

# A MUSIC-THEORETICAL APPROACH ON THEMATIC STRUCTURE AND INSTRUMENTATION IN MALAYSIAN FILM SCORING'S NARRATIVE: *BUJANG LAPOK* (1957)

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a music-theoretical analysis of the film score for *Bujang Lapok* (1957), focusing on its thematic structure and instrumentation by examining on selected scenes. The study demonstrates how recurring melodic motives, and consistent instrumental choices enrich narrative development and emotional resonance. The analysis identifies the use of Western-style leitmotif transformation along with chromatic and minimal instrumentation to established thematic continuity and subtle variations. These findings support existing research that highlights the distinctiveness of Malaysian film scoring compares to Western traditions, emphasizing mood-setting and narrative pacing. Through close score transcription and audiovisual analysis, the research emphasizes the eclectic musical language of composer *P. Ramlee*, which blends Western harmonic elements with local timbral textures. This study contributes to the expanding scholarship advocating culturally responsive analytical framework in film music studies, offering insights into how early composers utilized thematic structures and instruments in the early film.

**Keywords:** Film, Music, Film Scoring, Music Theory, Malaysian Film

## INTRODUCTION

Film scoring is an essential part of film storytelling, functioning not only as background music but also an effective driving force for narrative. It contributes to emotional depth, helps to define character identity, creates tone and mood, and helps in pacing and thematic development of a film (Gorbman, 1987; Karlin & Wright, 2004). Through the strategic use of music elements—such as harmony, melody, rhythm, and orchestration—film music indirectly controls the interpretation and emotional response of the audience. It can influence how audiences' characters' motivations, follow plot developments, and sense the mood of a scene, often working on a subconscious level to create the narrative experience (Kalinak, 1992; Buhler, Neumeyer, & Deemer, 2010).

While Western film scoring traditions, particularly from Hollywood, have received considerable scholarly attention (Cooke, 2008; Smith, 1998), less has been done on non-

Western film soundscapes. Within this context, Malaysia is an intriguing, underexamined case study in this regard. Being a nation with a rich multicultural heritage —of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other indigenous background, Malaysian film music is likewise defined by a hybridized soundscape that is in line with its multicultural state. This hybridization is neither epidermic layering of styles but rather a restrained mixture of various musical traditions and Western compositional forms. As Tan (2018) notes, “Malaysian film scores reflect a complex interplay between indigenous musical practices and Western orchestral techniques, resulting in a soundscape that is both locally rooted and globally informed” (p. 47). Malaysian film composers tend to utilize traditional modal systems such as the pentatonic, pelog, and slendro and adding modern touches using folk instruments like the rebab, sape and erhu, incorporating them into Western harmonic structure and orchestral textures. This blend creates a distinctive sound aesthetic that cannot be categorized into one style, reflecting the multicultural heritage of the nation. Rather than adhering to a singular cultural tradition. Malaysian film scores incorporate several instrumental timbres, melodic modes and composition styles. Besides enhancing the expressiveness of the film music, this enables us to convey multifaceted cultural narratives, that resonate with both local and foreign audiences (Kok, 2016; Yow, 2021).

The thematic structure in film music refers to the development and organization of musical themes or motifs that are associated with characters, settings, ideas, or narrative arcs which often referred as leitmotifs. These motifs are introduced in various forms reflecting character development or shifts of dramatic context.<sup>1</sup> As Frank Lehman notes, “leitmotifs are introduced early in the film and recur in various forms throughout the score to reflect changes in character development or dramatic context” (Lehman, 2018). Few of these themes are invariant where they shift in terms of orchestration, harmony, and rhythm, as does the emotional and narrative development of the story. This change helps create a musical cohesion and enhance the clarity and emotional continuity of the narrative of the film.

