

## Exploring selected Traditional and Contemporary Repertoires of Malay Gamelan on the *Keromong*

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### Abstract

This study examines the performance techniques of the *keromong*, a key melodic instrument in the Malay gamelan ensemble, focusing on both traditional and modern repertoires. Despite its central role, systematic documentation of *keromong* techniques remains limited, mainly because traditional teaching methods are mostly transmitted orally. Guided by constructivist learning theory, this research uses a qualitative approach, combining performance observation, semi-structured interviews, audiovisual analysis, and reflective journaling. The study explores three core techniques introduced by the late Adiguru Bob Khalil - Irama Satu (Simultaneous Rhythm), Irama Dua (Alternating Rhythm), and Irama Bertingkah (Interlocking Rhythm) and demonstrates how they are applied in both classical pieces (*Timang Burung*) and new compositions (*Overture Maharajawana*, *Maharajawana*, and *Nafas*). These techniques, integrated with the researcher's interpretive choices, such as dynamic playing/ hitting, expressive hand gestures, and controlled breathing, enhance the emotional and visual aspects of performance. The findings show that traditional techniques, while rooted in heritage, can be effectively adapted for contemporary compositions, enriching musical interpretation and expression. This study contributes to the ongoing discussion of Malay Gamelan pedagogy by proposing a structured, accessible teaching model that complements oral traditions and provides visual or written guidance for learners. It highlights the potential of performance-based research to preserve cultural heritage while fostering innovation.



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## INTRODUCTION

The Malay Gamelan ensemble consists of eight core instruments: *keromong* (also called as *bonang barun*), *gambang*, *saron baron*, *saron peking*, *demung*, *kenong*, a pair of gong (*gong besar*, *gong kecil*), and *gendang* (Mohd Shah & Poheng, 2021). Each instrument features distinct playing techniques that contribute to the ensemble's layered and interlocking textures. Among these, the *keromong*, also known as *bonang baron* is classified as a gong-chime instrument and serves as a central melodic component in Malay Gamelan performance (Matusky & Tan, 2017). It consists of ten horizontally arranged kettle gongs placed on a wooden frame in two parallel rows (spanning two octaves), played with a pair of padded wooden mallets. Despite *keromong*'s distinction in the ensemble, focused academic studies on its performance techniques of playing, especially within both traditional and contemporary repertoires, remain limited. This research addresses this gap by examining the foundational and improvised playing styles of the *keromong* during rehearsals and performances based on the researcher's observation and journaling, thereby contributing new insight into this underexplored area. The study is situated within the framework of **constructivist learning theory**, which suggests that learners construct knowledge through active engagement and contextual experiences (Fosnot, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This theoretical lens is instrumental in analysing how musicians internalise and reinterpret performance techniques, especially in creative and semi-improvised contexts. Furthermore, the study holds broader cultural and educational significance. As Malay Gamelan faces pressures from evolving artistic preferences and educational reforms, there is a growing need to preserve its intangible heritage while making it accessible to new generations of learners.

According to Nik Mustapha (2011), traditional Malay Gamelan, particularly in the Terengganu court tradition, is linked to *Joget Gamelan*, a dance-theatre form involving female dancers and male musicians. Malay gamelan evolved in the 80s in *dramatari* the interpretation of the music with dance and physical movements (Mohd Anis, 1985). In contrast, contemporary gamelan compositions often exhibit elements of **paradox and irony**, blending tradition with innovation. For instance, in one of the researcher's performances, a gamelan piece was accompanied by a *wayang kulit* narrative. While the *dalang* retained traditional Kelantanese dialect and expressions, the musical setting was modern, reinterpreting episodes from the *Ramayana*. Such combinations represent deliberate artistic choices that challenge and expand conventional understandings of Malay gamelan. They also reflect how compositional reinterpretations alter not only the musical style but also the associated gestures, storytelling, and audience reception. Mohd Shah & Poheng (2021) mentioned that in current practice in contemporary Malay gamelan music, many composers are trying other ways in highlighting the playing techniques through a stylistic and technical playing with the exploration of colour, melody, tonal ability, and expression.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The objective of this study is to demonstrate individual playing styles on both traditional pieces and contemporary works on the *keromong*. This study applies a constructivist theoretical lens to investigate how performers acquire and internalise *keromong* technique within the Malay Gamelan ensemble. Constructivist pedagogy posits that learning is an active, contextually situated process built through experience, reflection, and social interaction (Shively, 2006). It foregrounds two central facets: 1) what has known as the repertoire of musical technique; and 2) how it is known, the means through which learning occurs.

