

Melodic Fluidity and Cultural Continuity: A Qualitative Analysis of Flute Improvisation in Malaysian Keroncong Performance.

Amir Ashraf Bin Norazmam, Siti Hajar Mohamad Seperah

Faculty of Music, UiTM Shah Alam, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines flute improvisation in Malaysian keroncong performance, focusing on its role in shaping melodic fluidity and sustaining cultural continuity. Despite the prominence of improvisation in keroncong practice, scholarly attention to instrumental approaches—particularly the flute—remains limited. Adopting a qualitative methodology, this research draws on semi-structured interviews, audio analysis, and performance transcription involving three experienced keroncong flutists. The findings indicate that improvisation is informed by a combination of harmonic awareness and stylistic sensitivity, with performers employing chord tones, arpeggios, chromaticism, and controlled articulation to achieve coherent melodic development. These techniques support not only individual expression but also ensemble cohesion, as improvisation is closely aligned with listening practices, structural awareness, and real-time interaction within the group setting. Furthermore, the study highlights improvisation as a critical mechanism for cultural continuity. By adhering to established stylistic conventions while allowing interpretative flexibility, flutists contribute to the preservation and contemporary relevance of keroncong music. This dual function positions improvisation as both a creative and culturally embedded practice. This research contributes to the limited body of literature on Malaysian keroncong by foregrounding instrumental improvisation as a key site of musical and cultural negotiation, offering insights relevant to ethnomusicology, performance studies, and Southeast Asian music scholarship.

Keywords: Keroncong music, Flute improvisation, Malaysian traditional music, Musical performance practice, Cultural continuity, Ethnomusicology, Southeast Asian

INTRODUCTION

Keroncong music represents a distinctive hybrid genre shaped through historical encounters between Portuguese musical influences and indigenous musical traditions within the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. Through processes of adaptation and localisation, keroncong developed into a musical tradition with its own identifiable aesthetics, instrumentation, and stylistic conventions. Beyond its historical significance, keroncong continues to function as a living performance tradition in contemporary Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, where it remains present in formal concerts, educational settings, cultural festivals, and community-based music making (Haryono, 2019; Suwahyono, 2023). Its continued performance reflects not only the endurance of a traditional genre, but also its capacity for cultural continuity through adaptation. Among the defining musical characteristics of keroncong is its emphasis on melodic ornamentation and improvisational expression. While the genre is supported by a recognisable ensemble structure involving cak, cuk, guitar, cello, double bass, violin, and voice, the flute occupies a particularly significant melodic role. As both a supporting and soloistic instrument, the flute contributes substantially to the lyrical quality, expressive contour, and stylistic identity of keroncong performance (Sanjaya, 2018). Through improvised melodic elaboration, the flutist extends and interacts with the principal melodic material, shaping performance in ways that are often not fully captured by notation. This improvisational dimension has particular significance within keroncong performance practice. Unlike purely decorative embellishment, improvisation in keroncong often involves the negotiation of melodic development, harmonic awareness, stylistic sensitivity, and ensemble balance. In this sense, improvisation functions not only as a means of individual expression but also as a structured musical practice embedded within the aesthetic logic of the genre.

