

**The British Historiography of Malay Music in the Nineteenth Century**  
**D. R. M. Irving**  
**King's College London**

British writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries extolled the musical traditions and systems of Hindustan and Java, with key writers on these subjects including Sir William Jones, John Crawfurd, and Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles. The emphasis on these musical cultures, however, has diminished the amount of attention given by today's scholars to the parallel development of a British historiography of Malay music in the nineteenth century, which was caught between Indian and Javanese traditions. One possible reason for the relative neglect of the Malay Peninsula and other parts of the *Alam Melayu* (Malay World) is that this region has been viewed as essentially cosmopolitan, incorporating peoples from India, China, mainland Southeast Asia, and the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago at large. It could also be due to perceptions of the transculturative processes and syncretic formation of musical genres and practices that arose from successive waves of Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonialism.

Yet if we momentarily suspend speculation as to the reasons for this lacuna and turn our attention to surviving sources, we can see that it is possible to extract a great deal of information about music of the Malay World from a variety of documents, including travel accounts, economic and agricultural treatises, dictionaries and grammars, missionary reports, autobiographies, and especially court chronicles and other forms of Malay classical literature. In this paper I aim to focus on the British contribution to the documentation and understanding of Malay music in the nineteenth century; however, this is only a preliminary overview and just one small component of what aims to be a major study of all forms and sources of historiography in this period. British historiography represents only a fraction of the writings about Malay music in the nineteenth century, and from a colonialist perspective; it tells us more about the colonial construction of ethnographic knowledge than about Malay musical traditions themselves. This paper will focus on the development of a colonialist discourse that occludes many of the complex details of Malay musical practices. Key themes to be discussed in this paper include the formation of stereotypes about Malay music, the transcription of Malay melodies, the incorporation of music into ethnographic literature, and the production of exoticist musical works in Britain that were based on Malay themes.

From the late eighteenth century onwards, many tropes emerged in regard to Malay music, with comments about its 'sweetness', its affinities with European music, and its capacity to be assimilated within European genres. At the same time, British writers differentiated Malay music from Indian and Chinese musics (although some Malay instruments were considered to be derived from these traditions), and Malay music was seen to occupy a distinct niche in the region's gamut of musical styles. At the heart of this notion was the intrinsic connection between language and music, and especially the Malay language's emergent reputation as the 'Italian of the East'. Although this sobriquet very likely has older roots, one of the most prominent figures to write about it in the late eighteenth century was the orientalist and linguist William Marsden (1754–1836), in his *History of Sumatra*, first published in 1783:

The *Malay* language, which is original in the peninsula of Malayo, and has from thence extended itself throughout the eastern islands, so as to become the *lingua franca* of that part of the globe . . . has been much celebrated, and justly, for the smoothness and sweetness of its sound, which have gained it the appellation of the *Italian of the east*. This is owing to the prevalence of vowels and liquids in the words, and the infrequency of any harsh combination of mute consonants. These qualities

render it well adapted to poetry, which the Malays are passionately addicted to. They amuse all their leisure hours, including the greater portion of their lives, with the repetition of songs, which are, for the most part, proverbs illustrated, or figures of speech applied to the occurrences of life. Some that they rehearse, in a kind of recitative, at their *bimbangs* or feasts, are historical love tales, like our old English ballads, but often extempore.

The musical nature of the language, as Marsden saw it (and heard it), was directly related to his ideas of Malay musicality in general. Immediately prior to his discussion of the Malay language in his published history, Marsden had treated the music of Sumatra; he mentioned the instruments used on the island, and claimed that Sumatran tunes resembled ‘those of the native Irish’. He also emphasised the use of the violin, which he says had ‘found its way to them from the westward’, and whose players employed the ‘same notes as in our division’ (i.e. the European diatonic scale), tuning their instruments in fifths.

