

Dondang Sayang - The art of duelling *pantuns*

By Stephanie Ho, written on 24 January 2014

Dondang Sayang is a traditional musical genre and entertainment of the Malay and Peranakan communities in Singapore and Malaysia. Although its popularity has dwindled since the mid-20th century, Dondang Sayang is still loved and performed by enthusiasts today.

Dondang Sayang is a musical genre and entertainment associated mainly with the Malay and Peranakan communities in Singapore and Malaysia. The term *Dondang Sayang* is derived from the words *dondang* or *dendang* which means “to sing”, and *sayang* which encompasses a range of meanings that include love, longing and dejection. The tempo of *Dondang Sayang* is usually slow.¹

In a typical *Dondang Sayang* session, two or more singers exchange *pantuns* – a Malay poetic form – based on a theme or subject (*tajuk*). In public performances, *Dondang Sayang* is usually sung as a duet between a male and female performer in a lighthearted and teasing manner. Some common subjects for *Dondang Sayang pantuns* include good deeds (*budi*), love (*kasih*) and flowers (*bunga*).²

Pantuns have a basic structure of four lines, each line comprising four words. The first two lines create suspense and foreshadow the message. The third line begins the unveiling of the message and the fourth line delivers the punch.³ In *Dondang Sayang*, the *pantun* structure is modified to include repetition and fillers.⁴ An example of a *Dondang Sayang pantun* is as follows:⁵

Man	<i>Tanam selasih di tepi perigi Lambat laun berbunga juga Walaupun kasih bertukar ganti Ada masa terkenang jua</i>	Plant <i>selasih</i> next to a well Soon it will blossom Though I have many lovers You are sometimes in my mind
Woman	<i>Buah selasih di atas bangku Di tanam orang di pangkal serai Kalau rindu sebut namaku Air mata jangan berderai</i>	<i>Selasih</i> fruit on a bench It is planted next to lemon grass Should you long for me, just say my name It’s no use crying now

While *Dondang Sayang* practitioners typically know hundreds of *pantuns* by heart, the more talented can improvise *pantuns* on the spot. To do this, singers need to be

¹ Yusnor Ef. (1994). A brief on Malay asli and *dondang sayang*. In J. Peters (Ed). *Forum papers: Presentations at the 2nd ASEAN composers forum on traditional music*. Singapore: National Arts Council on behalf of the ASEAN COCI, p. 58.

² Thomas, P. L. (1986). *Like tigers around a piece of meat: The Baba style of Dondang Sayang*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, p. 13

³ Back to the days of tender tussle of the *pantun*. (1988, May 25). *Straits Times*, p. 22.

⁴ Thomas, P. L. (1986). *Like tigers around a piece of meat: The Baba style of Dondang Sayang*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, p.4.

⁵ Quoted in Yusnor Ef. (1994). A brief on Malay asli and *dondang sayang*. In J. Peters (Ed). *Forum papers: Presentations at the 2nd ASEAN composers forum on traditional music*. Singapore: National Arts Council on behalf of the ASEAN COCI, p. 59.

quick witted, and have a good grasp of the language and the diverse aspects of Malay culture.⁶

Dondang Sayang singers are accompanied by a small band of musicians playing the violin, Malay hand drums (*rebanas*) and gong. These core instruments may be supplemented with guitars, an accordion, western drums, a tambourine and a flute. The drums and gong play coordinated rhythms while the violin plays a melody independent of the singer.⁷

Historical background

The origins of *Dondang Sayang* are unclear. Some people believe it originated from Riau when it was introduced by Princess Wan Benai of Bintan island in the 12th century.⁸ A more widely held belief is that it was created in the Malaccan courts during the 14th and 15th centuries. In the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, a record of life during the time of the Malaccan Sultanate, Hang Jebat was credited with the invention of *Dondang Sayang*.⁹

Regardless of its origins, *Dondang Sayang* was a popular entertainment in the Malaccan courts where it was often accompanied by dancing. This courtly pastime later spread to the common people who performed *Dondang Sayang* during traditional festivals.¹⁰ After Malacca came under British rule in the 19th century, *Dondang Sayang* gradually spread to the Straits Settlements – Singapore and Penang – and other parts of Malaya.¹¹

From the late 19th century, *Dondang Sayang* was also performed in public. For the Singapore Malays, *Dondang Sayang* sessions often started after the late evening prayers and lasted till dawn. These sessions were usually held in conjunction with weddings, completion of Quaran reading courses and other celebrations.¹² *Dondang Sayang* was also frequently presented during scene changes at *Bangsawan* and other performances.¹³

Soon western influences began to creep into the genre. New instruments were added into the band such as the instruments from British India like the tabla. New rhythmic patterns were also used. For example, *Dondang Sayang mambo*, a fusion of *Dondang Sayang* with Latin dance styles was a dance craze in the 1950s.¹⁴

⁶ Back to the days of tender tussle of the pantun. (1988, May 25). *Straits Times*, p. 22.

⁷ Thomas, P. L. (1986). *Like tigers around a piece of meat: The Baba style of Dondang Sayang*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, p. 3.

