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Review Article

Musical creativity and the state of Southeast Asian music studies

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Seeding the tradition: Musical creativity in southern Vietnam

By ALEXANDER M. CANNON

Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2022. Pp. 279. Figures, Glossary, References, Index.

Sounding out the state of Indonesian music

Edited by ANDREW MCGRAW and CHRISTOPHER J. MILLER

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022. Pp. 345. Illustrations, Technical Notes, Index.

The field of Southeast Asian Studies has always included the study of performing arts and music, in particular. One of the earliest proponents of ethnomusicology, Jaap Kunst, based his work on observations of musical culture in Indonesia. Both area studies and ethnomusicology are born out of Western imperialism and empiricism, providing key methodological and analytical instruments for the ordering and classification of colonial knowledge directly or indirectly deployed for the subjugation of colonised subjects. Thus, the ethnomusicology of Southeast Asia is inherently attached to this ‘baggage’ of the privileged white male scholar’s inquiry of the Other. On the surface of the books reviewed here, the global order and institutional structures of such scholarship seem to be unchanged, as their respective author and editors *are* white men, based in the United Kingdom and the United States. However, they duly acknowledge and very clearly alert their readers to this very issue—the long-standing unequal power dynamics involved in the production of knowledge—and they attempt to address these issues with sincerity in their publications. Fortunately, a transparent framing of this postcolonial baggage results in a compelling, grounded study in Alexander Cannon’s monograph on the music of southern Vietnam, and a diverse and dynamic synergy of ideas in Andrew McGraw and Christopher Miller’s edited volume on Indonesian music. Both publications provide

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a clear narration about music in the context of the cultural paradigms of the nation-states studied.

The double entendre of 'the state' in McGraw and Miller's volume is apt, pointing toward the bounded nature of nation-states, while also signalling the current moment of music scholarship in relation to a genealogy of homogenous disciplinary boundaries for studying Indonesia. Thus, McGraw and Miller explicitly state that their work does not intend to limit the 'broad field' of 'Indonesian music' studies, but rather, aspires to recognise 'Indonesian music as the field, within which' the volume's contributing authors 'operate', while being aware of broader connections beyond said field (p. 3). *Sounding out the State of Indonesian Music* is developed from papers presented at a three-day conference in 2018 that was part of the 'State of the Field' series organised by the Southeast Asia Program and Modern Indonesia Project at Cornell University. The volume consists of 19 chapters divided into six sections that explore Indonesian music in the context of: musical communities; music, religion and civil society; popular musics and media; sound beyond and as music; music, gender and equality; and perspectives from practice. Along with Western ethnomusicologists and practitioners, the volume also reflects Indonesia's diversity with a variety of contributions and collaborations from and beyond the republic, including those by I Nyoman Catra (chap. 2), Darsono Hadiraharjo and Maho A. Ishiguro, (chap. 4), Jennifer Fraser and Saiful Hadi (chap. 5), Sumarsam (chap. 6), Danis Sugiyanto (chap. 9), Putu Tangkas Adi Hiranmayena (chap. 18), articulating diasporic and transnational perspectives.

More focused in scope, Cannon's monograph diverges from the majority of ethnomusicological publications on Vietnam by delving into the historical and contemporary contexts of the music of the nation's south. He highlights the particularities of southern Vietnam's musical culture, which intersects with the history of displaced Khmer and Cham peoples, who consequently absorbed 'numerous cultural influences from France, the United States and elsewhere' (p. 57). Historical debates are poignantly taken on by musicians to address the structural inequities of the Vietnamese nation-state as 'musicians from southern Vietnam use sound to advocate the voice of the diverse population of southern Vietnam within the national sphere, as they frequently view themselves as unequal partners in the creation of the contemporary Vietnamese nation' (ibid.). Thus, Cannon explicitly provides a local perspective and does well to give voice to southern Vietnamese musicians as the main contributors to his insights on the genre of music known as *đón ca tài tử* ('music for diversion').