Instrumentation involves the selection and combination of instruments which plays a significant role in defining the emotions and atmospheres. In traditional film scoring, it is often to have the symphonic orchestra used by the composer. The strings can express emotional warmth or sadness, brass conveying power or tension, woodwinds adding nuance and intimacy, and percussion emphasizing energy and drama. In contemporary film scoring, it is common to incorporate electronic elements, sound design, and non-Western instruments, resulting the blend of styles reflecting the diverse and global reach of modern filmmaking and allows composer to draw upon a greater cinematic storytelling. Simultaneously, thematic development and instrumentation contributes significantly to the emotional resonance of thematic material. Through musical concepts varied adjusting to the changing mood of narrative and balancing how those concepts sound instrumentally, film scores transcend accompanying the image which dynamically enriching the narration and incorporating emotional nuance into the screen.

Together, thematic structure and instrumentation form the foundation of effective film scoring, shaping emotional response of the audience and enhancing their engagement with the narrative.<sup>2</sup> As Wang Junyi indicates, “An analysis of the changes in musical melody and rhythm shows that music plays a crucial role in the construction of the film’s overall narrative” (Xu, 2019).

Despite its crucial role in film narrative studies on thematic structure and instrumentation of film music scoring remains relatively underexplored in music theory

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<sup>1</sup> Lehman, F. (2018). *Hollywood leitmotifs: Narrative, analysis, and the return of the musical signifier*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Xu, R. (2019). *Analysis of the role of music in film narrative*. In Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Art Studies: Science, Experience, Education (ICASSEE 2019) (pp. 55–57). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/icassee-19.2019.11>

contexts.<sup>3</sup> As Frank Lehman points out in *Film Music Analysis: Studying the Score*, while there has been a steady growth of serious analytical work on the film music repertoire, detailed investigations into how recurring themes (leitmotifs) and instrumental choices contribute to narrative development and emotional expression remain limited, thus points to a significant gap in existing academic research and the need for further analytical engagement with these compositional elements (Lehman, 2024).

This article aims to fill this gap by examining the thematic structure and instrumentation of P. Ramlee's score for *Bujang Lapok* (1957). Thus, this research seeks to answer: How does P. Ramlee employ thematic structures in his musical compositions to convey narrative and emotional content? And, what role does instrumentation play in shaping the mood in his music? By answering these questions, the study aims to fill the existing gap in detailed musicological analysis of P. Ramlee's compositions and contribute to a deeper understanding of his artistic legacy.

## RELATED WORKS

P. Ramlee's musical legacy still resonates throughout Southeast Asia which his work is celebrated for its ability to evoke cultural memory and emotional depth. Scholars such as McGraw and Azmi (2009) have observed how his film scores subtly captured the landscape of ethnic relationships during Malaysia's independence era. He used music to mediated social and class dynamics when visual representation was limited. Expanding on this, Johan (2019) highlights Ramlee's global sensibilities where he combined Anglo-American jazz and Latin American rhythms with Malay and Javanese folk styles. This created soundscapes that were both nostalgic and politically charged. Similarly, Chan (2012) emphasizes Ramlee's blend of Western tonality with melodic and rhythmic elements from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Arabic traditions where this reflects the multicultural mix in Malaysia's social fabric. While these studies explore the cultural, political, and stylistic aspects of his music, a critical gap remains. Little attention has been given to Ramlee's compositional techniques, specifically on how he structured themes and arranged instrumentation to shape narrative, emotion, and identity.

This study addresses both a theoretical and practical gap in music analysis by focusing on the internal musical logic of P. Ramlee's work—particularly his use of recurring themes, melodic development, and instrumental choices. In Malaysia, where scholarly music analysis remains limited and often leans toward biographical or sociocultural commentary, there is a pressing need for more detailed, structured methodologies that critically engage with the musical text itself. By applying analytical frameworks from musicology and thematic development, this study not only contributes to a deeper understanding of P. Ramlee's compositions but also advances the practice of music analysis within the broader context of Southeast Asian music scholarship.

Despite certain challenges, the methodology employed in this study offers a useful framework for analyzing the thematic structure and instrumentation in film scores by providing valuable insights into how these musical elements contribute not only the emotional landscape of a film but also to the articulation of its cultural narrative. This approach demonstrates the potential for film music analysis to uncover deeper understanding of film storytelling.

