

The Singing Style of Kamariah Noor: An Analytical Study of Singing Style in *Lagu Melayu Asli*

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Abstract

The preservation and revitalization of traditional musical performance practices represent critical challenges in contemporary ethnomusicological discourse, particularly within the context of Malay musical heritage. This research proposes a comprehensive strategy for rejuvenating Lagu Melayu Asli (LMA) through systematic integration of Kamariah Noor's (KN) distinctive singing style, which have been marginalized by current performance standardization. This research also examines the distinctive vocal characteristics and musical techniques of KN, a prominent singer in LMA. Through comprehensive discographic analysis and expert interviews, this study explores KN's unique singing style, focusing on her singing motifs in the singing style of LMA.



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INTRODUCTION

In the field of singing Lagu Melayu Asli (LMA), a singer can only achieve preeminence through a series of musical experiences. Nur Ainun, a renowned singer from Medan shared that she used to study diligently to develop her unique style and achieve excellence in her field (Ritawati, 2017). While, Tengku Hamidah, also renowned singer from Medan mentioned that developing a unique singing style comes from regularly listening to legendary artists (Ritawati, 2017). Moreover, Abdullah (2019) stated she never formally studied singing, but instead learned by continuously listening to the radio to develop her own unique style and improve the quality of her voice. Studying the works of prominent singers can enhance a singer's musical proficiency and help them develop their own unique style in music composition. Analyzing the contributions of past singers is crucial for understanding the evolving aesthetic principles and musical landscape over time. For example, Kamariah Noor (KN), a celebrated singer in Malaysia, exemplifies a distinctive singing style that showcases her limitless creativity in interpreting diverse musical themes.

KN was born in Kallang, Singapore in 1930 and deceased in 1992 in Kampung Pandan, Kuala Lumpur, initiated her music career at the age of 11 during the Bangsawan era in the 1940s. She obtained Malaysian citizenship in the 1960s from the inaugural Prime Minister of Persekutuan Tanah Melayu, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Saleha (2019), her daughter, affirmed her close collaboration with Tunku in the advancement of Malay music. An article in *Harian Metro* in 2017, entitled “*Wajar Abadi Nama SM Salim di Kampung Baru*,” underscored her status as one of Tunku’s favourite singers and a cherished figure in Malaya. Revered as the soul of LMA by Sudirman Hj. Arshad, KN’s eminence in the Malay music domain was widely acknowledged (Arshad, 2015). There is a notable lack of scholarly discourse regarding KN’s career and singing style in comparison to her brother, Hamzah Dolmat. Nik Shareena Rosny (2018) and Saleha (2019) have highlighted KN’s virtuosity as a singer, noting her resemblance to her brother’s violin playing and the influence of his training on her exceptional vocal abilities. KN’s incorporation of Asli violin ornamentations, phrasing, and succession in her singing style underscores the significance of studying her approach to enrich one’s own vocal performance.

The study of LMA musical performance requires a nuanced scholarly approach, especially when delving into the singing styles of influential artists who have had a significant impact on regional musical traditions. This research aims to provide a critical analysis of the unique singing styles of KN. Through an examination of her distinct vocal techniques, the study seeks to: document the intricate methods of vocal ornamentation she employs. KN’s musical trajectory not only showcases her personal artistic accomplishments but also symbolizes a pivotal juncture in Malayan musical heritage. Originating from the *Bangsawan* performance tradition, KN cultivated a vocal technique that amalgamated diverse musical elements such as *Asli*, *Dondang Sayang* and *Ghazal Melayu Johor*. Her vocal delivery is distinguished by a unique nasal and raspy quality, coupled with remarkable technical prowess that transcends conventional musical norms. The intricacy of her singing style mirrors a vibrant musical landscape that was both rooted in tradition and marked by innovation.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research methodology employed in this study encompasses a comprehensive approach to analyzing vocal styles of Kamariah Noor (KN). So, a literature review is typically seen as a systematic approach to gathering and evaluating previous research studies (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). An effective and well-conducted review serves as a strong basis for expanding knowledge and supporting theory development in research (Webster & Watson, 2002). The synthesis of multiple empirical findings in a literature review enables a comprehensive examination of research topics, providing a depth of understanding that surpasses the scope of single studies. Likewise, Mixture of methods are employed in research to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of data by corroborating findings from multiple sources (Creswell, 2022).

