

What's the Time? Deciphering "Meter" in Razak Abdul Aziz's *5 Early Songs*

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Abstract

The concept of meter in music has existed probably as old as music itself. Scholars had a variety of ways of categorizing meters in music. Recent investigations on the element of meter in contemporary art music show that scholars were more Europe-American-centric and only *10 Pantun Settings* and *Maria Zaitun* by Razak Abdul Aziz were previously discussed academically, hence justifying the need to conduct this investigation. *5 Early Songs* by Razak Abdul Aziz were written in 1980 (3 songs) and 1988 (2 songs). The researchers had chosen to conduct a systematic theoretical analysis of the chosen work using music theories proposed by Kostka et al. (2013), Kostka and Santa (2018), and Locke (2010). The analysis found that the use of the metric element is more complex in the two songs that were composed in 1988, suggesting that the 8-year gap the composer had given him time to acquire more musical materials, maturing over the years. It is hoped that this investigation would spark some interest among other scholars to conduct studies on the similar or other work(s) of Razak Abdul Aziz and possibly expand this to other Malaysian contemporary composers.

Keywords: *5 Early Songs*, meter, music theory, Razak Abdul Aziz, theoretical analysis

Introduction

Meter in music refers to the pattern of beats that are consistent throughout a passage (Kostka et al., 2013), as it is also a perceptual phenomenon that is usually characterized in terms of an internal sense of accent or strong and weak beats (Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 1982). The concept of music meter has probably existed as early as the music itself. Wiessner (2014) proposed that humans in the pre-historic era had danced to music as early as 40,000 years ago, suggesting that there were patterns of beats used to play dance music for social functions.

Killin (2018) argues that the timeline goes far back than Wiessner suggested, as he documented the findings on musical activities of pre-historic humans through archaeological artefacts from 400,000 years ago, stating that the function of music during this pre-historic era was similar to what Wiessner proposed, hence agreeing to the existence of pattern of beats during the said era. This concept is still relevant to this day, as composers and music theorists had developed it to be more complex and intricate.

Though Kostka et al. (2013) proposed that these patterns of beats are consistent throughout a passage, Kostka and Santa (2018) argued that meter for most tonal pieces is relatively consistent and easy to comprehend, unlike its post-tonal (sometimes called “contemporary art”) counterpart where meter and rhythms are frequently varied and complex. Hasty (1981) acknowledged the difficulty of theorizing rhythm in twentieth-century music, as well as the central role of meter. He stated “A useful place to begin is to ask what is meter if this music can depart from it (in various degrees) yet still be rhythmic” (p. 185). This is consistent with Sullivan (2018) when he discusses the opposing perspectives of Krebs (1999), Temperley (2001) and London (2012) when discussing the use of meter in Barber’s *At Saint Patrick’s Purgatory* from *Hermit Songs, Op. 29*. Krebs (1999) argues that the perception of multiple metrical layers in this song is possible, stating that the layer could exist in two ways: metrical consonant or metrical dissonance. Temperley (2001) states that (when discussing the said piece) “It is difficult to entertain two metrical structures at once, even in cases where either one can readily be entertained on its own” (p. 228). London (2012) disagrees with Krebs and Temperley, stating that such attending (of two metrical structures) is not possible.

Benward and Saker (2009) generalised the types of meter into two categories: (i) changing meter – referring to the frequent change of meter within a piece of music, (ii) asymmetric meter – referring to meters in which the beats are not grouped into units divisible by two or three. Though this categorisation is easy to comprehend, this oversimplification does not represent the real situation. Kostka et al. (2013) and Kostka and Santa (2018) categorized meters in greater detail, that are:

1. Asymmetrical meter – based on regular recurring pulses could not be subdivided into groups of two (2) or three (3). This includes the use of 5 or 7 in the numerator of a meter, with common denominators 4, 8 or 16.
2. Composite meter – indicates recurring irregular subdivisions on its numerator, such as 3+2+3, 2+2+3 and 3+3+2, while the common denominator is 4, 8 or 16.
3. Mixed meter – refers to the rapid change of meter in succession within a piece of music. As the name suggests, the “mix” could include symmetrical meter, asymmetrical meter and composite meter.
4. Polymeter – happens when more than one music meter is used simultaneously. This involves two (2) or more types of meters being executed concurrently.
5. Ametric music – Music that lacks an aurally perceivable metric organization. It does not seem to imply a regular series of recurring pulses (visibly and/or aurally), despite some ametric music using meter.
6. Metric modulation – used to describe an immediate change in tempo created by equating a particular note value to another note value, usually located in the next bar. Elliott Carter is generally credited with being the first to use this particular method of changing tempos.

Kostka et al. (2013) and Kostka and Santa (2018) also discussed the rhythmic characteristics of post-tonal/contemporary art music, mentioning additive rhythm, non-retrogradeable rhythm, polyrhythm, and displaced accent (among others) that were developed during this music era.

As this paper intends to conduct a systematic investigation on the use of meter in Razak Abdul Aziz’s *5 Early Songs* (1980-1988), we would not be discussing rhythmic characteristics as proposed by Kostka et al. (2013) and Kostka and Santa (2018). It is vital that we focus the investigation on the use of meter in this piece so that the readers would have a clear comprehension of how the composer perceives meter in this work and not be deviated.

Razak Abdul Aziz (b. 1959) is arguably one of the earliest contemporary art composers in Malaysia (Zamani et al., 2019). He received his academic trainings at Skidmore College (USA) as an undergraduate and at Columbia University (USA) and University of Edinburgh (UK) at postgraduate levels. Zamani and Gani (2020) documented the list of works by Razak Abdul Aziz as follows:

1. *5 Early Songs* for voice and piano (1980-1988)