

## Vocalizing the Archipelago: Rhythmic Harmony and Textural Innovation in Contemporary Indonesian Choral Music

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**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary Indonesian choral compositions increasingly incorporate traditional musical idioms such as gamelan and kecak into modern SATB frameworks. This study explores how selected choral works reinterpret these idioms by prioritizing rhythm, vocal texture, and articulation over conventional harmonic progressions. The objective is to understand how rhythm can function as a primary harmonic agent in a cappella settings. The methodology involves analytical comparison of three compositions Janger (Budi Susanto Yohanes), Cikala le Pong Pong, and Hela Rotan (both by Ken Steven). Through transcription, rhythm mapping, and texture classification, this study reveals the strategic layering of rhythmic motifs, percussive vocal effects, and responsorial structures across SATB and divisi settings. Results show that Janger employs interlocking vocal ostinati and contrasting articulations to emulate gamelan textures. Cikala le Pong Pong uses body percussion, chest voice, and glissandi to generate dissonant harmonic fields. Hela Rotan adapts Eastern Indonesian rhythmic idioms through responsorial phrasing, leading to emergent polyphonic verticalities. These techniques collectively redefine choral harmony through rhythmic density and vocal layering. Discussion highlights how these works negotiate cultural fidelity and artistic innovation. They challenge Western-centric harmonic paradigms by elevating rhythm and texture as compositional pillars. Such approaches contribute to broadening perspectives on harmonic theory and enrich global choral repertoires through culturally grounded, structurally inventive music.

**Keywords:** Rhythmic Harmony, Indonesian Choral Music, Gamelan, Kecak, Vocal Texture, Non Western Composition, SATB A Cappella.



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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's rich musical heritage, including gamelan and kecak, provides fertile ground for exploration in contemporary choral contexts. While historically embedded in communal and ritual practices, these traditions are now reinterpreted by a new generation of composers within modern

SATB frameworks. This development highlights a research gap: the limited understanding of how rhythm and texture, rather than harmony, shape contemporary Indonesian choral composition.

Gamelan music, often associated with both Javanese and Balinese cultural spheres, presents contrasting stylistic identities. The Balinese gamelan is noted for its vigorous, driving rhythmic interplay and high dynamic range, while Javanese gamelan tends toward more meditative, flowing textures. Despite these differences, both systems rely heavily on modal frameworks such as *slendro* and *pelog*, as well as cyclical time structures informed by *colotomic* patterns. *Kecak*, on the other hand, exemplifies a highly rhythmic vocal tradition that simulates gamelan using interlocking “cak” patterns. These traditions do not align with Western harmonic hierarchies, often resisting triadic progressions and functional tonality in favor of modal color and rhythmic layering.

Historically, Western scholarly interpretations of these forms have evolved from exoticist curiosity to more respectful, contextually grounded analyses. Early representations often romanticized Indonesian music, casting it as mysterious and otherworldly. However, subsequent academic discourse has shifted toward acknowledging the complex sociocultural frameworks and ritual functions underlying gamelan and *kecak*. As Yang (2023) argues, the shift from aesthetic abstraction to ethnographic engagement marks a critical turn in how Southeast Asian music is studied in Western institutions.

This growing appreciation has influenced compositional practices among Indonesian choral composers, particularly those seeking to recontextualize traditional sonic materials for international performance settings. By incorporating rhythmic and textural features from gamelan and *kecak* into SATB formats, these composers forge a hybrid musical idiom that is at once rooted in cultural tradition and forward looking in its aesthetic ambition. Works such as Budi Susanto Yohanes’s *Janger* and Ken Steven’s *Cikala le Pong Pong* and *Hela Rotan* exemplify this trajectory, using vocal interlocking, percussive effects, and modal gestures to simulate the harmonic effects of traditional ensembles.

