

# Malay Art Song as Cultural Expression: Performing Patah Sebelah Sayapku through a Practice-Based Lens

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## ABSTRAK

Artikel ini meneliti keterjalanan identiti budaya dan interpretasi artistik dalam persembahan Patah Sebelah Sayapku, lagu seni Melayu kontemporari ciptaan Marzelan Salleh. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kajian berasaskan amalan, kajian ini menganalisis perjalanan reflektif penyanyi dalam proses penyediaan dan persembahan karya ini, yang menggabungkan skala pelog selisir Jawa dengan progresi harmoni Barat. Artikel ini menghuraikan cabaran teknikal, keputusan interpretasi, dan integrasi puisi-muzik untuk menonjolkan bagaimana hibriditi budaya membentuk amalan persembahan. Melalui analisis skor, dokumentasi latihan, dan refleksi peribadi, kajian ini meletakkan lagu seni Melayu sebagai medium penting dalam mengekspresikan identiti artistik dan inovasi muzik.

**Kata kunci:** Identiti artistik, hibriditi budaya, lagu seni Melayu, kajian berasaskan amalan, analisis persembahan

## Abstrak

This article examines the interplay of cultural identity and artistic interpretation in the performance of Patah Sebelah Sayapku, a contemporary Malay art song composed by Marzelan Salleh. Drawing on practice-based research, the study analyses the performer's reflective journey in preparing and presenting this work, which synthesizes the Javanese pelog selisir scale with Western harmonic progressions. The article explores technical challenges, interpretive decisions, and poetic-musical integration to highlight how cultural hybridity shapes performance practice. Through score analysis, rehearsal documentation, and personal reflection, this study positions the Malay art song as a vital medium for expressing artistic identity and musical innovation.

**Keywords:** Artistic identity, cultural hybridity, Malay art song, practice-based research, performance analysis

## INTRODUCTION

The Malay art song (lagu seni Melayu) continues to evolve as a site for cultural negotiation and artistic expression in Southeast Asia. Emerging in the mid-20th century, the genre blends local poetic texts with Western-influenced art song structures, creating a platform where composers and performers can explore hybrid cultural identities. In recent years, contemporary composers have expanded the genre's expressive range by incorporating regional scales, languages, and stylistic idioms. This study focuses on one such composition: Patah Sebelah Sayapku by Marzelan Salleh, featuring lyrics by Ezwin Alyazaara. As a contemporary Malay art song, this work offers a rich synthesis of traditional Javanese modalism and Western classical harmony, rendering it a complex, hybrid musical text.

The broader discourse on Malay art songs has focused primarily on their historical development and nationalist themes (Razali & Salleh, 2021: 84<sup>1</sup>). Other studies have explored their pedagogical potential and cultural significance in Malaysian music curricula (Hashim, 2018: 212<sup>2</sup>). However, limited attention has been paid to the interpretive role of performers in shaping the expressive and cultural meanings of these songs. Literature

on practice-based research (Nelson, 2013: 9<sup>3</sup>; Barrett & Bolt, 2007: 3<sup>4</sup>) emphasizes the value of reflective performance as a means of generating knowledge—particularly within artistic disciplines where experiential processes are central.

Within this framework, artistic identity is understood not as static or predetermined, but as something continually constructed through interaction with material, culture, and context (Smith & Dean, 2009: 7<sup>5</sup>). The intersection of performance practice and cultural hybridity has been studied in Western art music settings (Cook, 2013: 88<sup>6</sup>), but few studies examine how Southeast Asian performers mediate between local and global idioms in real-time performance. This article seeks to fill that gap by documenting and analyzing the interpretive journey of performing *Patah Sebelah Sayapku*. The study adopts a practice-based research methodology, in which the act of performance itself functions as a site of inquiry. The research process included:

- Detailed musical score analysis of the song's form, melody, harmony, and text setting;
- Reflective journaling over 20 hours of preparation, including technique development, interpretive rehearsals, and coaching sessions;
- Contextual listening and immersion in traditional Javanese musical idioms to support stylistic understanding.

This qualitative method is underpinned by reflective practice theory (Schön, 1983<sup>7</sup>) and grounded in the performer's lived experience. The integration of theoretical reflection with embodied knowledge allows for a deeper exploration of artistic identity as shaped through cultural and musical interpretation.

This introduction sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the song's structure, performance strategies, and cultural significance in the discussion section that follows.

