



Changes in the Structure and Style of Gondrang in Simalungun Musical Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Gondrang is one of the most important musical ensembles in the Simalungun tradition, originally serving as sacred accompaniment in ritual contexts, particularly funerary ceremonies. Previous studies have largely focused on the social and cultural transformations of *Gondrang*, while the specific changes in its musical structure and style have not been analyzed in depth. This study aims to describe and analyze the internal musical changes of *Gondrang*, including its instrumentation, rhythmic organization, ensemble formation, melodic orientation, ornamentation, and performance expression. Employing a qualitative ethnomusicological approach, the research is based on observation of performances, interviews with musicians and cultural elders, and audio-visual documentation. The results show that *Gondrang* has experienced structural changes such as the addition of modern instruments and flexible ensemble settings, and stylistic changes including faster tempos, melodic expansion, ornamented improvisation, and more expressive performance gestures. Despite these changes, core rhythmic patterns and symbolic identity have been preserved. This study contributes to ethnomusicology by highlighting the internal dynamics of musical change, showing how *Gondrang* adapts to modern contexts while maintaining its cultural essence.

Keywords: *Gondrang, Structure, Style, Musical Change, Simalungun Tradition*

1. Introduction

Music, as an integral part of human culture, functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium of communication, identity, and spirituality. Within the cultural landscape of the Batak ethnic groups in North Sumatra, Indonesia, the Simalungun people possess a unique musical heritage, among which *Gondrang* stands as one of the most prominent traditions. Historically, *Gondrang* has been deeply associated with ritual life, particularly in funerary contexts such as *pusokni uhur* and *sayur matua*. In these ceremonies, the ensemble was more than a form of sound or performance; it was considered a sacred medium to accompany the deceased, a sonic bridge between the human world and the ancestral realm. The steady pulse of the drums, the resonance of the gongs, and the penetrating sound of the *sarunei* shaped an atmosphere of solemnity and reverence.

Traditionally, *Gondrang* ensembles were organized with a specific structural arrangement: seven drums (*gondrang sipitu-pitu*) forming the percussive foundation, the *ogung* (gong) providing time markers, and the *sarunei* (a double-reed instrument) leading the melodic lines. Each musician occupied a precise role, and the performance adhered to inherited rhythmic cycles (*pangindungi*, *panirang*, *paninting*) that carried symbolic as well as aesthetic meaning. Style, in this context, was characterized by slow to moderate tempos, limited ornamentation, and restrained bodily expression. The performance was not intended for spectacle but for ritual efficacy.

However, the socio-cultural context of Simalungun society has changed significantly over the past century. The spread of Christianity in the region brought shifts in ritual practice, reducing the role of traditional ensembles in religious ceremonies. Modernization and globalization introduced new performance contexts: cultural festivals, government-sponsored events, weddings, and stage entertainment. As a result, *Gondrang* is no longer confined to sacred spaces but has entered the sphere of public performance. This recontextualization

inevitably influenced not only the function of *Gondrang* but also its musical form.

This research departs from that emphasis. Rather than concentrating on social functions, it focuses specifically on the internal musical elements of *Gondrang*, namely its structure and style. Structural aspects include the organization of instruments, ensemble formation, and rhythmic cycles, while stylistic aspects encompass melody, ornamentation, tempo, dynamics, and performance gestures. By distinguishing between these two dimensions, the study aims to uncover the musical logic behind *Gondrang*'s evolution.

The relevance of this focus is twofold. First, it contributes to ethnomusicological scholarship by demonstrating how traditional ensembles adapt musically when contexts shift. Second, it enriches cultural preservation efforts by clarifying which musical elements remain consistent and which have undergone modification. Understanding this distinction is crucial: while social functions may change, the persistence of structural and stylistic elements ensures continuity of identity.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach situated within the field of ethnomusicology, with a particular focus on the concepts of musical change and musical style. The choice of methodology is grounded in two theoretical perspectives. First, Nettl (2005) emphasizes that all musical traditions are dynamic, constantly negotiating between the preservation of core identity and the introduction of innovations. This idea underpins the comparative approach of the study, which seeks to identify which structural elements of *Gondrang* have remained stable and which have adapted to new performance contexts. Second, Titon (2020) defines musical style as the expressive character of music, shaped by elements such as melody, rhythm, ornamentation, tempo, and performance gestures. This perspective provides a framework for analyzing the stylistic shifts in *Gondrang* between ritual and stage performances.

Fieldwork was conducted in two contrasting sites. In Simalungun Regency, ritual forms of *Gondrang* were observed in funerary contexts, where structural conventions such as the use of seven drums, fixed rhythmic cycles, and solemn performance style remain closely tied to traditional values. In Pematangsiantar City, modern versions of *Gondrang* were documented in cultural festivals, weddings, and government-sponsored events. Here, performances often included modern instruments such as keyboards and cymbals, faster tempos, and more expressive stage presentation. The comparison between these two contexts allowed the researcher to trace patterns of musical change consistent with Nettl's observation that traditions evolve by balancing continuity and adaptation.

