

## Response Towards Timang Xekory

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### Abstract

Music is a form of entertainment that is enjoyed by people of all ages from every culture. It does not require any formal education to be understood or appreciated by the listeners. However, music is divided into several categories, and one of them is avant garde music which can be fully appreciated through a specific approach because it contains elements, motifs and beats that are inconsistent. It is also known for its complex and abstract music and has its own group of fans. A study of avant garde music composition, *Timang Xekory* was conducted at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. The respondents were categorised into two groups, the first was a group of musicians of music background and the second group is not of music background. *Timang Xekory* was inspired by the *timang tuah* ritual, which is commonly observed in Kapit, Sarawak. The research which was done against the backdrop of the rituals of the Iban community has yielded several findings. Firstly, a respondent said that a detailed explanation of the storyline of the ancient Iban singing text is needed. In addition, listeners or viewers who read of the programme book before the *Timang Xekory* show were found to have a better understanding of the storyline compared to those who have not been given the programme book or explanation of the original work.

**Keywords:** Avant Garde, Iban Singing Text, Response, Ritual, *Timang Xekory*

### Introduction

Music can be defined as sounds which are supported by timing in the form of a certain tempo. Individuals have the ability to think, be emotional, feel, see and hear. However, each individual has different levels of ability to draw a conclusion, make a decision and respond to something. This study was aimed to investigate the response of audience towards a type of music which is avant garde music. Avant garde music requires a high level of understanding and observation. Moreover, those who respond to it need to have a certain level of musical knowledge.

### *Timang Xekory*

*Timang Xekory* is almost an hour long music composition and was composed by Laura Pranti Tutom. It was produced as part of the composer's doctoral study in 2017. The artwork with the concept of music programme, serialism, minimalism and aleatory can be categorised as avant garde music. *Timang Xekory* was produced to portray the singing text in the Iban ritual of *timang tuah* practiced in Kapit, Sarawak in the avant garde genre. The ritual of *timang tuah*

is most commonly practiced in Kapit. An average of three to four ritual activities in one month are carried out in different locations in Kapit District, with is more frequent compared to other districts in Sarawak. Other districts seem to no longer practice the ritual of *timang*, and some people are no longer aware of the rituals that are considered ancient, animistic, and outdated. They no longer believe in these rituals. *Timang XekorY* was produced because the primary source of the researcher's study is the *timang* ritual. The root word *XekorY* in the creation, is a combination of the word XY and the 4D lottery number also known in Malay as *nombor ekor*. To abbreviate the name of this composition, the word "*ekor*" is used. The alphabet "X" is placed before "*ekor*" and the alphabet "Y" is placed behind the word "*ekor*" resulting in "*XekorY*".

### **Timang Tuah Ritual**

The *timang tuah* ritual is an invocation and invitation sent to *petara* or the Iban gods and goddesses to attend the ceremony. The singing text in the *timang Tuah* ritual reflects the journey experienced by the *lemambang* (the one who sang the ancient Iban text while stomping on his *timang* stick) who told the stories of the gods and goddesses who were invited to the human world.

Before the *timang tuah* ritual is carried out, the person who will perform this ritual needs to get a dream. It is as a determinant of whether the ritual can be performed or not. The ritual will be held if the interpretation of the dream by experienced members of the Iban tribe shows that the ritual is to be conducted. The dreams are usually interpreted by the *lemambang*s themselves.

Masing (2010) said the ritual of *timang tuah* is highly dependent on the dream that the person who will undergo the ritual. In certain occasion, the ritual is performed by another person who is told in the dream. The Iban community has a long tradition of adhering to beliefs and taboos told by their ancestors which are still widely practised to this day among Ibans who live in the longhouses.

The longhouses in Sarawak are mostly located in a large jungle area which is the ancestral land of the Iban community. They still believe in taboos such signals from the sounds of wild animals, especially birds, when doing their daily chores or when carrying out important activities such as the *timang* rituals. According to Ngadi (1998), the traditional Iban community believes in the existence of *petara* (god) and *antu* (dead spirits), where all lives including animals, insects, plants, dead and living humans have a spirit.

