

Ecology of Rasa: A Relational and Embodied Framework in Malay Performing Arts

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes the *Ecology of Rasa*, a relational and embodied framework for understanding emotion, knowledge, and artistic expression in Malay performing arts. Moving beyond the reduction of *Mak Yong* and *Rebab* to mere melodic structures, the study positions these practices as dynamic vessels of intergenerational insight, transmitted through social, bodily, and affective networks. Through a comparative analysis of a Western-trained violinist and a lineage-based *Rebab* performer, the research demonstrates that conventional notation captures structural form but fails to account for the relational, kinesthetic, and improvisatory dimensions of *Rasa*. In contrast, *Rasa* emerges as a circulatory, collective phenomenon grounded in bodily experience, memory, and cultural continuity, moving fluidly among mentors, performers, instruments, and audiences. By articulating this framework, the study integrates perspectives from ethnomusicology, performance studies, and embodiment theory, establishing a conceptual and methodological basis for exploring traditional Malay arts in both scholarly and experimental contexts. *Ecology of Rasa* thus offers a robust theoretical lens to interrogate embodied cognition, relational aesthetics, and heritage pedagogy, while highlighting the epistemic authority of lived, performative knowledge.

Keywords: Mak Yong, *Rebab*, Violin, *Rasa*, Embodied Knowledge, Performance-as-Research, Traditional Malay Music, *Ecology of Rasa*, Kinesthetic Expressivity

1. INTRODUCTION

Rasa occupies a central yet theoretically under-articulated position in Malay performing arts. Commonly translated as emotion or inner

sensation, such equivalence inadequately captures its epistemic and relational dimensions. Within Malay performance practice, *rasa* does not function merely as affective expression; rather, it operates as an embodied mode of knowing that structures interaction among performer, instrument, audience, and environment. It is enacted through micro-gestural modulation, breath regulation, temporal elasticity, and cultivated attentiveness. Simultaneously, it is sustained intergenerationally through mentorship, kinship networks, and communal custodianship. *Rasa*, therefore, constitutes a relational field rather than an interior psychological state.

Despite substantial ethnomusicological documentation of Malay traditions—including studies on Mak Yong and the Rebab (Matusky, 1989; Darmawan, 2021)—scholarship has largely prioritised musical structure, repertoire, and performance technique. The relational and embodied processes through which aesthetic insight emerges *in situ* remain insufficiently theorised. Existing analyses tend to describe performance components without conceptualising the epistemological system that animates them. This gap signals the need for a locally grounded theoretical articulation capable of translating practice-based knowledge into analytical form without reducing its ontological complexity.

This article proposes *Ecology of Rasa* as a locally grounded theoretical framework originating from Malay performance epistemology. The framework conceptualises *rasa* as an ecological system constituted through dynamic interrelations among bodies, sonic materials, spatial atmospheres, pedagogical lineages, and communal memory. Rather than treating affect as individual sentiment or performance as textual reproduction, *Ecology of Rasa* positions aesthetic experience as emergent from relational co-presence. In doing so, it advances a conceptual model rooted in indigenous knowledge systems while contributing to broader debates in performance studies, embodied cognition, and affect theory.

By reframing *rasa* as an evolving relational ecology, this study shifts analytical emphasis from isolated technique to systemic interdependence. The Malay performance tradition is thus understood not as a repository of fixed forms, but as a living epistemic network sustained through embodied transmission. *Ecology of Rasa* offers both a theoretical intervention and a methodological orientation: it formalises practice-based knowledge without abstracting it from its cultural ground.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Rasa in Aesthetic Theory

The concept of *rasa* originates in classical Indian aesthetic theory, most systematically articulated in the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, where it denotes the distilled aesthetic experience evoked in the spectator through the orchestration of performative elements (Hanes, 2019). Within this framework, *bhāva* refers to the enacted emotional states embodied by performers, while *rasa* signifies the aesthetic realisation actualised in reception. *Rasa* thus emerges not as raw emotion but as cultivated aesthetic cognition structured by dramaturgical design.

Subsequent scholarship on Southeast Asian performance traditions has expanded this formulation by emphasising relational co-presence. *Rasa* is not passively transmitted from performer to audience; it materialises through reciprocal attunement within a shared performative field. Meaning is generated through interactional dynamics rather than unilateral expression, foregrounding the intersubjective dimension of aesthetic experience.

In the Malaysian context, *rasa* acquires further specificity as an embodied-performative discipline. Aesthetic authority is indexed not only by emotional expressivity but by calibrated timing, micro-gestural precision, ornamental modulation, and nuanced instrumental

handling. *Rasa* is therefore operationalised through corporeal technique and relational sensitivity. This configuration aligns with contemporary performance theory that recognises embodiment, affective exchange, and participatory presence as constitutive of aesthetic production (Schechner, 2003; Sautman, 2017).

However, while existing scholarship acknowledges *rasa* as aesthetic affect and relational emergence, it has not systematically theorised its ecological organisation within Malay performance systems. The present study extends the discourse by situating *rasa* within an embodied-relational ontology, thereby laying the conceptual groundwork for the proposed *Ecology of Rasa* framework.

2.2 Transmission in Malay Performing Arts

Transmission within Mak Yong and its associated Rebab tradition operates through embodied apprenticeship rather than textual codification. The guru–murid system structures learning as sustained relational immersion, where musical competence, rhythmic elasticity, and expressive nuance are cultivated through observation, guided imitation, dialogic exchange, and participation in live performance contexts (Darmawan, 2021). Knowledge is therefore enacted before it is verbalised.

While notation may preserve melodic contour or rhythmic framework, it cannot capture reciprocal timing, improvisatory recalibration, micro-gestural inflection, or the subtle modulation of affective atmosphere that defines aesthetic authority in performance. These dimensions are not ancillary to technique; they constitute its epistemic core. Transmission in this context is not the transfer of information but the cultivation of perceptual attunement within a relational field.