Data collection combined participant observation, interviews, and musical documentation. During observations, the researcher attended both ritual and modern performances, recording not only the sound but also the spatial arrangements, bodily gestures, and audience interaction. Interviews were conducted with elder musicians who maintain traditional practices and younger musicians who experiment with new styles. Their narratives revealed different attitudes toward change: elders stressed the need to preserve ritual conventions, while younger performers emphasized creativity and audience engagement. This divergence reflects Titon's view that style embodies cultural values and adapts as those values shift. Audio and video recordings were made of multiple performances, and selected pieces were transcribed into Western notation for closer analysis. Although transcription cannot fully capture the timbral nuances of the *sarunei* or the layered drumming patterns, it provided a practical means of comparing rhythmic structures, melodic contours, and stylistic variations. These transcriptions became central to analyzing how structural frameworks remained intact while stylistic features expanded.

Data analysis followed two interconnected paths. First, structural analysis examined the role of instrumentation, ensemble formation, and rhythmic cycles. Second, stylistic analysis considered melodic development, ornamentation, tempo, and performance expression. By comparing ritual and modern performances, the study highlighted points of preservation and innovation in line with Nettl's theory of musical change, while Titon's concept of musical style guided interpretation of expressive differences. To ensure reliability, triangulation was applied by cross-checking information from different informants and contexts. Ritual and modern settings were compared to distinguish between contextual variation and general musical trends. Ethical research practices were also observed: informed consent was obtained for all interviews and recordings, sensitive cultural information was treated with confidentiality, and the researcher followed customary protocols during ceremonies.

By combining ethnographic fieldwork with theoretical insights from Nettl and Titon, this methodology allowed for a holistic understanding of *Gondrang* as a living tradition. The approach made it possible to document musical change not merely as an external transformation but as an internal reconfiguration of structure and style, reflecting both continuity of identity and responsiveness to new cultural conditions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Structure Changes

3.1.1. Instrumentation

Traditionally, the Gondrang ensemble consisted of seven drums (gondrang sipitu-pitu), the ogung (gong), and the sarunei (double reed instrument). Each instrument carried symbolic and functional significance, with the drums providing the rhythmic foundation, the gong marking structural points, and the sarunei delivering melodic lines.



Figure 1. Gondrang keyboard ensemble consisting of sulim, gondrang and keyboard
(Source : Committee Documentation, 2025)

In modern performances, however, additional instruments such as keyboards, cymbals, tom-toms, and even electric bass have been introduced. These innovations expand the sonic palette, creating harmonic and dynamic layers absent in the original ensemble. Yet, the seven drums are still frequently retained, serving as the core identity of Gondrang. This duality illustrates Nettl's (2005) idea that traditions persist by preserving core elements while selectively adopting new ones to remain relevant.

3.1.2 Ensemble Formation

In ritual contexts, Gondrang performances followed a strict formation: three drummers would rotate roles in precise coordination, maintaining the integrity of the ensemble. On modern stages, however, the number of drummers is often reduced to one or two, and roles are adjusted depending on available performers and instruments. Amplification through sound systems further alters the balance, allowing melodic instruments such as keyboards or sulim (flute) to compete with the percussive core.



Figure 2. Gondrang Music Ensemble by Juli Ardiles Sipayung et al in Raya, Simalungun
(Source : Juli Ardiles, 2024)

3.1.3. Rhythmic Cycles

Core rhythmic patterns pangindungi, panirang, and paninting remain central in both ritual and modern contexts. However, in stage performances, these cycles are frequently embellished with syncopation, extended breaks, or rhythmic layering influenced by popular music. The persistence of these core patterns, even in altered contexts, reflects what Nettl describes as the continuity of identity through rhythm, a fundamental strategy by which traditional ensembles maintain recognition despite change.

3.2. Style Changes

3.2.1. Melody

In ritual performances, the melodic line is dominated by the sarunei, employing modal scales that give Gondrang its distinctive sound. Ornamentation is minimal, and melodies adhere to fixed formulas. In contrast,

modern performances often integrate the keyboard or flute alongside the sarunei, expanding the melodic register and incorporating diatonic or popular tonalities. This diversification illustrates Titon's (2020) notion of musical style as expressive adaptation: the melodic style of Gondrang shifts in response to new aesthetic demands while retaining its recognizable timbre.