Within music scholarship, improvisation has been widely theorised as a skilled and culturally situated practice rather than unregulated spontaneity. Pressing (1988) conceptualises improvisation as the real-time generation of musical material guided by learned structures, cognitive schemas, and adaptive response. Similarly, Berliner (1994) argues that improvisational practice depends upon internalised musical knowledge, stylistic fluency, and extensive experiential preparation. These perspectives are particularly relevant to the study of traditional performance practices, where improvisation frequently operates within inherited frameworks rather than through unrestricted invention. In ensemble contexts, improvisation has also been understood as fundamentally interactive. Monson (1996) emphasises that improvisation emerges not solely from individual creativity but through processes of listening, response, and musical negotiation among performers. This relational understanding is especially applicable to keroncong, where ensemble cohesion and the management of musical space are central aesthetic concerns. The presence of multiple melodic voices, particularly voice, violin, and flute, requires performers to negotiate texture, phrasing, and expressive roles collaboratively. Within ethnomusicological discourse, improvisation has further been linked to broader questions of cultural transmission and continuity. Nettl (2005) suggests that many traditional music systems sustain themselves through controlled variation, where stylistic stability is maintained through interpretative flexibility rather than rigid repetition. Such a perspective is particularly significant for keroncong, where improvisation may be understood not as departure from tradition, but as one of the mechanisms through which tradition is enacted and renewed. Although improvisation has been extensively discussed in relation to jazz and Western art music traditions, instrumental improvisation in Southeast Asian traditional music remains comparatively underexamined. Existing studies of keroncong have largely focused on historical development, educational transmission, genre preservation, and vocal or ensemble characteristics (Supiarza, 2021; Mulyana, 2022). While these studies have contributed significantly to understanding keroncong as cultural heritage, they offer limited engagement with micro-level performance practices, particularly the improvisational processes of melodic instruments. This gap is especially evident in relation to flute performance. Although the flute is widely recognised as central to keroncong sonority, relatively little scholarship has examined how flutists construct improvisational lines, employ specific melodic or harmonic strategies, or negotiate stylistic decisions within performance. Existing references to instrumental roles often remain generalised, leaving underexplored the detailed processes through which improvisation contributes to melodic fluidity and ensemble expression.

Research on flute performance and improvisational technique provides useful analytical perspectives for addressing this gap. Studies in performance pedagogy have emphasised the significance of articulation, phrasing, vibrato, and tone production as core expressive resources (Toff, 1996), while improvisation studies highlight devices such as chord-tone orientation, arpeggiation, chromatic approaches, and motivic development as means of melodic construction (Levine, 1995; Berliner, 1994). However, these approaches require contextual adaptation when applied to keroncong, where melodic fluidity, ornamental subtlety, and responsiveness to vocal phrasing often carry greater stylistic significance than overt technical display. In the Malaysian context, this issue becomes particularly significant. While Malaysian keroncong shares foundational repertoire and stylistic principles with broader Indonesian traditions, local performance practices have also developed through distinct educational, cultural, and institutional contexts. These localised articulations of keroncong remain underrepresented in scholarship, particularly regarding instrumental improvisation. Examining flute improvisation in Malaysian keroncong therefore contributes not only to performance studies but also to broader understandings of regional adaptation within traditional music practice. Equally significant is the relationship between improvisation and cultural continuity. Recent scholarship increasingly recognises that improvisation may function as a mode of preserving tradition while allowing interpretative renewal. Through stylistically grounded variation, performers sustain genre identity while adapting performance practice to contemporary contexts. In keroncong, such processes are especially relevant, as much stylistic knowledge continues to be transmitted through listening, imitation, and embodied performance experience rather than codified instructional systems (Sukanto, 2020; Supiarza, 2021).

Despite these insights, significant gaps remain in empirical research concerning flute improvisation as a performative and analytical domain, particularly within Malaysian keroncong. Existing scholarship has not sufficiently addressed how flutists conceptualise improvisation, what musical techniques they employ, how improvisational decisions are shaped through ensemble interaction, or how these practices contribute to sustaining stylistic identity.

This study addresses these gaps by examining flute improvisation in selected keroncong performances by Orkes Keroncong Arif Lukisan, focusing on melodic fluidity and cultural continuity as interrelated analytical concerns. Drawing on qualitative methods, including interviews, audio analysis, and transcription, the study investigates the techniques, interpretative approaches, and musical understandings employed by experienced flutists. By foregrounding flute improvisation as a structured, interactive, and culturally embedded practice, this research contributes to ethnomusicology, performance studies, and scholarship on Malaysian traditional music. More specifically, it positions improvisation as a site where musical creativity, ensemble ethics, and cultural continuity converge, offering a deeper understanding of how keroncong performance is sustained and reimagined through instrumental practice.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to investigate flute improvisation practices in Malaysian keroncong performance, with particular focus on melodic fluidity, ensemble interaction, and cultural continuity. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research seeks to examine not only technical aspects of improvisation, but also the interpretative understandings, stylistic values, and performance-based knowledge held by practitioners. As Creswell (2018) notes, qualitative inquiry is especially suitable for exploring complex artistic and culturally embedded phenomena where meaning is constructed through experience and practice.