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<sup>3</sup> Lehman, F. (2024). *Film music analysis: Studying the score*. Routledge.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research in film music has highlighted thematic structure and instrumentation as fundamental compositional practices in creating narrative significance and emotional context. The most widely research technique used within the context is the use of leitmotifs, that is the repetition of musical ideas with specific characters, settings, or ideas. This technique has been extensively studied in Western film music scoring particularly in the classical Hollywood tradition (Cooke, 2008; Gorbman, 1987). Leitmotifs play a part in developing not just narrative coherence but also enhanced emotional engagement by introducing familiar musical signs to audience which develops as the story develops. Additionally, scholars such as Buhler et al. (2010) and Kalinak (1992) noted the considerable role of genre in determining the use of thematic content for example, action, adventure, and fantasy films use explicit, vivid themes that emphasize heroism, tension, or suspense. These types of themes usually change and adapt throughout the course of the films and the character development as well as building up dramatic tension within the narrative.

Instrumentation too plays a critical role in shaping a film's emotional and cultural dimensions. Karlin and Wright (2004) suggest that orchestration has a narrative purpose by assigning different sound qualities to certain emotional states or character traits for example, strings often imply warmth, vulnerability, or intimacy. In contrast, brass and percussion usually express power, tension, or heroism. These guides the audience's perception in subtle but impactful ways by building on these ideas. Schneller (2015) describes how modern composers such as Hans Zimmer have increased the possibilities of orchestration by incorporating hybrid scoring. Hybrid scoring usually involves combining sounds of electronic and synthesized instruments and culturally diverse instruments into traditional orchestral performances, allowing for a richer and more flexible sonic palette. This approach adds to the expressive possibilities of film music, as a hybrid scoring approach also potentially embodies cultural fusion, allowing the soundtrack to resonate with audiences across the world while also representing the filmmaker's local cultural identity. Therefore, Karlin and Wright's (2004) observations still hold that orchestration communicates through sound qualities, and the types of sonic qualities at the disposal of contemporary composers extends these concepts, broadening their sound palette to convey emotional complexity while situating them in the cultural context of today's cinematic landscapes.

Although Western film music scholarship has traditionally emphasized leitmotif-based thematic development (e.g., Gorbman, 1987; Brown, 1994), their applicability does not always translate seamlessly across cultural boundaries. In Malaysian film scoring, composers often depart from strict leitmotivic approach and favoring modal melodies, cyclical patterns, and loosely recurring motivic fragments (Tan, 2001; Said, 2013). Drawing on local traditions such as *gamelan*, *keroncong*, and *dikir barat*, prioritizing atmospheric repetition and collective expression over individual thematic transformation where this stylistic orientation should be understood as a purposeful artistic choice rather than a shortcoming. The repeated appearance of musical motifs, though not developed dramatically, contributes to the continuity of the narrative while adhering to local aesthetic practices. This ability to reject Western conventions illustrates the need to have an analytical framework attuned to the musical and narrative traditions of non-Western film practices. Nonetheless, this study remains rooted in a music-theoretical perspective approach that emphasizes structural elements, namely thematic structure and instrumentation in *P. Ramlee's* scores for *Bujang Lapok*. While acknowledging the significant influence of Malay musical culture, it emphasizes analyzing the score's internal logic and formal characteristics rather than conducting a broader ethnomusicological analysis.

This study analyzes P. Ramlee's film scores in a music-theoretical manner, focusing on thematic progression, melodic motives, and instrumentation. To contextualize the analysis, various complementary music-theoretical frameworks are employed for example, Caplin's (1998) theory of formal functions provides a structured way to analyze how musical phrases

and themes are organized to understand the internal logic of the score. Also, Gorbman's (1987) analysis of film music is useful because the music is situated in cinematic installations. By utilizing Gorbman's work, it demonstrates how music shapes notions of narrative, guides storytelling, and complements emotional frameworks. In addition, Tagg's (2012) semiotic approach is helpful for understanding and interpreting connections between some musical gestures or instrumental choices to physically specific meanings. While this study does not lend itself to full ethnomusicological analysis, Tagg's (2012) insights allow for reflection on how cultural aspects subtly inform musical structure. By integrating these frameworks, the study situates Ramlee's scores both as formally constructed works and as active participants in the film's narrative and cultural contexts.

