

A PERFORMER'S COMPANION TO FOOTPRINTS BY CHONG LIM NG
& DEEP IN THE CITY BY JUNYI CHOW

by
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Chapter I: INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose

My lecture document focuses on pieces by two contemporary Malaysian composers. They are *Dragonfly(s)*, *A Distant Voice of the Rainforest*, and *Footprints* by Chong Lim Ng and *Three Short Malay Pieces* and *Deep in the City* by JunYi Chow. I aim to analyze these pieces from multiple angles, including music theory-based analysis as well as providing descriptive words for the different musical fragments in Ng's piece that could be understood by the non-musician. Ultimately, I aim to compile these findings into a document that could serve as a performance guide or as an introductory document for people to learn about Malaysian contemporary works for solo piano.

Malaysia's music industry is young when compared to Western countries or Asian countries such as China, Japan, and Korea. Much like the rest of the world, Malaysia has rich folk music traditions such as the Malay gamelan ensemble or the Chinese *ko tai*. However, it was not until the middle decades of the 20th century that we started to see the emergence of Malaysian musicians who were professionally trained in the Western classical music setting. Even though Malaysia's classical music scene is still in the early stages of its development, multiple local organizations have been dedicated to promoting local contemporary compositions, such as the MPO Composers Forum hosted by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) or the Free Hand Festival organized by the Malaysian Composers Collective.

While these efforts by local organizations and musicians are slowly showing results in the country, the world's understanding of Malaysian music is still very limited. Ng's *Footprints*, although it was premiered at the John Donald Robb Composers' Symposium in Albuquerque, USA, was not mentioned in any writings I can find from our library's databases. Chow's *Deep in*

the City has neither been performed in the United States nor discussed in any academic literature. It is my goal to advocate for the compositions by my fellow Malaysians to other parts of the world.

Scope of Research

While many distinguished Malaysian composers represent the sound of Malaysia in diverse ways through their works, this project focuses on pieces by Chong Lim Ng and JunYi Chow. Both composers have written extensively for various ensembles and instruments—for instance, several of Ng's works have been premiered by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, while Chow is highly regarded in the Chinese orchestra world. However, this project examines exclusively their compositions for solo piano, specifically Ng's *Dragonfly(s)*, *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* and *Footprints*, as well as Chow's *Three Short Malay Pieces* and *Deep in the City*.

While my initial reason for choosing to write about these two composers was simply that their music stood out to me, further exploration of their works led me to realize that part of their appeal lies in the presence of distinctly Malaysian elements that remind me of home. In Ng's music, traces of Malaysia emerge through cultural memory in *Dragonfly(s)*, the evocation of place and identity in *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, and the spirit of diversity reflected in *Footprints*. In Chow's works, Malaysian folk elements are presented explicitly in *Three Short Malay Pieces* and appear as subtle, hidden references in *Deep in the City*. Together, these works demonstrate different ways in which Malaysian identity can be expressed through contemporary piano music.

Ng's *Footprints* is composed in an atonal musical language, with numerous rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic motives embedded within this complex yet captivating piece. While I

could dedicate considerable time to identifying all possible variations and inversions of these different motives and documenting such findings, this is not the approach I intend to take. Inevitably, there will be some discussion of music theory in my research, but I aim to present ideas that are easily understandable for the general public, not just for musicians with advanced music theory knowledge. On the other hand, although Chow's *Deep in the City* also contains hidden messages and motives, its tonal approach in the writing is already much more accessible to everyone.

While I aim to research how Malaysia's diverse cultural conditions affect the musical languages of Malaysian composers, I will provide only a brief introduction to the country's cultural and geographical history in this document. I wish to introduce and promote the beautiful country of Malaysia to my audience and readers, but discussing the music remains the main focus here.

Lastly, I have learned that many of Ng's pieces serve pedagogical purposes. For example, his *Dragonfly(s)*, commissioned for the 5th ASEAN International Chopin Piano Competition, was designed to allow younger performers to experience contemporary improvisatory music. I will discuss the contributions these compositions have made to the music community.

Preliminary Review of Literature

Background of Malaysia and its Composers

My document revolves around two main topics: Malaysia and its composers. Malaysia is a small country with which people from this part of the world may not be familiar. Malaysian composers are discussed even less frequently; so little has been written about contemporary Malaysian composers that even local Malaysian musicians might struggle to name one.

Therefore, I will provide background on both the country and its composers before examining their music.

Jim Baker's *Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia and Singapore* provides a comprehensive historical account spanning from the first century through Malaysia's 2013 election.¹ Of particular relevance to my research are the histories of conflicts arising from Malaysia's ethnic diversity and multicultural character. Malaysia is currently one of the few countries where schools are organized along ethnic lines and students are required to study multiple languages. This distinctive educational system has fostered remarkable adaptability among Malaysians, including an openness to diverse musical styles.

The MPO Composers Forum and Its Impact on the Performance of Contemporary Western Classical Music by Malaysian Composers in Kuala Lumpur, compiled by several Malaysian musicians, provides a comprehensive background of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) Composers Forum.² It documents all featured composers during 2000-2008 and examines the forum's impact on Malaysia's music industry. The book offers a detailed record of Chong Lim Ng's involvement with the organization, including which pieces were performed in which years—valuable information for my research. In discussing the forum's impact on audiences, the authors observe that contemporary western classical music was not well received in Malaysia at that time. This presents an intriguing avenue for investigation: determining what has changed nearly two decades later.

¹ Jim Baker, *Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia and Singapore*, Fully updated third edition (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2014).

² HueyChing Chong et al., and Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, *The MPO Composers Forum and Its Impact on the Performance of Contemporary Western Classical Music by Malaysian Composers in Kuala Lumpur* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009).

Available Research on Another Piece by the Same Composer

As I research these specific composers, it is valuable to understand how other scholars interpret their work. While I have not found academic writing on JunYi Chow or his compositions, I have discovered multiple dissertations and one published article examining pieces by Chong Lim Ng, particularly *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* and *Two Preludes*. Although these studies focus on different pieces, they have nonetheless informed potential approaches for my own research.

Khe Sin Khoo's dissertation, *Selected Solo Piano Works by Contemporary Malaysian Composers: An Analysis*, focuses on three Malaysian composers and provides a detailed analysis of Chong Lim Ng's *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*.³ This contemporary work consists of multiple musical fragments, which Khoo analyzes in detail using set theory. While I do not currently plan to conduct such an in-depth analysis of the piece I am researching, her methodology has illuminated possibilities for analyzing another of Ng's works that employs a similar musical language.

Charmaine Blythe Siagian's dissertation, *Selected Solo Piano Works by Contemporary Malaysian and Indonesian Composers from 1979 to 2007: An Introduction*, explores solo piano works by contemporary Malaysian and Indonesian composers while providing detailed context about the musical scene of that period.⁴ Chong Lim Ng, whom I am researching, is featured in this work. The author's organizational approach—providing each composer's biography and concluding each section with a catalog of works—serves as a useful model for my own

³ Khe Sin Khoo, "Selected Solo Piano Works by Contemporary Malaysian Composers: An Analysis" (DMA Dissertation, West Virginia University, 2014), 59-114.

⁴ Charmaine Blythe Siagian, "Selected Solo Piano Works By Contemporary Malaysian And Indonesian Composers From 1979 To 2007: An Introduction" (DMA Dissertation, The University of Oklahoma, 2007).

document. Siagian takes a lighter analytical approach, offering overviews of the works and including composer's own reflection on the pieces.

Sin Yee Yap's article examines performance practice in Malaysian contemporary solo piano music through an analysis of Chong Lim Ng's *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*.⁵ Yap provides a brief overview of Malaysian contemporary piano music's development and includes a biography of the composer. Her method—analyzing the character of each melodic fragment before rearranging them into what she considers the most effective order—offers a valuable model for my analysis of another work by Ng. Yap's article also emphasizes artistic image theory, a pedagogical approach developed by the renowned Russian pedagogue Heinrich Neuhaus. According to this theory, “the artistic image is the music, the live musical speech with its regularities and consistency”⁶, and serves as a framework for learning contemporary works like this piece.

Recordings of the Pieces

Currently, only one publicly available recording exists online for *Dragonfly(s)*, *Footprints*, and *Deep in the City*. Ng's *Dragonfly(s)*, available on YouTube, was recorded by Malaysian pianist Celestine Yoong.⁷ The only available recording of *Footprints*, also on YouTube, was recorded by the composer himself at its premiere during the John Donald Robb Composers' Symposium.⁸ Chow's *Deep in the City* was premiered by UK-based Malaysian

⁵ Sin Yee Yap, “Creating Artistic Images on Chong Lim Ng's A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest (Fragments from Rimba...) for Piano Solo (2008, Revised in 2012),” *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 13, no. 11 (Winter 2023): 133-145, doi:10.6007/IJARBS/v13-i11/19165.

⁶ Anya Isababayeva, “Performance and Pedagogical Principles of Heinrich Neuhaus through the Prism of Philosophical Hermeneutics,” *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* Vol XIV, No. 2 (Winter 2022): 582.

⁷ Malaysiancomposerstv, “Dragonfly(s)- Ng Chong Lim,” performed by Celestine Yoong, YouTube video, 4:00, Oct 16, 2016, <https://youtu.be/vM8IKJGRaBk?si=11PPbYPFJfCgHT2n>.

⁸ Malaysiancomposerstv, “Footprints...(2011)- Ng Chong Lim,” performed by Chong Lim Ng, YouTube video, 6:33, February 1, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77sITXOx2aA&list=RD77sITXOx2aA&start_radio=1.

pianist Mei Yi Foo.⁹ While the scarcity of recordings has limited my ability to discuss different interpretations, it underscores the importance of my research. By providing a performance guide that combines my own insights with those of the composers, I hope to encourage future performances of these remarkable works.

Music Scores of the Pieces

Both composers generously provided me with scores when I contacted them, as the published *Free Hand Anthology I* proved difficult to obtain. I ultimately acquired the anthology through the University of Oregon library. The complete anthology includes a meaningful prologue by Adeline Wong, president of the Malaysian Composers Collective (MCC), in which she observes that Malaysia's rich cultural diversity has encouraged "the musical growth of the people of Malaysia."¹⁰ British concert pianist Murray McLachlan, in his review for *International Piano* magazine, expressed his fascination with the collection and argued that it deserves international attention.¹¹ The anthology includes not only the music for all fifteen pieces but also detailed information about their premiere dates and locations—information that may prove useful for my research. It also contains an introduction to MCC and the Free Hand Festival, Malaysia's first contemporary composer piano festival.

⁹ Mei Yi Foo, pianist, "Deep In The City" by JunYi Chow, track 6 on *Free Hand Anthology I*, recorded August 2019 at Free Hand Festival, Kuala Lumpur, <https://freehandfestival.wixsite.com/home/anthology..>

¹⁰ Malaysian Composers Collective, *Free Hand Anthology I*, (Malaysia: Malaysian Composers Collective, 2019): 4.

¹¹ Murray McLachlan, "Free Hand Anthology I – 21st Century Malaysian Piano Works," *International Piano* (Autumn 2021): 72.

Chapter II: BACKGROUND

Malaysia

In the relatively distant southeastern corner of Asia, there is a region commonly known as Southeast Asia, which comprises 11 countries (see Figure 1.1). Among them, some of the more widely recognized nations include Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and a country I proudly call home—Malaysia. Separated by the South China Sea into Peninsular (West) Malaysia and East Malaysia (which shares the island of Borneo with Indonesia and Brunei), Malaysia's land area is 28 times smaller than that of the United States, while its population is only about 10 times smaller, with approximately 35.5 million people according to World Bank estimates in 2024. Kuala Lumpur—the capital of Malaysia and the city where I grew up—had a population of 2.1



Figure 1.1

million in 2025, according to an official document released by the Department of Statistics Malaysia.

Even though it is a relatively young nation, Malaysia has a rich historical background. Although their numbers are few, some of the earliest inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia are believed to have lived there approximately 30,000 to 40,000 years ago.¹² The indigenous peoples of West Malaysia are descendants of the Austronesian, or Malayo-Polynesian, groups who migrated from southern China and Taiwan around 5,000 years ago.¹³ The Malays—the largest ethnic group in Malaysia—are descendants of a combination of multiple groups, including Polynesian peoples and the *Orang Laut* (“sea people”). The first empire was founded by Parameswara, a member of an Indonesian royal family, with the support of the *Orang Laut* around the beginning of the 15th century. Beginning in the 16th century, with the rise of mercantilism and the dual goals of controlling trade in the Eastern world and spreading Christianity, European powers began competing for control over Southeast Asia. Over time, Malaysia was colonized by Portugal, the Netherlands, and Britain. In the 19th century, due to labor demands in various industries, British authorities introduced workers from China and India, thereby laying the foundation for the three main ethnic groups seen in Malaysia today. In 1957, Malaysia (known as Malaya before 1963) finally gained its independence from Britain.

While this formation of multicultural and multiethnic societies is common throughout this region of the world, what truly sets Malaysia apart from other countries is its ability to preserve the distinct cultures of its diverse population. Malaysia’s elementary school system (for students aged 7–12) is unique in that schools are divided into different ethnic streams, including

¹² Jim Baker, *Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia and Singapore*, fully updated 2nd ed. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2008): 9.

¹³ *Ibid*, 10.

Malay, Chinese, and Tamil schools.¹⁴ This system is somewhat similar to the immersion elementary schools found in the United States; however, the primary language of instruction is the language associated with the ethnic school in which a student is enrolled. In addition to their primary language of instruction, all schools are required to teach both Malay (Malaysia's national language) and English. While there is no strict requirement for students to belong to a specific ethnic group in order to enroll in a corresponding ethnic school, most parents choose schools that reflect their own ethnic background. Through this educational system, the cultures and languages of Malaysia's different ethnic groups have been able to continue thriving over the years.

Like many other countries with multiethnic societies, issues of race remain an ongoing topic of discussion in Malaysia. One can learn more about these discussions through a series of essays compiled by David Lim.¹⁵ While this social structure may not represent the ideal scenario, I strongly believe that the interaction, collision, and merging of different cultures, races, and languages are precisely what contribute to a vibrant and colorful Malaysia. Malaysia's multicultural society has deeply influenced many aspects of daily life. Public holidays are observed to mark important celebrations of various ethnic groups, such as Lunar New Year, celebrated by the Chinese community; *Deepavali*, observed in Hindu culture; and *Hari Raya Aidilfitri*, a significant celebration for Muslims around the world. Cuisine is another important element closely tied to the culture and history of a place. In my view, Malaysian cuisine cannot be defined by a single type of food. *Roti canai*—an Indian-influenced flatbread; *nasi lemak*—one

¹⁴ Leslie D. Tableman, "The Impact of Structural Adjustment Policies on the Education Systems of Developing Countries: A Comparative Study between Thailand and Malaysia after the Asian Financial Crisis," (Master's Thesis, The University of Oregon, 2009): 18.

