



The Stirring Sound of Music

By Dipika Rai

The gamelan at the Asian Civilisations Museum, photo by Ingeborg Hartgerink-Grandia

Some of the most vivid memories for visitors to the spectacular islands of Indonesia are the haunting melody and liquid notes of the Javanese or Balinese gamelan. The soft tinkle of gently tapping hammers interspersed with the robust crash of gongs, sometimes breaking into a frenzy of sound like finely tuned rain, are among the movements performed by the gamelan, whose mellifluous refrain has been likened to the sound of moonlight on rushing water.

The rich diversity of cultures from Indonesia's many islands has also spilled into the area of music. Religious, cultural and geographical developments have prevented the growth of a single homogeneous Indonesian style, which makes the world of the gamelan even more fascinating for the listener. In Java alone the full-size gamelan, consisting of 70 pieces or more, has major stylistic differences occurring among the three main cultural areas: West, Central and East Java. All display a highly developed, although largely unwritten musical history. Many hundreds of orchestras are in full movement every day, keeping this tradition alive throughout the archipelago.

Though the instruments of the orchestra have existed since the ninth century (they are found in the relief carvings of Borobudur's ancient Buddhist temples), it is



Balinese saron (metallophone)

uncertain when they were grouped together to form an orchestra. All we know for certain is that the gamelan existed in the 14th century and was used then, much as it is today, to accompany *wayang kulit* (shadow theatre) and dance performances, and at such rites of passage as birth, marriage and death. The orchestra is also heard at *selamatan*s (purification ceremonies), *odalan*s (circumcision ceremonies) and welcome ceremonies.

To the uninitiated, all gamelan music may sound much the same: equally spontaneous, enchanting and beguiling. However, the music does have a basic structure and different pieces composed in the past by masters are in use even today. Sometimes, old pieces are used as base compositions and the players improvise within this prescribed context, much like jazz in the West. The result is that new music is created every day because the musicians play without notation. Different compositions are used to convey different emotions, for the most important role of the orchestra is to set the mood and define a situation. Therefore, the music played at a wedding will differ from that played at an *odalan*.

The gamelan, for the most part, is a percussion orchestra. The sounds range from deep resonating gongs to sharp clangs. The instruments of the gamelan have four musical functions in any piece. The bronze-keyed hammer-struck *saron* performs the main melodic



Hanging gongs and gangsa



Gamelan orchestra (1870-1891)

outline; the sonorous, deeper-sounding suspended gongs subdivide the piece into cyclic periods. Others, such as the two-headed drums, control the tempo of the entire ensemble, while the kettles and the thin bronze keys suspended over the resonating tubes give body and texture to the whole arrangement.

The *saron* is one of the most fascinating instruments on earth. It consists of neatly laid out bronze or brass plates of different thicknesses and widths, which when struck, emit sounds of varying tenor. The plates are affixed with wooden nails into a richly carved boat-shaped hollow stand. The cavity between the plates and the stand amplifies the sound. The carvings on the stands have ceremonial meaning: *naga* or dragon heads protect and purify, lion heads ensure success and fame, while floral patterns transport the instruments of the gamelan to the



Children having a gender lesson in Ubud, sketch by Siobhan Cool

world of the gods, above and apart from the daily routine of life.

Typically, the stands are carved from teak or jackfruit wood. A tree earmarked for a gamelan will be blessed by a priest before it is cut and carved. Once carved, the base is tinted with Chinese cinnabar red or ochre, after which the raised carving is gilded with *prada*, or liquid gold paint.

Often, the gamelan includes an all-male or all-female choir, and the *rebab*, a two-stringed bow lute and *suling*, a bamboo flute, are used to perform melodies in relatively free rhythm, contrasting with the organised structure of the music of the gamelan.

No ceremony in Indonesia is complete without the striking of the gong, or a *selamatan* accompanied by a gamelan performance. So widespread is the melody that it is common to hear it in the hinterland, simply wafting over the rice fields, seemingly without beginning or end. Gamelan is still a widespread folk art and it is usual to find players in several parts of the Indonesian archipelago, including the islands of Java, Bali, Madura and Lombok.

Since this is a folk art, gamelan players are trained to play from a very early age. In the morning, they go to school or work in the fields; come evening, the orchestra gathers for a serious two-hour rehearsal.

The forging of the instruments too, is a cottage industry, the art being passed down from father to son. Typically the metallic parts of the gamelan, such as the gongs and kettle drums, are made from brass. They are first cast into the required shape, then fired to red hot and beaten by as many as four men wielding heavy hammers in a strictly controlled rhythm, to produce the perfect instrument with the desired sound.

As the western world became familiar with Indonesian art and culture, the music of the gamelan captured the imagination of many music lovers and composers. Debussy, and more recently Godowsky, Bartok and Australian Peter Sculthorpe, have shown its distinct influence in their works.

The music of Indonesia has not been fully documented. Rare instruments are used on several islands in the region and not even people from other islands, let alone other countries, know anything about them. It may be that a variety of Indonesian music has yet to be realised, its richness discovered and enjoyed by all. In the meantime, the siren song of the gamelan continues to bewitch its listeners and encourages them to think of Indonesia once again.

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Except as noted, photos by Andra Leo



Gong chimes, part of a Balinese gamelan