

A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPOSITION WITH MYANMAR AND WESTERN MUSICAL LANGUAGES

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Abstract

In the 21st Century Myanmar, *mahar gita*, a once highly regarded and sophisticated form of Myanmar music, has fallen out of favor. No new *mahar gita* has been composed since Daw Saw Mya Aye Kyi, the last great *mahar gita* composer, passed away in 1968. There is little scholarly research and public interest has been on decline since Colonial times. This study aims to address this and grow interest in *mahar gita* by 1) bringing *mahar gita* into today's contemporary context via cross-cultural composition, and 2) through providing transcribed scores and music analysis for younger generations of Myanmar musicians. The musical elements for this research are collected from four sources: 1) books and documents; 2) interviews with the *mahar gita* experts; 3) study with Myanmar music educator; and, 4) transcription of key works.

There are two key results. Firstly, a comprehensive discussion of the musical elements of the *pat pyoe* derived from the systematic analysis of the transcribed score of *Hman Ya Wai*, a *pat pyoe* song. Secondly, *pat pyoe* musical elements are combined with Western musical elements in *Kyatthayay*, a cross-cultural composition that brings *mahar gita* into contemporary context. This study provides the starting point for future research that might include analysis other highly regarded *pat pyoe* songs for their musical characteristics or the study of the idiomatic playing techniques and orchestration of Myanmar traditional instruments.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Compositon, Pat Pyoe, Myanmar Music

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1. Introduction

Mahar gita, ancient court music, is an invaluable treasure for Myanmar both historically and musically but forgotten by the new generations today (Amar, 2004). As a Myanmar composer living in the 21st Century, I argue that to make this valuable music to be a living art today and it must also be made relevant. Although there were different approaches to show a new possibility of *mahar gita*, I chose to compose a cross-cultural work with the musical elements of *pat pyoe*, a subgenre of *mahar gita*, and Western compositional techniques to show a new direction of Myanmar traditional music. I also select Western music alongside with *pat pyoe* for this new creation because of my musical background as a church musician. Through my experiences in Nirmita composers' workshops⁵ in 2016 and 2017, I was introduced with contemporary compositions and encouraged to create experimental hybrid compositions between Myanmar and Western music traditions. This is the start of my journey to compose *Kyatthayay*, a cross-cultural work with the musical elements of *pat pyoe* and the Western music.

2. Research Objective

The Purpose of Creative Research is to compose *Kyatthayay*, for the *saung*, the *pattala*, the *maung*, and the viola with the musical elements of *pat pyoe* and Western Contemporary music.

3. Research Methodology

The research is qualitative research with three methods of data collection and analysis. The selected interviews and field studies with Burmese music experts are designed based on the intensive literature review. Professional recording and transcribing scores are tools for detailed musical analysis.

4. Instrumentation of the Piece and discussion of Instrument Techniques in *Kyatthayay*

This work is a quartet for *saung*, *pattala*, *maung*, and viola. *Saung* is a Myanmar/Burmese traditional harp with sixteen strings (Shein, 1969). The strings can be bent to raise the pitch using the thumb or finger of the left hand. Raising a tone or a semitone is common, and microtones are also possible. In *Kyatthayay*, both Myanmar and Western tuning are used and some Myanmar microtones are played on the *saung* by bending the strings. Bowing the strings, muting the string with palm, bending two strings simultaneously, knocking the sound body, striking the with palm, and snapping fingers are applied as the innovative extended techniques on the *saung* in the *Kyatthayay*.

Pattala is the Myanmar traditional xylophone, with twenty-four wooden or bamboo slats. It has a mellow tone. For *Kyatthayay*, I use a traditionally tuned *pattala* with a Burmese E and B that is slightly flatter than the diatonic E and B. The F is slightly sharper than the diatonic F. New non-traditional techniques used on *pattala* in *Kyatthayay* include playing with the wooden stick of the mallet (instead of the rubber head), and glissando.

⁵The Nirmita Composers Workshop was founded by Chinary Ung, a Cambodian- American composer, with his wife Susan Ung in 2013 to foster the next generation of composers and musicians throughout the Greater Mekong region and restore the practice of innovating with tradition.

The *maung* has twenty-five chromatic mellow gongs attached to a wooden frame, and it is played with mallets. As this piece is a hybrid piece, I use modern-day Western chromatic-tuned *maung* for greater pitch flexibility. I also used soft dynamics to produce a rounded, more resonance sound than usual. This was a creative approach to timbre and orchestration.

