

# Singing *Keroncong* and the Values Behind it

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**Abstract—**Learning through music is one of music education paradigm, but limited research articles talk about this concept in the context of singing *keroncong*. Combining content analysis and interview, this article tries to shed light on the values behind singing *keroncong*. Several famous *keroncong* songs like *Bengawan Solo*, *Keroncong Tanah Airku*, and *Pahlawan Merdeka* sang by legend artist including Gesang, Toto Salmon, Ismail Marzuki, Waljinah, Sundari Sukoco and Tuti Trisedia were selected to be analyzed. Content analysis was focused to understand how singers expressing their interpretation. These findings are compared with interview data about their experience in singing *keroncong*. Result of this study explain that singing *keroncong* builds the habit to be tolerance, to be empathy, to be creative, and to control the emotion.

**Keywords**—*keroncong; ornaments; gandul; tempo; values*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Keroncong* is one of Indonesian hybrid music that became popular music in 19th centuries but it's still heard until today [1,2]. This phenomenon indicates that *keroncong* is adaptive with the social, cultural and political change [3]. As representation of Indonesian histories and cultural tradition, *keroncong* is important to be learned through formal education.

There are three paradigm of music education in Indonesia: learning about music, learning with music, and learning through music. In the context of character education, we have to underline the third paradigm, learning about the moral and cultural values through music. Most research about *keroncong* usually focused on the history and the musical characteristic of *keroncong* but limited talk about the values behind it. It is interesting to know what is the values behind the representation of *keroncong*

This article explores the values behind singing *keroncong*. Singing means perform and delivered the message of the song. While singing, the singer should cooperate with musicians. How the singer expressed their interpretation, what kind of experience they felt are research questions delivered in this article.

## II. METHOD

This research using document analysis, and interview as data collection method. Document analysis is used to understand the characteristic of singing *keroncong*, and interview is used to understand what the singers feel while

singing *keroncong*. These two data were compared with previous research to find out the values behind singing *keroncong*.

Three most popular song in *keroncong* style: *Bengawan Solo*, *Keroncong Tanah Airku* and *Pahlawan Merdeka* were selected as samples. It's categorized as most popular songs because these songs at least have existed for 50 years.

Samples of singers were Gesang, Waljinah, Ismail Marzuki, Toto Salmon, Sundari Sukoco and Tuti Trisedy. It is important to choose them, because they have a lot of fans, and strong influence in Indonesia and abroad. For example, one of Gesang videos in you tube reached 666.000 viewers.

All of the sample songs were transcribed in modern notation and analyzed to find out the characteristic of each singers in singing the same song. How they expressed the meaning of lyric *Bengawan Solo*, *Keroncong Tanah Airku* and *Pahlawan Merdeka*. Another factor that want to find out is how singer cooperate with the musicians.

The other data was collected through interview. Waljinah the famous *keroncong* singer, Andre Michels from *Keroncong Tugu* – the legend group of Batavia *keroncong*, Teti the 15th years experienced *keroncong* singer, and Ervina 10 years experienced singers that perform in Solo *Keroncong* Festival 2018 were interviewees. Questions asked including:

- What is the difference between singing *keroncong* and singing another type of popular music?
- Tell me about what you feel when you are singing *keroncong*?
- What are you doing before singing *keroncong*?
- What is the benefit of singing *keroncong*?

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. How Singer Expressed the Song

Singing *keroncong* especially using Solo style is unique. Based on their interpretation, each singer expressing the same phrase “air mengalir sampai jauh (water flows far away)” differently. Waljinah give more attention to the words “water flow” to give impression of flowing. She also uses syncopation on the words “far away” to express step by step go far. Gesang make diminution to merge three words (*air mengalir sampai*) in one bar, and consequently on the next bar last word was

longer. According to Gesang, “*jauh* (far away)” is the important point to express. Toto Salmon start to sing this phrase earlier than the two singers. His initiatives cause words “water” as subject in this sentence became important. He also used syncopation with the same duration in the words “*jauh* (far)”. This strategy give impression that water flowing gradually. See figure 1.

