

Defining Vocal Aesthetic Parameters in Tembang Sunda Cianjuran: A Case Study of the PTSC DAMAS Competition

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Abstract

This study develops a conceptual framework to define a distinguished *panembang* (vocalist) in *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* based on a case study of the PTSC DAMAS competition. Employing a qualitative research design, the study integrates triangulation methods data, techniques, and sources to enhance validity. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 12 key informants (including judges, *panembang*, and cultural experts), field observations, and document analysis. The analytical framework is based on A.A.M. Djelantik's aesthetic theory and uses Miles and Huberman's interactive model for data analysis. The study identifies five core parameters: *Bener* (accuracy), *Merenah* (proportionality), *Genah* (melodiousness), *Alus* (artistic refinement), and *Mulus* (flawless integration), each with context-specific indicators. These findings offer a culturally grounded yet methodologically rigorous model for evaluating performance quality in traditional Sundanese vocal arts. The proposed parameters offer a foundational step toward developing a more objective, transparent, and accountable judging system.

1. INTRODUCTION

Around the world, singing competitions are increasingly recognized not only as platforms for showcasing vocal talent but also as cultural arenas that shape artistic identity and public appreciation [1], [2], [3]. From global spectacles like the Eurovision Song Contest in Europe and American Idol in the United States to culturally embedded events such as the Enka Singing Contest in Japan and the Carnatic Music Competitions in India, these platforms have served as springboards for career formation and social recognition [4], [5], [6], [7], [8]. While many modern competitions have adopted standardized evaluative criteria, numerous traditional arts contests across Asia, including in Indonesia, continue to grapple with a critical problem: the absence of clearly articulated aesthetic parameters that can be applied fairly and consistently.

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One of the traditional art forms most affected by this issue is *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*. This classical vocal-instrumental genre emerged in Cianjur, West Java, and developed in the Priangan region during the 19th century [9]. This art form is characterized by a lyrical synergy between vocal performance and accompaniment by indigenous instruments such as the *kacapi indung*, *kacapi rincik*, *suling*, and *rebab* [10]. Among these components, the vocal element occupies a central position, functioning as the primary medium for aesthetic expression and emotional communication. The success of a *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* performance largely depends on the competence of the *panembang* (vocalist), who is expected not only to master technical aspects but also to embody interpretive sensitivity and expressive depth.

In this context, the *Pasanggiri Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* (PTSC), organized by *Daya Mahasiswa Sunda* (DAMAS) since 1962, has served as the most prestigious competitive arena for *panembang* [11]. Held biennially or triennially, PTSC DAMAS functions not only as a forum for artistic regeneration, but also as a benchmark for excellence and symbolic supremacy within the Cianjuran tradition. According to Enip Sukanda, a prominent figure in the genre, PTSC DAMAS is the “masterpiece” of all *pasanggiri* events. Although similar contests are hosted by other institutions such as RRI, KORPRI, and PINDAD, PTSC DAMAS continues to command unrivaled influence [12]. Its winners are often invited to perform at high-profile events and are widely recognized as exemplary vocalists. However, despite its status and significance, PTSC DAMAS has been increasingly marred by controversies—particularly concerning dissatisfaction with jury decisions, which are frequently criticized for being subjective and opaque.

Beneath its credibility and contributions to cultural preservation, PTSC DAMAS faces a fundamental evaluative flaw: the absence of formally defined, measurable, and academically accountable aesthetic parameters for vocal performance in *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*. Judging decisions continue to rely heavily on individual taste and lack a shared conceptual framework that can ensure objectivity. This absence of systematic evaluation has weakened the legitimacy of competition outcomes, sparked conflict among participants, and contributed to a significant decline in participation over the past decade (2016-2023). In the context of traditional vocal arts, where “beauty” is often associated with *rasa* (feeling or affect), evaluative systems based solely on personal preferences risk undermining artistic standards and perpetuating aesthetic ambiguity [13], [14].

Previous studies have examined *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* from various disciplinary perspectives. Van Zanten explored its anthropological dimensions [15], [16]; Williams investigated its role within urban communities [17]; Hermawan focused on gender aspects [18]; Rosliani analyzed ornamental formulas [19]; and Wiradiredja and Sukanda et al., among others, documented its historical development [20], [21]. However, to date, no research has explicitly defined the vocal aesthetic parameters necessary for a fair and systematic assessment in competitive contexts. This gap is especially critical given the shifting function of *pasanggiri* competitions from mere contests into arenas that shape cultural values, artistic identity, and *panembang* professionalism.

