

THE “KING” AND I: LUCRECIA KASILAG’S INFLUENCE IN PIANO LITERATURE

In 1996 I started my graduate studies in Performance and Literature at the University of Rochester’s Eastman School of Music. The school had always been rated number one by the US News and World Report, but it became more prestigious to me when I learned that Philippine National Artist for Music Lucrecia Roces Kasilag graduated from Eastman in 1950.

Ever since I was a child, I have known her as “Tita King.” “Tita” may mean “Aunt” in Filipino, but in the arts and cultural scene there is a certain kind of reverence and respect when a grand dame is called “Tita.” She was dean of the Philippine Women’s University College of Music and Fine Arts when my mom was a student. Even so, my mom called her Tita as well, and Tita King became our musical godmother who always encouraged me and my siblings every time she saw us perform.

As early as when I was in grade five, I was already part of the annual festival of the Piano Teachers Guild of the Philippines held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and Tita King, as honorary chair, would attend. She always made sure to give a comment to either me or my mom. I saw her even more often in high school; she was co-founder of my alma mater, the Philippine High School for the Arts. She was present in art exhibits, book launchings, theater, dance and music recitals. She was more active than any director the school has ever had.

During my first performance at Luneta’s Concert at the Park, I couldn’t imagine a high-ranking official like Dr. Kasilag watching with the vendors and street children. Luneta, or Rizal Park, is not only a public park, it is also known for its open-air auditorium, the only one of its kind in the country. The heat of the sun and cement seats could be a discomfort to anybody, but nothing could prevent Tita King from supporting anything that promoted art, culture, and humanism.

It was only during my college days in Florida that I stopped seeing Tita King because I wasn’t able to visit the Philippines. I must admit that I somehow also lost my Filipino roots because of my quest to conquer the concert pianist scene. I competed, joined festivals, and performed for an American audience. At the end of my four-year course, I became an expert

in American Women Composers and propagated music for One-Piano Four Hands. I thought I had lost my Filipino identity, but little did I know that Dr. Kasilag would be my most influential mentor in promoting my real identity as an Asian-Filipino.

When I started college, I remember how Filipino Americans considered their ethnicity as Pacific Islander rather than Asian or Oriental. Oriental was for the Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. I myself couldn’t relate to these three big countries. I was the only Filipino during my sophomore and junior years. At Eastman, I was the only “native” Filipino during my three-year stay in Upstate New York. Filipinos preferred Manhattan. I chose Eastman because of my mentor.

Eastman was celebrating its 75th year when I entered as a graduate student. For the first time, it was also ranked number one, with Juilliard and Indiana sharing the second spot. The Eastman Graduate School Music Performance Program doesn’t offer a singular Graduate Performance Degree; what it does is a double degree in Master of Music in Performance and Literature. Because it was a big year in 1996, all performers were required to perform an Eastman composer. Obviously, most Eastman composers are North Americans and some Europeans and South Americans. I was the lucky Asian who was connected to an Eastman composer from the Philippines. However, I realized that I didn’t know any of Tita King’s compositions except for “Burlesque,” which only my mom and Rowena Arrieta, the only Filipino laureate of the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Russia, play.

I only played two Filipino compositions in high school. Antonio Molina’s *Malikmata* (Mirage), which I learned by myself and performed for Linggo ng Wika (Language Week), and Lucio San Pedro’s *Salimisim* (Retrospect), which was the contest piece for the First Rosario Picazo Competition, in which I garnered the gold prize. I recall sidestepping compositions from the Philippine piano repertoire because none can be used as audition pieces abroad. Most compositions sounded Spanish with a European Romantic style. On the other hand, international standards required a distinct Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and twentieth-century technique and structure.

I wrote to Tita King and told her that I was a student in her alma mater and that I would like to perform one of her piano compositions since our school is requiring us to perform a work of an Eastman composer.