As the viola is a well-known instrument in music, it will not be explained in detail. Among other Western instruments, its timbre is very close to the color of the *mahar gita* voice. Also, all the other instruments except for the viola used in this piece are percussive so the viola adds a smoothing quality to the overall sound.

5. The Subject of the Piece

Kyatthayay is a Burmese word, which means “filled with all of goodness and blessings.” It is derived from *kyauk* (mon) and *ŚRĪ* (Sanskrit) and is synonymous with grace, glory, and honor (Myanmar Language Commission, 1999). This piece was composed during the world pandemic when people were sad, anxious, uneasy, and feeling hopeless because of Covid-19. In such dark times, my impulse was to cultivate a spirit of goodness and blessing, *kyatthayay*. Humility is the most important thing for me to spread *kyatthayay* in such uneasy hours. This piece expresses my response to this pandemic with humbleness for spreading *kyatthayay*.

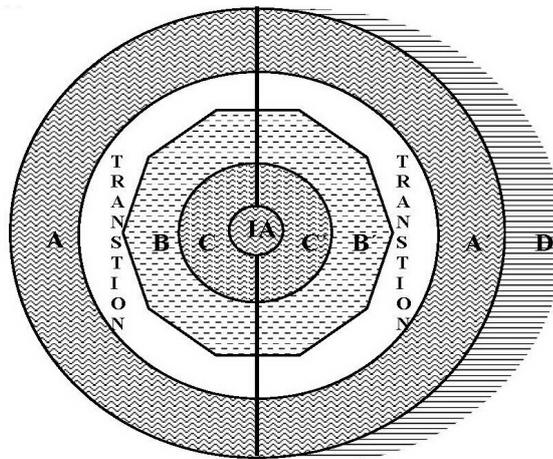
6. The Influence of Myanmar Traditional Singing on Vocalization in *Kyatthayay*

Myanmar musicians have been accustomed to singing while they are playing instruments as this is a very old tradition in *mahar gita*. By considering these two facts, I was convinced to add a vocalization in the *Kyatthayay* as both a traditional and innovative approach. There are two types of vocal music in Myanmar music: 1) recitative poems and 2) songs (Swe, 2018). As a creative approach, I ask the musicians in *Kyatthayay* to not only recite and sing, as would be done traditionally, but also to whisper and shout. For this vocalization, a short poem is composed and it was sung and recited in this piece.

7. Zedi Form, Form of *Kyatthayay*

It can be said that the form of *Kyatthayay* is based on the form of *pat pyoe*. There are seven sections in *Kyatthayay*: A, B, C, C', B', A', and D. Like the *pat pyoe khan* (specific musical introduction) of a typical *pat pyoe song*, *Kyatthayay* starts with an introduction section A. Both the first and second phrases of section A are in *atweh* (flexible rhythm) following the *pat pyoe kan* tradition. Section B is in the angular rhythm like the tradition of *pat pyoe* songs (angular section follows *atweh* section). While *pat pyoe* songs, always use quadruple meter (*nayi*) for angular sections, *Kyatthayay* uses quintuple and septuple meters applied alternatively to reduce the angularity. Furthermore, in the middle section, there are series of sub-sections like the sub-genre phrases featured in the middle section of a typical *pat pyoe* (Myint, 1990). The sections C and C' are sandwiched between or bordered by sections B and sections B'. A' follows B' so that the whole structure is one of nested mirror image sections (see Figure 1). Section D forms a tail or ending section like the *thaphyan* from *pat pyoe*.

Fig. 1: Form of Kyatthayay as the Layers of a Stupa.



When building a stupa or *zedi*, Burmese people enshrine the relics of Buddha at the center of the stupa structure. To represent this central holy space, *Kyatthayay* uses an inversion of an important motive from section A to make a heart-core phrase. Like the relics enclosed in a pagoda, this inverted A phrase (IA) is surrounded by the layer of C and C': then by B and B' and A and A' as the outermost layer. D is attached to the A' and features motives from the heart-core phrase (see Figure 1).