Sean Williams' seminal study further reinforces the urgency of this issue, *Competition in Sundanese Performing Arts in West Java, Indonesia*, which documents prevalent conflicts of interest such as former champions serving as judges for their students and external interventions by patrons or parents that influence adjudication outcomes [22]. In the absence of well-defined aesthetic standards, such contests become vulnerable to manipulation. This highlights the need for a context-sensitive, methodologically sound, and culturally anchored framework for evaluating *panembang* excellence.

This study addresses that void by formulating a set of vocal aesthetic parameters that are contextually grounded, empirically observable, and rooted in Sundanese cultural values. Drawing on A.A.M. Djelantik's aesthetic theory, which emphasizes three core dimensions: appearance, content/substance, and performance, this research proposes five evaluative parameters that encapsulate the principles of Sundanese vocal artistry: *Bener* (accuracy), *Merenah* (proportionality), *Genah* (melodiousness), *Alus* (artistic refinement), and *Mulus* (flawless integration) [23]. Beyond offering a conceptual contribution to the discourse on traditional vocal aesthetics, this framework provides actionable insights for *panembang* to enhance their competence while also presenting the potential for broader applicability across Indonesia's diverse vocal traditions.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in exploratory and descriptive inquiry to examine the nuanced aesthetic dimensions of vocal performance in *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*, with a particular focus on the PTSC DAMAS [24]. The central aim is to investigate how the notion of a "distinguished *panembang*" is constructed, assessed, and experienced within a performative and competitive framework.

A qualitative approach is adopted to explore the contextual and experiential nature of vocal aesthetics. This design enables an in-depth examination of local aesthetic values and subjective judgments that define artistic excellence in traditional music practices.

The study follows a case study approach, focusing on the PTSC DAMAS competition as a critical site for analysis [25]. PTSC DAMAS was selected due to its historical prestige and cultural legitimacy as a key arena for evaluating *panembang* excellence in *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*. The case study enables a focused investigation into the implicit and often unstandardized evaluative practices used by judges and practitioners.

Data collection employed three complementary techniques: participant observation of the competition and performances; in-depth interviews with key 12 informants representing four primary stakeholder groups: senior and award-winning young *panembang*, judges from various editions of the PTSC DAMAS competition, academics and practitioners with published work or teaching experience in *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*, cultural community leaders involved in mentoring and training emerging *panembang*; document analysis including judging rubrics, score sheets, audiovisual recordings, and PTSC DAMAS archives.

A total of 12 key informants participated in the study: Yus Wiradiredja, Dian Hendrayana, Rina Sarinah, Ubun Kubarsah, Neneng Dinar, Hery Suheryanto, Deni Hermawan, Rina Oesman, Ida Widawati, Ajat Sudrajat, Elis Rosliani, and Rosyanti. This diverse group ensured a comprehensive and balanced representation of viewpoints, ranging from technical expertise to critical reflections on judging practices.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three core components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification [26]. Data reduction involved selecting and condensing key information relevant to the study's focus on vocal aesthetic parameters. Data display was carried out through thematic matrices and narrative patterns, allowing the researcher to identify relationships and emerging categories. Conclusions were drawn inductively, referencing both Djelantik's aesthetic framework and culturally embedded values specific to *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, the study employed source triangulation. Interviews with *panembang*, judges, scholars, and community mentors were cross-verified with performance observations and supporting documents. This triangulation

method ensured that conclusions were grounded in empirical evidence and represented diverse yet converging perspectives on aesthetic practices in PTSC DAMAS.

The primary analytical tool is A.A.M. Djelantik's aesthetic framework, which comprises three core dimensions: Appearance, Content/substance, and Performance.