## DISCUSSION

### Cultural Hybridity in Musical Form

*Patah Sebelah Sayapku* presents a nuanced dialogue between Javanese modal traditions and Western harmonic structures. The use of the *pelog selisir* scale contributes an unmistakably Southeast Asian sonic identity, while the incorporation of Western chromatic mediants, extended harmonies, and formal devices such as ternary form places the piece firmly within the classical art song tradition. This juxtaposition allows the performer to embody a cross-cultural narrative, interpreting the work not merely as a musical piece but as a symbolic representation of identity negotiation.

The form, which oscillates between emotional states through carefully marked tempo and dynamic shifts—"Sadly," "Mournful," "Frustration," "Agitated"—mirrors the thematic journey of resilience. These structural markers guide the performer's interpretive arc, offering a framework in which to explore the shifting emotional and cultural terrain.

### Interpretive Process and Technical Challenges

From a performer's perspective, engaging with *Patah Sebelah Sayapku* required deliberate immersion in both Javanese and Western musical idioms. Technical challenges arose in rendering the unfamiliar intervallic structure of the *pelog selisir* scale, particularly in ensuring accurate intonation and expressive consistency. Unlike the tempered scales familiar to classically trained singers, the *pelog* mode introduces intervals that are microtonally nuanced and require a heightened sensitivity to pitch. Achieving this demanded a recalibration of vocal technique, including modified vowel shaping and dynamic tuning against the piano's fixed intonation.

In parallel, the chromatic Western harmonic progressions and complex voice leading present in the song introduced another layer of interpretive difficulty. These passages often modulate unexpectedly or employ dissonant tensions that require precise breath control, confident phrasing, and advanced aural acuity. The challenge, therefore, was not only technical but expressive—ensuring that the vocal delivery matched the

harmonic tension and release cycles in the music.

The rehearsal process included modal scale studies, contextual listening of gamelan performances, and iterative work with a vocal coach to ensure stylistic authenticity. Approximately 20 hours were dedicated to technical mastery, interpretive refinement, and ensemble balance with the pianist. The interpretive coaching sessions also focused on tone color, vibrato usage, and text articulation to emphasize the emotional content of the lyrics.

Furthermore, the integration of traditional Javanese musical gestures—such as descending balungan motifs, sliding intonation, and subtle rhythmic rubato—was key to conveying the song’s cultural hybridity. These gestures were not merely decorative but served as emotive cues, requiring the performer to internalize their function within both the narrative arc and the broader symbolic aesthetic of the work. The interpretive process, thus, became a site of negotiation between technical exactitude and emotional authenticity.

### **Embodied Interpretation and Emotional Expression**

Performing *Patah Sebelah Sayapku* demanded a deep level of embodiment, where emotion was not only conveyed through sound but experienced physically. The somatic engagement with the score—through breath, posture, facial expression, and gestural nuance—was integral to authentically expressing the song’s emotional landscape. The vulnerability expressed in the text translated into physical stillness in certain passages, while agitation and struggle called for expansive gestures, intensified vibrato, and visceral vocal timbres.

Throughout rehearsals and performances, the performer navigated the song’s emotional arc not as an external observer but as a participant in the narrative. For example, maintaining vocal clarity while conveying internal turmoil required precise control of dynamic shading and breath pacing. This embodied experience created a sense of catharsis both for the performer and the audience.

Journaling throughout the process also revealed a transformation in interpretive depth—from initial technical concerns to later emotional immersion. Such emotional expression, shaped by the performer’s own life experiences, brought an authenticity that theoretical preparation alone could not produce. This highlights the strength of practice-based research as a means to articulate knowledge from within the artistic act itself.

### **Collaborative Dynamics with the Pianist**

The collaborative relationship between singer and pianist was pivotal in realising the expressive intent of *Patah Sebelah Sayapku*. Rather than a traditional lead-and-accompany dynamic, the performance required co-creation—each gesture, tempo fluctuation, and phrasing decision negotiated in rehearsal. The pianist’s role was not limited to support; instead, the instrument functioned as a second voice, with equal agency in shaping meaning.

Effective collaboration was built through shared listening, verbal exchange, and mutual sensitivity to each other’s interpretive cues. This included developing a shared sense of rubato, rehearsing climactic points to align emotional timing, and discussing the narrative subtext behind each section of the song.

A particularly significant moment occurred in rehearsals of the “Frustration” and “Agitated” sections, where precise coordination of rhythmic tension and harmonic instability was essential. The pianist’s repeated ostinati and tremolos needed to intensify in tandem with the singer’s dynamic surges, creating a cumulative emotional effect. These interactions reflect not only technical synchronization but a deeper artistic empathy—where each musician supports and amplifies the other’s expressive voice.