This mode of learning foregrounds embodiment as the primary site of knowledge production. Performative decisions—timing shifts, ornamental density, tonal shading, spatial orientation—are generated through situational responsiveness rather than pre-scripted execution. Technique and understanding are therefore inseparable: technical refinement indexes the depth of relational alignment achieved within the pedagogical and performative ecology.

Such a transmission model substantiates the theoretical claim advanced in this study. If *rasa* operates ecologically, its continuity depends on embodied relational calibration across generations. The *guru–murid* system thus functions not merely as a pedagogical structure but as an ecological mechanism through which *rasa* is sustained, recalibrated, and renewed. Transmission, in this framework, is the operational infrastructure of the *Ecology of Rasa*.

2.3 Gaps in Scholarship

Despite substantial scholarship on Malay music and Mak Yong theatre, the theoretical articulation of *Ecology of Rasa* as an integrated, structured framework remains underdeveloped. Prior studies, including ecological analogies offered by Kant (2020) and Lim (2022), illuminate aspects of affective and relational dynamics in performance but do not systematically theorise how these processes operate as an interdependent, embodied, and generationally transmitted system.

This gap reflects a broader conceptual lacuna: while relationality, embodiment, and affect are acknowledged, their operational integration into a coherent theoretical model grounded in Malay performance epistemology has not been fully realised. Existing scholarship tends to describe phenomena phenomenologically or analogically rather than formalising them as analytic constructs capable of theoretical generalisation.

The present study addresses this gap by positioning *Ecology of Rasa* as a locally grounded, conceptually rigorous framework. It conceptualises *rasa* as an ecological assemblage in which aesthetic knowledge emerges through dynamic interaction among performers, instruments, audience, spatial context, and pedagogical lineage. In doing so, the framework not only consolidates existing insights into relational and embodied processes but also advances a systematic theoretical lens capable of capturing the affective, intersubjective, and ecological dimensions of Malay performing arts.

By framing *Ecology of Rasa* as both evolving and theoretically anchored, this study establishes a platform for subsequent scholarship to analyse performance epistemologies as complex, interdependent systems, while offering an empirically grounded model for comparative studies in global performance research.

3. DEFINING ECOLOGY OF RASA

Ecology of Rasa is conceptualised as a dynamic, intergenerational system of aesthetic cognition, enacted and sustained through embodied relational practice. It operates as an ecological assemblage, where affective, corporeal, and social dimensions coalesce to produce emergent performance knowledge. Its defining characteristics can be delineated as follows:

1. **Relational Transmission:** *Rasa* is transmitted from master to student and simultaneously circulates among performers, forming adaptive bonds in which affective attunement aligns with technical proficiency. Emotional resonance is inseparable from embodied capability, creating a continuous feedback loop that sustains collective aesthetic coherence.
2. **Embodied Modulation:** *Rasa* manifests through movement, breath, micro-gestural inflection, and temporal nuance. Timing—

including subtle pauses, ornamentation, and improvisatory turns—modulates affective intensity and shapes interpretive outcomes. Each performative gesture functions simultaneously as expressive act and epistemic signal, revealing that technical execution is intrinsically relational and context-sensitive.

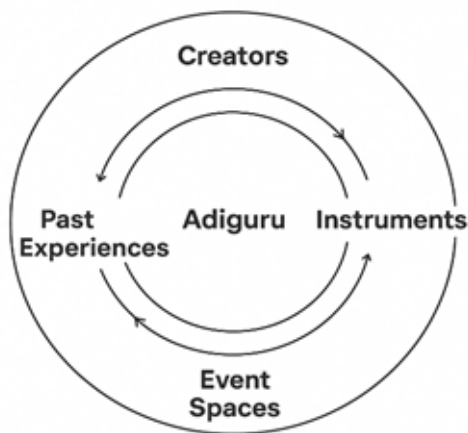
3. **Circular Interactivity:** Transmission is not unidirectional; information, affect, and performative insight circulate through the ensemble and audience. Feedback from listeners and fellow performers continuously recalibrates the aesthetic field, sustaining a dynamic system of co-created meaning.
4. **Intergenerational Memory:** Knowledge persists through instruments, techniques, and spatial practice, embedding historical and communal memory within contemporary performance. Performative choices, including site selection and material use, encode inherited insights, ensuring continuity of embodied epistemology across generations.
5. **Beyond Notation:** Conventional scores capture structural patterns but cannot represent the kinaesthetic, affective, and relational dimensions essential to *rasa*. Ecological transmission prioritises lived experience, bodily memory, and affective resonance as constitutive elements of aesthetic authority, demonstrating that performative knowledge cannot be reduced to symbolic representation.

In sum, *Ecology of Rasa* conceptualises Malay performing arts as a self-sustaining, embodied-relational ecosystem. It integrates emotional, technical, and communal processes into a coherent framework, articulating a locally grounded theoretical model that formalises practice-based knowledge for broader scholarly engagement.

A circular diagram explains *Rasa*'s function - *Adiguru* connects creators, instruments, event spaces, or past experiences. Links move

back and forth among them, reflecting emotional flow alongside knowledge transfer. One-part changes another gradually via interaction. Flow doesn't run straight; it circles, expanding when active.

Figure 1. A loop diagram showing how Rasa works in Adiguru-guided activity.



At the core stands the Adiguru, linking makers, tools, venues, and earlier encounters. Connections move both ways via lines, indicating shared feelings and mutual learning. One part slowly alters another through continuous contact, leading to an evolving, widening process instead of a straight path

4. CASE STUDY: VIOLIN VS REBAB PERFORMANCE

4.1 Research Design

This case study employs a qualitative, practice-based research design to examine embodied and relational dynamics in Malay performing arts, focusing on comparative performances of the Mak Yong melody *Mengulik* using the Violin and Rebab. The study foregrounds how aesthetic knowledge emerges ecologically through interaction, observation, and relational immersion rather than exclusively via textual notation. By contrasting Western notation-based pedagogy with lineage-based embodied learning, the design illuminates the operationalisation

of *rasa* as a system of intergenerational, embodied knowledge.