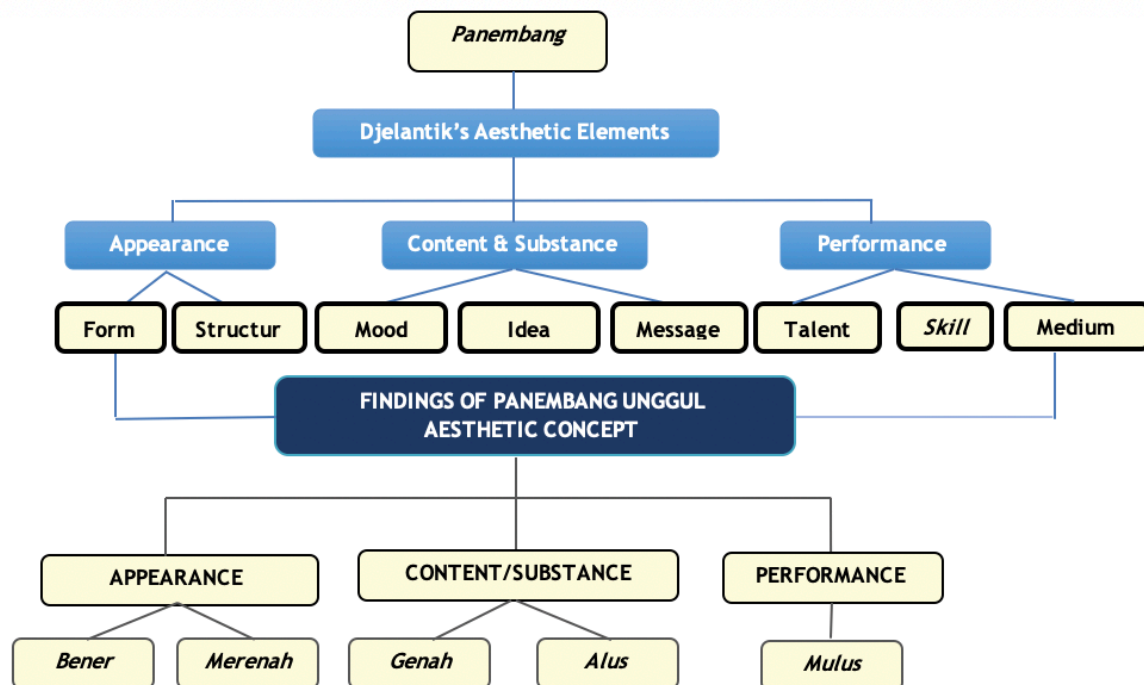


Figure 1. Adapting Djelantik's Aesthetic Concepts to Local Sundanese Karawitan Principles (Vocal Elements in Tembang Sunda Cianjuran)
[Illustration: Arif Budiman, 2025]

Within this adaptation, the appearance dimension incorporates *Bener* (technical accuracy) and *Merenah* (stylistic proportionality), providing an objective basis for performance assessment. The Content/substance dimension captures *Genah* (harmony) and *Alus* (artistic refinement), which represent the abstract, interpretative qualities of the performance. Finally, the Performance dimension is epitomized by *Mulus*, reflecting the flawless synthesis of all elements to create a cohesive aesthetic experience. This integrated framework not only facilitates an objective assessment of vocal performance through its measurable components but also honors the cultural complexity of *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* by incorporating the nuanced, emotional, and interpretative dimensions of the art form. Such an approach provides a systematic and comprehensive basis for evaluating the excellence of *panembang* in the PTSC DAMAS competition.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Defining Vocal Aesthetic Parameters of *Panembang Unggul*: A Case Study of the PTSC DAMAS Competition

This section provides an in-depth analysis of the concept of a distinguished *panembang* in *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* based on a case study of the PTSC DAMAS competition. Although PTSC DAMAS has been held since 1962 and is widely regarded as the primary benchmark of *panembang* excellence, its evaluation system continues to rely on a ranking-based approach

rather than a measurable scoring rubric. In practice, each judge is typically asked to select the top five performers from the pool of contestants. Final results are determined by the frequency of rankings across judges. For instance, if three out of five judges place contestant number one in fifth place, that contestant may be declared the winner—even if the remaining two judges rank other participants higher. This mechanism reflects the absence of clear and objective evaluation parameters, opening the door to subjective bias [27], [28], [29].

Although PTSC DAMAS has adopted basic evaluative categories such as *sora* (vocal production), *technique*, *wirahma* (rhythmic sensibility), and *expression*, in reality, the absence of precise, well-defined, and measurable criteria makes the classification of winners highly challenging—particularly in contexts of close competition. In some cases, even when scoring categories are formally used, it remains challenging to substantiate or validate score differences, such as contestant no. 1 receiving *sora*: 90, *technique*: 80, and *expression*: 70, while contestant no. 2 receives *sora*: 100, *technique*: 90, and *expression*: 80. Without methodologically justifiable indicators, such judgments lack transparency and reproducibility.

