Is It Ethical? The Appropriation of the Islamic Call to Prayer in Adeline Wong's *Jalinan* for String Quartet

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Abstract

Cultural appropriation in musicology has been a topic of scholarly discussion recently, though the practice is not new to academic research and publication. Coined as cultural colonialism in 1976 by Kenneth Coutts-Smith, one early instance was Francis Burton's 1853 hajj as a non-Muslim, which he documented in 1855 and 1856. Cultural appropriation can have both positive and negative impacts on the source culture. Scholars like Young, Brunk, Matthes, and Siems have explored the ethics of appropriation. Malaysian composer Adeline Wong appropriated *Azan* (Islamic call to prayer) in her string quartet composition, *Jalinan*. Through music analysis and transcriptions, the author found that Wong incorporated several characteristics of *Azan* into her work. The study concluded that Wong engaged in subject appropriation, considered the most benign form, and did not act unethically in her creative process. Understanding the degree of cultural appropriation in *Jalinan* is crucial, but its significance lies in its multifaceted contribution to the musical repertoire. The author argues in this paper that the act of cultural appropriation in *Jalinan* made the work unique and exceptional.

Keywords: Cultural Appropriation; Ethics; *Jalinan*; Adeline Wong; Malaysian Contemporary Composer.

Introduction

Scholars across disciplines have had vigorous discussions in recent years about cultural appropriation. In their analysis of Frankie Welch's Cherokee Alphabet textile design, Opishinski et al. (2023) argued that it is difficult to define Welch's work as appropriation or appreciation as Welch was not a Cherokee herself[1]. However, Welch's textile design was well-received by a few prominent Cherokee leaders of the time, among them was Reverend Sam Hider, who created a workbook on Cherokee syllabary. Many community leaders wore this textile design at important events, which further suggests that Welch's work was an appreciation rather than appropriation. In *Stealing My Religion: Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation* (2022), Elizabeth Bucar examined the appropriation of religious practice by non-members. One of the analyses focused on the hijab – the obligatory headscarf worn by Muslim women. Bucar expressed her concern towards political campaigns that use images of women in hijab without consent as political strategy. She cited two examples: first, Hillary Clinton used an image of Nida Allam in hijab during her 2016 presidential campaign. Using this image with the tagline "We made history" suggests Allam was working for Clinton, when actually she was working

1. Although Welch claimed that she was a Cherokee, no solid evidence supported her claim.

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for the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign. Second, the 2019 Sanders presidential campaign used footage of Sabirah Mahmud without her consent, which Mahmud herself described as "being used as hijabi clout", profiting from her hijab as a token of inclusivity in the campaign. These acts of appropriation may not have had direct repercussions on Allam and Mahmud, but Clinton and Sanders may have gained benefits in the form of money, support, and votes from this exploitation.

This paper focuses on an instance of cultural appropriation in musical composition, specifically the ethicality of Adeline Wong's appropriation of the Islamic call for prayer (*Azan*) in her composition *Jalinan* for string quartet. Wong (b.1975) is a Malaysian composer and professor. She graduated from the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music and the Royal College of Music London, majoring in music composition. Wong has written music for theater, orchestra, chamber ensembles, solo instruments and voice, as well as music for film. Her works have been performed by the Belgian National Orchestra, the Song Company (Australia), MiNesemblet (Norway), and the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, among others (Adeline Wong, n.d). Notable works include *Radiance* (2021), *Jalinan* (2021), *Crossings* (2020), and music for the film *Chermin* (2006). In an interview, Wong revealed that her recent works aim to distill musical material through an economical use of resources, exploring the material from every possible perspective.[2]

This paper returns to the artist in question and her work in a later section. At this stage, it presents an overview of cultural appropriation and the five types of cultural appropriation in the arts as articulated by Young (2008) and Brunk and Young (2009). To provide context, each type is illustrated with selected examples discussed by Matthes (2019), Lenard and Balint (2020), and Arya (2021), among others. The discussion also briefly considers arguments for and against cultural appropriation, with attention to how different forms may benefit or detriment the cultures being appropriated.

An overview of cultural appropriation

Cultural appropriation has been a topic of scholarly debate since it was first coined as "cultural colonialism" in 1976 by British historian Kenneth Coutts-Smith (Kendall 2024), although the practice itself has been documented at least since the nineteenth-century. One of the earliest and most well-documented acts of cultural appropriation pertains to the British explorer Sir Richard Francis Burton and the detailed account of his 1853 pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca and Medina, two holy cities of Islam (Burton 1855), which received critical acclaim (Godsall 1993). To prepare for the journey, Burton took the name Abdullah, learned Arabic, and studied Islamic rituals. He created a fictional backstory and took an extreme physical measure to ensure his safety and wellbeing throughout the journey: knowing that the safest way to reach Mecca was by traveling with a caravan of Muslim pilgrims, Burton underwent circumcision at the age of thirty-two prior to departure to minimize the risk of being exposed as an impostor during roadside toilet stops (Bucar 2022, 82). Bucar (2022, 84) argued that Burton's journey of "playing pilgrim" was problematic as "his journey entailed an intentional deception" and gained Burton more fame and influence as an explorer. As such, he benefited from the published accounts of the journey at the expense of the Muslim community.

2. This interview was conducted through Zoom online meeting platform and took place on 15 October 2022.

Though the subject of cultural appropriation has been defined and discussed throughout the years, for instance, Todd (1990, 24-25) described cultural "appropriation occurs when someone else speaks for, tells, defines, describes, represents, uses or recruits the images, stories, experiences, dreams of others for their own" and further added, "appropriation also occurs when someone else becomes the expert on your experience and is deemed more knowledgeable about who you are than yourself", one of the earliest (if not, the earliest) comprehensive discourse on cultural appropriation was by James O. Young. He mentioned that "human remains, archaeological finds, anthropological data, scientific knowledge, genetic material, land, religious beliefs, and a range of other items have all been subject to cultural appropriation" (Young 2008, 2). But what exactly is cultural appropriation? Kendall (2024), through Encyclopaedia Brittanica, defines cultural appropriation as:

> adoption of certain language, behaviour, clothing, or tradition belonging to a minority culture or social group by a dominant culture or group in a way that is exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical. An imbalance of power between the appropriator and the appropriated is a critical condition of the concept.

Young (2008, 6-7), following Todd's views on appropriation and expanding the discussion to consider artistic trajectory, identified five types of cultural appropriation in the arts: object appropriation, content appropriation, style appropriation, motif appropriation, and subject appropriation. In short, object appropriation "occurs when the possession of a tangible work of art (such as a sculpture or a painting) is transferred from members of one culture to members of another culture." Content appropriation refers to the "significant reuse of an idea first expressed in the work of an artist from another culture." Style appropriation occurs when "artists produce works with stylistic elements in common with the works of another culture." While somewhat similar to style appropriation, motif appropriation occurs when "artists are influenced by the art of a culture other than their own without creating works in the same style." Finally, subject appropriation happens when "artists appropriate a subject matter, namely another culture or some of its members." These definitions, though somewhat dated, are still used by many scholars in their discussions and arguments in recent years such as Matthes (2019) and Arya (2021).