The study adopts a case study framework because it allows in-depth examination of a bounded musical context, namely flute improvisation within selected keroncong performances associated with Orkes Keroncong Arif Lukisan. Case study methodology is particularly relevant when the objective is to generate detailed contextual understanding of a specific phenomenon rather than broad statistical generalisation (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). In this research, the case is bounded by repertoire, performers, and performance practice, enabling focused analysis of improvisational approaches within a defined traditional music setting.

Methodologically, the study integrates three complementary forms of qualitative inquiry: semi-structured interviewing, performance-based audio analysis, and transcription-based musical analysis. The combination of these methods enables triangulation across verbal accounts, observed musical practices, and notated analytical evidence, thereby strengthening interpretative depth and credibility (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018). This multi-method approach also reflects the dual musical and ethnomusicological orientation of the study, where performer perspectives and musical evidence are treated as mutually informing sources of knowledge.

Research Context and Musical Materials

The study focuses on three selected keroncong works performed within the musical context associated with Orkes Keroncong Arif Lukisan: Bengawan Solo, Dewi Murni, and Keroncong Moritsko. These works were selected through purposive musical sampling based on their prominence within keroncong repertoire, contrasting musical characters, and suitability for examining varied improvisational approaches.

Bengawan Solo was selected due to its lyrical melodic profile and relatively stable harmonic framework, which provides fertile ground for examining melodic variation and stylistic phrasing. Dewi Murni offers contrasting expressive characteristics associated with legato phrasing and lyrical ornamentation, while Keroncong Moritsko introduces a more rhythmically active and technically demanding context, enabling examination of different improvisational responses. Taken together, the three pieces provide a representative range of melodic, harmonic, and stylistic conditions within which flute improvisation may be observed.

In addition to serving as analytical repertoire, these works function as common musical references within the interview process. Their shared use across respondents supports comparative analysis by situating performer reflections and improvisational demonstrations within consistent musical material.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a strategy commonly employed in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Selection criteria prioritised active performance experience in keroncong music, demonstrable knowledge of flute improvisation practice, and diversity of training background.

Three experienced flutists participated in the study. Although modest in number, this sample size is consistent with qualitative case study research that privileges depth of insight over numerical breadth (Creswell, 2018). Importantly, the participants represent contrasting generational, pedagogical, and stylistic perspectives, enabling cross-case comparison.

The first participant represents a traditional oral-transmission model of learning, with extensive lifelong performance experience and predominantly informal training. The second represents a younger generation shaped by both formal music education and practical ensemble experience. The third reflects a hybrid background combining classical training with keroncong performance practice. This variation was analytically valuable because it allowed the study to examine how improvisational approaches may be shaped by differing musical biographies, training systems, and aesthetic orientations.

Participants were selected not as statistically representative subjects but as knowledgeable practitioners capable of providing detailed insights into performance processes often inaccessible through musical analysis alone.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted through three interrelated procedures: semi-structured interviews, audio recording analysis, and transcription.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore participants' conceptual understandings of improvisation, technical strategies, stylistic considerations, and learning processes. This interview format was chosen because it provides sufficient structure to address research objectives while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on experience-based perspectives and emergent themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Interview questions addressed topics including:

- conceptual understandings of improvisation in keroncong performance;
- melodic and harmonic strategies used in improvisation;
- ensemble interaction and management of musical space;
- stylistic considerations related to keroncong identity;
- learning processes and performance challenges.

