

"NOBAT TABAL" – THE SONG THAT INSTALLS A SULTAN

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Abstract

In the Throne Hall of the Iskandariah Palace, the Sultan sits motionless on the dais while the *nobat* orchestra starts to play a *lagu*. It is traditionally believed that this special piece would determine the legitimacy and length of the new Sultan's rule. Considered as the most significant piece among the sixteen *lagu* in the Royal Nobat of Perak's repertoire, "Nobat Tabal" as the title implies, is played during the most important ceremony of all – the *pertabalan* of the Sultan. The duration which the Sultan has to sit out is measured by a repeated rhythmic sequence or *ragam* called *man*. There has been confusion, even among nobat musicians as to the actual meaning and function of *man*. It has been termed as "series of notes" or "tunes" (Linehan, 1951) and used to describe the repertoire (P.M. Shariffuddin and Abdul Latif Haji Ibrahim, 1977). This paper looks into this unique piece and what *man* actually stands for, based on interviews with royal musicians or *orang kalur* and practical demonstrations by Toh Setia Guna Abdul Aziz, leader of the royal orchestra.

Introduction

Tabal comes from the Arabic word *tabl* (طبل) which means to beat a drum, drumbeat or drum (Madina, 1997). In India, the word *tabl* or *tabla* is generally known as a type of drum played in Indian classical music. In Malay, *tabal* is described as a type of drum called *beduk* or *tabuh* used during the installation of a Raja (Teuku Iskandar, 1986). Although this statement is yet to be ascertained – since the use of *beduk* or *tabuh* are generally confined to *masjid* or *surau* (small *masjid*) – the term also means “a gathering (or ceremony) to officially celebrate the crowning of a Raja” (p. 1157) where the drums of the *nobat* play a significant role. The importance of the drums in the *istiadat* resulted in the term *tabal* ultimately being used to denote the whole installation ceremony. In the Perak court, the *Istiadat Pertabalan* is the most important ceremony and is performed to install a new ruler of the state. It involves the following four ceremonies, *Tabal Kerajaan*, *Tabal Adat*, *Tabal Pusaka* and visits to the graves of previous Sultans.

During the installation ceremony, a special *lagu* or song is played by the *nobat* orchestra which is aptly called “*Nobat Tabal*.” The length of the piece is measured by rhythmic sequences called *man*, which will be explained later. Unlike the song “*Gendang Berangkat*,” this piece does not represent any physical movement of the Sultan; on the contrary, it is played during the moment when the Sultan is motionless. Since it is traditionally believed that the duration of the Sultan’s stillness would determine his reign; the longest and most complex of *lagu* is used.

The Repertoire

“*Nobat Tabal*” is one of the sixteen songs found in the repertoire of the Perak *nobat*. The *Misa Melayu* provides the earliest record of the *nobat* repertoire (Ahmad Fauzi, 1992). It gives two sets of *lagu* (song) consisting of eight pieces each, where the first eight *lagu* “came out from the sea” (pp. 138) and the other eight was added by the Perak sultanate. The first set is listed as follows:

1. *Gendang Berangkat*
2. *Arak Antelas*
3. *Kubang Si Kumali*
4. *Rama-Rama Terbang Tinggi*
5. *Arak-Arakan Panjang*
6. *Arak-Arakan Pandak (Pendek?)*¹
7. *Dang Gidang*

¹ Since Jawi, like the Arabic language, generally has no vowels, translators tend to misspell especially words which are not too familiar.

8. Puteri Mandi Mayang

The "added" pieces are listed as follows:

9. Juang Beralih
10. Lenggang Encik Kobat
11. Gendang Perang
12. Anak Raja Basuh Kaki
13. Tabal
14. Nobat Khamis
15. Nobat Subuh
16. Nobat Isya

Almost a hundred years later, these sixteen lagu was still maintained in the repertoire, as listed in the *Adat Lembaga* (Raja Bendahara et. al., 1935). However, titles of a few *ragam* (another name for lagu) have been changed and minor spelling variations existed until today. Below is a list of ragam which titles have seen some changes throughout the years.