The increasing emphasis various scholars and practitioners place on the role of instrumentation in the construction of cultural identity is perhaps clearer in Malaysian film scores. Yusof (2018) and Nasir (2020), for instance, note that local instruments such as the *rebab*, *seruling*, and *gambus* do not simply provide local color for the purposes of surface authenticity. Rather, they create soundscapes that are bound to convey cultural attitudes, rural settings, and historical contexts. Each instrument has provided a unique timbral distinction within traditional Western harmonics, which has allowed Malaysian composers to create a hybrid musical language relevant to Malaysia's multi-ethnic cultural forms. *Bujang Lapok* (1957) achieves this combination, bringing together cross-cultural influences, with a powerful connection to locality and situated sound use. The way instrumentation is accompanied by means and relates to possibility in affirming or presenting cultural identity demonstrates how instrumental choice can serve both narrative function and cultural affirmation.

Study and Year	Film/Scope	Thematic Structure Focus	Instrumentation and Narrative Focus
<i>Nujum Pak Belalang</i> thesis (2015)	<i>Nujum Pak Belalang</i>	Motif-phrase sentences, musical "question-answer"	Malay rhythmic forms, ornamentation, motif scoring
Adil Johan (2019)	<i>Ali Baba Bujang Lapok</i>	Cultural/narrative fusion through music themes	Fusion of jazz, Latin, Malay, Javanese styles
Clare Chan (2012)	Across songs (Mid 20 <sup>th</sup> C.)	-	Western instruments + regional rhythmic/melodic elements

**Table 1:** Past research on P. Ramlee's works focusing on musical analysis.

Several studies have examined how music shapes storytelling in classic Malay films. A 2015 thesis on *Nujum Pak Belalang* explores how the soundtrack uses musical phrases like questions and answers, supported by traditional Malay rhythms, ornamentation, and short repeated motifs to match the flow of the narrative. Adil Johan (2019), in his work on *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok*, highlights how music blends different cultural elements—such as jazz, Latin, Malay, and Javanese styles—to support the film's multicultural themes. Clare Chan (2012) takes a broader view, focusing on Malay film songs from the mid-20th century. She notes the mix of Western instruments with local rhythmic and melodic styles, even though her study does not emphasize specific thematic structures. Together, these studies show how music in Malay cinema not only supports storytelling but also reflects cultural identity and fusion.

Scholarly debates on Malaysian film scoring often center on the tension between cultural authenticity and cosmopolitan hybridity which questions that lie at the heart of understanding P. Ramlee's musical legacy. Hakim (2015) for instance, offers a rare close reading of *Nujum Pak Belalang*, showing how thematic motifs and phrase structures such as

musical “question-and-answer” forms are embedded into the pacing of the narrative, effectively aligning traditional Malay musical practices with cinematic storytelling. Additionally, Johan (2019) has argued that Ramlee’s intermingling of idioms particularly jazz and Latin rhythms with Javanese folk practices, has been used as intended cultural elements of narrative that critiqued monolithic, postcolonial ideas of “national” music. Likewise, Chan (2012) insightfully notes that Ramlee’s integration of Western instruments with Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Arabic modal traditions offered a sonic metaphor for Malaya’s mid-century multicultural identity. Collectively, these studies indicate that film music in Southeast Asia is increasingly being understood as more than mere background accompaniment but an important venue for the staging of ideological and cultural negotiations.

At the same time, an increasing number of Malaysian composers particularly those working in high-budget or international co-productions are incorporating Western thematic practice in their film scores. Whether influenced by Western training or collaborative partnerships, these composers are increasingly using techniques such as leitmotifs and expansive orchestration to create and achieved dramatic clarity. This showing an emergent hybridization of Western structural techniques being used alongside local instrumentation traditions. However, existing literature remains limited on this while most existing studies continue to emphasize music’s cultural symbolism, leaving its evolving technical and thematic construction in Malaysian cinema ripe for further research.