Regarding what is known, this study draws upon the work of Teuku (2021), who systematically document *keromong* playing techniques in the Malay Gamelan tradition, particularly as transmitted orally via listening, observation, and repetition among musicians linked to Terengganu's court traditions. This forms the foundational body of technical knowledge for the current study, which is then embodied and tested through individual practice and ensemble rehearsals involving both traditional and newly composed repertoire. Concerning how knowledge is constructed, learning is framed as a mentoring-based, experiential process consistent with constructivist principles whereby the researcher receives guided instruction and refines technique via rehearsal and feedback. This mirrors the apprenticeship model identified in Teuku Iskandar Illany & Marzellan's findings and aligns with constructivist views regarding active, social learning processes. Methodologically, the study uses a participatory action research design to enable cyclical engagement with planning, rehearsal, performance, observation, and critical reflection, thereby capturing evolving changes in technique and interpretive practice over time. To triangulate these insights, qualitative data gathered using:

1. Semi-structured interviews with the informants to get their perceptions of modern stylistic integration and its implications for tradition.
2. Audiovisual recordings of rehearsals and performances, analysed to document progressive, spatial, and stylistic shifts in and during the performance practice.

Collectively, this theoretical and methodological structure supports a nuanced exploration of how *keromong* technique functions as both a vessel of tradition and a medium for innovation in contemporary Malay gamelan performance

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pedagogical approach to teaching Malay Gamelan performance techniques has never been systematically documented (Nik Mustapha, 2011), primarily due to the oral nature of traditional music transmission. The stylistic implementation of Malay Gamelan remains fluid and lacks a standardised performance model (Mohd Shah & Poheng, 2021). For instance, the instructional content or syllabus for teaching Malay Gamelan techniques often varies depending on the individual teacher. This stands in contrast to Javanese Gamelan, which benefits from well-documented systems of notation and musical structure that guide instruction and performance (Rahayu, 2009). Furthermore, the researcher has identified that the technique framework reorganised by the late *Adiguru* Bob Khalil, also known as Pak Bob, represents a more systematic and pedagogical method for mastering Malay gamelan performance practices. His structured approach offers an alternative to the traditionally unstandardised and oral-based mode of instruction. As Bob Khalil (personal communication, 2011-2022), Malay Gamelan features elegant *bunga* (ornamented melodies),

cyclic structures, and rhythmic changes ranging from meditative transitions to dynamic climaxes aligned with dance movements.

## Playing Techniques

In the context of Malay Gamelan, playing technique refers to the specific methods used to emphasize notes and patterns on the instruments. Pak Bob proposed a structured approach to teaching playing techniques, aimed at helping students understand basic Malay Gamelan playing methods more efficiently. According to the interview, Pak Bob mentioned that his method is especially valuable because not all students can effectively engage with rote learning. The structured approach also supports learners who struggle with oral-based instruction by providing clearer and more accessible guidance, particularly when learning how to play the *keromong*. In this study, the composition applied the playing techniques demonstrated in the final recital. Additionally, the researcher used her techniques, including variations in playing pressure, expressive hand and arm gestures, and controlled breathing. These elements, combined with the researcher's interpretive approach, though traditionally associated with classical repertoire, proved equally effective when applied to contemporary compositions. These techniques formed the stylistic foundation across all pieces performed by the researcher. The three fundamental *keromong* playing techniques proposed by Pak Bob in this study are: 1) Simultaneous Rhythm (*Irama Satu Serentak*); 2) Alternating Rhythm (*Irama Dua Berselang*); and 3) Interlocking Rhythm (*Irama Bertingkah*). These techniques not only reinforce the technical foundation for traditional repertoire but also demonstrate versatility in contemporary performance contexts, highlighting their pedagogical value and expressive potential.

