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The Rhythm of Birds: A Programmatic Musical Composition about Living in Tanjung Malim

The Rhythm of Birds is a programmatic musical composition inspired by the composer's interaction with the environment at Tanjung Malim. The cultural life of urban communities around Tanjung Malim is an important source of influence for this work, as is the composer's background and his experience while living in Tanjung Malim. The musical idea is taken from the singing of the tual bird and the hill-bird from the aboriginal people's musical tradition. This musical composition narrates about urban culture, which is interpreted by the music in a programmatic way. The main purpose of this research is to create further new musical compositions. Another one of its goals is the fixation of a programmatic musical form inspired from the surroundings of Tanjung Malim which may be used by other composers.

The article about this musical composition was written with the use of qualitative, practice-based, practice-led and ethnographic methods. The process of composing musical works with the aid of performing analysis of data applying to traditional music taken from the results of folk music expedition fieldwork, combined with notated data is subsequently processed into a laboratory. This results in the creation of a programmatic musical composition in three movements inspired by Tanjung Malim cultural environment expressed by an urban society, the composer's background and life experience. These three movements express the respective times of day – morning, day and night – at the same time, expressing the activities of Tanjung Malim's society.

This musical composition is created with the application of cross-cultural elements combining Western music and the music of the indigenous people of the region. The musical instruments incorporated are a mixture of Western music and the areal traditions, where the aboriginal musical instruments are blended into the musical work, producing harmonies intrinsic to Western music. The ability to link ideas to a musical concept generates a new type research which can be studied and applied by musicians, practitioners, and educators around the world.

Keywords: cross-culture, program music, indigenous people, inspiration from nature, practice-led.

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**«Ритм птиц»: программное музыкальное произведение
о жизни в Танджунг-Малиме**

«Ритм птиц» – программное музыкальное произведение, вдохновлённое восприятием окружающей среды Танджунг-Малима. Культурная жизнь городских общин в местности Танджунг-Малим представляет собой важный источник для этого сочинения, как и происхождение композитора, и его восприятие быта в Танджунг-Малиме. Музыкальная идея заимствована из пения птиц туал и горных птиц, которое стало основой музыкальной традиции коренного народа данной местности. Это музыкальное произведение отражает городскую культуру региона, показывая её программной музыкой. Главная задача данного исследования состоит в инспирировании новых музыкальных произведений вслед за обсуждаемым в статье. Другая цель состоит в определении музыкальной формы, вдохновлённой местностью Танджунг-Малим, которую впоследствии можно использовать и в других сочинениях.

Изучение данного музыкального произведения проводилось с применением качественного, практического, прагматического и этнографического методов. Рассматривался процесс создания музыкального произведения посредством исполнительского анализа данных, применяемых к традиционной музыке, извлеченных из результатов фольклорных экспедиций, с последующей трансформацией зафиксированных данных в лаборатории. Этот путь стимулировал создание трёхчастного программного произведения, вдохновлённого культурной средой Танджунг-Малима, определённым городским социумом, жизненным опытом композитора. Три части сочинения изображают разное время суток, – утро, день и ночь, – одновременно обрисовывая деятельность жителей Танджунг-Малима.

Музыкальное произведение создано в опоре на подход, связанный с кросс-культурным соединением – западной музыкальной традиции с музыкой коренных народов данного региона. В сочинении используются музыкальные инструменты как европейские, так и относящиеся к региональным, органичное соединение которых образует гармонию, свойственную западной музыке. Умение связать вместе внемузыкальные идеи и музыкальную концепцию приводит к появлению нового типа исследований, предназначенных для научного рассмотрения и практического применения исполнителями, теоретиками и преподавателями во всем мире.

Ключевые слова: кросс-культура, программная музыка, коренные народы, вдохновение от природы, практический метод.

Introduction

The musical composition, titled *Rebawang Malim* is inspired entirely from my experience with the environment in the vicinities of *Tanjung Malim* in Malaysia. When I first arrived at *Tanjung Malim*, it was raining heavily, and I was struggling to find a ride to the university. The first

question asked by the taxi driver was where I came from. I was always mistaken for a Sabahan, and sometimes for a Filipino. Only afterwards, I am asked if I am an 'Indon'. My main exposure to the culture of *Tanjung Malim* in Malaysia was that when meeting the local people, I was always asked the same questions – it was the same situation, when I attended the various events and activities

at the University Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). The question arising in my heart is that I am not from 'Indon,' but the name of my country is Indonesia, so why is it that the name of my country changed in Malaysia?