In an interview with one of the occupants at a longhouse in Nanga Melinau, Kapit in 2015, the researcher was informed that a sound from a certain bird species can cause a gathering to be cancelled. Hunting and leaving the longhouse are not allowed after hearing the sound of the bird. The Iban community also believes that dreams can bring either prosperity or hardships.

It is believed that dreams may be a sign of upcoming prosperity, but may also be a sign of diseases and even death. The person performing the *timang tuah* rituals will be revealed through dreams. The rituals cannot be performed without getting the dream because it means that the *petara* (god) does not allow it.

According to Osup (2006); Ngadi (1998), the names of the Iban gods are *Singalang Burong* (God of War), *Menjaya* (God of Health and Wealth), *Simpulang Gana* (God of Earth and Crops), *Simpandai* (Creator and Healer) and *Anda Mara* (God of Wealth). The Iban community also believes in the myth of Keling who is a brave and strong warrior in the battlefield, as well as his wife, Kumang, who is believed to be good in handicraft. Kumang is

also believed to help the Iban warriors in battle. They also believe in the existence of *Antu Manah* (good spirit) and *Antu Jai* (bad spirit). Before the ritual, it is also believed that these gods and goddesses will give a sign through *burong* (birds, snakes, frogs and other animals) and dreams to indicate whether the *timbang* ritual needs to be conducted or otherwise.

*Timang* means the knocking sounds of the staff and songs of *lemambang*s. According to a *lemambang* named Enggong anak Banning (2010), the *timbang* ritual is an Iban ritual performed by three to four *lemambang*s who will sing the *timbang* singing text monotonously while stomping their stick. The whole *timbang* ritual takes between three to nine days. The time taken to complete the ritual depends on the level and the scale of the ritual. The songs cannot be sung melodiously because the texts sung by *lemambang*s are often improvised or spontaneous. However, they do not go out of the storytelling plot of the Iban gods and goddesses. Refer to Figure 1.

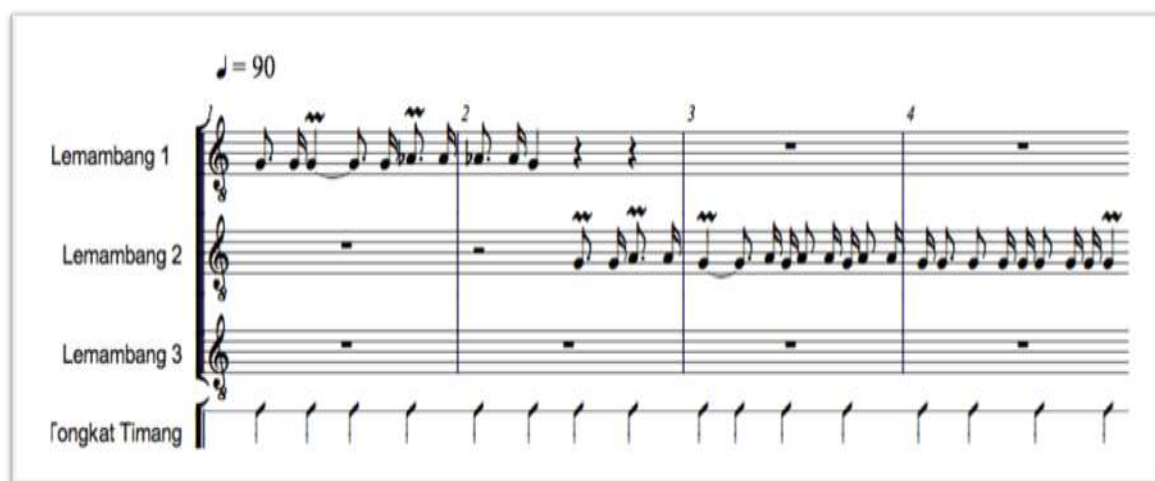
*Tuah* means good fortune. The ritual of *timbang tuah* is carried out to ask for success for one's business, job and political career. It is also done to ask for healing.



Figure 1. Iban *Timang Tuah* Ritual, 17hb Mac 2015, in Kapit, Sarawak.  
Host: Madam Rheineld Minor Panyau. Source: Yow Chong Lee

The *timbang* process is done by the *lemambang* who will circle a *pandung* (see Figure 1) which is erected for three to nine days. This process usually starts in the afternoon or before sunset and ends before noon the next day. The process will be repeated for three to nine days. *Pandung* symbolises the connection to the divine realm. It is made with rattan which is shaped into circles and covered with Iban traditional woven fabric called *pua kumbu*. Objects in the *pandung* includes *tajau* (vase), gong, rattan, *pua kumbu*, betel nut and cloths to tie the *pandung*.

