



Indigenous Sounds

and the Pianism of Lucrecia Kasilag

Colonial Violence, Hybridity and Philippine Modernism

By James Carl Lagman Osorio



Indigenous Sounds

An educator, ethnomusicologist, composer and artist, Lucrecia Kasilag, or “King,” devoted herself to search for and preserve the sounds of the Philippines. As a young child, she learned the violin, piano, guitar and *banduria*. Kasilag went on to study liberal arts and music at the Philippine Women’s University (the first women’s university in Asia administered by Asians) and later continued her studies at St. Scholastica’s College. During the Marcos regime, she became the artistic director of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, devoting a lot of time and energy in advancing Filipino artists from different disciplines. The magnitude of her cultural work led to her recognition as a National Artist in Music of the Philippines in 1989. In 1993, the UNESCO International Music Council named five International Artists of the World—Kasilag the only woman and person of color among the recipients.

Implications of Colonial Violence in Philippine Music

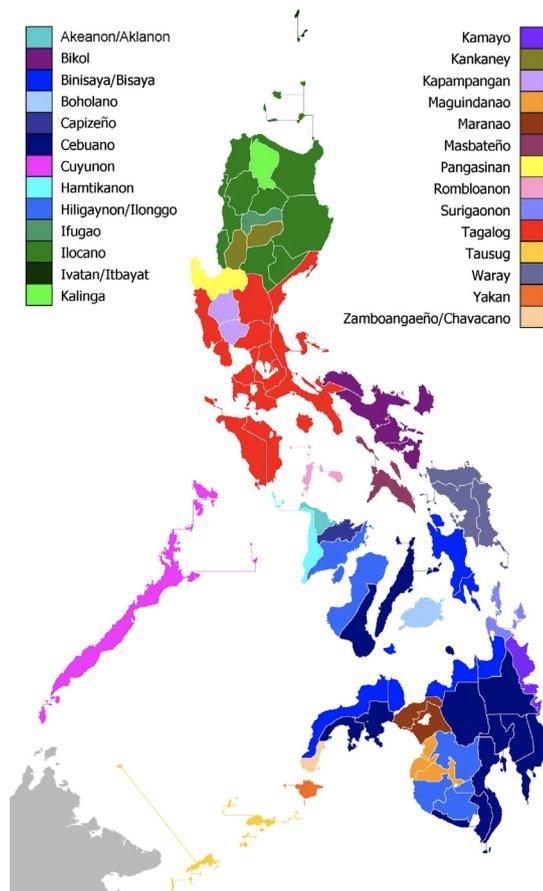


Figure 1. General overview of the ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines

The musical culture of the Philippines was never monotonous. Composed of more than 7,000 islands, the geography of the Philippine archipelago features different topographical structures that created cultural boundaries. The Philippines has more than 87 cultural-linguistic groups, each with their distinct musical tradition nurtured over the centuries. In effect, the Philippine landscape, with its natural-structural separations between these ethnolinguistic groups of people, hindered the true integration of the Filipino identity. With more than three centuries of colonization from Spain, half a century of imperial rule by the United States and half a decade of subjugation from imperial Japan, the Philippines and its people cannot avoid the pervading influence of these three eras of colonial violence. Drawing from Derek Walcott’s (1974) study of Caribbean culture, the Filipino people must “move faster, defensively” and “look for patterns” from this convoluted chaos. In doing so, they allow a form of Filipino identity to persevere, thrive and survive even if this results in cultural hybridity. This hybridity also engendered a shattered nation, making identity reconstruction challenging and difficult.

To trace the progression of Filipino music and its influences is inevitably a conversation entangled with the history of the country. When the Americans recognized the Philippines’ sovereignty in 1946, the country charged itself with reconstructing its cultural identity. There are several things to consider here: the implications of the colonial violence the Filipino people endured for almost four centuries, the repercussions of the Second World War and the two-decade dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, whose wife, Imelda Marcos, became the so-called patroness of Filipino arts, despite his administration’s corruption and controversy. Around this time of rebuilding, decolonization and dictatorship, Lucrecia Kasilag emerges as an important and central figure in searching and shaping Filipino musical identity and modernity.