Multiple qualitative methods were integrated to capture the ecological and embodied aspects of performance:

1. **Participant Observation:** Live performances were systematically observed to document micro-gestural modulation, breath control, ornamentation, timing, and relational responsiveness between performer and audience.
2. **Embodied Engagement:** Researchers engaged in performance practice alongside Rebab and violinists to directly access embodied dimensions of skill, improvisation, and affective attunement.
3. **Reflective Journaling:** Detailed post-session journals recorded experiential insights, focusing on corporeal sensation, emotional resonance, and relational dynamics observed during practice and performance.



Figure 2. Conceptual framework for the *Ecology of Rasa*, illustrating the “Interconnected Elements of the Embodied Aesthetic System.” At the core of the system is *Rasa*, defined as an **Embodied Aesthetic Experientence**.

4. **Interviews and Dialogic Exchange:** Structured and semi-structured discussions with performers, mentors, and students contextualised observations within pedagogical lineages and communal knowledge transmission.



Figure 3. Rebab player seated and holding the instrument vertically, reflecting standard Mak Yong playing technique.

4.3 Analytical Approach

Data were analysed using phenomenological methods, identifying structures of experience, relational patterns, and embodied interactions that constitute aesthetic knowledge. Comparative analysis emphasised how relational depth, temporal flexibility, ornamentation, and communal transmission manifest differently in notation-based versus lineage-based practice. This approach aligns empirical observation with

the theoretical claims of *Ecology of Rasa*, highlighting how embodied, relational, and affective dimensions operate within Malay performance systems.

4.4 Strategic Justification for Instrument Selection

- The violin serves as a contrastive case representing Western notation-based pedagogy, demonstrating precision, technical accuracy, and formal performance standards.
- The Rebab exemplifies lineage-based, relational pedagogy, enabling direct observation of spontaneous modulation, communal transmission, and intergenerational resonance.

- Comparative analysis provides evidence for how ecological dynamics of *rasa*—interconnectedness, embodiment, and affective circulation—emerge distinctively in practice.

4.5 Comparative Analysis: Violin vs Rebab

Aspect	Violin (notation-based)	Rebab (embodied lineage)
Source of knowledge	Western notation	Oral transmission / lineage
Learning method	Reading, repetitive practice	Observation, imitation, immersion
Temporal expression	Fixed, metronomic	Flexible, responsive, context-sensitive
Ornamentation	Limited by score	Organic, dynamic, improvisatory
Relational depth	Low	High, intergenerational
Transmission	Individualized	Communal, circular, iterative

Observations indicate that while the violin reproduces notes accurately, it lacks the relational and affective depth observable in Rebab performance. The Rebab performer’s gestures, timing adjustments, and micro-variations reflect both intersubjective alignment and embodied transmission of *rasa*. Notation alone fails to capture these subtleties; instead, meaning emerges through relational interaction, situational responsiveness, and embodied memory.

4.6 Implications for Ecology of *Rasa*

This case study demonstrates that *rasa* functions as a dynamic ecological system, dependent on relational networks, embodied skill,

and intergenerational transmission. Technical execution is inseparable from affective and relational attunement. By foregrounding the Rebab as an exemplar of lineage-based pedagogy, the study provides empirical grounding for the *Ecology of Rasa* framework, showing that aesthetic knowledge in Malay performing arts is emergent, circular, and situated within both corporeal and communal contexts.

5. VIOLIN AND REBAB INTERACTION IN MAK YONG PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

In Mak Yong performance, the Rebab functions as the primary melodic guide, aligning dynamically with the singer's vocal range—referred to as Pak Yong. This alignment necessitates continuous pitch modulation, rendering the Rebab inherently flexible and context-dependent. Unlike the Rebab, the Violin is conventionally constrained to fixed pitches. Consequently, ensemble coordination requires the violinist to engage in real-time adaptation, recalibrating intonation, phrasing, and articulation to maintain consonance with the Rebab's fluid melodic contour.

This interaction exemplifies relational and embodied musical cognition: tonal and temporal alignment emerges through continuous perceptual attunement rather than pre-determined notation. Violinists negotiate phrasing or articulation strategies contingent on the evolving musical and affective environment, highlighting how technical execution is inseparable from relational responsiveness. The process illustrates that performance meaning is co-constructed, with expressive nuance arising from the interplay between instrument, singer, and contextual cues.

Such dynamics substantiate the theoretical claim of *Ecology of Rasa*: aesthetic knowledge in Malay performing arts is emergent, circular, and relationally transmitted. Pitch, timing, and phrasing are not merely technical parameters but carriers of embodied understanding, affective

resonance, and intersubjective alignment. The Rebab–Violin interaction thus provides empirical evidence for the framework, demonstrating how *rasa* circulates, adapts, and sustains itself within intergenerational and performative networks.

5.1 Retaining Standard Violin Tuning

When maintaining standard violin tuning, the performer continuously adapts to the pitch set by the Rebab, which itself is aligned with the singer's vocal range. This practice demands acute aural perception and advanced technical mastery, as the violinist negotiates rapid string transitions, microtonal inflections, and ornamentation inherent in the Rebab's melodic contour. Execution is not solely mechanical; it entails embodied attunement to subtle tonal shifts and temporal dynamics, reflecting relational and situational responsiveness. By aligning precisely with the Rebab, the violinist participates in a co-creative aesthetic ecology, demonstrating that technical facility and affective sensitivity are mutually constitutive within Malay performance epistemology.