Interviews were conducted individually, audio recorded with participant consent, and later transcribed for analysis. Where relevant, musical demonstrations and explanatory examples offered by participants were incorporated into analytical interpretation.

Audio Recording Analysis

Audio recordings of selected performances formed a second major source of data. Performance analysis focused on identifying improvisational features including melodic phrasing, harmonic outlining, ornamentation, articulation strategies, rhythmic treatment, and ensemble responsiveness.

Listening analysis was conducted repeatedly and comparatively across performances and respondents. Particular attention was given not only to technical devices but to how these devices functioned musically within stylistic and ensemble contexts. This approach reflects performance analysis methodologies that prioritise interpretative musical function over purely descriptive cataloguing of techniques.

Transcription-Based Analysis

Selected improvisational passages were transcribed to support close musical analysis of melodic construction and technical strategy. Transcription was used not as exhaustive representation of complete performances but as analytical tool for examining salient improvisational devices identified in both recordings and interviews.

Examples involving chord-tone licks, arpeggiated patterns, chromatic approaches, and expressive articulations were selected because they illustrated recurring improvisational strategies across participants. The use of transcription supported analytical precision and enabled comparison between verbal descriptions of improvisation and actual musical practice.

Data Analysis

Data analysis combined thematic analysis of interview data with interpretative musical analysis of recordings and transcriptions.

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following principles outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2018). Transcripts were coded iteratively to identify recurring concepts, patterns, and relationships relevant to the research questions. Initial coding generated descriptive categories related to technique, harmonic thinking, stylistic awareness, learning strategies, and ensemble interaction. These were subsequently refined into broader analytical themes.

Cross-case comparison was then employed to examine similarities and differences across respondents, allowing patterns in improvisational practice to be interpreted comparatively rather than solely individually. This comparative dimension was particularly important for identifying how differing musical backgrounds shaped performance approaches.

Musical data analysis focused on interpretative rather than purely formal analysis. Rather than treating improvisational devices as isolated technical events, analysis considered how melodic construction, harmonic movement, articulation, and ornamentation functioned within broader expressive and stylistic contexts. This interpretative orientation aligns with ethnomusicological approaches that treat musical structure and cultural meaning as interconnected.

The integration of interview themes, transcription findings, and performance analysis formed a process of triangulation through which interpretative claims were corroborated across multiple forms of evidence.

Trustworthiness and Research Rigour

In qualitative inquiry, research quality is often evaluated through criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability rather than positivist notions of validity alone (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several strategies were employed to strengthen trustworthiness in the present study.

Credibility was supported through methodological triangulation, combining interviews, recordings, and transcription analysis. The convergence of these sources strengthened interpretative confidence by allowing findings to be corroborated across different forms of evidence.

Dependability was addressed through transparent documentation of sampling, data collection procedures, and analytical processes, enabling methodological traceability. Transferability was supported through rich contextual description of participants, repertoire, and performance setting, allowing readers to assess relevance to other contexts.

Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive attention to the researcher's interpretative role, particularly in musical analysis where analytical decisions inevitably involve disciplinary judgement. Efforts were made to ground interpretations in both musical evidence and participant perspectives rather than researcher assumption alone.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained in accordance with institutional research requirements. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and participated voluntarily through informed consent procedures.

Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage, and interview materials were used solely for research purposes. Given that participants are identified practitioners whose expertise forms part of the study's analytical framework, names are retained with consent as part of acknowledging performer contribution.

Methodological Positioning

Taken together, this methodology positions flute improvisation as a phenomenon requiring both musical and interpretative inquiry. By integrating performer perspectives, transcription-based evidence, and performance analysis within a qualitative case study design, the methodology is intended to capture improvisation not merely as technical output but as structured, relational, and culturally embedded musical practice.

