

# SOUNDBRIDGE FESTIVAL: FIELDWORK, PEDAGOGY, AND CROSS-CULTURAL ARTISTIC DIALOGUES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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**Received:** 13 January 2026

**Revised:** 19 February 2026

**Accepted:** 24 March 2026

**Published:** 31 March 2026

**Citation:**

Chong, K. Y. (2026). Soundbridge festival: Fieldwork, pedagogy, and cross-cultural artistic dialogues in Southeast. *PULSE: Journal for Music and Interdisciplinary Practices*, 7(Special Issue), 40–91. [https://so18.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/pulsejournal/article/view/vol7\\_2/keeyongchong](https://so18.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/pulsejournal/article/view/vol7_2/keeyongchong)

## Abstract

Founded in Malaysia in 2013, the SoundBridge Music Festival is an independent, artist-led platform dedicated to contemporary music, interdisciplinary collaboration, and cross-cultural dialogue in Southeast Asia. Established with the support of the Society of Malaysian Contemporary Composers (SMCC)<sup>1</sup> and co-founded with the author's independent initiative, Studio C<sup>2</sup>, SoundBridge emerged outside institutional frameworks as a response to structural limitations in funding, pedagogy, and audience development.

Rather than functioning solely as a performance-based event, SoundBridge has evolved over seven editions (2013–2025) into a sustained pedagogical and cultural initiative integrating artistic creation, education, and fieldwork. Drawing on the author's dual role as composer, educator, and artistic director, this article examines SoundBridge as a practice-based model that foregrounds experiential learning, interdisciplinary

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<sup>1</sup>The Society of Malaysian Contemporary Composers (SMCC), founded in 1993, is a non-profit organisation dedicated to the promotion, performance, and development of contemporary art music in Malaysia through concerts, education, commissions, and international exchange.

<sup>2</sup>Studio C is an artist-led independent initiative founded by the author, focusing on contemporary music creation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and experimental performance practices in Southeast Asia.

collaboration, and regional artistic exchange. Particular attention is given to the festival's fieldwork programmes in Indonesia and Malaysian Borneo, situated in dialogue with Southeast Asian pedagogical traditions, notably the legacy of José Maceda.

Through workshops, lecture concerts, cross-media performances, and immersive on-site experiences, the festival functions as a “bridge” between artists, students, traditions, and contemporary practices. In doing so, it offers an alternative framework for contemporary music education and cross-cultural artistic dialogue, contributing to the sustainable development of artistic ecosystems in Malaysia and the wider Asian region.

As this study draws in part on reflections from participating artists and students across multiple editions of the festival, some contributors are presented anonymously. This approach reflects the informal, process-oriented nature of many interactions within the festival context, where discussions often occur outside formal interview settings. Anonymity is therefore maintained where appropriate to respect the conversational and practice-based conditions under which these insights emerged.

**Keywords:** SoundBridge Festival, contemporary music, Southeast Asia, artistic pedagogy, fieldwork, cross-cultural dialogue, practice-based research.

## Introduction

Southeast Asia is a region marked by cultural plurality, layered histories, and complex negotiations between tradition and modernity. Yet, despite its rich artistic resources, contemporary music platforms that actively encourage cross-cultural experimentation and pedagogical engagement remain relatively scarce. In Malaysia, contemporary music practices have often been constrained by institutional limitations, fragmented audiences, and a lack of sustained platforms connecting emerging artists with regional and international discourses. It was within this context that the SoundBridge Music Festival was conceived.

Founded in 2013, SoundBridge did not emerge as a conventional festival centered solely on concerts and premieres; rather, it developed as an open, process-oriented platform. Its formation responded directly to structural challenges within the Malaysian contemporary music landscape, including limited long-term funding mechanisms, insufficient institutional support for experimental and interdisciplinary practices, and the absence of consistent platforms capable of cultivating audiences beyond academic or specialist circles. From the outset, its objective was to create a space in which composers, performers, visual artists, students, and audiences could engage in meaningful artistic dialogue across cultural, disciplinary, and institutional boundaries.

Across seven editions spanning more than a decade, SoundBridge has evolved from a modest contemporary music festival into a multifaceted cultural initiative encompassing concerts, lecture concerts, masterclasses, interdisciplinary workshops, field trips, public forums, art markets, and community-oriented activities. This evolution reflects a broader pedagogical ambition: to reposition the music festival as a site of learning, encounter, and attentive listening, rather than merely a site of presentation. In this sense, SoundBridge functions as a bridge not only between musical styles and cultures, but also between artistic practice and education.

This study positions SoundBridge not only as a Malaysian initiative, but as a Southeast Asian artistic platform through which questions of contemporary Asian practice, pedagogy, and cultural responsibility are actively negotiated.

Adopting a practice-based and reflective methodology, this study is grounded in the author's dual role as artistic director, composer, and educator within the SoundBridge Festival. In addition to longitudinal observation across seven editions (2013–2025), the analysis draws on informal interviews, written reflections, and post-event conversations with participating composers, performers, and collaborators. Selected reflections are incorporated as direct quotations where appropriate, while others are paraphrased for clarity and continuity. In cases where participants are not explicitly identified, anonymity is maintained either at the request of the individual or to enable candid reflection on pedagogical and artistic processes within the festival context.

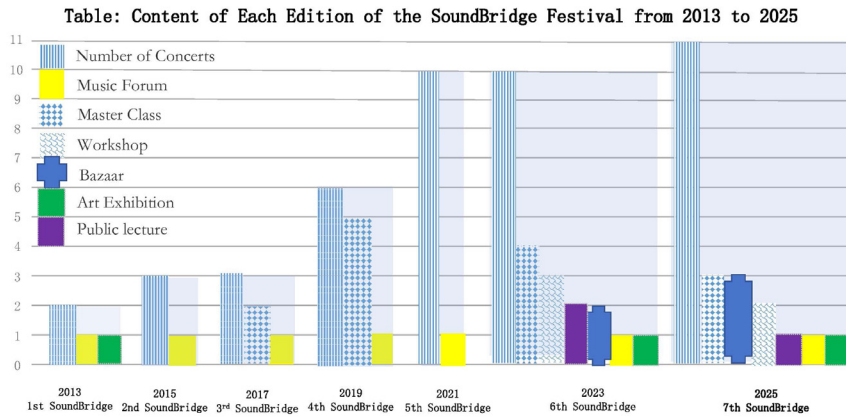


Figure 1. Content of 7 editions of SoundBridge Festival



Figure 2. SoundBridge Festival rehearsal photos  
*“In 1<sup>st</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2013, Philippines young composer/Conductor Aj Villanueva collaborated with filmmaker Mohamadrezza Shams, rehearsing his “A Cup of Oxygen” for flute, piano, and percussion with video projection.”*



**Figure 3.** In 7<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2025, Semara Ratih Gamelan (Bali), puppeteer I Made Christian Wiranata Rediana (Yogyakarta) and dancer Zhu Shiya (China) performing at the opening concert



**Figure 4.** SoundBridge Festival participants in dialogue.  
*Participants and invited panellists engaged in a public discussion on “Trends in Cross-Media Contemporary Music” at the 7<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival, 2025.*



Figure 5. Artist Jean-David Caillouët (French/Thailand) shared his perspective on cross-media practices during a panel discussion at the 3<sup>rd</sup> SoundBridge Festival, 2017.

**Video link 1:** SoundBridge Festival 2013-2023 at the youtube channel playlists:  
<https://www.youtube.com/@soundbridgemusicfestival/playlists>

**Video link 2:** SoundBridge Festival’s website:  
<https://soundbridgefestival.com/>

## II. Curatorial Pillars: SoundBridge, Connecting Cities, and Malaysian Voices

Within SoundBridge, the notion of “bridge” is understood not as a symbolic metaphor, but as an operative condition—one that connects artistic practice with pedagogy, local knowledge with regional dialogue, and tradition with contemporary experimentation.

As SoundBridge evolved from an experimental initiative into a sustainable cultural platform, its programming gradually crystallized into three interrelated curatorial pillars: **SoundBridge**, **Connecting Cities**, and **Malaysian Voices**. These core concert formats function not merely as labels, but as strategic frameworks through which artistic creation, education, and audience development are systematically aligned.

### **SoundBridge: A Bridging Platform for Young Asian Composers**

The *SoundBridge* concert series operates as the methodological core of the festival. Conceived explicitly as a bridging platform, its primary purpose is to provide young composers from Southeast Asia and the broader Asian region with opportunities for cross-domain collaboration and artistic exchange. For each edition, emerging composers are selected through recommendations by established regional composers and artists, ensuring curatorial continuity while foregrounding mentorship and peer transmission rather than open competition.