8. Pitches and Scales in *Kyatthayay*

Kyatthayay uses the basic two scales of *mahar gita*: *than yoe* (do-mi-fa-so-ti) and *pale* (do-re-mi-so-la) with modulations (Shein, 1969). When *than yoe* is used with the pitch center “so,” the scale is “so-ti-do-re-fe-so.” This scale is tuned in the *lay bauk ouk pyan* tuning in the lower two octaves of the *saung*. Burmese musicians usually called this scale as *lay bauk ouk pyan* instead of *than yoe* in “so.” When the *pale scale* is used, the helping tone is “fe” instead of “fa.” Because of the presence of “fe” frequently instead of “fa,” “fa” and “fe” becomes alternate pitches in *Kyatthayay*. Based on the other scales, other alternative tones are found out.

Table 1: Scales based on Than Yoe

Pitches	P1	Secondary Tone 1	P2	P3	P4	Secondary Tone 2	P5	P1
<i>Than yoe</i>	do	re	mi	fa	so	la	ti	do
<i>Ngar bauk ouk pyan</i>	fa	so	la	ta	do	re	mi	fa
<i>Lay bauk ouk pyan</i>	so	la	ti	do	re	mi	fe	so
No Specific Name	la	ti	de	re	mi	fe	se	la

Table 2: Scales based on Pale

Pitches	P1	P2	P3	Secondary Tone 1	P4	P5	Secondary Tone 2	P1
<i>Pale</i>	do	re	mi	fe	so	la	ti	do
<i>Myin Zine</i>	fa	so	la	ti	do	re	mi	fa
No Specific Name	so	la	ti	de	re	mi	fe	so

Four alternative tones based on these scales are: “fa” and “fe,” “ta” and “ti,” “do” and “de,” and “so” and “se.” Based on these scales that are used in *Kyatthayay*, the lower octave of the *suang* is tuned into *than yoe* and the upper two octaves are tuned into *ouk pyan* tuning. Even though this alternation of the pitches is majorly related to its own scale and modulations, these alternative tones are applied more freely in *Kyatthayay*, especially in section C’ (see Figure 2).

Fig. 2: A Phrase of *Kyatthayay* which is Comprises of the Alternative Pitches in Freedom



9. The Idea of Musical Phrase

The phrases in *Kyatthayay* are influenced by the phrase construction in a *pat pyoe*. They have three parts—the head, the body, and the tail. Following *pat pyoe*, phrases can be any length. However, they do follow a specific structure of head, body, and tail. Within that structure, there are single and doubled headed phrases. Figure 3 below shows a typical phrase in *Kyatthayay*. The body of the phrases could be either a single sub-phrase or a compound sub-phrase, which comprises of several short sub-phrases.

Fig. 3: A Phrase from Kyatthayay with Its Features

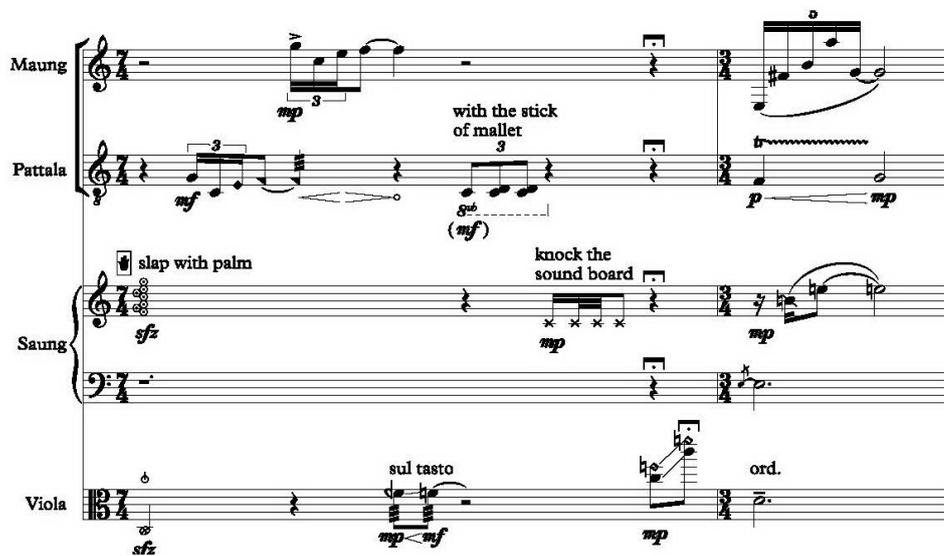
The musical score for Viola in Kyatthayay is divided into three main sections: 'The Head', 'The Body', and 'The Tail'.
 - **The Head (Measures 1-4):** Labeled 'Majestically'. It begins with a tremolo on the first measure. Dynamics include *sfz*, *smfz*, and *mp*.
 - **The Body (Measures 5-8):** Starts with a triplet of eighth notes. Dynamics range from *mf* to *f*. Performance instructions include *port.* (portamento) and *sul tasto*.
 - **The Tail (Measures 9-10):** Begins with a *jeté* (trill) on the first measure. Dynamics include *p* and *pp*. Performance instructions include *sul pont.* and *ord.* (ordine).

