Cosmopolitan Intimacies: Malay Film Music of the Independence Era


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[Review length: 638 words • Review posted on March 6, 2019]

The increasing scholarship on film music largely consists of writings that focus on textual and musical inspects of both American and European cinematic traditions. Therefore, Adil Johan’s book, Cosmopolitan Intimacies: Malay Film Music of the Independence Era, becomes an evocative publication with reference to the principal aspects of this study. This is, firstly, because the book deals with Southeast Asian film music perception, creation, and reception, namely, in Malaysia and Singapore—an area outside the so-called Western world; and, secondly, because the author (as an ethnomusicologist) approaches his subject from a sociocultural point of view, thus resulting in a more undemanding way for the readers to tackle the content and the context of his analyses without losing their academic character.

In his stimulating book, Johan examines what is now recognized as “the Golden Age of Malay film”—a label that is largely linked to the captivating music of the commercial films of the 1950s and the 1960s and its contribution to the formation of national identity. The book has 416 pages and contains valuable supplementary material, such as numerous pictures, a rich glossary, a list of bibliographic and filmic references, music scores and transcriptions, excerpts from interviews, and an index. Methodologically, the author makes use of various historical, textual, and interpretive tools to further enrich his study of Malay film music. Hence, he explores the soundtrack of selected films, he analyses quite a few film songs and their lyrics, he musically scrutinizes specific film sequences, he employs interviews of film composers and musicians, and he incorporates relevant quotes from several periodicals of the era under question.

Johan primarily discusses the concepts of decolonization, ethnonationalism, musical cosmopolitanism, and eclecticism, the relations between the traditional and the modern qualities of nationhood, stardom, and popular youth culture in the Southeast Asian Peninsula, as well as the nostalgic notion of “indiepretation” that signifies a rather fascinating, yet ambivalent, postmodern mode of interpreting independence in Malaysia and Singapore. By referring to P. Ramlee, Zubir Said, and Kassim Masdor, three of the most prominent composers of Malay-language films of the 1950s and 1960s, the author narrates the chronicle of Malay film music that practically embodies the history of a recently established nation. In this framework, film music becomes a celebrated indicator, a sophisticated melting pot, and a symbolic arena where the past, the present, and the future compete with one another to create hybrid artistic and cultural forms.

Cosmopolitan Intimacies: Malay Film Music of the Independence Era provides fresh insights to a crucial phase of Malay recent history that has been invisible till the present day—at least to Western readership. As a result, the book might possibly be of particular importance to a wide range of researchers working on sociocultural issues relating to Southeast Asian area studies and give them a different perspective that highlights the unique role of culture in the construction and consolidation of modern states. Film music, in particular, as a formation that combines audio and visual channels of human experience that balance between realistic and abstract types of representation, could easily become a site of combining groundbreaking technologies and customary aesthetics.

In the concluding chapter of the book, Johan reveals that “Malay film music was indeed constitutive of a homogeneous national identity, but it was also inherently hybrid, pluralistic and subversive” (273). It is this distinct aspect of Malay film music that the author draws attention to. Therefore, his exploration is not restricted to a straightforward interpretation of hegemonic, dominant, or mainstream practices of arts, politics, and economics; instead, Johan also underlines the alterations, the paradoxes, and the inconsistencies during the above multi-layered process in addition to the contemporary engagement with the past as Western cultural innovation encounters local traditions. It is, perhaps, this kind of ambiguity that makes all of these films and musics of “the Golden Age” still recognizable and worthwhile.