According to Masing (1981), there was only one female *lemambang* in the 1950s. Up to now, almost all of the *lemambang*s are males. The *lemambang*s received the knowledge on how to conduct the ritual through dreams which last for days and even months. They continuously receive instructions on rituals and customs through dreams until they become very knowledgeable in the subject area.



Score Extract 1: Transcript of Bar 1 to 4: Songs Sung by *Lemambang* Without Texts

According to Masing (1981), there are four types of *timang* rituals namely *Timang Beintu Intu* (ritual for the people's wellbeing), *Timang Tuah* (ritual for good luck), *Timang Beneh* (ritual to get paddy seeds) and *Timang Gawai Amat* (highest form of ritual). The researcher chose *timang tuah* as the main source for *Timang XekorY* as it is very frequently done in Kapit.

During the *timang tuah* ritual that the researcher attended on 17 March 2015 in Kapit, the researcher has collected data on the meaning of the symbols in the *timang tuah* ritual which are

- i. *Taboh* (Iban traditional gong) is played throughout the process of wood cutting in the jungle to avoid hearing the sounds of *burong* which can lead to misfortune
- ii. *Rendai* (maize seeds) are thrown during the *miring* ceremony to symbolise that the deities are coming to the human realm
- iii. Hot rain symbolises that the beings from *panggau libau* (heaven) have arrived
- iv. Lamp in *ruai* (the common area of the longhouse) is suddenly extinguished which means the beings from *panggau libau* will be arriving
- v. A group of eagles fly around the house, indicating the house in which the *timang* ceremony is held has been identified by people from *panggau libau*
- vi. *Ilang besarung* (sword with scabbard) is placed at the *pandung* to show that the ceremony is over

The plot of the *timang tuah* ritual which is presented through the singing texts was explained by Mr. Enggong anak Bani in an interview conducted in Kapit in 2017. His explanation has been summarised by (Allen, 2017). According to Allen (2017), there are seven levels in the spiritual realm of the Iban deities.

The levels are as follows


|   |                                |
|---|--------------------------------|
|  | <i>Alam Sengalang Burung</i>   |
|   | <i>Alam Bhiku Bunsu Petara</i> |
|   | <i>Alam Aki Ungkuk</i>         |
|   | <i>Alam Kunding Burung</i>     |
|   | <i>Alam Burung Nendak</i>      |
|   | <i>Alam Biawak Tuchok</i>      |
|   | <i>Alam Api Besi</i>           |

Figure 2: Seven Levels in The Spiritual Realm of The Iban Deities by Allen (2017)

### ***Timang XekorY Music Sturcture***

*XekorY* is a combination of the concept of lottery number (*nombor ekor*) and the centre of the XY-axis. It is inspired by the *timang tuah* singing text and interpreted as a music performance. This production is performed in Panggung Budaya, Fakulti Muzik Seni Persembahan, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris on 24 May 2019. It is presented by an orchestral and choir team which consists of 30 Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris students who are majoring in music. The performance was led by the composer, Laura Pranti Tutom.

There are seven *renggat* or level in this performance. Each *renggat* is around eight minutes in length and they have been arranged according to the *timang* singing texts. The compositional structure of the production is as follows:

