



Spontaneous Representation and Thought-Out Patterns: A Semiological Analysis of the Philippine Kulintang's Improvisational Idiom

Hideaki Onishi and Pamela Costes-Onishi

Kulintang refers to the gongs and drum ensemble of the Philippines. As a musical genre, it gained popularity in the Philippines and the United States among non-Muslim southern Filipino people during the latter half of the 20th century.

Kulintang is an oral tradition and thus involves a lot of improvisation, but it has not really been taught that way outside the village context, seemingly the only place where improvisation is the norm. It is indeed hard to achieve the “feeling” inherent in the music as described by native performers, although it is an important factor to transmit in order for kulintang to develop dynamically. At present, only a few masters can really deliver kulintang music as it should be and most of the learners and performers can only copy their “versions,” knowingly or not.

The issue of improvisation in kulintang has remained within its scholarship. Usopay Cadar (1999), for example, referred to improvisation as kulintang's constitution. The purpose of this study is to unlock the internal workings of kulintang's variations through analysis and to offer new terminologies in describing the compositional and improvisational processes unique to the tradition. We are more inclined to use “spontaneous reinterpretation” and “thought-out patterns” rather than the respective Western concepts of improvisation and composition. The end goal is to provide a useful tool for kulintang learners and performers to create their own kulintang renditions based on the proper idiom.

Although previous studies have provided effective concepts in looking at the creative processes in kulintang, it seems that the issue of the actual creation of new renditions that can aid the learner of the tradition was not addressed. We will re-examine Jose Maceda's (1963) “rhythmic mode” and “nuclear unit” as well as Kristina Benitez's (2005) “musical phrase” and “module.”

The use of notation is helpful to understand the inner workings of kulintang. In the Philippines, a notation system has been developed in order to facilitate learning. At the University of the Philippines, students are given notated renditions by master musicians and simply memorize them to perform as though they were composed pieces as in Western art music. Kulintang has been taught by rote in the United States, although patterns are to be memorized in a certain order as finished works. In this study, we follow the cipher representation as introduced by Aga Mayo Butocan (1987) and followed by scholars like Benitez (2005). This is preferable since kulintang gongs do not have a fixed tuning system. A

staff notation will be also provided to introduce pitch equivalents of the numeric representation, however, so that the audience will be able to hear what is written.

In our previous study (Onishi and Costes-Onishi 2007), we adopted a semiological approach in the analysis of three renditions of *tagunggo* by a master musician for the following reasons: (1) the melody on kulintang gongs is based on repetition and variation of patterns and is thus susceptible to temporal or vertical segmentation; and (2) the absence of regulations that would control the simultaneity of pitches among the instruments in the kulintang ensemble (such as functional harmony in Western art music) allows the isolation of a single line for close examination. We discovered that the patterns are variegated through various means such as doubling, rhythmic shift, syncopation, and omission, and that these variations were ordered to create musically meaningful renditions with a climax toward the end. We will take a step further and examine what is variegated and what remains unchanged in these variations in an attempt to single out the so-called core (both in the melodic and rhythmic sense) of each pattern. In addition to the detailed motivic analysis, we will also examine other gongs and drum parts and study how they all relate to each other, in order to see if such cores tie them together as a musical whole.

Restoring kulintang's improvisational aspect through performance practice as well as academic research is expected to preserve and revitalize this unique musical tradition. We believe that kulintang as an improvisational tradition will develop more dynamically if learned in this manner. We therefore seek to answer the question how we can learn kulintang's idiom effectively outside of the village context.

References

Benitez, Kristina. "The Maguindanaon Kulintang: Musical Innovation, Transformation and the Concept of *Binalig*." Ph.D. diss., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005.

Butocan, Aga Mayo. *Palabunibuyan: A Repertoire of Music Pieces for the Maguindanaon Kulintangan*. Manila: Philippine Women's University, 1987.

Cadar, Usopay. Email communication. July 19, 1999.

Maceda, Jose. "The Music of Maguindanao in the Philippines." Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1963.

Onishi, Hideaki and Pamela Costes-Onishi. "'The Improvisational Structure of the Philippine Kulintang: A Semiological Analysis of Tagunggo Performances by Danongan Kalanduyan.'" Unpublished paper read at the College Music Society International Conference in Thailand, July 2007; and the Dutch-Flemish Society for Music Theory 9th International Conference in Groningen, the Netherlands, February 2007.

Biographies

Hideaki Onishi earned a Ph.D. in music theory at the University of Washington, Seattle, studying with Jonathan Bernard and John Rahn. His main research interest has been Western concert music in the 20th and 21st centuries and he has presented and published papers on works by Pierre Boulez, György Ligeti, and Toru Takemitsu in Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States. His involvement with kulintang dates back to 2001, when he began taking lessons with Pamela Costes-Onishi in Seattle. He helped her direct Filipino American Youth Center for Culture and the Arts (FAYCCA), a nonprofit organization in Tacoma, WA, and performed with her and her ensemble on numerous occasions. Onishi and Costes-Onishi recently formed the first kulintang group in Singapore, *Sari-Sari* (Variety) and have been actively performing ever since. Onishi's other kulintang teachers include Danongan "Danny" Kalanduyan and Kanapia Kalanduyan. He is currently Assistant Professor of Music Theory at Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, National University of Singapore.

Pamela Costes-Onishi earned her Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at the University of Washington, Seattle. She taught kulintang while completing her graduate studies and co-founded the Filipino American Youth Center for Culture and the Arts (FAYCCA) in Tacoma, WA. Her doctoral dissertation is on the music of Tunog Pil-AM, a Filipino-American youth group that incorporates Philippine indigenous instruments in their musical creations. She learned kulintang at the University of the Philippines under the tutelage of prominent scholars on Philippine music and master musicians. Her studies on Philippine musical childhoods and Philippine music hybridities will be published as book chapters. She has presented papers on Philippine music and ethnomusicology in the United States, the Netherlands, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Burma, and Singapore. Costes-Onishi is currently Lecturer in Music and Arts Appreciation at the American Center for Education, Singapore.