### Simultaneous Rhythm Technique (*Irama satu serentak*)

The *Irama Satu* technique is performed by playing two *canang* (kettle gongs) from the upper and lower octaves simultaneously. As illustrated in Figure 1, the *canang* marked in orange colour indicates the sequence to be played by the left hand, while the *canang* marked in black colour represents the sequence to be played by the right hand, both to be played at the same time. There is also Western notation (*notasi barat*) as well as Malay gamelan notation (*notasi gamelan*).

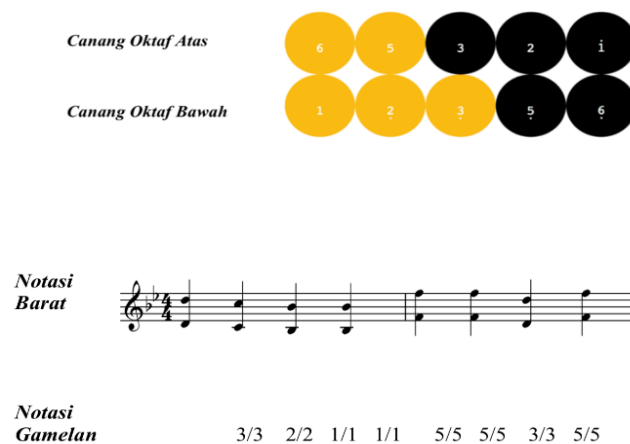


Figure 1. Example of the use of the *irama satu* technique in the traditional piece *Timang Burung*

The **same playing technique** (*Irama satu*) is prominently featured in the piece *Overture Maharajawana*, performed by the researcher. At the beginning of the piece, the researcher played the note E in both the upper and lower octaves simultaneously, using the *irama satu* technique (see Figure 2). This technique can be seen throughout *Overture Maharajawana* and *Maharajawana*, compositions that demonstrate majestic and ceremonial significance (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). The use of this technique is representatively associated with the **traditional Malay beduk**, a large wooden drum historically used to call villagers together to deliver important news. Traditionally, the *beduk* was used in mosques or *surau* (smaller mosques) to signal the time for prayers, announce deaths, or alert the community to emergencies. This practice reflects the originality of the Malay community in using percussive instruments as tools for communication (Amin et al., 2023). The researcher found the playing technique particularly effective for modern compositions with an overture-like or majestic

character. The strength of this technique lies in its dynamic impact; when executed, it requires a forceful motion, with the hands raised significantly to produce a loud and resonant sound. This exaggerated movement creates a visual and auditory emphasis, reinforcing the dramatic intensity of the piece. As such, the *irama satu* technique is deliberately and frequently applied in *Overture Maharajawana* and *Maharajawana* to deliver the intended sense of power and majesty.



Figure 2. Example of hand movement when raised high

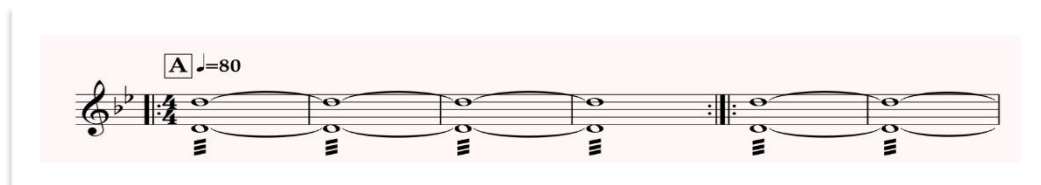


Figure 3. Example of the application of the *Irama satu* technique in the piece *Overture Maharajawana*



Figure 4. Example of the application of the *Irama satu* technique in the piece *Maharajawana*

### Alternating Rhythm Technique (*Irama dua berselang*)

The *Irama dua* technique begins by playing a *canang* in the lower octave with the left hand, followed by the corresponding *canang* in the upper octave with the right hand. This sequence is repeated up to the third *canang*. Next, the fifth *canang* in the upper octave is struck with the left hand, followed by the fifth *canang* in the lower octave with the right hand, and the pattern is repeated for the sixth *canang*. This method of playing reflects a fundamental principle in traditional Malay gamelan performance, where all notes are initiated with the left hand to avoid hand crossover during playing. This approach helps in the efficiency movement across the instrument.

