Singing Kercong and the Values Behind it

Rita Milyartini
Music Education Department
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
Bandung, Indonesia
ritamilyartini@upi.edu

Abstract—Learning through music is one of music education paradigm, but limited research articles talk about this concept in the context of singing kercong. Combining content analysis and interview, this article tries to shed light on the values behind singing kercong. Several famous kercong songs like Bengawan Solo, Kercong Tanah Airku, and Pahlawan Merdeka sang by legend artist including Gesang, Toto Salmon, Ismail Marzuki, Waljinah, Sundari Sukoco and Tuti Trisedya 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 kercong. Result of this study explain that singing kercong 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 kercong is adaptive with the social, cultural and political change [3]. As representation of Indonesian histories and cultural tradition, kercong 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 kercong usually focused on the history and the musical characteristic of kercong but limited talk about the values behind it. It is interesting to know what is the values behind the representation of kercong

This article explores the values behind singing kercong. Singing means perform and delivered the massage 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 kercong, and interview is used to understand what the singers feel while singing kercong. These two data were compared with previous research to find out the values behind singing kercong.

Four most popular song in kercong style: Bengawan Solo, Kercong 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 Trisedya. 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, Kercong 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 kercong singer, Andre Michels from Kercong Tugu – the legend group of Batavia kercong, Teti the 15th years experienced kercong singer, and Ervina 10 years experienced singers that perform in Solo Kercong Festival 2018 were interviewees. Questions asked including:

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

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. How SingerExpressed the Song

Singing kercong 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.

![Figure 1. Difference in rhythm.](image)

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

Usually singer puts ornaments such as luk, gregel, and cengkok while singing Solo kerongcong 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 Barock music ornament. See table 1.

Despite this ornaments, singing kerongcong 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 message expressively as rubato.

![Types of Kerongcong Ornaments](image)

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 kerongcong.

![Application of Luk and Cengkok by two singer.](image)

B. Behind the Singer Experience

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poetry</th>
<th>Example of Poetry and Rhyme Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pahlawan merdeka yang gugur sebagai bunga</td>
<td>Walang kekek menclok ning tenggok, Mabar maneh menclok ning pari. Ojo ngenyek yo mas karo wong wedhok. Yen ditenggal lungo setengah mati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jatuh mewangi di atas pangkuan ibunda</td>
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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 kerongcong 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.
Waljinah explained that she writes “Walongkekek (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 metaphor, 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).

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, cello 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 circumcision. 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, circumcision, 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 kercong to internalize Indonesian cultural values.

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