

Gamelan music of Java

The God Sang Hyang Guru ruled from his mountain top in Medangkamulan. This was the boundary between the kingdoms of Surakarta and Madiun. Sang Hyang Guru created a single gong tuned to a certain pitch as a signal to summon all the Gods of these kingdoms together. As the messages he sent out to the other gods became more complicated there grew a need for more gongs tuned to different pitches.¹

This ancient story of the origins of the gamelan helps illustrate the relationship that the people of Java have with their music. This relationship mends myth and social dynamics with poetry and moral instruction to give a deep sense of place for the individual within the community. “Gamelan is moonlight and flowing water. It is pure and mysterious like moonlight. It forms for our ears no song, it is a state of being, like moonlight itself which lies poured out over the land” writes Leonhard Huizinga on the qualities he found in gamelan.² The people of Java have maintained a connection to the spiritual side of their lives through the vitality and substance of their myths and the invention and imagination in their telling.

The population of central Java is 30 million people and is one of the most densely populated regions in the world. The island of Java is part of a chain of islands stretching three thousand miles from the East Asian mainland. There are over three hundred ethnic groups living on these islands. There is an old saying in Java “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” which translated means essentially “Unity in diversity”.³ The two main cities in Java are the court cities of Surakarta and Yogyakarta. It is here that the art of gamelan, dance,

¹ Jennifer Lindsay, *Javanese Gamelan: Traditional orchestras of Indonesia* (Oxford University press Oxford New York 1992).

² Ruth T. Mcvey. *Indonesia: Music and Theatre in Java and Bali* (South east Asia studies Yale University 1963)

³ Jennifer Lindsay, *Javanese Gamelan: Traditional orchestras of Indonesia*(Oxford University press Oxford New York 1992)

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poetry and the wayang theatre (shadow puppet theatre) are performed and considered most correct. The arts are performed with equal devotion, albeit in different regional styles, all over the island.

Javanese religion is an amalgam of various ideas from the past. Today Java is predominately Muslim, however, Java has a deep and long history of Hindu-Buddism.⁴ The Borobudur and Prambanan temples are two of the greatest monuments of Hinduism and Buddhism found in central Java. The two epic stories of Java, Ramayana and Mahabharata, are comprised of heroes and gods from Hindu mythology. The epic Hindu story of Ramayana recounts the life of Rama, who is one of the incarnations of the god Vishnu. Rama and his wife, Sita, are both used as ideals of man and womanhood. The 90,000 stanzas of Mahabharata tell the story of Bharatas and is primarily a story about the moral duties of an individual set against a backdrop of war.⁵

The creation of the gamelan instruments is attributed to the Hindu gods, though they are said to have been created long before the temples at Borobudur and Prambanan where built, and the instruments are not traditionally Hindu. The story of Sang Hyang Guru surrounding the origins of the gamelan, is a prime example of its connections to something mysterious. Later in the story the god Sang Hyang Guru builds two more gongs to help simplify the messages. It is these three gongs that represent the first gamelan. It is believed that their original purpose was to send messages or signals between regions in Java.⁶

⁴ Jennifer Lindsay, Javanese Gamelan: Traditional orchestras of Indonesia(Oxford University press Oxford New York 1992)

⁵ John Hinnells, Dictionary of religions (Penguin press 1984)

⁶ Jennifer Lindsay, Javanese Gamelan: Traditional orchestras of Indonesia(Oxford University press Oxford New York 1992)

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Gamelan instruments are made primarily of metals such as iron and bronze; bronze being preferable but also the more expensive. Mallet instruments make up the largest portion of a Gamelan. Some of the mallet instruments are the gong, which is the largest hanging instrument in the Gamelan; the Siyem which is slightly smaller but used for a similar purpose; the Kempul, the smallest of the hanging instruments; and the kenong, the largest of the kettle gongs, which does not hang but rests on wooden frames. Also, among the kettle gongs, is the kempyang, kethuk, kempyang, boning barung, and the boning panerus. These instruments make up one section in the Gamelan called knobbed gong instruments. Another set in the gamelan is called the metal keyed instruments and this is comprised of instruments like the saron demung, saron burung, saron peking, gender slentem, genderbarung, gender panerus. The metal keyed instruments are played in the same technical manner as the knobbed gong instruments, albeit having a different musical purpose. The knobbed gong instruments are used to punctuate the phrases in the music and the metal keyed instruments are used for melody.