Every day I walked to the campus of the University of Pendidikan Sultan Idris, and often heard the sounds of birds singing. The 'frenzied' bustle of the local community welcomes the morning with different kinds of activities. Everybody is engaged in his or her own activities, some take the children to school by car, some go to the market, some go to the Malay shops for "nasi lemak," some go to the Chinese shops to drink coffee or eat noodle soup, others go to the Indian tavern for breakfast of thosai, some rush to the office – to punch in and then go out looking for breakfast; there is a group of students on bicycles going to the campus, some rush into the class to start teaching, and others get ready for meetings. However, these bustling activities around the UPSI environment can be observed only in the early morning, until 10 AM. After 10 AM, the atmosphere seems to become calmer.

Through a combination of personal experience and research of the patterns of daily activities in Tanjung Malim and its surroundings, the musical composition is built with the use of natural sounds, such as birds singing in the morning. In addition to that, since I come from Indonesia, the experience of Malaysian culture differs from Indonesian culture. I am writing from within a culture that is new for me, using my own background and interaction with the surrounding environment to compose music. Because I am not Malaysian, the composition seems like a "tourist composition" or an "expatriate composition." Both terms apply because for foreign residents, there are still many places in their new place of abode which have not been yet explored, and emigrés can still easily enter the role of tourists.

A Review of Programmatic and Cross-Cultural Musical Compositions

1. International Compositions

According to James Hepokoski, the term "program music" refers to instrumental musical compositions which induce their listeners to attend to them with the aim of grasping their correspondences with normally pre-given external images, texts, sound assemblages, ideas, or narratives of varying degrees of specificity. As he explains: "While broader understanding of the term has been advanced to include all illustrative music, programme music is most scrupulously regarded as that subset of representational music whose otherwise idiosyncratic formal structures or musical materials are most readily grasped by mapping the details of the music onto a governing external narrative or temporal sequence of images. In other words, a musical composition's background storyline plays a vital role in helping the listener to understand its ongoing musical process and intended representational content" [4, p. 63].

Although the idea of program music or programmatic instrumental music was permeated during the early nineteenth-century, it could be traced back to the seventeenth century, where instrumental works were always given 'meaningful' titles, as suggested by Thomas Schmidt-Beste: "The origins of this practice are found in the instrumental canzona, whose titles are derived from those of the vocal models, but the practice of titling remains widespread and colourful. The basis of the title can be either a notional or a fictitious vocal model, or it can be the identifier of a dance or an ostinato model ('Il Ruggiero', 'La Romanesca', etc.). Also frequently used are names of places or people (first names or family names) from the composer's circle of friends and acquaintances – Merula's 'La

Monteverde', for example, refers to the older composer; Biagio Marini's 'La Foscarina' to the Venetian Foscari clan – in a manner that may have been intended as a kind of dedication or homage. It is not often apparent how these titles are actually relevant to the musical content of the pieces – they may be pure products of fancy" [8, p. 189].

More attempts were made by composers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to compose programmatic instrumental music, such as the *Battalia* by Heinrich Biber (1644–1704), *Musicalische Vorstellung einiger Biblischer Historien in 6 Sonaten auf dem Claviere zu spielen* ("Musical Representation of Certain Biblical Stories in Six Sonatas to be Played on the Keyboard") by Johann Kuhnau (1660–1722), *The Four Seasons* by Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741), as well as orchestral suites (for example, *Water Music* and *Music for the Royal Fireworks*) by George Handel (1685–1759).

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries composers, such as Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, continued attempts in composing programmatic instrumental music. Examples of these include Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross* (1785) which was originally an oratorio, but was transcribed by the composer for string quartet, and then for orchestra [8, p. 190], Mozart's overtures to his operas such as *Die Zauberflöte* [*The Magic Flute*] and *Don Giovanni*, which provided audiences with brief musical snapshots of the ensuing dramas [5, p. 162], as well as orchestral works by Beethoven such as the *Pastoral Symphony* (1808), where the composer explores the orchestral means for express extra-musical ideas, such as sounds of nature, including bird songs and the rippling of a brook [Ibid.]. Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* was also considered as a vivid example of programmatic orchestral music expressing a series of scenes of contemporary life. For

Hugh Macdonald, it is a personal drama narrated by the main protagonist, an artist who goes to the scaffold for murdering his unattainable beloved [6, p. 4].