Lucrecia Kasilag and Philippine Musical Modernity



Figure 2. Lucrecia Kasilag playing the *kulintang* (photo by V. de la Torre)

For scholar Christi Anne Castro (2011), two strands characterize Kasilag as a composer: the first one is the experimentation in musical modernity and second, the retranslation and incorporation of Asian instruments in orchestral works. Her early compositions focused on folk song arrangements and 19th-century Romanticism. However, her studies and completion of a master's degree in composition from the Eastman School of Music in the 1950s ignited her interest in writing using the modernist language. As a Fulbright scholar, she was under the wing of Allen Irvine McHose and Wayne Barlow. Throughout her training at Eastman, she honed and polished her skills in modernist composition. Castro states [citation] this new language of modernist music stemming from Schoenberg afforded Kasilag and other composers the much-needed liberation from the hegemony of Western tonality, producing a symbolic import for a country grappling with its newfound sense of independence and sovereignty.

Here, I echo Castro's contention that while European and American approaches to musical modernism did not have a unified approach and attitude, Kasilag's affinity for it makes a lot of sense since modernism is flexible. What resonated to Kasilag is the spatial and temporal malleability in aesthetic expression that pervades this style. As the Philippines' first contemporary woman composer, she responds to the many currents of modern music. Among these trends are impressionism

and expressionism, primitivism, neoclassicism, Neo-romanticism, jazz, polytonality, avant-garde and electronic music. If we put this in the perspective of the Philippines in the 1950s, Kasilag's eclectic style had the innuendos of nationalism that figuratively strives to disperse the smoke of colonialism while also acknowledging the unchangeable facts and consequences of history.

The modernity in Kasilag's music highlights noble nationalist sensibilities that favor "symbolic distinction" over utilitarianism. Kasilag embraced the inherent spirit of innovation in the modernist movement and took advantage of the weakening of traditional tonality through the inclusion of dissonant instruments and pitches (Castro 2011). Therefore, Kasilag's hybridity validates the claim of Filipinos on Western music, not as an immutable universal product, but rather as a birthright. Hybridity, as a nationalist and creative compositional strategy, may reasonably be considered the zenith of Filipino modernism.

Lucrecia Kasilag's Piano Compositions and the Kulintang Ensemble

Kasilag's hybrid compositional style dominates her piano compositions. While her style encompasses different compositional trends from Western modernism, it foregrounds Kasilag's penchant for the music of indigenous Muslim folks known as the Tausug and Maranao who previously occupied the Sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao. Kasilag is notably interested in the "Palabunibunyan," which means an ensemble of loud instruments. *Palabunibunyan*, which consists of five instruments, is the most famous type of gamelan ensemble in the southern terrains of the Philippines. The principal melody-gong is the *kulintang*, a set of eight graduated gongs played horizontally like a xylophone. In addition, the four-set large gongs with narrow rims is called the *gandingan*, the big kettle shaped gong *agong*, the smaller *babendil* gong and an upright drum with goat skin cover called *dabakan*. The rhythmic and melodic forces in the Palabunibunyan are very complex in which the interlocking rhythm

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underscores the improvisatory character of the performance (Butocan 1987). In addition to this ensemble, numerous expeditions and fieldwork in remote areas of Southern Philippines allowed Kasilag to immerse herself in the richness of the cultural heritage of indigenous Filipino Muslims.



Figure 3. *Palabunibunyan* (Pakaraguan Kulintang Ensemble, photo by Ernie Pena)

These explorations greatly informed her compositions, especially for the piano. Following is a survey of some of Kasilag's piano compositions, illustrating the influences of indigenous Muslim culture, which are an integral part of Filipino heritage and identity. These pieces are presented progressively, from late-intermediate to early-advanced levels.