Such an approach is particularly suited to the aims of this study, which seeks to understand not only what improvisational techniques are used, but how those techniques acquire meaning within the aesthetic and cultural logic of Malaysian keroncong performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Flute Improvisation as Structured Musical Practice

The findings demonstrate that flute improvisation in Malaysian keroncong performance operates as a structured musical practice rather than as unrestricted spontaneous invention. Across all participants, improvisation was consistently conceptualised as grounded in harmonic awareness, melodic organisation, and stylistic discipline. This challenges reductive assumptions that improvisation in traditional music is primarily intuitive or unsystematic, instead positioning it as a form of situated musical knowledge shaped through both technical understanding and performance experience. A significant finding concerns the centrality of harmonic orientation in improvisational construction. Although articulated differently among respondents, all participants demonstrated awareness that effective improvisation must remain responsive to harmonic progression.

For Respondent 1, this orientation was explicit and highly developed, with improvisational lines frequently shaped through chord-tone targeting, major seventh extensions, modal colouration, and chromatic passing structures. These practices reflect a sophisticated understanding of harmonic function in melodic construction and resonate with theoretical models that identify harmonic internalisation as central to improvisational fluency (Pressing, 1988; Berliner, 1994; Levine, 1995). Importantly, harmonic awareness in this context did not function merely as technical correctness. Rather, it operated as an expressive framework through which melodic fluidity could emerge. Chord tones and arpeggiated figures were not employed mechanically but as resources for shaping lyrical continuity, tension-resolution relationships, and stylistically coherent melodic contours. This suggests that harmonic thinking in keroncong improvisation may be understood less as imported theoretical system than as embedded performance intelligence.

Respondent 2 articulated a somewhat different, though complementary, orientation by prioritising melodic coherence over extensive harmonic exploration. His approach, centred on following the principal melody while outlining harmonic movement, reveals a more restrained improvisational aesthetic in which structural clarity and phrase continuity are privileged. Rather than indicating reduced improvisational complexity, this approach

reflects an alternative model of improvisational sophistication, one grounded in economy, melodic responsiveness, and ensemble appropriateness.

Respondent 3 similarly demonstrated that improvisation may operate through harmonically supportive rather than foregrounded melodic roles. Her emphasis on harmonisation, supportive phrasing, and shared melodic space expands the understanding of improvisation beyond soloistic invention. Here, improvisation emerges not through density of melodic elaboration alone but through relational musical judgement. Taken together, these contrasting approaches indicate that improvisational structure in keroncong is plural rather than singular. Structured practice may be realised through harmonic elaboration, melodic continuity, or supportive interaction, depending upon performer orientation and ensemble role. This finding complicates monolithic conceptions of improvisational competence and suggests that multiple aesthetic models coexist within keroncong performance. This plurality also has broader implications for understanding improvisation in traditional music contexts. Rather than measuring improvisational sophistication solely through technical complexity, the findings suggest that stylistic appropriateness, structural sensitivity, and relational awareness constitute equally significant dimensions of improvisational expertise.

Melodic Fluidity as Improvisational Aesthetic

One of the central findings of this study concerns melodic fluidity as a defining aesthetic principle in keroncong flute improvisation. While the article title foregrounds melodic fluidity conceptually, the empirical findings demonstrate that this quality is realised through specific performative strategies involving phrasing, articulation, ornamentation, and melodic continuity.

Across respondents, improvisation was consistently approached as extension of lyrical movement rather than interruption of it. Even where technical devices such as arpeggios, chromatic runs, or rapid scalar figures were employed, their musical function was generally directed toward sustaining melodic flow rather than foregrounding virtuosity. This finding aligns with scholarship suggesting that keroncong aesthetics privilege expressive continuity and lyricism over overt technical display (Sanjaya, 2018).

Respondent 1's improvisations illustrated melodic fluidity through long-arched phrase construction supported by chromatic connectors and extended chord tones. Particularly significant was the use of chromatic passing motion, which functioned not merely as embellishment but as a device for smoothing voice-leading and linking structural tones with expressive nuance. This reinforces observations in improvisation studies that chromaticism may serve both harmonic and lyrical functions (Berliner, 1994).

