Pious Precussionists
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MUSIC

Pious Precussionists

The complex rhythmic orchestral music of Bali rivals the best of classical traditions East or West. Played in temples for the Gods or at concerts for people, it is enjoying a sudden worldwide appreciation. A special report by Wayne Vitale.

On almost any evening in bali, one can hear the bell-like tones of the gamelan--from the high, shimmering melodies of the metallophones to the deep, resonant tones of the gongs and drums--drifting across the rice fields as villagers prepare for yet another temple ceremony. I first encountered gamelan not in Bali but in California when I sat in on a rehearsal of Gamelan Sekar Jaya, the American music group I later joined and now direct. Their Balinese teacher, Wayan Suweca, requested I play the kajar, the beat-keeping instrument. At the time, I was a music student at the University of California and fancied myself a pretty sophisticated musician. I thought keeping the beat should be easy. Everything went well until the middle of a complex composition when the whole piece turned on its head metrically, as if the downbeats were suddenly upbeats. I had no idea what was going on around me--this was something outside my musical experience. At that moment I was captured.

The first real Balinese gamelan (pronounced gha-meh-lon) I saw was in the village of Peliatan. From the first note they started to play the stage exploded with energy, made all the more amazing by the fact that the lead metallophone player was close to 70 years old. It was in great contrast with the other music which had begun to fascinate me at that time, Indian classical where there is a gradual build-up of tempo and complexity.

Even the structure of Balinese music seems unique. Over the centuries, Balinese musicians have developed a musical language in which layers of melody and complex figurations are interwoven to produce a dense tapestry of sound. The music is rehearsed to perfect synchrony by musicians in a typical village gamelan percussion orchestra. No religious or secular celebration is complete without music and dance.

Organizationally, music and dance troupes in Bali are rooted in the banjar --the fundamental unit of community within the Balinese village or town. Its guiding principle and philosophy is that any group must strive to exist as a coherent unit rather than as a collection of individuals. Unlike in Western or classical Indian music, a single part or musician cannot stand alone, but is integral to the whole. For this reason, solo performance is essentially nonexistent in Bali.

Gamelan music is interlocking, meaning that the faster layers of melodic rhythmic elaboration are divided into two complementary parts, which are played in close synchrony so that they fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. But this is much more than a technical exercise. I once saw two players in rehearsal working out their parts so that every physical gesture--from the way they raised their mallets to their body language and facial expressions--were completely matched. It was like a dance.

Because of the constant demand for musical performances, there is a very large number of active music and dance troupes on the island (one recent estimate put the total at well over 2,500). However, with the exception of large hotel or other tourist performances, little money is made.

The most common kind of gamelan consists of bronze keys suspended over bamboo resonators in carved wooden frames, together with a number of bronze gongs, drums, cymbals and flutes. But there are bamboo ensembles as well--entire orchestras of bamboo marimbas or flutes. All gamelan instruments, no matter how or where they are played, are believed to contain spiritual power which must be respected with proper offerings and rituals, depending on the occasion and the date in the Balinese calendar on which

the gamelan was originally made.

There is an amazing diversity of musical ensembles and genres. Some 25 different kind of gamelan ensembles have been documented, and the list grows as a younger generation of composers experiments with new combinations and types of instruments. The ensembles range in size from the small gender wayang, a quartet of musicians who play the demanding accompaniment for the wayang kulit shadow play, all the way up to the massive gamelan gong, whose 35 or 40 members perform the ancient and stately ceremonial pieces required for village rituals.

This astonishing degree of musical activity is not intended only to maintain the tradition, but to extend it. New works are constantly being created and premiered. If deemed worthy by the players and the audience, such pieces are added to the existing repertoire and may even gain island-wide popularity. The Balinese view this as a "grafting of new flowers onto the old tree" rather than a break with tradition--an attitude that insures the vitality of the arts here.

These ideals find clear expression today in the National Institute of the Arts in Denpasar, where many of the country's best performers, composers and choreographers work to develop and transmit their arts to a new generation. The Institute also serves as the focal point for an international community of artists and scholars interested in the Balinese performing arts. Although the academy is giving birth to a new generation of professionals, music remains by and large a nonprofessional, village endeavor.

People participate in these groups from a very young age, and one is often surprised to hear intricate pieces being performed by children's groups in which the average age is only 12 years. I once attended a rehearsal of the famed gamelan orchestra from the village of Pinda. As I scanned the players, mostly in the 30s or 40s at the time, I noticed that one of the two jublag players was almost invisible. All I could see were his hands coming up from behind the instrument. It dawned on me that this was a small child, probably no more than eight years old, yet he played his part perfectly. He and other

children in Pinda later formed their own group, which played at an adult level of virtuosity. People do not lower their expectations for child performers, with the result that they rise to the occasion and play with remarkable skill and concentration. But they still manage to remain children, and have fun in the process.

The gamelan selunding is a rare and sacred ensemble, with keys made of iron with simple trough resonators. The one at Asak village, for example, is so sacred it is kept in its own pavilion, which is not entered by anyone except the priests and musicians. On those rare occasions on which this gamelan is carried in a procession, all electrical cables above the street must be severed, so that no man-made object is above the sacred iron keys.

The bronze instruments are all hand-forged in Bali by using centuries-old techniques. Each orchestra is tuned to match a pentatonic, or five-tone, scale that is unique to that particular set of instruments. While all ensembles of a similar type will be tuned to approximately the same scale, there is no uniform standard of reference. Each thus presents a unique sonic universe.

Each tone in this Balinese tuning system has a corresponding tone tuned slightly higher or lower, so that when struck together the two notes produce a pulsating, tremolo effect. This "paired tuning" is responsible for the shimmering quality so characteristic of the Balinese gamelan.

Orchestras play at dazzling tempos--enough to keep up with even the most nimble-fingered classical pianist. Western musicians are amazed by the speed of these interlocking parts, by the pure unity of the ensemble and the fact that all the music is learned completely by heart. One baffled Western symphony orchestra conductor commented upon his first gamelan performance, "Well, I don't know what they are doing, but they are certainly doing it together."

This sophisticated music attracted the attention of composer Claude Debussy in 1889, and later of Colin McPhee in 1931 who moved to Bali for eight years.

McPhee especially was responsible for spreading knowledge of gamelan in the West. Today there are more than 200 gamelan in America alone, of which Sekar Jaya (below) is one of the most widely known. Gamelan has become far more than an exotic import, today influencing an entire generation of Western composers and spreading its magic among thousands of new devotees. **

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A Western Rendition

California's Gamelan Sekar Jaya wins acclaim in Bali

By Marc Perlman, Tufts, University, Massachusetts, USA

Sekar Jaya ("flowering Success") is an independent gamelan ensemble that has surpassed all other American groups in endurance, sense of purpose and acclaim. The group is based in northern California, and has been performing since 1980. The Indonesia press hailed it as "clearly the finest Balinese gamelan outside of Indonesia." Unlike in Bali, few temples in America need the services of a gamelan, and Sekar Jaya must fund-raise to pay its way.

In today's era of identity politics, Sekar Jaya's musical explorations may raise some eyebrows. These people were not born to Balinese music; they are not returning to their 'roots'. Sekar Jaya's composers are border-crossers. As a

result their work is potentially controversial; it can be interpreted as either homage or plunder. They have themselves struggled with the issue of musical exploitation, refusing at first to "meddle" with Balinese tradition. But the Balinese themselves have proved to be the most enthusiastic supporters of Sekar Jaya's innovative, cross-cultural musical experiments.