5.2 Adopting Rebab-Based Tuning

Alternatively, violinists may retune the instrument—typically reducing to three strings—to match the Rebab's pitch system. This adjustment enables the violin to approximate the timbral qualities, microtonal inflections, and expressive phrasing characteristic of the Rebab. Mastery requires internalising Rebab-specific bowing techniques, ornamental gestures, and phrase shaping. In this configuration, the violin transcends its conventional role as accompaniment, becoming a relational, performative counterpart that sustains melodic integrity and affective depth. Such adaptive tuning exemplifies embodied relational knowledge, in which technical modifications are inseparable from aesthetic attunement, reinforcing the circular and interdependent transmission of *rasa*.

5.3 Theoretical Implications for the Ecology of Rasa

The interaction between the Rebab and the Violin in Mak Yong performance practice provides substantive empirical grounding for the *Ecology of Rasa* framework. Whether the violin retains standard tuning or adopts a Rebab-based configuration, both approaches demonstrate that aesthetic coherence is achieved through relational attunement rather than structural uniformity. Pitch alignment, phrasing flexibility, and ornamental responsiveness are not secondary embellishments but constitutive mechanisms through which *rasa* circulates and stabilises within the ensemble.

The necessity for continuous adaptation—aural, technical, and affective—confirms that musical knowledge in this tradition is enacted rather than merely reproduced. Tuning systems, bowing gestures, and melodic contours function as embodied epistemic structures: they encode intergenerational memory, situational awareness, and communal sensibility. The violinist's role, therefore, is not that of an external adjunct to a pre-existing tradition, but of an active participant within a living aesthetic ecosystem.

Crucially, the Rebab–Violin encounter demonstrates that notation alone cannot regulate expressive authenticity. Standardised pitch frameworks remain subordinate to relational calibration. Meaning emerges through iterative adjustment, mutual listening, and contextual responsiveness. This process substantiates the central theoretical claim that *rasa* functions ecologically—circulating across bodies, instruments, and social relations in a dynamic, reciprocal flow.

Accordingly, Mak Yong performance practice affirms that aesthetic knowledge is neither fixed nor individually contained. It is distributed, adaptive, and sustained through embodied transmission. The Rebab–Violin interaction thus stands as a concrete articulation of

the *Ecology of Rasa*: an interdependent system in which sound, gesture, memory, and communal presence co-constitute artistic meaning.

Figure 4. Musical notation transcription of *Mengulik*, divided into sets of notes.



6. RELATIONAL AND EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE IN VIOLIN–REBAB MAK YONG EXPERIMENTATION

6.1 Emergence of *Rasa* as Relational Process

This study examines how *rasa* emerges through the interaction between a traditionally trained Rebab performer and a Western-trained Violin player within Mak Yong performance practice. The investigation is not framed as a technical comparison of instruments, but as an inquiry into epistemological encounter—where embodied lineage-based knowledge intersects with notation-centred musical training.

Two distinct knowledge systems converge in this interaction:

1. **Embodied transmission grounded in bodily habitus and intergenerational memory**, sustained through oral pedagogy,

imitation, and affective attunement.

2. **Codified European methodological systems**, structured through notation, standardised pitch organisation, and formalised pedagogical sequencing.

The study systematically analyses how these epistemic orientations negotiate timing, phrasing, gesture, and tonal alignment during shared performance. Rather than treating *rasa* as a subjective emotional by-product, the research conceptualises it as an emergent relational phenomenon generated through coordinated bodily movement, micro temporal adjustment, and reciprocal listening.

Attention is directed not only to observable technical execution but also to the subtle processes that structure inter-performer synchronisation: shifts in breath rhythm, kinaesthetic recalibration, and the modulation of phrasing in response to the other's tonal contour. These dimensions are treated as primary data, demonstrating that *rasa* materialises through embodied coordination and intersubjective alignment rather than through structural accuracy alone.

6.2 Research Context and Procedural Design

The study was conducted within a controlled rehearsal environment designed to maximise acoustic clarity and perceptual responsiveness between performers. The setting enabled detailed observation of microtonal adjustment, articulation patterns, and temporal negotiation.

One performer executed a Mak Yong melody from internalised memory, relying on embodied recall and lineage-based transmission. The second performer reproduced the same melody using standard Western notation as the initial reference framework.

Data collection focused on:

- Upper- and lower-limb gesture patterns
- Bowing directionality and pressure variation
- Breath regulation and its correlation with phrasing
- Micro-temporal alignment and divergence
- Reciprocal adaptation in melodic contour
- Emergent synchronisation dynamics during repetition cycles

Observations were analysed phenomenologically to identify patterns of coordination, interruption, recalibration, and convergence. Particular emphasis was placed on how rhythmic stability was achieved—or destabilised—through relational negotiation rather than metronomic consistency.

This procedural design substantiates the central thesis of the *Ecology of Rasa*: aesthetic coherence in Mak Yong does not derive from structural replication but from embodied, adaptive interaction. The emergence of *rasa* is therefore demonstrable as a relational process sustained through mutual responsiveness, kinaesthetic intelligence, and contextual attunement.

6.3 Experience of the Rebab Player: Embodied Knowledge and Bodily Memory

The experiential account of the Rebab performer constitutes primary phenomenological data in this study. Rather than serving as anecdotal testimony, the performer's reflections are treated as empirical evidence of embodied cognition within Mak Yong performance practice. Analysis reveals a tightly integrated coordination of breath regulation, bow trajectory, micro-gestural modulation, and rhythmic elasticity,



demonstrating that musical coherence emerges from somatic integration rather than premeditated sequencing of discrete notes.