### **Compositional and Structural Analysis**

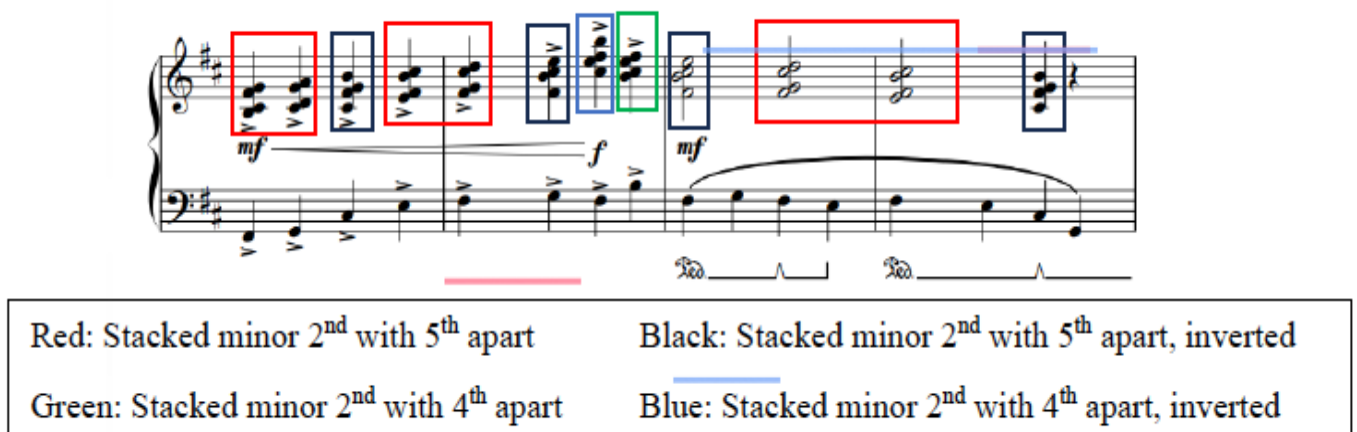
Structurally, *Patah Sebelah Sayapku* follows a modified ternary form (A–B–C–A’), with each section corresponding to shifting emotional states as marked in the score: “Sadly,” “Mournful,” “Frustration,” and “Agitated.” The return of the opening material in section A’ is altered both melodically and harmonically, symbolizing transformation through emotional and musical development.

The melodic language of the piece is rooted in the Javanese pelog selisir scale, lending it a regional character that distinguishes it from conventional Western tonality. This mode introduces microtonal intervals and ornamental contours that are suggestive of gamelan melodies. The vocal line features recurring motives, such as descending sigh figures and fragmented phrases, which mirror the internal disintegration expressed in the text.



Figure 1 2 motifs assumed to be derived from the same material

Harmonically, the composer integrates Western chromaticism and extended tertian chords with non-functional progressions. Chromatic mediants and polychords are used to create tension and ambiguity, often avoiding resolution to reflect the poetic themes of longing and emotional unrest. The use of quartal harmonies and dissonant clusters further accentuates the dramatic intensity of the music.



Red: Stacked minor 2 <sup>nd</sup> with 5 <sup>th</sup> apart	Black: Stacked minor 2 <sup>nd</sup> with 5 <sup>th</sup> apart, inverted
Green: Stacked minor 2 <sup>nd</sup> with 4 <sup>th</sup> apart	Blue: Stacked minor 2 <sup>nd</sup> with 4 <sup>th</sup> apart, inverted

Figure 2 Chord clusters formed by stacking two minor 2nds with a fifth or fourth apart, sometimes inverted.

Rhythmically, the piece fluctuates between fluid rubato and metrically unstable phrases. Irregular phrase lengths and syncopation are employed to reflect the instability of the persona's emotional state. These disruptions are often intensified by the piano accompaniment, which uses tremolos, rhythmic ostinati, and sudden dynamic contrasts to reinforce narrative shifts.

The piano texture is particularly noteworthy. Beyond harmonic support, the piano evokes gamelan textures through layered ostinato patterns, pentatonic embellishments, and a percussive use of register. In several instances, the piano imitates the vocal line, suggesting an internal echo or reinforcement of the protagonist's voice.

