

## 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)

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the performance practice of Malaysian contemporary piano solo music, using Chong Lim Ng's *A Distant Voice of a Rain Forest (Fragments from Rimba...)* for solo piano (2008, revised in 2012) as a case study. As contemporary art music is always challenging to perform, performers have the need to study the complex contemporary work thoroughly. Ng hugely emphasizes on the importance of deep understanding towards his creation, which also greatly supported by Soviet pianist and pedagogue, Heinrich Neuhaus on his *artistic image* theory. Neuhaus explains his *artistic theory* is manifested in sound during a performance. The way a performer perceives the musical substance of a work determines her decisions at the instrument. Chong Lim Ng's *A Distant Voice of a Rain Forest* is much heavily influenced by gamelan music, and the pianist needs to grasp the Malaysian cultural characteristics before tackling the composition, which also highlighted by Neuhaus on his *artistic image*. Heinrich Neuhaus also pointed on the importance of familiarity to the musical content and solving the performance practice issues accordingly with great efficiency.

**Keywords:** *Heinrich Neuhaus, Artistic image, Malaysian contemporary music, Contemporary piano music, piano playing*

### Introduction

Most of the Malaysian contemporary art music composers received their music education in the United States and Europe. A few Malaysian contemporary composers gained international reputation and received great reviews on their compositions, including Tazan Tajuddin, the winner of Toru Takemitsu Composition Award in 2002; Dr. Kee Yong Chong, Belgium-trained Malaysian composer who won several awards at the international composition competitions.

The publication of Malaysian's first twenty-first century piano anthology by Rhythm Music Publishing is a great step forward to the Malaysian music circle. However, performance guidelines on these contemporary piano works are lacking, due to limited understanding on composers' compositional language and the reluctant attitude to accept the contemporary art music in general. Most of the Malaysian contemporary piano works are experimental, which opposes with the conventional performing style. For instance, *Vatni* (2017) by Samuel Cho, *Kabus Pantun* (2018) by Tazul Izan Tajuddin, and *In the Absence of Silence* (2019) by Chow Jun Yan, provide performance notes on unorthodox musical notations, but not giving descriptions on the interpretation of the musical work. There might be potential implications on executing ideal interpretation, without further understanding of these contemporary compositions.

In Ng's *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* (2008), characteristics of Malay and Javanese gamelan incorporates with the Western experimental contemporary art music. Performers must abandon the classical performance practice while performing this piece. This brings the performers' creativity to the maximum capacity, by applying the *artistic image* theory by Soviet pianist and pedagogue, Heinrich Neuhaus. Through providing insights on creating artistic image on *A Distant of the Rain Forest* (2008) by Malaysian composer Chong Lim Ng, pianists can understand the context of the Malaysian contemporary piano solo compositions better, as well as the Western experimental performing techniques and achieving the ideal interpretation. Also, performers can create their own music with greater spontaneity, once they are more familiar with the musical content of Ng's composition.

### **Development of Malaysian Contemporary Piano Music**

Malaysian contemporary piano music developed for few decades, since the 1990s till now. Most of the Malaysian composers submit their piano solo compositions to the Society of Malaysian Contemporary Composers (SMCC). SMCC has organized few editions of *SoundBridge* Music Festival, which provides a great platform to composers for promoting their compositions. Their compositions often incorporate with the characteristics of Western post-tonal music: polyrhythm, electronics, atonality, and serialism. However, they still manage to insert Malaysian cultural elements into their compositions, which makes their works more exhilarating to discover.

Another non-profit Malaysian contemporary music organization formed in 2007, the Malaysian Composers Collective (MCC) achieved a major milestone in Malaysian contemporary art music scene. They collaborated with Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank to hold Malaysia's first contemporary music workshop in 2008, "HSBC Young Composers Workshop" at Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPAC).