One of Marsden’s older contemporaries was the British navigator and keen amateur musician Thomas Forrest (c.1729–c.1802), whom Marsden noted was called ‘Capitan Gila’ (‘mad captain’) by the Malays, for his musical antics and ‘other such whimsical practices’. Forrest’s musical impulses were known in many parts of the Malay Archipelago: he performed on flute before the Sultan of Aceh, exchanged flute melodies for songs sung by Papuan women, gave a flute and violins to the *raja muda* of Maguindanao, transcribed and played *kulintang* music (on the flute), composed Malay verses, and engaged in musical duets with wives of rulers. Forrest even attempted to marry Malay texts with Italian music in ‘A Malay Song’, whose words he had composed and whose music was adapted from one of the movements of a trio sonata by Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713), Op. 4 No. 2 (first published in Rome, 1694). The musical score of Forrest’s ‘Malay Song’ was published in his travelogue of 1792, *A Voyage from Calcutta to the Mergui Archipelago*. During his visit to Aceh in 1784, Forrest was requested to perform this piece several times before Sultan Ala’ud-din Muhammad Shah, who apparently took great pleasure in it (and, incidentally, who bestowed the Order of the Golden Sword on Forrest that year). Forrest, who spoke Malay fluently, appears to have seen music as another type of *lingua franca* that was prevalent throughout the archipelago – just like the Malay language itself – although it seems that he most often performed European music, and only sometimes local melodies. The reputation of Forrest lived on throughout the nineteenth century: he is the likely inspiration for an imaginary European flautist visiting a Malay court in the novel *Naufragus* (1827); the German musicologist Carl Engel (who lived most of his life in Britain) also mentioned the story of Forrest’s Malay–Corellian song in his book *An Introduction to the Study of National Music* (1866), speculating that the melody might have entered into oral tradition in Sumatra.

If Forrest’s reputation remained strong, then Marsden’s assessment of affinities between the Italian and Malay languages and musical styles appears to have had an even greater impact writers of the nineteenth century, many of whom echoed or paraphrased him. For example, Edward Moor of the East India Company, in his influential publication on Hindu mythology, *The Hindu Pantheon* (1810), commented that ‘Malay music is, indeed, proverbially sweet; so is the language’, continuing with the rhetorical question: ‘How happens it, that the promontory of Malaya in the Indian ocean, like that of Italy in the Mediterranean, is distinguished by its fine climate, soft language, sweet music, and treacherous inhabitants?’ James Hingston Tuckey paraphrased Marsden’s comment on the Malay musical instruments, language, and singing in his *Maritime Geography and Statistics* of 1815. Several decades later, the anonymous author of the autobiographical account ‘Twenty-Seven Years of a Cosmopolite’s Life’, published in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1858, recounted the singing of Malay sailors as he approached the island of Penang, stressing

the pleasure he took in Malay music. Whereas he stated unequivocally that he thought of ‘Oriental music’ as ‘notoriously vile’, he made it clear to the reader that he considered Malay music to be the Italian music of the East, just as the Malay language was the Italian of the East.

This stereotypical view of Malay music promoted by British writers – namely, the *cantabile* style of Malay music and its affinities with European common practice – was supported by the publication of multiple Malay melodies, transcribed on the spot by musical observers and transmitted to Britain amongst an abundance of ethnographic data. The earliest Malay melody to be published in Britain appears to be the ‘Malay Tune’ appearing in the first volume of Dr William Crotch’s anthology *Specimens of Various Styles of Music, referred to in a course of Lectures, read at Oxford & London* (London, 1807). Although the notes for the lectures themselves do not seem to mention Malay music at all, the tune is found as part in a series of ‘East Indian’ (i.e. North Indian) melodies. In the third edition, published *circa* 1820, the provenance of this melody is indicated: ‘from M<sup>r</sup> Brown C.C.C.Ox: [Corpus Christi College, Oxford]’. A second ‘Malay Tune’ is also included; this is the same melody as published in the first volume of John Crawfurd’s *History of the Indian Archipelago* (1820), for which Dr Crotch supplied a bass and chordal accompaniment to the transcriptions of Javanese and Malay melodies.