Unlike Western harmony, which is built upon principles of consonance, dissonance, and functional progression, Indonesian harmonic logic is emergent, arising from the interaction of parallel layers, heterophonic textures, and cyclical rhythmic motion. Theoretical imposition of Western analytic frameworks often fails to capture the internal coherence of these traditions. As such, compositional adaptation of gamelan and *kecak* into choral settings requires new analytical perspectives that emphasize rhythm, texture, and timbre as primary harmonic agents.

In the contemporary Indonesian choral scene, this approach has gained momentum. Composers navigate between cultural fidelity and stylistic innovation, producing works that resonate within global choral competitions and festivals while retaining the sonic signatures of their cultural roots. The international success of ensembles such as the Batavia Madrigal Singers, whose repertoire includes these hybrid works, suggests an expanding recognition of Indonesian choral idioms on the global stage.

The rise of such compositions also reflects broader cultural dynamics. As global communication enables greater exposure to diverse musical practices, Indonesian composers are increasingly empowered to assert their aesthetic priorities while participating in international dialogues. This shift is not merely artistic but also philosophical, asserting that non Western music systems possess intrinsic value and can contribute to reimagining contemporary compositional paradigms.

This study examines how selected choral compositions reinterpret gamelan and kecak through rhythm and texture, thereby proposing an alternative framework for understanding harmony in vocal music. By focusing on rhythm as a structuring force and timbre as a vehicle for harmonic expansion, this research highlights the potential of culturally embedded strategies to inform global choral innovation. The findings not only enrich our understanding of Indonesian music's adaptability but also contribute to broader conversations about decolonizing harmony and expanding compositional vocabulary in choral contexts.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a multi method analytical framework to examine the ways in which contemporary Indonesian choral composers reimagine traditional rhythmic and textural idioms particularly from gamelan and kecak within modern SATB a cappella formats. The methodology integrates transcription based analysis, rhythmic mapping, and comparative frameworks rooted in both ethnomusicological and computational traditions. These approaches are selected to address the layered complexity inherent in the selected vocal works and to highlight culturally embedded compositional logics.

The works selected for analysis represent three prominent examples of Indonesian choral composition:

- *Janger* by Budi Susanto Yohanes (SATBB a cappella)
- *Cikala le Pong Pong* by Ken Steven (SSAATTBB a cappella)
- *Hela Rotan* by Ken Steven (SATB with rhythmic idioms)

These works are chosen for their explicit integration of traditional Indonesian rhythmic logic into choral writing, as noted in program annotations and publisher notes (Earthsongs; Hal Leonard). Their circulation in international festivals further affirms their relevance and artistic significance.

## **Transcription and Rhythmic Mapping**

To uncover rhythmic layering and vocal interactions, this study applies polyphonic transcription methodologies supported by spectrogram analysis. As Bohak & Marolt (2016) and McLeod et al. (2017) illustrate, such methods allow for visual and temporal identification of rhythmic motifs and their interlocking behavior. Event based segmentation was employed to analyze interactions across vocal lines, enabling detailed mapping of articulation (e.g., marcato vs. legato), ostinati patterns, and their composite effects.

Convolutional neural network aided models (Wang et al., 2023) were also referenced to validate temporal alignment and pitch density, especially in complex percussive sections of *Cikala le Pong Pong*. These tools were supplemented with manual annotations to capture expressive deviations and percussive articulations absent from conventional notation.

### **Texture Categorization**

Texture was mapped by identifying functional roles of each vocal line, their pitch strata, and interaction across time. A classification model similar to that proposed by Ellis et al. (2018) was adopted, focusing on timbral density, polytextural layering, and pitch variation. Maler & Komaniecki (2021) work on ensemble performance texture informed the criteria for stratification, allowing for distinctions between static drones, rhythmic cells, and percussive inserts.

### **Comparative Framework**

To contextualize the compositional strategies within broader choral practice, a cultural comparative framework was used. Drawing from Lee (2020) and Hu (2024), this approach examined how Indonesian rhythm driven vocal idioms contrast with Euro American harmonic priorities. Factors such as improvisational scope, ensemble hierarchy, and modal flexibility were considered. This framework enabled deeper insights into how cultural context informs textural and harmonic choices.