In 2019, Malaysian Composers Collective organised another major event, which was the "Free Hand: 1<sup>st</sup> Malaysian Contemporary Piano Festival and Competition". As Malaysia has a great tradition of piano education and tradition, it provides a great stage for local compositional talents to share their best work with the general public. The event encouraged many local contemporary music composers to submit their piano solo compositions to the competition. In August 2019, MCC worked together with UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur, for organizing the festival and competition. Fifteen works were selected to perform in the festival concert, performed by internationally acclaimed Malaysian pianist Mei Yi Foo, who is currently based in the United Kingdom. Also, the winning composition was selected by a few members of the jury during the festival concert. The chosen winner would commission a piece for the final round of UCSI University International Piano Festival and Competition 2020.

After the festival, the Malaysian Composers Collective compiled the selected works from the festival for publication. The compilation of Malaysian contemporary piano solo works eventually become the nation's first 21<sup>st</sup> century piano anthology (MCC, 2020). It is a great step forward to the Malaysian music circle, as the anthology displayed the diversity of Malaysia as a multicultural country and served as a record of a permanent documentary of the musical growth in Malaysia (Malaysian Composers Collective, 2020). Each piano piece featured in the anthology reflects the composers' origins and cultural views while also experimenting with new compositional styles and techniques.

Although these organisations made huge effort to promote contemporary art music in Malaysia, composers still find they are not recognised in their home country and yet they are internationally acclaimed composers. Scholarly research on Malaysian contemporary art music is very limited. Until today, there are not more than ten publications on Malaysian contemporary music. Meanwhile, the popular music and traditional music are the most discussed and presented in Malaysia scholarly circles. Most of the scholarly writings on Malaysian contemporary piano music focusing on the musical analysis instead of performing guidelines and issues. For example, Khoo's dissertation (2014) mainly focused on the detailed musical analysis of selected Malaysian contemporary piano compositions by selected Malaysian composers.

In terms of music education, music teachers do not usually introduce these local contemporary works to their students, as they have the mindset that viewing these compositions is technically difficult, and a big challenge for the students to understand the compositional meaning. They are more favourable to the conventional Western music traditions instead of the contemporary. Despite of the fact that Malaysian contemporary music has flourished for almost twenty years in the local contemporary music scene, Malaysian public still lacks interest towards the local compositions. Malaysian audiences also raise their doubts and concerns about the craftsmanship of local composers.

### **Biography of Chong Lim Ng, Malaysian pianist, and composer**

Mr. Chong Lim Ng is a Malaysian pianist, and composer. Ng completed his postgraduate diploma in piano performance at the Royal College of Music, London. He continued his piano studies in Austria with Elza Kolodin and studied composition with Prof. Beat Furrer. He has earned several awards in piano competitions, including first prize at the Malaysian National Piano Competition (1993), Royal Overseas League Competition, United Kingdom (1994). He also made concerto appearances with international orchestras: Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, Kharkov Youth Symphony Orchestra, Royal College of Music Symphony Orchestra, and many others.

His compositional output includes orchestral music, chamber music, and piano solo works. Mr. Ng has had his works commissioned and premiered in various countries, including South Korea, the United States, Germany, Singapore, etc. Notable premieres of Ng's compositions include *Rimba* (Rainforest) and *Xiang* by the musicians from Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) at the 1st and 2nd editions of MPO Composers' Forum directed by conductor Kevin Field. Ng himself premiered most of his piano solo compositions, except one of his pieces, *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest (Fragments from Rimba...)* (2008, revised in 2012) was premiered by Korean pianist, Soo-Yeon Lim at the 2009 Tongyeong International Music Festival in South Korea (Khoo, 2014).

Ng's compositional language often plays with tonal fragments, but also includes Western post-tonal music characteristics. As Ng is a concert pianist, his compositions are

largely focused on the solo piano. He also composed chamber music and orchestral works. In his piano music, there are some hints of musical influences from Pierre Boulez, György Ligeti, George Crumb, and John Cage; but also adding in Malaysian elements. According to Ng, his compositional ideas often come to him naturally, most of them come from mother nature, which reflect on the titles of his piano solo compositions, including his *Daun (Leaves, 2002)* for piano solo and electronics, *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest (fragments from Rimba...)* (2008), *Dragonflies* (2012), *Fireflies* (2021) (Khoo, 2014). He will notate the melodic fragments that come into his mind at any time, and compose his music based on these melodic fragments. Most of his compositions reflect his cultural upbringing as a Malaysian Chinese, and his religious views as a Buddhist.