The foundation of the methodology lies in discographic analysis, this methodical approach utilized to examine and interpret the collection of recorded works (discography) of a specific artist, genre, or time period. It entails exploring the historical, cultural, and technical elements of recordings to grasp their importance, development, and influence on music and society. This examination may involve investigating recording methods, production styles, lyrical themes, instrumentation, and the socio-political backdrop of the music. Furthermore, Discographic analysis frequently utilizes qualitative methods, including close listening, textual analysis, and historical research. This methodology prioritizes depth and context over quantitative measures (Moore, 2012). Delving into a particular artist or genre enables a thorough examination of their body of work, offering intricate perspectives on their artistic output (Tagg, 2012).

This method allows a systematic examination of KN’s recorded performances spanning from the 1940s to the 1980s. By critically analyzing these recordings, researchers can track the motifs of KN’s vocal style, identifying sub-idioms, patterns of melodic and ornamentation forms, and musical interpretation in the past. Musical applications such as MuseScore, Sibelius, and VLC Media Player are utilized to convert analytical processes. These tools are crucial for notating KN’s singing motifs besides methods involved conducting expert interviews to confirm the findings regarding the characteristics of the singing style of KN. The singing style of Kamariah Noor (KN) formulae in several stylistic catogaries. Namely, singing style, vocal characteristic, *Patah Lagu* and *Lenggok*. The catogarization implies better comprehension and focus in ensuring the study remains bring into line with the goals (Nik Shareena Rosny, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Singing Style

According to the daughter, Saleha (2019) and Kajol (2018) Kamariah Noor's (KN) musical development emerged from a complex familial and performative ecosystem characterized by intergenerational musical transmission and cross-stylistic influences. Her primary musical foundation was established through direct paternal mentorship, with her father Dolmat Abdul Fatah. As a renowned violin player and *Bangsawan* activist, Dolmat Abdul Fatah provided KN with foundational musical training that extended beyond formal music education, which was notably limited in the Malayan context during that period. This informal yet intensive training approach enabled KN to develop a nuanced understanding of musical performance techniques that transcended conventional learning methodologies.

The broader performative context of the *Bangsawan* tradition significantly shaped KN's musical aesthetic, with substantial influences from senior performers such as Miss Julia, Miss Riboet, Miss Ta'seah (older sister) and prominent GMJ singers. Her musical style represented a sophisticated process of cross-stylistic acculturation, integrating techniques from Dondang Sayang (DS), Ghazal Melayu Johor (GMJ) in the main. Kajol (2018) suggests that KN's unique vocal approach emerged from her ability to fluidly navigate and synthesize multiple musical vocabularies, creating a distinctive performance style that reflected the dynamic cultural interactions of mid-20th century Malayan musical practices. This complex musical genealogy positioned KN as a pivotal figure in preserving and evolving traditional Malayan musical performance techniques.

The singing motifs of Kamariah Noor (KN) represent a complex taxonomical framework of sub-stylistic musical techniques within the (LMA) tradition, characterized by intricate ornamentation and cross-genre hybridization. Unlike conventional vocal practices, this sub-style demonstrates a sophisticated musical lexicon presenting a nuanced departure from standardized Western classical ornamentation. While Western musical traditions typically emphasize precise, detached ornamental execution, LMA's ornamentation emerges as a more fluid and contextually embedded performative practice, prioritizing delicacy and subtlety over technical rigidity. The intricate relationship between articulation, melodic emphasis, and stylistic execution reflects a deeply sophisticated musical approach that transcends conventional performance boundaries, revealing the complex cultural and aesthetic negotiations inherent in traditional Malay musical expression.