The following month, I received copies of all of Kasilag’s piano compositions with program notes written by the composer herself. I started reading her works. Derivation I-V could fit because I also experimented on John Cage and Henry Cowell in college. Using the inside of the strings of

the piano and playing it like a harp or using my finger nails creating banshee sounds on the strings made my undergraduate recital interesting. But I had to consider my other criteria, which had to be a nomination for the Performer's Certificate. I needed to make the Eastman Piano Faculty see the dexterity and flexibility of my fingers. Prepared piano doesn't necessarily need technique.

After excluding prepared piano, I focused on learning Kasilag's late twentieth-century compositions. *The Elegy on Mt. Pinatubo* caught my attention because it can compete with Buencamino's *Mayon* composition. Mt. Pinatubo is also historic and, when it erupted, its ashes reached our high school on Mt. Makiling (the news even said some ashes reached outer space). However, the piece was handwritten, and I had to perform in a month's time for my jury auditions.

Reading Kasilag's compositions from 1940 to 1994, I noticed that my Western piano technique was not natural in her treatment of fourth and fifth intervals coupled with extended left hand passages forming a ninth span and pentatonic melodic lines. Debussy imitated the Balinese gamelan and used an open fifth chord but he did not use the fast rhythmic patterns and was akin to the Western technique of thirds. Bartok and Kodaly focused on rhythm but did not use double fourths and double fifths and extended ninth chords for virtuosity.

I realized then that Kasilag was using the Eastern technique of doubling coupled with odd twentieth-century time signatures and rhythm. Kasilag's piano technique and piano repertoire was something new to international piano literature. Her two early works (*Valse Tendresse* and *April Morning*, 1940–41) sounded romantic, but her use of double fourths and fifths in the right hand passages was the start of her experimentation. Graduating from Eastman, her *Passacaglia*, *Rondo in E minor*, and *Variations on Walay Angay* (all composed in 1950) grounded her piano technique and paved the way for the compositional technique to sound oriental and Asian Filipino. Hence, her *Sonate Orientale* in 1961 used as a contest piece for Jeneuse Musicale and Fantasy on a Muslim Theme in 1962 distinguishes her among the top world piano composers.

Another Filipino National Artist, Jose Maceda, who was also a pianist like Kasilag, started this research into Oriental music in the 1960s (ten years after Kasilag's innovations). Maceda went into the extreme and stopped playing and composing for the piano since the instrument itself is a Western invention.

Since I was pressed for time, I had to choose a short composition that had all of the new techniques I discovered. Thus, the *Rondeau in E-flat*, composed in 1981 became my tour de force for my jury examination and Performer's

Certificate Nomination. Surprisingly, I was unanimously chosen for the award amidst the politics among the Eastman piano faculty. My professor claims that no one has gotten unanimous votes since she started teaching more than twenty years before 1997. The *Rondeau in E-flat* also became the basis of my topic for the required lecture-performance for my Master of Music in Performance and Literature degree.

I gained an appreciation for cross-cultural music—Kasilag called it a fusion of East-West music—Kasilag being on the apex of Philippine music and the leading composer of piano music. I coined the term Philippine scale (which has a pentatonic deception because of its leading tone idea) and the imitation of ethnic Philippine instruments plus a twentieth-century technique in piano playing that departed from the Western tradition.

I also emphasized that Philippine music is an important aspect in the development of Western music through the fusion of Spanish music and that the influence is actually the other way around. It is Philippine music that influenced Europe. With Kasilag as the first composer of authentic Philippine piano music, her compositions should be included in piano literature.

It took me a year to visit my homeland and finally reunite with Tita King, but my theories were acknowledged not only by Tita King herself but by the media. A review entitled “Kasilag upstages Beethoven” of a Cebu performance of her Philippine Scenes for Orchestra described how the orchestra members had to sing Igorot chants while playing Western instruments. At the end of the review were my solo piano concerts featuring *Rondeau*.