In summary, film scholar has long affirmed the importance of thematic structure and instrumentation in shaping cinematic narrative. Yet, when these established frameworks are applied to Malaysian film music, they reveal distinct narrative strategies and cultural imperatives Malaysian’s blending of indigenous and international scoring practices not only showcases creative innovation but also a redefines the very notion of effective film music within a multicultural and postcolonial context. To fully capture this dynamic changes, future studies should undertake detailed score analyses and engage directly with composers. Thereby enriching our understanding of Malaysia’s distinctive musical contribution to the art of film.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design well suited to uncovering the nuanced context-specific practices of Malaysian film scoring. By drawing on established qualitative traditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Berg & Lune, 2012), it enables a rich, interpretive exploration of musical form and its narrative role without relying on numerical data.

Thus, the process of selecting the musical structure, thematic structure and instrument texture are as follows:

### **Similarity: Melodic Motives and Instrumentation**

In both sets of examples (Pictures 1–3 and Pictures 4–6), the use of melodic motives and instrumentation plays a central role in shaping the emotional and narrative function of these scenes. The musical elements are carefully aligned with on-screen actions, reinforcing key moments through thematic repetition and timbral choices. This also serves to illustrate a trademark of P. Ramlee’s scoring, which is the use of motifs and textures to emulate characters’ interactions and concurrently dramatize the action.

## **Difference: Narrative Contexts and Musical Functions**

Despite the parallels in compositional techniques present across the examples used, the narrative functions are quite different regarding the stories presented. In Pictures 1–3, melodic motifs and instrumentation support comedic timing as the score highlighted the comedic gestures and facial expressions of the characters. Alternatively, Pictures 4–6 feature instrumentation and the chromatic motifs which helped to underscore action in more serious narrative settings, rescue, comforting and the confession. In these scenarios, the musical compositions had a greater expressive and dramatic role, supporting the narrative experience of meaning for the humour of the story.

This research did have certain limitations, especially concerning the evidence of a complete score manuscript to the *Bujang Lapok* (1957) film. As a result, the analysis relied on commercially available soundtrack recordings, and directly viewing the film to attempt to reconstruct the thematic material of composition. Repeated viewings and close listening sessions were conducted, acknowledge that this method inevitably emphasizes auditory perception over direct access to original compositional documentation. In several instances parts of Ramlee's creative decision making and specific details of the music were likely less than aural clarity in the composed sound recordings alone and this is a structural challenge that is characteristic in film music research, and especially in the instance of availability in source materials.

To mitigate these limitations, the study employed music-theoretical basis centered on thematic structure and instrumental texture. Key musical sections were transcribed via Sibelius software by using a careful pause-and-play approach that accurately represented the melodic and rhythmic details. Selected scenes were also shown as audio-visual references to display how P. Ramlee's musical features, such as modal shifts, cyclical motifs, and hybrid orchestration functions in conjunction with the on-screen narrative. Taken altogether this audiovisual approach to study provides a systematic framework to analyze and understanding how instrumentation and thematic development contribute to both narratives and emotional depth in the film.

## **FINDINGS**

The analysis of selected scenes from *Bujang Lapok* (1957) exemplifies how *P. Ramlee* strategically actualizes thematic structures and instrumentation to enhance both narrative progression and sentiment. His score encompasses western harmonic language, instrumentation, and unique sounds of local instruments, lending thematic complexity to his music. By associating themes and instrument colors with dramatic moments of significance, *Ramlee's* compositional decisions reinforce character development and create coherence by holding the film's narrative and emotional trajectories together.

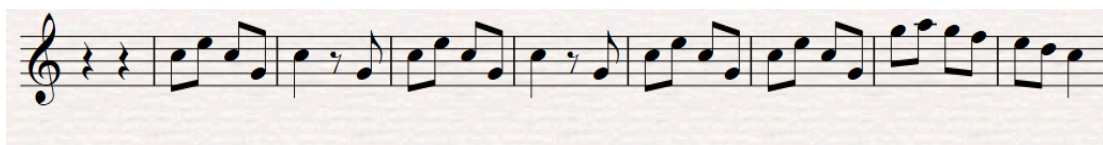
### **Thematic and instrumental treatment in *Bujang Lapok* (1957)**

#### **Similar melodic motive and instruments**

A recurring melodic motif serves as a unifying musical element in *Bujang Lapok* (1957), providing cohesion and reinforcing the film's comedic tone. Picture 1 shows the scene where Sudin, Ajis, and Ramlee waling together through a traditional village setting framed by coconut tree, evoking a sense of local charm and simplicity. The accompany melody shown in the transcription<sup>1</sup> mirrors this atmosphere through the repetition and gentle motivic phrases, contributing to a sense of movement and playfulness.