¹⁵ David C. L. Lim, *Overcoming Passion for Race in Malaysia Cultural Studies*, 1st ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2008.)

of Malaysia's national dishes originating from Malay cuisine; and *bak kut teh*—a rich pork rib soup influenced by Chinese culinary traditions and developed in Malaysia—are just a few examples of Malaysian delicacies that showcase the influence of different cultures.

If you are visiting Malaysia for the first time, or have just made friends with a Malaysian for the first time in your life, one observation you may immediately notice that reflects Malaysia's multiethnic society is its linguistic diversity. It is believed that at least one hundred languages are spoken in Malaysia.¹⁶ In addition to the main languages—Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil—spoken by the three major ethnic groups, there are countless dialects whose origins can be traced to specific regions in India, China, and throughout Southeast Asia. As mentioned earlier, all Malaysians are required to learn at least two languages through compulsory education; therefore, most Malaysians are multilingual. Walking through the streets of Malaysia, one can hear people communicating in a wide variety of languages at any given time. Malaysians even describe the way we speak as *rojak* (originally a Southeast Asian salad consisting of mixed fruits, vegetables, and proteins), referring to the frequent mixing of different languages within a single sentence. Malaysians' high adaptability to these linguistic and cultural elements also influences our approach to music.

Music in Malaysia

Although the pieces examined in this research are not directly related to traditional or folk music of Malaysia, both composers were born and raised in the country, where they were influenced by and interacted with these musical traditions. Furthermore, both composers have

¹⁶ Dipika Mukherjee et al., *National Language Planning & Language Shifts in Malaysian Minority Communities: Speaking in Many Tongues*, 1st ed., edited by Dipika Mukherjee and Maya Khemlani David, (Amsterdam University Press, 2011): 15.

written works for various Malaysian traditional music ensembles. Having some contextual understanding of Malaysia's traditional music will therefore be helpful in interpreting their compositions, which will be discussed later in this study.

Unlike many other aspects of cultural identity, the musical styles of Malaysia's different ethnic groups have largely retained their distinctive characteristics without substantial assimilation.¹⁷ Many of the most significant traditional music ensembles found in Malaysia were not intended solely for solo or instrumental performance, but traditionally served as accompaniment for various theatrical and dance forms. One example is the Malay gamelan, which is similar to the traditional Indonesian gamelan ensemble. In Malaysia, however, the Malay gamelan is most often used to accompany *joget gamelan*, a classical Malay court dance. In addition to the modern Chinese orchestra influenced by musical traditions from China, Malaysia also has a rich history of Chinese opera. Rather than being performed in Mandarin, Chinese opera in Malaysia is commonly presented in various Chinese dialects, such as Teochew, Cantonese, and Hokkien. The *pantun*, most commonly known as a traditional Malay poetic form, also frequently exists in sung form among various indigenous ethnic groups in East Malaysia. A singer typically delivers a pantun in free rhythm, primarily in a syllabic style that resembles the German *Sprechstimme* ("spoken voice"), while melisma and portamento are often employed as embellishments to the melodic line.¹⁸ While the musical examples presented here represent only a small glimpse of the richness of Malaysia's traditional music, they also demonstrate the lack of musical uniformity in Malaysia that continues to the present day.

¹⁷ Patricia Ann Matusky and Sooi Beng Tan, *The Music of Malaysia: The Classical, Folk, and Syncretic Traditions*, (England: Ashgate, 2004): 5.

¹⁸ Ibid, 269.

As established earlier, since Malaysia gained its independence from Britain and has continued to remain a member of the Commonwealth to this day, its earliest contemporary musical influences came primarily from the West. Some of the earliest Malaysian composers, such as Tony Fonseca, Alias Arshad, and Johari Salleh,¹⁹ received Western musical training before returning to Malaysia, where they contributed their talents to the local music scene. Today, British music examination systems—including the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), Trinity College London certifications, and the London-based Rockschoool graded music examinations—constitute a major component of Malaysia’s private-sector music education. Growing up in this musical environment, my exposure to newer music was very limited. Reflecting on my early music education before coming to college in the United States, I realize that I played only one piece by a composer born after 1950 in all of the music certification examinations I completed: Fazıl Say’s *Paganini Variations* (1970–). Although I may have misunderstood it at the time, I clearly remember being taught—implicitly—that contemporary and popular music were considered inferior to Western classical music. Even though I began to fall in love with Joe Hisaishi’s music during my teenage years, performing his works was considered taboo in concerts held by the music center where I studied. From this perspective, attitudes toward different musical genres have gradually evolved, as Hisaishi’s music has since been included among the repertoire options in the ABRSM syllabus.

This shift in perspective did not occur overnight, but rather through an ongoing process driven by the painstaking efforts of many individuals and institutions. The Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO), the only professional symphony orchestra in Malaysia, was

¹⁹ Daun Hamzah, “Malaysia,” In *New Music in the Orient: Essays on Composition in Asia since World War II*, edited by Harrison Ryker, (F. Knuf, 1991): 92-94.

founded in 1998 and, in its early years, consisted of 150 musicians from twenty-five different nations. Funded by the state-owned company Petroliaam Nasional Berhad (PETRONAS), the MPO's mission extends beyond concert performance. The orchestra has been deeply involved in promoting Malaysia's musical development through a wide range of initiatives, including instrumental instruction, educational workshops, the Malaysian Philharmonic Youth Orchestra (MPYO), and the MPO Composers Forum.²⁰

Established in 2002 by the MPO's then Associate Conductor, Kevin Field, the first MPO Composers Forum aimed to discover new local talent and foster the growth of orchestral composition in Malaysia. The inaugural forum attracted twenty-six applicants, followed by twenty participants in the second forum held in 2005. Although the MPO Composers Forum was relatively short-lived—with only two major forums and an extended format that continued for a few additional years—it nevertheless had a significant positive impact on the development of Malaysia's contemporary music scene. The forum provided composers with a platform to present their works to local audiences and opened opportunities for Malaysian composers to gain international exposure. Perhaps most importantly, it facilitated connections among local composers that led to more collaborative and impactful creative outcomes. As a direct result of the influence of the MPO Composers Forum, the first HSBC Young Composers Workshop was established in 2008, producing Malaysia's first anthology by contemporary composers.²¹

Guided by five primary goals—"to create more opportunities and exposure for local composers; increase awareness of and promote Malaysian music at home and abroad; support the

²⁰ HueyChing Chong et al., *The MPO Composers Forum and Its Impact on the Performance of Contemporary Western Classical Music by Malaysian Composers in Kuala Lumpur*, (Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009): 1.

²¹ Ibid, 46-51.

creation of new Malaysian music repertoire; provide a catalyst for composition and new music education; and encourage individuals and groups to organize new music activities”—the Malaysian Composers Collective (MCC) was formed in 2008 by a group of enthusiastic composers who first connected through the MPO Composers Forums. Within a year, MCC successfully rejoined Malaysia to the regional Asian Composers League (ACL). Over the years, MCC has hosted and organized numerous events with notable success. These include the *Kuala Lumpur Contemporary Music Festival 09* (Southeast Asia’s first young composers’ competition), as well as the production of Malaysia’s first women composers’ CD anthology, titled *Interweaves*, among many other initiatives.²²

Free Hand Festival

In 2019, the first Malaysian Contemporary Piano Festival and Competition—commonly known as the *Free Hand Festival*—was held. This composition-focused festival was organized in collaboration with the UCSI University International Piano Festival & Competition, in which the winner of the composition festival was commissioned to write the set work for the finalists of the piano competition.²³ As a result of this inaugural *Free Hand Festival*, Malaysia’s first anthology of piano compositions was published, accompanied by a dedicated webpage featuring complete recordings of the anthology. This anthology contains piano works by a total of fifteen Malaysian composers from different generations. Among them included a piece by Adeline Wong, President of the MCC and a finalist of the first MPO Composers Forum. In the prologue

²² “Our Story,” About MCC, Malaysian Composers Collective, accessed March 9, 2026, <https://www.malaysiancomposers.com/p/about-us.html#story>.

²³ “Call for scores: 1st Malaysian Contemporary Piano Festival and Competition 2019,” Malaysian Composers Collective, last modified October 15, 2018, <https://www.malaysiancomposers.com/2018/10/contemporary-piano-fest-2019.html>.

of the anthology, she wrote: “Malaysia, with its diverse culture, offers opportunities for composers to be inspired from this rich heritage. Over the past two decades, new music has taken root in the country like never before, and the result is a tapestry of forms and textures from various corners of the land and a myriad of experiences.”²⁴ These words of hers perfectly summarize my experience when I first encountered recordings of the anthology online.

I have wanted to write about Malaysian composers ever since I learned what was required for my lecture document. From that moment, I had a clear goal but was unsure where to begin. I initially reached out to fellow Malaysian musicians to ask for recommendations of composers or pieces; however, the results were quite disappointing. I quickly realized that while we may all be successful musicians in certain respects, our knowledge of local composers is, regrettably, very limited. My next step was to search online databases to see whether any scholarly work had been written about Malaysian composers. While I did find a few papers on related topics, the authors had already provided detailed analyses of the works they discussed. Moreover, the musical examples included in these papers were too limited for my purposes. In the end, I turned to one of the dullest yet most effective methods: Google. After several days of searching, I finally came across a website²⁵ containing complete recordings of the *Free Hand Anthology I*. I immediately knew that I had found exactly what I needed.

At that point in my life, I had not yet heard of the *Free Hand* Festival, but even a brief glance at the names of the composers and the titles of their works gave me a strong sense of familiarity and comfort. From the composers’ names alone, I could tell that the anthology

²⁴ Adeline Wong, prologue to *Free Hand Anthology I*, compiled by Malaysian Composers Collective, (Malaysia: Malaysian Composers Collective, 2019): 4.

²⁵ “Free Hand Anthology I,” Malaysian Composers Collective, accessed March 10, 2026, <https://freehandfestival.wixsite.com/home/anthology>.

included artists from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The titles of their compositions were equally varied. Some are straightforward, such as *Five Little Pieces for Piano* by Jessica Cho. Others draw inspiration from Malaysia's culture and history, including *Dol Said* by Raja Alif and *Kabus Pantun* by Tazul Tajuddin. Others feature evocative, descriptive titles that invite curiosity about the music itself, such as *Herringbone* by Adeline Wong and *In the Absence of Silence* by Chow Jun Yan. Among these pieces, this lecture document will focus on *Footprints...* by Chong Lim Ng and *Deep in the City* by JunYi Chow.

While both pieces immediately captured my attention as I listened through the anthology, they are markedly different. One, by an older-generation composer, is set in multiple movements and is atonal, loosely structured, and improvisatory in nature. The other, by a younger composer, is through-composed and exhibits a clear sense of harmony, formal structure, and motivic development. Although this contrast was not originally intentional, the differing characteristics of these two works provide compelling examples of the multifaceted nature of Malaysia's contemporary piano music.

I reached out to both composers to express my interest in conducting research on their works. Both responded positively, which led to the creation of this document. As I had difficulty obtaining a copy of *Free Hand Anthology I*, they kindly sent me their scores. I was also fortunate to meet both composers in person during the summer of 2025 to briefly discuss their works, followed by numerous exchanges via text messages, emails, and phone calls. Throughout this process, I realized that there is much more to uncover in their music, which led to the inclusion of a few additional pieces in this document. Through these efforts, I aim to produce a comprehensive performance guide to some of their works, with the hope of generating interest

among pianists around the world while also viewing this project as a personal milestone in beginning to pay closer attention to Malaysian composers whom I had previously overlooked.

Chapter III: FOOTPRINTS

Chong Lim Ng

Hailing from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, pianist, pedagogue, and composer Chong Lim Ng grew up in Seremban. His first introduction to music came through the Yamaha Music Education System, which he began at around four years of age, and he was among the first cohort of Yamaha students in his state. He was selected twice to represent Malaysia at the Yamaha Junior Original Concert (JOC). In 1993, he won the Malaysia National Piano Competition organized by Kawai. The chairman of the jury, Frank Wibaut—then a professor at the Royal College of Music—subsequently invited him to study abroad on a full scholarship. During his time in London, he became a prizewinner at the AT&T International Piano Competition, the Royal Overseas League Competition, and was awarded the Anthony Saltmarsh Junior Fellowship. He later continued his graduate studies at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Graz, Austria, studying piano with Elza Kolodin and composition with Beat Furrer.

As a pianist, Ng has performed extensively as both a soloist and chamber musician at numerous international festivals, from Singapore through Italy. In 2022, he also appeared as a concerto soloist with the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra. In addition to his performance career, he has served as a juror for several international competitions, including the ASEAN International Chopin Piano Competition, the Jakarta International Piano Competition, the Ohrid Pearls International Competition for Young Musicians, and the Singapore International Piano Competition.

A committed pedagogue, he has served on the faculty of Universiti Malaya in Malaysia and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore. Many of his students have gone on to study at some of the world's most prestigious institutions, including the University of Music and

Performing Arts Vienna, the Hanns Eisler School of Music Berlin, the Royal Academy of Music, and the Manhattan School of Music. In addition, many of his students have received major prizes in both national and international competitions. A number of his early students have since returned to Malaysia to take up teaching positions at various universities, continuing and extending his pedagogical legacy. I was fortunate to have studied with Chong Lim for several months prior to beginning my undergraduate studies in the United States. In lessons, he was among the most demanding teachers I have encountered, consistently challenging his students to exceed their perceived limits. At the same time, he is also one of the most caring and supportive mentors I have known. He remains an important influence on my musical and professional development to this day.

A keen composer, Ng was selected as one of four finalists in the second MPO Composers Forum, which began in 2005 and drew twenty applicants. It was during this forum that he composed *Rimba*, *Window*, and *Xiang*, which were subsequently premiered by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra in 2006. His other notable works include *Two Preludes*, *Three Sketches* for Two Pianos, *Amorphous* for String Orchestra, *Shadows* for Piano and Malay Traditional Instruments and *Fireflies* for orchestra, specially commissioned by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra in 2019.

In honor of his huge contribution to Malaysia's music scene, Ng was awarded S.T.M. (Pingat Setiawan Tuanku Mukhriz - Associate-Order of Loyalty to Tuanku Mukhriz) by the Yamtuan Besar, the ruler of the state of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia in 2011.