(a) Breath as the Structuring Principle of Melody

The performer explicitly identified breath as the generative axis of melodic articulation. Micro-variations in inhalation and exhalation corresponded directly with bow pressure, shoulder rotation, wrist flexibility, and fingertip weight distribution. These coordinated adjustments were not consciously pre-

calculated but enacted through deeply sedimented bodily memory formed through prolonged immersion in Mak Yong tradition.

Crucially, the performer reported perceptible disruption when required to read notated music concurrently with performance. While pitch information could be decoded accurately, the act of visual adherence to notation introduced temporal rigidity that constrained expressive elasticity. The inner kinetic impulse—described as an urge toward melodic expansion beyond fixed rhythmic values—was inhibited under such conditions. This observation substantiates the study's theoretical position that *rasa* cannot be reduced to pitch correctness or rhythmic exactitude; rather, it is sustained through breath-governed phrasing and continuous kinaesthetic recalibration.

The performer further characterised Rebab tones as “alive,” indicating an ontological understanding of sound as dynamic and relational. Excessive precision, in this context, was perceived not as refinement but as diminution of tonal vitality. Such testimony provides critical evidence that Mak Yong aesthetics prioritise expressive fluidity over metric uniformity.

(b) Melody as Communal and Kinaesthetic Memory

Temporal stretching, suspension of phrases, and spontaneous pauses observed during performance were not deviations from structure but enactments of collectively internalised memory. These interpretive



Figure 5. Azlan Che Othman-adapting to the Rebab’s tiny pitch shifts.

decisions emerged from long-term exposure to Mak Yong staging conventions and narrative pacing rather than from written prescription. The melody functioned as embodied archive—stored within motor patterns, breath cycles, and affective anticipation.

This finding reinforces the argument that Rebab performance operates within an affective-kinetic epistemology. Expressive meaning is generated

through relational responsiveness to dramatic context, co-performer interaction, and narrative intensity. Musical structure remains present, yet it is continuously reshaped through embodied negotiation.

The performer's reported constraint under notational dependence provides analytic confirmation that fixed pitch systems and standardised precision are insufficient explanatory models for Mak Yong expressivity. Notation stabilises tonal reference but cannot encode the microtemporal elasticity, breath-inflected contouring, and intersubjective timing through which *rasa* becomes perceptible.

Taken together, the data demonstrate that *rasa* in Rebab performance is a dynamic emergent property produced through somatic intelligence, relational attunement, and adaptive phrasing. It constitutes a living aesthetic process rather than a reproducible structural template. The performer's experiential evidence therefore substantiates the central claim of the *Ecology of Rasa*: aesthetic knowledge in Mak Yong is embodied, distributed, and enacted through movement, sensation, and communal memory, and is fundamentally diminished when reduced to static representational systems.

6.4 Experience of the Violinist: From Notational Dependence to Embodied Attunement

The Violin performer initially approached the Mak Yong melody through conventional Western parameters: calibrated intonation, metric stability, and adherence to notated pitch structure. However, once the Rebab entered the shared performance space, a perceptible structural dissonance emerged. The Rebab's microtonal inflections, elastic phrasing, and non-metric contouring destabilised the violinist's reliance on fixed pitch coordinates and linear rhythmic sequencing.

This moment of instability constitutes a critical analytic point within the study. It demonstrates that the epistemic assumptions embedded in Western notation—pitch discreteness, rhythmic regularity, and structural predictability—are insufficient for negotiating Mak Yong's fluid tonal ecology. The violinist's initial difficulty in matching

microtonal shifts confirms that *rasa* cannot be accessed through structural replication alone.

(a) Technical Constraint as Epistemic Friction

The violinist reported abandoning visual reliance on the score when attempting to align with the Rebab's phrasing. This shift was not merely practical but epistemological. The recognition that the Rebab "does not play fixed notes" reflects a transition from a discrete pitch ontology to a relational tonal orientation.

The inability to follow the written notation precisely did not indicate technical deficiency; rather, it revealed a misalignment between two musical knowledge systems. The microtonal glides and breath-inflected elasticity of the Rebab exposed the limits of standardised

notation as an expressive guide. This friction functions analytically as evidence that Mak Yong's tonal logic operates within a continuous rather than segmented pitch field.

(b) Transition to Embodied Listening and Kinaesthetic Adaptation

Subsequent adaptation by the violinist illustrates a measurable epistemic reconfiguration. Performance adjustments included:

- Reduction of left-hand muscular rigidity to accommodate microtonal shading
- Modification of vibrato width and oscillation speed to align with the Rebab's breath-shaped phrasing
- Controlled reduction of bow pressure to soften tonal attack
- Relaxation of metric strictness in favour of responsive temporal elasticity

These modifications were not superficial stylistic changes but indicators of perceptual realignment. The violinist shifted from visually mediated execution to kinaesthetic listening—where auditory perception and bodily movement became integrated processes. Conscious analytical control gradually yielded to responsive, movement-based attunement.

This transition substantiates the study's theoretical claim that *rasa* emerges through relational embodiment rather than structural compliance. The violinist's movement from notational dependency toward somatic responsiveness exemplifies the transformation required to enter Mak Yong's aesthetic ecology. Precision was not abandoned; rather, it was recalibrated within a dynamic relational framework.

Analytically, this progression demonstrates that access to *rasa* involves a redistribution of cognitive authority—from external visual systems to intercorporeal coordination. Musical meaning, in this context, is not extracted from notation but co-constructed through adaptive listening, breath synchronisation, and shared temporal negotiation.

The violinist's transformation therefore provides critical corroboration of the *Ecology of Rasa* thesis: aesthetic coherence in Mak Yong arises when performers relinquish rigid structural absolutism and participate in a distributed, embodied field of interaction. *Rasa* is not imposed through technical dominance; it materialises through relational recalibration and kinaesthetic intelligence.