This compositional architecture—rooted in hybridity—demonstrates Marzelan Salleh's intention to fuse traditional Southeast Asian aesthetics with modernist harmonic and formal techniques. The result is a song that not only challenges traditional performer expectations but also expands the expressive potential of the Malay art song as a contemporary genre.

## Poetic and Musical Integration

The synergy between Ezwin Alyazaara's poetry and Marzelan Salleh's music is pivotal to the song's expressive power. The poetic metaphor of a broken wing (*patah sebelah sayapku*) finds resonance in the jagged melodic intervals, unresolved dissonances, and fluctuating dynamics. Salleh's compositional technique accentuates these images with fragmented melodic lines that echo the emotional ruptures in the text. Wide leaps, chromaticism, and ambiguous tonal centers reflect the inner turmoil conveyed by the poetry.

Musically, the vocal line often mirrors the rhythm and contour of the text, allowing the poetry's natural inflection and emotive rhythm to shape the phrasing. For example, words associated with pain or fragility are often set on descending intervals or unstable harmonies, emphasizing vulnerability. Conversely, moments of inner strength or defiance are framed with dynamic intensification, ascending motion, and rhythmic propulsion.

The piano part serves not only as accompaniment but as an interpretive partner. It interjects, echoes, and sometimes anticipates the vocal line, forming a dialogic relationship that deepens the storytelling. Salleh utilizes pianistic textures that mimic gamelan layering—such as tremolos, ostinati, and abrupt silences—to add cultural dimension. The interplay between rubato vocal phrases and sustained or syncopated piano lines creates temporal tension, enhancing emotional depth.



Figure 3 Left hand broken chords play a consistent pattern spanning 4 bars.

A particularly effective moment occurs in the line “*kerana sakitnya tidak terperi*” (for the pain is indescribable), where the harmonic tension in the piano builds beneath a sustained high vocal note, resulting in a powerful suspension of breath and time. This pairing of poetic climax and musical intensity demonstrates Salleh's skill in aligning the affective arc of both mediums.

The reprise of earlier motifs in the coda evokes a sense of return and reconciliation. Rather than a resolution in the Western tonal sense, it suggests a transformation—the same melodic idea, now reshaped through lived experience. The poetry and music together form a unified narrative arc, one that captures not only emotional struggle but the subtle shifts of healing and introspection.

This integrative approach affirms the Malay art song's potential as a vessel for emotive storytelling and cultural reflection. It underscores how the fusion of musical language and poetic content enables a richly layered expressive experience—one that affirms the genre's relevance in both national heritage and contemporary artistic discourse.

## Reception and Reflective Insights

Audience responses during recital performances of *Patah Sebelah Sayapku* revealed a strong emotional connection to both the music and its narrative. Listeners commented on the raw vulnerability expressed through the voice and the piano's atmospheric intensity. Several audience members noted that they experienced the song as a personal journey—one that moved from fragility to empowerment.

Reflective journaling after performances captured the evolving relationship between performer and repertoire. Initially, the focus was on managing technical complexities. However, as familiarity grew, the interpretation



deepened, and the performer became more attuned to the song's subtleties—musically and emotionally. This shift from technical delivery to expressive embodiment exemplifies the developmental arc typical of practice-based inquiry.

Peer feedback from fellow musicians and mentors highlighted the success of cultural integration. The use of pelog intonation, ornamentation, and gamelan-inspired textures was praised for its authenticity and originality. These reflections confirmed the artistic and cultural impact of the work, affirming that Malay art song can serve not only as a mode of expression but also as a catalyst for cross-cultural dialogue and innovation.

## CONCLUSION

This study of Patah Sebelah Sayapku demonstrates how performance practice can become a dynamic space for negotiating artistic identity, especially within a culturally hybrid composition. Engaging deeply with the song's layered poetic and musical language, the performer embraced both technical rigor and emotional vulnerability, navigating a synthesis of Javanese modalism and Western chromatic harmony.

The practice-based approach enabled a unique mode of inquiry, where knowledge emerged not just from analysis but through embodied experience, rehearsal collaboration, audience feedback, and self-reflection. These processes illuminated how performance becomes a site of transformation—personally, musically, and culturally.

By drawing on traditional aesthetics while embracing modern expressivity, this work affirms the artistic potential of the Malay art song as a relevant, evolving genre. It shows how such repertoire can serve both as a vessel for personal storytelling and as a tool for expanding the expressive language of Southeast Asian vocal music. Ultimately, this research contributes to a growing recognition of the performer's role as not only interpreter, but as co-creator and cultural narrator in the evolving landscape of art music.

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