10. Melody

Smoothness and delicacy are praised in *mahar gita* (K, 2006). The melody of *Kyatthayay* mostly follows those attributes except for some phrases. According to the nature of the *pat pyoe* melody, it is constructed through either the scale notes or the seven tone scales, which include two helping tones. In the *pat pyoe*, the melody is given to the vocal part as it is a song. However, in the *Kyatthayay*, the melody is either distributed among the instruments (see Figure 4) or placed in the viola part (see Figure 5).

When the melody is broken down and distributed among the instruments, it brings out the color combinations of the instruments, creating either a texture of the heterophony or unison. Figure 4 shows how melodic motive is used across instrumental parts in heterophony. The viola plays two types of *pat pyoe* melody: one is from the vocal line and another one is from the upper active line of the saung. In the first two measures of Figure 5, the melody takes the form of the vocal melody in the *pat pyoe*, and in the third measure, it takes the melodic form of the upper active line of the *saung*.

Fig. 4: A Melodic Motive Broken Down and Embedded in the Texture of *Kyatthayay*



The musical score for Figure 4 consists of four staves: Maung (top), Pattala, Saung, and Viola (bottom). The Maung staff features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes marked *mp*. The Pattala staff has a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes marked *mf* and an 8th note marked *(mf)*. The Saung staff includes a 'slap with palm' marked *sfz* and 'knock the sound board' marked *mp*. The Viola staff has a 'sul tasto' marked *mp* and 'ord.' marked *mp*. The score is in 7/4 time and includes various dynamic markings and performance instructions.

Fig. 5: Some Melody Parts of Viola in *Kyatthayay*



The musical score for Figure 5 consists of two staves: Viola (top) and Vla (bottom). The Viola staff starts with 'ord.' marked *mf* and includes a 'poco rit.' marking and 'sul tasto' marked *p*. The Vla staff starts with *f* and includes *mp* and *mf* markings. The score is in 12/8 time and includes various dynamic markings and performance instructions.

11. Rhythm and Meters in *Kyatthayay*

There are two main types of rhythm in the *pat pyoe*: *atweh* or flexible rhythm, and angular rhythm (Keeler, 2008). In *Kyatthayay*, the composer tries to reduce the angularity as much as possible. Except for Sections B and B', all the Sections are composed in *atweh*. In order to be *atweh*, repeated notes with feather beams, descending scales with feather beams, and odd beat divisions such as triplets, quintuplets, and sextuplets are used to create rhythmic flexibility.

According to the Burmese rhythm concept that one beat can be of any length in *mahar gita*, a beat or a motive can be extended by a pause. When a beat with two quaver value is extended by a quaver-long pause, that beat becomes a dotted crochet beat. In this way, compound meters can be used as an *atweh* rhythm. When the last note of the quadruple meter is extended by a crochet-long pause, that meter would have an extra beat and becomes quintuple meter. Therefore, the various meters, whether compound or simple, are used in the *Kyatthayay* to make *atweh* rhythm. Section B and B' used regular rhythms (angular rhythm) like the middle sections of a *pat pyoe*. However, the quintuple and septuple meters are used alternatively in the *Kyatthayay* to reduce the angularity.

12. The Concept of Harmony in *Kyatthayay*

In *Kyatthayay*, I use the *twe lone* harmonizing way of mahar *gita* based on the interval strength (Swe, 2018). There are five techniques in *twe lone* harmonizing way, (1) alternation consonance and dissonance within a beat, (2) the interval arpeggio by two notes, (3) arpeggio-like figures (one note against a few notes including third intervals), (4) ascending or descending a certain scale against one note in the lower line (either divided or undivided in rhythm), and (5) two lines flowing independently to the same meeting point (stable cadences).