The potentiality of the operatic overture during the nineteenth century seems to give an impetus on the composers such as Weber (*Der Freischütz*) and Rossini (*Guillaume Tell*) to write works of dramatic and programmatic nature which were totally independent of any ensuing opera [8, p. 163]. This contributed to the emergence of a new musical genre called the concert overture, which subsequently inspired the idea of the symphonic poem in the second half of the nineteenth century. One of the notable works in the genre of symphonic poem is Smetana's *Má vlast*, which not only depicts the picturesque and historical images of Bohemia, but also embodies the resurgent national feeling shared by all Czechs at the prospect of creating an independent Czech nation with its own language and culture [6, p. 4].

In the twentieth century some composers continued to write programmatic instrumental music, among them, Charles Ives (1874–1954), whose *Concorde Sonata* was accompanied by a set of philosophical texts titled *Essays before a Sonata*. The text consists of a prologue, an epilogue and an essay for each of the sonata's four movements. This instrumental work is a document of Ives's involvement with the philosophical ideas of Transcendentalism, which, being influenced by Romanticism and Idealism, centers around the striving of the individual for the "oversoul," an all-encompassing spiritual state [8, p. 170].

According to Rao in her book *China and the West Music, Representation, and Reception*, the creation of intercultural musical compositions has been a concern for both Chinese and Western composers. The contemporary Chinese composers who have written cross-cultural musical compositions

include Tan Dun, Chen Yi, Zhou Long, Chen Qi Gang, and Bright Sheng. Rao points out that the features which characterize these individuals in terms of Chinese-Western musical relations are fourfold in nature: the composers themselves number among the success stories of the open-door economic policy of the People's Republic of China; they make good use of Western musical influences; their works reflect a hybridized approach to contemporary cross-cultural musical composition; as a result, their compositions have been enthusiastically received in the West. Rao also argues that the cultural syntheses produced by these individuals are rooted in the “yang ban xi,” the “model works” (especially the “model operas”) popularized during China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution [7].

2. The Asian Composer Who Creates Program Music

Chinary Ung, a Cambodian composer living in California as an American citizen, wrote his orchestral work “Rain of Tears.” What Ung has accomplished by composing “Rain of Tears” was to create a new work of program music, where his idea of *shunyata* from the Buddhist religious tradition possesses many meanings, depending on the context of the teaching. This may be one of the ontological features of reality, the state of meditation, or the analysis of phenomenological experience. In this composition the idea of *shunyata* is expressed by a peculiar type of instrumentation involving a flute, a piccolo and cortiles in the high register and by a drone-like bass drum in the low register. The soft texture, expressing the feeling of compassion, is represented by percussive attacks in the strings and piano. In his work “Rain of Tears” the composer presented four different versions of manifestation of *shunyata*; each passage (all of which last for only a few bars) creates

a variety of textures depicting compassion. In these passages, the principle of emptiness instigates a type of signal which evokes a specific feeling or action of compassion. With each new texture, the composer wished to articulate a distinctive sound world, although all the varieties of texture are quite delicate. Indeed, the success of the *shunyata* passage depends upon the listener's capacity to differentiate it from the surrounding moments – to hear it as a representation of openness, regardless of the degree of distinction from one texture to the next [9].

Composer Junita Batubara from Indonesia created a programmatic musical work titled *Story of Tjong A Fie*. This composition expresses an idea from the story of the life of Tjong A Fie. Tjong A Fie (1860–1920), otherwise known as Tjong Yiau Hian, was a Hakka Chinese businessman, banker and captain (Chinese Major) who established a large plantation business in North Sumatera, Indonesia. This composition, following the narrative about Tjong A Fie, combines together Chinese, Indonesian, Malay (the *inang*, *joget* and *zapin* rhythms) and Western musical techniques. Batubara composed this musical work using the six-pitch scales or modes, known as *Huowu*. The composer combined this six-pitch scale with the twelve-tone technique from the Western musical system. The six tones become transposed within the Western twelve-note continuum, which produces a new pitch scale. With this new set of scales, the music possesses a greater amount of aesthetic expression in terms of the elements present in it, which include melodic motives, color, sound, atonal harmony, rhythmic patterns, and texture [1].