1836	1935	1963	1985	2006
1. Arak Antelas	Arak-Arak	Arak-Arak Antandis (Arak-Arak Antelas)	Arak-Arak Atandis (Entelas), (Arak-Arak Untandai)	Arak-Arak
2. Kubang Si Kumali	Kumbang Kemali	Kumbang Si-Kumali	Kumbang Si Kumali (Kumbang Kembali)	Kumbang Kemali
3. Arak-Arakan Panjang	Aleh-Aleh Panjang	Aleh-Aleh Panjang	Aleh-Aleh Panjang	Aleh-Aleh Panjang
4. Arak-Arakan Pendak	Aleh Pendek	Aleh-Aleh Pandak	Aleh-Aleh Pendak	Aleh-Aleh Pendak
5. Dang Gidang	Dang Gendang	Dang Gidang	Dang Gendang	Dang Gendang
6. Tabal	Nobat Tabal	Nobat Tabal	Nobat Tabal	Nobat Tabal
7. Nobat Isya	Nobat Raja	Nobat Raja	Nobat Raja	Nobat Raja

Song Type

The pieces in the repertoire are divided into *lagu tetap* and *lagu berpalu*, based on the occasions in which they are played. *Lagu tetap* are pieces fixed or assigned to be performed for specific occasions, whereas *lagu berpalu* are pieces selected at random based on their suitability during a particular occasion.

Lagu Tetap	Lagu Berpalu
1. Gendang Berangkat	1. Gendang Berangkat
2. Nobat Tabal	2. Puteri Mandi Mayang
3. Nobat Raja	3. Dang Gindang
4. Nobat Subuh	4. Rama-Rama Terbang Tinggi
	5. Kumbang Si Kumali
	6. Arak-Arak
	7. Aleh-Aleh Panjang
	8. Aleh-Aleh Pendek
	9. Lenggang Cek Kobat
	10. Jong Beraleh
	11. Anak Raja Basuh Kaki
	12. Gendang Perang
	13. Nobat Khamis

Notice that "Gendang Berangkat" is the only song found in both categories.

The Musical Style

The music of the nobat is generally medium in tempo. This gives an aura of stateliness and majesty, befitting the status and power of a sultan. Its haunting sounds reverberating in the *Balairong Seri* (audience hall) evoke an eerie feeling, conjuring images of Malay sultans of bygone eras. Confined within the palace walls and virtually trapped in time, this pristine ancient Malay art form offers an aural glimpse of the past. This section analyzes the music of the Perak nobat.

Form

All nobat lagu or *ragam* are sectional, consisting of an introduction and repeated rhythmic sections. A lagu starts with an introduction, signalled by the long single notes of the *nafiri*, followed by the *nengkara* which determines the tempo of the piece. The *serunai* then plays the melody to beautify the piece until the *nafiri* signals the end of the lagu. To end a lagu, the *nengkara* player will give a signal to the other players through eye contact or physical gestures. The pieces are often combined to form a medley of four lagu, which amount to about 12 to 13 minutes in duration.

Rhythm

Every single nobat lagu is distinguished by its rhythm, which is built upon repeating patterns or figures. A lagu may have a pattern that ranges from a short 6-beat to a long 136-beat phrase. The large rhythmic groupings are typical of traditional Southeast Asian music, which are generally binary or can be divided into smaller beat units of usually 4 or 8 beats. However, the cyclical rhythms of the Perak nobat are found to have a mixture of regular and irregular meters, which are also non-binary. The basic rhythm of a piece is mainly played in unison by the *nengkara* and *gendang nobat* or *melalu*, which also produce different timbres. Finally, *gendang peningkah* is used to play interlocking rhythms and completes the whole rhythm section.

Melody

Melody is played by the *serunai* in all of the nobat lagu. Although the *nafiri* can also be considered a melodic instrument, its function is limited only to playing static single notes, signalling the beginning and ending of a piece. Due to the manner in which the instrument is constructed, the *serunai* produces a loud and piercing sound that penetrates through the ensemble. Contrary to the Western notion of melody as the abstract 'idea' that can be remembered in a piece of music; the melody played by the *serunai* is not meant to be discernable or tactile. The function of the *serunai* is to only beautify rather than identify a piece and each lagu uses similar melodic contours and phrases, with a little variation or improvisation. This is similar to the music of *wayang kulit Siam* in which identical melodic phrases played by the *serunai* are repeated in other different pieces in the repertoire (Matusky, 1993). According to Matusky, this is common in an oral tradition where music is not written down (*ibid.*). For centuries, young aspiring players learn these phrases by listening and imitating older *serunai* players (usually their fathers) and learning the proper fingering positions. The melody is a mixture of fast and highly embellished lines laced with ornaments, and long sustained notes. These lines and phrases are played using the 'circular breathing' technique which produces an unbroken flow of sound from beginning until the end of a

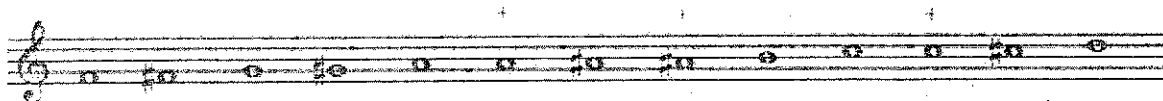
piece. Since it is not bounded by the rhythmic meters of the drums, the melody flows freely with such fluidity that it provides a contrasting linear feel to the music. However, since there is no fixed tuning system, the pitch of the melody varies from player to player but the overall form and structure remain the same.