Vocal Characteristic

Kamariah Noor's (KN) vocal timbre is characterized by a distinctive nasal and hoarse quality. Her vocal range typically spans from F3 to G5, positioning her as a soprano with exceptional technical capabilities. The acoustic characteristics of her voice are marked by a pronounced nasal and hoarse quality, which contrasts sharply with the more resonant tonal productions of modern singers in *Lagu Melayu Asli* (LMA). The technical dimensions of KN's vocal performance are distinguished by several remarkable attributes: a shrill vocal quality, pure vowel production aligned with traditional Malay linguistic phonetics, and an extraordinary control of chest voice. Her musical capabilities extend to performing melismatic lines with remarkable agility, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of traditional musical ornamentation. Furthermore, her balanced vibrato technique allows her to navigate complex musical phrases with remarkable precision, embodying a sophisticated approach to vocal performance that transcends conventional musical boundaries.

KN's ornamentation techniques are distinguished by rapid melodic transitions that demonstrate exceptional vocal agility, typically involving two to six notes executed in swift, complex motion. Her ornamentations are notably subtle and delicate, contrasting sharply embodying a fluid manner. The complex intervallic movements in her performance reflect a deep understanding of traditional Malay musical aesthetics. In the melodic landscape of *Alunan*, KN demonstrated extraordinary musical sophistication through her nuanced approach to melodic articulation. Her vocal performances were characterized by vibrant melodic patterns executed with remarkable dynamic variation, revealing a profound understanding of LMA musical aesthetics. KN's ability to produce extended melodic phrases with exceptional clarity and precise onset distinguished her as a virtuosic performer within LMA traditions.

Patah Lagu

According to Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat (2017), the term *Patah Lagu* refers to trembling (trill) or interrupted (staccato) voice when singing Dayang. Nonetheless, Asmidar (2023) defines *Patah Lagu* as a point in the music where interval disruptions occur within phrases. Agreeing to that, *Lagu Melayu Asli* (LMA) melodic patterns are typically formed through

conjunctive and disjunctive movements, and singers are required to incorporate *Patah Lagu* and embellishments to enrich the melodic phrases. Additionally, Abu Bakar (2023) points out that *Patah Lagu* often presents intricate variations of *Lenggok*, a subtle ornamentation technique that significantly changes the melodic structure.

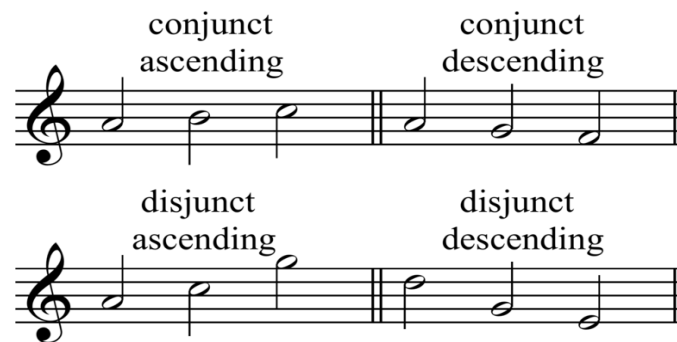


Figure 1. Conjunct and Disjunct Melodic Pattern

Figure 1 illustrates the fundamental melodic patterns of conjunct and disjunct motion. These two categories can be further analyzed into various types of motion. The first type is scale-wise patterns, which involve ascending and descending motion without intervallic skips and are often embellished with simple ornamentations. The second type is disjunct motion, which includes skipping intervals in both ascending and descending directions. In some discoveries, *Patah Lagu* can be seen in oblique motion. This type of melodic structure typically incorporates complex and intricate *Patah Lagu* with a series of *Lenggok*. Drawing on this inference, the phrasing point technique can be conceptualized in several ways: first, between syllables, and second, between phrases themselves.