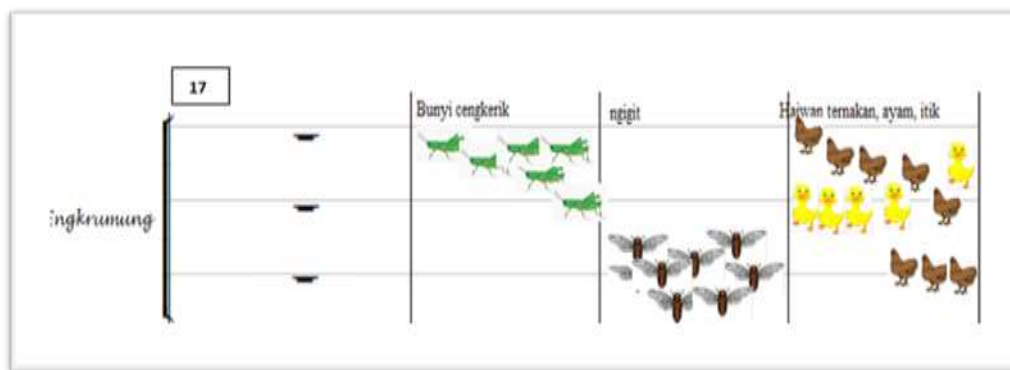
Table 1

Compositional Structure of *Timang XekorY*

| Renggat Name                                     | Duration             | Scene   | Background  | Highlight   |
|--|----------------------|---|---|---|
| <i>Renggat 1: Menua Sempulang Gana</i>           | 7 minutes 34 seconds | From the human world to the spiritual realm                     | Drone-low range from every musical instrument           | Knock of the stick and the singing of <i>lemambang</i>            |
| <i>Renggat 2, Menua Wung Kelansau</i>            | 8 minutes 10 seconds | Still in the human world, slowly sounding muffled               | The maize symbol- paving the way to the spiritual realm | Singing and other musical instrument                              |
| <i>Renggat 3, Daluh Sungai Buluh</i>             | 7 minutes            | A journey to see the beauty in the spiritual realm              | Drone-low range from every musical instrument           | The sound of a bird's chirp that never existed in the real world  |
| <i>Renggat 4, Menua Kemara</i>                   | 8 minutes            | Meet a group of warriors  | Drone-low range from every musical instrument           | Singing and other musical instruments                             |
| <i>Renggat 5, Menua Tuchung Tempalung Subang</i> | 7 minutes 54 seconds | Hearing noises from a party from afar                           | Drone-low range from every musical instrument           | <i>Taboh</i> (Iban traditional gong), singing of <i>lemambang</i> |
| <i>Renggat 6, Menua Bujang Abang Remang</i>      | 8 minutes            | Approaching the village of the gods                             | No drone  | Singing and other musical instrument                              |
| <i>Renggat 7, Menua Riguh</i>                    | 7 minutes 56 seconds | Excitement is already at its highest level, people are partying | A deafening sound, clamour                              | <i>Tutti</i>  |

*Timang XekorY* is almost an hour long and uses several non-conventional techniques such as cupping the face with *engkrumung* which resulted in a muffled sound. This technique is aleatory in nature which means that the results will not be the same in another performance.





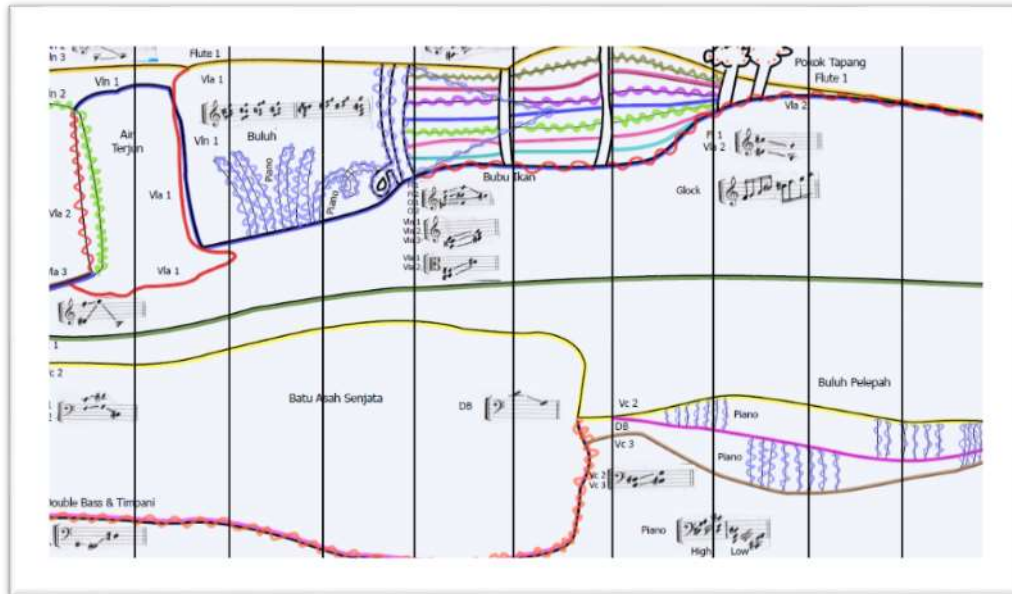
Score Extract 2: *Timang XekorY, Renggat 1* from Bar 17 to 20

