

[We Play to Entertain the Gods - And the People](#)

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MASTER MUSICIAN

We Play to Entertain the Gods - And the People

An interview with I Wayan Sinti of Bali

Performer, teacher, scholar and composer for both gamelan orchestra and dance, I Wayan Sinti has won abundant awards in Bali's annual Festival of Arts and is a recognized expert in classical music and vocal styles. With the help of translators Wayne Vitale, Sekar Jaya's director, and Rajakumar Manickam of Malaysia, he shared the traditional attitudes and beliefs of the Balinese gamelan musicians with hinduism today.

God and gamelan

This form of art is God's creation. Every time there is a ceremony in Bali, it is accompanied by gamelan music. One of the fundamental goals is to entertain the Gods, to make the Gods feel welcome and for them to enjoy us at the ceremony. We invite them. Through gamelan a feeling of gratitude for the Gods can be expressed--gratitude that we exist, that we eat, that we live, that we have art and that we have a way to create beauty.

Proper timing

The music supports the atmosphere of what's happening in a ceremony. You can't do a certain part of a ritual until it becomes apparent to everyone together that this is the right moment to do the next step. Part of that whole feeling is the music. The music is acting as a medium for people to connect to one another and to connect with the Gods who are visiting the temple.

Religious and secular music

The line between religious and secular in Balinese music and dance is not

clear. In a music festival you have two competing gamelan playing on opposite sides of the stage. On the surface that's a very secular kind of situation. People come and sit in the audience, and they scream and yell. Even so, there are many religious aspects. Before they do the performance each group does offerings. All the members of the gamelan group will pray in the temple for success and unity of the ensemble before they do the competition. Nothing is purely secular. Even in rehearsals, there are offerings.

Ancestors

My father and my grandfather were musicians. I do not know, but I hope they watch me from the heavens. Whenever we have ceremonies or cremation rites we offer, besides food, music and dance. We hope that the ancestors will enjoy these. Even though they are dead, they will wake up from the heavens.

Trance compositions

At times the priest will request certain songs to bring someone into a trance state. An ancestor or a particular God will actually come and inhabit someone and speak through them and tell them what's going on. Trance happens by building up the atmosphere around them with incense, offerings and certain kinds of music.

Philosophy of the notes

Every note in the gamelan has a partner note detuned from it slightly to create pulsation when they are hit together. It is a reflection of the Hindu concept of dualism [in the sense of male/female, Siva/Shakti]. If you play one of those notes without its partner, it is not complete. They are always hit together. In gongs you have a female gong and a male gong played together. They are even married in a ceremony. The drums as well. You can't have one drum. The male and female play different parts which interlock. The composite of what they play is important.

Women playing gamelan

Earlier it was the tradition that only the men played gamelan. Recently,

especially in a contest of the yearly gamelan festival, there are female groups. There are no mixed groups. The only time you ever see male and female together would be at the two academies in a learning situation.

Men and women playing together in concert in Bali
Maybe...

The new gamelan

In 1914 a new kind of music was invented based on the pre-existing styles. The older gamelan changed. They actually melted their keys down and made this new kind of instrument to play this new music, called Gong Kebyar. In the last 80 years, this kind of gamelan has become more widespread and popular. The old style was much plainer and less adorned. The new style ranges from hard-hitting and fast to sweet and mellow.

Gamelan outside Bali

We have no problem with gamelan being played in other countries. Some gamelan do have a special spiritual power. In consideration of that, those instruments should not play in certain situations, for example, in a pornographic film. From a cultural or artistic point of view, the people of Bali feel very strongly there should not only be tradition, but there should also be innovation and new music. Things that come from outside could be adapted to Balinese tradition.