PASANGGIRI TEMBANG SUNDA CIANJURAN
DAYA MAHASISWA SUNDA KA-21 TAHUN 2016

Nomer Patandang 33

Babak FINAL
Golongan PAMEGET

| NO | LARAS | WANDA | K | LAGU | AJEN | | | JUMLAH |
|---------------------|-------------|------------|---|---|------|--------|--------------|--------|
| | | | | | SORA | TEHNIK | EKSPRESI | |
| 1 | SOROG | RARANCAGAN | W | Pangasahan | 85 | 90 | 90 | 355 |
| | | | P | [a] Adumanis [b] Dangdanggula Madenda | 85 | 90 | 90 | 355 |
| | | PANAMBIH | W | Bangbara | 85 | 90 | 90 | " |
| 2 | MANDALUNGAN | RARANCAGAN | W | Pagerbaya | 85 | 90 | 90 | " |
| | | | P | [a] Danglang Sunda [b] Paku Sarakan | 85 | 90 | 90 | " |
| | | PANAMBIH | W | Santika | 85 | 90 | 90 | " |
| 3 | SALENDRO | RARANCAGAN | W | Lampuyangan | 85 | 90 | 90 | " |
| | | | P | [a] Rakitan Pakuan [b] Pangauban | 85 | 90 | 90 | " |
| | | PANAMBIH | W | Bangbara Sang kuring | 85 | 90 | 90 | " |
| JUMLAH TOTAL | | | | | | | 3.195 | |

Implik-implik : W = Wajib P = Pilihan
[X] = Laya jeung pilihan patandang

Bandung, Oktober 2016

Gising Pangajén

Figure 2. Evaluation criteria format for the quality of *panembang* at PTSC DAMAS XXI in 2016 [Source: Daya Mahasiswa Sunda, 2016]

In response to this issue, the present study proposes a set of vocal aesthetic parameters that are contextually grounded, methodologically measurable, and rooted in Sundanese cultural values. It introduces five core parameters recognized by the local artistic community as benchmarks of *panembang* excellence: *Bener* (accuracy), *Merenah* (proportionality), *Genah* (melodiousness), *Alus* (artistic refinement), and *Mulus* (flawless integration). These parameters were derived through in-depth interviews, performance observations, and literature review, and collectively reflect how the Sundanese musical community conceptualizes and evaluates aesthetic quality within the *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* tradition.



Figure 3. The aesthetic components that shape the concept of a distinguished *panembang* [Illustration: Arif Budiman, 2025]

The following discussion systematically examines each of these parameters, along with their contextual and practice-based indicators.

3.2. Indicator of *Bener* Concept

The concept of *bener* in *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* refers to precision in adhering to established aesthetic conventions and performance norms. More than merely meaning "correct," *bener* signifies a faithful commitment to the structural, tonal, and technical demands inherent in the genre [30] [31]. Its indicators include mastery of *leunjeuran lagu* (complete memorization of the song's structure without deviations or mixing with other pieces), control over vocal quality—defined as not hollow, but instead round, clear, articulate, and full-bodied—and sensitivity to pitch accuracy, or *titincakan sora*, in order to avoid singing out of tune. Additionally, a *panembang* must demonstrate the ability to reach both low and high notes accurately. The performer is also expected to possess technical proficiency in vocal techniques distinctive to the *Cianjuran* style, such as producing a controlled vocal tone (not *ngagèwor*), achieved through a centered and contained vocal approach (*ditèngkèp* or *dipègèg*), along with the precise and expressive execution of vocal ornamentation (*dongkari*) in line with established aesthetic expectations [32], [33].



Figure 4. Winners of the 2019 PTSC DAMAS Competition, Held in Cianjur Regency and Attended by Participants from Across West Java. Exemplify High Vocal Standarts in the *Bener* Aspects [Source: Ajinumoto, 2019]

Within the competitive framework of PTSC DAMAS, such elements are crucial, especially given the subjective nature of aesthetic judgment. Without measurable parameters like *bener*, judges may differ in interpretation, leading to inconsistent evaluations and dissatisfaction among contestants. Thus, *bener* serves as a fundamental criterion that reflects not only technical precision but also the vocalist's legitimacy within Sundanese vocal aesthetics.

3.3. Indicator of *Merenah* Concept

The *merenah* concept emphasizes a vocalist's ability to render musical elements proportionally and contextually—particularly in terms of vocal dynamics, ornamentation, and emotional expression according to the character of each *wanda* (song type). Each *wanda* possesses distinct melodic structures and aesthetic qualities, and a *panembang* must align vocal delivery accordingly [21]. A misaligned performance style, such as using the *papantuan* technique in a *dedegungan* piece—is a clear sign of aesthetic inaccuracy and indicates a lack of interpretive maturity.