KN is recognized for her utilization of various *Patah Lagu* motifs, which encompass four specific patterns that distinguish her musical style. Her approach to *Patah Lagu* is marked by conjunct and disjunct movement, with musical phrases characterized by continuous steps and leaps or skips. These motifs, include *Acciaccatura*, *Appoggiatura*, *Turns*, a combination of *Acciaccatura* and *Turn*, and a fusion of *Trill* and *Turn*, typically comprise two to six notes and are performed rapidly.

Patah Lagu 1 (PL1) of Kamariah Noor (KN)



Figure 2. Example of *Patah Lagu* 1 (PL1) by Kamariah Noor (KN) in Batu Belah.

Patah Lagu 1 (PL1) primarily functions to disjoin a syllable in a descending disjunct melodic pattern. PL1 is executed at *belah* in bar 2 with fundamental notes B and G, and in bar 3 with notes F to D, as shown in Figure 2. In the context of PL1, the disruption of the phrase is fashioned in a *Lenggok* form, formalized in *Turn*. While this type of PL is common, KN's variations can include successions of 5 notes harmonically. Hereafter, these notes often follow a regular form, moving to upper auxiliary, lower auxiliary, and resolving in the principal note. KN's approach differs from the western approach in its fluidity, encompassing modal melodic flow and expressive rather than harmonic development. Further, this type of approach is beneficial for embellishing resolving phrases and cyclic repetitive musical motifs.

Patah Lagu 1 (PL1) of Kamariah Noor (KN)

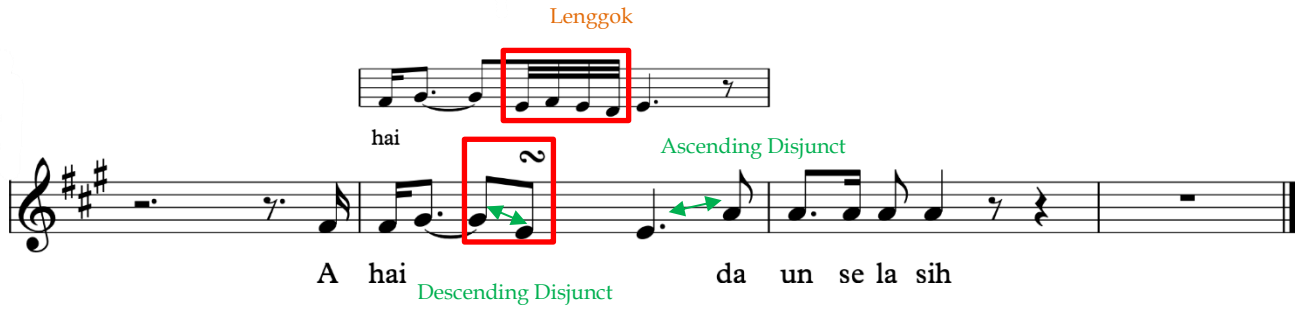


Figure 3. Example of *Patah Lagu 2 (PL2)* by Kamariah Noor (KN) in *Jalak Lenteng*.

In Figure 3 above, we see an example of PL2 by KN. This specific PL involves skipping a third lower in the phrase *Menimang, ahai*. The fundamental notes are G and E, and the disjunct manner is executed in a Turn fashion. While similar to PL1 in formulation, PL2 is characterized by a delayed and prolonged execution. Instead of immediately following the principal note, the delayed turn occurs after a brief pause, often creating heightened tension or anticipation. This technique is particularly effective in classical music, emphasizing the conclusion of a melodic passage. Additionally, it can be used to embellish in termination of a phrase before continuing the following phrase.