### **A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest (2008, revised in 2012)**

*A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* was written in 2008, and Ng made final revisions for this piece in 2012. The piece was premiered in March 2009, at the Tongyeong International Music Festival by Korean pianist Soo-Yeon Lim. This piece is a reconstruction of his chamber work, *Rimba* (which means jungle) for fourteen musicians, which has very unusual instrumentation for two groups of string quartets, three winds instruments, one pianist, and two percussionists (Classical Music Asia, 2012). *Rimba* was composed in 2005, and it was premiered by musicians from the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO), as it was selected as one of the best orchestral works in the MPO Composers' Forum in 2006. *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* was also commissioned in Malaysia as the required repertoire for the 5<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Chopin International Competition in 2012.

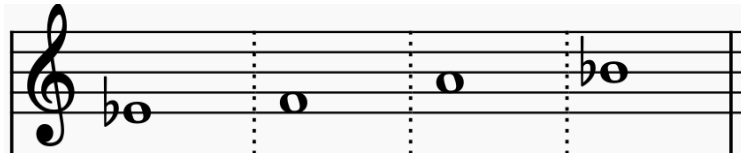
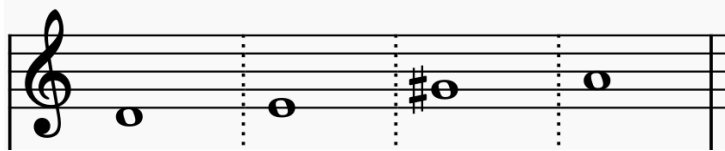
Ng wrote his impressions of the tropical rainforest in his manuscript, as rainforests are abundant in Malaysia. Some of the rainforests in Malaysia are on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including *Gunung Mulu National Park* located in Sarawak, and *Kinabalu Park* in Sabah. However, Ng also clarified that the image in the pianist's mind does not have to be a real view of a rainforest. It could be just pure feelings or based on the pianist's imagination. Ng also mentioned that this work is also heavily influenced by the *gamelan*, which is used prominently in Malaysian traditional music and Javanese music.

The performance notes provided by the composer are very specific. Ng also includes descriptive programme and his imaginary pictures of tropical rainforests. He wrote:

The murmuring of insects, birds...  
 rustling of falling leaves, water on rocks.....  
 the mystical sense of stillness and calmness .....  
 creation of balance, at times, silent, quiet, and docile...  
 at times, brutal, forceful, and unpredictable.....  
 There are always changes in every movement, whether in a subtle or drastic manner..... (Ng, 2008)

The construction of this piece is unique, Ng wrote eleven thematic fragments based on two motivic ideas, and the fragments are put into individual boxes. The main motivic ideas of this piece are D-E-G#-A and Eb-F-A-Bb (Excerpt 1). Each thematic box has different musical elements, including trills, rapid thematic figurations, chordal clusters, unexpected changes of texture, and many musical pauses (Excerpts 2 and 3). These boxes recall the similarities in George Crumb's piano compositions, in which Crumb also includes the similar kind of boxes for pianists to improvise their own music. Each box represents the different images of the rainforest, which gives the pianist the opportunity to explore and create their own music.

According to Ng, pianists are very encouraged to perform these thematic boxes without any specific order and absolutely welcomed to repeat the fragments more than once. The composer also emphasised that these fragments need to be performed in a continuous flow, without any stops from one box to another. This piece lasts approximately five to eight minutes, depending on the pianist's flexibility on interpreting it.