**Picture 1:** Scene where *Sudin, Ajis* and *Ramlee* Walking back home (7:31-7:51)



**Transcription 1:** Melodic Motive in C Major Key

The melodic motive first introduced in the early part of the film in the key C major. The melodic motive then reoccurs *Ajis* caught side of *Kak Normah* came out secretly from *Bujang Lapok* Room Shown in picture 2.



**Picture 2:** Scene where *Ajis* caught *Kak Normah* secretly comes out from *Bujang Lapok* room (31:45 - 25:40)



**Transcription 2:** Similar melodic motive which modulates to G Major Key



Transcription 2 shows the same melodic motive modulates to G Major here.

The motive then appeared again, where Sudin went to find glass bottle to call Zaiton, unfortunately, Zaiton's mom appeared at the window and made Sudin panic shown in picture 3.



**Picture 3:** Sudin went to call Zaiton end up panicking after seeing Zaiton's mom appear (33:09 – 33:26)

In this scene, the familiar melodic motive reappears in the key of G Major, however its pace subtly changes to mirror *Sudin* deliberates slowing down as he steps the front porch.

The instrumentation remains deliberately understated, creating a light musical undercurrent that under discussion is intentionally restrained, contributing to a subtle yet effective musical backdrop. A bright, bell-like timbre most likely from a xylophone or glockenspiel carries the melody underscoring its playful character. Beneath this, upright bass and light snare brush percussion pattern provide gentle rhythmic support, while occasional flourishes from celesta or clarinet added a touch of color. At moments, the xylophone presents the motif alone, heightening it as a thematic signpost. This transparent texture reinforces the film's comedic timing that accentuating humorous gesture drowning the dialogue and ties separate narrative beats together into a cohesive musical thread.

### **Similar instrumentations and chromatic musical motive**

The score returns to a consistent instrumental palette in each of each of these moments. A bright, bell-like xylophone voice carries a predominantly chromatic motive where its stepwise lines and semitone inflections introduce subtle tension and unpredictability within an otherwise transparent texture. There are show in picture 4 where the scene that *Ajis* rescues *Salbiah* from the river. Another scene in picture 5 where *Ajis* informs *Kak Normah* of the incident and *Kak Normah* comforts *Salbiah*. As Well as scene show in picture 6, where *Salbiah's* father apologized to *Ramlee*.



**Picture 4:** *Ajiz rescues Salbiah from the river (51:43 – 53:39)*



**Picture 5:** *Ajiz informs Kak Normah of the incident and Kak Normah comfort Salbiah (54:27-55:50)*



**Picture 6:** *Salbiah's father apologized to Ramlee (57:30 – 58:08)*

Although the melodic motive is in the form of chromatic, it remains functionally concise and deployed without modulation or extensive thematic development so underscore the emotional stake of scenes. The repetition of this motive across diverse narrative contexts like rescue, consolation, and confession creates a unifying thread that ties these moments together. P.Ramlee sustained narrative coherence, allowing the music to respond fluidly to on-screen emotion while preserving the score's overall restraint by utilizing similar instrumental combinations timbral blend and succinct chromatic gesture.

Aspect	Pictures 1, 2, and 3	Pictures 4, 5, and 6
<b>Musical elements</b>	Melodic motive and instrumentations	Chromatic motives and instrumentations
<b>Function of Music</b>	Reinforces comedic timing; accentuates humorous gestures	Enhances emotional expression; supports dramatic shifts
<b>Narrative context</b>	Comedy Scenes	Rescue, consolation, and confession scenes

<b>Role of Music in Narrative</b>	Emphasize physical comedy and light-hearted interactions	Underscores emotional intensity and character vulnerability
<b>Stylistic Approach</b>	Light, rhythmic instrumentation; syncopated and playful	More expressive, slower-paces passages; use of chromaticism to convey tension or emotion