Patah Lagu 3 (PL3) of Kamariah Noor (KN)

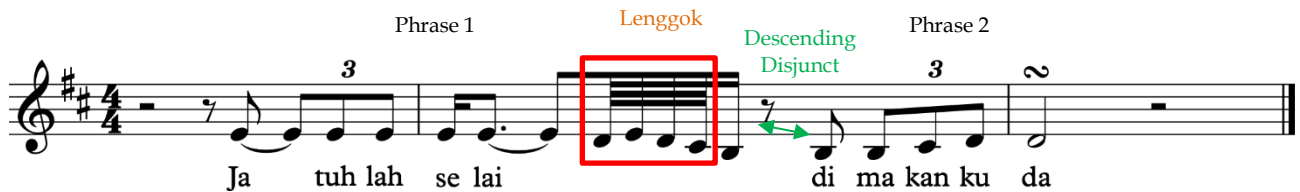


Figure 4. Example of *Patah Lagu 3 (PL3)* by Kamariah Noor (KN) in *Jalak Lenteng*.

In Figure 4, *Patah Lagu 3 (PL3)* serves as a resolving ornamentation within a phrase. This specific PL consists of 5 notes, similar to a turn but with varying motion. It is typically executed at the end of a syllable, such as the word *selai* which marks the end of a phrase. Besides, the sequence of notes ascends to the upper auxiliary, descends to the lower auxiliary, and resolves on the third lower of the principal note. Above all, this type of PL is commonly found in KN singing styles, particularly for Asli and Joget, as it is also familiarized from the PL in *Dondang Sayang (DS)*. The essence of DS can be observed in the rapid, short, and jagged motion of this PL, although KN singers often perform it with a more subtle and nuanced approach, rather than emphasizing extreme harmonic accuracies.

Patah Lagu 4 (PL4) of Kamariah Noor (KN)

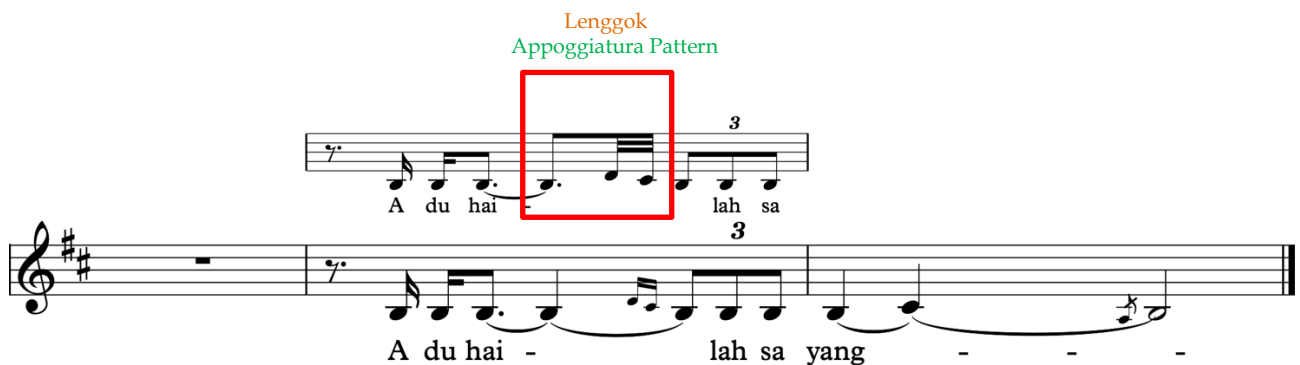


Figure 5. Example of *Patah Lagu 4 (PL4)* by Kamariah Noor (KN) in *Jalak Lenteng*.

The analysis of *Patah Lagu 4* (PL4) above reveals a distinctive use of conjunct motion in an oblique pattern, with disjoining appoggiaturas comprising two notes, the second of which is higher and descends to the main melody. The incorporation of appoggiaturas and acciaccaturas in LMA serves to enrich the melodic characteristics through the application of melismatic techniques like legato and staccato, thereby enhancing the overall musical expression. Additionally, this technique is employed to facilitate the seamless transition of passing tones into harmonic tones, contributing to the harmonic variation in a horizontal to vertical manner.