In both performance and composition, Ng has drawn influence from the German musical tradition, particularly composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz

Schubert, and Robert Schumann, as well as contemporary figures including György Ligeti, Pierre Boulez, and György Kurtág. Regarding piano virtuosos such as Arthur Rubinstein, Dinu Lipatti, Vladimir Horowitz, and Glenn Gould, he has noted that “they inspire me with their distinctive personality, their individuality, and their dedication to music, whether new or ‘conventional’.”²⁶

Due to his diverse educational background—having received his early training in Malaysia and pursued higher education in Europe—Ng’s compositions often exhibit a sense of duality. While his musical language is generally improvisatory and frequently atonal, many of his works incorporate elements from both Western and traditional Malay musical practices. For instance, *Shadows* combines piano with gamelan ensemble, while other works reflect Malay linguistic influences in their titles, such as *Khatulistiwa* (Malay for “equator”), *Klavierstück...Warna* (“warna” meaning “color”), and *Daun* (“leaf”). His affinity for nature is also prominently reflected in his output. Works such as *Rimba* (“jungle”), *Dragonfly(s)*, *Morning Mist*, and *Daun* demonstrate a recurring engagement with nature imagery, further enriching the expressive and cultural dimensions of his music.

In this chapter, we will explore three works by Chong Lim Ng: *Dragonfly(s)*, *A Distant Voice of the Rainforest*, and *Footprints*. These pieces are presented in order of increasing difficulty. *Footprints* and *Dragonfly(s)* were composed a year apart, in 2011 and 2012 respectively, while *A Distant Voice of the Rainforest* was originally written in 2008 and later revised in 2012.²⁷ These pieces share a common emphasis on varying degrees of improvisation. In an interview with Classical Music Asia, Chong Lim expressed his affinity for freedom in

²⁶ Charmaine Blythe Siagian, “Selected Solo Piano Works By Contemporary Malaysian And Indonesian Composers From 1979 To 2007: An Introduction” (DMA Dissertation, The University of Oklahoma, 2007): 35.

²⁷ Sin Yee Yap, “Creating Artistic Images on Chong Lim Ng’s *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* (Fragments from *Rimba*...) for Piano Solo (2008, Revised in 2012),” *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 13, no. 11 (Winter 2023): 136.

music, noting that “players can create their own music—everyone can play it differently.” At the same time, he acknowledged that this freedom may feel intimidating to some performers.

However, with a strong imagination, a thorough understanding of the work, and the courage to take risks, performers can ultimately “feel the music and make the connection.”²⁸

Dragonfly(s)

Composed in 2012, *Dragonfly(s)* by Chong Lim Ng is a set of four miniature movements commissioned for the 5th ASEAN International Chopin Piano Competition, which took place in the same year. In the preface, the composer writes:

“Dragonfly(s) are specially written to allow young children explore different soundscapes of the piano with their imagination, joy, and youthfulness. While composing these short pieces, various childhood memories appeared vividly in my mind, such as my school days, a fishing farm, a lotus pond, garden, etc. I really hope the young pianists will have fun exploring their own versions of the colorful dragonfly(s), wherever they come from.”

While such practices may be viewed today as animal cruelty, in my parents’ generation, it was not uncommon for children to capture dragonflies, tie a string around their bodies, and release them to fly like a kite. This activity formed part of the childhood experience for many in earlier generations and was even reflected in folk songs. In this context, the use of the dragonfly as a central theme for competition repertoire aimed at younger performers is particularly fitting, as it evokes a sense of nostalgia, playfulness, and cultural memory.

²⁸ “Composer draws inspiration from nature- Feature article on Ng Chong Lim,” Malaysian Composers Collective, last modified June 17, 2018, <https://www.malaysiancomposers.com/2018/06/ngfeature.html>.

Before the music begins, the composer devotes an entire page to explaining how to interpret specific notational markings in the score. Figure 2.1 presents several of these examples. With these indications, along with additional “composer’s suggestions” included throughout the score, performers are well equipped to approach the work with greater clarity and confidence. All four movements are notated on a single page, with *attacca* markings connecting each movement. This continuous flow of music effectively unifies the work, reinforcing the imagery of the dragonfly(s) in motion.

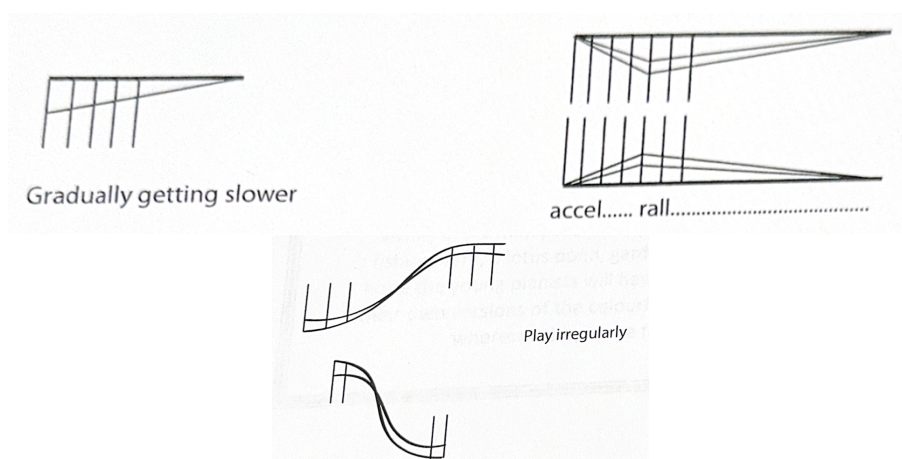


Figure 2.1

At first glance, one of the most striking features of the notation is that the music is presented in discrete “chunks” rather than in a continuous linear format. The composer also arranges the staves according to pitch register, visually reinforcing the spatial dimension of the musical material. The first movement begins with two groups of sustained tones (see Figure 2.2). In addition to the indication *slowly*, this opening evokes the atmosphere of early morning, as if the surrounding environment is gradually awakening. After several short, sharply articulated chords, a passage of repeated notes follows, gradually decelerating. This figure serves as the dominant motive of the movement and may be interpreted as depicting the motion and sound of a dragonfly in flight, with the gradual slowing suggesting it drifting away. As shown in the same

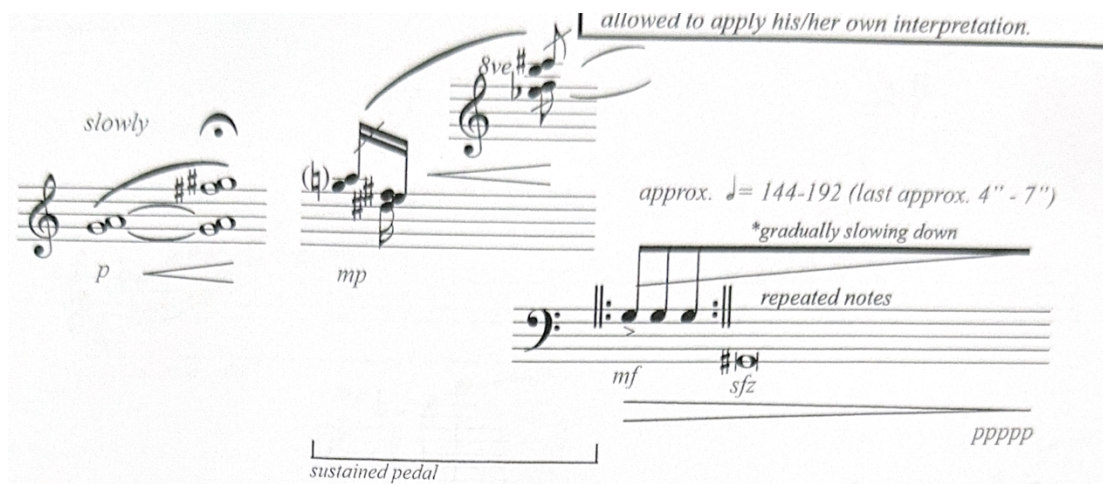


Figure 2.2

figure, the composer provides approximate tempo indications and durations for the repeated-note passages. This serves as a clear example of how improvisatory elements are embedded within the notation. At the same time, this freedom is balanced by detailed instructions regarding dynamics, articulation, and pedaling, ensuring that the music retains a coherent structural framework. The subsequent two phrases of the movement follow a similar design: each begins with a slow, atmospheric gesture and concludes with the recurring “flying” motive, reinforcing the unity of the movement.

Marked *light, floating*, the second movement opens with a line of ascending notes intended to be played irregularly. This gesture, combined with the use of the damper pedal, evokes the image of shimmering ripples on the surface of a lake or pond. This sense of stillness



- Figure 2.3

is then interrupted by a contrasting group of irregular double notes. Much like a stone skipping across water and momentarily disrupting a tranquil scene, these figures are performed without pedal and with staccato articulation, creating a clear textural contrast (see Figure 2.3). In the second half of the movement, the composer introduces a new gesture in which both hands move in parallel motion but with differing rhythmic groupings (see Figure 2.4). This passage is

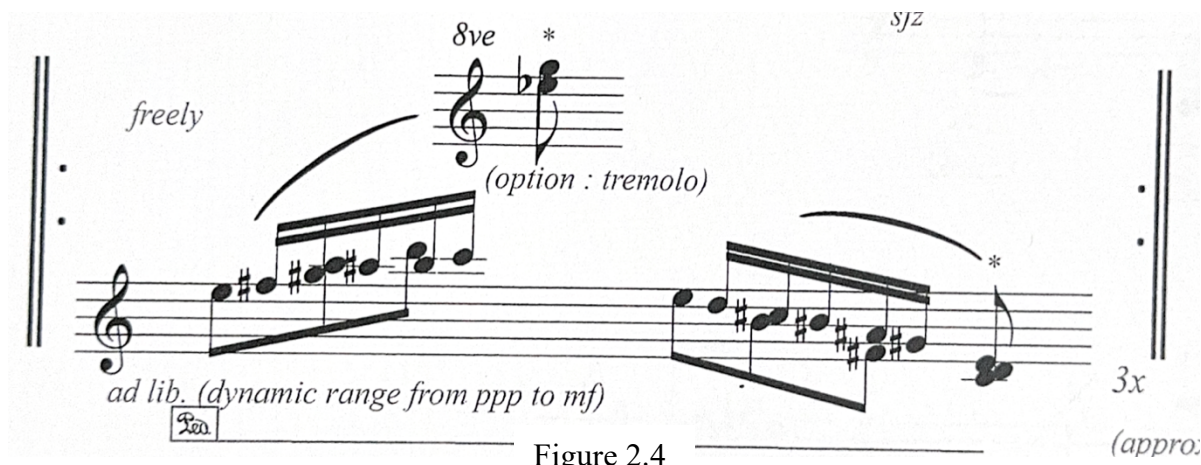
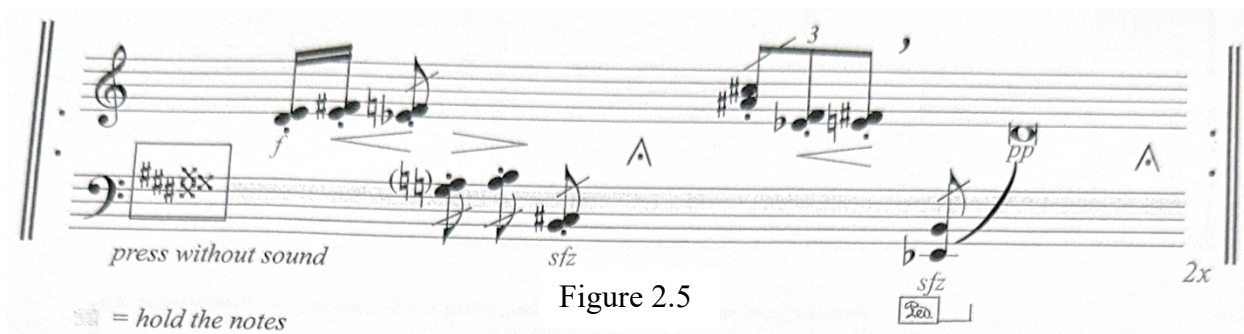


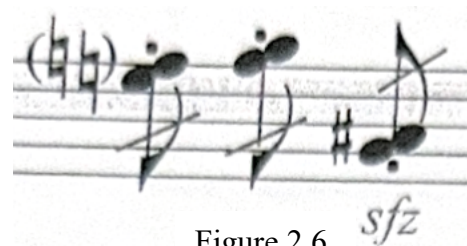
Figure 2.4

particularly engaging to perform, as both the sonic result and the physical gesture mirror the visual contour of the notation, suggesting the image of a dragonfly gliding and darting through the air. Toward the end of the movement, this parallel-hand texture transforms into a tremolo pattern executed by alternating hands, gradually ascending in register. In addition to the notated instructions, the composer provides several optional performance suggestions, such as the use of *una corda* and the possibility of rendering certain chords as tremolos. He also offers recommended numbers of repetitions for various phrases; however, these decisions are ultimately left to the performer, further reinforcing the work's improvisatory character.

With most notes articulated *staccato*, the third movement presents a markedly sharper character. A less conventional technique introduced here involves silently depressing selected keys—either held physically or sustained using the middle (*sostenuto*) pedal (see Figure 2.5). This produces a distinctive timbral effect, as the silently held strings resonate sympathetically



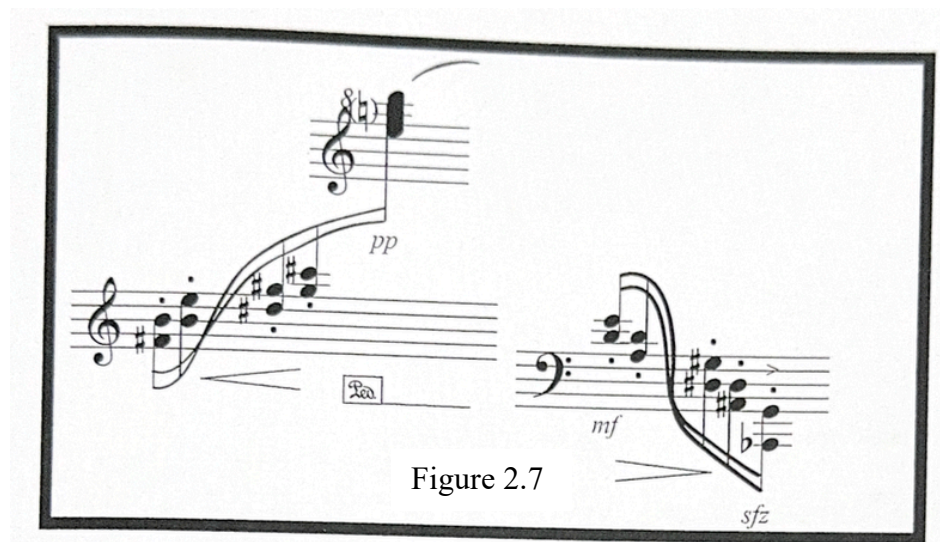
when activated by related frequencies in other sounding pitches. Although this effect appears straightforward in notation, it requires a high degree of control in execution. Depressing a key without producing sound demands careful touch, which may present a challenge for younger performers. In my own experience, my first encounter with the sostenuto pedal in performance occurred in a work by George Crumb. In this regard, the present movement can serve as an effective introduction for young pianists who are interested in exploring the expressive possibilities of the middle pedal. Figure 2.6 illustrates a marking that appears frequently throughout this movement, in which a stroke is placed across the end of the note. Upon inquiry, the composer explained that this indication should be interpreted as playing “very short and bouncy.” This articulation



contributes to the movement’s sharp and energetic character. As dragonflies are predatory insects, these crisp gestures and pointed articulations may be understood as evoking the image of a dragonfly in pursuit of its prey, adding a vivid layer of programmatic interpretation to the music.