Tonal Vocabulary and Scales

Analysis of the serunai lagu was made on pieces played by three different players of varying experience and style. Due to the way the instrument is made and played, the pitch of the serunai varies a little. It is common to hear slightly lower or higher pitches (noted as + in Example 1) than the Western-tempered tuning system, especially in the long notes. Nevertheless, it is possible to produce an approximation of a tonal vocabulary that forms the basic melodic structure typical for the music of the Perak nobat. As shown in Example 1, the tonal range generally used by the serunai is less than an octave (F to D), almost similar to the *serunai anak* of the *wayang kulit Siam*.

EXAMPLE 1

Tonal Vocabulary of the Serunai



Three predominantly chromatic 5-, 7- and 8-tone scales are found in the serunai lagu, encompassing the range of less than an octave. The pentatonic and heptatonic scales are made up of a series of half and whole tones, while the 8-tone scale is purely chromatic. The heptatonic scale starts with a major second interval, which is also found between the fourth and fifth degree of both the pentatonic and heptatonic scales (see Example 2).

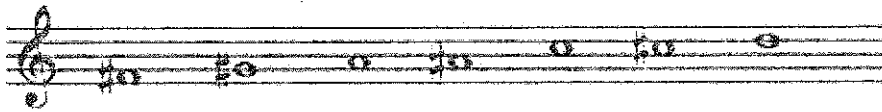
EXAMPLE 2

Serunai Scales

Pentatonic



Heptatonic



8-Tone Chromatic



In most cases, pitch centers lie in the third and fourth scale degree of the pentatonic and heptatonic scales or the fifth and sixth of the 8-tone chromatic scale.

Phrases

There are two types of phrases (also called lagu) used by the serunai, which are called *senangin*² and *merawan*³. These phrases are played interchangeably by the player in a particular piece. The difference between *senangin* and *merawan* is explained by Azini, one of the serunai players:

"Bezanya ni antara merawan dengan senangin ni dia...petik dia tu. Dia kalau yang senangin tu dia galak petiknya...Yang merawan ni dia kurang petik dia...itu beza dia. Tapi sekali main mesti ada dua-dua sekali"

² Threadfin fish usually found in tropical waters.

³ A type of tree with numerous sub-species valued for furniture making.

The difference between *merawan* and *senangin* is... the 'pluck' (referring to the fingering). In *senangin* the 'pluck' is more 'excited'... the 'pluck' is less in *merawan*... that's the difference. But both must be available when playing.

Haji Lop Zahari, a retired Perak serunai player, now playing for the Selangor nobat, describes *senangin* as *merayu* (pleading or begging) and *merawan* as just slow notes played *turun naik* (down and up). However, from the analysis of the serunai transcriptions and explanations given by the players, an additional phrase can be added – the introduction. Now there are three distinct phrases that characterize every serunai lagu – introduction, *senangin* and *merawan* (noted as *i*, *s* and *m* respectively in the rectangular boxes as shown in Example 3). The biggest interval in a serunai lagu is played in the introduction, usually a perfect fourth or fifth. In a four-piece medley, the introduction is played only once since the serunai is the only instrument that does not stop in between lagu. However there are times when the second serunai player plays a new lagu in between the medley where the introduction is again played.

The *senangin* phrase is played using many melodic ornaments and with more step-wise melodic contours. It accelerates with half- or one-tone trills and embellishments leading to the long vibrato-less and slower *turun naik* or half- and one-tone vibratos of the *merawan*. These two phrases then alternate throughout the piece or a medley of pieces until a signal is given for the ensemble to stop.