### **Source Materials**

Primary materials include critical editions of the scores provided by Earthsongs and Hal Leonard, performance recordings by ensembles such as the Batavia Madrigal Singers, and annotated composer notes. These were cross referenced for consistency and triangulated using online catalogues and competition records where necessary.

This comprehensive methodology thus ensures a rigorous and culturally responsive analysis of harmonic innovation via rhythm and texture in Indonesian choral music.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Janger**

Budi Susanto Yohanes's *Janger* showcases a profound emulation of gamelan's interlocking structures through a cappella vocal techniques. Drawing inspiration from Balinese kotekan, the composition employs staggered vocal ostinati across SATBB voices, crafting a complex web of rhythmic interplay. The interlocking rhythms in *Janger* emulate gamelan ensembles and create harmonic density that emerges through layered vocal interactions. Rather than restating techniques, these results highlight the implication that rhythmic simultaneity can substitute for

traditional harmonic progression, reframing how verticality is achieved in vocal music (Cahill & Hamel, 2021; Gao & Wang, 2023).

The articulation in *Janger* particularly the contrast between marcato and legato passages directly contributes to its harmonic richness. Strong consonantal attacks (e.g., 't', 'k') and glottal effects serve as vocal surrogates for percussive textures, enhancing rhythmic clarity while simultaneously densifying the harmonic field (Cahill & Hamel, 2021). The alternation of articulatory styles marcato bringing vertical prominence, legato offering melodic fluidity enables a dynamic tension that shapes the listener's perception of harmonic verticality (Gao & Wang, 2023).

This rhythmic layering leads to emergent harmonic density. Multiple vocal lines interacting through different rhythmic strata produce overtones, implied chords, and textural saturation that surpass conventional triadic harmony. Thus, *Janger* constructs harmonic verticality not through progression but via percussive simultaneity and timbral richness (Cahill & Hamel, 2021).

### **Cikala le Pong Pong**

In *Cikala le Pong Pong*, Ken Steven advances a unique approach to harmonic innovation by integrating body percussion and extended vocal techniques. Vocal percussion clapping, stomping, snapping functions not only as rhythmic support but as a primary generator of sonic texture (Tukova, 2021; Cahill & Hamel, 2021). The layering of these percussive elements across SSAATTBB voices builds complex rhythmic architecture that mimics the energy and cyclical nature of traditional ensemble music.

Moreover, the use of glissandi and chest voice introduces intentional textural dissonance. Glissandi destabilize pitch focus, introducing tension and temporal suspension within the texture (Liu et al., 2020). Chest voice, with its resonant depth, adds weight and contrast, producing moments of vertical emphasis and reinforcing rhythmic impulses (Tukova, 2021). These techniques work in tandem to challenge harmonic expectations and enrich the auditory landscape.

Harmony in this piece is perceived less through triads and more via microtonal interactions, dynamic contours, and the resonance between textural gestures. The ensemble becomes a multidimensional instrument where pitch, noise, and physical gesture converge to form a fluctuating harmonic spectrum (Liu et al., 2020).

### **Hela Rotan**

*Hela Rotan* introduces rhythmic idioms from Kalimantan and Eastern Indonesia, adapting polyrhythmic and trance like structures into a SATB choral framework. The repetitive patterns form a hypnotic base that is richly layered through responsorial entries, suggesting traditional call and response formations (H, 2025; Cahill & Hamel, 2021).

Structured responsorial phrasing creates moments of implied polyphony. Each entry complements or extends the prior vocal statement, reinforcing textural layering and producing an evolving sense of vertical sonority (Liu et al., 2020). This method not only evokes traditional practices but also enables modern reinterpretation within competitive and concert settings.