First Rondo

First Rondo was published on January 15, 1950. Written in the key of E minor, it follows a shortened version of the rondo form. The music is almost a concise study of double notes, quartal and quintal harmonies. For the most part, the right hand plays around these intervals in a smooth contour, evoking the kulintang instrument, while the left hand provides the percussive and rhythmic grounding. It starts in a straightforward manner as if



the two hands are in dialogue with each other. The middle section not only provides a contrasting lyrical character but also the main difficulty. The conflict between the triplets in the right hand and the sixteenth notes of the left hand may prove to be challenging. Throughout the piece, one can hear the influence of dance in all its sections. Here, the pedal is used judiciously to highlight Kasilag's specific articulations. Kasilag then built up the music to an exciting ending without greatly straying away from the devices she has already used previously. This energetic work can be considered both an appropriate concert piece and an etude for double notes. It is written very pianistically and can be assigned to students transitioning from the late-intermediate to early-advanced level.

Scherzino

Scherzino is a composition written for the National Music Competition for Young Artists (NAMCYA) at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in 1980. The NAMCYA is a nationwide competition in the Philippines dedicated to young and talented musicians. The competition is divided into different categories and age groups. The competition organizers commissioned Kasilag to write Scherzino for the Piano Category A, that is, for pianists who are at least 9 years old but no more than 13 years old. Due to its purpose, Kasilag sought to challenge young pianists in terms of articulation, hand alternation, rhythm, unison playing and sense of color throughout the piece. Kasilag continued to utilize quartal and quintal harmonies, triplets, multi-meters (alternating duple and triple meters) and contrasting characters in each section. The A section features a play between duplet and triplet groupings underneath a vigorous rhythmic character; the B section is a lyrical song. One can argue that this is reminiscent of the Filipino *kundiman*, which is a transnational song popular within the Hispanicized areas of the Philippines.



However, Kasilag’s melody is undeniably modal and with traces of indigenous Filipino sensibilities. This robust piece, while direct in its compositional writing, still poses a great challenge for a young pianist’s musicality and is a great showpiece for concerts and recitals.

Burlesque

The inspiration for the third piece in this survey has its roots in the 18th century. Composers around that time used the term “burlesque” or *burlasca* to describe works where elements of comic opera and opera seria are juxtaposed to achieve an incongruous effect. Kasilag used this essence in her composition. Written in ternary form, the A section is full of surprises. It does not affirm what kind of texture it wants to do. Like Harlequin and Columbine, the two hands fight over who gets to play the main melodic material. Throughout this A section, Kasilag showed this conflict, employing compositional techniques such as counterpoint. The middle B section is slow and contrasting characterized by a drone-like bass and quintal harmonies. Here, the right hand plays a haunting chant-like melody evoking the chants recited by indigenous Muslims during their traditional rituals. However, this section adapts Sergei Prokofiev’s use of tonal displacement in place of transitional passages. The A section returns briefly with more suspense and bombast. Kasilag’s Burlesque has an innate quality of storytelling, tonal flexibility and vibrancy that can challenge a pianist’s interpretive and artistic palette.

Conclusion

Despite the many influences from different trends in modern music, Kasilag’s compositions still carry a signature of her own individual creativity. She took on the huge responsibility of opening the musical wealth of the Philippines to the world and went beyond blending Filipino and Western musical forces

in the most literal sense. At the same time, she warranted a newfound sense of authenticity rooted in musical practice, historical process and colonial struggle. Kasilag believed that no matter how deeply ingrained Western tonality is in Filipino music, it is still centrally Asian, with elements rooted in various modes of indigenous music. With this philosophy, Lucrecia “King” Kasilag offered a kind of music that envisions the Philippines as a modern nation liberated from the barbarisms of colonialism.

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Selected compositions including the pieces discussed in this article can be found at <https://www.pianoraescores.com/archive/lucrecia-kasilag-burlesque-rondo-scherzino-sonata-orientale-piano-works/>.

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