Cultural appropriation often deals with the notions of "insider" and "outsider" and the interaction between these groups. In the most simplistic yet accurate definitions, "insider" refers to a member of a certain culture, while "outsider" refers to a non-member of that culture (Young 2008; Brunk and Young 2009; Young 2021). All types of cultural appropriation involve this interaction, though not all of them are detrimental, either directly or indirectly. Object appropriation is objectionable when tangible items are obtained through coercion and/or oppression. One example of object appropriation was the transfer of a North American totem pole to a European museum, as discussed by Young (2008)[3]. This type of appropriation, however, is not always dramatic. An American tourist, for instance, who purchases a sculpture from a properly authorized dealer in Australian Aboriginal art has engaged in cultural appropriation but does nothing objectionable (Young and Brunk 2009, 4). In the realm of music, a notable instance of harmful object appropriation can be observed in Madonna's extensive

3. Young cited the case of a totem pole created by the Xenaaksiala clan (now part of the Haisla Nation) in 1872, which was removed to Sweden in 1929 without proper authorization and repatriated in 2006; once treated as an ethnographic object, it has come to symbolize both colonial domination and, upon its return, Haisla cultural recognition.

use of cultural artifacts throughout her career. The pop icon has faced significant criticism for incorporating cultural symbols and objects from various marginalized communities in the United States without offering proper acknowledgment or showing due respect. While her actions did bring some level of visibility to these communities, the manner in which she appropriated these cultural elements – primarily for commercial purposes – has been widely regarded as both harmful and disrespectful. This superficial engagement with cultural symbols, devoid of genuine understanding or appreciation, underscores the problematic nature of such appropriation in the music industry (Team Parle 2022). Conversely, George Harrison of The Beatles is frequently acknowledged for his role in popularizing the sitar within Western music (Lavezzoli 2006). His introduction to the instrument came through the renowned Indian musician Ravi Shankar, whose mentorship deeply influenced Harrison. This newfound appreciation led Harrison to integrate the sitar into several Beatles tracks, notably "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)." Harrison's sincere interest in Indian music, coupled with his dedicated efforts to learn from and collaborate with Indian musicians, is widely regarded as respectful and appreciative. Unlike exploitative forms of appropriation, Harrison's approach is considered benign, as it fostered cultural exchange and mutual respect, thereby enriching the musical landscape (Tan 2020).

Content appropriation, while often harmless, could be detrimental to the insiders when it is misrepresented and perpetuates stereotypes with or without intent. Young (2008, 107-08) stated, "It is true that outsiders can harm insiders by misrepresenting them in certain ways. Pretty clearly Hollywood filmmakers have harmed members of Native American cultures by employing bigoted stereotypes." This could potentially have a devastating domino effect on the livelihood of the insiders such as being subjected to certain negative connotations that may potentially jeopardize their socio-economic status, as argued in Young (2008) and Matthes (2019). Lenard and Balint (2020) added that as creative works that appropriated content from other cultures often select a minute portion of that culture, content appropriation could be reductive. Mascareñaz (2017), when expressing distaste towards the misrepresentation of Mexican culture, stated "Mexican culture cannot be reduced to tacos, oversized sombreros, and piñatas." A recent example of harmful content appropriation in music can be observed in the actions of Miley Cyrus. The pop star has been widely criticized for her appropriation of hip-hop culture, particularly during her *Bangerz* era (Zink 2016). During this period, Cyrus adopted various elements of hip-hop music and aesthetics, such as twerking and the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), in an effort to reinvent her public image. Critics contend that Cyrus's engagement with these cultural elements was superficial and primarily intended for shock value, lacking genuine understanding or respect for the culture (Zink 2016; Paul 2023). This approach is deemed exploitative and harmful, as it commodifies and trivializes the lived experiences of marginalized communities (Helligar 2020). Conversely, Paul Simon's album *Graceland* is frequently cited as a benign example of content appropriation (Meintjes 1990; Erlmann 1999). Simon collaborated with South African musicians, integrating their musical styles into his work. Despite initial controversy surrounding the album, many of the South African artists involved have expressed that the collaboration was mutually beneficial and helped bring global attention to their music. Simon's efforts to properly credit and compensate the musicians he worked with contribute to the perception that this was a respectful and appreciative form of cultural exchange (Manuel 2021).

Style, motif, and subject appropriations are mostly benign. Despite these types of appropriation taking something from another culture by the outsiders, they often do not present harm

to the insiders. A good example of benign style appropriation is *Pagodes* (1903) by Claude Debussy, in which he appropriated Javanese traditional music into a musical piece for piano. It could be heard clearly throughout the piece that he appropriated the scalic material, musical texture, playing gestures, and other musical dimensions of Javanese traditional music into this musical masterpiece. Since its premiere in 1904, this work has been appreciated and celebrated by many without its audience failing to identify the musical style Debussy appropriated from in the creative process (Tamagawa 2020), hence no harm was done to the insiders, at least directly. On the other hand, Steve Reich's incorporation of Anlo Ewe drumming elements into his phase work, *Drumming*, is frequently cited as a notable instance of harmful style appropriation (Taylor 2007; Feld 2000). Critics such as Agawu (1995) and Gopinath (2004) contend that Reich's utilization of this distinctive drumming style, without adequately acknowledging its cultural origins or the profound significance it holds within the Anlo Ewe community, constitutes a violation of cultural intimacy and respect. This form of appropriation is perceived as exploitative, as it commodifies a deeply rooted cultural practice without providing proper recognition or demonstrating a genuine understanding of its cultural context. Such actions underscore the ethical concerns surrounding the appropriation of musical styles from marginalized communities (Dodd 2021, 373).

Motif appropriation involves a more limited form of borrowing than style appropriation, occurring when artists draw inspiration from specific elements of another culture's art without adopting that culture's overall stylistic framework. Take *Piano-Rag Music* (1919) by Igor Stravinsky as an example. Hage (2011, 105) stated that "its cross rhythmic complexity and charging ostinato indicate a constant shift in musical ideas similar to jazz improvisation". This is consistent with Young (2008, 7), who noted that although this work was influenced by the jazz of African American culture, the composition is not in a jazz style. Similar to style appropriation, the insiders are not harmed by this type of appropriation as it does not distort the perception of the appropriated materials – in the example above, jazz music – nor changes the way the materials in question are practiced. Nevertheless, harmful motif appropriation remains a significant concern in the realm of music composition. A notable example is found in Igor Stravinsky's renowned ballet, *The Rite of Spring*. According to Morton (1979), Stravinsky appropriated materials from the Juszkiewicz collection, an anthology of 1785 European traditional melodies. The composer incorporated these traditional melodies into his composition without adequately acknowledging their cultural origins or the communities from which they originated. This act of appropriation is considered exploitative, as it commodifies cultural motifs without providing proper recognition or demonstrating a genuine understanding of their cultural significance (Taruskin 1980, 507). Such practices underscore the ethical implications of using cultural elements in artistic works without due respect and acknowledgment.