I apply Western musical elements such as cluster chords and some tertian chords in *Kyatthayay*. However, they are built from the scales and some alternative pitches of *pat pyoe*. In section B and B', the cluster chords are used on the maung. In section C and C', some tertian chords are used as a spacious arpeggio in the rhythm devices of the *pat pyoe*. *Twe lone*, chords and the melody are put together to make the texture of *Kyatthayay*.

Fig. 6: Example from *Kyatthayay* that uses *Twe Lone* Harmonizing Techniques 1-3

The figure displays three systems of musical notation for the *Kyatthayay* instrument. Each system includes a Maung part and a Saung part. The first system is marked with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 70$. The Maung part features a long, sustained note with a *p* dynamic. The Saung part consists of a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a *mp* dynamic. The second system is marked with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 60$. The Maung part uses triplets and has a *mp* dynamic. The Saung part also uses triplets and includes a *port.* (portamento) marking. The third system shows the Maung part with a *p* dynamic and the Saung part with triplets and a *mp* dynamic. The notation includes various musical symbols such as beams, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Fig. 7: Example from *Kyatthayay* that uses *Twe Lone* Harmonizing Techniques 4-5

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Maung, Pattala, and Saung. The top system features Maung and Pattala in 4/4 time, both marked *ppp*. The Saung part is in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and marked *pp*. The bottom system continues the Maung and Pattala parts with dynamic markings *mp*, *mf*, *p*, and *mf*. The Maung part has a slur over a series of notes, and the Pattala part has a slur over a series of notes. The Saung part is not visible in this system.

I apply Western musical elements such as cluster chords and some tertian chords in *Kyatthayay* (see Figure 8). However, they are built from the scales and some alternative pitches of *pat pyoe*. In section B and B', the cluster chords are used on the maung. In section C and C', some tertian chords are used as a spacious arpeggio in the rhythm devices of the *pat pyoe*. *Twe lone*, chords and the melody are put together to make the texture of *Kyatthayay*.

Fig. 8: Cluster Chords and Tertian Chords in the Maung Part of *Kyatthayay*

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Maung and Mg. The top system features Maung in 4/4 time with three cluster chords marked with a *v* dynamic. The bottom system features Mg in 3/4 time with two tertian chords marked *p* and *mp*. The Mg part has a slur over a series of notes.

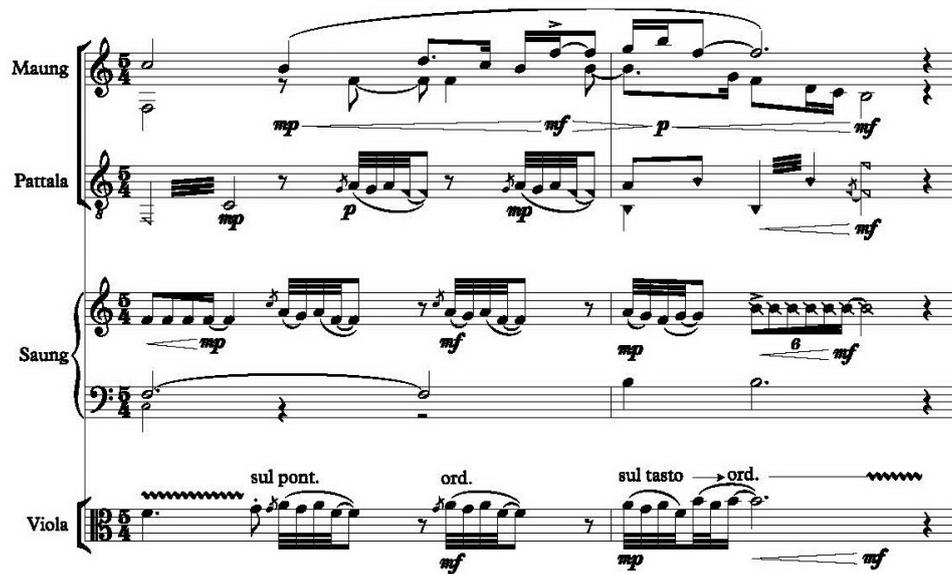
13. Musical Textures in *Kyatthayay*

Heterophony and polyphony are the original textures of the *pat pyoe*. *Kyatthayay* uses these, plus homophony. In the heterophony of Myanmar instruments, the same melody is played on all the instruments but they are played in different ways with their own *twe lone* harmony lines (K, 2006). Therefore, each instrument has two lines – one is the more active line, which can be called melody, and another one, which is more basic, is the *twe lone* harmony line. The colors of the instruments enrich the heterophonic lines.