Rather than prioritising nationality or stylistic affiliation, *SoundBridge* emphasises process: experimentation through rehearsal, dialogue across disciplines, and sustained interaction between composers, performers, and artists from diverse cultural and artistic backgrounds. Works presented within this platform are frequently realised through close collaboration with the festival ensemble and invited guest artists, positioning composition as a practice shaped through negotiation, embodied experience, and collective inquiry.

An illustrative example can be found in the interdisciplinary work of **Deasylina da Ary** in collaboration with the young Malaysian composer Tian Yoon Teh in the 3<sup>rd</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2017, who described her artistic practice as emerging from the interrelationship between embodied knowledge, sound, and memory of tradition. Drawing upon the sensitivity of the body, Javanese vocal nuance, and lived experience in dance, her work confronts contemporary music through an exploratory approach that places bodily presence and sonic material in continuous dialogue. In this context, tradition is not treated as an aesthetic ornament or symbolic reference, but as a living archive—knowledge that remains active, negotiable, and transformable through performance.

Within such collaborations, dance does not function as a passive response to music, nor does music merely serve as an accompaniment to movement. Instead, both operate within a shared sonic–corporeal field, mutually shaping form, structure, and temporal flow. From a curatorial perspective, this mode of collaboration exemplifies how SoundBridge frames difference not as an obstacle to integration, but as a productive strategy for creation. The process demands openness, the suspension of disciplinary hierarchies, and a willingness among participants to relinquish individual authority in favour of collective authorship.



Figure 6. In 3<sup>rd</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2017, Javanese court dancer Dr Deasylina da Ary (Indonesia) in collaboration with the young Malaysian composer Tian Yoon Teh and in Ensemble Studio C in her new creation 〈苦→花〉 (Blossom) for dancer and ensemble

### Connecting Cities: Regional and Transnational Dialogues

*The Connecting Cities* concert series extends SoundBridge's mission beyond national boundaries, fostering artistic exchange between Malaysian musicians and their counterparts across Southeast Asia and other regions. Rather than presenting international artists as visiting authorities, this platform emphasises dialogue, reciprocity, and shared creative agency, situating cities as interconnected nodes of contemporary musical practice rather than hierarchical centres.

A representative example can be found in the third SoundBridge Festival (2017), where German percussionist **Max Riefer** presented the world premiere of *Man Against Machine*, a work for solo percussion and visual projection by Thai composer **Jiradej Setabundhu** in collaboration with visual artist **Prinda Setabundhu**. The project brought together performers and creators from different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, integrating contemporary percussion practice with visual media to explore tensions between human agency and technology.

Reflecting on his experience at SoundBridge, composer Jiradej Setabundhu described the festival as one that approaches new music as a form of lived experience rather than an abstract academic activity. While formal workshops and presentations were part of the programme, he emphasised that learning extended

well beyond institutional settings. Long rehearsal hours were often followed by informal conversations in local cafés, where discussions moved fluidly between artistic projects, traditional instruments, everyday objects, emerging technologies, and personal aspirations. In these moments, distinctions between senior and emerging artists softened, allowing knowledge to circulate horizontally rather than unidirectionally.

For Setabundhu, the most enduring aspect of SoundBridge was this human dimension of music-making—one grounded in shared time, conversation, and mutual curiosity—combined with a strong sense of professional rigour in rehearsal organisation and stage management. Such experiences exemplify how *Connecting Cities* operates not merely as a showcase of international works, but as a framework for sustained interpersonal exchange, where artistic practice is shaped through both professional collaboration and informal social encounter.

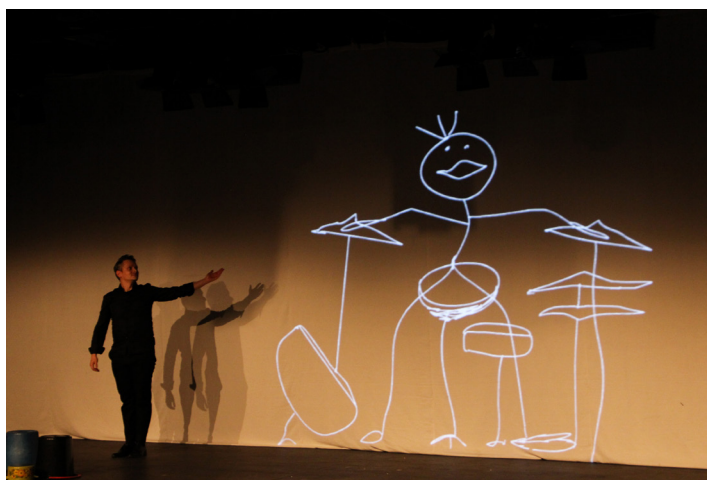


Figure 7. In 3<sup>rd</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2017, German percussionist Max Riefer presents the world creation of “Man against Machine” for percussion solo and visual projection by composer Jiradej Setabundhu and artist Prinda Setabundhu from Thailand.

### Malaysian Voices: Malaysian Musicians Performing Malaysian Works

*The Malaysian Voices* concert series foregrounds Malaysian musicians performing works by Malaysian composers, asserting local creative voices as central rather than peripheral to contemporary music discourse. In a context where

international repertoires often dominate programming, this platform deliberately recentres Malaysian artistic production within its own cultural and professional ecosystem.

Beyond representation, *Malaysian Voices* functions as a targeted developmental platform. By rotating its curatorial focus across editions, the series addresses structural gaps within Malaysia's contemporary music landscape and supports long-term capacity building among composers and performers.

The significance of *Malaysian Voices* becomes particularly evident through the reflections of young Malaysian composers who have experienced the platform from within. One participating composer, who has spent extended periods of his musical training overseas, described his return to Malaysia small town Kluang for the seventh edition of SoundBridge as more than a presentation of new work; it became a moment of reflection on artistic identity, direction, and belonging.

From his perspective, SoundBridge provided a rare transition point between academic composition and professional artistic practice. While students within conservatory systems often have limited access to rigorous professional rehearsal environments, the festival offered what he described as a “real-world testing ground.” Collaborating with experienced performers, he observed that rehearsals extended beyond the execution of written material toward a shared investigation of intention, sound, and artistic direction. This process compelled him to reassess his work not as an academic exercise, but as a professional artistic statement, addressing a critical gap within Malaysian music education prior to entering international circuits.

The composer further reflected on how the festival environment encouraged confidence in developing a distinctly local aesthetic. Contrary to assumptions that serious contemporary music must be confined to acoustically controlled Western concert halls, performances in Kluang embraced the sonic conditions of a tropical small town—ambient noise, lived spaces, and everyday soundscapes. Presenting a work incorporating objects and sounds drawn from Southeast Asian daily life, he noted that the strong audience response affirmed the expressive potential of engaging honestly with local auditory memory.

Finally, the composer described SoundBridge as a powerful point of return for Malaysian artists living abroad. Having long observed the dispersal of Malaysian

musical talent across different countries, he experienced the festival as a rare gravitational centre—one that enabled artists to reconnect not only with place, but with a contemporary artistic community. Through this collective return, SoundBridge contributes to the cultivation of a sustainable ecosystem for contemporary Malaysian music.



*Figure 8. In 5<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival (2021), Malaysian Voices concert featured N10 Ensemble (Malaysia) conducted by Lee Kok Leong (Malaysia), performing works by Malaysian composers.*



*Figure 9. In 7<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2025, Malaysian Guzheng players Cloud Teo and Leong Jia Yuit performed “Dance in the Prime of Youth” by Malaysian young composer Sebastian Ooi Wei Chenn at Art space of Kluang Days Café*

### Curatorial Expansion Across Editions

While the three curatorial pillars—*SoundBridge*, *Connecting Cities*, and *Malaysian Voices*—remained conceptually stable, their concrete articulation expanded over time in response to generational change, increasing artistic responsibility, and the festival’s growing regional role.

Beginning with the fourth edition in 2019, SoundBridge introduced composer-focused and artist-centred curatorial formats through the *SMCC Artist-in-Residence* programme, featuring the renowned Malaysian pianist **Nicholas Ong**. This marked a shift away from programme-based representation toward deeper engagement with individual artistic trajectories, allowing audiences to encounter compositional thinking through sustained artistic presence rather than isolated works.