EXAMPLE 3

Excerpt of a Serunai Lagu
(Transcribed by Raja Iskandar Raja Halid)

The musical score consists of seven staves of music, each beginning with a treble clef and a common time signature. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings. The first staff has a dynamic marking of *s* (sforzando). The second staff has a dynamic marking of *s*. The third staff has dynamic markings of *s* and *m* (mezzo-forte). The fourth staff has a dynamic marking of *m*. The fifth staff has dynamic markings of *m* and *s*. The sixth staff has dynamic markings of *s* and *m*. The seventh staff has a dynamic marking of *m*. The music is characterized by a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often grouped in beams, and some longer note values with ties.

Man

The term *man* was first mentioned by R. J. Wilkinson (1951) while describing the installation of the Sultan of Perak. According to him, while the Sultan sits motionless on the dais, the nobat orchestra plays "a certain series of notes a certain number of times; each series is called a *man*" (p. 63). Wilkinson further explains that the "Sultan fixes the number of *man* that he can sit out, but the number should not exceed nine or be less than four" (*ibid.*). He was referring to the *tabal adat* where according to traditional belief, the number of *man* played would determine the length of the Sultan's reign. W. Linehan (1951) on the other

hand, describes *man* as "tunes" or "staves of tunes" which are played on "solemn occasions, such as the installation of a ruler" (pp. 63). He speculates that *man* is probably derived from the word *mantera* or "incantation intoned to the accompaniment of the drums and other instruments" (*ibid.*).

P.M. Shariffuddin and Abdul Latif Haji Ibrahim (1977) in comparing the terms used for tunes in both the Royal Nobat of Brunei and Perak said, "In the Royal Nobat of Brunei, the tunes have no specific label as *Man* in the Nobat of Perak. They simply are called as *Lagu* or *Irama*" (pp. 12). There has been confusion, even among nobat musicians as to the actual meaning and function of *man*. Some of them attribute *man* to the rhythmic pattern (or patterns) that differentiates each nobat lagu. However, the present Toh Setia Guna insists that the term only applies to the rhythmic sequence of the piece "Nobat Tabal," similar to what was described by Wilkinson, although the piece is not mentioned by name. This piece has the longest and most elaborate rhythmic patterns, consisting of three phrases played in succession, shown as A, A2 and B in Example 4. These three phrases make one *ragam* and this *ragam* is further repeated three times to make one *man*, or "series of notes" said by Wilkinson. The end of each *man* is signalled with another short phrase (marked as C), which is not considered as part of the *man*.

As shown in Example 4, the first 30-beat 'A' phrase is repeated in 'A2' and followed by a 76-beat phrase 'B'. In the third cycle of repeat, there is a slight alteration to the 16-beat phrase in bar 9, thus the use of the $\sqrt{2}$ direction. These "*dua pendek satu panjang*" (literally two short one long) *ragam* as described by Toh Setia Guna, end with an 18-beat phrase labelled as 'C', which is slower in tempo. As usual, the nengkara and gendang nobat play in unison, while the gendang peningkah interlocks with upbeat quavers (some of the improvised beats are marked in brackets). The accented 'tik' played by both the gendang nobat and peningkah are also played muted or damped.

During the installation of Sultan Idris Shah, eight *ragam* was played and not eight *man* as reported by Raja Norsheela (1987). This is agreed upon by the Toh Setia Guna since one *man* is about three minutes in duration and it would have taken nearly half an hour for Sultan Idris to sit out the eight *man*. The eight *ragam* amounted to almost three *man* or about nine minutes in duration, which is more reasonable.

EXAMPLE 4

The Man of "Nobat Tabal"

(Transcribed by Raja Iskandar Raja Halid)

Approx. no. 149

Nengklau
Cendang Nobat
Cendang Peningklau

This block contains three staves of musical notation. The first staff is labeled 'Nengklau' and has a tempo marking of 149. The second staff is labeled 'Cendang Nobat' and the third is labeled 'Cendang Peningklau'. Each staff begins with a box containing a letter (A, B, C) and a number (1, 2, 3). The notation consists of rhythmic patterns with vertical stems and horizontal lines, typical of traditional Indonesian notation.

This block contains three staves of musical notation, labeled N, GN, and GP. Each staff begins with a box containing a letter (A, B, C) and a number (1, 2, 3). The notation consists of rhythmic patterns with vertical stems and horizontal lines.

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Approx. no. 100

N
GN
GP

This block contains three staves of musical notation, labeled N, GN, and GP. Each staff begins with a box containing a letter (A, B, C) and a number (1, 2, 3). The notation consists of rhythmic patterns with vertical stems and horizontal lines.

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A - A2 - B = 1 Ragam 3 Ragam = 1 Man

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