The melody on the gual sitalasari is played by the gondrang ensemble with variations using the basic note off which begins with the minor note also using the format of 1 *sarunei*, gondrang sipitu-pitu and *ogung* and mingmongan. As shown in the following picture:



Figure 3 Sarunei melody in Gual sitalasari with Gondrang Keyboard ensemble format
(Source : Nelson, 2025)

3.2.2. Tempo and Dynamics

Ritual contexts emphasize steady tempos and restrained dynamics, evoking solemnity and reverence appropriate to funerary rites. Modern performances, however, often adopt faster tempos and more dynamic contrasts, aligning with the expectations of audiences seeking excitement and entertainment. This acceleration of tempo and intensification of dynamics mark a stylistic shift that reflects changing values, where solemn spirituality gives way to performative energy.

3.2.3. Ornamentation and Improvisation

In ritual contexts, ornamentation is formulaic and improvisation is limited, as deviations could undermine the ritual's efficacy. On stage, however, improvisation is not only tolerated but celebrated. Musicians frequently embellish melodic lines with flourishes, add rhythmic variations, or extend solos to engage audiences. Titon's concept of style as "performance practice" is clearly evident here: improvisation becomes a stylistic marker that transforms Gondrang from a ritual medium into a display of individual creativity.



Figure 4. Ornamentation and Improvisation played by the sarunei instrument
(Nelson, 2025)

Furthermore, in this rhythm, you can also see the use of varied notes, some use quarter notes, eighth notes and sixteenth notes then combined with intervals that jump far and the pattern of blows on gondrang that have used note cymbals ride and crash in the notation above. This makes ornamentation and improvisation free carried out by the ensemble players of the gondrang sipitu-pitu mix but does not eliminate the original tone of the Gual. In the presentation of gual sitalasari with the gondrang keyboard ensemble, there are also several improvisations carried out by the gondrang player accompanied by 3 toms and 2 cymbals as in the notation below.



Figure 5. Ornamentation and improvisation of the game Gondrang
(Nelson, 2025)

It can be seen in the notation above, gondrang has used the form of cymbals ride and crash notation as well as tom which is marked by semiquaver which in general This game technique is not used if sarunei is a melody carrier or in a traditional ensemble without any element of modern instruments because of the tempo and notes are many and close together.

Despite significant changes, several elements of continuity persist. The symbolic importance of the seven drums remains widely recognized, even when modern instruments are added. Core rhythmic cycles continue to define the identity of *Gondrang*, ensuring that audiences can still perceive the performance as authentically

Simalungun. Traditional repertoire names are retained, linking modern performances to their ritual heritage. In line with Nettl's framework, these continuities demonstrate how traditions strategically preserve essential markers of identity while permitting stylistic adaptation.

3.2.4. Analytical Synthesis

The findings demonstrate that *Gondrang* has experienced both structural change (new instrumentation, flexible ensembles, altered rhythmic applications) and stylistic change (expanded melody, faster tempos, richer ornamentation, theatrical performance expression). Yet, these changes coexist with continuity in rhythmic cycles and symbolic identity.

From Nettl's perspective, *Gondrang* exemplifies the tension between preservation and innovation: its survival in modern contexts depends on balancing respect for tradition with responsiveness to new cultural demands. From Titon's perspective, stylistic transformation reflects not only technical shifts but also broader changes in expressive values, as *Gondrang* moves from solemn ritual to dynamic performance. Together, these frameworks reveal how *Gondrang* has adapted musically while retaining its cultural essence.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that *Gondrang* has undergone significant transformations in both structure and style as it has moved from ritual contexts to modern stages. These transformations can best be understood through the complementary insights of Nettl and Titon.

4.1. Preservation and Innovation in *Gondrang* (Nettl)

Bruno Nettl (2005) observes that no musical tradition is ever static; rather, each exists in a constant state of negotiation between continuity and change. Traditions preserve certain elements to maintain cultural identity while simultaneously adopting innovations to ensure relevance. The case of *Gondrang* illustrates this principle with clarity.

On the one hand, continuity is evident in the persistence of the seven drums, the core rhythmic cycles (*pangindungi*, *panirang*, *paninting*), and the symbolic meanings attached to them. These elements serve as anchors of tradition, ensuring that *Gondrang* remains recognizable to both performers and audiences as Simalungun music, even when played in unfamiliar contexts such as a government-sponsored stage or a cultural festival.

On the other hand, innovation is seen in the incorporation of modern instruments such as keyboards and cymbals, the adoption of faster tempos, and the flexibility of ensemble formation. These changes respond to new performance environments and audience expectations. They represent what Nettl describes as the "creative survival strategy" of traditions without adaptation, *Gondrang* would risk losing its relevance in contemporary cultural life. Thus, the balance between preservation and innovation ensures the continuity of *Gondrang* as both a traditional and modern form.

4.2. Musical Style as Expression (Titon)

Jeff Todd Titon (2020) emphasizes that musical style encompasses not only sound patterns but also the expressive behaviors of performance. Style, in this sense, is a reflection of cultural values and a medium of communication between musicians and audiences. The stylistic changes in *Gondrang* demonstrate how cultural values in Simalungun society have shifted alongside performance contexts.