In 2021, this curatorial orientation expanded further with the formal introduction of the *Artist-in-Residence: Emerging Musicians* platform. German percussionist **Max Riefer**, who has participated in every edition of SoundBridge since its inception in 2013, served as SMCC Artist-in-Residence, while the *Young Rising Star Series* featured Malaysian Saxophonist **Scarlet Gouk Yan Tong**. That same edition also presented MASTER Series miniature portrait concerts dedicated to **Dieter Mack** (Germany) and **Lukas Ligeti** (Austria/USA), signalling a growing concern with lineage and historical consciousness.

*The Dream for Future – Dare to Dream* programme foregrounded process-oriented experimentation through works-in-progress, including excerpts from *Hope* by young Malaysian composer and interdisciplinary artist **Teh Tian Yoon**, alongside collaborative projects involving OpusNovus ensemble from the **Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music** (Singapore). Rather than presenting isolated performances, these initiatives emphasised mentorship, rehearsal, collaboration, and public reflection, positioning SoundBridge as a space where artistic futures could be collectively imagined.

Reflecting on this long-term curatorial development, Max Riefer observes that the festival’s early emphasis on Southeast Asian composers—particularly emerging voices—has proven foundational to its present role as one of the most significant platforms for contemporary music in the region. Under the sustained curatorial vision of **Kee Yong Chong**, SoundBridge has gradually evolved into an international

hub that connects Southeast Asian new music scenes with globally recognised figures, fostering durable artistic relationships rather than one-off encounters. This evolution is most tangibly embodied in the formation of **Ensemble Studio C**<sup>3</sup>, the festival's core resident ensemble.

Comprising musicians from Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, China, Germany, Switzerland, and beyond, Ensemble Studio C represents the material outcome of SoundBridge's curatorial expansion. Its core members include violinist **Saori Nakawaza**, cellist **Martin Jaggi**, clarinetist **Tsai Pei-Lun**, guzheng player **Cloud Teo**, pipa player **Su Yun-Han**, dizi player **Gill Toh**, pianists **Nicholas Ong**, flautist **Daiske Kino-shita**, and percussionists **Max Riefer**, **Adam Sharawi**, and **Aris Huzaimi**.

Subsequent editions in 2023 and 2025 extended this curatorial logic toward historical and ethical reflection through *MASTER Series* mini-portrait concerts dedicated to composers who have made significant contributions to Asian contemporary music. These included **Anothai Nitibhon** (Thailand) and **Chinary Ung** (Cambodia/USA) in 2023, as well as **Ramon Santos** (Philippines) and **Gao Weijie** (China) in 2025. These focused presentations functioned not as retrospective tributes, but as contextual anchors—situating emerging practices within longer genealogies of Asian modernism and cross-cultural experimentation.

Alongside these portrait concerts, the Dream for Future platform continued to evolve through collaborations with younger performers and ensembles, including students from the **Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music** (Thailand) in 2025 and Singapore-based **Weird Aftertaste Ensemble** (Singapore) in 2023. Educational and discursive dimensions were further reinforced through lecture-concert formats, such as those presented by Japan's **Trio AR**, formed by **Tadashi Tajima**, **Tosiya Suzuki**, and **Daiske Kino-shita**.

By the seventh edition in 2025, this curatorial expansion further embraced site-specificity, spontaneity, and cross-disciplinary dialogue. The festival incorporated invited guest musicians in flash improvisation sessions alongside rapid on-site sketching by local visual artists, foregrounding immediacy and shared creative process.

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<sup>3</sup>Ensemble Studio C is the resident ensemble of the SoundBridge Music Festival, comprising musicians from Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Europe. Formed through long-term collaboration across multiple festival editions, the ensemble embodies SoundBridge's curatorial emphasis on continuity, intercultural dialogue, and process-based artistic practice.

An open studio presentation with Singapore-based Kluang artist **Chanker** extended the festival's engagement into the visual arts domain, transforming exhibition space into an active performative environment. Audiences were also invited to witness a musical encounter featuring Chinese cellist **Zhou Yi**, SoundBridge field researchers **Jiao Ying**, **Cong Yixuan**, and **Wang Tian**, dancer **Zhu Shiya**, handpan musician **Zhang Tongfen**, Sape player **Salomon Gau** and sketcher artists whose spontaneous performances wove dialogues between tradition, contemporary expression, and the artworks themselves.

In doing so, it offers an alternative framework for contemporary music education and cross-cultural artistic dialogue in Southeast Asia, and has been described as a “resonant bridge” connecting diverse Asian sound worlds (Zou, 2018). Through this ongoing curatorial expansion, SoundBridge has transformed from a concert-based platform into a multi-layered curatorial ecology where composition, improvisation, visual art, and research practice converge within shared temporal and spatial frameworks. Rather than being defined primarily by formats, the festival is increasingly shaped by a sense of curatorial responsibility—balancing immediacy with legacy, experimentation with continuity, and local urgency with a growing regional and intergenerational consciousness.



**Figure 10.** *In the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of SoundBridge, Ensemble Studio C performed Echoes II by Ramon Santos within the MASTER Series mini-portrait concert, highlighting the integration of composer-focused curation and the festival's resident ensemble.*



Figure 11. In 7<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2025, Students of PGVIM performed at “Dream for future” with their collective composition “Social Dilemma” collaborated with Thai composer/Sound artist Pradit Saengkrai.



Figure 12. In the 6<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival (2023), Japan’s Trio AR presented a lecture-concert featuring works specially commissioned and written for the ensemble.

Video link 3: SoundBridge Festival’s website:  
<https://youtu.be/i6hhZG1WZ2U>

### III. From Precedents to Praxis: KLCMF, Goethe-Institut SEA, and the Genesis of SoundBridge

Before the founding of the SoundBridge Music Festival in 2013, my engagement with contemporary music platforms in Malaysia and Southeast Asia had already been shaped by two significant initiatives: The Kuala Lumpur Contemporary Music Festival (KLCMF) 2009 and the Goethe-Institut Southeast Asia Young Composers Competition and Festival. These projects played a formative role in clarifying both the possibilities and limitations of existing contemporary music infrastructures in the region, and they directly informed the conceptual foundations of SoundBridge.

The Kuala Lumpur Contemporary Music Festival 2009 represented one of the earliest large-scale attempts to establish a visible contemporary music platform in Malaysia. It demonstrated that local audiences were receptive to experimental and newly composed works when presented within an accessible and well-curated framework. At the same time, KLCMF revealed structural challenges that would recur in subsequent years: the difficulty of sustaining long-term funding, dependence on institutional cycles, and the absence of continuity beyond the festival event itself. While KLCMF succeeded artistically, it underscored the need for a more flexible, artist-led model capable of evolving beyond a single edition.

Following the successful Southeast Asia Young Composers Competition and workshop held during KLCMF 2009, the Goethe Institute extended its support by awarding the ten selected finalists full scholarships to attend the Darmstadt Summer Course in 2010. This initiative marked a significant moment of encouragement and investment in the continued development of contemporary music in Southeast Asia. Building on this momentum, two further editions of the Goethe-Institut Southeast Asia Young Composers Competition and Festival<sup>4</sup> were organised in 2011 (Indonesia) and 2013 (Thailand), situating Malaysian composers within a broader regional network encompassing Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and beyond.

These initiatives were supported not only institutionally, but also through the active involvement of leading professional ensembles and senior composers from the region and abroad. In particular, the Berlin-based **Ensemble Mosaik**

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<sup>4</sup>The Goethe-Institut Southeast Asia Young Composers Competition and Festival was a regional initiative supporting emerging composers from Southeast Asia through workshops, professional ensemble collaboration, and international mobility, active between 2009 and 2013.

(Germany) played a significant role by working directly with young Southeast Asian composers, offering a level of professional rehearsal culture and performance rigour rarely accessible within local contexts at the time. Alongside this, established composers and musicians from the Southeast Asian region—including **Michael Asmara** (Indonesia), **Kyai fatahillah gamelan** and **Iwan Gunawan** (Indonesia), **Ho Chung Shih** (Singapore), **Anothai Nitibhon** (Thailand), **Jonas Baes** (Philippines), **Tran Kim Ngoc** (Vietnam) and others —contributed to workshops, mentorship, and critical dialogue, reinforcing a regionally grounded yet internationally connected pedagogical environment.

Supported and shaped in part by German composer **Dieter Mack**, these combined efforts fostered a strong sense of regional consciousness among participants, emphasising Southeast Asia as a shared yet diverse cultural space. However, as competition-based platforms, their structures inevitably prioritised selection, outcomes, and short-term project cycles over sustained pedagogical engagement and long-term artistic relationships.

