

# **Kulintang Suite**

**for violin and piano with  
assistant (inside piano technique)**

**Jeff Myers**

**(2006)**

## Kulintang Suite

I. Prelude	1
II. Kapagonor	4
III. Sinulog a binalig	14
IV. Tagunggo (healing ritual)	16
V. Sinulog	20
VI. Duyug a binalig	25

The *Kulintang Suite* was written for Yuki Numata, a violinist whom I have worked with on several occasions. After playing my *Six Sketches* for violin and piano, she requested a piece for a recital. After working with Yuki on the *Sketches*, my violin concerto *Metamorphosis* and other chamber pieces, I still did not know the extent to which I could push her virtuosity. It was my goal from the beginning to write a new piece for her which would push her to a new level, or at least touch the ceiling of her abilities. I am afraid to say that this goal is yet to be achieved. Judging by her ability to play some very demanding passages with ease and superb musicianship, either I have not yet reached the ceiling, or I have broken a hole in the roof!

The theme of this suite of pieces is kulintang music. Kulintang music is a genre of folk music which hails from the predominantly Muslim island of Mindanao—the largest southern island of the Philippines. This repertoire of folk music is played and cultivated on gongs; having a rich tradition that extends at least into the 15<sup>th</sup>-Century (during which the northern islands became colonized first by the Spanish, the Americans after 1899, and Japanese during WWII). The ensemble which plays this music consists of a main melodic instrument comprised of set of *kulintang* gongs (eight small graduated button gongs arranged in variable tunings usually alternating in seconds and thirds of some kind), a set of two suspended *agung* (large button gongs), sometimes a set of four suspended *gandingan* (thin-rimmed button gongs), a medium-sized drum called a *dabakan*, and a tiny gong to keep time called a *babandir*. The *kulintang*, is played by a seated performer with soft wooden mallets and although the mallets soften the sound, the sound is very loud (its name means “loud sound”). The *kulintang* player performs fast melodic patterns which repeat and cycle up and down in register. The other musicians play repeated rhythmic patterns to accompany the *kulintang*. Pieces are short and fast. There is set repertoire which is played and improvised over in subtle ways.

There are also various styles or sub-genres which traditional pieces fit into according to mood, function or technique. Here are short descriptions of the genres which I reference in my composition:

*Sinulog* pieces are generally more lyrical and moderate in tempo. The name means “in the style of the Sulu people” (Sulu live in islands near Mindanao and share cultural practices). The tendency to imitate vocal music, or to take preexisting vocal pieces and make them kulintang pieces is common.

*Kapagonor* originates from the Maranao ethnic group (who live up the river) and is used to greet guests.

*Tagunggo* pieces are used for rituals, such as healing rituals which requires a medium to communicate to the spirit world. These pieces are longer and more functional.

*Duyug* means “to accompany” and these pieces are used in ceremonies such as weddings.

The concept of *binalig* “to make different” is rather recent. Progressive (mostly the “downriver” Maguindanao and urban Filipinos) kulintang players which seek to expand kulintang music beyond its traditional repertoire attach the term *binalig* to old pieces which they have made more technically demanding or “different” in some way. Recently, virtuosity and showmanship has become a mainstay of the modern kulintang repertoire. Often, it is hard to tell what the kulintang player is playing because it has been modified so much.

My compositional strategy was not to take this kulintang music and arrange it for violin and piano, but rather to take these pieces as somehow make them “different,” albeit in a much more drastic way. Each movement except for the first, takes a preexisting kulintang piece and uses it as basic material to form a new piece.

The six movements are structured in three pairs. Each pair is comprised of a shorter first movement and a more developmental second movement (which include piano techniques inside the piano). The first movement has original notes, but uses repeating melodic cells which gradually build and repeat. The second movement uses the melodic contours of *Kapagonor*, but changes the intervals through contraction and expansion, always keeping the internal intervallic relationships the same. This altered melody is then pulled apart—every even note is deleted creating a resultant melody. Other times, only the odd notes appear. Eventually both even and odd notes appear in the violin and piano simultaneously, creating an interlocking version of the original melodic contour. In the last bars of the piece the violin overstays its welcome by ignoring the piano’s blatant attempts to cadence. Eventually the piano revolts with a startling virtuoso flourish which the violin finally joins at the end.

The third movement embellishes a *Sinulog* melody which undergoes various alterations in pitch and rhythm, not to mention a new harmonic contextualization. It also provides a relief from the wild movement before it. The fourth movement evokes the real experience of a kulintang performance with repeating ostinati in the bass of the piano with the violin playing repeating melodic cells. The piano is divided into harmonics and muted tones which emulate percussive gong sounds. For added interest, I wrote a lyrical part in the upper voice of the violin (which plays two parts at the same time). *Tagunggo* is a piece played for a healing ritual or any ritual event. As a result the music is played slower and longer to create the atmosphere for the ritual.

The fifth movement, *Sinulog*, is a process oriented piece. The bass of the piano has the *sinulog* melody and it gradually speeds up from long durations into shorter and back to longer by the end. There is a gradual metamorphosis in the violin which starts out playing a modified version of the main melody with a focus on color shifts, then moves toward a lyrical, plaintive kind of melody towards the end. The harmonies in the piano appear sporadic but actually are the result of the systematic deletion of notes. The harmonic and melodic treatment of the piano parts gradually shifts from overtone-based harmonies to sequences of restricted intervals (fifths, tritones and minor sixths) and back to the overtone harmonies. The last movement *Duyug a binalig* is intended to showcase the versatility of the violin. The structure of this movement was created by first composing the melody by mapping the contours of the *Duyug* onto the harmonics of the G string. Next, I began to stuff the melody—in other words, I inserted material in between segments of the melody, creating a kind of refrain form out of the original melody. The piano assistant plays two piano harmonics which emulate the *agung*. I invented a cadential gesture for this movement which I use as a signifier for a change of character in the music. This is exploited in various ways throughout the piece and serves as a foil for the harmonics. My use of these folk melodies is not always derived from individual aspects of the genre, but is integrated into other disparate musical ideas of mine to create something new.