Respondent 2's emphasis on phrasing and melodic contour further underscores that improvisational fluency in keroncong is deeply tied to phrase shaping. His use of arpeggiated material was not simply harmonic outlining but a means of generating melodic continuity through structured linear movement. This suggests that melodic fluidity may arise as much from phrase logic as from ornamental complexity.

For Respondent 3, melodic fluidity emerged through articulation and timbral shaping, particularly through adaptive use of vibrato in lyrical passages and articulated tonguing in faster material. This highlights that melodic fluidity is not reducible to pitch organisation alone but also depends upon sound production and expressive articulation.

A significant analytical implication arising from these findings is that melodic fluidity should be understood not as descriptive metaphor but as musically observable phenomenon. It is constituted through specific improvisational practices and therefore analytically meaningful as category of performance analysis. The findings also suggest that melodic fluidity operates as a mediating principle between individual creativity and stylistic convention. Performers generate variation, but such variation remains oriented toward preserving the lyrical and flowing character associated with keroncong. In this sense, melodic fluidity functions simultaneously as aesthetic value and stylistic regulator. This observation is significant for broader improvisation scholarship because it foregrounds continuity rather than disruption as improvisational ideal. Whereas some improvisatory traditions valorise contrast, tension, or rupture, keroncong flute practice appears to privilege continuity, integration, and graceful melodic unfolding.

Improvisation, Ensemble Interaction, and Musical Space

Another major theme emerging across the data concerns ensemble interaction as constitutive of improvisational practice. All participants emphasised, albeit differently, that improvisation in keroncong cannot be understood apart from its ensemble ecology. This finding strongly supports interactive theories of improvisation which position musical meaning as emerging through relational processes rather than individual invention alone (Monson, 1996).

Particularly significant is the recurring importance participants assigned to listening. Listening was described not merely as preparatory activity but as active performance practice through which improvisational decisions are shaped in real time. Participants referred to listening for vocal phrasing, harmonic movement, violin activity, and ensemble density when determining how and when to improvise. This suggests that improvisation in keroncong involves distributed musical cognition, where decision-making is shaped collaboratively across ensemble interaction. Such a finding resonates with contemporary improvisation studies that challenge performer-centred models in favour of relational agency. Respondent 3's emphasis on avoiding melodic clashes and negotiating shared space with the violin is particularly illuminating. Her responses suggest that improvisation often involves restraint as much as invention. Choosing not to fill musical space may itself constitute improvisational judgement. This observation expands conventional understandings of improvisation, which often privilege note production while overlooking strategic silence, spacing, and supportive response.

Similarly, Respondent 2's view that improvisation is context-dependent rather than always mandatory indicates that improvisational presence is governed by ensemble necessity rather than individual assertion. This perspective further reinforces improvisation as collective responsibility. From a performance analytical perspective, these findings highlight musical space as critical yet often under-theorised dimension of improvisation. Space here refers not simply to temporal gaps but to negotiated expressive territory within ensemble texture. Managing such space appears central to keroncong improvisational practice. This has important implications for how improvisation is studied. Analyses focused narrowly on melodic vocabulary risk missing relational dimensions through which improvisation acquires much of its musical meaning. The present findings suggest that interaction, spacing, and ensemble ethics are not secondary contexts surrounding improvisation but integral components of improvisational practice itself.

Stylistic Identity and Cultural Continuity

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that flute improvisation functions not only as musical practice but as mechanism of cultural continuity. Across respondents, improvisational decision-making was consistently framed in relation to stylistic identity, tradition, and cultural appropriateness.

Respondent 1 explicitly linked improvisation to cultural distinction between Malaysian and Indonesian keroncong approaches, suggesting awareness that improvisation may articulate regional identity through phrasing, ornamentation, and melodic character. This is particularly significant because it positions improvisation as site of cultural inscription rather than purely technical behaviour. Respondents 2 and 3 likewise emphasised maintaining stylistic authenticity even while allowing interpretative flexibility. This shared concern suggests that improvisation is regulated not only by harmonic or ensemble considerations but by tacit aesthetic norms associated with what constitutes recognisably keroncong performance.