Taken together, these two experiences—KLCMF’s event-based visibility and the Goethe-Institut’s emphasis on regional networking and mentorship—highlighted both the strengths and limitations of prevailing models. They reinforced my conviction that Malaysia required a platform that was not only international in outlook, but also pedagogically sustained, process-oriented, and rooted in local realities. SoundBridge emerged from this realisation as a response that sought to integrate artistic excellence with education, collaboration, and continuity. Rather than replicating established festival or competition formats, SoundBridge was conceived as an adaptive framework—one capable of growing organically through workshops, fieldwork, and long-term artistic relationships.

From an external perspective, Mack later characterised SoundBridge as an initiative that transformed limited resources into an unusually dense and creative artistic environment, in which cross-media experimentation and interdisciplinary dialogue were not supplementary features but central organising principles. He observed that the festival functioned simultaneously as a presentation of contemporary artistic achievements and as a laboratory for new visions, emphasising the role of the artist as an active participant in social and cultural dialogue rather

than a figure operating outside society. In his view, Southeast Asia's multiplicity of cultural memories and aesthetic positions positioned the region not at the margins of contemporary art, but as a potential leader in shaping its future trajectories.

In this sense, SoundBridge should be understood not as a departure from earlier initiatives, but as a praxis-based evolution shaped by them. By learning from the achievements and constraints of KLCMF and the Goethe-Institut SEA platform—and through sustained dialogue with figures such as Mack—SoundBridge positioned itself as a bridge between precedent and possibility, transforming accumulated experience into a sustainable model for contemporary music and cross-cultural artistic dialogue in Southeast Asia.

From an analytical perspective, SoundBridge's emergence outside institutional frameworks is not merely a circumstantial condition, but a structuring force that has fundamentally shaped its curatorial logic. Operating without sustained governmental or institutional funding has required the festival to adopt a flexible, adaptive, and process-oriented model. This has enabled responsiveness to local contexts, the incorporation of non-traditional venues, and the prioritisation of long-term artistic relationships over short-term visibility. At the same time, such independence entails significant limitations, including financial precarity, reliance on personal networks, and the absence of stable infrastructure for scaling or archiving. Rather than being resolved, these tensions are actively negotiated within SoundBridge's evolving structure, positioning the festival as both a response to and a reflection of broader conditions shaping contemporary music practices in Southeast Asia.



Figure 13. Poster of the 1st KL Contemporary Music Festival 09 (KLCMF09) from 27 – 29 November 2009



Figure 14. Ten selected finalists from the Goethe-Institut Southeast Asia Young Composers' Competition and Workshop at KLCMF09 were awarded full scholarships to attend the Darmstadt Summer Course for the first time in 2010. From left: Matius Shanboone (Indonesia), Juro Kim Feliz (Philippines), Tan Tuan Hao (Singapore), Lee Chie Tsang (Malaysia), Neo Nai Wen (Malaysia), Thatchatham Silsupan (Thailand), Chow Jun Yan (Malaysia), Kittiphan Janbuala (Thailand), Zurazak Ut-sa (Thailand), Chow JunYi (Malaysia)



**Figure 15.** Kyai fatahillah gamelan (Indonesia) lead by Iwan Gunawan (Indonesia) and Ensemble Mosaik (Germany) conducted by Robert H. Platz (Germany) at the Goethe Institute Southeast Asia Young Composers Competition and Festival 2011 (Indonesia)



**Figure 16.** Ensemble Mosaik (Germany) conducted by Enno Poppe (Germany) at the Goethe Institut Southeast Asia Young Composers Competition and Festival 2013 (Thailand)

IV. Fieldwork as Pedagogy: SoundBridge and the Legacy of José Maceda<sup>5</sup>



Figure 17. 5<sup>th</sup> edition “SoundBridge” Indonesia field trip 2024, SoundBridge field trip students studying Wayang Kulit with Javanese Puppeteer I Made Christian Wiranata Rediana and Ganis Naluri Putri Surtikanthi at Yogyakarta.



Figure 18. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition “SoundBridge” Indonesia field trip 2018, SoundBridge field trip students studying Kecak with musician of Semara Ratih Gamelan (Bali) Dewa Put at Ubud.

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<sup>5</sup> José Maceda (1917–2004) was a Filipino composer, ethnomusicologist, and cultural thinker whose work profoundly shaped discourses on Southeast Asian music, fieldwork-based pedagogy, and culturally grounded contemporary practice. He advocated immersive listening, collective participation, and learning through direct engagement with sound environments rather than score-centred conservatory models.



**Figure 19.** 1<sup>st</sup> edition “SoundBridge” Indonesia field trip 2017, SoundBridge field trip students studying Javanese court dance and meditation with dancer Aung Gunawan at Pacitan.

**Video link 4:** 3<sup>rd</sup> edition “SoundBridge” Indonesia field trip 2019, Balinese gamelan study with Semara Ratih Gamelan (Ubud) <https://youtu.be/bn0MOqBQbq4?si=pEvVKKrhzTTgKkcg>

**Video link 5:** 5<sup>th</sup> edition “SoundBridge” Indonesia field trip 2025, creative workshop and performance with Omah Gamelan and director Anon Suneko [https://youtu.be/\\_oPElbT3kU0?si=CmDrv2358cW01QIN](https://youtu.be/_oPElbT3kU0?si=CmDrv2358cW01QIN)

One of the most distinctive features of the SoundBridge Music Festival is its emphasis on fieldwork as a core pedagogical strategy. This orientation is closely aligned with the ideas and practices of **José Maceda**, whose work as a composer, ethnomusicologist, and cultural thinker continues to shape discourses on music, education, and artistic responsibility in Southeast Asia.

Maceda advocated a mode of learning grounded in direct engagement with sound environments, ritual practices, and communal forms of music-making. His pedagogical stance challenged Western conservatory paradigms that privilege written notation, individual authorship, and stylistic lineage. In their place, he proposed an approach centred on listening, collective participation, and cultural context. Through his work in Southeast Asia, Maceda articulated a model of artistic knowledge rooted in immersion and encounter—principles that strongly inform the conceptual foundation of SoundBridge’s fieldwork initiatives.

From 2017 to 2025, SoundBridge has organised a series of cultural field trips in Indonesia and Malaysian Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah), bringing composers, performers, and students into close contact with local communities, traditional musicians, and everyday soundscapes. These field trips are not conceived as ethnographic surveys in the academic sense, nor as short-term cultural tourism. Rather, they function as immersive learning laboratories in which participants are encouraged to listen attentively, observe carefully, and engage respectfully with unfamiliar musical, social, and cultural practices.

Within these fieldwork contexts, the role of the educator shifts significantly. Instead of acting as an authoritative transmitter of knowledge, the educator becomes a facilitator and mediator, creating conditions for encounter, dialogue, and reflection. Students from diverse educational backgrounds, alongside independent artists and traditional practitioners, participate as equals within a shared learning environment. Knowledge emerges through interaction rather than instruction, and creativity is understood as a collective and relational process rather than an individual achievement.

Accounts from musicians who participated in the Indonesia field trips describe experiences that temporarily suspended everyday routines and enabled profound shifts in perception. Encounters with trance rituals, nocturnal village ceremonies, and *Wayang Kulit* performances dedicated to ancestral spirits blurred conventional boundaries between art and ritual, sound and belief, and life and death. For some participants, the cyclical resonance of gamelan music or the layered calls to prayer at dusk reactivated sonic memories no longer present in their own urban environments.

Others emphasised the importance of embodied participation and spatial proximity. Observing *Wayang Kulit* from behind the screen—surrounded by rows of instruments and live performers—revealed the inseparability of sound, gesture, and dramaturgy in ways that could not be grasped through recordings or notation alone. Learning gamelan, Javanese court dance, Kecak, and monkey dance alongside local artists in Yogyakarta, Pacitan, Bali, and surrounding villages foregrounded bodily knowledge as a primary mode of musical understanding.

Several participants also reflected on the lasting influence of these fieldwork experiences on their subsequent creative practice. Encounters with instrument-making processes, village landscapes, and communal rhythms reshaped their listening habits and informed later compositional decisions. In some cases, musical concepts encountered during the field trips were later integrated into new works that combined Southeast Asian materials with Chinese and Western compositional languages, extending the pedagogical impact of fieldwork well beyond the temporal boundaries of the festival.

An important extension of SoundBridge's fieldwork pedagogy lies in its continuity beyond the field trip itself. At the conclusion of each fieldwork programme, local mentors and collaborating artists identify one or two participants whose engagement, sensitivity, and creative potential demonstrate an exceptional response to the field experience. These participants are subsequently invited to develop new compositions for future editions of the SoundBridge Music Festival, drawing directly upon their fieldwork encounters as sources of material, concept, or artistic methodology.