*Renggat 1* from Bar 17 to 20 of *Timang XekorY* is an avant garde technique which has been applied to the composition through the writing of the graphic score. These bars were presented by the choir team according to the pictures of the animals. At this part, the *engkrumung* is cupped to the singers' face. There are three pitching ranges which are low, medium and high.



Score Extract 3: *Timang XekorY, Renggat 1*, Bar 125 to 127

From Bar 125 to 127, the sequence serial of pitch of Approach Five that is Centre E (XY, -X-Y) 2941; F# C# G# F D G C D# is used in retrograde and the rhythm is diminution. The writing technique for the solo piano creates the scene where the strong blow of the God of Thunder shakes the longhouse of *Sempulang Gana* and all amulets are shaken out of the crevices on the walls.



Score Extract 4: Third drawing with timeline. Each column is 12 seconds long

Inspired by the singing text of the *lemambang*, the researcher drew four images that visualise their journey to the spiritual world. In the third drawing in the fourth *Renggat*, the group is depicted to be sharpening their weapons. Then, they invited *Manang Betengkelang Bulu* to join the event. *Manang Betengkelang Bulu* is a shaman who is well known to be able to strengthen oneself and boost one's confidence. The *bulu* or feather is depicted in the third drawing. *Menua Ini Antu* (the realm of the giant ghost) is the area that they want to avoid but it is the only way to the next destination. From there, they have to walk pass *Menua Ini Antu* quietly and carefully.

The third drawing is divided into ten columns, and each column is 12 seconds in length. It is played based on the colours coded for each musical instrument. The pitch sound is set at the coloured line, and it is different for each musical instrument. This is so that the range for each instrument is clearer. For example, the yellow line is played by the flute because it represents a mountain while the red line is played by the double bass and timpani which represents a river and low areas.

### Research Objective

The purpose of this study is to investigate the response of the audience towards the *Timang XekorY* performance. The second objective is to study the audience understanding of the *timang tuah* ritual that can lead to a greater interest and appreciation of this tradition. The last objective is to promote the traditional Iban ritual that is almost forgotten by the Iban community nowadays.

### Research Questions

Did the *Timang XekorY* successfully visualise the *timang tuah* ritual? What is the purpose of the *timang tuah* ritual? Who is a *lemambang*? Why is it done? Did the response of the audience provide reaction, feedback or answers to these questions? Was the audience able to understand the *Timang XekorY* performance through avant garde music?



### Problem Statement

The ancient singing texts of the *lemambang* are difficult to be understood by the young generation. There are also some older people who do not understand the *timang tuah* ritual.

### What does Audience Response Mean?

The audience response is an important factor in the presentation of *Timang XekorY*. The research on audience perception when watching a musical performance is done to study their emotions such as joy, excitement, sadness, and anger. Audience responses depends on the structure of the composition of the musical piece or its genre and whether it is presented live or otherwise. Thus, varying responses are observed. According to Harrison and Louis (2014), audiences prefer to watch a live music performance rather than the recorded version on radio or on their computer. It is reported that watching live music performance is more interesting, real, personally satisfying and stress relieving.

Gabrielsson (2011) said that a high level of appreciation of the source material is needed to respond to a musical piece. The response towards music is also the first step to digging deeper into the source material. Deliege (2010) and Mack (1995) said that contemporary composers need to conduct thorough research and analysis when composing. A detailed investigation is needed to study the original sources which will be reinterpreted in their art.

According to Saari et al (201), music is a form of communication because it has four basic elements of communication which are the source, recipient, message, and channel. A message is conveyed through a channel that contains the idea and the feelings that the source wants to share with the recipient. Messages contain verbal and non-verbal symbols. Verbal symbols are words that can be either concrete or abstract. In this study, *Timang XekorY* is a mix of concrete and abstract language, but the latter makes most of the composition.

### Response Gathering Process

The first step of the response gathering process is the selection of samples. The samples include music students in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak as well as live audience at Panggung Budaya Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris.