Figure 5. Gilang Angga Finalist from Garut, West Java, Winner of the *Wanda Dedegungan* Category in PTSC DAMAS 2016 and 2019, Exemplifies the Concept of *Merenah* Through Expressive Precision Aligned with *Wanda* Character
[Source: Daya Mahasiswa Sunda Archive, 2012]

Equally essential is the concept of *rasa*, or emotional depth, which forms the expressive core of *merenah*. Although intangible, *rasa* is perceived through cultivated musical intuition and deep interpretive experience [34]. A *panembang* must not only perform beautifully but must do so in alignment with the character and essence of each song. Thus, *merenah* serves as a critical measure of artistic sensitivity and culturally grounded musical excellence.

3.4. Indicator of *Genah* Concept

The concept of *genah* refers to a vocal quality that is pleasing, harmonious, and emotionally resonant. It represents the culmination of both *bener* (accuracy) and *merenah* (proportionality), realized through the seamless integration of melody, accompaniment, rhythm, and expressive nuance. In the vocal aesthetics of *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*, *genah* serves as a vital indicator of a *panembang*'s ability to interpret the song holistically—not merely adhering to established conventions but evoking an immersive auditory experience.

This requires a high level of *wirahma* (musical sensitivity), enabling all vocal elements to coalesce into a coherent and moving performance.



Figure 6. Judges Evaluating Participant Performances During the 2023 PTSC DAMAS Competition. The *Genah* Parameter—Representing Musical Harmony and Auditory Pleasantness—is a Key Indicator in Assessing the Vocal Quality of a *Panembang* [Source: Daya Mahasiswa Sunda Archive, 2023]

However, the pursuit of *genah* often provokes controversy, particularly when performers introduce new interpretations or ornamentation that diverge from traditional expectations. Cases involving prominent *panembang* such as Neneng Dinar (Winner of PTSC DAMAS in 1990 and 1993) and Rina Sarinah, illustrate that while such innovations remain within the aesthetic boundaries of *Cianjuran*, resistance from judges or audiences may result in unfavorable evaluations. Thus, *genah* entails more than the pleasantness of tone; it demands a comprehensive aesthetic understanding of regional styles, versional plurality, and ornamentation principles. Its implementation requires both *panembang* and adjudicators to exercise artistic sensitivity and possess broad aesthetic literacy.

3.5. Indicator of Alus Concept

In the vocal aesthetics of *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*, the concept of *alus* signifies an advanced stage of artistic mastery, characterized by the seamless integration of *bener* (accuracy), *merenah* (proportionality), and *genah* (melodiousness). A *panembang* who reaches this level displays not only technical perfection but also expressive maturity and interpretive depth. The *alus* quality is marked by vocal fluidity, emotional dynamism, and a resonant sense of *greget*—the compelling force that captivates audiences. Thus, *alus* transcends mere vocal clarity; it emerges from the performer's refined artistic sensibility and profound engagement with the emotional and aesthetic substance of the song.

A core indicator of *alus* lies in the ability to execute *senggol*—the distinctive vocal ornamentation reflecting individual and regional stylistic identity. Mastery of *senggol* requires comprehension of both musical factors (song structure, tuning, vocal techniques) and non-musical dimensions such as mood, aesthetic taste, and psychological presence during performance. *Alus* is not a product of rote memorization, but rather of cultivated interpretation and responsive improvisation. While *alus* reflects a near-perfect rendition, it does not equate to *mulus*, the flawless state, if any technical lapses remain. Hence, achieving *alus* is an essential milestone for any *panembang* aspiring toward artistic excellence and complete vocal presentation.



Figure 7. Renowned Maestros and Former PTSC DAMAS Champions—Yus Wiradiredja, Ida Widawati, Rosyanti, Neneng Fitri, and Imas Permas—are Celebrated for their Distinctive Senggol Styles that Influence Younger Panembang.

[Source: Pikiran Rakyat, accessed 2025]

3.6. Indicator of *Mulus* Concept

In the aesthetic framework of *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*, the concept of *mulus* represents the apex of vocal mastery, a performance that approaches perfection in its fluency, cohesiveness, and expressive power [35]. A *panembang* who attains *mulus* demonstrates a seamless integration of the four preceding aesthetic dimensions (*bener*, *merenah*, *genah*, and *alus*) into a unified, emotionally resonant musical delivery. At this stage, the singer transcends memorization, performing with spontaneity and interpretive depth, transforming technical skill into a compelling expressive force. What distinguishes *mulus* is the presence of radiant expressivity—the *panembang*'s ability to actualize the soul of the song and emotionally engage the audience through total musical embodiment.