Seeding the Tradition is organised as eight chapters, not including its Introduction and Conclusion. The first two chapters frame the work conceptually in terms of contested creativities and creativity in ethnomusicology. The third chapter provides a historical background, while the fourth details the formal musical qualities of *đón ca tài tử*. Chapter 5 explores the metaphors used by *đón ca tài tử* practitioners to conceptualise their music. Chapter 6 explores the contradictions and problems of preserving traditional music in Vietnam along the lines of postcolonial development discourse and state-sanctioned cultural heritage projects. Chapter 7 explores how musicians strategically sustain their art by evoking a 'rhetoric of the ruin' to give voice to artists who are increasingly overlooked, while aligning themselves with state policies to develop (and fund) the preservation of traditional cultural practices

(p. 196). The penultimate chapter considers how traditional southern Vietnamese musicians have adapted to new contexts of performance such as festivals, popular competitions and television programmes. In so doing they have ‘adopted new forms of technology to disseminate their message and understanding of sound’ to ‘mediate past creative practice and current modern conditions’, wherein ‘dynamic approaches to performance ... keep traditional music spontaneous and meaningful’ (p. 215). This brings to the fore how traditional practices are sustained in the face of rapid development, modernity and globalisation; a theme that resonates with many traditional arts in the region.

At its core, Cannon’s book challenges essentialist ideas derived from ‘Western models of creativity’ and seeks to ‘deemphasize, in particular, the focus on the individual creative genius and the assumed mastery that’ such individuals possess (pp. 32–3). He calls for ethnomusicologists to pay attention to the ‘proactive and generative’ processes and forms of creativity expressed by non-Western musicians who ‘perform within local models of creation and react to—and occasionally reject—global models of creativity’ (p. 32). In enacting a framework to analyse Vietnamese music, Cannon offers a critical review of ethnomusicological studies that fall short of critiquing the colonial and Western neoliberal assumptions about creativity and individual mastery. He draws attention to the works of ‘women scholars, queer scholars, and scholars of colour’ who ‘offer dehumanist and decolonized perspectives that must resound more widely in ethnomusicology’ (p. 54).

This critical approach to understanding creativity consequently raises questions concerning the performing arts and *creative economy* discourse that pervades much government policy, promotion and funding for the arts in Southeast Asia. As Southeast Asian governments blindly jump on the neoliberal bandwagon of promoting their cultural industries and creative (human) capital, Cannon’s book prompts readers to question the very models and schema on which these initiatives are based. If the measurements and valuations of such creative capital and cultural novelty are based on Western-centric models, what is the impact of state-endorsed cultural development projects on local artistic practices and their practitioners? What is a sustainable way to encourage the rejuvenation of the arts on local terms, unfettered from a postcolonial neoliberal agenda of development? Scholars need to look past the exploited products of local creative practice and consider the processes that are grounded in local ethos and creativity.

In exploring the creative process of *đón ca tài tử*, Cannon unpacks the notion of *xuất thần* (roughly translated as ‘ecstasy’) referenced by select southern Vietnamese musicians. The affective aim of a performance encapsulated by *xuất thần* is explained as ‘an altered state of mind of the musician who appears so engrossed in the creation of music and the conviviality of the social performance setting that other events just beyond the performance space go unnoticed’ (p. 128). Notably, this chapter reminds readers of the limitations of Western models of creativity. When explaining the affective state described above, ethnomusicologists like Thomas Turino draw on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of ‘flow’—a state of intense concentration in performing a given task with great accuracy’ (p. 129). Cannon finds this notion incomplete and prefers to use the term ‘ecstasy’ (drawn from *xuất thần*), which resonates with the concepts found in ‘Arab classical music’ of ‘*tarab* and *sultanah*’ explored in