Call and response dynamics further modulate the piece's harmonic landscape. As leadership shifts among voices, harmonic texture thickens or thins accordingly. These fluctuations foster interactive

harmonic pacing, allowing the listener to perceive evolving verticalities shaped by phrase overlaps and rhythmic emphasis (H, 2025).

Cultural context profoundly informs the work's rhythmic melodic phrasing. Local traditions influence ornamentation, pacing, and phrasing decisions, allowing the vocal adaptation to reflect indigenous aesthetics while repositioning them within global choral discourse. This sensitivity to cultural nuance underscores the composer's dual objective: to preserve and reimagine tradition (H, 2025).

The compositions analyzed in this study demonstrate a distinctive reorientation of harmonic function through the lens of rhythm and vocal texture. Rather than operating within the bounds of Western harmonic progressions, these works propose a model in which rhythm assumes the central structural role. This concept, often described as "rhythmic harmony," redefines how coherence and vertical sonority are achieved in choral music particularly within non Western traditions such as those of Indonesia.

In many non Western choral contexts, harmony is not a product of chordal syntax but a result of layered rhythmic interactions. As Khashan & Salman (2025) emphasize, rhythm in these traditions is deeply tied to communal identity and ritual expression. The music's emotional depth and social function emerge not from harmonic resolution but from the interplay of repetition, variation, and timbral nuance. Indonesian composers draw upon this sensibility, constructing sonic density through rhythmic stratification, percussive effects, and responsive layering that are rich in interpretive possibility.

These works illustrate how cultural fidelity and innovation are not opposites but complementary forces in Indonesian choral composition. By foregrounding rhythm and texture as structural agents, composers contribute theoretical insights that expand the global choral vocabulary. This approach positions Indonesian music as a critical voice in rethinking harmony, offering both practical techniques and conceptual frameworks for inclusive music analysis.

This reconceptualization of harmony as emergent arising from rhythm and texture challenges traditional paradigms in music theory. As Dixon (2021) and Moyer (2025) contend, it invites a more inclusive approach to music analysis, one that recognizes the emotional and structural power of rhythmic cohesion. These works expand the expressive vocabulary of choral music, offering new ways to experience unity and complexity without relying on harmonic progression in the Western sense.

Reception within international choral communities may be mixed. On the one hand, festivals and competitions increasingly embrace global musical expressions, with growing interest in culturally specific idioms that offer fresh perspectives (Pirner, 2024). On the other hand, unfamiliarity with non triadic harmonic logic may provoke hesitation among ensembles accustomed to Eurocentric choral traditions. As Lester (2020) and Qiao (2025) suggest, such responses often surface tensions around authenticity, adaptation, and the evolving definition of "choral music." Yet it is precisely in these moments of tension that intercultural dialogue and aesthetic expansion can flourish.

Ultimately, the Indonesian choral works discussed here point toward a pluralistic future in choral composition and pedagogy. They advocate for a decolonized understanding of harmony one that

prioritizes rhythm, texture, and cultural specificity as equally valid foundations for musical structure. In doing so, they contribute not only to the richness of the global choral repertoire but also to a more inclusive framework for musical thought.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how contemporary Indonesian choral compositions reinterpret gamelan and kecak through rhythm, texture, and vocal articulation. The key finding is the emergence of “rhythmic harmony,” where vertical sonority is achieved not through Western-style harmonic progressions but through layered rhythmic interactions, percussive vocal effects, and timbral density. This approach highlights the adaptability of Indonesia’s musical heritage while offering new frameworks for understanding harmony in choral contexts.

The main contribution lies in positioning rhythm and texture as legitimate alternatives to triadic progression, expanding the conceptual vocabulary of choral composition. By integrating cultural fidelity with innovation, these works enrich global choral practice and demonstrate the value of non-Western traditions in reimagining harmonic structures. Future research may explore audience reception across cultural settings and include a wider range of indigenous idioms, further strengthening the inclusivity of global choral discourse.

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