In *Kyatthayay*, section A follows this kind of texture. The *maung*, the *pattala*, and the viola play in heterophony (see Figure 9). However, the *saung* part enriches the texture by vocalization and long notes played with a bow, which is an extended technique. In mm 14, the texture becomes polyphonic (see Figure 10). The *pattala* and *saung* parts are heterophonic. Each has its own *twe lone*. Additionally, the *pattala* part imitates the *saung* part a beat later. The viola part is in rhythmic unison with the upper saung part. *Pattala* and *saung* share the same *twe lone*: *ngar bauk tayaw* (perfect 5th) in the first measure and *htapauk tayaw* (diminished 5th) in the next (see Figure 10). This kind of complex texture can be seen as another kind of *twe lone* structure in *Kyatthayay*.

Fig. 9: Heterophonic Texture in *Kyatthayay*

The image displays a musical score for the piece *Kyatthayay*, featuring four staves: Maung, Pattala, Saung, and Viola. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of two systems of music. The first system covers measures 1 through 10, and the second system covers measures 11 through 14. The Maung and Pattala parts are in the treble clef, while the Saung and Viola parts are in the bass clef. The Maung and Pattala parts feature complex rhythmic patterns with sixteenth notes and slurs, and dynamic markings ranging from *pp* to *mp*. The Saung part includes vocalizations and long notes, with dynamic markings of *mf* and *sfz*, and performance instructions such as *port.*, *arco*, and *ord.*. The Viola part is in rhythmic unison with the upper Saung part, with dynamic markings of *pp*, *mf*, *p*, and *mf*, and performance instructions such as *sul pont.*, *ord.*, and *sul tasto*. The lyrics 'kyat thayay toe bar loh' are written below the Saung staff. The score is marked with various dynamics and performance techniques, including *pp*, *mp*, *mf*, *p*, *sfz*, *port.*, *arco*, *ord.*, *sul pont.*, and *sul tasto*.

Fig. 10: A Complex *Twe Lone* Texture in *Kyatthayay* by Combining Different Textural Lines

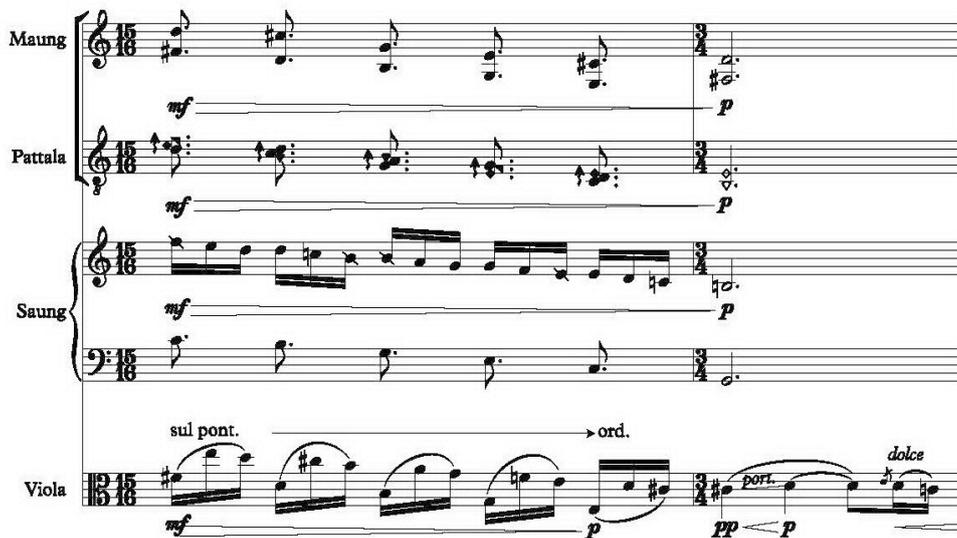
The musical score for Figure 10 consists of four staves: Maung, Pattala, Saung, and Viola. The time signature is 5/4. The Maung staff features a melodic line with dynamics *mp*, *mf*, *p*, and *mf*. The Pattala staff has a rhythmic accompaniment with dynamics *mp*, *p*, *mp*, and *mf*. The Saung staff is divided into two parts: the upper part has dynamics *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, and *mf*, while the lower part has a sustained bass line. The Viola staff includes techniques like *sul pont.*, *ord.*, *sul tasto*, and *ord.*, with dynamics *mf*, *mp*, and *mf*.

