

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH'S
SELECTED SACRED CANTATA BWV 004 AND PREMASIRI
KEMADASA'S MUSICAL COMPOSITION
PIRINIVANMANGALLAYA**

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Introduction

The Cantata, which is a genre of western music, has a unique structure. In the Baroque period, it was highly developed with orchestral accompaniment on religious or secular themes. At present, Sri Lankan musicians are especially interested in the possibilities of adopting western musical styles to local music. Among such styles, the name "cantata", has received the attention of local musicians. Premasiri Kemadasa had mentioned that his music composition named Piriniwanmangallaya is the 'first Buddhist Cantata' in the world. For this comparative study, Johann Sebastian Bach's Easter Cantata, BWV 004 was selected as it is similar in theme to Premasiri Kemadasa's Piriniwanmangallaya. This research aims to identify the cantata structure and its elements and to clarify whether Piriniwanmangallaya can be regarded as a cantata.

Methodology

As research methodology, both primary and secondary sources were used in order to obtain data as well. Audio tapes and Compact discs of selected Cantata BWV 004 and Piriniwanmangallaya were used as primary sources. In addition, examination of music scores, interviews with relevant personnel and related discussions with eminent musicians were also carried out. The secondary sources include books, magazines, articles published in academic journals and the internet.

Results & Discussion

Premasiri Kemadasa has attempted to mix appropriate elements in western, eastern as well as folk music traditions in composing Piriniwanmangallaya. Though Kemadasa has called it a cantata, a close observation reveals certain differences from the original cantata structure. In the original cantata structure, there are elements such as sinfonia, chorus, arias, recitatives, solo and duets and each of these have

unique tasks. But Kemadasa uses only chorus parts, solo singing and short instrumental introduction similar to sinfonia.

In any musical composition, the most important role is played by the musical score. However Kemadasa has not used a permanent musical score for his composition. Singing Sri Lankan folk melodies according to western style has also created a strange impression and possibly caused a certain amount of harm to the theme of the play. Furthermore, Sri Lankan folk melodies have a limited notation system and it is rather difficult to fully develop them into a western cantata style.

Audiences of other cultures find it difficult to understand the philosophy of death in Buddhism by listening to this composition. According to the teachings of the Buddha, Parinibbana (or the passing away of a Buddha) is considered a sacred event. Kemadasa mentioned that he tried to introduce his first buddhist cantata to the outer world so that western music audiences may “feel” the Sri Lankan folk melodies. However, western music audiences already familiar with the cantata structure are not able to clearly identify Piriniwanmangallaya as being a cantata; only the melody is felt.

Conclusion

Although it can be said that Kemadasa has combined certain elements of western music with Sri Lankan folk music tradition with the purpose of offering the same sense to the audience, his selection of the poem titled “Piriniwanmangallaya” raises some contradictions. The main reason is that according to Sri Lankan Buddhists, this poem tends to evoke emotions of sadness and misery rather than pleasantness or calmness. Some Sri Lankan western musicians, familiar with both western and eastern music traditions, consider it more similar to the Oratorio rather than a Cantata.

It can be argued that the composition could have become successful if Kemadasa wished to come up with a newly written poem that best matches with the theme as well as his intentions. Even though folk music is appropriate for the theme of Piriniwanmangallaya, the use of certain elements such as singing styles, harmonic variations, voice ranges cannot be considered suitable for this context. He does not seem to capture the

Buddhist belief that the death of the Buddha is a sensitive and devotional moment. This musical composition may not express the original feeling of misery of Lord Buddha's Parinibbana to Sri Lankan culture. Kemadasa did not clearly follow the full cantata genre.

References

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