These samples were divided into four groups which are;

Live performance: Orchestra and choir performance in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

- i. 30 music students of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris who performed *Timang XekorY*
- ii. Audience of the *Timang XekorY* performance. The members of the audience include people with and without a music background. There were 20 members of the audience, where 14 were of music background while six were without a music background.

Recorded Performance: Audio recording of *Timang XekorY*

- iii. 50 music students of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
- iv. 20 *lemambangs*, old and young Ibans who do not receive formal music education

### Response from the first Group

The first group consists of 30 music students from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. The practice session started three months before the performance. In the first month, the students studied the score individually. In the second month, the researcher conducted practice sessions with them in groups; woodwind, strings, percussion and choir group. In the third month, the researcher conducted tutti practice sessions with the whole orchestral and choir team.

In every practice session, the researcher would play the role of a conductor to explain the unconventional approach such as slide and gliss on certain notes as well as knock-on bow or col legno. As a composer, the researcher explained the inspiration, interpretation and expression in *Timang XekorY*. The explanation of the *timang tuah* ritual is also very important to strengthen their understanding of the tradition which will make their performance more impactful.

Their response showed that they understood *Timang XekorY* that they were able to appreciate the non-conventional composition. The responses showed that 88% of the students were interested to join an actual *timang* ritual.

### **Responses from the Second Group**

The second group is the audience who watched the performance of *Timang XekorY* at Panggung Budaya Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. All members of the audience were given a program book that contains the synopsis of *Timang XekorY*. The program books were distributed 30 minutes before the performance started.

Their responses showed that 55% of the audience understood the performance. Meanwhile, 45% stated that they could not feel immersed in the performance because they felt uncomfortable with the unconventional music. There was a clear distinction between those with and without music background. The 55% who said that they understood the production have received music education.

### **Response of the Third Group**

The third group consists of 50 music students from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. They listened to the audio recording of the production which is 56 minutes in total. Photos that visualised the scenes at each *renggat* were included in the audio recordings. The audio recording also includes a narration of the synopsis of each *renggat*. The programme books were not distributed to the audience to study a different perspective from the previous group.

The study showed that 30% of the audience did not understand and failed to immerse themselves in the non-conventional music, which was expected by the researcher. They were in their first year and have not studied avant garde music. Meanwhile, 32% of the audience said that they tried to immerse themselves in the music, but they did not understand why the music was played in an unconventional way.

This group suggested that *Timang XekorY* be played in other mediums such as through dances and theatre performances to enhance the audience's understanding. The other 38% understood the production because they were third-year students who have studied avant garde music.

### **Response and Discussion of the Fourth Group**

The fourth group consists of 20 *lemambangs* and old as well as young Ibans who did not receive music education. The group listened to the audio recording of the production. Their responses towards the production were only guided by the synopsis and narration because they understood the *timang* ritual.

As many as 80% said that they were able to immerse themselves in the music while the other 20% who were mostly young did not understand the performance because they were not exposed to avant garde music. They preferred that this music is used as background music for musical theatre or in movies. There was also a suggestion for this production to be animated.

## Conclusion

*Timang XekorY* evokes various emotions such as mystical, magical, horror and suspense. This production received a mixed response from the audience, and it is highly dependent on the background of the listener. The lack of exposure to avant garde music is an important factor that determines the response towards the performance. The students in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris showed the most positive response, probably due to their extended choir and orchestral practice sessions where the performance was thoroughly explained to them to help them to perform the music. The positive response shows that *Timang XekorY* has successfully presented the journey of the *lemambang*s by visualising the realm of the Iban deities through avant garde music.

It is admitted that not everyone enjoys avant garde music. Since the emergence of the genre, listeners have always preferred pop music as well as comforting and calming music over avant garde music.

It is found that live audience enjoyed and understood the performance more than those who listened to the recording.

It is also found that preparation and exposure are needed before watching an avant garde performance. One of the ways is by explaining the performance to the audience before the show. The audience can also be given programme books before the performance.

The effort by relevant authorities, especially the Sarawak State Government, to document and promote this activity is necessary. The researcher has successfully explained the *timang* ritual and related it to *Timang XekorY*, which is hoped to lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of the tradition.

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