depth by the ethnomusicologist Ali Jihad Racy (ibid.). While *tarab* is associated with the social environment of a musical performance, Cannon finds that *sultanah*, a form of ‘modal ecstasy’, is closer to *xuất thân*: ‘the apogee performance experience for musicians in a social setting’, whereby ‘the production and experience of sound empowers and overpowers the musicians, and if successful, they perform good music effortlessly’ (ibid.). Cannon also connects *xuất thân* with Daoist ideas, whereby in attainment of one’s creative autonomy, ‘one must dismiss the self rather than develop it’ (p. 130). Here, the Western model of creativity is effectively challenged, and the primacy of individual mastery is complicated in terms of artistic practice.

Scholars of Southeast Asian music must therefore consider the affective implications, power dynamics and collective aspects of making and experiencing music, where the performer, audience and communities of practice are of equal importance. While Cannon provides a lucid framework for further examining musical practices in Southeast Asia, many of the chapters in McGraw and Miller’s volume also describe and reflect on performance practices that resonate well with Cannon’s approach to understanding musical creativity.

This prompts me to ask: are there hierarchical structures of mastery in Indonesian music that are inherently local (pre-colonial) and are there cases in which the expression and embodiment of mastery can also be a means of empowerment? There are multiple case studies where the concept of musical mastery and empowerment are explored in *Sounding Out the State*. One such is explored in Christina Sunardi’s study of ‘the magnetic power of femaleness’ in cross-gendered gamelan dancers in Malang, Jawa (pp. 287–302). This reading of power in Indonesian individuals who seemingly occupy a marginal position in society reveals how their creative mastery grounded in local practices empowers them as performers.

By contrast, but also resonating with the notion of creative mastery and empowerment, Rebekah E. Moore’s chapter explores the international and local prominence of Balinese rock band *Navicula* as eco-activists (pp. 133–50). Moore reads *Navicula*’s musical activism in line with the notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism due to their adoption of North American and British ‘grunge, metal and psychedelic rock’, while being actively involved in the Indonesian ‘underground rock movement steeped in political dissidence ... as well as student activists opposing the Suharto regime’, thereby embodying ‘rock as both a globally circulating and definitively local music’ (pp. 136–7). Read alongside Cannon’s monograph, *Navicula* can be seen as articulating a creative mastery of global popular music styles instrumentalised for a social-environmental cause that resonates with both Indonesian and international audiences. Unlike cross-gender Javanese dancers and southern Vietnamese musicians, their agency is expressed with greater sonic amplification and the more widely circulated platform of the global popular music industry. Perhaps, the case of *Navicula*’s vernacular cosmopolitanism—in their ‘mastery’ of both local and global cultural contexts in their music and activism—can be read as a creative act of decolonisation and empowerment as well. However, such idealistic readings need to be tempered with more problematic realities present in Southeast Asian music. On the one hand, cosmopolitan access to global culture might empower some Indonesian artists to challenge social injustice. On the other hand, such cosmopolitan conditions may also reproduce postcolonial and global neoliberal inequities,

brought about by creative individuals who (advertently or inadvertently) perpetuate the notion of Western creative mastery.

Such is clearly unravelled in Julia Byl's chapter, which draws on the case of the pop musician, jazz guitarist, composer and producer, Viky Sianipar, of Toba Batak and Sundanese parentage, who released five albums titled *Toba Dream* (pp. 21–39). These albums' wide success in Indonesia is largely due to Sianipar's contemporary fusion of Western popular music (including electronica, rap and jazz) and selective elements of Toba Batak traditional music and lyrics. Byl bases her analysis on the song and music video, *Tongging Hill*, which was released in the second volume of *Toba Dream*. The song features the 'modern sonic wash' of Sianipar's 'electric guitar', alternating 'abruptly to the sound of the ritual *gondang sabangunan*', which includes 'a set of five tuned drums' that exhibit 'a vastly different tuning system from that played by Sianipar's electric guitar' (p. 25). The music video depicts Toba Batak musicians entering Sianipar's studio, where he instructs them when to play their traditional instruments, 'conspicuously' demonstrating his ideas to them written on 'musical manuscript', thereby presenting himself as 'a master composer executing his vision' (ibid.). Sianipar reproduces the unequal power dynamic of (Western) mastery, subsuming the cultural contributions from indigenous artists under his individual creative vision, catered for non-indigenous musical tastes. As a musician trained and practised in Western styles, he overtly diminishes the agency of his Toba Batak collaborators in the interests of creating an aesthetically pleasing and novel music product for wider Indonesian and global consumption.