Subject appropriation, which is sometimes referred to as voice appropriation, "involves taking but artists who engage in subject appropriation do not, in any obvious sense, take anything from insiders" (Young 2008, 8). It occurs when artists (outsiders) represent aspects of another culture (Young and Haley 2009, 268). Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (1904) is an example of this type of appropriation. Using Rudolph Dittrich's piano arrangements of Japanese melodies, *Nippon Gafuku* (1894 and 1895), as the main source materials (Hara 2003), Puccini appropriated these melodies by adapting them into the opera (Liao 1990). This type of appropriation also does not commit blasphemy towards the subject nor harm the insider, just like style and motif appropriations. While subject appropriation appropriated the

voice of the insiders (in this case, adaptation of Japanese melodies into the opera), it does not present harm to the original melodies as they are still sung in their original style and language by the owner of the melody: the Japanese people. However, this type of appropriation could also be considered harmful. As argued by Shadle (2021), Antonín Dvořák's *New World Symphony* is often criticized for its harmful subject appropriation due to the incorporation of African American spirituals and Native American music. Shadle argued that Dvořák's use of these cultural elements was superficial and lacked a genuine understanding of their deep cultural significance and historical context. By integrating these motifs into a symphony for Western classical audiences, Dvořák commodified the music of marginalized communities, reducing rich cultural expressions to exotic elements for Western consumption. The ethical implications of Dvořák's appropriation are significant. While he aimed to honor and elevate the music of African American and Native American communities, his approach did not adequately acknowledge their contributions and struggles. This lack of recognition and respect is seen as a form of cultural exploitation, highlighting the importance of ethical considerations in the use of cultural elements in artistic works.

In general, cultural appropriation may be considered harmful when it involves coercion, deprivation, misrepresentation, or the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Conversely, if an artist treads carefully and exercises ethical precaution in acts of "taking" or "borrowing" from another culture, appropriation by an outsider is sometimes framed as potentially beneficial. It is against this broader understanding that, although the ethical questions surrounding appropriation will be addressed in greater depth later in this study, the present section critically interrogates the appropriation of religious elements as a contested practice. Returning to Burton's case discussed earlier, this section examines how such acts of appropriation are embedded in unequal insider–outsider dynamics and frequently produce tangible and symbolic harms for originating communities. Further examples demonstrate that, while religious appropriation is often defended on the grounds of mutual exchange or benefit, any perceived advantages for insiders tend to remain contingent, uneven, or secondary to wider processes of marginalization and misrepresentation.

Literature Review

Appropriating Religious Elements

The brief discussion on Burton's act of appropriation by performing hajj in 1853 presented earlier illustrated an example of the religious dimensions of cultural appropriation. As performing hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam and perceived as the peak of what it means to be Muslim, Burton's gimmicks to maneuver his way in and out of Mecca and Medina without being caught was distasteful (Bucar 2022). Not only did he manage to get away with his deceit, but Burton also benefited from this act by publishing a narrative about his journey[4], which has continued to gain praise. Romney (2013) described it as "one of the greatest travel narratives ever written by an Englishman." Burton's actions highlight a critical issue within cultural appropriation, particularly when it intersects with religious practices. The hajj is not merely a journey; it is a deeply spiritual and communal act that holds immense significance

4. Richard F. Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to ElMadinah and Meccah*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1857).

for Muslims worldwide. By infiltrating this sacred space under false pretenses, Burton not only disrespected the sanctity of the pilgrimage but also commodified a profound religious experience for personal gain. This act of appropriation underscores the broader implications of such behavior, where the sacred is reduced to a spectacle for the outsider's consumption.

Burton's case illustrates how religious elements are particularly susceptible to exploitation within acts of cultural appropriation. As this early example demonstrates, religious appropriation did not end with Burton; rather, records and evidence of such practices become increasingly visible and compelling in the post-Burton period. Appropriation of religious elements occurs across many – if not all – religious traditions, most often undertaken by non-members or "outsiders," a pattern that continues to provoke tension and resistance from originating communities.

Arya (2020), when discussing her thoughts on the appropriation of religious imagery in fashion by outsiders, stated that it could cause discomfort and uproar to the insiders. She cited two examples that had caused such ruckus in the past. First, Roberto Cavalli's 2004 collection of swimwear and underwear featured images of the Hindu deities Rama, Vishnu, and Saraswati. Second, a swimsuit from Lisa Burke's 2011 collection depicted another Hindu deity, Lakshmi. Both collections caused uproars among Hindus. Their overriding feeling was that the symbols held so sacred to them were disrespected in their use by reducing these deities into prints on swimwear and underwear, while Cavalli and Burke cashed in on the controversial collections. The fashion industry's appropriation of religious symbols often leads to significant backlash from the communities whose sacred symbols are being used. The use of Hindu deities on swimwear and underwear by Cavalli and Burke is a prime example of how such actions can be perceived as deeply offensive. These deities are not mere decorative motifs; they are revered figures in Hinduism, embodying profound spiritual and cultural meanings. By placing these sacred images on items of clothing that are often associated with sensuality and commercialism, the designers not only trivialized the deities but also disrespected the beliefs of millions of Hindus. This kind of appropriation can lead to a sense of alienation and disrespect among the affected communities, highlighting the need for greater sensitivity and understanding in the use of religious symbols.

Cruz, Seo, and Scaraboto (2023), when devising a framework on self-authorization strategies in the consumption of cultural differences, mentioned a further example of cultural appropriation of a Hindu deity; the famous K-pop girl group Blackpink featured an image of Ganesha in the music video for the [year] song "How You Like That." It was not the use of religious iconography that caused uproar among the Hind community. Instead, it was the mistreatment towards the said iconography (being placed on the floor in the video in question) that was seen as a gesture of disrespect and an insult towards the deity, as statues of gods and goddesses are often placed on a designated and elevated altar to symbolize their divinity. The incident involving Blackpink's music video further illustrates the complexities of cultural appropriation in the modern, globalized world. The placement of the Ganesha statue on the floor was seen as a significant act of disrespect by many Hindus, as it violated the cultural and religious norms that dictate the proper treatment of sacred objects. This incident underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness, especially in an era where media and entertainment have a global reach. The backlash against Blackpink highlights how cultural appropriation can lead to unintended consequences: in this case, offending the Hindus as the insiders.

Appropriating religious elements could also benefit insiders. An excellent example of this is "the headscarf of harmony" movement in 2019 or as coined by Bucar (2022), "the solidarity hijab," in protests against Islamophobia. Use of the "solidarity hijab" is defined as "political campaigns initiated and adopted for the most part by non-Muslims with the intention of combatting gendered Islamophobia" (Bucar 2022, 36). Bucar discussed the responses towards the Islamophobic mass shooting incident of 15 March 2019 at Al-Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand to exemplify this solidarity. In showing support towards the Muslim minority of Christchurch, non-Muslim women started wearing headscarves in public, following the initiative that was first started by the then New Zealand prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, when she went to visit the site of the horrible massacre (Bucar 2022, 55). This eventually started the movement "#HeadscarfofHarmony" that went global almost instantly, though Muslims all around the world had mixed feelings and reactions towards the movement as it progressed into (un)desired territories. Regardless of how the movement was perceived, it still spoke of an important political statement, benefitting Muslims by increasing the sense of safety in non-Muslim-majority society of Christchurch, New Zealand (at least during the movement was trending).