This process establishes a clear pedagogical trajectory from immersion to reflection, and from experience to creation. Fieldwork thus functions not as an isolated educational event, but as the initial phase of a longer creative cycle that culminates in new artistic works presented within a professional festival context. By entrusting local mentors with the responsibility of selection, SoundBridge affirms the authority of in-situ knowledge and avoids imposing external evaluative criteria disconnected from the cultural contexts encountered during the field trips.

Through this mechanism, SoundBridge ensures that fieldwork-based learning translates into tangible artistic outcomes while fostering long-term mentorship relationships between participants and local practitioners. The resulting works not only reflect individual artistic growth, but also extend the dialogue between field experience and contemporary composition across successive editions of the festival, demonstrating how fieldwork, pedagogy, and artistic production are structurally integrated within SoundBridge's curatorial model.



**Figure 20.** During the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of SoundBridge, students participating in the 1<sup>st</sup> time Malaysia Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah) field trip conducted interviews with Kenyah tribe dancers and sape players at the longhouse in Kampung Long Moh, located in the Telang Usan region of Sarawak, Borneo — a traditional dwelling of the Kenyah Dayak community.



**Figure 21.** 5<sup>th</sup> edition SoundBridge — First Malaysia Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah) field trip 2025: students learning the bongkau (jaw harp) from master maker and performer Yatam Miki from Kg. Takutan, Ranau, Sabah.

**Video link 6:** Video clips of the 5<sup>th</sup> edition SoundBridge — First Malaysia Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah) field trip 2025 at Kampung Long Moh, Sarawak  
<https://youtu.be/9DP-pM45cg8?si=3dPNF8oK3bT4CqjB>

## V. From Festival to Ecosystem: Young Composers, Cross-Media Practices, and Community Engagement



**Figure 22.** Interdisciplinary performance integrating music, dance, visual art, or live electronics at SoundBridge.

*In 1<sup>st</sup> SoundBridge festival, Thai young composer Kittiphan Janbuala in collaboration with Chong Keat Aun (Malaysia) in his “Fee For Free” (DOM) for baritone, flute, violin and live electronic with the live performer. [Composer is nominated by Anothai Nitibhon]*



**Figure 23.** Interdisciplinary performance integrating music, dance, visual art, or live electronics at SoundBridge.

*In 2<sup>nd</sup> SoundBridge festival 2015, Indonesian young composer Gatot Danar Sulistiyanto in collaboration with Javanese Dancer Agung Gunawan and studio C ensemble in his “Katalompen No.3”. [Composer is nominated by Artistic director of Yogyakarta Contemporary Music Festival Michael Asmara],*

Over the course of its seven editions, SoundBridge has gradually evolved from a contemporary music festival into a broader cultural ecosystem. This transformation has been driven by four interrelated priorities: the sustained support of young composers and emerging musicians, the integration of cross-media artistic practices, the reconfiguration of educational models beyond the classroom, and the active engagement of local communities through public-facing activities.

### Supporting Young Composers and Emerging Voices

From its inception, SoundBridge has placed young composers and emerging musicians at the centre of its artistic vision. Rather than treating emerging artists as peripheral participants or competition entrants, the festival positions them as active contributors within a professional artistic environment. Young composers are given opportunities to present new works alongside established figures, participate in workshops and rehearsals with international artists, and engage directly with performers, visual artists, and audiences.

World premieres, lecture concerts, and open rehearsals form a key component of this support structure. By contextualising new works through dialogue and reflection, SoundBridge encourages young composers to articulate their artistic intentions while remaining responsive to performers and listeners. This approach fosters artistic confidence while resisting the pressures of stylistic conformity often associated with institutional training.

For artists who have worked with SoundBridge across multiple editions, this emphasis on process has been described as central to the festival's long-term impact. Javanese dancer **Agung Gunawan** reflected on SoundBridge as a space that functions as a “home for process,” where young and established artists interact through works developed specifically for the festival context. Having collaborated with the festival both in performance and in educational initiatives such as the SoundBridge Cultural Field Trip in Java and Bali, he emphasised the importance of independence and self-organisation within artistic communities. In his view, platforms like SoundBridge generate conditions for sustained creation and interaction, giving rise to future compositional and performative works that extend well beyond the temporal boundaries of the festival itself.

### Cross-Media and Interdisciplinary Practices

Cross-media collaboration has been a defining characteristic of SoundBridge since its earliest editions. Music performances are frequently situated alongside dance, visual art, calligraphy, puppetry, video, and live electronics, creating spaces in which multiple artistic languages coexist and interact. These collaborations are not conceived as decorative additions, but as integral components of artistic inquiry. For many artists, such interdisciplinary projects provide a critical entry point into contemporary artistic practice in Southeast Asia, where boundaries between art forms have historically remained porous. Contemporary dancer **Zhu Shiya** from China, reflecting on her participation in a cross-media production that brought together gamelan, Indonesian shadow puppetry, Chinese traditional dance, and contemporary movement, described initial rehearsals as marked by uncertainty and concern over whether disparate artistic systems could meaningfully converge. Through sustained rehearsal, however, differences between cultural and disciplinary approaches began to generate unexpected forms of communication. Rather than forcing integration, the process allowed distinct practices to coexist long enough for productive artistic “chemistry” to emerge.



*Figure 24. Pianist Jan Michiels (Belgium) performed György Ligeti’s Piano Études alongside a shadow-puppet-inspired dance by Zhu Shiya during the 7<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival.*

She further described the festival environment as one in which artists from different countries, backgrounds, and disciplines temporarily formed an intense community, united by shared artistic purpose despite linguistic and cultural differences. In an era increasingly characterised by digital mediation and social fragmentation, such embodied encounters were experienced as particularly significant, underscoring the human dimension of cross-cultural artistic practice that SoundBridge seeks to cultivate.

From the perspective of senior interdisciplinary practitioners, this commitment to cross-media dialogue carries broader cultural and intellectual significance. Malaysian choreographer and Indian classical dance master **Ramli Ibrahim**, who participated in SoundBridge 2015 through both performance and collaboration with young Malaysian composers **Tee Xiao Xi** in her work “**The Silent Path**” for dancer, multi-instrumentalist, zhong Ruan, flute and string quartet, emphasised the importance of cultivating creative and intellectual discourse in music beyond commercial imperatives. For him, festivals such as SoundBridge play a critical role in affirming music’s intrinsic creative power to shape thought, perception, and social imagination.



*Figure 25. Malaysian choreographer and Indian classical dance master Ramli Ibrahim, who participated in SoundBridge Festival 2015 through both performance and collaboration with young Malaysian composers Tee Xiao Xi in her work “The Silent Path” for dancer, multi-instrumentalist, zhong ruan, flute and string quartet.*

Reflecting on the festival's interdisciplinary structure, Ramli highlighted how the convergence of composers, choreographers, filmmakers, visual artists, and other performing arts practitioners generates a synergistic environment in which artistic ideas are tested, negotiated, and transformed. He argued that such integrated approaches are essential for enriching notions of contemporary modernity, particularly within Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-faith context. Rather than seeking a singular aesthetic identity, SoundBridge's embrace of diverse cultural backgrounds was understood as a source of sustained creativity—one that invites artists to continually expand the conceptual and expressive boundaries of contemporary practice.

### **Education Beyond the Classroom**

SoundBridge's educational philosophy is grounded in the belief that artistic learning must extend beyond formal classroom settings. Workshops, masterclasses, lecture concerts, field trips, and rehearsal-based collaborations are designed to facilitate direct interaction between students, peers, and experienced practitioners. Learning occurs through shared processes, informal discussion, and collaborative problem-solving rather than one-directional instruction.

By situating educational activities within performance venues, community spaces, and fieldwork environments, SoundBridge challenges conventional hierarchies between teacher and student. This model emphasises mentorship, peer learning, and experiential engagement, enabling participants to develop artistic skills alongside critical awareness and cultural sensitivity.

### **Markets, Communities, and Cultural Sustainability**

In recent editions, SoundBridge has expanded its scope to include art markets "SoundBridge Bazaar", community-based activities, and open studios. These initiatives provide platforms for local artists and artisans, invite broader public participation, and situate contemporary artistic practice within everyday social life. From the perspective of indigenous and community-based musicians, such openness is central to the festival's significance. Sape master Salomon Gau from Sarawak described SoundBridge as a platform that genuinely lives up to its name

by bringing together musicians, dancers, singers, and technical practitioners in a shared environment of respect and collaboration. Experiencing performances by artists from around the world while sharing Kenyah cultural music and songs affirmed for him that the festival functions not only as an artistic event, but also as a space for cultural exchange, education, and mutual inspiration.