The final movement is perhaps the most intriguing of the set. On the page, the musical material is arranged into four separate boxes, with instructions for the performer to execute them in a random order and with a sense of spontaneity. This approach allows each performance to

generate a distinct realization of the work, reflecting a form of controlled aleatoricism similar to that employed in *Jeux vénitiens* by Witold Lutosławski and *Broken Music Box* by Stephen Chatman. A suggested performance duration of 45 to 70 seconds is also provided. The materials within these boxes are derived from the second movement, with only minimal alterations. The first and fourth boxes present direct quotations of the final two phrases of the second movement, while the middle two boxes consist of recombined fragments from its opening section. Although the performer may begin with any box, the layout suggests a reordering of the original material, offering a fresh structural perspective even when the same musical ideas are used. The only available recording²⁹ of this work that I could locate is performed by Malaysian pianist Celestine Yoong, who was awarded “Best Interpretation of the Commissioned Piece” at the ASEAN



International Chopin Piano Competition. In her interpretation of the final movement, she further subdivides the boxed materials into smaller fragments. As shown in Figure 2.7, each box contains distinct motivic units; rather than performing them in their given order, she reorganizes these fragments freely, shaping the musical narrative according to her own interpretive vision. In

²⁹ Malaysiancomposerstv, “Dragonfly(s)- Ng Chong Lim,” performed by Celestine Yoong, YouTube video, 4:00, Oct 16, 2016, <https://youtu.be/vM8IKJGRaBk?si=11PPbYPFJfCgHT2n>.

approaching this movement, it is helpful to identify the characteristic qualities of each fragment. For example, the ascending motive may evoke a sense of stillness and mystery, while the descending staccato double notes convey a sharper, more percussive character. Once these features are internalized, constructing a coherent and evocative musical landscape becomes more intuitive. The choice of concluding gesture is also significant. In Yoong's performance, she ends the piece with an extended tremolo on a single fragment, lasting approximately thirty seconds. This decision effectively creates a sense of reverie, reinforcing the work's broader themes of imagination and memory.

A Distant Voice of the Rainforest

As mentioned earlier, Chong Lim Ng's *Rimba*, *Window*, and *Xiang*—a set of three ensemble and orchestral works—were composed around 2006. Among them, *Rimba* was written for the first phase of the MPO Composers Forum.³⁰ The title *Rimba*, a Malay word meaning “jungle” or “forest,” refers to a chamber work scored for fourteen musicians: two string quartets, flute, oboe, clarinet, piano, and two percussionists performing on a variety of instruments, including four gongs of different sizes. Intended to evoke “the earthy simplicity of the tropical rainforest,”³¹ the work adopts a semi-improvisatory approach to capture natural soundscapes, such as the murmuring of insects and the rustling of falling leaves. At the same time, it reflects a broader sense of ecological balance, where gentle and forceful elements coexist within the musical texture.

³⁰ HueyChing Chong et al., *The MPO Composers Forum and Its Impact on the Performance of Contemporary Western Classical Music by Malaysian Composers in Kuala Lumpur*, (Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009): 7.

³¹ MPO STAGE+, “MPOPlaysOn: NG CHONG LIM *Rimba*” (Video description), performed by Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, YouTube video, 7:17, May 30, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmFRNAUvSYE>.

In 2008, Ng extracted the piano material from *Rimba* and reworked it into a new solo piano composition titled *A Distant Voice of the Rainforest (Fragments from “Rimba” ...)*. The work was subsequently revised in 2012 and selected as a required piece for the ASEAN International Chopin Piano Competition. Since then, the piece has become one of Ng’s most frequently performed works. Based on my informal survey, there are at least six recordings by different pianists, along with two academic papers and a lecture-recital dedicated to the work. The piece has gained popularity for several reasons. One contributing factor is its accessibility: it is well suited for advanced-level pianists, incorporating selected extended techniques without being so technically demanding as to discourage performers. Another important factor lies in its underlying concept and expressive message. For many Malaysian pianists, the work offers an opportunity to engage with and express a sense of cultural identity, which has contributed to its widespread performance within the community.

A Distant Voice of the Rainforest is a single-movement work largely based on gamelan modes³², while there are various forms of gamelan scales, the most common—*sléndro*—is pentatonic, whereas another, *pélog*, consists of seven pitches per octave³³. It shares a conceptual similarity with the final movement of *Dragonfly(s)*; however, instead of four boxes, it consists of eleven. At the very beginning of the score, the composer includes the indication “...Atmospheric,... distant...,” two descriptors that encapsulate the essence of the piece. These words may be understood as a summary of the work, a performance directive, or an expression of the composer’s aesthetic expectations. Beneath this marking, the composer provides further

³² “Composer draws inspiration from nature- Feature article on Ng Chong Lim,” Malaysian Composers Collective, last modified June 17, 2018, <https://www.malaysiancomposers.com/2018/06/ngfeature.html>.

³³ Marc Perlman, *Unplayed Melodies: Javanese Gamelan and the Genesis of Music Theory*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2004): 40

instructions in smaller print: “This section is a ‘view’ which keeps changing, allowing the pianist to create their own music. The boxes should be played randomly without any restriction. Spontaneity and intuition play a very important role here. The sustaining pedal must be used wisely throughout the whole piece. The work should be performed continuously and last approximately 5’–8’.” With these guidelines in mind, each box may be interpreted as representing one or more elements of the rainforest. Some may evoke specific natural sounds, while others suggest broader sonic landscapes in which multiple elements coexist and interact. A detailed analytical study of the work using set theory has already been undertaken by Malaysian scholar Khe Sin Khoo.³⁴ While such theoretical analysis provides valuable insight into the structural relationships within the piece, from a performer’s perspective, associating each box with a distinct image and constructing a narrative from these musical ideas proves particularly effective. In the following section, I will focus on several boxes that stand out to me and offer my own interpretive insights into their musical and expressive qualities.

In this work, Ng frequently employs four-note motivic units as a foundational element across many of the musical fragments (or “boxes”). Figure 2.8 presents the material from Boxes 1 and 3. The whole-note pitch collections in these examples—D–E–A–G $\sharp$ and A–B–D–C $\sharp$ —illustrate two instances of this four-note construction. Although the materials in these two boxes appear similar—both beginning with comparable chordal gestures followed by a principal melodic line with related intervallic content—they produce notably different sonorities in performance. With the sustaining pedal held throughout each box, the pitches in Box 1 exhibit closer intervallic relationships, resulting in a more consonant and blended sound. The concluding

³⁴ Khe Sin Khoo, “Selected Solo Piano Works by Contemporary Malaysian Composers: An Analysis,” (DMA Dissertation, West Virginia University, 2014): 64-115.

Figure 2.8 displays two musical boxes, Box 1 and Box 3, each containing piano and bass staves with specific performance instructions.

Box 1: The piano staff begins with a *sfp* dynamic and a *Red. sempre* instruction. The bass staff features a *mf* dynamic with a green annotation "approx. 2''". The piano staff has a *ppp* dynamic with an *8ve* marking. The bass staff has a green annotation "approx. 4''" and a performance instruction: "damp the strings with fingers sfz (ring like a gong)".

Box 3: The piano staff begins with a *sfp* dynamic and a *Red. sempre* instruction. The bass staff features a *mf* dynamic with a green annotation "approx. 2''". The piano staff has a *ppp* dynamic with an *8ve* marking. The bass staff has a green annotation "approx. 7''" and a performance instruction: "(white keys only play with 2 hands)".

Figure 2.8

open fifth, executed through an extended technique, evokes the resonance of a distant gong and enhances the perception of expanded sonic space. By contrast, the ornamental figures in Box 3 introduce greater dissonance against the primary pitch set, particularly through the use of adjacent seconds surrounding C#. The concluding all white key cluster chord reinforces a stronger sense of closure, creating a more grounded and resolved sonority in comparison to the openness of Box 1.

Figure 2.9 displays Box 4, featuring piano and bass staves with complex rhythmic patterns. The piano staff begins with a *ppp* dynamic and a performance instruction: "(celesta like & irregularly)". The bass staff features a *Red. sempre* instruction. The piano staff has an *8ve* marking and a triplet of eighth notes. The bass staff has a triplet of eighth notes.

Figure 2.9

In Box 4, the performer is instructed to play irregularly in a *celesta-like manner* and irregularly. The timbre of the celesta often evokes, for me, the image of a starry night—countless points of light scattered across a dark sky—creating a sense of mystery and detachment from reality. Within this context, Box 4 demonstrates a distinctive form of “text painting,” in which the irregular organization of pitches and the intricate notation evoke the imagery of a nocturnal landscape (see Figure 2.9). In the latter half of this box, a third instance of the four-note motivic unit appears—B $\flat$ –A–E $\flat$ –F. At first glance, this passage presents a dense texture marked with accented articulations; however, these accents should not be interpreted as requiring a heavy touch. Rather, they suggest a more resonant, bell-like sonority, to be executed with a light and controlled touch.

As shown in Figure 2.10, Box 6 opens with a low B that is reiterated throughout the passage. The instruction for this repeated bass tone—marked “damp the strings with finger”—may initially be ambiguous. After surveying multiple performances of this passage, it becomes evident that there is no single prescribed approach. Some pianists adopt a more conventional method, placing the palm of the right hand on the string while playing the note with the left hand. Others strike or tap the string directly, producing a more resonant and percussive sonority, while some choose the optional approach of performing the passage without damping altogether. Given

6

distant

expressively

(3'' - 5'')

sfz

continue til the end of this group

damp the strings with fingers
(ring like a gong) option : possible to play without

sfz

Figure 2.10

the indication that the repeated Bs should “ring like a gong,” fully damping the string would seem to contradict this effect. The passage ultimately invites the performer to prioritize a particular sonic outcome. The interpretive flexibility here is central to the work’s aesthetic: regardless of the chosen approach, multiple realizations can be equally valid. Above this repeated pedal tone, various short motivic figures unfold in the higher register. These contrasting gestures may be heard as evoking natural soundscapes; for instance, they can be imagined as different birds calling across the canopy of a tropical rainforest, adding further depth to the work’s programmatic imagery.

Although brief and concise, Box 7 presents one of the more aggressive musical fragments in the work, characterized by predominantly loud dynamics (see Figure 2.11). Its large harmonic intervals and wide leaps between chords contribute not only to a sense of sonic grandeur but also

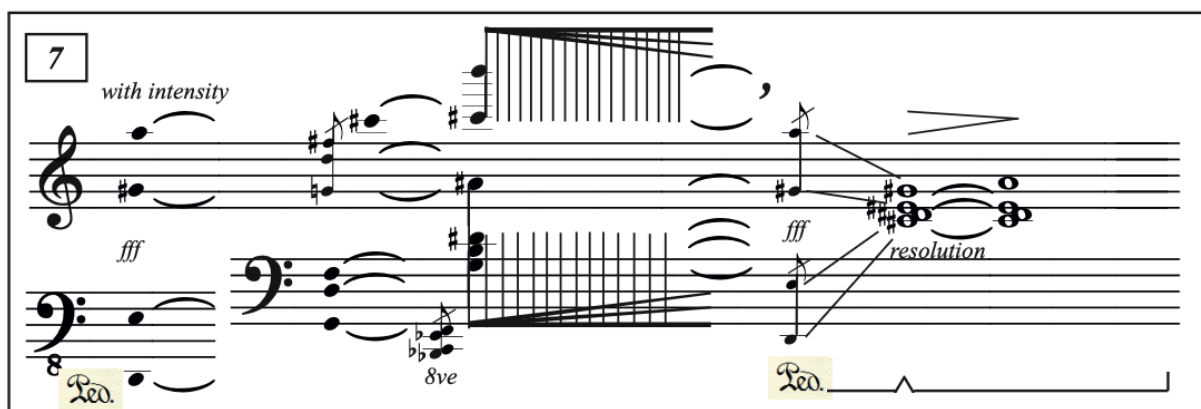


Figure 2.11

to a heightened physicality in performance. The repeated, dissonant chords—accelerating gradually—further intensify the musical momentum. This cumulative build-up of tension renders the eventual resolution at the end of the box particularly striking and hard-won.

Structured in a two-phrase design, Box 8 once again features the four-note motivic unit—D–E–G♯–A (see Figure 2.12). Marked *expressively*, the composer provides detailed guidance to shape the phrasing, as evidenced by the numerous dynamic indications, two instances of written *ritardando*, and even the inclusion of breath marks. However, the chromatic grace notes in this passage are particularly striking. These fleeting embellishments evoke an traditional folk quality and may be associated with the long-standing traditions of Malaysian vocal music, in which subtle pitch inflections and wavering tones are characteristic features.³⁵ With its lyrical expressivity and clearly articulated structure, this box functions effectively as an introductory gesture. For this reason, it—along with Box 1—often serves as a preferred starting point for performers when shaping their interpretation of the work.

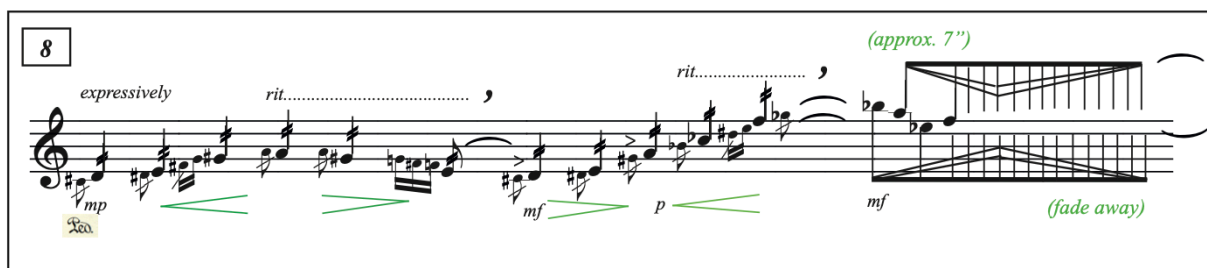


Figure 2.12

The final box of the piece, Box 11 (see Figure 2.13), is significantly longer than the others. Its structure is comparable to Box 4, beginning with a thinner texture and irregular flow before gradually building in density. However, due to its lower register, the passage loses some of the brilliance found earlier, resulting instead in a sonority that resembles the timbre of a wooden wind chime. Within this texture, the original four-note motive is clearly articulated in the interwoven lines between the hands. Performance directions—marked in green—are presented as optional suggestions, allowing the performer flexibility in interpretation. When

³⁵ Patricia Ann Matusky and Sooi Beng Tan, *The Music of Malaysia: The Classical, Folk, and Syncretic Traditions*, (England: Ashgate, 2004): 255.

followed, these indications contribute to a broad crescendo, not only in dynamics but also in tempo. The accumulated tension reaches its peak in the third system, where repeated high-register notes marked *ffff* create an intense sonic climax. Amid this heightened energy, additional motivic variants emerge in the middle voice, such as A–G#–D#–E and F#–E–A–G#. Following a dramatic low-register outburst contrasted with rapid figurations in the upper register, the fragment concludes with a return to the original four-note motive from Box 1, which gradually dissipates, fading from the musical surface. Given its length and richness, this box could stand independently as a self-contained piece. Much like the ecosystem of a rainforest, the blending and interweaving of musical elements create a vivid and multifaceted sonic landscape, which has led many performers to adopt it as the concluding section.