⁸ Jeman Sulaiman. (1988, June 7). Courteous, thoughtful *dondang sayang*. *Straits Times*, p. 7.

⁹ Amend, J. M. (1998). *Negotiation of identity as theme and variation: The musical art of dondang sayang in Melaka, Malaysia*. PhD dissertation. Florida State University School of Music, pp. 39-40.

¹⁰ Amend, J. M. (1998). *Negotiation of identity as theme and variation: The musical art of dondang sayang in Melaka, Malaysia*. PhD dissertation. Florida State University School of Music, p. 46.

¹¹ The *dondang sayang* has its origin in Malacca. (1985, June 18). *Straits Times*, p. 6.

¹² The special verses of dondang sayang known as pantuns. (1985, June 25). *Straits Times*, p. 6.

¹³ Amend, J. M. (1998). *Negotiation of identity as theme and variation: The musical art of dondang sayang in Melaka, Malaysia*. PhD dissertation. Florida State University School of Music, p. 51.

¹⁴ Amend, J. M. (1998). *Negotiation of identity as theme and variation: The musical art of dondang sayang in Melaka, Malaysia*. PhD dissertation. Florida State University School of Music, p. 53-54, 61.

By the 1970s, interest in *Dondang Sayang* began to wane as few members of the younger generation were interested in learning this art form.¹⁵ Attempts were made to revive *Dondang Sayang* in the 1980s. The Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) ran a television programme *Kelab Dondang Sayang* from 1982 to 1985, the Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC) held an annual *Dondang Sayang* show, and *Dondang Sayang* performances and classes were conducted in community centres.¹⁶

Peranakan style dondang sayang

In addition to the Malay community, *Dondang Sayang* is also associated with the Peranakans or Straits Chinese many of whom originated from Malacca. The main difference between the Peranakan and Malay versions of *Dondang Sayang* is in the language used. The Peranakans used their own patois rather than the Malay language.¹⁷ This point was significant as Peranakan life and culture was different from that of the Malays due to differences in religion, cultural borrowings and social status.¹⁸

Between the 19th century and the 1960s, the Peranakans mainly performed *Dondang Sayang* in their homes, usually during informal gatherings of family or friends.¹⁹ *Dondang Sayang* was also an essential part of Peranakan celebrations such as *Chap Goh Meh*, wedding dinners, birthdays and anniversaries where it was often accompanied by *Ronggeng* dancing.²⁰

Baba William Tan recalled going with his father to musical sessions on Sundays at his friend's homes. During these sessions, eight or nine people would sit around a table "sharpening their wits" in *Dondang Sayang*. A person would start with a verse, a second would reply and so on. If a person could not respond during his turn, the next person would take over.²¹ Tan said that the hardest part of *Dondang Sayang* was the "on-the-spot rebuttal by the singer" as this required "a keen mind, a quick tongue and mastery of the language, including the proverbs and idiomatic terms".²²

The Peranakans formed several *Dondang Sayang* associations in the 20th century. In Singapore, the Gunong Sayang Association of Singapore was set up in 1910 to support the singing of *Dondang Sayang*. The Penang *Dondang Sayang* Club was initiated in 1954.²³ Every *Chap Goh Meh* (15th night of the Lunar New Year) members of the club would serenade the city traveling in decorated buses.²⁴

¹⁵ Faithful 60 who keep the dondang sayang swinging. (1977, January 25). *Straits Times*, p. 13.

¹⁶ Courteous, thoughtful dondang sayang. (1988, June 7). *Straits Times*, p. 7.

¹⁷ Peters, J. (2003). Sonic orders in the sonic environment of Singapore. In J. Peters (Ed). *Sonic orders in ASEAN music's, Volume 2*. Singapore: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, p. 383.

¹⁸ Amend, J. M. (1998). *Negotiation of identity as theme and variation: The musical art of dondang sayang in Melaka, Malaysia*. PhD dissertation. Florida State University School of Music, p. 59.

¹⁹ Thomas, P. L. (1986). *Like tigers around a piece of meat: The Baba style of Dondang Sayang*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 5-6.

²⁰ T. F. Hwang takes you down memory lane. (1975, December 13). *Straits Times*, p. 16.

²¹ Lim, M. (1998, July- September). For William Tan life is a song. *The Peranakan*, pp. 6-7.

²² Lim, M. (1998, July- September). For William Tan life is a song. *The Peranakan*, p. 7.

²³ Thomas, P. L. (1986). *Like tigers around a piece of meat: The Baba style of Dondang Sayang*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 8-9.

²⁴ Serenading for Chap Goh Meh. (1962, February 15). *Straits Times*, p. 6.

When Singapore became part of Malaysia in 1963, the learning of *Bahasa Kebangsaan* (National language) was encouraged. With more Singapore Peranakans being fluent in Malay, they also began to sing the *Dondang Sayang* in Malay rather than in the Baba patois. In Malacca, the Peranakans still sing in the Baba patois.²⁵

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²⁵ Lim, M. (1998, July-September). For William Lim life is a song. *The Peranakan*, p. 7.