In the later part of the transition and section B, a homophonic texture is used. The melody is given to the viola part in the first phrase and the saung part in the second phrase. And other parts stand as the supportive harmony and they also function as the ostinatos repeating every two measures. Moreover, some clusters chords, which were built from the scale tones and alternative pitches of the *pat pyoe*, are employed in the maung part (see Figure 8). Motive, ostinato, homophony, and cluster chords are the musical elements from Western music and are not part of the tradition of the *pat pyoe*.

Section C features a three-part texture following *pat pyoe* (vocal part, active instrument upper line, and *twe lone* line). However, the vocalization is not the main melody line, and it includes unpitched sub-phrases. The extended techniques such as unpitched vocalization and percussive playing on the viola are used for the color combinations of the instruments in the texture.

In the *pat pyoe* songs, it is very common to repeat a short fragment from a line in another line after it had just played. In Section C', this type of repetition or echoing occurs between the saung and the viola parts. And *twe lone* intervals in arpeggio are in the maung and the pattala parts. These two textures can be found in the first and second mini phrases of section C'. Homophony is created on the poly pitch-center harmony in mm. 89-90 (see Figure 11).

Fig. 11: Homophonic Texture with Poly-Pitch Center in *Kyatthayay*



14. Blending Myanmar and Western Musical Elements

Table 3: Musical Languages of *Pat Pyoe*

- 1) *Pat pyoe* form (three sections: *pat pyoe kan*, the middle section, and *thaphyan*).
- 2) Each phrase is composed of a head, body, and tail.
- 3) Sub-phrases are overlapped in different parts, which create a longer phrase.
- 4) *Mahar gita* scales and pitches.
- 5) Pitch alternation in the modulations of *pat pyoe* scales.
- 6) Rhythmic devices of *pat pyoe* (unusual divisions of a beat, odd meter, and feather rhythm)
- 7) Constructing a melody following the traditions of *pat pyoe* (using rhythm devices, scales, and pitches of the *pat pyoe*).
- 8) *Twe lone* cadences.
- 9) Harmonizing *twe lone*.
- 10) Three parts texture of *mahar gita* (Both heterophony and polyphony depending on the use of *twe lone*).

Table 4: Western Musical Elements

- 1) Motive
- 2) Inverted motive
- 3) Narrowing down the intervals of the motive
- 4) Ostinato
- 5) Cluster Chords
- 6) Tertian chords in spacious arpeggio
- 7) Poly-pitch centered harmony
- 8) Breaking down a melodic line and distributing among the parts
- 9) Extended techniques (percussive playing, dropping the string, bowing percussions, harmonic tones, bow pressure, and pitched or unpitched vocalization)
- 10) Ornamentations (trill, tremolo, and inverted mordent “m”)

When musical elements from different cultures are combined in a composition, it can be a challenge to find ways they can be blended into one voice. *Pat pyoe* and Western music have different historical, cultural, socio-political, and philosophical backgrounds. The present writer uses four ways to combine these musical elements from different cultures. They are: (1) finding the common ground; (2) modifying the original ideas; (3) maintaining the uniqueness; and, (4) embracing each other

15. Conclusion

This piece makes a fresh contribution for both *mahar gita* and the Western music traditions. New musical elements are created by merging these two different music traditions. This creative composition introduces the advanced musical elements of *pat pyoe* (such as the way of using rhythm and meters) and unique musical elements (such as the tuning, pitches, and *twe lone* harmony) to new audiences. The newly invented musical ideas with both cultures contribute to both genres, plus the modern-day cross-cultural music repertoire. The innovative way of playing traditional instruments in this piece also suggests new avenues of exploration to younger Myanmar composers for their future works. Taking the renovated pagoda (*zedi*) as a paradigm for the structure and the whole composition can also be an ideal approach for both younger Myanmar musicians and cross-cultural composers. With more cross-cultural repertoire, *mahar gita* could live again as a living music among modern audiences. *Kyatthayay* is an important step towards this.

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