6.5 Convergence Point: The Relational Circulation of Rasa

The moment of convergence between the Rebab and the Violin marked a decisive shift from epistemic friction to relational coherence. Analytical observation indicates that synchronisation was not achieved through metric conformity or pitch standardisation, but through reciprocal temporal negotiation and kinaesthetic calibration. As both performers

stabilised within a shared rhythmic field, tonal blending emerged as a by-product of intersubjective attunement rather than structural enforcement.

This convergence demonstrates that *rasa* materialises when performers enter a state of distributed responsiveness. The musical texture no longer reflected two parallel systems attempting alignment; instead, it functioned as a single adaptive organism sustained through mutual regulation of breath, gesture, and tonal shading.

(a) Synchrony Without Verbal Mediation

Empirical observation documented measurable indicators of non-verbal synchronisation:

- Melodic trajectories began to co-evolve, maintaining independence while exhibiting coordinated overlap
- Microtonal oscillations stabilised through reciprocal adjustment rather than imposed correction
- Eye contact, breath pacing, and subtle postural shifts operated as regulatory signals
- Bow pressure and articulation timing converged without explicit instruction

These phenomena confirm that synchrony in Mak Yong performance is intercorporeal rather than mechanical. Alignment did not result from identical note execution but from affective resonance and temporal elasticity. The ensemble coherence observed here supports the theoretical claim that *rasa* arises through relational entrainment—an embodied synchronisation process grounded in shared perceptual awareness.

(b) Distributed Reciprocity: One to All, All to One

At the point of convergence, the violinist effectively internalised Mak Yong's tonal logic, while the Rebab performer recognised the violin as an integrated extension of the shared sonic field. This mutual recognition signifies more than technical success; it reflects the activation of a distributed aesthetic system.

Within this relational matrix, the following elements operated recursively:

- Intentional orientation
- Bodily movement
- Sonic articulation
- Embodied memory
- Cultural transmission

Each component both influenced and was influenced by the others, forming a self-regulating loop. This recursive circulation constitutes the operative mechanism of the *Ecology of Rasa*. Meaning did not reside within either performer individually; it emerged through dynamic feedback across bodies, instruments, and inherited tradition.

The convergence observed in this experiment therefore provides direct empirical substantiation for the central thesis of this study: *rasa* is neither a fixed aesthetic attribute nor a purely internal emotional state. It is an emergent relational phenomenon produced through adaptive coordination within a living performance ecology. Structural systems may initiate interaction, but only intersubjective attunement sustains aesthetic vitality.



Figure 6. Azlan and Baisah – interacting with their environment created a loop essential to the Ecology of Rasa.

6.6 Summary of Case Study Findings

The findings of this case study demonstrate that *rasa* cannot be adequately theorised through symbolic representation, conceptual abstraction, or notational systems alone. Empirical analysis confirms that *rasa* emerges through embodied enactment—specifically through iterative practice, intercorporeal calibration, and affective responsiveness situated within performance. It is neither reducible to semiotic coding nor fully capturable through structural description. Rather, it materialises through lived execution within a relational field.

Four principal findings substantiate this conclusion:

1. **Breath-Structured Embodiment Rooted in Lineage Transmission**

The Rebab performer demonstrated that melodic formation is governed by breath cycles and sedimented bodily memory shaped by hereditary pedagogy. Expressive coherence was sustained through kinaesthetic continuity rather than through externally imposed metric regulation.

2. **Epistemic Reconfiguration from Structural Control to Kinaesthetic Intuition**

The Violin performer underwent a measurable transition from notation-centred execution toward embodied listening. This shift confirms that access to *rasa* requires perceptual realignment, whereby cognitive authority migrates from visual-symbolic systems to somatic and relational attunement.

3. **Emergent Synchrony through Relational Entrainment**

Convergence between performers occurred when both entered a shared temporal ecology characterised by adaptive responsiveness. Synchronised movement was not achieved through identical note production, but through reciprocal micro-adjustment in breath, bowing pressure, vibrato modulation, and phrasing elasticity.

4. **Embodied Actualisation of Knowledge within Contextual Alignment**

Musical knowledge became operational only when bodily movement aligned with narrative intention and situational context. Purpose directed action, and action materialised meaning. Knowledge, therefore, functioned as an enacted phenomenon rather than a stored abstraction.

Collectively, these findings provide empirical validation for the *Ecology of Rasa* as a theoretical framework. Traditional Malay performance practice—exemplified here through Mak Yong interaction—operates as a dynamic, self-regulating system in which bodily expression, cultural memory, intentionality, and affective resonance interact recursively. Aesthetic meaning is not transmitted linearly from structure to performer; it circulates through a complex ecology of movement, sound, and shared consciousness.

Accordingly, *rasa* must be understood as a distributed emergent property arising from relational embodiment. Any analytical model that isolates technique from sensation, or structure from lived execution, remains incomplete. The case study therefore establishes that Mak Yong performance embodies an integrated epistemology in which knowledge, memory, and affect are inseparable from corporeal enactment.

7. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL PERFORMANCE EPISTEMOLOGY

The findings of this study extend beyond the specific interaction between the Rebab and the Violin in Mak Yong. They intervene directly in broader debates within global performance studies, ethnomusicology, and embodied cognition by challenging the epistemological dominance of notation-centred analytical models.

7.1 Reframing Musical Knowledge Beyond Notational Authority

Prevailing Western musicological paradigms privilege symbolic inscription as the primary site of musical knowledge. Pitch, rhythm, and structure are treated as stabilised entities that can be codified, archived, and reproduced independently of context. The present study demonstrates the analytical insufficiency of this assumption when applied to Mak Yong performance practice.

In Mak Yong, notation—where used—functions only as a secondary mnemonic device. It does not regulate expressive timing, tonal elasticity, or affective contour. These dimensions are

governed by embodied memory, breath-synchronised phrasing, and intersubjective responsiveness. Consequently, musical knowledge must be reconceptualised as enacted rather than encoded.