Tita King was so proud that after my Manila and Cebu performances she wrote to the founder of the Bangkok Chopin Society. I performed in Bangkok and even stayed there for almost a year in 1999 before finally coming home to the Philippines. It was also during this time that our Coo siblings trio was launched at Odette Alcantara’s Heritage House with Tita King as our guest of honor. I’ve had many performances at Heritage House, and one occasion saw Tita King giving her compositions to Cecile Licad after I performed her *Rondeau* which had an Asian-sounding fughetta. I was hoping more Philippine concert pianists would perform her works, but it was only after Tita King’s death in 2008 that piano students really learned her works. My piano students and I were able to perform her complete piano works in 2003, but Tita King was already visually impaired at that time.

After my successful homecoming concert, Tita King wrote to me on February 5, 1998. “I am very much pleased with your hot project to produce a CD featuring an All-Kasilag piano works and of your forthcoming piano recitals presenting my piano pieces. Your project of publishing my pianistic

output in book-folio with accompanying CD or cassette is quite exciting. We have to look into the matter of funding for your project when I get out of confinement due to a mild motor infarction which rendered my left hand fingers and leg weak. Upon doctor's orders I have to rest for a month which prevents me from undertaking my regular activities.”

It was also around this time, during the planning stages of the Kasilag Foundation, that Tita King was told by the board that it was not possible to support our projects. Odette (Alcantara) would later tell me that Tita King, in front of Irene Marcos Araneta, stormed out and said, “I want Jonathan Coo in the Philippines.” According to people, this was the first time that Tita King got mad and that the board fell silent.

I was actually busy, having won the Chautauqua Piano Duet Competition with Australian pianist Kristian Bezuidenhout. I also had my Beethoven Sonatas project “In Search of the Middle Period,” and I was performing and recording it live for National Public Radio. But Kasilag indeed upstaged Beethoven, and I came home for the second time. It wasn't the grand concert halls that we planned. I was lecturing in schools and museums (St. Paul University Manila, UP, UST, Museo Pambata, Adventist University of the Philippines, almost all 11 major music schools in Luzon). Tita King reimbursed my plane ticket during a performance and awarding ceremony at PWU and introduced me to the sponsor who agreed to support our projects during the board meeting.

Perhaps after a pioneering career dedicated to the promotion of indigenous Philippine music on Western instruments, she found someone who believed in her as a composer. I recall the former First Lady Imelda Marcos publicly saying that she never liked any of Kasilag's compositions. In fact, it was during the time of President Corazon Aquino that Kasilag was declared a National Artist. The Philippines has produced many pianists, yet we don't hear Filipino compositions in the concert stages abroad.

In 2010, I was able to include *Rondeau* during my Scandinavian concert tour. Filipinos still had the same reaction. It sounded Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Yes, the concerts had Spanish-influenced kundiman and American-influenced Filipino OPM, and jazz-sounding compositions, but, to the European ear, “Filipino classical artists wow audience in Oslo Concert” meant that the virtuoso Oriental sound of *Rondeau's* gamelan extravaganza almost sounded like the kulintang ensemble of Mindanao on one piano. It was not just unique but could equal any European classical composer's composition.

From Post-Romanticism to Asian Philippine Nationalism, the piano as an instrument of the nineteenth century and European music developed a

new style through Dr. Lucrecia Roces Kasilag. Kasilag is the only relevant Philippine piano composer, internationally recognized and the only link to the transition of Spanish and Western-influenced Philippine music to the original voice of Philippine piano music. The development of Philippine piano music as a unique genre and style only occurred after the country’s independence, a transformation that owes much to Kasilag.

I didn’t expect my relationship with the “King” of Philippine piano music to extend to my own career as a concert pianist, pedagogue, and music educator. Philippine piano music should not only be limited to the Pacific or Maria Clara’s renditions in Rizal’s *Noli me tangere* but rather performed on the world’s concert stages and heard on classical record labels. A woman’s voice is as mighty as a “King.”

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Last concert in Manila with my siblings and my mom (1997)



Mrs. Gatmaitan, my mom's piano teacher, with my mom and Mrs. Arambulo, my piano teacher, at the back. Front row with Tita King and my brother.



With Tita King after I played her composition (1997)