He further observed that SoundBridge offers opportunities for families, students, and local music communities to encounter contemporary and traditional arts side by side, contributing to broader public appreciation and cultural sustainability. By integrating markets and community engagement into the festival framework, SoundBridge reinforces the idea that contemporary music and art are embedded within social and cultural ecosystems rather than isolated from them.



**Figure 26.** *In 7<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2025, Sape master Salomon Gau from East Malaysia Sarawak perform traditional kenyih folk music to our audiences who have limited knowledge of East Malaysia's musical heritage*

Together, these four dimensions—support for young composers, cross-media artistic practices, educational innovation beyond the classroom, and community engagement—demonstrate how SoundBridge has moved beyond the conventional boundaries of a music festival. Instead, it operates as an evolving ecosystem that nurtures artistic growth, facilitates intercultural dialogue, and reimagines the relationship between music, education, and society in Southeast Asia.



Figure 27. In 6<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2023, Malaysian dancer JS Wong conducting dance workshop on improvisation” for the dance students of Muar Chung Hwa High School.



Figure 28. In 7<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2025, Students of Kluang primary Chong Hwa 2 took part in a two-day Kecak workshop during the festival and finally go onstage to perform with the famous Semara Ratih Gamelan group from Bali.



Figure 29. In 7<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2025, three-day art market “SoundBridge Bazaar” at the alley behind one of the festival venue Kluang Days Art space and café in the old town Kluang

## VI. Case Studies: Facilitating Cross-Cultural Artistic Dialogues in Southeast Asia



Figure 30. Opening concert of KLCMF 2009 “Malaysian Voices”, Malaysian composer/flutist Ahmad Muriz Che Rose performed his “Desir Angin Cina Selatan” for 2 Gamelan players and Flute with guest musicians

To contextualize the SoundBridge Music Festival within a broader regional ecosystem, this section examines several key initiatives that have shaped contemporary music development and cross-cultural exchange in Southeast Asia. These case studies illuminate both the structural challenges and strategic approaches that informed the founding philosophy and curatorial direction of SoundBridge.

### **1. KL Contemporary Music Festival (KLCMF), 2009 – Malaysia**

The KL Contemporary Music Festival (KLCMF) in 2009 represented one of the earliest sustained attempts to position contemporary art music within Malaysia's public cultural discourse. As a composer-participant, my involvement in KLCMF revealed both the possibilities and limitations of festival-based contemporary music initiatives in Malaysia. While KLCMF successfully brought together local and international composers and performers, its structure remained largely event-driven, with limited continuity in pedagogy, audience cultivation, or post-festival engagement.

Nevertheless, KLCMF played a crucial catalytic role. It demonstrated that Malaysian audiences were receptive to contemporary music when programming was thoughtfully contextualized, and it highlighted the urgent need for platforms that extend beyond concert presentation toward education, dialogue, and long-term community building. These insights directly influenced the conception of SoundBridge as a process-oriented, rather than product-oriented, festival model.

### **2. Goethe-Institut Southeast Asia Young Composers Competition and Festival**

The Goethe-Institut's Southeast Asia Young Composers Competition and Festival, spanning Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, provided a rare transnational framework for emerging composers in the region. Unlike isolated national initiatives, this program emphasized mobility, intercultural encounter, and professional mentorship. Young composers were not only evaluated through competition, but also engaged in workshops, rehearsals, and dialogues with performers and senior artists from diverse cultural backgrounds.

This model strongly informed SoundBridge's emphasis on cross-border artistic exchange and peer learning. However, the Goethe-Institut initiative also underscored structural vulnerabilities: dependence on external cultural institutions, limited local infrastructure for sustaining outcomes, and the absence of long-term field-based engagement. SoundBridge was conceived in part as a response to these gaps, seeking to localize international exchange while embedding it within regional cultural contexts.



*Figure 31. The juries and mentors of Goethe Institut SEA young composer's competition and workshop (Indonesia 2011)*

*Left front: Dieter Mack, Iwan Gunawan, Thomas Oesterdiekhoff, Jonas Baes, Anothai Nitibhon, Ernst Surberg, Michael Asmara, Chong Kee Yong, Tran Kim Ngoc, Bernd Asmus, Ho Chung Shih*

### **3. SoundBridge Contemporary Music Festival – Malaysia**

In contrast to the aforementioned initiatives, SoundBridge was designed from its inception as an integrated ecosystem combining performance, pedagogy, fieldwork, and community engagement. Rather than positioning itself as a flagship metropolitan event, SoundBridge adopted a flexible, site-responsive model that allowed it to operate across concert halls, educational institutions, public spaces, and rural or indigenous communities.

A defining feature of SoundBridge is its sustained commitment to Malaysian composers and artists across generations. By foregrounding world premieres, lecture concerts, and interdisciplinary collaborations, the festival has created a space in which local artistic voices are not peripheral, but central to regional and international dialogue. This positioning challenges hierarchical cultural flows that often privilege Euro-American centers, proposing instead a horizontal network of exchange grounded in Southeast Asian realities.



Figure 32. In 6<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2023, closing concert with all the participants.

#### 4. SoundBridge Cultural Field Trips and Creative Workshops: Indonesia and Malaysian Borneo

Perhaps the most distinctive case study is SoundBridge's cultural field trip initiative in Indonesia and Malaysian Borneo. These field trips function not as ethnographic excursions, but as immersive pedagogical laboratories inspired by José Maceda's field-based methodologies. Participants—composers, performers, students, and educators—engage directly with local soundscapes, rituals, craftsmanship, and communal practices.

The resulting creative workshops emphasize listening, ethical encounter, and collaborative authorship. Rather than extracting material for compositional use, participants are encouraged to reflect on positionality, cultural responsibility, and the politics of representation. These experiences often lead to new works, interdisciplinary projects, and long-term collaborations that extend beyond the temporal boundaries of the festival itself.



*Figure 33. Students of 3<sup>rd</sup> edition SoundBridge Indonesia Cultural Field trip and creative workshop 2019 at the house of Semara Ratih gamelan (Ubud, Bali)*

### Comparative Reflections

Taken together, these case studies reveal a shift from event-centric models toward sustainable, dialogic, and pedagogically grounded initiatives. While KLCMF and the Goethe-Institut programs provided crucial precedents, SoundBridge distinguishes itself through its integration of fieldwork, education, cross-media practice, and community engagement within a single curatorial framework. In doing so, it offers a model for inclusive and impactful music initiatives capable of addressing the complex cultural landscapes of Southeast Asia.

## VII. Facilitating Cross-Cultural Artistic Dialogues: From Encounter to Co-Creation



**Figure 34.** In 4<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival, Composer Chong Kee Yong portrait, “Bell stone” for percussion solo, 2 dancers and visual project performed by Max Riefer (Germany), Agung Gunawan (Indonesia), Zhu Shiya (China) and Jean-David Cailloët (France/Thailand)

**Video link 7:** 6<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2023 youtube link:  
<https://youtu.be/QLlhNx9DY?si=Z-r0ghvITHwPRudk>

Within SoundBridge, cross-cultural artistic dialogue is not approached as a symbolic gesture of diversity or a superficial juxtaposition of cultural elements. Instead, it is approached as a sustained process of encounter, negotiation, and co-creation—one that unfolds through time, shared labor, and critical reflection. This approach responds directly to the socio-cultural realities of Southeast Asia, a region marked by layered histories, plural identities, and uneven access to artistic resources.

### Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration as Creative Pedagogy

At the core of SoundBridge’s approach to cross-cultural dialogue is an equally strong commitment to cross-disciplinary collaboration. SoundBridge does not treat collaboration between composers, performers, dancers, visual artists, puppeteers, and media artists as an auxiliary programmatic feature, but as a primary pedagogical and creative strategy. For young music students in particular, these encounters often constitute their first exposure to artistic processes that extend beyond the

conventional boundaries of instrumental training or compositional technique.

Within rehearsal rooms, open studios, and lecture concerts, students witness how artistic ideas are negotiated across disciplines—how musical structure responds to bodily movement, how visual gesture reshapes temporal perception, and how improvisation becomes a shared language among artists with different training backgrounds. Such environments encourage curiosity rather than correctness, allowing emerging musicians to understand creation as an exploratory process rather than the execution of predetermined solutions.