These melodies were collected by travellers in the field and at urban centres of multilateral intercultural encounters. In terms of urban centres, Penang was one of several significant trading entrepôts which provided fertile conditions for the mixing and exchange of musical practices – and for the transmission of knowledge about them. James Low, in his *Dissertation on the Soil & Agriculture of the British Settlement of Penang . . . including Province Wellesley* (1836), discusses the multiplicity of musical styles present in this locality, citing Siamese, Javanese, and Chinese genres and performances, as well as Malay music. Likewise, Jonas Daniel Vaughan, in his article ‘Notes on the Malays of Pinang and Province Wellesley’ (1858), mentioned that at festivals Indian musicians played ‘shrill pipes resembling the clarinet’.

European music was also practised at Penang, and was taken up by local Malays and other local inhabitants. This is another influential trope emerging from nineteenth-century British historiography: many British observers noted with interest the particular aptitude of Malay musicians to play European music. Jonas Daniel Vaughan noted the difference between urban and rural environments, as regards the Malay adoption of European musical practices; he observed that ‘on the violin they will execute by ear all their own tunes and English jigs and Portuguese fandangoes and will dance to the tunes with as much spirit as an Englishman at a fair’. After mentioning several dance genres he continued: ‘it must be stated that the stolid country Malay seldom indulges in such amusements, [whereas] those that reside near the Town and the Jawibukans [children of Malay mothers and Bengali fathers] are fond of imitating their European neighbours.’ The interaction between Europeans and Malays in crucibles of intercultural exchange was considered responsible for the processes of transculturation and hybridity that manifested themselves aurally (and visually) through musical performance. Even though the mixing and cross-cultural adoption of musical styles could be said to contribute to the blurring of identity categories, music was still viewed as a clear marker of Malayness, and Malay music was seen as being distinct from the traditions of other cultures in the broader region (Indian, Burmese, Siamese, Chinese).

The transcription of different ‘national airs’ in the nineteenth century was part of the Romantic enterprise of codifying national identity. One of the largest collections of Malay melodies published in the nineteenth century was sourced from Penang; this collection was included (perhaps rather incongruously, at first sight) in an article entitled ‘History of Tennasserim’ by Captain James Low of the Madras Army, in the fourth volume of *The*

*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1837). The tenth chapter of this article focuses on the music of Burma; it contains descriptions and illustrations of Burmese instruments, followed by transcriptions of eleven ‘Siamese Airs’ and one ‘Burman Air’ reproduced on five pages. The largest musical section is a group of twenty-eight ‘Malayan’ melodies – all with titles – appearing on twelve pages. In a footnote reference, Low acknowledges that he is ‘indebted for the *Burman* music to Lieut. Sherman, Madras Infantry . . . The Siamese and Malayan airs have been set to music by *Che Draman*, an inhabitant of Penang, who has been long known to the settlement as their Niel Gow; and Lieutenant Sherman has also favoured me by revising them.’ Significantly, there are far more Malay melodies than Siamese or Burmese; this could point to the predominance of Malay melodies on Penang, or to the predilection of Che Draman. The comment that the airs were ‘set to music’ by this musician suggests that he wrote them himself in European staff notation (although they were apparently ‘revised’ by Sherman).

It is worth commenting briefly on Che Draman’s epithet, the ‘Niel Gow’ of Penang; there were two famous Scottish musicians named Niel Gow, the first being a self-taught fiddler who lived from 1727 to 1807 and attained celebrity status, and the second being his grandson Niel Gow Junior, a famous composer of dance music (who was doubtless also a fiddler). The reference to Che Draman as a ‘Niel Gow’ most likely refers to his technical skill on the violin and his expertise in performing dance music. It could even point to the burgeoning of Scottish influence in dance music on the Malay peninsula, although more research needs to be undertaken in this area, as well as on the life and work of Che Draman.