This repositioning does not reject notation but rather relativises its epistemic authority. While notation stabilises structural reference, it cannot generate *rasa*. Aesthetic vitality emerges only within relational performance ecology.

7.2 Embodied Cognition as Primary Analytical Category

The case study substantiates embodied cognition not merely as a theoretical metaphor but as an operational mechanism. Breath cycles, muscular tension, bow pressure modulation, and microtemporal recalibration function as knowledge-bearing processes. These are not expressive “add-ons” to structural form; they constitute the form in performance.

Accordingly, analytical frameworks in global performance scholarship must move beyond representational models toward process-oriented paradigms. The *Ecology of Rasa* offers such a model by situating aesthetic meaning within dynamic circulation across:

- bodily movement
- sonic articulation
- cultural memory
- intentional orientation
- relational interaction

Meaning is therefore distributed rather than contained. It arises from recursive feedback loops between performers, instruments, and context.

7.3 Decentring Universalist Pitch Ontologies

The violinist's epistemic transition reveals a deeper theoretical implication: pitch in Mak Yong operates within a continuous relational field rather than as discrete, fixed units. This destabilises universalist pitch ontologies that assume equal-tempered or standardised tonal systems as neutral baselines.

Microtonal inflection in Rebab performance is not deviation; it is normative structure within its own aesthetic logic. The inability of Western notation to fully capture these inflections exposes the limits of universalising analytic frameworks. Global performance epistemology must therefore accommodate plural tonal ontologies grounded in lived practice.

7.4 Toward an Ecological Model of Aesthetic Knowledge

The Ecology of Rasa proposes that aesthetic knowledge is:

- relational rather than individual
- emergent rather than predetermined
- embodied rather than abstract
- adaptive rather than fixed

This model repositions traditional Malay performance not as a peripheral ethnographic subject but as a site of theoretical

production. Mak Yong practice generates conceptual insight into how knowledge circulates through movement, sensation, and shared temporal experience.

By articulating *rasa* as a distributed, intercorporeal phenomenon, this study contributes to a broader reconfiguration of performance theory—one that recognises cultural traditions as epistemic systems capable of informing global discourse.

8. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The case study presented in this article does not merely document an intercultural instrumental encounter; it exposes a deeper epistemological divergence in how musical knowledge is constituted, stabilised, and transmitted. Through the interaction between the Rebab and the Violin, this study has demonstrated that Mak Yong performance practice operates within a relational aesthetic logic irreducible to notational abstraction.

8.1 Beyond Notational Primacy

Dominant paradigms in global musicology continue to privilege notation as the principal repository of musical knowledge. Structure, pitch stability, and metric regulation are often treated as universal foundations of coherence. However, empirical findings from this study reveal that in Mak Yong, notation functions at best as a secondary stabilising device. It cannot generate microtemporal elasticity, breath-shaped contouring, or tonal fluidity—the very dimensions through which *rasa* becomes perceptible.

This does not negate the value of notation; rather, it relativises its epistemic authority. Structural representation preserves skeletal form, yet expressive vitality emerges only through embodied negotiation. Accordingly, musical meaning must be reconceptualised as enacted rather than inscribed.

8.2 Embodied Cognition as Structural Mechanism

The interactional data confirm that breath cycles, muscular recalibration, bow pressure modulation, and microtonal inflection are not ornamental additions to structure; they are structural in performance. Meaning formation occurs through kinaesthetic adjustment within a shared temporal ecology.

The violinist's epistemic transition—from visual-symbolic dependence to somatic listening—demonstrates that access to Mak Yong's aesthetic logic requires perceptual reorientation. Knowledge shifts from external codification to intercorporeal synchronisation. This shift substantiates the argument that *rasa* operates through embodied cognition as a primary organising mechanism.

8.3 Plural Tonal Ontologies

The friction observed between fixed pitch systems and the *Rebab*'s continuous tonal field reveals a fundamental ontological difference. Within Mak Yong, pitch does not function as a discrete unit stabilised through equal temperament. It unfolds relationally—negotiated in real time through breath and gesture.

This finding challenges universalist pitch ontologies that assume tonal discreteness as normative. Microtonal elasticity in Rebab performance is not deviation but constitutive logic. Analytical models must therefore accommodate plural tonal epistemologies grounded in lived enactment rather than abstract standardisation.

8.4 Ecology as Analytical Paradigm

The convergence achieved between performers illustrates that aesthetic coherence arises when participants enter a recursive feedback system. Breath, gesture, tonal shading, memory, and intentionality interact dynamically. No single element dominates; each modulates and is modulated by the others.

This relational circulation defines the *Ecology of Rasa*. Within this framework:

- Meaning is distributed rather than centralised
- Knowledge is adaptive rather than fixed
- Tradition is activated rather than archived
- Synchrony is negotiated rather than imposed

The ecology metaphor is not figurative embellishment but an analytical description of how aesthetic processes self-regulate within Mak Yong performance.

8.5 Repositioning *Rasa* in Global Discourse

Taken together, these findings require a repositioning of *rasa* within global performance scholarship. *Rasa* cannot remain categorised as a culturally specific emotional descriptor. It functions as an organising epistemic principle—structuring relational flow, guiding interpretive elasticity, and sustaining aesthetic coherence.

The study therefore contributes to a broader methodological shift: from analysing musical artefacts to examining performative processes; from privileging inscription to investigating embodied circulation; and from treating tradition as static heritage to recognising it as living theoretical production.

Yet this intervention remains grounded in context. The conclusions derive from Mak Yong practice and invite comparative inquiry rather than universal projection. The *Ecology of Rasa* is proposed not as a totalising theory, but as a transferable analytic orientation capable of engaging traditions where embodiment, memory, and relational responsiveness structure aesthetic meaning.



