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Theme

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# PROCEEDINGS

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## Dichter-Gila: Localising Schumann and Heine through Theatrical Storytelling

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### ABSTRACT

This practice-based research explores the convergence of classical music, poetry, and theatre through *Dichter-Gila*, a reinterpretation of Robert Schumann's song cycle *Dichterliebe* (A Poet's Love), settings of poems of the German poet Heinrich Heine. Composed in 1840, *Dichterliebe* captures the Romantic ideals of love, irony, and disillusionment through Heine's poetry in a psychological journey of a poet betrayed by love. *Dichter-Gila* transforms this narrative into a contemporary Malaysian context, reimagining the protagonist as a young artist whose emotional heartbreak unfolds amidst modern social struggles, including financial deception and emotional manipulation.

This project addresses the broader question of how canonical Western classical vocal music can be reinterpreted through local perspectives to sustain cultural relevance and accessibility. Employing a practice-based methodology that integrates musical analysis, dramaturgy, and performative experimentation, the work transforms the song cycle into a one-man theatrical performance. Spoken monologues, recontextualised translations of Heine's texts, and additional music by the composer are interwoven to create a new narrative that speaks to Malaysian sensibilities while retaining the psychological and musical integrity of the original work.

Findings from rehearsals and exploration sessions suggest that audiences engage deeply with this hybrid form when it reflects both familiar emotional realities and local linguistic textures. The process demonstrates how performative storytelling can bridge classical repertoire and contemporary cultural identity, positioning itself as an act of dialogue and emotional expression.

Ultimately, *Dichter-Gila* contributes to ongoing discussions in the practice of storytelling, culture, and identity. By imposing Heine's nineteenth-century poetry and Schumann's music within a Malaysian narrative context, this project highlights how reinterpretation can bring cultural relevance to a seemingly distant art form of Western classical music.

**Keywords:** *storytelling, song cycle, Dichterliebe, reinterpretation*

## INTRODUCTION

Across the world, Western classical music continues to grapple with the challenges of sustaining relevance in the modern cultural landscapes. Malaysia is no exception to this. While canonical works remain central to professional music training, tertiary educations and concert programming, many audiences, especially younger or non-specialist listeners, often find Western classical music distant, opaque, or culturally disconnected. This resonates closely with the idea that "while classical music is for everyone, we cannot therefore deduce that everyone is for classical music." (Balio, 2025) To counter these challenges, innovative performance practices such as theatricalised recitals, cross-genre collaborations, immersive staging, and narrative-driven reimagining of art song cycles have been happening. For example, "3D projection, artificial intelligence (AI) robots, and virtual reality (VR) are being incorporated into Cantonese opera performances" (Ma & Pang, 2025) These approaches seek not only to revitalise classical music but also to create access points for modern audiences unfamiliar with the historical, linguistic, or aesthetic contexts in which these works were originally conceived.

In Malaysia, similar challenges are faced in classical music practitioners, especially regarding Classical vocal works which are written in a foreign language of Italian, German or French. These challenges are further amplified by limited exposure to art song traditions and the perception that classical vocal works represent an imported and elite cultural form. While the field of music education continues to develop, classical art songs remain primarily confined to academic settings, often presented in the traditional song recital format. This creates a gap between performers, who engage deeply with this repertoire, and local audiences, who may struggle to connect with this convention of music performance.

Robert Schumann's song cycle *Dichterliebe*, based on the poetry of the German poet Heinrich Heine, immediately represents this tension between artistic richness and cultural distance. The cycle's psychological complexity, musical richness, and highly charged emotional sentiments offer immense expressive potential. However, it might not be a directly relevant medium to be performed for the Malaysian audiences. This leads to the need to address what can be adjusted and adapted for this work to stay relevant in the local context. Famous Hong Kong-Malaysian pianist Kajeng Wong mentioned that "it is important to realise and define what stays in classical music and what can be adapted." (Chin, 2024) The *Dichter-Gila* project addresses this very gap by transforming *Dichterliebe* through theatrical storytelling, reframing Heine's poetic world within a contemporary Malaysian narrative. By integrating spoken texts, staged acting, and performative reinterpretation, this project maintains the musical richness and integrity of the song cycle while adapting it to resonate meaningfully with Malaysian cultural realities.

## ARTISTIC CONCEPT

Existing scholarship on the performance of classical art song increasingly highlights the need to bridge the gap between historical repertoire and contemporary audiences. Researchers such as Carolyn Abbate (1996) emphasise the narrative and affective potential of *Lieder* as a form of musical storytelling, arguing that modern reinterpretations can revitalise listener engagement. "Music is narrative...because it mimes a drama" (Abbate, 1996). This sparks the inspiration of localisation through language adaptation and theatrical framing to foster stronger audience identification with Western classical works in non-Western settings.

This project adopts a practice-based research methodology, combining musical analysis, dramaturgical development, rehearsal experimentation, and audience feedback. The songs in *Dichterliebe* are examined both musically and narratively, followed by creating a script comprising spoken monologue,

reimagined translations of Heine's poetry, and additional Schumann repertoire familiar to Malaysian audiences. This will be examined through a series of rehearsals utilising different strategies of message delivery, including but not limited to gesture, tone, pacing, and staging, to identify approaches that can achieve the greatest communication and engagement. A workshop performance will then be conducted with a small audience to evaluate reception, clarity, and effectiveness of this format of storytelling.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Rehearsal explorations reveal several effective strategies for conveying the emotional arc of *Dichterliebe* to Malaysian audiences. Localised spoken monologues significantly improved comprehension of Heine's psychological narrative. For example, the use of the following monologue enhanced the sentiment of the first poem of Heine, '*im wunderschönen monat Mai*' ("In the wonderful month of May").

"I was performing at this art fiesta. No one listened to me, but she did.  
She came up to me, saying she loved my music.  
I tell you, at that time, I really believed there's such a thing as 'love at first sight'.  
I thought, maybe, finally the universe is saying yes to me!"

Monologues like this, coupled with carefully chosen performance gestures such as colloquial physical expressions and posture shifts provided points of relatability to the expression of the songs. Additionally, by incorporating other Schumann works well known among Malaysians, such as *Träumerei*, it created familiarity that anchored the audience's listening experience. Brief feedback from the workshop performance also indicated strong positive engagement with the theatrical storytelling format. Audience members reported that the monologues helped in understanding the meaning of each song, making the progression of all the emotional stakes easier to follow. Several participants also noted the use of colloquial terms like "wah" and "can lah" enhanced the engagement. Overall, the combination of classical vocal performance with localised narrative elements kept the story relevant, accessible, and emotionally compelling. Most importantly, this format does not become a dilution of the original work, but as a meaningful reinterpretation that respected the original music while creating a culturally grounded performance experience.

## CONCLUSION

This project demonstrates that Schumann's *Dichterliebe* and Heine's poetry can be meaningfully reinterpreted within a Malaysian context through the lens of theatrical storytelling. By integrating spoken monologues, creative gestures and performative experimentation, the practice-based project of *Dichter-Gila* bridges the gap that separates classical vocal works from modern audiences. The workshop findings highlight the potential of theatrical storytelling to deepen understanding, emotional resonance, and cultural relevance without compromising musical integrity. This approach offers a model for revitalising other canonical works through contextual reframing, translation, and narrative adaptation. Future applications may include expanding the dramaturgical process to include non-programmatic music like a symphony or creating multilingual versions of art songs. Ultimately, *Dichter-Gila* highlights the value of practice-based research in fostering culturally relevant performance practices that keep classical music alive and accessible, in Malaysia and beyond.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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