3. Music and Environment

By the 17th century, the use of animal sounds as literary symbols had diminished, and any imitations of animal sounds occurred most frequently in humorous

contexts. Instrumental compositions had taken the lead from vocal works as the primary vehicles for animal imitations. Heinrich Biber (1644–1704) and Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767) both used comically crude imitations of animal sounds as a contrast to the overall more refined spirit of their music. For example, in his *Sonata Representativa* (1669), Biber dedicates each movement of the work to imitations of nightingales, cuckoos, frogs, hens and roosters, quails and cats. More typical of Classical-era animal imitations are Haydn's depictions of the quail call in his minuet for flute *Der Wachtelschlag* ("The Quail"), H. 19/8. Here, the simple, rhythmic quail call serves as a musical motive in an otherwise entirely conventional movement. In the second movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 in F Major, *The Pastoral* (1808), a proto-Romantic program work, depicts a day in the countryside and brings in actual imitations of birds at the end of the movement. These examples are of stylized imitations, recognizable as representations of the primary animal or bird, but sufficiently smoothed and altered to sound undoubtedly like music appropriate for human beings, as well. Their function is to assist the narrative, rather than to present birds as creators of music (Doolittle, 2008).

According to Doolittle (2008), imitations of animal songs abound in later Romantic program music. Bedrich Smetana's (1824–1884) *Má Vlast, Z českých luhů a hájů* ("From Bohemian Woods and Fields," 1879) makes use of stylized evocations of birdsong in the woodwind instruments. Frederick Delius (1862–1934) employs bird imitations similarly in the fourth movement of his *North Country Sketches*, "The March of Spring: Woodlands, Meadows, and Silent Moors" (1914). In *The Lark Ascending* (1914) by Ralph Vaughn Williams' (1872–1958) the solo violin imitates in a very approximate

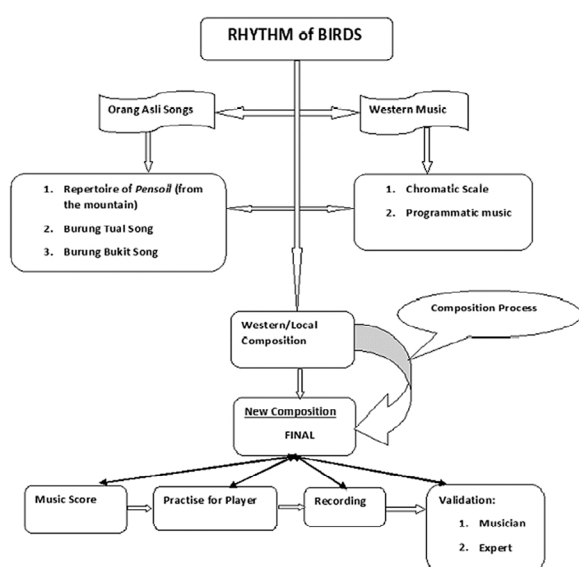
manner the light trills of the lark's song, while the woodwinds suggest the presence of other birds. Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) is perhaps the best-known 20th century composer to use birdsongs in his music. His bird-inspired works include the movement *L'abîme d'oiseaux* ("Abyss of birds") from the Quartet for the End of Time (1941), *Le merle noir* ("The Blackbird," 1952), *Le Réveil des Oiseaux* ("The Awakening of Birds," 1953), *Oiseaux Exotiques* ("Exotic Birds," 1956), *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, ("Catalogue of Birds" 1958), *La fauvette des jardins* ("Garden Warbler," 1970), and *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux* ("Small Sketches of Birds," 1985).