When I first began writing about this work, I intended to propose several possible performance orders for the piece. However, after engaging more deeply with the music and gaining a clearer understanding of the composer's intentions, I realized that doing so would undermine one of the work's central ideas: the creation of a unique, individualized musical experience. As a result, this study has shifted toward offering interpretive insights into selected musical elements, with the aim of providing performers with points of departure rather than prescriptive solutions. Ultimately, each performer is invited to construct their own sonic narrative. The improvisatory nature of the piece extends beyond what is notated on the page. Some performers incorporate additional elements into their interpretations, such as introductory soundscapes. One particularly compelling example is an interpretation by Malaysian pianist Hao Zi Yoh, who integrates singing and tapping on the piano frame, seamlessly connecting these

Footprints...

Composed and premiered by Chong Lim Ng in 2011 at the John Donald Robb Composers' Symposium in New Mexico, *Footprints* is another one of his works for solo piano. The piece began as a sketch and an improvisation during a concert in Kuala Lumpur, before being fully notated for the symposium. The piece is included in the *Free Hand Anthology I*. It consists of three movements: the first is through-composed, while the second and third adopt an aleatoric framework in which the performer determines the order of pre-composed short musical phrases. In the introduction to the work, the composer writes:

“Footprints are impermanent and transitory. Their formation, being and eventual fading mirror the fleeting memories of people who had made them. Many of these memories are reflective, serene, sorrowful or melancholic. At the same time, footprints also imply one's roots, as well as one's past, present and future paths.”

With musical elements that are even more atonal and fragmented than those in the previously discussed works, this piece invites an alternative analytical approach. I have chosen to examine each movement through graphical representations, using diagrams to illustrate and interpret the structural and expressive features of the music.

IMPORTANT NOTE:
The score for this work is spread over left and right pages, and should be read as a single page.

I. Fast and agitated

Rapidly

approx 5 *

pppp

PI (sustain)

PIII (una corda)

approx 6 *

approx 2 *

Ng Chong Lim (2011)

PI (sustain)

PIII

* (depress slowly)

C. 4 =

sf

approx 4 *

pppp

approx 3 *

mf rit

expressively

sf

approx 1 1/2 *

approx 2 *

approx 2 *

approx 2 *

quite slowly

mp

ppp

PI & III

PI & III

PI

PI & III

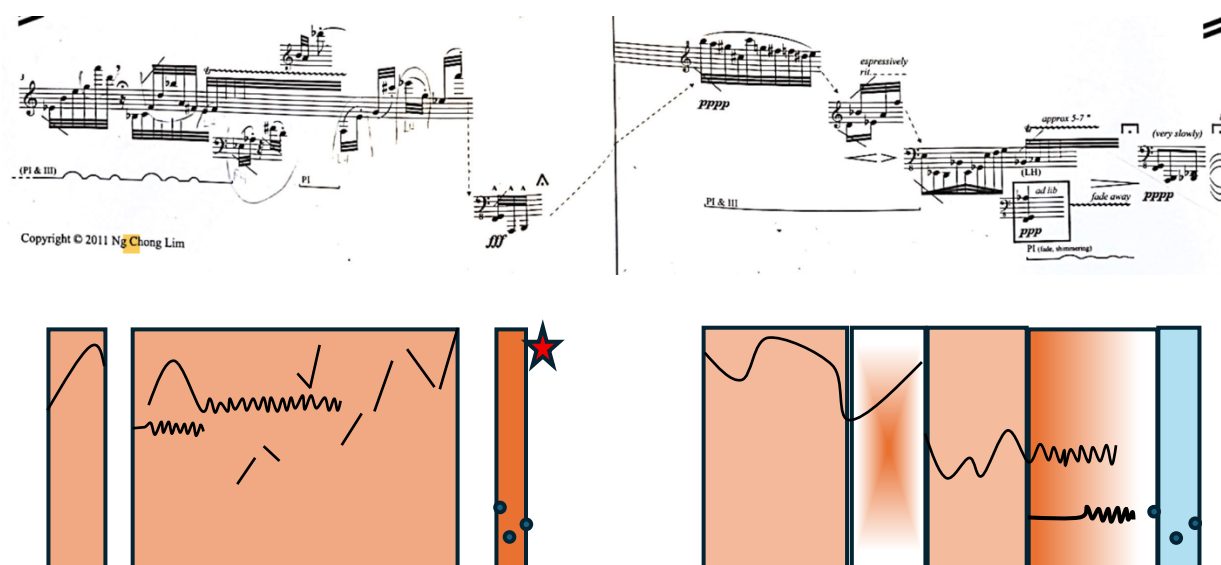


Figure 2.14

Figure 2.14 shows the three systems that make up the first movement of the piece. The diagrams below each system are drawn to correspond with the musical elements I hear, see, and interpret. The longer lines, whether curved or straight, represent the basic melodic contour, while the wavy lines indicate trills. Although most of the material is presented as a single line, the thicker lines in the graphic illustrate denser textures. Similarly, a single dot indicates an individual note, whereas an oval shape represents a chord. Regarding color, orange is used to indicate more active rhythmic motion, while blue represents slower, more expressive sections. The density of the color reflects dynamics: the denser the color, the louder the dynamic. Crescendos and decrescendos are depicted through gradient effects. Star shapes correspond to brief pauses indicated in the music; those in red suggest moments that may function as points of closure for a phrase or section. Performers may reinterpret phrasing by adjusting the duration of these pauses according to their preferences. An effective performance of this movement depends on clearly projecting contrasts in dynamics, articulation, and register, while shaping coherent phrases. Although the original notation may appear intimidating or complex, reducing the

material to a pitchless diagram reveals a clearer representation of the work's underlying structure.

The three adjectives provided by the composer for the second movement are “distant, shimmering, and reflective.” Combined with further instructions asking the performer to play “extremely slowly, reflectively, sporadically, and pointillistically,” the goal of this movement is to create a spacious sonic landscape using relatively short musical motives. The slower, more reflective middle movement also aligns with the conventional structure of a three-movement work. As shown in Figure 2.15, this movement returns to an improvisatory setting. However, unlike the previous pieces with similar approaches that we have discussed, this movement functions more like a book: there is a narrative to follow, but the performer makes choices at various points along the way. Like traffic signs, the arrows in the score indicate possible paths forward, but the performer must decide which route to take. Unlike a book, however, while all possible outcomes are presented, we never know exactly where we will end up—and that is part of the charm and beauty of this work.

The diagram I created for this movement is further simplified compared to the one above. Using only five symbols, each represents a single function, effect, or texture. In the diagram, the two red squares refer to the opening motif that begins each phrase. These two motives are almost identical, with the only difference being the addition of a B $\flat$ on the final eighth note of the second one. The circles represent passages that generate the “sporadic” aspect of the movement. These passages consist of chords with varying harmonies and rhythms, helping to establish the character and overall atmosphere. More rhythmic and linear motives are represented by triangles in the diagram. The irregular beaming of notes, as seen in the top and bottom boxes, indicates

that these notes should be played irregularly. All musical elements represented by rectangles are trills. While most are single-line trills, their interest lies in the intervals between the repeated notes, which create different colors and sonorities depending on the intervals and registers in which they are played.

84 **II. Distant, shimmering, reflectively**
(duration 2 - 3½ min)

Extremely slowly, reflectively - sporadic, poetic. From *pppp* - *ff*. Play freely and irregularly, sometimes distant and isolated.

85

More flowing and agitated

*More energetic, breathless with irregular length of the fragments from 1" to 3", from *pppp* - *ff* with ad lib cresc and decrescendos.*

The figure shows a musical score for a piece titled 'II. Distant, shimmering, reflectively' on pages 84 and 85. The score is written for piano and includes various dynamics (pppp, mf, ff, p, mp, f, sfz, sf) and performance instructions. It features trills represented by rectangles and other musical elements like trills and trills. Below the score, there are geometric shapes (circles, triangles, rectangles) and stars, likely representing the musical elements described in the text.

Figure 2.15

As mentioned earlier, one of the central ideas behind this movement is pointillism. The term refers to “a compositional technique, named after Georges Seurat’s method of painting with tiny dots of color, in which each note has a distinct quality of timbre, loudness, etc.”³⁷ In my own words, it is a compositional technique in which each small motive, chord, or note is assigned its own dynamic and/or rhythmic value, independent of the surrounding material; when combined, these elements create a unique overall effect. While not as extreme as one might expect, traces of this technique can be observed in this movement. For example, in the middle of the second box from the top (circled in Figure 2.15), although the notes are played in a single gesture, each is given an individual dynamic marking, creating additional layers of sonic detail. Overall, this movement is densely packed with diverse musical elements and requires exceptional control of sound to bring out the full range of tonal contrasts. The purpose of my diagram is to highlight the most important features of each section and to assist the performer in making interpretive decisions when shaping their path through the piece.

The final movement of the piece, described similarly to *A Distant Voice of the Rainforest* as “atmospheric” and “spacious,” is composed with a comparable concept: the composer treats each box as an individual “view,” allowing performers to create their own musical “scenery.” Although it is set up in a manner similar to the second movement, the key difference is the increased number of arrows, which connect the boxes more intricately. This movement relies heavily on intervals to create its atmosphere. The music on this page is saturated with intervals of the 2nd and 9th, both harmonically and melodically. In Figure 2.16, the red rectangles highlight chords built on the interval of a 9th. The green rectangles indicate intervals of a 2nd, including

³⁷ *The Oxford Companion to Music*, “pointillism,” accessed April 18, 2026, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037-e-5256>.

86

III. Atmospheric, spacious (duration 2½ – 5 min)

This page is a "view" that keeps changing, giving you a chance to create your own music. Play the boxes randomly without restriction [1]

Poeticistic, atmospheric

PPP - mf

Continue through the box

Poeticistic, slightly more agitated & uneven

PPP - ff

**** play boxes irregularly with more rapid movement and slight hesitation*

With widest contrast, play irregularly (see [1])

8va...

***** play boxes as rapidly as possible*

May start from any box and move in any direction.

PPP - mp

***** Repeat this (D - D, B etc) and similar small boxes through each main box. (see [2])*

+1

+2

+3

+4

+5

8va...

***** play boxes as rapidly as possible*

May end the work in any of the four boxes on this page.

86

III. Atmospheric, spacious (duration 2½ – 5 min)

This page is a "view" that keeps changing, giving you a chance to create your own music. Play the boxes randomly without restriction [1]

Poeticistic, atmospheric

PPP - mf

Continue through the box

Poeticistic, slightly more agitated & uneven

PPP - ff

**** play boxes irregularly with more rapid movement and slight hesitation*

With widest contrast, play irregularly (see [1])

8va...

***** play boxes as rapidly as possible*

May start from any box and move in any direction.

PPP - mp

***** Repeat this (D - D, B etc) and similar small boxes through each main box. (see [2])*

+1

+2

+3

+4

+5

8va...

***** play boxes as rapidly as possible*

May end the work in any of the four boxes on this page.

Figure 2.16

in three different sections of the music. Another important idea behind this movement is the creation of a sense of stillness through the D–D, E $\flat$ ostinato. This ostinato is marked by the yellow boxes and is distributed fairly evenly throughout the movement.

Apart from the box in the top right, the texture remains consistent throughout the piece, dominated by a predominantly chordal style. This is paired with a more even distribution of registers, with musical material spread across both clefs, creating a balanced layering of low, middle, and high voices. The interweaving of these voices produces a spacious texture, while the constant shifts in intervals result in changing colors—reminiscent of looking into a kaleidoscope. The top-right box is structured somewhat differently from the rest of the piece. In this section, the D–D, E $\flat$ ostinato is extended indefinitely. While the right hand repeats the ostinato with varying dynamic shaping, the left hand plays five groups of motives in a random order. Due to the continuous presence of the ostinato, this section feels more restless compared to the more spacious character of the other boxes. When placed effectively—as in Ng’s own interpretation of the piece,³⁸ where this box appears roughly in the middle of the movement—a loose three-part structure can be perceived. With the final instruction to end the movement in any of the four boxes at the bottom of the page, there is no single “correct” solution. Instead, performers are given the freedom to explore multiple possibilities and ultimately discover the sonorities that best conclude a piece that guides us through an exploration of past, present, and future. This journey unfolds not only on a spiritual level, but also in a tangible way, as performers linger on past choices, listen to the sounds they are currently producing, and anticipate what comes next.

³⁸ Malaysiancomposerstv, “Footprints...(2011)- Ng Chong Lim,” performed by Chong Lim Ng, YouTube video, 6:33, February 1, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77slTXOx2aA&list=RD77slTXOx2aA&start_radio=1.

Today, Chong Lim Ng continues to be an active part of Malaysia's classical music scene. He teaches and gives masterclasses to students across the country while maintaining a busy performance schedule, presenting both solo and collaborative recitals throughout the year. At the most recent Free Hand Festival—the fourth in the series—his role shifted from participant to jury member. Although he views composing as a secondary pursuit, he looks forward to writing a piece for piano and orchestra, as well as a set of works for children. Beyond his musical career, Ng is also actively involved with PA Nepal, an organization dedicated to rescuing, rehabilitating, and reintegrating incarcerated children into society. He makes annual trips to Nepal to support this work.

Chapter IV: DEEP IN THE CITY

Jun Yi Chow

JunYi Chow is an award-winning composer and leader in developing traditional Asian music as a musical language of the world, whose music The Financial Times has described as having "skillful contrasts in both volume and texture."

Chow is composer in residence with Singapore's TENG Ensemble. His music with TENG combines traditional Chinese, Malay, and Indian instruments and musical elements, enhanced with electronic sounds. As an active researcher of music for Chinese Orchestra, he is co-author of "The TENG Guide to the Chinese Orchestra", the most substantial English-language book on Chinese instruments, and an authoritative source for composers, scholars and enthusiasts.