In ritual contexts, the style of *Gondrang* is solemn, restrained, and formulaic. The melody of the *sarunei* adheres to established modal structures, the tempo is steady and unhurried, ornamentation is minimal, and performance expression is subdued. These stylistic features embody values of reverence and spiritual focus, aligning the music with its role as a medium for ancestral communication.

In modern stage contexts, however, the style of *Gondrang* is markedly different. Melodies expand through keyboards and flutes, sometimes borrowing from popular diatonic tonalities. Tempos accelerate, and dynamics become more dramatic to energize audiences. Ornamentation becomes richer, and improvisation is encouraged, allowing musicians to showcase individual creativity. Performance gestures grow theatrical, with musicians interacting directly with audiences. These stylistic shifts reflect a reorientation of values from ritual efficacy toward cultural display and entertainment. Titon's framework highlights that these changes are not merely technical adjustments, but transformations in the very meaning of performance.

The combination of Nettl's and Titon's perspectives helps explain the recontextualization of *Gondrang*. When performed in rituals, the music is inseparable from its sacred context. Its structure and style are fixed to ensure ritual efficacy. When performed on stage, however, *Gondrang* is redefined as a cultural performance. The same rhythms and instruments become symbols of identity rather than vehicles of spirituality.

This recontextualization exemplifies how musical traditions adapt to multiple lifeworlds: sacred and secular, traditional and modern, local and global. Nettl would describe this as the negotiation of a tradition's survival, while Tilton would interpret it as the reshaping of style in response to new cultural values. Together, these frameworks reveal how *Gondrang* has become a “living tradition” that changes without losing its essence.

The changes observed in *Gondrang* resonate with broader patterns in world music traditions. Many ritual ensembles whether in Indonesia, Africa, or Latin America have adapted to modern stages by preserving their core structures while modifying style to suit entertainment contexts. The case of *Gondrang* contributes to comparative ethnomusicology by demonstrating how a relatively localized tradition in Simalungun embodies global patterns of musical change.

At the same time, this case emphasizes the agency of musicians. Changes in *Gondrang* are not only responses to external pressures such as modernization or globalization but also expressions of creativity and innovation by performers themselves. Musicians actively reinterpret tradition, negotiating between respect for ancestral forms and the desire to connect with contemporary audiences. This agency underscores Tilton's emphasis on style as lived practice, continuously shaped by performers' expressive choices.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the structural and stylistic changes of *Gondrang* in the Simalungun musical tradition, highlighting how the ensemble has evolved from its ritual setting into modern stage contexts. By focusing on musical sound and performance practice, the research has provided insights distinct from earlier studies that emphasized primarily the social and cultural functions of *Gondrang*. The analysis demonstrates that structural elements such as instrumentation, ensemble formation, and rhythmic cycles have undergone change through the incorporation of modern instruments, the reduction or flexibility of drummers, and the introduction of amplified sound systems. Yet the persistence of the seven drums and the continuity of core rhythmic patterns indicate that structural identity is actively preserved. At the same time, stylistic elements including melody, tempo, ornamentation, and performance expression have shifted significantly. While ritual performances were solemn, restrained, and formulaic, stage performances are marked by faster tempos, expanded melodic ranges, richer ornamentation, improvisation, and theatrical gestures. These stylistic adaptations reflect new cultural values, where entertainment and cultural display have become central.

From Nettl's perspective, the case of *Gondrang* exemplifies the negotiation between preservation and innovation. The ensemble survives in modern contexts precisely because it balances the retention of symbolic rhythmic structures with the creative adoption of new instruments and styles. From Tilton's perspective, stylistic transformation reflects deeper cultural shifts: the reorientation of *Gondrang* from a vehicle of ritual efficacy to a performance of cultural identity. The broader implication is that the transformation of *Gondrang* should not be understood as the decline of tradition but as its recontextualization. By maintaining continuity in structure while innovating in style, *Gondrang* demonstrates the resilience of musical traditions in the face of social, religious, and technological change. This finding resonates with global ethnomusicological observations, affirming that tradition and modernity are not opposites but interdependent forces shaping the life of music.

For the Simalungun community, these changes signify that *Gondrang* remains a living tradition—rooted in ancestral heritage yet responsive to contemporary realities. For ethnomusicology, this study underscores the importance of analyzing not only the external functions of music but also its internal musical dynamics, where sound and style themselves tell the story of cultural adaptation.

Future research could build upon this study by examining how audiences perceive these changes, how intergenerational transmission of *Gondrang* is affected, and how improvisation practices contribute to the ongoing negotiation of tradition. Such directions would further enrich our understanding of how musical heritage evolves in the twenty-first century.

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