These findings strongly support Nettl's (2005) argument that continuity in traditional music may be sustained through controlled variation. Rather than threatening tradition, improvisation appears to function here as one means through which tradition is reproduced. This is especially evident in participants' repeated emphasis on learning through listening to earlier performers and internalising inherited stylistic models. Such practices reveal improvisation not as isolated personal expression but as dialogic engagement with lineage.

At the same time, the findings also indicate continuity is not simply conservative preservation. Participants integrate harmonic extensions, personalised phrasing approaches, and adaptive strategies shaped by contemporary training contexts. This suggests continuity in keroncong is maintained through dynamic reinterpretation rather than static reproduction. This duality between preservation and innovation sits at the

conceptual core of this article. It is precisely through melodic fluidity—through improvisational movement within stylistic bounds—that cultural continuity is enacted. This insight contributes beyond keroncong scholarship by challenging oppositional models that separate creativity from tradition. The findings instead support understanding tradition as actively constituted through creative practice.

Learning Processes and Transmission of Improvisational Knowledge

A further theme emerging from the findings concerns learning processes through which improvisational knowledge is acquired and transmitted. Although not the primary focus of the study, this dimension proved analytically significant because it illuminates how improvisational practices are sustained. Generational differences among respondents revealed contrasting yet overlapping learning models. Respondent 1's experiential, apprenticeship-like development reflects oral-traditional transmission, where knowledge is embodied through long-term participation rather than formal codification. This aligns with scholarship on tacit knowledge transmission in traditional music cultures (Nettl, 2005). Respondent 2's emphasis on recording-based practice and repetitive listening reflects more contemporary self-reflexive pedagogical strategies, while Respondent 3 combines listening with structural analysis shaped partly by formal training. Despite these differences, a notable shared pattern is the centrality of listening across all participants. Listening emerges not simply as learning support but as primary epistemology through which improvisational style is acquired. This finding has pedagogical implications. It suggests that any attempt to develop instructional models for keroncong improvisation must account for tacit, auditory, and experiential dimensions of learning rather than relying exclusively on theoretical abstraction. It also reinforces the broader argument that improvisation in this tradition cannot be adequately understood apart from transmission processes through which stylistic knowledge circulates.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken collectively, the findings indicate that flute improvisation in Malaysian keroncong performance operates through four interrelated dimensions: structural musical organisation, melodic fluidity, relational ensemble interaction, and cultural continuity.

First, improvisation is structured through harmonic and melodic logic rather than unrestricted spontaneity. Second, melodic fluidity emerges as defining aesthetic principle realised through phrase construction, articulation, and expressive continuity. Third, improvisation is fundamentally relational, shaped through listening, shared musical space, and ensemble ethics. Fourth, improvisation functions as culturally embedded practice through which stylistic identity is sustained and renewed.

These dimensions should not be understood as discrete categories but as mutually constitutive. Harmonic choices shape melodic fluidity; ensemble interaction shapes improvisational possibilities; stylistic identity regulates creative variation. It is through the interaction of these dimensions that keroncong flute improvisation acquires both musical and cultural significance.

Conceptually, the findings support positioning improvisation in keroncong not as ornamental supplement to repertoire but as central performance practice where creativity, structure, and cultural memory converge.

Implications for Ethnomusicology and Performance Studies

The findings offer several broader implications. For ethnomusicology, the study contributes to growing scholarship that treats improvisation as culturally embedded practice rather than transferable abstract skill. It further extends discussion of how tradition may be sustained through variation.

For performance studies, the research foregrounds relational and stylistic dimensions often underemphasised in technique-centred analyses of improvisation. In particular, the prominence of ensemble interaction and musical space suggests need for broader analytical models capable of addressing improvisation beyond note-based vocabularies.