A native of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, he received his B.A. at the Central Conservatory of Music in China and M.M. at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Chow is now pursuing PhD in Music (Music Composition) at University of Hawaii since Fall of 2021. Besides his role as a composer, Chow is also a pianist and cellist, exploring not only the classical repertoire but also engaging in free improvisation.³⁹

As a composer, Chow's works have received numerous international awards, including second prize at the Taipei Chinese Orchestra International Composition Competition and first prize at the Singapore International Competition for Chinese Chamber Music Composition. In 2013, he was selected as a finalist for the ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer Award in the United States. In 2016, his *Guanzi and Orchestra* was selected for performance at the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra International Composers' Summit during the Hong Kong Arts Festival.

³⁹ This biography was provided by the composer.

A year later, his work *Kampung and the City* won Best Orchestral Work at the International Composition Competition held as part of the Hong Kong Arts Festival.

It is evident that Chow's current compositional focus lies primarily in music for Chinese orchestra and related ensembles based on his professional experience and awards he has received over the years. However, he has also written extensively for the piano. Having begun piano and cello studies at a young age, these two instruments have remained central to his musical life. Chow has composed seven works for solo piano to date, in addition to a four-hand arrangement of one of these pieces. His earliest piano work was written in 2007, when he was twenty years old, and his most recent piano composition was completed in 2025 as a commission from pianist Angela Kim. Many of his piano works feature imaginative titles, such as *The Wolf in Sheepskin* and *It Rained! The Ants Ran....* These pieces are short character works designed to evoke the scenes suggested by their titles. Some of his earlier piano compositions, including *Autumn in Yushan* and *Flight of the Imagination*, have yet to be performed. His compositional style is influenced by a wide range of composers, including Claude Debussy, Béla Bartók, John Adams, Astor Piazzolla, Joe Hisaishi, and Ryuichi Sakamoto.

Although still relatively early in his compositional career, Chow's works have already been performed across three continents. He has also led successful workshops that attracted over 200 composers worldwide, focusing on composition for traditional instruments from East and South Asia, supported by an Asian Cultural Council grant he received in 2021.

Three Short Malay Pieces

Before delving into Chow's *Deep in the City*, it is important for us to take a brief detour to examine another set of piano works by him to explore his artistic style and development through his earlier music. Completed in 2012, *Three Short Malay Pieces* is one of Chow's major

works for solo piano, written while he was pursuing his master's degree in composition at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Each movement is based on a different Malay folk tune—melodies that are very familiar to most Malaysians. Although these folk tunes are originally “simple, tuneful, and lyrical,”⁴⁰ Chow reimagines them by applying a range of compositional techniques, offering a fresh and contemporary perspective.

The first piece is titled *Ikan Kekek*, translated as “pony fish.” The original lyrics describe fish in a literal sense, with a hidden message at the end that is open to interpretation—a common characteristic of Malaysian folk songs. When examining the folk tune in its basic form, the melody is constructed from only four pitches: C, F, A, and G (see Figure 3.1). In Chow's adaptation, the opening retains a simple pitch structure and melodic contour. (see Figure 3.2).

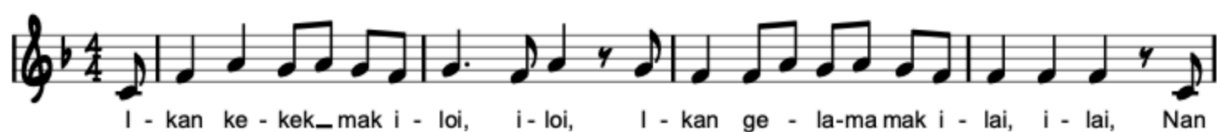


Figure 3.1

Rather than notating the melody with dotted rhythms and pickup notes, Chow reimagines it

Chow Jun Yi

Animato ♩.=120

Figure 3.2

through a constant alternation between compound and simple meters. Combined with long pedal markings for each phrase, this approach produces a bell-like, fanfare effect at the opening. After four phrases of similar texture—matching the number of phrases in the original song—the music

⁴⁰ JunYi Chow, preface to *Three Malay Pieces* (Unpublished, 2012).

then takes a sudden turn into contrasting material. With the instruction to play all eighth notes detached, the music turns into a dialogue between the two hands. Each hand introduces a motive built from different pitch groups (right hand: F $\sharp$ –E–A–B–C $\sharp$; left hand: A–E–F $\sharp$ –B), with additional pitches gradually added to the left hand as the section progresses. In this passage, the meter shifts to 8/8, with rhythms grouped into irregular patterns such as 3+3+2 and 7+3+3+2+6⁴¹ (see Figure 3.3). This irregular rhythmic grouping, combined with the repeated pitch collections (though not strictly pentatonic), creates a gamelan-inflected soundscape. The piece concludes with an added-ninth chord built on D, following several measures of intensified tempo and dynamics.



Figure 3.3

⁴¹ In 8th notes.

The second piece in the set draws on the folk song *Burung Kakak Tua*, which translates to “cockatoo,” a species of parrot. In the original lyrics, the aging parrot is compared to a grandmother, expressing an awareness of the passage of time in the form of a children’s nursery rhyme (see Figure 3.4 for the first two phrases of the original folk song melody). In Chow’s



Figure 3.4

adaptation, the piece opens with a two-measure ostinato figure in the bass, accompanied by a three-measure repeating pattern in the middle voice that eventually leads to the off-beat entrance of the melody (see Figure 3.5). Set in a slow 6/8 meter, this opening evokes the character of a barcarolle, imbued with melancholy and nostalgic sentiment that aligns closely with the expressive content of the original folk song. At measure 23, the left-hand accompaniment shifts



Figure 3.5

to a more active, flowing pattern, while the bass ostinato remains clearly present. With the melody now entering on the downbeat, the music conveys the impression that memories have moved closer to the surface. An arpeggiated rubato section interrupts the otherwise continuous motion, creating a sense of searching—an open-ended exploration whose meaning is left to interpretation. The piece concludes with an unresolved closure that leads back to the opening

ostinato figures, this time without the familiar melody (see Figure 3.6). Only fragments of pitches from a C major chord remain, guiding the music toward a quiet, open-ended conclusion.



Figure 3.6

The final piece in the set is based on the Malay folk song *Rasa Sayang*, which directly translates to “feeling love.” If there were a billboard chart for Malay folk songs, *Rasa Sayang* would undoubtedly remain at the top year-round—such is its importance and universality among Malaysians. A joyful song celebrating love, deep affection, and care, the original version consists of two distinct sections. The opening verse (see Figure 3.7) functions as a recurring refrain with fixed lyrics, while the subsequent verses are strophic, each presenting different text set to the same syllabic structure and melodic framework. Chow’s version of *Rasa Sayang* opens with a



Figure 3.7

striking exploration of rhythm, employing five different time signatures within the span of eight measures (see Figure 3.8). This introduction also contains the most atonal passage of the entire set, with harmonies that resist clear tonal identification. The principal theme of the folk song finally appears in measure 9. Chow elevates the lighthearted character of the original song



Figure 3.8

through his continued rhythmic experimentation. As he notes in his introduction to the piece, his intention was to create a dance-like, festive atmosphere in this section. Although the strophic portion of the original folk song is not directly presented, the adaptation still features a contrasting middle section. A clear change in texture delineates the formal division, shifting from a chordal texture to a more animated passage dominated by wide leaps (see Figure 3.9). Even though this middle section remains in a single time signature, rhythmic play continues through varied groupings of notes and fluid alternation between triplets and quintuplets. Cast in ternary form, the festive opening section returns at the end, and the piece concludes on an energetic high point, with the final harmony echoing the opening sonority.

Three Short Malay Pieces provides an excellent introduction to JunYi Chow's compositional voice. He demonstrates a remarkable ability to capture the essence of each original folk song. Through the application of varied compositional techniques, he highlights the



Figure 3.9

innocence of *Ikan Kekek*, the poignancy of *Burung Kakak Tua*, and the cheerfulness and vitality of *Rasa Sayang*. As a composer, his harmonic language is generally tonal, while his command of complex rhythmic writing stands out as one of his greatest strengths.

Deep in the City

You said: "I'll go to another country, go to another shore,
find another city better than this one.
Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong
and my heart lies buried like something dead.
How long can I let my mind moulder in this place?
Wherever I turn, wherever I look,
I see the black ruins of my life, here,
where I've spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally."

You won't find a new country, won't find another shore.
This city will always pursue you.
You'll walk the same streets, grow old
in the same neighborhoods, turn gray in these same houses.
You'll always end up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere:
there's no ship for you, there's no road.
Now that you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,
you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.⁴²

- C. P. Cavafy

In my view, the poem "*The City*" by the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy perfectly captures the atmosphere of the opening section of *Deep in the City*. Written in 1894, although the

⁴² Constantine P. Cavafy, "The City," in *Selected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton University Press, 1972): 12.

poet did not experience the modern urban landscape of towering skyscrapers and densely populated cities, his sense of entrapment within a confined space resonates deeply with the experiences of many contemporary city dwellers. Composed in 2017 and later revised in 2019, Chow's work was written during his time working as a freelancer in New York. Composed during a period of loneliness, the piece also draws inspiration from the defining characteristics of metropolitan life—its relentless energy, seemingly endless skyscrapers, and diverse, complex environment.

Originally titled *Rhapsody*, Chow later changed the title to *Deep in the City* during his revision of the work in preparation for the *Free Hand Festival*. The piece was subsequently premiered at the festival by the London-based Malaysian pianist Mei Yi Foo. Her performance, available on the festival's website, remains the only existing recording of the work. To date, the piece has not been discussed in any known scholarly publication, which further underscores the significance of this document. Understanding the composer's circumstances and mindset at the time of composition, the revised title appears particularly fitting. As someone who also grew up in a major metropolitan city, upon first reading the title and listening to the recording, I felt an immediate connection to the music from the opening measures. In the preface to the score, Chow provides brief remarks about the piece, which I will reinterpret and expand upon in the following analysis. The piece consists of two contrasting sections: a rhapsodic section and a fantasia section, with the former serving as the fast section and the latter as the slow. This contrast is clearly evident on the score, even without listening to the music.

Without any introduction, an outburst of a fast yet steady bass line marks the beginning of the piece (see Figure 3.10). Rising like a roar from deep underground, echoing a panicked

A Presto ♩=176
no legato, but not too detached

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system is marked 'fff' and '8vb'. The second system is marked 'dim.' and '(8)'. The music is in 3/4 time and features a series of second intervals.

Figure 3.10

heartbeat, and charged with anger at life's injustices, these nine measures immediately establish the seriousness of the first part of the work. I imagine the music describing the footsteps of emotionless city dwellers shuttling between countless skyscrapers. As seen in the score, the melodic material is constructed largely from various types of second intervals—major seconds, minor seconds, and augmented unisons—which contribute to the music's footstep-like quality. Marked “no legato, but not too detached” and indicated at *fff*, the articulation calls for a controlled yet percussive touch, reminiscent of passages in the piano writing of Béla Bartók and Sergei Prokofiev. The composer also embeds a subtle hidden message in the opening section. Examining the first six notes—G, A, E, E $\flat$, B $\flat$, and A—we can derive a coded reference. Converting E, E $\flat$, and B $\flat$ into solfège yields *Mi*, *Me* (with emphasis on the “M” from *Mi* and the “e” from *Me*), and *Li* (since B $\flat$ is the enharmonic equivalent of A $\sharp$). By appending an “N” at the end, the word *gamelan* is spelled out. This hidden code appears to be Chow's playful response to

the question, “Who am I?”, subtly embedding an element of cultural identity within the musical fabric of the work.⁴³

After a drastic decrescendo, the music arrives at letter B, where a “dance-like main theme” in 7/8 time is introduced. This section marks the official beginning of the first of five sub-sections within the larger rhapsodic section. The opening running bass-line motive does not disappear; instead, it remains active in the left-hand while the right hand presents the new theme (see Figure 3.11). In addition to its unusual time signature, this theme stands out for its intricate,



Figure 3.11

toccata-like articulation and its prominent use of diminished harmonies. In most measures of section B, three different articulations—staccato, tenuto, and accent—are indicated simultaneously, even before considering the non-legato touch required in the left hand. Although it may not immediately sound overtly virtuosic, this passage is technically demanding, particularly for a performer who aims to observe all of the composer’s detailed markings. While the rhythm and articulation lend the theme a dance-like character, it is unmistakably a dark and unsettling dance. Diminished sonorities permeate the melody, alternating between half-diminished and fully diminished chords, intensifying the section’s ominous atmosphere. The anticipated resolution, however, does not materialize. Instead, through the intensifying buildup of consecutively sounding C half-diminished chords, the composer propels the music into the second variation of the theme (see Figure 3.12).

⁴³ Pointed out by composer.

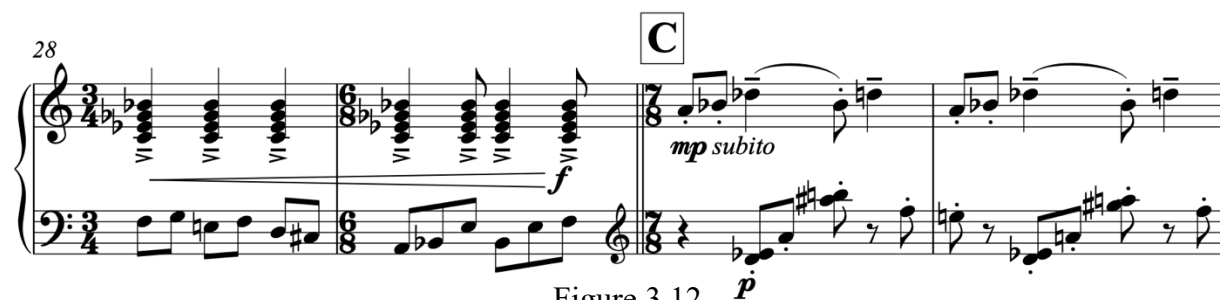


Figure 3.12

The music now arrives at letter C, where the dynamic suddenly drops from *forte* to *mezzo piano*. Two additional musical elements undergo abrupt changes as well: the texture of the melodic line shifts noticeably, and the bass-line motive disappears entirely. In this new variation of the theme, the previously chordal texture—responsible for projecting the diminished harmonies—is reduced to a single upper voice in the melody. This thinner texture persists throughout most of the variation, creating a striking contrast with the density of the preceding section. As for the left-hand material, the intense, consecutive eighth-note motive is replaced by leaping, lighter figurations, now frequently situated in the treble register. Although the texture has changed drastically, a closer examination reveals that the underlying material remains related to what came before. Intervals of the second and chromatic motion continue to form the structural basis of the left-hand writing. With the left hand constantly shifting across registers, the music takes on a more playful character—what the composer describes as “a light and naïve manner.” The palm-smashing gesture in the left hand in measure 42 reveals the composer’s intention to explore unconventional approaches to the instrument (see Figure 3.13). In a manner



Figure 3.13

similar to the transition from the first to the second variation—yet now intensified by the introduction of octave staccatos in the left hand, foreshadowing what is to come—the music proceeds into letter D, marking the third variation of the initial dance-like theme.