Gamelan musicians enjoy working hard on their music for many reasons but the meanings inherent within the music provide the foundation. The social element among gamelan players is important, as the feeling of togetherness created in these atmospheres is highly valued and therapeutic.⁷

There have been parallels drawn between gamelans and western orchestras. However, there is an important distinction that needs to be made between an orchestra in the western tradition and that of a gamelan in Java. In an orchestra, musicians bring their instruments with them to the performances and the instruments are an extension of their

⁷ Neill Sorrel, A guide to the gamelan (Faber and Faber limited 1990)

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voices as individuals.⁸ In the west, our experiences are more subjective. We sit separate from the performance and the impressions we take away can be highly personal.

However, in gamelan the instruments are not moved and are approached as objects imbued with distinctive powers. The people of Java are familiar with the ideas in the music, because the primary function, until recently, was to accompany performances of Wayang theatre.⁹

In the past, the only people who had any real contact with the gamelan instruments were the makers. The instruments are not even touched by the musicians except with mallets. The makers of gamelan instruments are very spiritual people within the community. Before working with the materials they ritually transformed themselves into a thirteenth century hero named Panji. While working they are addressed by their helpers and family as Panji.¹⁰ The practice today is still imbued with these spiritual elements though not as formally, as before.

An entire section within the gamelan is for melodic instruments. The gambang is a melodic instrument and the only instrument made with wooden keys. Like the knobbed gongs and the metal keyed instruments, it is played using mallets. The celepung is a stringed melodic instrument that is plucked with the thumb nail and sits at an angle to the player. The siter is like the celepung, but smaller, and sits on the floor in front of the player. The remaining melodic instruments are the suling, which is a bamboo flute; the rebab, a two stringed fiddle; and, of course, the voice. The last section, the percussion

⁸ Neill Sorrel, A guide to the gamelan (Faber and Faber limited 1990)

⁹ Neill Sorrel, A guide to the gamelan (Faber and Faber limited 1990)

¹⁰ Ruth T. Mcvey. Indonesia: Music and Theatre in Java and Bali (South east Asia studies Yale University 1963)

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section, is comprised of hand drums which vary in size. These are the only instruments touched directly with the hands.¹¹

All the instruments within one gamelan are made specifically for that gamelan. Instruments are not intermingled or exchanged. Unique spirits are believed to be in each set and the tuning of a gamelan is critical. There are two types of tunings, slendro and pelog, with slight variations possible. Each gamelan has a distinctive character and all the instruments within each gamelan must be kept together. The slendro tuning system is comprised of five pitches that are placed equally apart. There is the root note or barang, the gulu which is slightly sharp of the second degree in a major scale, the dada which is a perfect fourth, the lima which is a perfect fifth, and the enem which is slightly flat of a minor seventh. In slendro there are three pathet or modes and each is used for a specific type of composition. Players consider pelog tuning to be the more complicated of the two systems. The pelog is comprised of seven pitches fashioned to sound deliberately different from the slendro system. The root note or panunggul, the gulu which is slightly sharp of a half step above the root, the dada which is between a major second and a minor third, the pelog which is slightly flat of a tri tone, lima which is a perfect fifth, enem which is slightly flat of a minor sixth and barang which is between a major sixth and a minor seventh. The pelog system uses three pathet for various types of compositions.