For traditional music pedagogy, the findings suggest possibilities for documenting improvisational strategies without reducing them to decontextualised formulae. Such documentation may support transmission while respecting the interpretative and experiential nature of the tradition.

More broadly, the study positions Malaysian keroncong as an important site for expanding improvisation scholarship beyond dominant jazz-centred paradigms, contributing Southeast Asian perspectives to wider conversations in music research.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined flute improvisation in Malaysian keroncong performance through the interconnected lenses of melodic fluidity, ensemble interaction, and cultural continuity. Drawing on qualitative interviews, performance analysis, and transcription, the findings demonstrate that flute improvisation in keroncong operates not as unrestricted spontaneity, but as a structured and culturally embedded practice shaped by harmonic awareness, stylistic sensitivity, and relational musical judgement. A central contribution of the study lies in showing that improvisation in keroncong is governed by identifiable musical principles while remaining responsive to individual interpretation. Participants employed varied yet complementary improvisational approaches, including chord-tone construction, arpeggiation, chromatic movement, articulation-based phrasing, and harmonically supportive melodic strategies. Although these approaches differed according to training background, generational orientation, and ensemble role, they collectively reveal improvisation as a disciplined practice grounded in both technical understanding and aesthetic awareness.

The findings further establish melodic fluidity as a defining characteristic of keroncong flute improvisation. Rather than functioning merely as descriptive metaphor, melodic fluidity emerged as an analytically observable feature realised through phrase continuity, ornamental shaping, expressive articulation, and smooth negotiation of harmonic movement. In this regard, the study contributes a more precise conceptualisation of melodic fluidity as both an aesthetic principle and a performance practice. Equally significant is the study's demonstration that improvisation in keroncong is fundamentally relational. Improvisational decisions were shown to be shaped through ensemble interaction, attentive listening, and management of shared musical space, reinforcing the view that improvisation in this tradition is not reducible to individual melodic invention alone. By foregrounding these interactive dimensions, the study expands understandings of improvisation beyond technique-centred models toward a more relational and performative conception. Perhaps most importantly, the research highlights improvisation as a mechanism of cultural continuity. The findings indicate that stylistically grounded improvisational variation enables performers to sustain and renew keroncong identity, suggesting that tradition is maintained not through static preservation but through creative enactment. This contributes to broader ethnomusicological discussions by demonstrating how improvisation may function simultaneously as musical creativity and cultural reproduction.

Taken together, the study contributes to the limited scholarship on keroncong performance practice, particularly within the Malaysian context, while also extending wider conversations in ethnomusicology and performance studies concerning improvisation in traditional music. By positioning flute improvisation as a site where musical structure, ensemble ethics, and cultural identity converge, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of instrumental practice in keroncong than has previously been available. The study also carries pedagogical implications. The documentation of improvisational strategies and performer perspectives offers a foundation for future approaches to teaching and transmitting keroncong flute practice, particularly in contexts where much stylistic knowledge continues to circulate through oral and experiential modes of learning. In this sense, the research contributes not only analytically but also to broader efforts of sustaining traditional music practice.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. As a qualitative case study involving a small number of expert participants and selected repertoire, the findings are intended to provide depth of interpretation rather than broad generalisation. The study focuses specifically on flute improvisation and does not address improvisational roles of other keroncong instruments, nor does it attempt comprehensive comparison across regional keroncong traditions. These limitations suggest several directions for future research. Further studies may expand the scope by examining larger performer communities, comparative Malaysian and Indonesian keroncong practices, or improvisational interaction across multiple instruments within the ensemble. Future

work may also explore pedagogical models for documenting and transmitting keroncong improvisation without reducing its experiential and interpretative dimensions.

Ultimately, this study argues that flute improvisation occupies a central role in the expressive life of Malaysian keroncong, not only enriching musical performance but sustaining the creative processes through which tradition itself continues to live. It is through this convergence of melodic fluidity and cultural continuity that the broader significance of keroncong flute improvisation may be understood.

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