### **Learning Through Making: Experience Before Explanation**

SoundBridge's emphasis on collaborative creation places experience before explanation. Young participants are not introduced to cross-media concepts through abstract theoretical instruction, but through direct involvement in making, listening, adjusting, and responding. This experiential model fosters a mode of learning in which questions arise organically from practice: how does sound inhabit space, how does movement alter musical timing, and how does collaboration reshape authorship?

For music students accustomed to score-based learning, these processes often produce moments of productive disorientation. Yet it is precisely within this uncertainty that curiosity and artistic agency emerge. By engaging with dancers, puppeteers, and interdisciplinary artists, students begin to perceive music not as an isolated discipline, but as one element within a larger performative and cultural ecology.

### **Inspiring Curiosity and Future Pathways**

The impact of cross-disciplinary collaboration extends beyond immediate artistic outcomes. Many young participants have articulated that these encounters expanded their imagination of what a musical career could entail. Exposure to artists working fluidly across media, cultures, and community contexts has inspired students to pursue further interdisciplinary study, collaborative projects, and socially engaged artistic practices.

In this sense, SoundBridge functions not only as a festival, but as a site of artistic awakening. By foregrounding cross-disciplinary collaboration and lived creative experience, the festival cultivates curiosity, openness, and a willingness to experiment—qualities that are essential for the next generation of musicians navigating an increasingly complex and interconnected artistic landscape.



*Figure 35. In 6th SoundBridge 2023, dancer JS Wong (Malaysia) and clarinettist Gregor Siedl (Austria) perform improvisation to lead audience into the gallery for mini portrait concert of Anothai Nitibhon (Thailand)*

#### VIII. Selected Voices from SoundBridge: Artists' Reflections Across Seven Editions



*Figure 36. In 7th SoundBridge Festival, Samara Ratih Gamelan group (Indonesia) parading and leading the guests from the art exhibition venue Kluang Days to the festival opening venue at the primary school Chong Hwa 2 auditorium*

**Video link 8:** *7th SoundBridge Festival 2025 — “MASTER Series I”: Miniature Portrait Concert of Ramon Santos (Philippines). Alingawngaw II (Echoes II) for Chinese instrumental and performed by Ensemble Studio C, with conductor Ya-ou Xie.*  
[https://youtu.be/HdaacJum-Hc?si=Q9zWWhsVcL1\\_tv69](https://youtu.be/HdaacJum-Hc?si=Q9zWWhsVcL1_tv69)

While curatorial frameworks and pedagogical models provide a structural understanding of the SoundBridge Music Festival, its ethos is most clearly articulated through the lived experiences of participating artists. Across seven editions, these reflections foreground encounters between young composers, emerging musicians, and established practitioners, revealing how dialogue, mentorship, interdisciplinary collaboration, and place-based engagement have directly shaped new creative works. Rather than functioning as testimonials, these accounts serve as practice-based evidence of SoundBridge's artist-led methodology.

### **A. Intergenerational Collaboration: Young Composers and Established Artists**

Across multiple editions of SoundBridge, one of the most frequently cited experiences by young composers and emerging musicians has been the opportunity to work closely with internationally recognised artists within non-hierarchical and time-intensive settings. Unlike conventional masterclass formats, collaborations at SoundBridge often unfold through extended rehearsal periods, informal discussion, and shared problem-solving, allowing artistic ideas to develop through proximity, trust, and sustained interaction.

Several returning artists described the festival as generating an unusually concentrated creative environment. Having participated across five editions between 2017 and 2025, one senior musician observed that the intense, time-compressed working conditions repeatedly brought together large numbers of artists from diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, often producing unexpected artistic outcomes. This dynamic became particularly evident when the festival returned in 2025 to Kluang, the hometown of its artistic director. In the absence of standardised concert halls, performances were distributed across Chinese school auditoriums, repurposed heritage cafés, and community venues. Rather than constituting a limitation, these non-typical sites enabled a more grounded realisation of SoundBridge's boundary-crossing ethos—one that moved beyond surface-level cultural juxtaposition toward the reconfiguration of cultural relationships through practice.

Within this context, mentorship was frequently described as reciprocal rather than didactic. Established performers and artist-educators noted that

working with younger composers—often unconstrained by entrenched stylistic expectations—prompted a reassessment of habitual artistic approaches and revitalised collaborative risk-taking. Mentorship thus emerged not as instruction, but as shared inquiry into material, structure, and cultural reference.



*Figure 37. In 7th SoundBridge festival, Semara Ratih Gamelan group (Indonesia) conducting kecak for local young primary school students*

## B. Interdisciplinary and Cross-Media Practices

SoundBridge’s emphasis on cross-media collaboration has been consistently identified by participating artists as central to its artistic identity. Composers, performers, dancers, visual artists, puppeteers, and media practitioners engage in projects where sound is not treated as an accompaniment, but as an equal participant within a shared performative field.

Indonesia visual artist **Astuti Kusumo** described SoundBridge as a rare space of encounter in which sound is not merely heard, but experienced as a living, resonant presence. Painting alongside live compositions by composers from across Asia transformed the canvas into an active site of negotiation, where gesture, colour, silence, and sonic intensity interacted continuously. In this performative context, sound functioned not as a backdrop but as a collaborator, demanding heightened attentiveness, reciprocal listening, and a willingness to suspend disciplinary boundaries. Artistic creation was thus experienced as a shared process of emergence rather than the execution of a predetermined outcome.

Similarly, interdisciplinary performance collaborations foregrounded the negotiation of difference rather than seamless integration. Contemporary dancers and performers described initial rehearsals as marked by uncertainty, particularly when working across unfamiliar cultural or artistic systems. Over time, however, these differences generated productive forms of interaction, allowing music, movement, puppetry, and visual media to coexist within a shared creative space. Such embodied encounters—often occurring in close proximity to audiences—underscored the human dimension of cross-cultural practice that SoundBridge seeks to cultivate.



*Figure 38. In 6th SoundBridge Festival 2023, festival featured guests Astuti Kusumo (Indonesia) and Mr Ong Chia Koon (Malaysia) perform live painting and live calligraphy at the miniature portrait concert of Dr. Anothai Nitibhon*

### C. From Experience to New Works: Composers as Performers and Mediators

For emerging composers and performers, SoundBridge has been described as reshaping fundamental assumptions about what a music festival can be. Thai young composer-performer **Dhorn Tartan Taksinwarajan**, who was directly involved in performance at SoundBridge 2023, reflected that initial expectations of a conventional contemporary music festival—defined by successive concert presentations—were quickly displaced by the intensity of collective engagement.



**Figure 39.** In 6th SoundBridge Festival, Thai young composer-performer Dhorn Tartan Taksinwarajan and Ensemble Studio C performed “Here I am” by Anothai Nitibhon

**Video link 9:** 6th SoundBridge Festival 2023, “MASTER Series 1” --Miniature portrait concert by Anothai Nitibhon (Thailand) and musical reflections on her works by composer Dhorn Taksinwarajan (Thailand)

<https://youtu.be/QllhNxyr9DY?si=yZffiV3nP7Smpff>

The absence of rigid boundaries between artists, technical teams, organisers, and audiences created an environment characterised by shared enthusiasm and collaborative momentum. Rather than functioning solely as a platform for presentation, SoundBridge was experienced as a bridge between tradition and innovation, preservation and reinvention. For participants, this reorientation foregrounded passion, process, and relational exchange as central drivers of new creative work.

Within this ecosystem, certain artists assumed structurally significant roles as mediators between composers, performers, and interdisciplinary collaborators. Conductor and pianist **Xie Ya-ou**, whose sustained involvement in SoundBridge spanned multiple editions, was frequently cited as a key connective figure. Her dual engagement as performer and musical director enabled fluid communication between compositional intent and performative realisation, particularly within complex cross-media contexts. Such roles exemplify how SoundBridge fosters artistic agency not only through composition, but through collaborative leadership and interpretative mediation.



Figure 40. In 4th SoundBridge Festival 2019, Conductor Xie Ya-ou (China/Germany) rehearsing with violist Yoshiko Hannya (Japan) and Ensemble Studio C for Japanese young composer Natsuki Niwa on her “Under the Steps” for viola solo, guzheng, zhong ruan, violin, clarinet with video projection

#### D. Fieldwork, Place, and Listening as Evidence



Figure 41. Chinese dancer Zhu Shiya studying mask performance skill with mask dance guru Aung Gunawan (Indonesia) during the SoundBridge Cultural Field trip in Pelem, Pacitan.