Waljinah

Bengawan Solo

Cipt. Gesang  
Transcript by Endi



Gesang



Toto Salmonlike



Fig. 1. Difference in rhythm.

Figure 1 describe that all singers sing the same melody but use difference expression especially in rhythm. Singing *keroncong* give the singers opportunity to express freely and individually.

Usually singer puts ornaments such as *luk*, *gregel*, and *cengkok* while singing Solo *keroncong* style [4-6]. This ornaments used to deliver message expressively. *Luk* similar with *portamento*, it was short note added before the main melody, and sang immediately by sliding. *Gregel* similar with inverted mordent or mordent. *Gregel* is a note added higher or lower the main note. It seems like speedbump. *Cengkok* is improvised embellishment on the main note. Seems like turn in western *Baroque* music ornament. See table 1.

Despite this ornaments, singing *keroncong* also use another expressive technique such as *embat* and *gandul*. *Embat* is the application of dynamic especially crescendo from one note to the next note as the target. *Gandul* is the way singer delivered the massage expressively as rubato.

TABLE I. TYPES OF KERONCONG ORNAMENTS

Types of Ornament	example
<i>luk</i>	
<i>gregel</i>	
<i>cengkok</i>	

The application of ornament in singing depend on individual interpretation. Figure 2. describe how two singer singing the first phrase of *Pahlawan Merdeka* [7], “pahlawan merdeka yang gugur sebagai bunga (Hero who died for independence as flower)”. Sundari Sukoco tend to express it sadly while Ismail Marzuki more steadfast. Luk (red circle) that Sundari used at the first four notes are sobbing expression, while on Ismail Marzuki it uses as dissapoint expression. It also happened in using cengkok ornament (blue rectangular). Ismail Marzuki not put it in the text “gugur (dead)” because dead as an hero is honorable. Sundari Sukoco as representation of women used cengkok here as an expression of sadness left by someone who is important in her life. What happened here is representation of gender expression in singing *keroncong*.

Sundari Sukoco



Ismail Marzuki



Fig. 2. Application of Luk and Cengkok by two singer.

### B. Behind the Singer Experience

Most of *keroncong* lyric not straightforward and more poetic because it is in the form of poetry or rhyme.

TABLE II. EXAMPLE OF POETRY AND RHYME FORM

Poetry	Rhyme
Pahlawan merdeka yang gugur sebagai bunga Jatuh mewangi di atas pangkuan ibunda	Walang kekek menclok ning tengkok, Mabur maneh menclok ning pari. Ojo ngenyek yo mas karo wong wedhok. Yen ditinggal lungo setengah mati

*Pahlawan merdeka yang gugur sebagai bunga* (Hero who died for independence as flower). *Jatuh mewangi di atas pangkuan ibunda* (falling down and fragrant on mother's lap). This is an example of lyric in poetry form. Singer has to do hard to understand the lyrics. If the singer can do it well, the message will have delivered expressive and natural. Waljinah explained that sometimes she put mark in the important part while study the lyric. She has to interpret the massage, imagine the context and expressed it through her voice. She said that singing *keroncong* means sing by heart (interview 20 July 2018).

The other form is rhyme or *pantun*. Tiwon said: “in general, a *pantun* consists of two couplets. The first couplet, called *sampiran* ‘approach’, describes a natural phenomenon. The second couplet, called *isi* ‘content’, describes the purpose or the intention of the *pantun*” [8] *Walangkekek* is an example of *pantun*.

Walang kekek menclok ning tenggok } sampiran  
 Mabur maneh menclok ning pari }  
 Ojo ngenyek yo mas karo wong wedhok } isi  
 Yen ditinggal lungo setengah mati }

Waljinah explained that she writes “*Walangkekek* (grasshopper)” lyrics as representation of woman. In this song she wants to say that women are independent, has a capability and don’t be humbled (interview 20 July 2018).

