse in Section A and the intensified rhythmic activity in Section B was particularly important in conveying the emotional journey of the song.

The structure of *Korban Tanah Air* follows a binary form (A-B) with a return to A via *D.C. al Coda*, making it crucial to understand the relationship between the sections. Three hours were spent analyzing how Section B builds in intensity before returning to the somber and reflective atmosphere of Section A. This transition had to feel organic, with the crescendo of emotion in Section B giving way to the final resolution. The process of rehearsing these transitions ensured that the shifts in dynamics, tempo, and articulation were seamless, preserving the narrative flow of the composition.

The final stage of preparation involved approximately three hours of rehearsal with a vocal coach, where all musical elements melodic interpretation, harmonic nuances, rhythmic execution, and textual expression were integrated into a cohesive and polished performance. Particular emphasis was placed on stage presence, breath control, and emotional engagement, ensuring that the delivery remained compelling and deeply resonant. Attention was also given to diction and phrasing, reinforcing the poetic meaning behind the lyrics.

Beyond the technical preparation, the performance experience itself was deeply immersive and emotionally charged. Singing *Korban Tanah Air* was not merely about executing the notes correctly and it was about conveying the solemnity and weight of sacrifice embedded within the poetry and music. The climactic sections, where the vocal line reaches its highest register, demanded a balance between power and control to convey urgency and intensity. The mournful conclusion, marked by a gradual *morendo* (dying away), required careful dynamic shading to leave a lingering emotional impact on the audience.

Through journaling and self-reflection, insights into the emotional and technical journey of performing this piece were documented. The interaction between traditional rhythmic embellishments and the melodic line played a crucial role in shaping the overall interpretation. Notably, the audience response indicated that the familiarity of *Melayu Asli* rhythmic elements evoked a deep emotional connection, reinforcing the cultural and historical significance of the song.

Ultimately, performing *Korban Tanah Air* was an enriching and transformative experience, requiring a holistic approach that combined musical precision with emotional storytelling. By ensuring that every musical element melody, harmony, rhythm, and text was carefully intertwined, the performance aimed to honor the sacrifices depicted in the song and provide a deeply moving experience for listeners.

## Conclusion

Within the framework of Malay art songs, Yusran Yusoff's analysis of *Korban Tanah Air* demonstrates the profound interaction of poetry and music. This research highlights the song's profound patriotic spirit and emotional impact through textual analysis, musical composition assessment, and performance practice. Usman Awang's poetic composition embodies themes of sacrifice, recollection, and national pride, which are meticulously represented in the song's melodic and harmonic structure. Yusoff's piece utilizes a harmonious integration of Western classical and traditional Malay musical components, notably through its *Melayu Asli* rhythmic patterns, stepwise melodic progression, and emotive harmonic language.

The examination of the song's structure, adhering to a binary form with D.C. al Coda, elucidates how the piece adeptly communicates the emotional trajectory of heroism and lamentation. The interaction between the piano accompaniment and vocal line enriches the lyrical narrative, enabling the music to function as an expressive extension of the text. Considerations of

performance techniques, such as diction, phrasing, and dynamic control, underscore the intricacies of presenting Malay art songs within a contemporary classical framework. The artistic and technical hurdles encountered in executing Korban Tanah Air, especially in conveying the subtleties of Melayu Asli rhythms and the emotive climactic instances, underscore the necessity for specialized training and research in this genre.

This study promotes enhanced recognition and incorporation of Malay art songs within the classical vocal repertoire. Notwithstanding its profound cultural and historical importance, Malay art songs are inadequately represented in scholarly and performing arenas. This research on Korban Tanah Air enhances the discourse around the incorporation of Southeast Asian art songs into the classical music canon. Subsequent research ought to further investigate the diversity of Malay art songs, specifically regarding its linguistic, stylistic, and interpretative dimensions, to guarantee its preservation and advancement. Ultimately, Korban Tanah Air exemplifies the capacity of music to articulate national identity, historical memory, and profound emotional expression, rendering it an indispensable contribution to the canon of classical vocal music.

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