Figure 3.14

Aiming to create what he describes as a “symphonic soundscape,” the composer transfers the main theme to the lower register, where it is projected by the left hand in continuous octave figures. The right hand, cast in octaves (with added fifths later in the section), presents a countermelody in the upper register. Through the sharp contrast of high and low registers, as well as the interplay between familiarity (the recognizable theme) and strangeness (the countermelody), the music reaches its most agitated and dissonant point thus far in measure 59 (see Figure 3.14). One may also observe that many of the earlier articulation markings are omitted in this section, likely due to the already formidable technical demands of the octave writing. Although Chow reshapes the theme in three highly distinctive ways, he preserves the exact number of measures in each variation (excluding transitional passages), thereby maintaining structural consistency amid contrasts in texture and characters between the variations. I relate this compositional approach to the architecture of tall buildings in a large city: while their exteriors may appear strikingly different, their internal structures often remain fundamentally the same.

After the conclusion of the third variation of the dance-like theme, the opening bass-line motive briefly reappears, now functioning as a transitional passage that leads into the second sub-section of the larger rhapsodic section. This new section, marked letter E, bears the instruction *Marcato*. It begins with a series of cluster chords, marked with staccato, accent with a dynamic marking of *fff*. The music has been highly active up to this point—like a wild horse running without pause. These forceful cluster chords act almost like an invisible hand, abruptly restraining and redirecting the music’s momentum. Amid these percussive sonorities, a new melodic motive emerges. This horn-call-like figure is generally brief and constructed from repeated notes. With its introduction, the texture becomes an interlocking dialogue between the sharply articulated chords and the new motive (see Figure 3.15). At times, the original bass-line motive can still be heard rumbling in the distance, as if echoing from afar. This section evokes



Figure 3.15

elements of musical primitivism, particularly reminiscent of Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. The percussive rhythms, sharply articulated cluster chords, and overwhelming sense of raw energy all contribute to a sound world characterized by rhythmic drive and visceral intensity.

At letter F, the music moves into the development section of this second sub-section. The initial horn-call motive is extended and transformed into a call and response gesture with the bass line. The bass line is marked staccato with tenuto, suggesting a non-legato articulation that is not overly detached. This nuanced articulation creates a slightly emphasized and weighty effect in the lower register. Chow continues to explore the contrast between high and low

registers in this section. The call and response texture resembles a conversation in which one voice (the higher register) attempts to elaborate or explain, while the other (the lower register) responds tersely and repetitively. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the upper line occasionally expands beyond its original one-measure length, whereas the bass line remains consistently short and concise. At measure 115, the extended horn-call motive appears in inversion, now presented in the left hand. Figure 3.16 provides a direct comparison: the original phrase appears on the left, and its inversion is shown on the right. It is interesting to note that once the motive is transferred to the bass line, the previously consistent bass-line response is

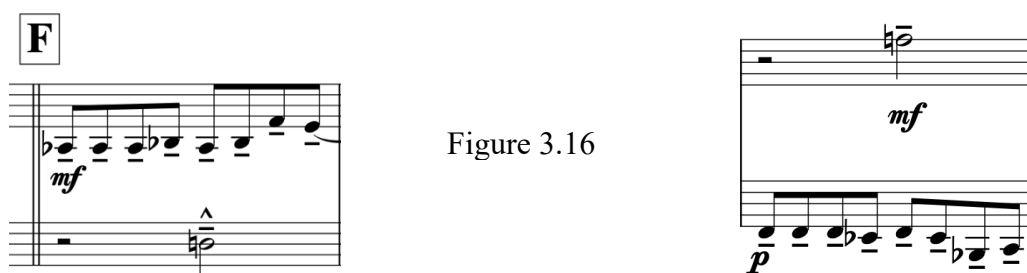


Figure 3.16

omitted. This interruption halts the ongoing “conversation” and is further emphasized by a change in texture and a sudden withdrawal in measure 128. Just as one might assume this marks the conclusion of the sub-section, the music reemerges from the silence—like a flare rising from the ashes—and gradually gains momentum and activity, ultimately driving toward letter G.

Letter G opens with two measures of an ostinato figure, setting the stage for the return of a familiar motive, now tinged with a sense of dark humor. The ostinato, which persists throughout the entire section, is constructed in two textural layers and grounded by a minor-second interval in the bass—a clear callback to the opening of the piece. The consistent staccato articulation and the contour of the upper layer recall the left-hand staccato bass figures frequently heard in the fourth movement of Sergei Prokofiev’s Piano Sonata No. 2 in D Minor, Op. 14 (see Figure 3.17). Even more than in Prokofiev’s writing, however, maintaining this ostinato evenly



Figure 3.17



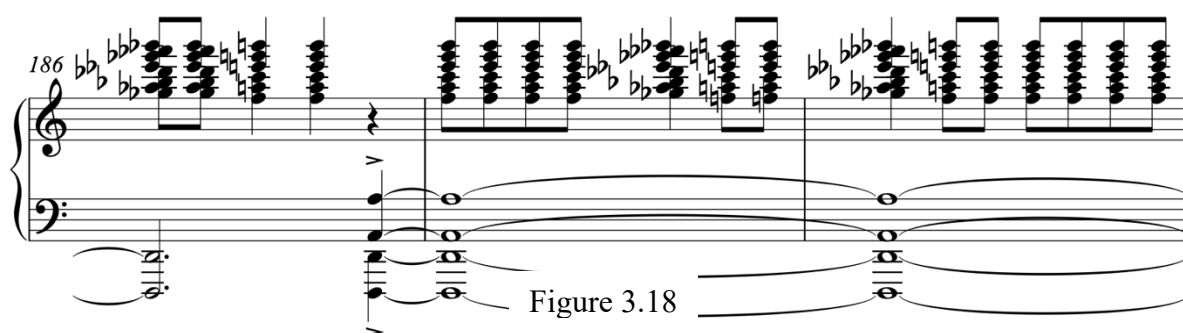
in a soft dynamic presents a particular technical and interpretive challenge. The melodic fragment that first appears in measure 145 is strikingly concise: two groups of two slurred eighth notes separated by a quarter rest (see Figure 3.17). At this point in the work, it is fair to observe that the use of such compact melodic gestures is one of Chow's compositional hallmarks. Throughout the piece, he consistently constructs longer phrases from short musical cells—often two- or three-note slurred figures. The four principal pitches that initiate this section—A, D $\flat$, C, and G—can be understood as two pairs of descending seconds (A–G and D $\flat$ –C). Yet when arranged in this particular order, they produce a sonority marked by ambiguity and darkness. Several measures into the section, the horn-call motive emerges from this shadowed texture. Although it appears in a much higher register than the surrounding material, it has lost the brilliance it possessed at letter E. Instead, it resembles a beam of light attempting to pierce the night—faltering each time, yet persistently striving forward.

Without any of the traditional transitional devices—such as a *ritardando*, cadential emphasis, or dynamic reduction—the music abruptly enters the third sub-section of the rhapsodic section at letter H. This is the shortest of the five sub-sections and is labeled A' by the composer in the preface, functioning as a recapitulation of the dance-like principal theme. The main theme reenters while the left-hand pattern continues unchanged. Although the pitch content differs, the seamless continuity of texture makes the sectional arrival somewhat understated; it takes a

moment to recognize that a new section has begun. The three-measure theme is presented three times within this passage: first in single notes, then in double thirds, and finally in the upper register. As the section progresses, increasing rhythmic activity and chromatic intensity propel the music forward, leading directly into letter I.

Letter I functions as a transitional passage leading to the fourth sub-section. Here, Chow depicts what he describes as “a drum-like loud banging, just like a sudden thunderstorm.”

Marked *marcato*, the passage features a sustained pedal tone in the bass, while the upper register hammers out groups of notes in a simple rhythmic pattern (see Figure 3.18). The two principal



chord in a simple rhythmic pattern. Although this gesture recalls the earlier drum-like motive, its texture is now significantly reduced, creating a sense of naïve and simplicity.

In conversation, Chow shared that he was inspired by the *shigu* (獅鼓), a traditional Chinese drum made with a wooden body and a cowhide drumhead. The *shigu* is one of the principal instruments used in lion dance, a prominent form of Chinese performing art symbolizing harmony, peace, and prosperity, and one that is especially popular in Malaysia.⁴⁴ Some scholars suggest that for Malaysian Chinese communities—who constitute a minority group within Malaysia—cultural displays such as lion dance function as a form of identity assertion. In this context, these practices may carry a particular resonance, potentially holding even greater significance for the diaspora community than for those in mainland China today.⁴⁵ It is important to remember that this work was composed during a period of loneliness, when the composer was attempting to establish himself in a city far from home. Within this context, the incorporation of elements associated with lion dance conveys not only a sense of cultural identity but also a profound feeling of nostalgia. In measure 201, the repeated two-note chord briefly shifts to a different pitch group for one beat before returning to its original form (see Figure 3.19). This change—from a grouping of black keys to white keys—recalls the earlier contrast introduced in the previous section. One distinctive characteristic of the *shigu* is that, in addition



Figure 3.19

⁴⁴ Patricia Ann Matusky and Sooi Beng Tan, *The Music of Malaysia: The Classical, Folk, and Syncretic Traditions*, (England: Ashgate, 2004): 152.

⁴⁵ Loo Fung Ying, and Loo Fung Chiat, “Dramatizing Malaysia in Contemporary Chinese Lion Dance,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 134.

to striking the drumhead, performers frequently strike the side of the drum to produce contrasting timbres. I interpret this brief alteration of pitch content as an imitation of that change in sonority, mirroring the varied timbral effects of the drum.

In measure 202 (see Figure 3.19), a fragment of a new musical idea appears that will later develop into the principal melodic motive of this fourth sub-section. Although not an exact quotation, this motive is derived from the Chinese folk song *Feng Yang Flower Drum* (凤阳花鼓). The song was included in the elementary school music textbook I used as a child, and I still recall performing it for a recorder examination. Figure 3.20 presents two measures excerpted from the opening phrase of the original folk song. The melodic contour and rhythmic pattern of

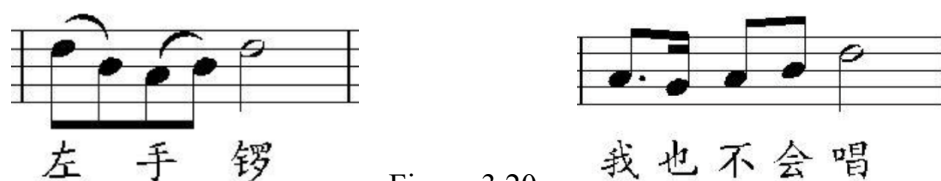


Figure 3.20

the latter measure, in particular, demonstrate clear influence on Chow's writing. In the preface to the work, Chow also notes that the "theme imitates the accent of Chinese *luo gu jing* (锣鼓经)."

Luo gu jing is a specialized onomatopoeic notation system used in Chinese folk percussion traditions for both instruction and performance.⁴⁶ In this system, specific Chinese characters represent individual percussion instruments or groups of instruments. By vocalizing these characters, performers can efficiently coordinate rhythmic patterns and playing order, enabling an ensemble of percussionists to execute complex passages with precision while also serving as a vital means of transmitting knowledge to the next generation within this tradition. One can

⁴⁶ Jonathan D Fox, "Chinese Percussion Instruction through the Lens of Western Pedagogy," (PhD Dissertation, The University of Maine, 2021): 182.

imagine the dominant dotted rhythm being vocalized together with the distinctive melodic contour that falls and rises, particularly as it alternates between shorter and longer motivic units in a cyclical manner, resembling the patterns of an actual drum rhythm. In the middle of letter J, the two motives in this section undergo a brief modulation: the drum-like motive shifts up by a whole step, while the starting pitch of the folk-song-derived motive moves down by a whole step.

Although the music remains within the fourth sub-section at letter K, the drum-like motive in the right hand from the previous section is discontinued, leaving only the folk-song-derived motive. In this passage, the phrase unfolds in a clear 4 + 4 + 10 phrase structure. The previously concise motive expands into a dialogue between the two hands, shifting registers every two beats (see Figure 3.21). In an effort to build tension, the first two phrases begin with



Figure 3.21

strong dynamic energy but suddenly drop in the final measure before quickly rising again within the same measure. The opening of the third and longer phrase begins in a similar manner; however, instead of the abrupt dynamic dip heard earlier, Chow skillfully exploits the inherent forward-driving quality of the dotted rhythm. This effect is further intensified by the addition of ascending chromatic double notes, which heighten the sense of momentum. The passage reaches its climactic point in measure 247, where the accumulated tension begins to release through a descending chromatic sequence, ultimately leading into the next section.

Letter L marks the fifth and final sub-section within the rhapsodic section of the piece. The composer describes this passage as “a rather impressionistic and flowing section.” A general overview reveals a continuous stream of triplet eighth notes in the right hand, while the left hand presents shifting chords that change nearly every measure. The term *impressionism* in music was clearly defined by the English musicologist Edward Joseph Dent, who described it as:

“Music intended to convey some suggestion of a landscape, or of a picture in which colour is more important than outline, the melodic line in such cases being ill-defined and fragmentary, while subsidiary figures of accompaniment are much developed, often in rapid movement, the object of which is to produce a general effect of timbre rather than a clearly intelligible succession of notes. Similar effects are also obtained by slow harmonies based on chords which an older generation would have regarded as discords, but which the present day regards as agreeable consonances.”⁴⁷

This description aptly characterizes the musical texture of this section, where no clearly defined melodic line emerges. Although the right hand is highly active, its continuous motion functions more as a means of shaping atmosphere and color rather than presenting a distinct melody. Upon closer examination, the opening two groups of triplets reveal the exact same pitch content as the running-bass motive that begins the piece (see Figure 3.22). Meanwhile, the left-hand chords introduce subtle harmonic shifts—what might be described as changes in musical “color”—yet they also do not form an independent melodic line. While the music up to this point cannot be considered atonal—since the harmonic motion still suggests certain tonal centers despite frequent dissonances—it remains difficult to identify specific harmonic structures with

⁴⁷ Edward J. Dent, “impressionism,” in *A Dictionary of Modern Music and Musicians*, edited by A. Eaglefield Hull (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1924): 248.

precision. It is only in this section that the left-hand chords begin to clarify the harmonic language that Chow appears to be exploring.