The solidarity hijab movement is a powerful example of how the appropriation of religious symbols can be used positively to foster solidarity and combat discrimination. By wearing the hijab, non-Muslim women were able to visibly show their support for the Muslim community in the wake of a horrific act of violence. This act of solidarity helped to challenge stereotypes and promote a sense of unity and understanding. However, it also sparked a debate within the Muslim community about the implications of non-Muslims adopting the hijab. Some viewed it as a meaningful gesture of support, while others saw it as a superficial appropriation of a deeply significant religious practice. This ambivalence highlights the complex nature of cultural appropriation and the need for ongoing dialogue and sensitivity.

Songkran Festival in Thailand is another example of how appropriating religious elements benefits insiders. This religious festival is celebrated to welcome an important date on the Buddhist calendar: the traditional Thai New Year. Despite being a religious celebration, outsiders have participated in this festivity with sacred and secular intentions, both being commercialized as tourism, with the latter being the more profitable of the two. By marketing the Songkran Festival as a national tourism event, the Thai government has generated substantial profit, thereby boosting the country's economy. For perspective, during the 21 days of the Songkran Festival in 2024, Bangkok Post reported that the income generated from this festival was over THB140 billion, or approximately USD41 billion (Online Reporters 2024). The commercialization of the Songkran Festival demonstrates how cultural appropriation can have significant economic benefits for the host community. This influx of tourists not only brings financial benefits but also fosters cultural exchange and understanding.

In sum, the appropriation of religious elements constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon with both positive and negative implications. While such practices may yield cultural visibility and economic benefits, they also carry the potential to cause harm, provoke offense, and exacerbate existing power imbalances. The examples discussed underscore the need for heightened sensitivity and critical awareness in the use of religious symbols and practices. Engaging in informed dialogue and seriously considering the perspectives of affected communities are essential for navigating the complexities of cultural appropriation in ways that respect and acknowledge the diversity and significance of religious experience.

Ethics on Appropriation

Cultural appropriation frequently arises in contexts where cultural traditions intersect and circulate beyond their originating communities. Young (2000) argues that certain instances of cultural appropriation may be morally permissible, particularly when they result in valuable artistic production and foster meaningful cross-cultural dialogue. This dialogue is essential for fostering understanding and appreciation among different cultures. Artists, in particular, often find it unavoidable to represent other cultures in their work, as addressing these matters through art can lead to meaningful conversations and reflections on cultural diversity. Young further emphasized the importance of avoiding blanket statements about cultural appropriation. While it is crucial to recognize that certain forms of cultural appropriation can be immoral, it is equally important to acknowledge that not all instances of cultural appropriation are harmful. In fact, some forms of cultural appropriation can be seen as a celebration of cultural diversity and an opportunity for learning and growth. By avoiding sweeping generalizations, we can better understand the nuances of cultural appropriation and its impact on different communities.

Building on Young's (2008) discussion of ethical considerations in cultural appropriation as outlined earlier in this study, Brunk and Young (2009) stated that outsiders have a responsibility to make every reasonable effort to accurately understand the beliefs of another culture. By doing so, they reduce the risk of misrepresenting or offending insiders. If individuals wish to adopt aspects of a culture, blend them with other traditions, or modify them, they are free to do so under the principle of liberty of conscience. They must, however, avoid claiming that they are practicing the culture authentically and should respect the legitimate ownership of cultural expressions and practices as previously outlined.

Matthes (2016, 347) contends that cultural appropriation is widely regarded as morally objectionable only when a member of a dominant cultural group appropriates from a marginalized group. This perspective highlights the power dynamics involved in cultural appropriation. Matthes (2019, 1003) reiterated this by adding that the wrong of cultural appropriation is rooted in the imbalance of power and argued that "justified objections to cultural appropriation must ultimately be grounded in considerations of oppression" (Matthes 2019, 1004). This view ties cultural appropriation to the broader context of social and historical inequalities, emphasizing the need to address these imbalances to achieve a more just and equitable society.

Siems (2019), on the other hand, rejected this idea of what he calls "assumed suffering," as it is not self-evident. Sometimes, cultural appropriation can be felt positively, namely as recognition of another culture (Siems 2019, 415). Adapting the deontological approach, Siems further suggested removing the general ban towards the act of cultural appropriation. Instead, he named three potentially unethical conducts that need to be avoided when appropriating: denying the origins of a cultural phenomenon, treating it disrespectfully, and diminishing its use in the source culture. Siems added it is certainly possible to argue that the misuse of power in relation to cultural phenomena is ethically wrong. However, this should be labelled differently (e.g., as cultural "oppression", "domination", or "dependency") rather than making power imbalances a necessary part of the definition of cultural appropriation (Siems 2019, 417).

Wissmann (2024) added to this discussion by stating that when cultural appropriation takes racially discriminatory forms, it may conflict with human rights frameworks. She proposed that ethical cultural appropriation should be within the international human rights framework. This approach is appropriate, as intangible culture is not a fixed legal concept but a dynamic, evolving practice that fosters human creativity through its development and transformation (Wissman 2024, 216). Wissmann also encouraged further research in the area of ethics of cultural appropriation within the context of public international law, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

The discussion above provided an outline of the ethics of cultural appropriation as presented by Young (2000), Brunk and Young (2009), Matthes (2016, 2019), Siems (2019), and Wissmann (2024). While these scholars may have differing views on the ethics of cultural appropriation, they all agree that objectionable appropriation involves the misuse of power, racial discrimination, denial of the origins of cultural elements, disrespect, and diminishing the use of the appropriated element in the source culture. They also agreed that when appropriate measures are taken, cultural appropriation can be morally and ethically acceptable.

Revisiting the concept of power imbalance in cultural appropriation, it is evident that cultural appropriation often involves an imbalance of power between the appropriator and the appropriated. Kendall (2024) argues that this imbalance is critical, and Matthes (2016) supports this view, stating that cultural appropriation is morally objectionable when it involves a dominant group appropriating from a marginalized group, emphasizing the role of power dynamics. However, Siems (2019) suggests that power imbalance is not a necessary part of the definition of cultural appropriation, proposing that the misuse of power should be labelled differently, such as cultural oppression or domination.

In this article, the author acknowledges that power imbalance is a significant factor in many instances of cultural appropriation. However, the author also recognizes that not all acts of appropriation involve clear power dynamics. Therefore, while power imbalance is often present and critical in understanding the ethical implications of cultural appropriation, it is not an absolute requirement for defining the concept. Instead, the author proposes that each case should be evaluated on its own merits, considering the specific context and the presence or absence of power dynamics. Cultural appropriation is a multifaceted issue with no clear-cut guidelines. The ethicality of such practices often depends on various factors, including the context in which they occur, the intent behind them, and their impact on the source culture. This study aims to shed light on these complexities, inviting ongoing dialogue and reflection.

Building on the preceding discussion, which emphasizes the importance of evaluating cultural appropriation on a case-by-case basis and attending closely to context, intent, and impact, the analysis now turns to a specific musical case study. The discussion begins with an introduction to the Islamic call to prayer (*Azan*), outlining its historical background and cultural significance within Muslim communities. It then progresses to an overview of the artist and her work *Jalinan*, before proceeding to an analytical examination of how Azanic elements are incorporated into the composition. Musical excerpts and transcriptions are employed to identify and illustrate these appropriated elements, thereby grounding the broader ethical discussion of appropriation in a concrete musical and cultural context.