A gamelan composition is called a gending. Each type of gending is composed for a specific function, such as dance or theatre. Gendings may be composed with specific moods in mind, such as sad, mischievous, cheerful, or humorous, or they may be part of

¹¹ William P. Malm, *Music cultures of the pacific, the near east, and Asia* (Prentice Hall Inc.) 1967

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births, deaths and weddings. The important point to underline, as Niell Sorrell points out in his book “A guide to the Gamelan”, is “The close interconnection of the arts in Java, which is quite common in Asia but much less so in Europe”. These connections do exist in Europe, but not toward the same function as in Java. The specific meanings in a play or dance must be accompanied by music to serve that specific purpose¹²

Wayang refers to a shadow puppet play by the name Wayang Kulit. There are other forms of Wayang called Wayang orang in which dancers are used as actors rather than puppets. Although dance has been a part of Javanese culture for as long as gamelan, its inclusion in wayang is a relatively new development. Wayang is a dramatic retelling of the myths of Java before Islam and functions on different levels. It is a means by which the people watching keep intimate and meaningful ties to the past. It also acts as an example or ideal for the Javanese people to live up to. The dhalang or puppeteer acts as the mediator between the spirit world and the audience. The dhalang narrates the entire story, directs the gamelan, sings, chants and moves the shadow puppets for 10 hours non-stop. This is quite a daunting task.¹³

The Wayang begins at about 8 o'clock in the evening and continues uninterrupted until 6 o'clock the next morning. The gamelan begins the evening, and then, at the appropriate time the dhalang removes a symbol from the center of the screen where the shadow puppet play is focused. The symbol could be a tree or mountain that represents both the beginning and end of the performance. The first stage of the wayang lasts until about midnight and is considered to symbolize youth. It is the time in the play where the main characters are introduced and moral and ethical instructions are given through

¹² Neill Sorrell, A guide to the gamelan (Faber and Faber limited 1990)

¹³ Neill Sorrell, A guide to the gamelan (Faber and Faber limited 1990)

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various scenes to be ideals for Javanese youth. At around midnight the gara-gara is introduced which represents the raging elements. It is at this point where the audience finally finds out exactly which myth is being portrayed. The clown plays an important role of counterbalancing the fighting, which symbolizes a young adult's struggles. It is what anthropology calls enculturation, the period where society places its identity on the young. As the night goes on the plot gets thicker and thicker until the final battle where evil is destroyed and good triumphs.¹⁴ What is the moral and ethical instruction given? What is one of the ideals of Javanese society?

Sometimes, what relates one culture to another can be non-specific. This means that many subtle details become lost in translation. In Java there is a word called "alus" which is not easily translated into English. Anderson Sutton in his book "Traditions of Gamelan music in Java" points out that the nearest translation of the word in English is "refinement".¹⁵ However, there is more meaning and importance given to alus in Javanese than is typically given to "refinement" in the west. "Alus" is a very important concept in Javanese society and art. A more exact definition is needed if we are to understand a complex concept.

"Alus" is one idea surrounding artistic and emotional expression in which instincts are sublimated as the source of great expression and meaning. The author Anderson Sutton in his book "Traditions of Gamelan music in Java" gives a good description. "The meaning of this term alus is to a certain extent covered by the idea of

¹⁴ Ruth T. Mcvey. Indonesia: Music and Theatre in Java and Bali (South east Asia studies Yale University 1963)

¹⁵ Anderson Sutton, . Traditions of Gamelan music In Java (Cambridge University press1991)

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smoothness, the quality of not being disturbed, spotted, uneven or discolored.

Smoothness of spirit means self-control, smoothness of appearance means beauty elegance, smoothness of behavior means politeness and sensitivity. Alus also implies intricacy, subtlety, even ambiguity.”