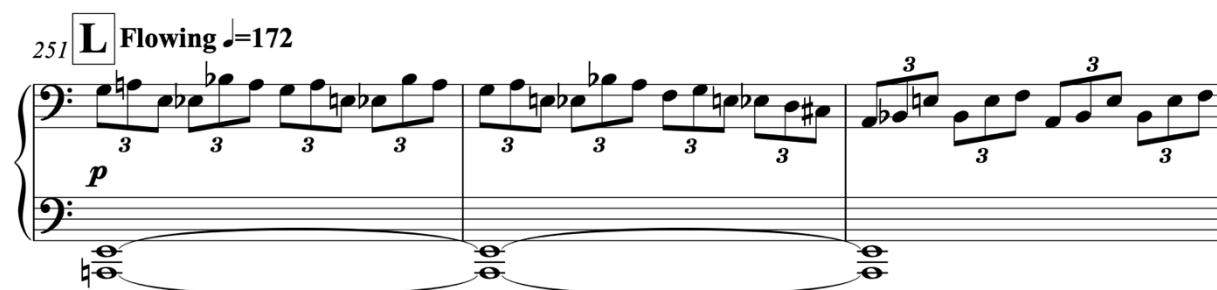


Figure 3.22

Although this entire section explores transformations of harmonic color, several transitional moments stand out. The first occurs in measure 259. In the preceding measures, the texture is highly chromatic, with the left hand outlining two-note sonorities a fifth apart, making it difficult to identify specific harmonic structures. Measure 259 marks the first appearance of a clearly defined full chord in the left hand (see Figure 3.23). Although the B minor seventh chord in third inversion is inherently unstable, the relatively consistent pitch content in the right hand helps support and stabilize the harmony. The resulting change of color is striking—like a boat at sea finally finding a brief moment of



Figure 3.23

steadiness after sailing through a prolonged storm. Another notable shift occurs in measure 269, where the introduction of pentatonic-like harmonies briefly brightens the sonority (see Figure 3.24). However, only a few measures later, the color darkens again as the running passage returns to a more chromatic language. Around the same point, with some of the upper notes of the rolled chords in the left-hand marked *tenuto*, a faint melodic line begins to emerge in the middle voice (highlighted in example below). Beginning in measure 273, this line ascends gradually and reaches its peak six measures later with a leap of a minor seventh. The section concludes with a plagal-like cadence, moving from G minor seventh to D minor. With a broad

ritardando, the music arrives at the fantasia, where D minor appears to function as the primary tonal center.

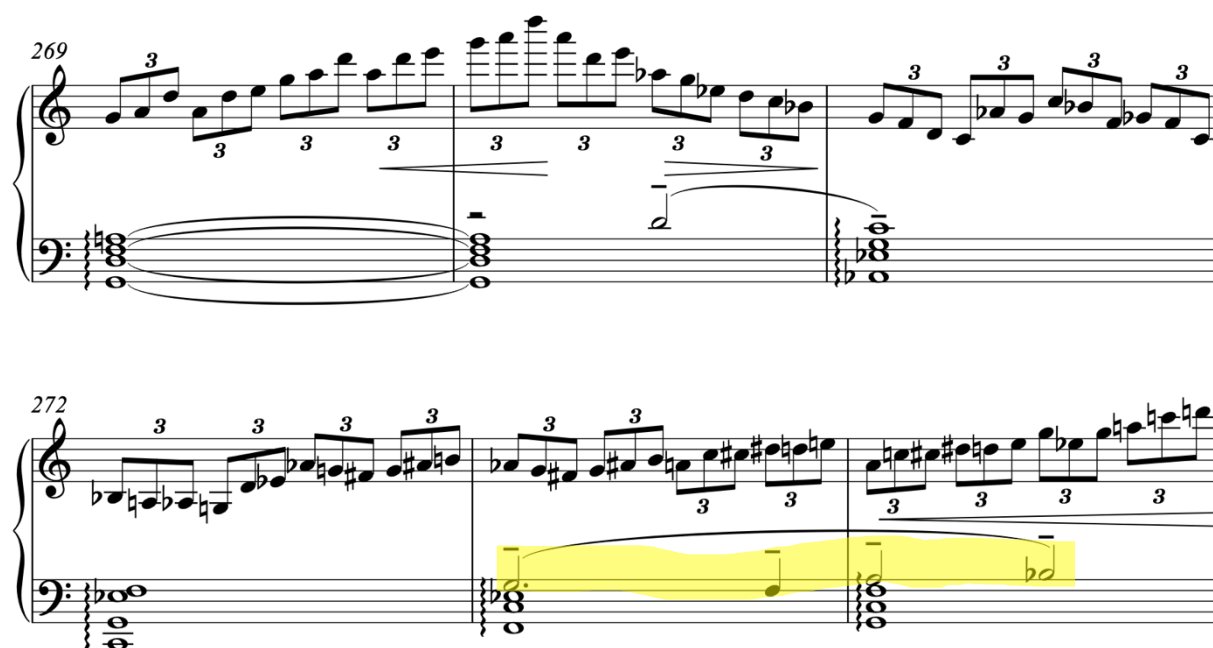


Figure 3.24

The depressive and gloomy atmosphere of the rhapsodic section dissipates immediately upon entering the fantasia. If the preceding music evokes the image of a person confined within the city, gazing upward at towering buildings day after day, the fantasia instead suggests a sense of freedom—like soaring above the city skyline. From this vantage point, while enjoying the expansive view below, one may also experience a subtle sense of bittersweet reflection. The stark contrast in mood between these two sections can be attributed primarily to differences in tempo and harmony. Although the texture continues to feature continuous eighth-note motion, letter M—the beginning of the fantasia—is marked at a tempo of quarter note = 48, nearly three times slower than the slowest tempo in the rhapsodic section. This slower tempo setting is maintained throughout the entire fantasia. Harmonically, while it remains difficult to identify every specific chord employed, the overall soundscape is noticeably more consonant and stable compared to the preceding passage.

Letter M presents a serene texture characterized by a stable left hand, where sustained tones serve as the primary material. When movement occurs, it generally proceeds through stepwise or closely related motion. Above this foundation, two distinct layers of material unfold in the right hand. The first consists of an eighth-note figure that eventually develops into an ostinato later in the piece. Chow described this continuously ringing figure as resembling “never-ending wind chimes.” The uppermost layer contains the material with the most melodic function in this section. These top-voice gestures typically enter on offbeats and appear in several forms: rolled chords that unfold in two directions (either ascending or descending), widely spaced two-note rolled chords, and single-note tremolos. Together, these gestures provide a sense of lightness and forward motion within the texture. In particular, the tremolo—indicated to be played freely, as shown in Figure 3.25—introduces a refreshing sense of spontaneity amid the otherwise steady rhythmic patterns of the section.

(tremolo by alternating fingering, rhythm can be free)

R.H. *pp*

L.H. *p*

* Ped.

Figure 3.25

With another subtle modulation accompanied by a *poco ritardando*, the music arrives at the final section of the piece. Serving as the concluding passage of this expansive work, the section conveys a strong sense of reflection and release. The left-hand material is relatively simple. Aside from a few chords near the very end, it is primarily built upon sustained pedal tones in the bass, accompanied by a three-eighth-note figure in the upper layer that enters on the

offbeats of beats one and three (see Figure 3.26). Only two pedal tones are used throughout this passage—A $\flat$ and G. In the accompanying three-note figure, the first pitch changes according to the bass (a perfect fifth above it), while the remaining two pitches remain constant, forming a descending second from G to F. Derived from the earlier “continuously ringing wind chimes” figure, this ostinato provides a stable grounding that allows the right hand the freedom to explore a variety of expressive motives. The first half of the

melody is shaped by frequent pentatonic harmonies, which evoke a sense of timelessness and nostalgia. With the reappearance of the horn-call motive first heard at letter E—now recalled twice—the music suggests a reflective moment in which the protagonist looks back on earlier



Figure 3.26

memories, perhaps recalling the time when he first devoted himself to building a life in a distant city. Measure 310 presents the first appearance of what I refer to as the *bell motive*. Consisting of the pitches G and A, it rings clearly above the surrounding texture, with G sounding on the downbeat and A entering on the offbeat of beat two (see Figure 3.26). This gesture becomes one of the most prominent motives in the closing portion of the piece. Although additional musical materials are introduced later, the music repeatedly returns to this bell motive, reinforcing its structural and expressive significance near the conclusion of the work.

Amid the otherwise steady and flowing texture, Chow briefly introduces rhythmic play in measures 315–318 (see Figure 3.27). Here, ascending scalar figures and descending arpeggiations explore the contrapuntal tension of five against four. This insertion adds momentary rhythmic vitality and effectively sustains the listener’s attention within the otherwise contemplative atmosphere of the section. The music makes one final ascent—through a series of

rolled chords that gradually expand in register and density—reaching a peak at measure 324 before settling into a more static passage. The subsequent return of the bell motive ultimately guides the music toward its conclusion. The final harmony, a D minor seventh chord with an added G in the bass, leaves a sense of openness and ambiguity, creating an inconclusive ending that invites a feeling of boundless imagination.



Figure 3.27

Within this ten-minute work, the composer guides the listener through a wide spectrum of emotions. The music moves from the tension, restlessness, and darker atmosphere of the rhapsodic section to the freer, more expansive character of the fantasia. Drawing upon the composer's own comments, as well as my personal reflections following conversations with him, I have attempted to relate the musical materials of the piece to images and ideas that may be more readily understood. While it is not necessary for performers to have personal experience living in a city in order to interpret this work, I hope that the descriptions provided in this document will help performers better grasp the atmosphere and expressive character of the piece. Chow also incorporates several culturally specific elements that may not be immediately familiar to a broader audience. Although an understanding of these references is not strictly essential for

performance, recognizing their cultural origins can certainly deepen one's appreciation of the work.

When asked about his thoughts on Dr. Foo's interpretation of the piece,⁴⁸ Chow remarked that certain sections were overly articulated and that the overall performance felt somewhat overly meticulous. As a pianist myself, I understand from a performer's perspective the desire to follow the notated details of the score as carefully as possible. However, the composer expressed that he envisions the piece being performed in a more playful manner, with a sense of spontaneity and improvisatory freedom. When describing the character of *Deep in the City*, Chow offered several key words: contrast, virtuosity, forward momentum, and flow. These concepts, in his view, capture the essential spirit of the work and should guide the performer's overall approach to interpretation.

With the long-term goal of composing a piano concerto incorporating Malaysian musical elements, JunYi Chow has been traveling extensively in search of inspiration while also bringing his music to audiences around the world. At the time of writing this document, recent performances of his works have been presented by the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, the Macau Chinese Orchestra, the Chinese Music Department at Tainan National University of the Arts, the Singapore National Youth Chinese Orchestra, and by Beauty and Melody, a professional all-women Chinese ensemble based in Chengdu, Sichuan, China. Chow's music reflects the fresh energy of a young composer while remaining deeply connected to his cultural roots. I sincerely look forward to hearing more piano works from him in the future and to the continued success of

⁴⁸ Mei Yi Foo, pianist, "Deep In The City" by JunYi Chow, track 6 on *Free Hand Anthology I*, recorded August 2019 at Free Hand Festival, Kuala Lumpur, <https://freehandfestival.wixsite.com/home/anthology>.

our shared mission of bringing Malaysian music and culture to audiences around the world.

Chapter V: CONCLUSION

This lecture document explores *Dragonfly(s)*, *A Distant Voice of the Rainforest*, and *Footprints* by Chong Lim Ng, as well as *Three Short Malay Pieces* and *Deep in the City* by JunYi Chow. Focusing on these two prominent Malaysian composers, it provides background on each work, performance analyses tailored to the individual pieces, and insights drawn from the composers' own perspectives on their music.

During my ten years of studying in the United States, I have had first-hand experience of the growing interest in researching and performing lesser-known composers. Similar topics have frequently appeared in recitals, talks, and conferences I have participated in over the years. At one point, I questioned the necessity of shifting attention toward lesser-known composers, given that it is already impossible to fully comprehend the oeuvre of the so-called canonical figures in keyboard literature. However, over time, I have come to find great joy in discovering and learning works by unfamiliar composers. These experiences have continually broadened my musical horizons and introduced me to cultural and historical contexts I had previously overlooked. While these new perspectives have been enriching, I have noticed that composers from Malaysia are rarely represented in such settings. This document, together with the accompanying lecture recital, therefore serves as a valuable opportunity to share music from my home country with a wider audience. Although many of the works discussed here are rooted in the composers' personal experiences, and many of the interpretations offered are my own, the aim is to spark interest and curiosity among listeners. As demonstrated throughout this document, these works allow for a wide range of interpretations and can be approached in many different ways.

With the hope that music by Malaysian composers will one day reach audiences around the world, its promotion ultimately depends largely on Malaysian musicians themselves. In her DMA dissertation completed in 2014, Malaysian pianist Khe Sin Khoo observed that “the musical growth in Malaysia is often said to be much slower than expected, as evident in the lack of homegrown professional musicians and composers, as well as the lack of interest in commissioning, performing, publishing, and publicizing works by local composers.”⁴⁹ Twelve years later, I am glad to say that some of these observations are no longer entirely valid, as positive changes have taken place. Although musical development in Malaysia still progresses more slowly compared to neighboring countries such as Singapore and Thailand, and although the country still does not yet have a dedicated music conservatory, music education at the higher-education level has become increasingly established in both private and public universities. More students are now earning music degrees locally, reflecting the growing strength of these programs. In addition to those who remain in Malaysia for their studies, an increasing number of musicians are also pursuing education abroad. While some ultimately choose to reside and work overseas, many return home with the knowledge and skills they have acquired throughout their training. Today, the faculty rosters of several well-established private music academies in Malaysia consist largely of teachers with formal music degrees, including some with doctoral qualifications—a significant improvement compared to a decade ago. The growth of human resources within the music industry has, in turn, energized the broader classical music scene. Festivals such as the *Free Hand Festival*, mentioned throughout this document, as well as

⁴⁹ Khe Sin Khoo, “Selected Solo Piano Works by Contemporary Malaysian Composers: An Analysis,” (DMA Dissertation, West Virginia University, 2014): 246.

RondoFest—which focuses on cultural exchange and musical collaboration in Southeast Asia—and *Bachfest* are all products of this development.

When I returned home in the summer of 2025, two years after my previous visit, I was genuinely impressed by the number of concerts and recitals taking place within such a short span of time. Through conversations with performers and organizers, I learned that many of these events barely break even financially, while some organizers continue searching for funding even after the performances have concluded. Yet it is their passion for and commitment to sharing music that sustain these efforts. Despite the often thankless nature of their work, they continue striving to introduce classical music to the Malaysian public. With Malaysian pianist Vincent Ong recently receiving recognition at the 19th International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition, classical music has also begun to gain visibility within Malaysia's mainstream media. This recognition has helped demonstrate that Malaysia does indeed have a place on the international classical music stage. Across the world, Malaysian musicians continue contributing to the growth of the nation's arts and culture through their work as performers, educators, composers, and students. I firmly believe that Malaysia possesses tremendous potential for further musical development, and I look forward to contributing to and participating in that growth in the years ahead.

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