Excerpt 1, motivic ideas of Chong Lim Ng's  
A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest (2008)



The image displays a complex musical score for piano, consisting of multiple staves. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Key elements include:

- Dynamic Markings:** *mf* sempre, *pp*, *pppp*, *mf*, and *pppp*.
- Performance Instructions:** "freely", "stiffness", "gradually getting much faster & louder", "with force - play white keys with 2 hands", and "(as fast as possible with brilliance)".
- Annotations:** "a little mark movement..." and "approx. 6"-8"").
- Boxed Note:** "All indications which marked in green are for reference only (composer's suggestion). Pianist is allowed to apply his/her own interpretation."

Excerpt 3, A Distant of the Rain Forest (2008, revised in 2012) from composer Ng Chong Lim's composition manuscript  
 Source: from composer (2008)

**Performing A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest (2008, revised in 2012) by Ng Chong Lim**

To perform Chong Lim Ng's *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* vividly, it is beneficial to relate *artistic image* theory by renowned Russian pianist and pedagogue, Heinrich Neuhaus (1888-1964). Artistic image is crucial to all music performers, as well as to all pedagogues to develop the students' artistic capabilities and creativity (Neuhaus, 1993). It covers three main principles:

1. Performers need to be engaged and acquainted the context of the composition.
2. Performance spontaneity and technical virtuosity can be developed through the development of artistic and intellectual capacity.
3. Neuhaus emphasised on the importance of musical score study, focusing on the compositional and structural elements. (Neuhaus 1993, 17)

*Artistic image* is displayed through deep understanding and attention to the musical details. Pianists would be able to describe their imageries that they want to present. According to Ng, the piece could sound horrendous, performer needs to take risks, feel the music, and make connection to the music (Malaysian Composers Collective, 2018). Before tackling the composition, performers need to listen to the original version of the work: *Rimba* (2005), to understand the context of *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* (2008, revised in 2012) better. *Rimba* captures the essence of a tropical rainforest through interesting combination of instrumentation, which features the soundscapes of the Malay and Javanese gamelan. After grasping the interpretative ideas from *Rimba*, performers will need to do "problem solving" when they are having the first reading of the musical work. Performing music can be seen as a long problem-solving journey, as a musical work will need some time to be understood by the performers (Chaffin, Imreh, Lemieux, & Chen, 2003).

From Neuhaus' point of view, the "instantaneous and subconscious" problem solving is the result of the performers having greater familiarity with the musical style, structure, and compositional background, as well as able to make fast and accurate decisions while working on the piece (Neuhaus 1993: 24). The complexity of the compositional structure in Ng's work requires performers to understand the context of the composition.

To perform this piece effectively and achieve the highest level of *artistic image*, pianists will need to consider the character of each fragment when sorting out the order of these fragments. The first three fragments (Excerpts 4, 5 and 6) sound similar with a few variations. Pianists will have to avoid playing these fragments in straight order by inserting the contrasting fragments in between of the three fragments.

**Excerpt**

Chong Lim Ng: *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, fragment 1

Source: from composer (2008)

**4**



**Excerpt 5**

Chong Lim Ng: *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, fragment 2  
 Source: from composer (2008)

**Excerpt 6**

Chong Lim Ng: *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, fragment 3  
 Source: from composer (2008)

As Ng suggested, pianists are encouraged to explore their own order of the fragments when performing this piece. There is no definite formula for performing this piece according to the author’s point of view. Spontaneity and intuition play an important role, in making the performance of this piece convincing. A few performing orders of these boxes are suggested, which are: 2- 3- 6- 8- 5- 7- 1- 4- 9- 10- 11; 1- 8- 2- 4- 6- 10- 9- 3- 5- 7- 11, as well as adding own improvisations before starting these boxes, and to end the piece. To bring out the tropical rainforest imagery, it is possible to insert the sound audio of birds chirping, river rushing, and tree rustles before starting to perform the piece. To the reference of two recorded performances of this piece by Malaysian pianists, Dr. Nicholas Ong, and Ms. Hao Zi Yoh. Dr. Ong did not add in any of his own improvisations to this piece (Kee Yong CHONG, 2021). Meanwhile, Yoh added the Southeast Asian ethnic singing improvisations and played a few of improvisatory passages before starting the piece (Hao Zi Yoh, 2022).