While power inequities are played out within Indonesia, there are, however, more empowering narratives associated with Indonesian music and musicians abroad. Hiranmayena's chapter poignantly provides some insight into this matter (pp. 306–19). As a transnational individual and son of an established gamelan instructor based in the United States, his positionality clearly indicates the potential disjunctures that arise from oscillating between multiple positions of mastery. The chapter titled, 'Fix your Face: Performing Attitudes between Mathcore and *Beleganjur*' narrates the author's own creative experience of combining the Balinese processional music of *gamelan beleganjur* with the song *Fix Your Face* by the American group Dilinger Escape Plan, who perform a sub-genre of heavy metal called mathcore. Hiranmayena, in naming his version of the song, translates the English title to the Balinese title *Benen Mua*, a phrase 'employed primarily by Balinese parents to their children ... to describe the performance of attitudes in contexts that require a momentary reshaping of identity: an attitude that resembles the passive aggressiveness of cultural mediation, a comfort found in the frustrations of social relations, and affects created in generational shifts' (p. 308). The author proceeds to reflect lucidly on his positionality as a transnational individual, both privileged and hindered by his constant travelling between the United States and his family home in Bali due to his father's employment as an established gamelan instructor and director in American universities. Thus, for Hiranmayena—who is now a graduate student in ethnomusicology and gamelan instructor in America—it is his 'mastery' of the Balinese gamelan that has empowered him with a transnational experience; to have the opportunity to create and reflect on his dual interests of Balinese gamelan and mathcore, in reflective consideration of his mediated Indonesian-American identity.

Both publications transparently situate North America as a frame of understanding Southeast Asia. Cannon begins his monograph by enacting the ‘old and tired trope’ of referencing the Vietnam War, situating himself as an American author who grew up with the ‘collective memories’ and ‘fiction’ that generate ‘an understanding of Vietnam as a war and not a country’, whereby “‘Vietnam’ becomes an index of conflict’ in Western representations of the state and its often obscured people (p. 2). In truth, Vietnamese immigrants and the wide integration of their culture—such as the ubiquitous phở restaurant—in American society have made ‘the United States ... more Vietnamese than Vietnam has become American’ (ibid.).

Similarly, in *Sounding Out the State*, the editors highlight its contributors’ ‘predominantly North American perspective on Indonesian music, with limited representation of the field’s international scope’ (p. 3). The ubiquity of Indonesian gamelan ensembles in North American higher education institutions also resonate with Cannon’s observation cited above. The volume’s editors McGraw and Miller, while acknowledging how ‘most non-gamelan facets of Indonesian music in North America have sprung in one way or another from the teaching of gamelan at academic institutions’, attempt to pay attention to lesser-known forms of Indonesian music such as avant-garde improvised sound art, keroncong and kontemporer. The long-established genre of keroncong music is ‘itself a crystallization of a long history of hybridization’, while the term kontemporer represents the ‘innovative fusions of keroncong and American old-time music’ (p. 4).