Being a devout Catholic, Messiaen believed birds to be the primal and the greatest musicians and considered birdsongs to embody the purest form of praise to God. Idealized, mystical birdsongs are used frequently in his music as a way of praising God and of celebrating the beauty of God's creation. They permeate the melodies, harmonies, timbres, and forms – indeed the entire language of his bird-inspired compositions is informed by the birdsongs they contain. The importance given to birdsongs is radically different from that of most previous animal-inspired composers in that birdsongs, and they present the substance of his work, not merely the surface (Doolittle, 2008).

Methodology

Musical composition in general presents a hybrid process, because each main result is a unique product. Each composer's individual methodology varies greatly. This research was carried out using methods that are mostly qualitative (practice-based, practice-led, and automatic) in terms of composition and preparation for informal performance in the selection of the traditional music of Tanjung Malim for inspiration.

In music composition, methodologies are generally referred to as “creative processes.” In the creation of the work “Rebawang Malim,” the “creative process” of each movement was slightly different. In general, the environmental situation in the vicinities of the villages Kelawar and Sungai Bil were chosen to represent the traditional music of Tanjung Malim with a specific purpose (such as the sound of birds in the morning), after which the environmental characteristic features of Tanjung Malim were “translated” into music, using my experience with surroundings of natural sounds, merged traditional music and soundscapes related to culture.



Scheme 1. Composition Methodology of Rhythm of Birds

In the scheme above it can be observed how a methodological process was undertaken to achieve the maximal amount of results in a research work about a musical composition.

1. Auto-Ethnography

In the composition *Rhythm of Birds* inspiration is derived from my personal experience in Malaysia. Stemming from my taking the position of composing “Malaysian music” with the use of Western

musical techniques, I chose to approach the process of writing this work by absorbing the surrounding environment of Tanjung Malim and from my personal perspective as an Indonesian citizen who has lived since childhood in Medan (North Sumatra) and who is currently living and working in Malaysia as a senior faculty member of the University of Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). The combination of these factors has made me accustomed to being an outsider in the surrounding culture. The circumstances affecting the current environment have often instigated my chief interaction with the local culture. I would necessarily hear and perceive voices from different environments in the vicinity of Tanjung Malim, but I would experience them differently from everybody else. Conceptually, when I hear and perceive the sounds and atmosphere of Tanjung Malim, it still remains relatively new to me, so my experience would be fresh but unfledged. I come from the perspective of the ambience of the surrounding environment where most of this experience from Indonesia and the other countries where I have lived is formed. Therefore, my approach to composing music is similar to my personal status in Malaysia: that of an expatriate. I am somewhat familiar with the culture, custom and language of the country where I presently reside, but I have not grown up with them and am not fully immersed in the culture all the time, so I resemble the ‘tourists’ to a greater degree than the ‘natives.’ Such an approach towards compositional work can be named ‘expatriate composition’ or ‘tourist composition.’

2. Individual Movement Methodology

When the process of musical composition results in “new music,” this new music becomes the chief “discovery,” and these parameters of it become the main topic for post-composition analysis. The musical work “Rhythm of Birds” is comprised of

three interrelated movements – namely, the first movement bearing the tempo mark of *Larghetto* (60 beats per minute), the second movement *Andante* (80), and the third movement *Larghetto* (60). Therefore, every movement is possessed of different approaches and results. The creation of “Rhythm of Birds” was inspired by repertoire of the pensoil, a musical instrument made from bamboo, played by blowing through it from the nose. Most frequently the tunes and melodies sounding from the pensoil resemble nature-based sounds from mountainous regions. Other inspirations for composing the work include the songs of the tual and hill birds (three songs which originated from indigenous tribes) and my personal perception of the morning environment. Tual bird songs are traditional songs which are most often played on rangot musical instruments, while hill bird songs are most often played on kereb musical instruments. These two musical instruments are performed by the native people of Malaysia, where they have appeared as a result of the influence of the forest atmosphere on the local music. The composition “Rhythm of Birds” starts with the metric indication of 4/4 and the tempo indication of *Larghetto* with the metronome marking of 60 per eighth note. At measure 20 there is a metric change to $\frac{1}{4}$, the aim of which is to provide a short transition, which subsequently changes to the metric indication of $\frac{3}{8}$ at measure 21 with the tempo indication of *Andante* being equal to the eighth note, not the quarter note. At measure 78 there is a return to the short meter, with a short transition to the $\frac{2}{4}$ meter at measure 79. Finally, at measure 90 the meter returns to 4/4.