**Table 2:** Comparison of Musical Technique and Narrative Contexts in Selected Scenes

The music in Pictures 1, 2, and 3 differ significantly in style and narrative function compared to that in Pictures 4, 5, and 6. In the first set, the music relies on clear melodic motives and light instrumentation, with a rhythmic and syncopated quality that reinforces comedic timing and highlights humorous gestures. These scenes, rooted in comedy, use music to emphasize physical humor and playful character interactions. In contrast, the second set of images presents scenes involving rescue, consolation, and confession—moments that carry greater emotional weight. Here, the music adopts chromatic motives and more expressive instrumentation, often slower in pace and rich in tension. This stylistic shift supports dramatic changes in tone, underlining emotional intensity and revealing character vulnerability. Together, the two sets illustrate how musical style and function adapt to different narrative needs, from light-hearted comedy to deep emotional expression.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Bujang Lapok* (1957) demonstrates how *P.Ramlee* crafts his score with both restraint and precision to support the film's narrative and emotional contours. The consistent use of a limited instrumental palette, which are most notably the xylophone or glockenspiel by *P.Ramlee* creates a sonorous signature that gently underpins the action without competing with the dialogue. The melodically motive returns throughout the film, often presented in isolation and acts an obvious aural signposting to connect disparate scenes while allowing the overall transitions within a cohesive film and conversational flow within the scenes.

*P.Ramlee* subtle chromatic shifts in his melodic lines instead of larger treatment transformations. These slight pitch shifts provide differentiating characteristics that can echo transformations on screen but remain grounded in a consistent instrumental and textural framework. This approach diverges from the dominant leitmotif practice employed by Hollywood screen composers, as it is ultimately a wide-ranging feature of Malaysian film musical practice that tends to privilege thematic clarity and continuity, such that pitch changes made for cinematic development are ultimately incremental.

Simultaneously, *P.Ramlee*'s practice of combining Western harmonic techniques with indigenous instrumental timbres also creates integrated music which is a music that has some European tangents and hints of local embodiments. The films and music accessible to the international audience but still emerges from the depth and expansive localness of *P.Ramlee*'s indigenous cultural traditions. In *Bujang lapok* (1957), this blend might shape the film's space and pace, however, it might also reflect the emergent priorities of early Malaysian film, where communal storytelling and performative immediacy usually superseded individualized, psycho-dramatic depth of character. Together, these observations expand our understanding of how Malaysian film music navigates between cultural tradition and cinematic space.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study offers an analysis of the music-theoretical aspects of the thematic structure and instrumentation in *Bujang Lapok* (1957) and considerations about how this can assist the narrative and effective content of the film. The full movie can be viewed at this YouTube link [https://youtu.be/ztc3NLUXYKA?si=ilnoXAC4fL\\_Pva0k](https://youtu.be/ztc3NLUXYKA?si=ilnoXAC4fL_Pva0k) for further reference. The findings established a significant departure from Western leitmotif-based score conventions, and that a characteristic Malaysian ethos centring on repeating melodic motives and chromatic gestures. As in examples show in picture 1 to 6, these thematic ideas are placed within an unchanging and orderly instrumental fabric, which allows thematic cohesion while sensitively responding to the shifting emotional colors of the film.

As opposed to thematic elaboration, the music recognizability and mood with communal story and performative convention. *P. Ramlee's* employment of Western harmonic language with local instrumental timbres is a case in point for hybridity and consistent as it is Malaysia's multicultural and the emerging language of its early films. By employing a culture-aware music-theoretical approach, this research challenges the universal applicability of Western theories of film music and calls for greater care in attention local musical and narrative conventions. By doing so, not only is the scope of film music studies extended, but it is also confirmed that context-conditioned research practices also applicable to analyses of non-Western filmmaking traditions.

Future research may expand on this foundation by considering the ways in which Malaysian films music has developed over time, particularly in response to technological advancements and global influences. A comparison of contemporary scoring methods with older approaches may yield valuable insight into the ways in which Malaysian composers continue to struggle with questions of identity, tradition, and modernity in music. This is a path that can further our understanding of film music as a narrative device as a cultural practice.

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