Gendings are compositions in Javanese gamelan and are comprised of melodic phrases which are punctuated by the large gong and subdivided within those phrases by the smaller gongs and drums. There is a polyrhythmic layering of these phrases by the melodic instruments which creates harmonies between the crossing melodies. The melodic instruments give the sensation of moving in different directions simultaneously. This is due in part to the tuning and the layering of the music. However, this sensation, that some describe as a horizontal motion, is still held to a cohesive intent¹⁶.

Across the island of Java there is a large variety of regional styles of gamelan. In some regions more emphasis is placed on a particular style over the others or on the use of certain instruments. Throughout the region there are two types of classifications used to describe a gamelan gending. Loud and soft are two styles used in gamelan that have an infinite variety within them. Loud style and soft style both use phrase making instruments, such as the gong, the kempul, the kenong, the ketuuk, and the kempyang. They provide punctuations within the melodic phrases. The tempos may vary during both styles in order to accentuate the theme or idea. The melodic instruments used in the loud style are the saron, and the bonong. The loud style is the more layered of the two types of gendings. The layering is typically thought of as the lowest pitched instrument is

¹⁶ Anderson Sutton, . Traditions of Gamelan music In Java (Cambridge University press1991)

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usually played the least and the highest pitched instruments the most. There are no solo instruments in the loud style, all the melodic instruments blend and the phrase making instruments and the rhythm give the emphasis in the piece. The soft style uses the melodic instruments of the voice, flute and rebab and they are the lead instruments. It is said that the slendro system was given to the Javanese by the God Sang Hyang Hendra and this is the tuning system most often used in soft style Gamelan. The melody in the soft style is said to be approached “as if remembering a dream”.¹⁷

In remarking about the musicality within Gamelan music it feels appropriate to mention a quote by Claude Debussy “Their conservatoire is the rhythm of the sea, the wind among the leaves and the thousand sounds of nature which they understand without approaching an arbitrary treatise. Their traditions reside in old songs built up throughout the centuries. Yet Javanese music is based on a type of counterpoint by comparison with which that of Palistrina is child’s play. And if we listen without European prejudice to the charm of their percussion we must confess that our percussion is like primitive noises at a country fair.”¹⁸

A new trend developed in Javanese society during the 1930’s, where competitions between gamelans became exciting entertainment. Perhaps the notion of composition came through the Dutch East Indian company. Prior to this contact, gamelan as “entertainment” was a concept they would not have understood. Today gamelan gendings are being performed as works of art, separate from any specific function and more

¹⁷ Jennifer Lindsay, *Javanese Gamelan: Traditional orchestras of Indonesia*(Oxford University press Oxford New York 1992)

¹⁸ Neill Sorrel, *A guide to the gamelan* (Faber and Faber limited 1990)

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individual pieces of expression. New institutions have been put in place to learn the Gamelan. The regional styles are in danger of being lost to a more uniform idea of the “proper style”. This all in a country whose philosophy is “unity in diversity”. The style of the administrative region of Yogyakarta has become the predominate musical type. There are some musicians who feel it unnecessary to create a uniformity in Java and that this new trend implies feudal overtones.¹⁹

Java, like the rest of the world, is in a state of cultural transition. Cross pollination of ideas between cultures is due, in large part, to the information highways that have been created. Java could serve as an example of a very distinctive culture learning to adapt to these new outside influences. Where is the music and culture of Java going? Niel Sorrell states that “When the History of gamelan in the west comes to be written, it may well provide a classic example of what anthropologists in the west call ‘Marginal Survival’ whereby the centre of a culture constantly changes and evolves while its farthest flung manifestations cling to traditional models, and even turn into museum cultures.” It is obvious that how people outside Java view gamelan music will not be the same as the Javanese themselves. However, these words from gamelan musician Harja Susilo may clarify an important accent on where the intention are within the music: “I find it interesting in retrospect that we should study dance and music not to become the best dancers and musicians, but to become better persons.”

¹⁹ Anderson Sutton, . Traditions of Gamelan music In Java (Cambridge University press1991)

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