Lenggok

Dayang stated the Malaysian community employs the term *Lenggok* to denote melismatic embellishments in vocal or instruments (Arshad, 2015). She added, melismatic refers to a style of singing where multiple notes are sung on a single syllable of text. It is often used in vocal music to add ornamentation and expressiveness to the performance. Precisely, *Patah Lagu* frequently manifests within phrasal structures, positioned either in the middle of a phrase or at the termination of a syllable. This phenomenon is closely linked to *Lenggok*, which serve as embellishments to be inserted in *Patah Lagu* or other places in the melodic phrase. As noted by Tengku Ritawati (2017), *Lenggok* in Lagu Melayu Asli (LMA) is observed to occur at the initial, medial, or final position within a word.

Lenggok 1 (L1) of Kamariah Noor (KN)

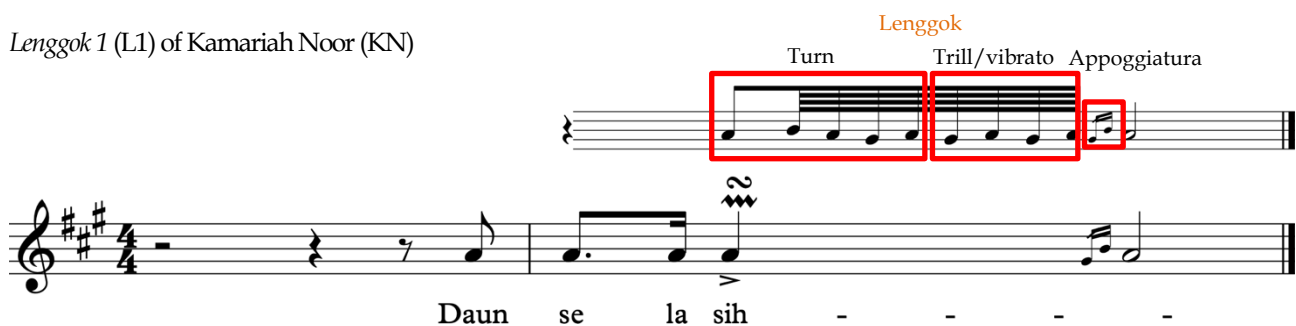


Figure 6. Example of *Lenggok 1* (L1) by Kamariah Noor (KN) in Jalak Lenteng

The transcription above provided highlights L1 as a distinctive pattern of turn with added trills of vibrato and appoggiatura commonly found in LMA. While the general structure of L1 is common, the differentiation of motion and choice of notes can vary. Typically, L1 of Kamariah Noor (KN) concludes with appoggiaturas that necessitate a rapid trill of vibrato, known as *Anak Suara*, to propel the appoggiatura forward. Moreover, L1 frequently appears in the resolving syllable or melodies in termination.

Lenggok 2 (L2) of Kamariah Noor (KN)



Figure 7. Example of *Lenggok 2* (L2) by Kamariah Noor (KN) in Batu Belah

Figure 7 illustrates the analysis of *Lenggok 2* (L2) by Kamariah Noor (KN). This particular *Lenggok* style is commonly used in her Asli singing, and some suggest it is also present in Ghazal Melayu Johor (GMJ) and Dondang Sayang (DS). L2 is characterized by 7 notes, starting with a skip of the third above initially, moving to the lower auxiliary, progressing to the tonal note, descending from the tonal note, and finally resolving back to the tonal note. Hence, this style of *Lenggok* was frequently used by connoisseurs in the 1960s and 1970s, but it is not commonly seen in the modern singing style of LMA.

Lenggok 3 (L3) of Kamariah Noor (KN)



Figure 8. Example of Lenggok 3 (L3) by Kamariah Noor (KN) in Jalak Lenteng

The analysis of Figure 8 above highlights the presence of *Lenggok 3 (3)* in the form of trill/vibrato and Turn fashion, particularly observed in the termination of a phrase. These ornamental notes are common for KN's singing style, often used to transition between phrases, as evidenced in the *Menimang* section of the song *adulhai*. The trill/vibrato element in the initial part of this *Lenggok* serves to extend the delayed turn, with KN's execution typically displaying a subtle and nuanced approach rather than a strict adherence to harmonic precision.