*The duration is approximately 20’*

*The Kulintang Suite was written during 2005-6 at the request of Yuki Numata.*

## Performance notes

1. Accidentals carry through the bar, but are sometimes repeated for ease of performance.
2. For movement four and six, the piano assistant must mute and stop harmonics on the piano strings in conjunction with the pianist, which plays the keyboard *only*. The assistant should carry masking tape to mark the nodes on the strings which must be stopped to produce the requisite harmonics. The most convenient harmonic is the fifth harmonic (three octaves and major third above the struck note or fundamental), since it is situated just beyond the damper on the string; the next most available harmonics (moving away from the damper) are the fourth (2 octaves above), the seventh (three octaves and flat minor seventh) and the third harmonic (a perfect 12<sup>th</sup> above).

Harmonics' resonance and placement inside the piano will vary depending on the make and size of piano. It is essential to practice on the piano which will be used for the performance since each model of piano has a different layout of support beams; in some 6-9 foot grand pianos, there will be a support beam which lies in the way of nodes which need to be touched—avoid these pianos if possible. Smaller grand pianos (7 feet and under) often have fewer obstructive metal beams inside the piano in the low register.

The assistant must also mute strings in the second movement with a felt cloth, as well as jam a felt cloth or felt wedges between the low C and C# and low D and Eb strings (for the fourth movement only—do not forget to take them out before movement VI!). Felt can be taped to the bottom of a ruler to be used as a muting device in the second movement to facilitate the muting of the middle register strings.

# Kulintang Suite

## I. Prelude

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Violin

$\text{♩} = 112$  (non legato)

6

12

17 *poco a poco sul pont.*  $\longrightarrow$  *molto sul pont.*

24 *ord. (subito)*

30 *molto sul pont. (sub.)* *ord. (sub.)*

36 *poco a poco sul pont.*  $\longrightarrow$  *molto sul pont.*

42 *ord.*

47

50

*sfz p sf fp ff pp ppp f pp ff pp*

54 *f* *p* *f* *p* *f* *p* *f* *pp* *ord.* *molto sul pont.*

58 *ff*

64

68 *p* *ff*

73 *ff* *sfz*

Pno. *ff martellato*

78

82

*sf* *p* <sup>3</sup> *f* *sf* *p*

*p*

87

*ff* *p* *ff* *gliss.*

*ff*

91

*ff* *sf* *pp* *ff* *fff* *rit.* *a tempo* *dampen* *dampen*

*ff* *fff*

## II. Kapagonor

♩ = 60

1 \*) all muted (by dampening the string)

Piano

*mp*

Vn.

*pizz.*  
*mf*

Pno.

*mf*  
muted  
unmuted

15

*f*  
*f* muted

21

unmuted  
*ff*  
Ped.

♩ = 140

arco

27

*ff con fuoco*  
*pp*  
*ff*  
Ped.

\*) The assistant mutes the strings with a removable device (felt cloth attached to a ruler, or some similar thing) while the pianist plays the keyboard; Muting is best achieved by stopping the string closest to the front of the string, behind the dampers--there should be no discernible harmonics.



33

39

45

50

♩ = 60

pizz.

56

63

68

arco  
pizz.  
*p* *f* *p* *f* *p*

un-muted  
*f* > *mp* *p*

8<sup>va</sup>-1

stacc. sim. sempre  
*f*

muted (+ only)

73

pizz. arco pizz. arco pizz. arco

*f* *p* *f* *p* *f* *mp*

8<sup>va</sup>-1 8<sup>va</sup>-1

*p* *f* *+* *+* *+* *+* *mp*

79

pizz.  
*mf* *f* *sfz*

un-muted *pp* *ff* 5 *p*

8<sup>va</sup>

Ped.

♩ = 130

84 arco

*poco a poco sul pont.*

*ff*

*ff*

8<sup>vb</sup>

89

*molto sul pont.*

8<sup>vb</sup>

95

*sul tasto*

*pp*

8<sup>vb</sup>

101

*molto sul pont.*

*ord.*

*ord.*

*sul pont. ord.*

*sul pont.*

*ff*

*fmp*

*ff*

8<sup>va</sup>

8<sup>vb</sup>

108

*sul tasto*

*p*

*f*

*p*

*f*

8<sup>vb</sup>

♩ = 130, if possible

115

*mf legato*

*mf* *sul pont.*

*ff*

8<sup>va</sup>

♩ = 130, if possible

120

*mp* *ff* *mf* (open strings)

II.

III.

*pp* *p*

8<sup>va</sup>

♩ = 130, if possible

124

*f* *ff* *f* *ff* *mf* (open strings) *ff*

*sul pont.* *sul tasto* *sul pont.*

*mf* *p* *mp* *f*

8<sup>va</sup> 8<sup>va</sup> 8<sup>va</sup>

130

*mf* (open strings)

II.

*rit.*

*pp*

0 3

*sf* *f* *mf* *p*

8<sup>va</sup> 8<sup>va</sup>

♩ = 130  
135 *ord.*  
*ff*

*f*  
8vb

140 *sul pont. (sub.)* *ord.*

8va-1  
8vb-1

146 *mp* *ff*

*p* *mp* *mf* *ff*

♩ = 80 *espress.* *fff* *ff* *fff* *f* *ff* *f*  
152 *fff* *ff* *fff* *f* *ff* *f*  
♩ = 60 *pizz.*

8va-1