The cultural field trips to Indonesia and Malaysian Borneo were repeatedly identified by participants as pivotal moments in their artistic development. These initiatives extend beyond observation, emphasising immersion, listening, and ethical engagement with local communities. For many composers and interdisciplinary artists, this marked their first sustained exposure to sound-making practices rooted in communal life rather than concert-based presentation.

Participants frequently linked these encounters to subsequent creative outputs presented at SoundBridge. Rather than quoting surface sonic elements, composers and performers emphasised structural and conceptual transformations derived from lived musical processes—such as cyclical temporality, collective rhythm, and spatial awareness. Engagement with place thus functioned as a catalyst for rethinking form, authorship, and artistic responsibility.

Taken together, these collaborative experiences demonstrate how SoundBridge’s commitment to dialogue, mentorship, interdisciplinary practice, and fieldwork translates into tangible artistic outcomes. The voices of both young and established artists attest to a shared understanding of the festival as a space where new works emerge from listening, encounter, and responsibility—principles that continue to define SoundBridge’s approach to cross-cultural artistic dialogue in Southeast Asia.

### **Boxed Text: Why SoundBridge Matters for Young Musicians Today**

For many young musicians in Southeast Asia, formal training continues to take place primarily within classroom- and score-centred environments. While such foundations are essential, they often leave limited room for experimentation, cross-disciplinary encounter, or engagement with lived cultural contexts. SoundBridge offers an alternative learning ecology—one in which music is understood not only as a technical discipline, but as a social, ethical, and collaborative practice.

Through fieldwork, workshops, interdisciplinary projects, and direct interaction with artists across generations, young musicians encounter uncertainty as a productive condition rather than a deficiency. They learn to listen before performing or composing, to negotiate meaning across media and cultures, and to imagine artistic futures that extend beyond conventional career pathways. In doing so,

SoundBridge does not prescribe what contemporary music should be; instead, it cultivates curiosity, responsibility, and openness—qualities that are increasingly vital for musicians navigating an interconnected yet fragmented world.



**Figure 42.** *In 6th SoundBridge Festival 2023, Malaysian young solo cellist Guo Yi Tong presenting her solo recital with cello suite by Bach and Malaysian composer' works.*

The experience of Malaysian young solo cellist **Guo Yi Tong** offers a concrete illustration of this learning ecology in practice. Invited to participate in SoundBridge as an emerging performer, she described the festival as providing a professional yet creatively open environment—one that not only supported the presentation of core repertoire, but also actively encouraged engagement with contemporary works and experimental formats. For her, this exposure represented a significant expansion of artistic horizon beyond the conventions of solo instrumental training.

Most notably, she reflected on an interdisciplinary collective improvisational collaboration with festival featured visual artist **Astuti Kusumo** (Indonesia) and calligraphy artist **Ong Chia Koon** (Malaysia) in the work “**Here I am**” by Thai composer **Anothai Nitibhon**, in which live music-making unfolded simultaneously with painting and calligraphy. As musicians performed on stage, visual gestures emerged in real time behind them, responding directly to musical rhythm, texture, and affect. This shared temporal and emotional space transformed performance into a site of reciprocal creation, where sound and image were generated through

mutual listening rather than predetermined hierarchy. For Guo, this encounter crystallised the meaning of SoundBridge as a platform that builds bridges not only within music itself, but across artistic disciplines and cultural contexts.

In this sense, SoundBridge functioned for her not merely as a performance opportunity, but as a space of trust, artistic risk, and intercultural dialogue. Such experiences exemplify how the festival enables young musicians to move beyond technical proficiency toward a more reflective, responsive, and socially situated mode of artistic practice.

### **IX. Conclusion: Toward a Living Model of Cross-Cultural Artistic Practice**

The SoundBridge Music Festival emerged from specific cultural, institutional, and economic conditions within Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Its formation was neither accidental nor idealistic, but grounded in pragmatic responses to funding precarity, institutional gaps, and the limited sustainability of event-based contemporary music initiatives. Across seven editions, SoundBridge has demonstrated that a music festival can function not merely as a site of presentation, but as a living pedagogical and artistic model—one that integrates creation, education, fieldwork, and community engagement within a sustained curatorial ecology.

From a curatorial perspective, the articulation of its core pillars—SoundBridge, Connecting Cities, and Malaysian Voices—has enabled the festival to align artistic programming with long-term developmental responsibility. These frameworks foreground Malaysian musicians and composers while situating them within horizontal regional and transnational networks. In doing so, SoundBridge resists hierarchical cultural flows and affirms Southeast Asia not as a peripheral recipient of contemporary practices, but as an active site of artistic knowledge production shaped by local histories, plural identities, and lived experience.

The conceptual orientation of SoundBridge has been shaped equally by intellectual mentorship and ethical reflection. During my years of study and work in Europe and USA, encouragement from my mentor late **Chou Wen-chung**<sup>6</sup> played a decisive role in redirecting my attention toward Asia. Long an advocate for the

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<sup>6</sup> Chou Wen-chung (1923–2019) was a Chinese-American composer, theorist, and educator whose writings and mentorship played a foundational role in shaping contemporary Asian art music discourse. He strongly advocated the integration of Asian musical thought, philosophy, and tradition into contemporary composition.

confluence of Asian musical heritages, Chou emphasised Southeast Asia's unique position at the intersection of multiple cultural lineages—and the responsibility of artists from the region to cultivate contemporary practices grounded in their own historical and cultural contexts. His encouragement served as a reminder that meaningful contemporary work must remain accountable to place, memory, and responsibility.



*Figure 43. With my mentor late Chou Wen-chung at his house at New York City.*

This perspective resonates strongly with SoundBridge's development. Rather than treating sound as a stylistic object or a neutral medium, SoundBridge approaches sound as a connective force—one that traverses geography, ritual, memory, and imagination. Across its programming, traditions and contemporary practices, Eastern and Western instruments, ritual forms and experimental media are brought into proximity not to dissolve difference, but to allow difference to coexist, negotiate, and generate new meaning. In this sense, SoundBridge understands contemporary practice not as a fixed aesthetic position, but as an evolving condition shaped by dialogue, encounter, and listening.

Equally central to SoundBridge’s identity is its commitment to experiential learning. Drawing inspiration from the field-based pedagogies of **José Maceda**, the festival privileges listening, immersion, and ethical encounter over stylistic replication. Fieldwork in Indonesia and Malaysian Borneo, alongside workshops, lecture concerts, and interdisciplinary collaborations, enables participants to experience music as a social practice embedded within place, community, and lived time. For young composers and emerging musicians, such encounters cultivate attentiveness, cultural sensitivity, and a willingness to reconsider inherited assumptions about authorship, notation, and performance.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration further amplifies this pedagogical impact. By bringing together composers, performers, dancers, visual artists, puppeteers, and media practitioners, SoundBridge creates conditions in which learning unfolds through making, negotiation, and shared risk-taking. In an era increasingly shaped by digital abstraction and accelerated production, these embodied and relational processes reaffirm artistic practice as a human, temporal, and ethical act.

The significance of SoundBridge has also been recognised beyond the artistic community. As articulated by **YAM Tunku Zain Al-‘Abidin Ibni Tuanku Muhriz**, Patron of the Society of Malaysian Contemporary Composers and the SoundBridge Contemporary Music Festival, the festival stands as a vital platform that connects communities across Malaysia, the region, and the international stage. Through sustained commitment to collaboration, interdisciplinary exchange, and openness across borders and media, SoundBridge contributes to a cultural landscape in which artistic dialogue resonates far beyond the concert hall—affirming the capacity of contemporary music to inspire, unite, and uplift communities.

Rooted in Southeast Asia yet open to the world, SoundBridge—described in its own curatorial language as “a resonant bridge of Asia’s most exquisite sounds”—invites artists and listeners alike to reconsider listening not as passive reception, but as an active, responsible, and emancipatory practice. In an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world, SoundBridge suggests that meaningful artistic exchange begins not with spectacle, but with listening—and that bridges are built not only through sound, but through shared responsibility, memory, and experience.



Figure 44. In 7<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival, in the opening concert YAM Tunku Zain Al-‘Abidin Ibni Tuanku Muhriz as our festival guest of honour, and Philippine National Artist Prof. Ramon Santos as our festival featured portrait composer.

Within this context, the notion of “bridge” extends beyond metaphor to describe a set of operational conditions: between generations (emerging and established artists), between geographies (local, regional, and international), and between epistemologies (traditional knowledge systems and contemporary artistic practice). SoundBridge thus functions not only as a platform, but as a mediating structure through which these relationships are continuously negotiated and redefined.



Figure 45. In 5<sup>th</sup> SoundBridge Festival 2021 (Virtual), group photo of all online guests!

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