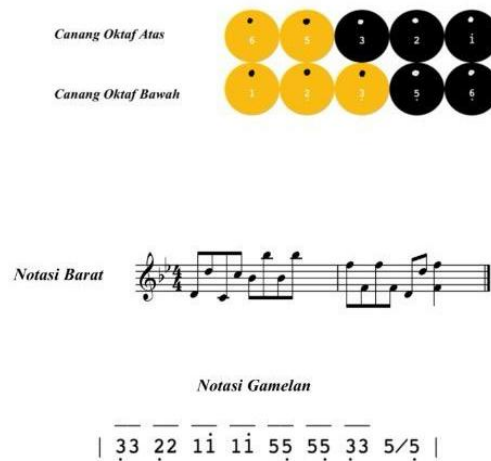


Figure 5. Example of the application of the *irama dua* (alternating) technique in the piece *Timang Burung*



Figure 6. Example of the application of the *irama dua* (alternating) technique in the piece *Maharajawana*, showing alternating hand movements according to the pitch sequence

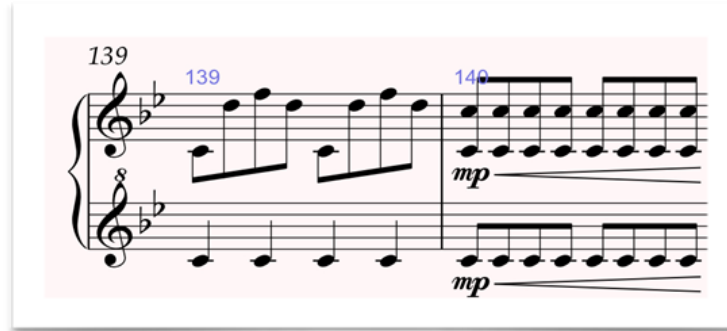


Figure 7. Example of the application of both *irama dua* (alternating) and *irama satu* (simultaneous) techniques in the piece *Maharajawana*, demonstrating mood transitions leading into the next section of the piece

The alternating technique is featured in the piece *Maharajawana*. The researcher observed that this technique produces a gentle and graceful style, both in the movement of the hands and the resulting tonal quality on the *keromong*. This is similar to the gentle gestures conveyed by a dancer, where the visual gracefulness of movement enhances the expressive depth of the performance. In *Maharajawana*, *Irama Satu* (simultaneous) and *Irama Dua* (alternating) techniques are used alternately to create emotional contrast within the piece. The *irama dua* technique typically appears at the beginning of the composition, symbolising a delicate and reflective introduction to the musical narrative. This can also be observed during *ritardando* sections, where the mood transitions from strong to soft, typically signalling a shift into a new musical section. This technique not only supports technical clarity, allowing the performer to avoid hand crossing, but also contributes to the visual elegance and discipline of the hand movements, enhancing the overall aesthetic of the performance.

### Interlocking Technique (*Teknik bertingkah*)

The interlocking technique implements the same approach as the *irama dua* (alternating) method but incorporates an additional interlocking note on every second and third note of the even-numbered bars (i.e., bars 2, 4, 6, etc), which must be played in an interlocking manner (see Figure 8 for the \* symbol indicating this). It sounded as if the right hand is having a question and answer with the left hand when it's played.

Figure 8 illustrates the application of the interlocking *irama dua* technique in the song *Timang Burung*. It includes two diagrams of the *Canang* (a traditional Malay Gamelan instrument) and its corresponding musical notation.

The top diagram shows the *Canang Oktaf Atas* (Upper Octave Canang) with notes 4, 5, 3, 2, 1. The bottom diagram shows the *Canang Oktaf Bawah* (Lower Octave Canang) with notes 1, 2, 3, 5, 6.