Since this piece is influenced by the soundscape of a gamelan, the sound production and timbre need to be carefully considered while performing it. For instance, in fragments 5 and 9 (Excerpts 7 and 8), which include rapid figurations and followed by long held notes, time taking is needed to create the sound vibrations in the air.

**Excerpt****7**

Chong Lim Ng: *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, fragment 5  
 Source: from composer (2008)

**Excerpt****8**

Chong Lim Ng: *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, fragment 9  
 Source: from composer (2008)

The first three fragments (Excerpts 4, 5, and 6) in this piece sound almost similar, but pianists need to perform in such a way that these fragments sound different. For instance, the first fragment, the author suggests playing the grace notes slightly faster than in the second fragment. The second fragment has two grace notes before the whole note, and it sounds an octave higher than written. In this case, pianists will need to take time for the grace notes and listen attentively to the vibrations of the harmony.

Dynamics marking in this piece is very specific in this piece. There are many *crescendos* (getting louder) and *diminuendos* (getting softer) hairpins markings in most of the thematic boxes (Excerpt 9). Also, this piece has a wide range of dynamics, from *ppp* (very soft) to *ffff* (very loud). These markings need to be studied carefully, to create an atmospheric sound like a rainforest. Also, there are many detailed performance directions indicated in the music. Looking at excerpts 4, 5, and 6, the marking in green indicates the suggested timing for the pianists to control. Pianists can manipulate these suggested timings differently when they perform. Pianists need to observe the directions carefully to bring out the spontaneity of their performance and achieve the maximum level of *artistic image*.

**Excerpt****9**

Chong Lim Ng: *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, fragment 7, 8, 10  
 Source: from composer (2018)

The use of the sustain pedal is very important to this piece as well, as the gamelan has the sustained sound quality when it plays a note. Ng had the pedal markings specifically written for each thematic fragment. Pianists are encouraged to use the sustain pedal almost throughout the piece, to accumulate the distinct harmonies and create the distant feeling of a tropical rainforest. However, the sustain pedal needs to be used carefully when it comes to the box which has more activity in fragment 4 (Excerpt 10). It is because the piano has the tendency to accumulate too much noise, if the sustain pedal is excessively used.

**Excerpt****10**

Chong Lim Ng: *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest*, fragment 4  
 Source: from composer (2018)

**Conclusion**

Chong Lim Ng, the composer for *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest (fragments from Rimba...)* (2008, revised in 2012) strongly encourages pianists to take more risks when making performance decisions and having the spontaneity and virtuosity when performing this piece. However, one must have thorough understanding towards the musical work and have deep appreciation towards the creation by the composer, which is much emphasized by Soviet pianist and pedagogue, Heinrich Neuhaus on his *artistic image*.

It is very fascinating to see that Ng employs the South East Asian music traditions and

incorporates the Western music compositional techniques in this piece. Ng's creativity on crafting eleven boxes based on the two main motivic ideas is extraordinary, though the work is technically challenging to perform. As the work is heavily influenced by the Malay and Javanese gamelan, pianists need to understand the Malaysian cultural characteristics and gamelan music, as Neuhaus pointed out the importance of being engaged to the musical composition in his *artistic image* concept. Once pianists have understood the musical context of *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* and done much performing considerations on each box, pianists are very welcomed to experiment and manipulate the musical elements differently.

Neuhaus also hugely emphasises the importance of musical score study, as it is the most crucial task for all performers, especially for those compositions which have complex compositional ideas and structure (Neuhaus 1993,17). Pianists need to observe the performance directions of Chong Lim Ng's *A Distant Voice of the Rain Forest* carefully, especially for those thematic boxes which are more complex. After realising the three main focal points from Neuhaus' *artistic image*, pianists are much welcomed to experiment with different performing order for the thematic boxes and creating their own interpretation.

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