Given its aspirational nature, *mulus* is rarely achieved with consistency; even minor lapses, such as forgotten lyrics or missed entries, can detract from the overall impression. However, such errors are often tolerable if they do not compromise the song's structural integrity or aesthetic identity. Thus, *mulus* is not merely about technical precision, but about delivering a musically holistic experience that elicits profound emotional responses from listeners—what Sundanese audiences describe as *muriding* (goosebumps) or *muringkak* (emotional resonance). Ultimately, mastery of *mulus* serves as the defining criterion for a distinguished *panembang* and is pivotal in adjudicating excellence within prestigious competitions like PTSC DAMAS.

The following table summarizes the five core aesthetic parameters previously discussed as a foundation for evaluating *panembang* quality in the PTSC DAMAS competition. This synthesis integrates technical, expressive, and cultural dimensions into a coherent evaluative framework.

Table 1. Defining Vocal Aesthetic Parameters in Sundanese Traditional Music: Insights into Vocal Excellence from PTSC DAMAS Competition
[Source: 1]

| Parameter | Evaluation Focus | Key Indicators | Aesthetic Objective |
|--|---|--|---|
| <i>Bener</i> (Accuracy) | Technical accuracy and vocal norms | Full memorization of song structure (<i>leunjeuran</i>), stable and clear voice quality, accurate <i>titincakan sora</i> (intonation), vocal techniques aligned with Cianjuran style (<i>sora tembang</i> -vocal production), range control, and mastery of cianjuran ornamentation (<i>dongkari</i>) | Ensures conformity with tradition and establishes the foundation of performance |
| <i>Merenah</i> (Proportional) | Proportional placement of vocal elements and expression | Stable vocal dynamics, accurate placement of <i>pedotan</i> (pauses) and ornamentation, expressive delivery aligned with the character of each <i>wanda</i> (song type) | Realizes expressive and technical balance in presentation |
| <i>Genah</i> (Melodiousness) | Musical harmony and auditory comfort | Harmonious handling of melody, rhythm, and <i>wirahma</i> (musical sensitivity); smooth, unobtrusive delivery | Creates an emotionally resonant and aesthetically pleasant performance |
| <i>Alus</i> (Artistic Refined) | Emotional depth and aesthetic vocal artistry | Flawless technique, creativity in <i>senggol</i> (stylistic inflections), strong expression, confident delivery | Produces a captivating and characterful musical impression |
| <i>Mulus</i> (Flawless Integration) | Holistic perfection in performance | Seamless integration of all aspects, no major errors, consistent and expressive delivery, coherence across the repertoire | Achieves a total presentation that moves the soul and leaves a lasting impression |

4. CONCLUSION

This study presents a significant breakthrough in developing culturally grounded aesthetic parameters for traditional vocal performance, particularly within the Tembang Sunda Cianjuran tradition. Drawing upon A.A.M. Djelantik's aesthetic framework and recontextualizing it through Sundanese cultural logic, this research articulates five key parameters of vocal excellence: *bener* (accuracy), *merenah* (proportionality), *genah* (harmonious delivery), *alus* (artistic refinement), and *mulus* (flawless integration). These

parameters were derived through a triangulated methodology, combining field observation, in-depth interviews, and literature review.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its departure from conventional, often subjective assessment practices, offering instead a conceptual framework that is both systematic and deeply rooted in local aesthetic sensibilities. While not prescribing a fixed scoring rubric, this framework lays a theoretical and practical foundation for developing a more equitable, transparent, and musically sensitive evaluative model—one that acknowledges nuance, context, and emotional resonance beyond the reach of rigid formalism.

This research does not claim to be exhaustive; instead, it proposes a conceptual map that invites further development. Future research is encouraged to build upon these findings by creating a weighted scoring rubric based on validated vocal parameters. Such efforts would enhance the accountability and professionalism of traditional music competitions while safeguarding the subtleties of local artistry.

Beyond its local context, this research contributes to global conversations on the preservation and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage. In an era marked by the commercialization and homogenization of art, culturally embedded and critically reflective approaches such as this are vital to sustaining the relevance, dignity, and continuity of traditional performance practices. While centered on PTSC DAMAS, the implications of this study extend far beyond, offering a replicable model for assessing traditional vocal excellence in other cultural contexts. Ultimately, this research bridges the gap between traditional artistic intuition and modern evaluative expectations, proposing a visionary framework for preserving artistic excellence while ensuring fairness and cultural integrity in the adjudication process.

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