While it seems that North American culture, through neo-liberal globalisation, has shaped Indonesian music, the volume and its contributors provide novel insights as to how Indonesian music is equally re-shaping North American music. Sugiyanto’s chapter provides an account of the development of keroncong groups in North American universities since 2008, culminating in the formation of the keroncong group Rumput (‘grass’), founded by Andrew McGraw (the volume’s co-editor) and Hannah Standiford, based at the University of Richmond, Virginia (pp. 152–4). The group mixes the keroncong style of *langgam jawa* with ‘Javanese, Balinese, Sundanese, Appalachian, and Irish musics’, a combination that could only be realised in this North American context (p. 155). Thus, it is equally important to consider the unique creative possibilities afforded by transnational contexts of Southeast Asian popular music beyond the region. Such instances of diasporic/transnational music practised beyond Southeast Asia have to be considered in tandem with the impact of foreign or global influences on music within the region. Ultimately, a constellation of influences and multidirectional flows of musical exchange are played out within, across and beyond the (geographical, conceptual and aesthetic) borders of Southeast Asian music.

In summary, this review of two contrasting publications, albeit focusing on the related theme of Southeast Asian music, has drawn attention to new approaches in understanding local and transnational creative practices. While the publications are authored and edited by white, male scholars of Southeast Asia—inescapably recalling postcolonial orders of knowledge production—their contributions are sufficiently self-aware of such power dynamics and this is addressed transparently in their exploration of southern Vietnamese music and a diverse survey of Indonesian music. Such ethnographic reflexivity in these works has resulted in a compelling, detailed and locally

grounded study of Vietnam's *đón ca tài tử* and an eclectic, novel volume on Indonesian music.

In critiquing essentialist conceptions of creativity, Cannon's study outlines the elusive boundaries and poetic schemas of practice in southern Vietnamese music. The ethos of creativity that defines southern Vietnamese music draws from Eastern philosophies and contexts, diverging from Western notions of creativity, mastery and designations of the 'master' musician. Cannon's book takes a resolute stance against the essentialism produced by Western notions of creativity posited on the individual achievements of 'genius' artists. He calls for the examination of artistic creativity that rejects 'mastery' as understood in neoliberal paradigms, drawing attention to ethnomusicological frameworks that emphasise creative acts as decolonising, agential, reparative, interactive and playful (pp. 44–50).

Moving forward, I will end with Jeremy Wallach's reflections in *Sounding out the State* about being an 'anti-anti essentialist' in studying Indonesian popular music (pp. 162–79). Such a stance 'rejects both the ethnonationalist's racial essentialism and the dogmatic postmodernist's bottomless deconstruction of a stable identity' (p. 167). Diverging from Cannon's attention to traditional music, Wallach advocates strongly for the study of popular music (despite its overtly global inclinations) to be explicitly recognised as distinct to its country of origin. He specifies how Indonesian popular music, while not always articulating indigenous sounds and instrumentation, is created and expressed in distinctly local contexts of meaning, expression and consumption. Thus, he urges readers to consider 'an ethnographically grounded exploration of how music structures and practices signify in the cultural lifeworlds of the people who create and understand those structures and practices' (p. 171). While this is apt and obvious, it is a much-needed reminder for all scholars of Southeast Asian performing arts and culture that resonates well with Cannon's equally grounded approach to studying *đón ca tài tử*. The recognition of distinct Indonesian cultural particularities in cross-dressing Javanese gamelan dancers must be on par with acknowledging the uniquely Indonesian experiences of Balinese eco-rock group Navicula; the (contested) Indonesian indigeneity of Viky Sianipar's Toba Batak adaptations/appropriations; the (diasporic) Indonesian entanglements of Hiranmayena's experiments with Balinese gamelan and American mathcore rock; and the (transnational) incursion of Indonesian keroncong in America. As exemplified in the publications reviewed, the current state of Southeast Asian music scholarship calls for a turn away from the essentialist, imperialist 'baggage' of an antiquated area studies approach to studying musical culture in isolated geographies. Instead, a simultaneous recognition of the entanglements of postcoloniality, globalisation and transnational exchanges alongside distinctly local contexts, concepts and processes of creativity will drive our continuous understanding of Southeast Asia's arts and its peoples.