The musical notation for the *Notasi Barat* (Western Notation) is shown in a single staff, featuring a melody in 4/4 time. The *Notasi Gamelan* (Gamelan Notation) is shown below, using a system of numbers and lines to represent the rhythm and pitch of the Gamelan ensemble.

Figure 8. An example of the application of the interlocking *irama dua* technique in the song *Timang Burung*

In the performance, an interlocking technique was also played in the piece *Nafas*. The technique has a prominent yet soft touch when being played. The composition narrates and shows the beauty of the love between Sri Rama and Siti Dewi. Consequently, the researcher proposed the use of the interlocking technique, as the melody in this section was considered particularly suitable for it. The playing technique enhanced the stylistic authenticity of Malay Gamelan and highlighted the traditional atmosphere associated with it, given that interlocking is one of the core techniques in Malay Gamelan performance. Based on the practice and rehearsals, the researcher felt that this section should be played with a gentle touch to show the gentleness of Siti Dewi as a queen. Moreover, the use of the interlocking technique in *Nafas* contributed to a more graceful and coordinated hand movement during performance, thus adding aesthetic value to the execution of the piece.

Figure 9 shows an excerpt of the application of the interlocking technique in the song *Nafas*. The notation is presented in two staves, with the first staff starting at measure 8 and the second at measure 15. The notation includes a repeat sign with instructions: "1st time repeat - play bar 9 only" and "2nd time repeat - play all [malay style]". The notation also includes a "pick-up" instruction and a "poco accel." (poco accelerando) marking. The notation is written in a system of numbers and lines, representing the rhythm and pitch of the Gamelan ensemble.

Figure 9. An excerpt of the application of the interlocking technique in the song *Nafas*.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigates the performance techniques of the *keromong*, a key melodic instrument in the Malay Gamelan ensemble, focusing on both traditional and contemporary musical contexts. Despite the *keromong*'s central role in the ensemble, there has been limited academic research on how it is taught and performed. Through the researcher's role as performer and observer, the study examines how *keromong* techniques are learned, internalised, and applied using a constructivist learning framework. This theory suggests that knowledge is built through experience, reflection, and social interaction. The study also involved interviews with gamelan practitioners, performance video analysis, and reflective journaling, where the late *adiguru* Pak Bob's *irama satu* (simultaneous rhythm), *irama dua* (Alternating Rhythm), and *irama bertingkah* (interlocking rhythm). These techniques were used in both traditional pieces and newly composed works, such as *Overture Maharajawana*, *Timang Burung*, and *Nafas*. Each technique used in the song was interpreted by the researcher, where she added unique expressive qualities to the playing of *keromong*, from strength and majesty to grace and softness. The study demonstrates how traditional techniques can be effectively applied to contemporary compositions in Malay Gamelan, enriching their interpretation and expressive potential. The novelty of this research presents a performance-based study to document *keromong*

techniques systematically, combining practice, theory, and pedagogy. It proposes a simple, structured teaching approach that complements oral traditions and enhances learning, especially for students who benefit from referring to teaching and learning materials.

### Implications

The research offers a model for integrating tradition with innovation in Malay Gamelan. It highlights how traditional techniques can remain relevant in modern music and teaching practices. The findings also support the idea that performance-based learning can be a powerful tool for cultural preservation.

### Recommendations

1. **Develop a structured syllabus** for Malay Gamelan instruction using clearly defined techniques to assist in teaching consistency.
2. **Create digital archives**, including annotated video recordings and notated examples, to aid in the preservation and accessibility of *keromong* techniques.
3. **Encourage contemporary composers** to apply traditional playing methods in new works, especially the late *adiguru* Pak Bob approach.

Overall, this study contributes valuable insights into how traditional Malay gamelan techniques, especially the *keromong* can be preserved, taught, and creatively reimagined in contemporary performance and education. It affirms the importance of structured, reflective, and culturally grounded approaches in sustaining the living heritage of Malay Gamelan music.

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