

Guhit-Tugtugin:
Adventures in Filipino Folksongs for Piano

Geraldine Gonzales

Guhit-Tugtugin is a collection of Filipino folksongs arranged for piano by Augusto Espino, pianist, pedagogue, conductor, arranger, and member of the UP College of Music Piano Faculty. This book won for its author the Gawad Chanselor for “Pinakamahasay na Alagad ng Sining” in February 2001. This compilation consists of ten “sketches” (*guhit*) of the arranger’s favorite folksongs (*tugtugin*). At first glance, these little pieces may seem to be short and simple miniatures, but a closer look would reveal that they are highly innovative, original works that are both interpretatively and technically challenging.

It is a common misconception that arranging pieces for children is a simple job. It is actually easier to compose original works than be confronted by difficulties (such as freshness of approach) when one ventures into the overcrowded field of setting the best-known Filipino songs in every shape and form imaginable. This particular arranger is able to hurdle this challenge by adapting a progressive style that does not repeat methods already exhausted by previous composers. The results are unique, personal sketches that unmistakably bear his individual stamp. It is amazing how the most recurrent folksongs can still be reincarnated into something new in the hands of an artist with enough imagination and creativity.

The following are notable musical devices employed by the arranger that contribute to the book’s success in capturing the interests of students, teachers, and performers:

In “*Pagtatanim ng Palay*,” the lighthearted, carefree nature of the familiar planting song is generally depicted in the writing, but

this updated version makes use of a recurring motive in the left hand that somewhat captures the regularity of the movements by farmers planting in the field.

“*Itik-Itik*” is a lively, spirited piece that successfully portrays the awkward, angular gait of the native bird with its two-note phrases and *staccatos*. Unconventional harmony provides humor with “wrong notes,” and a play on rhythm is achieved with a hidden 6/8 within the regular 3/4.

“*Salidummay*” makes interesting use of rhythm to create variety and novelty. The original melody is alternately compressed and stretched out unexpectedly. A jazzy left hand adds a “pop” flavor. This experiment in different rhythms together with its modal flexibility makes it one of the most original in the set.

“*Paruparong Bukid*” features a delicate, bell-like accompaniment that essentially captures the fluttering of butterflies’ wings. Hand crossings abound, providing challenge and delight to students who want to explore the different registers of the piano with added flair.

“*Sarung Bangui*” is written for the left hand alone, but the main difficulty lies in making it sound as if it is being actually played by two. Phrasing and *legato* playing require a certain degree of maturity on the part of the interpreter to bring out the sad, moving lines of the song. This may be recommended for adult players rather than children.

“*Pamulinawen*” offers a wealth of possibilities in terms of technical skills: crisp yet light *staccatos*, articulate runs, and rhythmic precision. The teasing, joking nature of the folksong is captured in chromatics, tricky accents, and syncopations: all in the spirit of lightness and vigor. It begins and ends on a clever parody of the nursery tune “London Bridge is Falling Down.” This can be considered to be one of the most difficult in the set.

“*Bahay Kubo*” is theme and variations set during which the very common folk tune is subjected to different transformations: from a singing, lazy *Andante* to a swinging *Allegretto* with the right hand in

conversation with the left, and later a delicate patter of triplet figures with the theme cleverly woven in between.

“*Chitchiritchit*” is an impressive, brilliant *toccatina* (little showpiece) with the folksong in repeated notes shared by the rapid alternation of hands resulting in an unusual echo effect. Occasional punctuations and accents provide a contrast of unpredictability against regularity. To be played “as fast as possible,” this piece is one of the most exciting in the set.

“*Ili-Ili, Tulog Anay*” is one of the simplest in the collection, yet not without its difficulties. Like the “*Sarong Bangui*,” this piece calls for maturity especially in the handling of long *legato* lines with utmost tonal control and balance. Again, this is suited for adult players, but it may be tried by children gifted with sensitivity.

“*Leron Leron Sinta*” presents abundant opportunities to display one’s technical proficiency: dizzy, frenzied left hand figures, right and left hands scurrying alternately up and down, trills, glissandos, and orchestral chord playing. A brief stopover of the theme in minor key midway effectively creates momentary diversion. It exhibits the same degree of difficulty as “*Pamulinawen*.”

Guhit-Tugtugin succeeds because the writing is for today’s generation: simple, fresh, accessible, and ear-catching, yet without compromising the technical and musical demands on the aspiring musician. These pieces capitalize on just the right balance and combination of old and new elements to attract and keep their prospective performers and listeners. Young students’ interests are sparked since they can easily relate to these familiar folksongs (something old), and the new “twists” keep them from being bored during the course of their study (something new).

Teachers are given the liberty to exercise their creativity since fingering, pedaling, and dynamic marks were deliberately left out by the arranger. Much is left to the student, teacher, and performer’s discretion on these aspects. Artistic freedom is given a lot of space; individuals are given free rein to tap their inner resourcefulness and ingenuity in interpretation.

It may be added that these pieces are not just for intermediate pupils (children or adult) but also for the advanced students (college

students and professional musicians). These pieces may be played individually, by groups (usually in contrasting tempi), or as a complete set in suite form. As previously mentioned, there are certain technical difficulties to be surmounted, and the thin, transparent textures leave very little room to hide mistakes during performance. Yet simple as they are, the writing exhibits a high level of artistic sophistication that opens the door to a rich and varied palette of interpretations subject to the performer's personality, taste, and imagination.

An added strength of these arrangements is their accessibility. Because of their brevity, they are easily read, mastered, and memorized in a brief span of time. Preparation time for performance would not take as long as one would allot for a piece with technical difficulties in the level of Liszt, Chopin, or Brahms. They are also proof that complicated and difficult passagework is not necessarily a guarantee to win over performers and listeners: sometimes it is not the quantity of notes that matter but the quality of writing.

Guhit-Tugtugin's place in Filipino piano literature is summed up by no less than Reynaldo Reyes, internationally acclaimed Filipino concert pianist, pedagogue, and professor of piano in Towson University, Maryland:

These pieces are little gems for the piano. . . the beauty of these pieces lie in their simplicity and implicit interpretative difficulty. The writing is simple, concise, and straight to the point without any sugary additions like most of Philippine piano pieces. The rhythmic counterpoint brought new life to these otherwise ordinary tunes. The modern concept of the harmony added to the spice in good taste without ruining the simple tunes from which they are derived . . . There is no doubt in my mind that these pieces will rest in the Philippine piano standard repertoire for a very long time. . . Congratulations are in order for a very outstanding composition!

Geraldine Gonzales is Assistant Professor of Piano at the UP College of Music. She obtained her Bachelor of Music in Piano (magna cum laude) and Master of Music in Piano both at the College of Music. She is currently working on her second Master's degree, majoring in Musicology. Ms. Gonzales has premiered and recorded the complete *Guhit-Tugtugin* set. *Guhit-Tugtugin* is available at the UP College of Music.