Azan – The Islamic Call to Prayer

Muslims are required to perform five obligatory prayers each day: (1) *fajr*, (2) *dhuhr*, (3) *asr*, (4) *maghrib*, and (5) *isha*. These prayers are performed at specific times throughout the day, marking the rhythm of a Muslim's daily life. As stated by Huda (2024), each prayer is marked by a formal announcement called *Azan*. This call to prayer is recited by a designated individual known as the *muazzin* and delivered from larger mosques' minaret tower or from a side door in smaller ones. *Azan*, which translates to "to listen," serves as a proclamation of shared faith among Muslims and signals that prayers are about to commence within the mosque.

Azan is a deeply significant ritual in Islam, symbolizing unity and devotion. Historically, this call to prayer was revealed to a companion of the Holy Muslim Prophet Muhammad, Hadrat 'Abdullah ibn 'Aziz, in his dream (Ahmadiyya 2024). The epiphanic dream came to Hadrat after the Holy Prophet sought advice from his companions on how to call Muslims to congregational prayers. In the early days of Islam, there was no established method to signal the beginning of prayer time or to call Muslims to the mosque for prayers. Hadrat, in his dream, saw someone announcing the time for prayer and calling people to the mosque by reciting religious phrases in a loud voice. This dream was then shared with the Prophet Muhammad, who approved it, and thus the practice of *Azan* was established.

Azan's role in these prayers is not only functional but also deeply spiritual. It serves as a reminder of the presence of God in daily life and the importance of regular worship. The words of *Azan*, calling Muslims to prayer, resonate with themes of faith, devotion, and community. The *muazzin*'s call is a moment of pause and reflection for Muslims, a call to leave behind worldly concerns and turn towards spiritual fulfilment. It is a sound that marks the passage of time and the rhythm of daily life. In many Muslim-majority countries, *Azan* can be heard echoing through the streets, creating a sense of unity and shared identity among the community members (Rashed 2017). The call is a reminder of the collective faith and the shared practices that bind the community together (Darehbidi, Afzal, and Zarei 2024).

Azan also is significant in other contexts. For example, in performing exorcism, *Azan* is an integral part of the ritual to expel evil spirits that inhabit animate and inanimate objects (Oparin 2020; Werth 2012). The powerful and sacred words of *Azan* are believed to have the ability to cleanse and protect. Additionally, *Azan* is whispered to male newborns by the family patriarch, such as the father, grandfather, uncle, or elder male siblings, to welcome them to the world (Firat 2024). This practice signifies the child's introduction to the faith and the community, marking the beginning of their spiritual journey.

Azan's importance extends beyond the mosque and the act of prayer. It is a symbol of Islamic identity and a proclamation of faith that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. Whether in a bustling city or a quiet village, the sound of *Azan* connects Muslims to their faith and to each other, reinforcing the sense of belonging to a global community.

The discussion now turns to the primary focus of the present study. It incorporates an online interview with the composer Adeline Wong, in which she reflects on her experiences with *Azan* as a nonMuslim growing up in Malaysia and her subsequent incorporation of Azanic elements into *Jalinan* for string quartet. The discussion is complemented by an analytical examination of the work, situating Wong's compositional approach within its broader

cultural and musical context. To support this analysis, defining characteristics of the *Azan* are outlined and examined, providing a framework for understanding how this Islamic tradition is translated and recontextualized within the musical language of *Jalinan*. Musical excerpts and transcriptions are employed to illustrate the appropriated elements with analytical clarity.

Adeline Wong's Early Years and *Jalinan*

As noted in the introduction, Adeline Wong is a Malaysian composer and professor currently residing in Singapore. Wong has stated that she spent her younger days growing up in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, one of the southern states of Peninsular Malaysia from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, before completing tertiary studies abroad[5]. Raised in Muslim-majority Malaysia, she heard *Azan*, the Islamic call for prayer, during her childhood and adolescence, as did other Malaysians regardless of their faith or beliefs, as this daily call is broadcast on loudspeakers at mosques and on national television and radio channels. Though Wong is not a Muslim, upon hearing *Azan* over many years, the sound became familiar to her and she memorized its tune; however, she does not understand the text and its meaning, only that this call of prayer is made to alert Muslims of the time for each prayer. Wong's background complicates labelling her an outsider, as she has a personal and cultural connection to *Azan*. Her ambivalent position within Malay Islamic culture challenges simplistic insider-outsider dichotomy and highlights the fluidity of cultural boundaries. This perspective is crucial in understanding her relationship with *Azan* and the ethical considerations of her work.

During the interview, she mentioned that her state of mind and emotion were distraught as the imposed travel restriction forbade her from visiting her parents in Negeri Sembilan, as she resides in Singapore. The visit that she did once every few months before COVID-19 became impossible during this period. Wong was living in Singapore when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020. She was unable to visit her parents in Negeri Sembilan; she has noted that her melancholy and longing for home brought back memories of her childhood in Malaysia, where she heard *Azan* five times a day – something that does not occur in Singapore. From a musical perspective, the phrases and form of the prayer are beautiful. The voice has a limited range and uses melisma, and each repetition may be ornamented and extended (Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra 2022). Wong expressed her feelings by translating and re-imagining *Azan* into music using a string quartet as a medium of instrumentation. *Jalinan*, the outcome of this longing, reflects how much the composer missed her country during the COVID-19 lockdown period. This string quartet premiered at Dewan Filharmonik Petronas during the Three Nations Chamber Concert (Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra 2022), alongside works by eight other composers from Malaysia, South Korea, and Singapore.

Methodology

The author conducted an interview with Wong[6] to gain insights into her creative process and her experience with *Azan* as a non-Muslim growing up in Malaysia. The interview lasted

5. Interview with Adeline Wong, Zoom, October 15, 2022.

6. Interview with Adeline Wong, Zoom, October 15, 2022.

for about an hour and provided valuable context for understanding Wong's intentions and the emotional significance of the *Azan* in her composition. Important data gained from the interview include Wong's background and education in music composition, her experience hearing *Azan* during her childhood and teenage years in Malaysia, and the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on her emotional state and creative process. According to Wong, her musical approach to translating and re-imagining *Azan* into music can be generalized into five aspects: scalic material, pitch range, melisma and roulade, melancholic quality, and metric freedom. These aspects will be the focus of the musical analysis later in this article, illustrating the transformation process and ultimately categorizing the type of appropriation contained within this string quartet.

During the interview, the discussion turned to the specific version of *Azan* that served as the inspiration for Wong's work. To facilitate this discussion, the author presented Wong with several recordings of *Azan* performed by various muezzins who are well-known in Malaysia, sourced from YouTube[7] [8]. After listening to these recordings, Wong identified the version she remembered hearing during her formative years in Malaysia. Although she was unable to pinpoint the exact individual who had performed *Azan* during her early years, she recognized the version based on its distinctive nuances and the scalic material present in the recording. This recognition underscores the deep impression that *Azan* left on Wong, influencing her creative process and the resulting composition.