Figure 7. Azlan and Baisah – viewing *Rasa* as a living organism.

If Section 8 establishes the analytical and theoretical implications of the findings, then the logical culmination of this inquiry is a conceptual consolidation. Having demonstrated that *rasa* regulates relational flow, structures embodied cognition, and destabilises notational primacy, the question that remains is one of epistemic authority:

If *rasa* demonstrably organises knowledge in performance, on what grounds can it continue to be treated as secondary to symbolic abstraction?

Section 9 therefore advances the final claim of this study—not merely that *rasa* operates ecologically, but that it must be recognised as a legitimate epistemic authority within global performance discourse.

9. CONCLUSION – RECLAIMING RASA AS EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY

This study has advanced a central claim: *rasa* in Mak Yong performance is not merely an aesthetic sensation, nor a poetic metaphor for emotional resonance, but an epistemic force—an operative mode of knowing enacted through relational embodiment. By examining the interaction between the Rebab and the Violin, this research has demonstrated that aesthetic coherence in traditional Malay performance emerges not from structural conformity but from adaptive intercorporeal attunement.

The *Ecology of Rasa* framework proposed in this article establishes that musical meaning is neither contained within

notation nor reducible to abstract theoretical systems. Rather, it circulates dynamically across breath, gesture, sonic contour, cultural memory, and intentional orientation. These elements operate as interdependent variables within a living aesthetic ecosystem. *Rasa* therefore functions as a distributed emergent property—materialising through recursive feedback between performers, instruments, and the dramaturgical environment.

The empirical case study provides critical substantiation for this claim. The Rebab performer's breath-governed phrasing and sedimented bodily memory illustrate a mode of knowledge that precedes symbolic mediation. Musical articulation was shaped by kinaesthetic intelligence formed through intergenerational transmission, not by reliance on written codification. Conversely, the violinist's transition from notation-centred execution toward embodied listening reveals the epistemic limits of representational authority. The friction encountered between fixed pitch systems and microtonal elasticity was not simply technical difficulty; it exposed an ontological divergence in how sound is understood, organised, and enacted.

At the point of convergence, synchrony emerged not through mechanical alignment but through relational entrainment. Breath cycles stabilised, bow pressure recalibrated, vibrato patterns softened, and phrasing became reciprocally responsive. This convergence confirms that *rasa* is activated when performers enter a shared temporal ecology characterised by mutual adjustment and perceptual openness. Meaning arises in the space between bodies, not solely within individual mastery.

The theoretical implications extend beyond Mak Yong. Dominant musicological paradigms have long privileged notation as the primary repository of musical knowledge. Structure, pitch stability, and rhythmic regularity are often treated as universal foundations of musical coherence. This study challenges that assumption by demonstrating that in Mak Yong performance practice, notation cannot fully account for expressive vitality. It may stabilise reference points, but it cannot generate *rasa*. The authority of aesthetic meaning resides in embodied circulation rather than symbolic inscription.

Reclaiming *rasa* as epistemic authority therefore necessitates a decentring of universalist analytic frameworks. It requires acknowledging that traditional performance systems are not merely cultural artefacts for ethnographic documentation, but coherent knowledge structures with their own ontological logics. In Mak Yong, pitch operates within a continuous relational field; temporality unfolds through elastic negotiation; and memory is stored within the body as motoric and affective patterning. These features demand analytical models capable of engaging process rather than static representation.

The *Ecology of Rasa* offers such a model. It conceptualises aesthetic knowledge as:

- relational rather than individualised;
- emergent rather than predetermined;
- embodied rather than abstract;
- adaptive rather than fixed.

Within this framework, performers do not execute pre-existing forms; they co-produce meaning through dynamic interaction. Instruments are not neutral tools; they function as agents within an interdependent sonic ecology. Tradition is not a static archive; it is a living reservoir activated through bodily enactment.

Importantly, positioning *rasa* as epistemic authority does not romanticise intuition nor dismiss structural knowledge. Instead, it reorders analytic priority. Technical precision remains significant, but it is subordinated to relational responsiveness. Structure persists, yet it is continually reshaped through contextual negotiation. Knowledge is not abandoned; it is embodied.

This reordering carries broader consequences for global performance epistemology. If *rasa* operates as a valid mode of knowing, then embodied traditions must be recognised as sites of theoretical production rather than peripheral case studies. Mak Yong performance does not merely illustrate existing theory; it generates conceptual insight into how aesthetic meaning circulates across bodies, memory, and environment. In this sense, traditional Malay performance contributes not only cultural diversity to global discourse but epistemological innovation.

The reclamation proposed here is therefore methodological as much as conceptual. It calls for research approaches that privilege intercorporeal observation, microtemporal analysis, and phenomenological attentiveness to breath, gesture, and sonic inflection. It demands that scholars treat performer testimony not as anecdotal reflection but as data articulating embodied cognition.

It requires analytic sensitivity to tonal systems that resist equal-tempered standardisation and temporalities that unfold beyond metronomic regularity.

Ultimately, this study affirms that *rasa* is not an ineffable residue beyond analysis. It is observable in coordinated breath cycles, traceable in microtonal adjustment, and measurable in the convergence of gestural timing. Its operation is subtle yet structurally decisive. When performers relinquish rigid structural absolutism and enter a field of adaptive reciprocity, *rasa* emerges as the organising principle of aesthetic coherence.

To reclaim *rasa* as epistemic authority is therefore to recognise that knowledge in performance traditions such as Mak Yong is enacted through movement, sensation, and relational awareness. It is to affirm that embodied practice constitutes a legitimate and generative mode of theory. And it is to assert that within the living interaction of the Rebab and violin, one encounters not only musical collaboration but a model of how knowledge itself can circulate ecologically—through bodies in time.

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