Lenggok 4 (L4) of Kamariah Noor (KN)

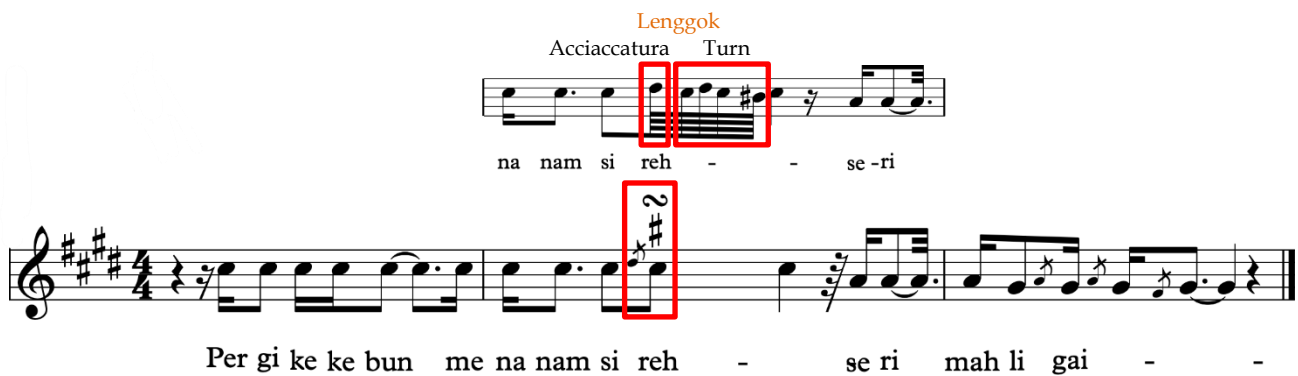


Figure 9. Example of Lenggok 4 (L4) by Kamariah Noor (KN) in Sri Mahligai

Figure 9 above illustrates the *Lenggok 4 (L4)* frequently employed by Kamariah Noor (KN), which is structured in an Acciaccatura and Turn style, comprising a total of 6 notes, including the resolving note. This particular *Lenggok* can be viewed as a variation of L1 and L2 due to its functional similarity. KN is known to switch between L1, L2, and L4 to introduce various nuances in her vocal embellishments. However, this type of *Lenggok* is not commonly utilized by contemporary singers in the modern era. However, this particular style of *Lenggok* conveys the impact of old-style practices and may offer a more accessible approach.

Lenggok that pertained as Lenggok of Dondang Sayang (DS) by Kamariah Noor (KN)

Abdul Wahab (2023) posits that the singing style of LMA, attributed to the apprentice of Nyonya Tan, appears to have evolved from the singing style of Dondang Sayang (DS), characterized by the proverb *Dondang Sayang si ibu lagu*. The significance of the DS singing style lies in its use of quatrains, with a more spoken form of delivery. This spoken form combines elements of speaking and singing, with alterations in pitch and tone to align with melodic contours indicated in musical notation. Additionally, the DS style often incorporates call-and-response interactions with a partner or audience. Despite its cultural importance, the musical aspects of the DS singing style have received limited scholarly attention. Common patterns in melodic lines and ornamentations are evident in the singing style, underscoring its unique musical characteristics.