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology centered on an interview with the composer, the transcription of a selected *Azan* version into standard music notation, and a comparative musical analysis. The primary analytical focus is on identifying and examining similarities between melodic, structural, and stylistic elements of *Azan* and Islamic musical features reimagined in Wong's *Jalinan*. Selected excerpts from the score are analyzed to illustrate how *Azan*-related materials are appropriated and transformed within the composition. By integrating insights from the composer interview with close musical analysis, the study aims to elucidate the ethical dimensions of cultural appropriation in *Jalinan* and to contribute to broader scholarly discussions on intercultural composition and musical meaning. Standard Western music notation is employed throughout the analysis, as it is a commonly known and widely used notational system.

Analysis

The scalic material

Azan in Malaysia generally uses the *Hijaz* or *Nahawand* mode. The Malaysian national television channels RTM 1 and RTM 2 broadcast recordings in these modes, which are also available on YouTube[9]. *Hijaz* mode is comparable to the Phrygian dominant mode, while *Nahawand* mode is parallel to the Aeolian mode in the Western tradition.

7. Abdulkarim Almakki, "Azan Ustaz Fahmi Asyraf MAQAM NAHAWAND," YouTube video, 4:55, posted January 4, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FalN_FRqgYI&t=1s.

8. Aliff Najmi Official, "Azan Maghrib TV1 Malaysia (2013)," YouTube video, 4:35, posted September 19, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10k8gTHTwMo.

9. Abdulkarim Almakki, "Azan Ustaz Fahmi Asyraf MAQAM NAHAWAND," YouTube video, 4:55; Aliff Najmi Official, "Azan Maghrib TV1 Malaysia (2013)," YouTube video, 4:35.

Figure 1 / *Hijaz* mode/Phrygian dominant mode in C.

Figure 2 / *Nahawand* mode/Aeolian mode in C.

In the author's interview with the composer, she mentioned that she used the Aeolian mode to construct the melodic and harmonic materials: a deliberate choice to incorporate one of many elements of *Azan* into the composition. Using A♭ as the tonal center, the composer believes it portrays the scalic dimension of *Azan* in this composition[10].

Figure 3 / A♭ Aeolian mode.

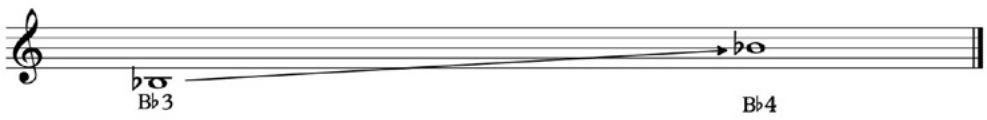
The narrow range of pitch

Wong mentioned in the score's introductory note that she used a narrow range of pitch to emulate the melody of *Azan*. The following figure presents the author's transcription of *Azan* in the *Nahawand* mode. This transcription is based on one version of *Azan* in this mode. As *Azan* is improvisatory in nature, it does not have a fixed melodic line. However, each *Azan* follows a certain melodic contour and is performed within the chosen mode (in this case, *Nahawand*).

10. Aeolian mode is parallel to *Nahawand* mode.

Figure 4 / *Azan* in *Nahawand* mode (transcribed by the author).

Based on the transcription, the melodic range is a perfect 8th (an octave), as illustrated in Figure 5.



Compare this range to the range used in the composition for each instrument.

Instrument	Register range used	Staff notation
Violin 1	A♭3 – A♭5	
Violin 2	A♭3 – G5	
Viola	E3 – C5	
Cello	E2 – C5	

Table 1 / Pitch register used for each instrument in *Jalinan*.

On cursory examination, the registers used by all instruments are somewhat wide compared to the melodic register of *Azan*. However, closer inspection reveals that the upper octave of these ranges appears only infrequently. Hence, the most used range for each instrument in this piece is as follows:

Instrument	Register range used	Staff notation
Violin 1	A♭3 – A♭4	
Violin 2	A♭3 – A♭4	
Viola	E3 – E♭4	
Cello	A♭3 – A♭4	

Table 2 / The most used pitch registers for each instrument in *Jalinan*.

Table 2 illustrates the most-used range for each instrument in this composition. The range for each instrument is within an octave (Violin 1: perfect 8th, Violin 2: perfect 8th, Viola: diminished 8th, Cello: perfect 8th). This is consistent with the melodic range of *Azan* as illustrated in Figure 5. Despite the wide compass that each instrument possesses, Wong chose to utilize the mentioned range to mimic and integrate another element of *Azan* into her composition.

The use of melisma and roulade

Melisma is a vocal technique in which multiple notes are articulated on a single syllable, often serving expressive, decorative, or structural functions within a melodic framework (Sadie and Tyrrell 2001). As illustrated in Figure 4, *Azan* uses melisma in its execution. Figure 6 demonstrates an example of this:

Figure 6 / An example of melisma in *Azan* (marked in blue).

Although melisma is often associated with vocal music, Wong integrated this element into the instrumental composition through the use of consecutive small note values in arch and/or inverted arch shape, played with one or a separate bow. Figures 7 through 9 are examples of the integration of melisma into the composition.

Figure 7 / Melismatic melody in the arch shape, with one bow (Violin 2, marked in blue).

Figure 8 / Melismatic melody in the inverted arch shape, with one bow (Violin 1, marked in blue).

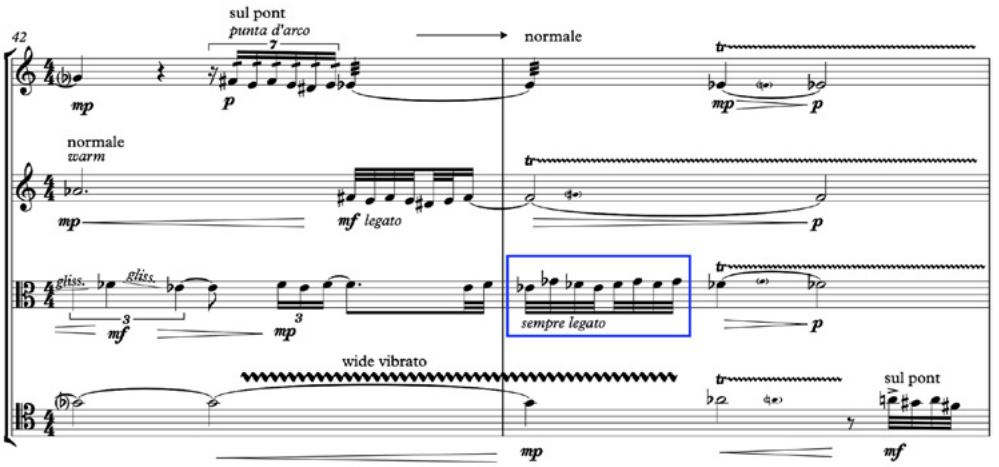


Figure 9 / Melismatic melody played with a separate bow (Viola, marked in blue).