Through these two examples, it can be understood that the metaphor sentence is commonly used in *keroncong*. On the basis of metaphors, *keroncong* lyrics not only tell a story in a comfortable way, but also in a way that is respective to cultural values such as politeness.

Respective to cultural values not only expressed on the lyrics but also on the way how singers choose their costume and performances. For example, Teti and Ervina, the singers in Solo *Keroncong* Festivals 2018 said that usually they use *kebaya* and *sanggul* for performance, and because of that they have to adjust their kinesthetic expression as Indonesian woman.

Singing *keroncong* requires mastering the technique which makes the singer has to control their emotions. This statement also supported by Andre from *Keroncong Tugu* Group, that said: "Our version of polite is when what we sing can impress children and can be expressed in daily life. According to his experience as *keroncong* instructor, students who talk and be rude become gentle after learning *keroncong*. They can brac their emotion "

Why *keroncong* has a power to control emotions? There are several possibilities. First, metaphor sentence educate singer to speak carefully. This is the way how to aware with the norm and the feelings of others. Therefore, emotional control is needed in speaking, and as an impact the singer became polite.

The second argument is related to the tempo and musical instrument of *Keroncong*. Most of *keroncong* tempo's is slowly. According to Yampolsky *keroncong* tempo in 1925 – 1935 is 52-56 qpm [2]. The tempo of *Bengawan Solo*, *Pahlawan Merdeka*, and *Keroncong Tanah Airku* correspond with Yampolsky statement. This tempo influences the singer to be patient and calm down

*Keroncong* use acoustic instrument such as violin, flute, *cak*, *cuk*, cello, guitar, and bass [2,6,9]. It has an impact to the volume of *keroncong*, and also the singer emotion. Ervina said that “the sound of instrument is soft not loud like rock music”, this give the calm nuance (interview, 20 July 2018).

The third answer related to the process of expressing *keroncong* together with musician. Musical texture of *keroncong* is homophony consist of melodic line and accompaniment. The singer sings the main melody whereas the instruments play as accompaniment section. While singing, the singer should listen to the *keroncong* accompaniment but at the same time she also has a freedom to express the meaning of lyric. As a result, the singer should empathize with musicians.

Figure 3. shows an example of this phenomena. Here the singer sang with *gandul* technique, and as consequence melodic line of singer rhythmically not accordance with the thesis of quadruple meter played by accompaniment section. (see word “Indonesia” between two and third bar in figure3).



Fig. 3. Relation between melodi and accompaniment.

Accompaniment can be divided into three groups related to the function. First is instrument that have function as a basic harmonic line, it is played by bass instrument. Second, is instruments that accompany the melodic line continuously. This function is representing by *cak*, *cuk*, *celo* and guitar. The third is instrument that fill in the musical space with ornament, or motives of melody, and also play intro and coda. This function is represented by violin and flute.

Combination of all musical instruments configure three layer of beat with interlocking technique. Bass instrument bring the macro beat as foundation for the other instruments and also the singer. The interlocking between *cak*, *cuk* and improvisation of guitar tend to emphasize the micro beat, whereas cello plays the beat. The relation of all instruments make complex musical texture but the sense of quadruple meter still clear. The musician should keep the tempo while the singer has the freedom to play the tempo, this is why the singer has to control the emotion.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Singing *keroncong* provides the way to control the emotions that has impact to personality such as politeness, and circumspection. Collaboration between singers and musicians also provides the development of empathy as the basis for developing the ability to cooperate. Through singing *keroncong* the singer has opportunity to develop their creativity in the corridor of normative propriety. *Keroncong* keep these cultural values: politeness, circumspection, tolerance and creativity.

As an implication of these findings, it is recommended to research the impact of singing *keroncong* as medium for music therapy or using *keroncong* to internalize Indonesian cultural values

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