Results and Overviews The Musical elements of the Individual Movements

The musical motion in *Song of Birds* (Figure 4) was inspired by the songs of the tual

bird and the hillbird, the repertoire of pensoil instruments and my personal experience of perception of the environment. The songs of the tual bird provide a considerable amount of influence on the repertoire of the original indigenous instrumental songs, in which the former are interpreted as voices derived from forest sounds of animals, insects, birds and the noise of streams. The tual bird song is impressed in melodies played by the rangot (a kind of idiophone music instrument), which provide imitations of forest bird sounds. The imitative quality of the melody of the tual bird song can be seen in the picture below:

Figure 1. Songs of Tual Birds



At the same time, the melody of a hill-bird presents an imitation of bird sounds on the Semai hill. Usually this repertoire is played by the kereb, a type of bamboo zither with two strings. This instrument is heterochordal, since its strings are made of different types of material. The kereb is made of bamboo which has been dried up and has two strings. The strings are made of wild coconut leaves. An imitation of the melody of the hill bird song can be seen in the picture below:

Figure 2. Song of Bukit Birds



Next is the repertoire of the pensoil which is a musical instrument, classified as an aerophone, which is played by blowing air from the nose. An example from the melodic repertoire of the pensoil can be seen below:

The musical composition *Song of Birds* is in three movements: the first bears the metric indication of 4/4 and the metronome mark of 60, the second has the metric indication

Figure 3. Example from the melodic repertoire of the pensoil



of 3/8 and the metronome mark of 80, and the third has the metric indication of 2/4 and the metronome mark of 60. From my observations during the process of recording the work, I came up with the conclusion that it is necessary to have a musical atmosphere which provides an emotional state wherein one can describe various kinds of bird songs in the morning. This reminds me of the experience of listening to the voices of birds around UPSI, as well as the area where I resided while living in Tanjong Malim. To illustrate this, I may assert that it requires “good taste,” more than mere musicianship, when keeping track with the different note values in the musical score during the process of recording, in order to describe the “communication” between the birds perching on the trees. This musical composition features different musical rhythms and other elements interlocking with each other, and the work demonstrates that interlocking can be found not only in musical compositions scored for ensembles of traditional musical instruments, but can be manifested in various different ideas, which have disclosed the identity of *Song of Birds*. This musical composition demonstrates many techniques used by literary writers. The incorporation of the pensoil instrumental repertoire is carried out by bringing in a chromatic scheme and generating new musical ideas. Imitations of tual bird song melodies, hill birds and the pensoil musical repertoire are sounded out

by a number of instruments with various melodic embellishments aided by tonal harmonic accompaniment on the piano and other keyboard instruments. The melodic imitation is played with variations and different interlocking ornamentations. This can be seen in the music example below:

Figure 4. Fragment of the Music Score of *Song of Birds*

The melodies played by the flute, viola, double bass and piano appear as the result of the melodic formulations of the singing of the tual bird and hill bird, as well as the pensoil repertoire with the use of the chromatic scale prominent in western music. In Figure 4 above we can see the relationship of each melody to the other melodies in each instrument. Here we aim to explain that the sounds of birds notated by the composer are expressed through ‘dialogues’ between birds, presumably expressing the mood of welcoming the morning in a very melodious voice.

Conclusion

The artistic result of this composition is derived from the idea that a composer can draw inspiration from Malaysian culture, the influence of the environment in his or

her temporary residence, and thereby the composer is able to create not only the composition but also an original musical form. I hope this analysis would provide inspiration to others for making use of this rich musical source. The environment is something everyone has the ability and necessity of being connected with, when it has to do with music. Malaysian performers may be associated experiential musical works in a greater amount of environments, if they fully understand their meaning behind the music personally. Educators can

teach musical compositions, the concepts behind them, such as program music or postmodernism, and the Malaysian musical genres incorporate local cultural traits which bring substance to music. Finally, if the musician searches for inspiration reflecting his or her culture, he or she may to find a local, mundane source for artistic stimulus and present it as an element for artistic unfolding. The environment of one's residential milieu presents something which may be connected to artistic inspiration when it is associated with music.

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