Weiss and Taruskin (2007, 555) used melisma and roulade interchangeably as both terms have similar definitions, though the latter refers to a virtuosic approach to melisma. Roulade occasionally occurs in *Azan*, as illustrated in Figure 4. To replicate the virtuosic vocal passage into instrumental writing, the composer used a rapid *arpeggio* figure in arch shape, as exemplified by Figures 10 and 11.

Figure 10 / Rapid *arpeggio* passage in arch shape (Violin 1, marked in blue).

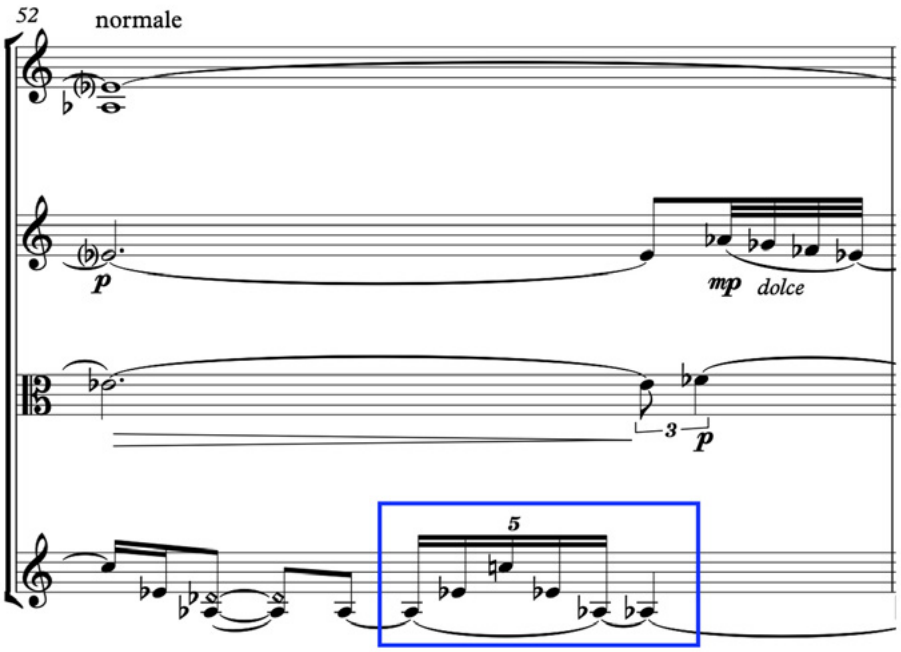


Figure 11 / Rapid *arpeggio* passage in arch shape (Cello, marked in blue).

The melancholic quality of *Azan*

Although *Azan* often uses the mosque loudspeakers, the call is not necessarily deafening. It is often perceived as melancholic, particularly when heard at dusk (*maghrib*) and at dawn (*fajr*). Though *Azan*'s melancholy has not been a subject of academic discussion, this quality is articulated in the lyrics of several notable Malay songs, including "Suara Takbir" sung by P. Ramlee (1959), "Peristiwa Subuh" sung by Raihan (1997), and "Suara Azan" sung by Fitri Haris (2011).

Wong re-imagined this melancholy her composition by exploring different widths of vibrato, which directly affect the frequency of the pitch, and using long tones and soft dynamics. Figure 12 shows an excerpt from *Jalinan* that incorporates these elements.

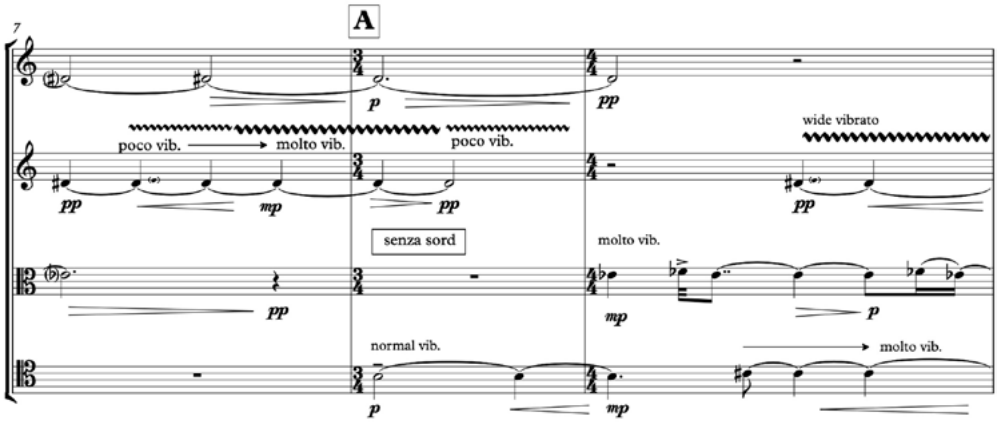


Figure 12 / Re-imagining *Azan's* melancholy (bar 7-9).

The composer also used extended techniques such as *sul ponticello*, *punta d'arco*, *tremolo*, *sul tasto*, *glissando*, and quartertone, alongside the elements mentioned earlier to recreate this melancholy, as shown in Figure 13.

Figure 13 / The use of extended techniques in recreating *Azan's* melancholy (bar 10-12).

Metric freedom

Azan is performed *a capella*, with freedom, and in an improvisatory manner. The melodic phrases are always determined by the text and the duration of each note and also depend on the length of each syllable (*harakat*). Hence, *Azan* is ametric in the Western musical sense. Though Wong wrote *Jalinan* with fixed music meters, she incorporated one main strategy to create the ametric music. She the uses "X" to denote free meter, as shown in Figure 14.

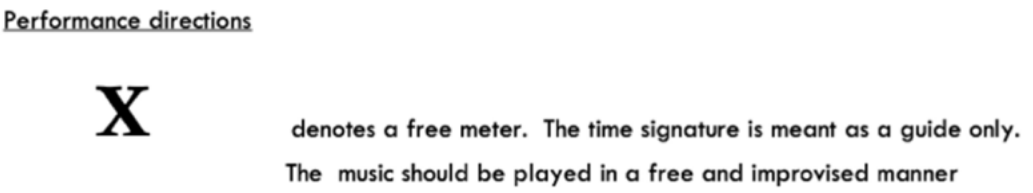


Figure 14 / "X" and Wong's explanation.

The use of this free meter is found in the prayer-like section towards the end of the piece, as illustrated in Figure 15.

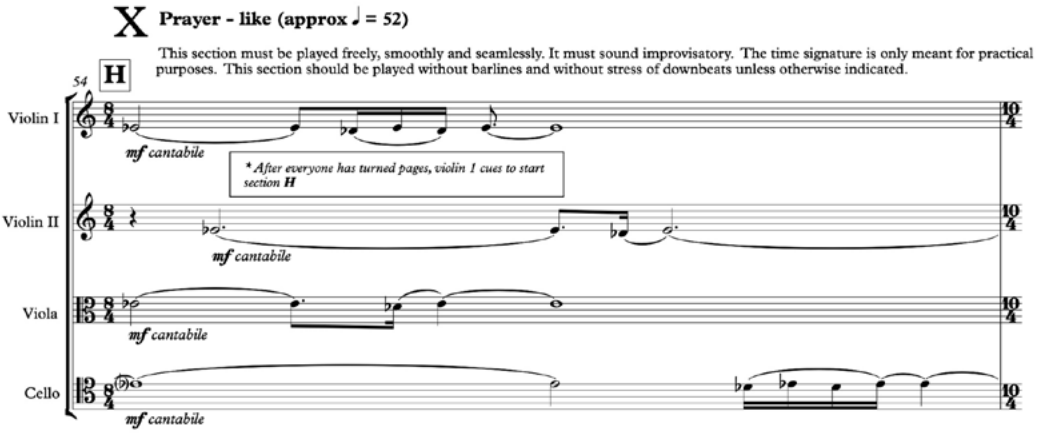


Figure 15 / Excerpt from the prayer-like section.