Figure 10. Example of Lenggok Dondang Sayang (Example 1) by Ahmad Jusoh 1973

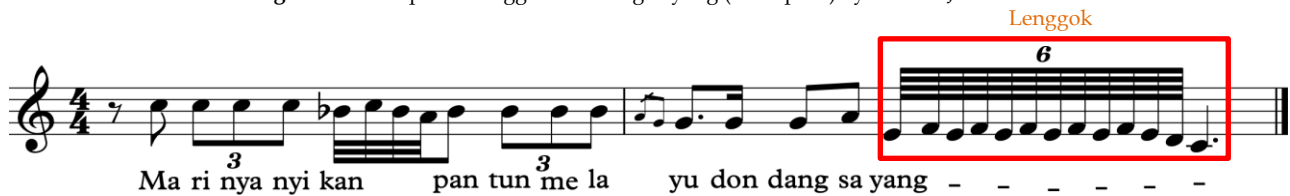


Figure 11. Example of Lenggok Dondang Sayang (Example 2) by Fatimah Adan 1973.

As per marked above in Figure 10 and 11, the melismatic pattern known as *Lenggok Dondang Sayang* (LDS) is characterized by a series of notes moving in a conjunct motion, either descending or repeated in a second and then descending. This pattern is commonly used at the end of phrases. In both examples provided, the pattern consists of up to 13 notes, creating a subtle and ambiguous motion rather than a distinct execution. Moreover, these melismatic patterns are also evident in the singing style of Kamariah Noor (KN), indicating her incorporation of elements from LDS which adds a unique and captivating dimension to her performance.

Lenggok Dondang Sayang (LDS1) by Kamariah Noor (KN)



Figure 12. Example of Lenggok Dondang Sayang (LDS 1) by Kamariah Noor (KN) in Jalak Lenteng with Orkes Hamzah Dolmat.

Lenggok Dondang Sayang (LDS2) by Kamariah Noor (KN)



Figure 13. Example of Lenggok Dondang Sayang (LDS 2) by Kamariah Noor (KN) in Makan Sireh with Orkes Hamzah Dolmat.

Lenggok Dondang Sayang (LDS3)



Figure 14. Example of Lenggok Dondang Sayang (LDS 3) by Kamariah Noor (KN) in Dayang Senandung with Orkes Hamzah Dolmat.

The application LDS in KN's has gained significant recognition, allowing us to observe distinct patterns in her recordings for LMA, particularly in songs like *Jalak Lenteng*, *Makan Sireh*, and *Dayang Senandung*. This particular style of *Lenggok* is a defining characteristic of KN's singing. However, some experts argue that this type of *Lenggok* can also be found in Lagu Melayu Deli (LMD). The LMD singing style combines elements of GMJ and LMA but has not been extensively analyzed in academic discourse. Interviews with

Abdul Wahab (2023) and Ahmad (2023) confirmed that this pattern is more prominently derived from the Lenggok style in DS.

As what we can see all LDS patterns by KN are in the form of sixplet, in the motion of conjunct descending movements, based the rhythmic scents, this particular *Lenggok* moves in vast speed, the notes move three steps lower and rise a whole step and move again in the same motion. This type of *Lenggok* gives distinct feel and style form the conventional singing style in LMA. This LDS no longer used in Asli performances due to lack of attention and recognition by recent experts. This old practice can be a tool of improvisation technique in making the singing style significantly different.

CONCLUSION

Kamariah Noor's (KN) vocal performance represents a pivotal moment in *Lagu Melayu Asli* (LMA) musical practice, characterized by her unique synthesis of multiple musical styles including Dondang Sayang, Ghazal Melayu Johor, and other elements. The primary novelty of her musical contribution lies in her ability to create intricate melodic patterns through disjunct motion, rapid intervallic transitions, and sophisticated ornamentations that preserve and evolve LMA musical expressions.

The research on KN's musical techniques opens several potential avenues for future scholarly exploration, including comparative musicological studies of traditional performance practices, systematic documentation of endangered musical styles, and interdisciplinary research on cultural musical transmission. Potential research fields that could benefit from this study include ethnomusicology, performance studies, cultural preservation, and applied musical anthropology. By meticulously documenting KN's unique singing style, researchers can develop methodological frameworks for understanding how traditional musical practices adapt, transform, and maintain cultural significance in the face of modernization and standardization.

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