Returning to John Crawfurd, we can see that the treatment of music in his *History of the Indian Archipelago* focuses on Javanese traditions, as did Raffles’ earlier *History of Java* (1817). However, in a later work, his *Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands & Adjacent Countries* (1856), Crawfurd comments specifically on Malay practices, emphasising their differentiation from Indian and Chinese traditions. Crawfurd mentions stringed, wind, and percussion instruments, tuned pentatonically, and – quoting James Richardson Logan – he describes a kind of acoustemological practice in the interior of the peninsula, namely ‘giant Æolian pipes’, bamboo poles set up to resonate in the wind, which he states were referred to in Malay literature as ‘buluh-parindu, literally “the languishing bamboo,” and occasionally of buluh-ribut, or “the bamboo of the storm”’. This is a feature of Malay musical practice that was noted by several writers. Crawfurd also stressed the aptitude of Malay musicians for European music: ‘Fine musical ears often occur among all the nations and tribes of the Archipelago, and in this respect they are favourably distinguished from the Hindus, and still more from the discordant Chinese. They are all passionate lovers of their own music and capable of acquiring considerable skill in European.’

Jonas Daniel Vaughan (mentioned earlier) also differentiated Malay music from its Indian and Chinese counterparts, saying that Malay tunes ‘are exceedingly pleasing and excel in sweetness the Chinese and Indian melodies’. In the diverse cultural environment of Penang, he clearly had the opportunity to hear all these styles of music. He commented on the abundance of semitones in Malay music, but asserted that ‘they are not numerous enough to destroy all traces of a regular melody as is so remarkable in Chinese music’. Finally, he opined that ‘Malayan tunes are capable of being easily adapted to European music, and a musician of Singapore has set several for the piano and other instruments’. This last comment requires elaboration. In nineteenth-century Britain, and amongst the European community in the Straits Settlements, there emerged an exoticist trend for the arrangement of Indian and Malay melodies for pianoforte and other instruments. Although the so-called *Hindostannie Airs* and related publications are well known and have been studied extensively, the Malay equivalents have yet to be examined. In circa 1824, Thomas Bridgewater published in York a seven-page musical score entitled *Malay Air, with Variations for the Piano Forte, and an*

*Accompaniment (ad lib) for the Flute*; according to the composer, his source for the air was a British officer who first heard the melody sung by a group of Malay soldiers marching in the interior of Sri Lanka in 1817. Several decades later, *The Johore Quadrilles* – five in total, each based on several Malay melodies and arranged for the pianoforte – were published in London with the title page featuring a colour lithographed portrait of Abu Bakar, the dedicatee of the work (named here as ‘the Maharajah of Johore’). The date suggested for this publication is 1867, which corresponds to Abu Bakar’s voyage to England in 1866, during which he was known to the British public as ‘Maharaja’. Further research has yet to be undertaken to reveal some the contexts of *The Johore Quadrilles*’ production. It is likely that many more exoticist European musical productions based on Malay melodies will emerge as this investigation continues.

The scope of this paper has allowed for only a brief survey of some of the themes that emerge from the British historiography of Malay music in the nineteenth century. British writers highlighted the differentiation of Malay music from neighbouring traditions; they also projected several tropes and stereotypes about affinities between Malay and European musics, and the propensity of Malay musicians to adopt European practices. Malay identity in music was codified through transcription and publication of melodies, and its potential compatibility with European music was explored through the production of exoticist works based on Malay themes. Although this study is in its preliminary stages, it is clear that there remain many detailed analyses to be made, for example of British writers’ treatment of organology (i.e. the study of instruments), the *nobat* ensembles of Malay courts, festivities in urban and rural contexts, music in religious devotion, and numerous genres of vocal, instrumental, and dance music. An intriguing question that invites further exploration is the extent to which earlier waves of Portuguese and Dutch colonialism influenced musical practices in port cities and coastal settlements; the musical impact of migrants from India and Hadhramaut in the nineteenth century needs also to be considered. Of course, the history of Malay music must be studied in conjunction with indigenous written records (Malay court chronicles and other classical Malay literature), musical artefacts (especially instruments), living traditions, and evidence of musical interaction with the many different waves of migrants to the region. It is only by considering all of these dimensions that we can begin to understand the many places and contexts of music in the nineteenth-century Malay World, during this complex period of political, social, and cultural transition.