Results and discussion

Wong used five strategies to appropriate *Azan* in her composition *Jalinan*: the scalic material of the azan in *Nahawand* mode is aligned with that of *Jalinan* in Aeolian mode; the use of similar range between *Azan* and frequently used register in the composition; the use of melisma and roulade in *Azan* and their adaptation into instrumental writing in the composition; the melancholic quality of *Azan* that is re-imagined using extended techniques, exploiting the width of vibrato, and the use of long tones and soft dynamics; finally, the metric freedom of *Azan* that is recreated using "X" towards the end of this piece.

Revisiting the five types of cultural appropriation proposed by Young, we conclude that Wong's appropriation in *Jalinan* aligns with style, motif, and subject appropriation. Style appropriation occurs when an artist adopts stylistic elements from another culture's music. In *Jalinan*, Wong incorporates the melodic and harmonic characteristics of *Azan*, such as the use of the *Nahawand* mode and melismatic phrases, focusing on the stylistic features that define the music's cultural identity. Motif appropriation involves the use of specific musical motifs or themes from another culture without adopting the entire style. Wong reimagines the melodic contours and phrases of *Azan*, integrating them into her composition, highlighting the influence of specific musical elements while maintaining the overall structure of her

work. Subject appropriation occurs when an artist represents aspects of another culture through their work. Wong's *Jalinan* uses *Azan*, a significant cultural and religious element, as a central theme in her composition, respecting its cultural significance while reinterpreting it within a new musical context.

As defined by Young, object appropriation involves the transfer or acquisition of tangible cultural artifacts across cultural contexts, which in music would entail the physical use or ownership of instruments, manuscripts, or recordings (Young 2008). Since *Jalinan* engages only with musical ideas rather than material objects, this form of appropriation is not applicable. Young also describes content appropriation as the reuse of representational content such as melodies, texts, or narratives, typically requiring the direct adaptation of identifiable source material; however, Wong does not reproduce specific *Azan* melodies or recordings but instead draws selectively on musical characteristics associated with *Azan*, such as contour, register, and affective quality. Accordingly, the compositional approach in *Jalinan* aligns more closely with style, motif, and subject appropriation than with object or content appropriation as conceptualised by Young.

Wong appropriated *Azan*, which has a strong significance in the Muslim world. However, this act of appropriation is acceptable as the composer did not claim to be engaged in the authentic practice of this tradition and respected the ownership of *Azan*, in line with what Brunk and Young (2009) proposed. *Jalinan* also followed the outline of ethics of appropriation as presented by Young (2000), Brunk and Young (2009), Matthes (2016; 2019), Siems (2019), and Wissmann (2024).

Wong, as a non-Muslim, occupies a minority position in relation to the religious culture that practices *Azan*. Nevertheless, her appropriation occurs within Western art music, a cultural sphere in which Muslim traditions have historically been marginalized, exoticized, and subject to caricature. This context introduces complex questions of power, particularly concerning how elements of Islamic sound culture are reframed and perceived by predominantly Western audiences. Accordingly, while Wong's compositional approach adheres to established ethical guidelines for appropriation, the positioning of *Azan* within a Western art music framework necessitates critical examination of how historical patterns of representation shape the ethical and perceptual implications of her work. This perspective is central to understanding the broader cultural dynamics at play in *Jalinan*.

Scholars generally agree that when cultural appropriation is considered morally objectionable, it is most often in cases where members of a dominant cultural group appropriate from marginalized groups, reflecting an asymmetrical power relationship in which the majority takes from the minority (Matthes 2016, 347; Arya 2021, 3). As "the wrong of cultural appropriation is rooted in imbalances of power" (Matthes 2019, 1003), the power imbalance and asymmetry are not at play in this situation. Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country with 63.5% of its population being Muslim and the remaining 36.5% are of other faiths such as Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian, and those who do not claim a particular faith (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2023). As a non-Muslim, Wong belongs to the latter group. Hence, the argument of power imbalance is not valid in this situation, making the act of cultural appropriation committed by Wong in this musical piece ethical.[11]

11. It is important to consider the perspectives of Muslim individuals who are insiders to the culture in which *Azan* is practiced. Their recognition of *Azan* in Wong's quartet, their reactions, and their approval or disapproval of its use can

This analysis serves as a foundation for further discussion on the ethics of cultural appropriation in music. The author encourages scholars, artists, and cultural practitioners to contribute their perspectives and insights, fostering a richer and more nuanced understanding of this complex issue. Comparing Wong's *Jalinan* with other examples of cultural appropriation in music, such as the works of George Harrison or Paul Simon, can offer valuable insights into the diverse ways artists engage with cultural elements and the varying ethical implications of their practices.

Conclusion

The ethical considerations regarding Wong's use of *Azan* are crucial to understanding why her appropriation is acceptable. By not claiming authenticity and respecting the cultural significance of *Azan*, Wong follows the ethical guidelines proposed by scholars. This respect for the source culture is essential in mitigating potential harm and fostering a respectful exchange of cultural elements. The composer's approach demonstrates how cultural appropriation, when done thoughtfully and respectfully, can lead to the creation of meaningful and impactful art.

Moreover, *Jalinan* serves as a bridge between cultures, showcasing how elements from different traditions can be harmoniously integrated into a single piece of art. This integration not only enriches the artistic landscape but also promotes a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural expressions. By incorporating *Azan*, the composer highlights the beauty and significance of Islamic traditions, inviting audiences to engage with and appreciate a culture that may be different from their own. While this study finds that Wong's appropriation of *Azan* in *Jalinan* aligns with certain ethical guidelines, it is important to recognize that perspectives on cultural appropriation are diverse and evolving. Further discourse and analysis from various viewpoints are essential to fully understand the implications of such artistic practices.

Ultimately, determining whether *Jalinan* is a product of cultural appropriation or otherwise is less significant than its contribution towards musical art. Its contributions are multifaceted: enriching Malaysian contemporary music repertoire, contributing to the existing literature of string quartet music, and promoting Muslim culture by appropriating *Azan* in the composition. *Jalinan* also encourages listeners to look beyond cultural boundaries and recognize the commonalities that connect us all. By blending elements from different cultures, the composition fosters a sense of unity and shared humanity. Just like many works of art, the act of appropriation makes *Jalinan* unique and exceptional. As spoken by Lionel Shriver (2016) in her (in)famous speech during the Brisbane Writers Festival 2016, "we would not have the great works…if writers had not borrowed from other cultures".

offer valuable insights into the ethicality of Wong's appropriation. Future research should explore these viewpoints to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical implications of cultural appropriation in music.

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