

Asia Society
presents

Gamelan Dharma Swara: Balinese Music and Dance



Gamelan Dharma Swara

Photography by Byba Septit

Friday May 21, 2010 at 8:00 PM

Pre-performance lecture at 7:00 PM

by **Rachel Cooper**, Director of Cultural Programs, Asia Society



About Balinese Music and Dance

The sophisticated percussion-based *gamelan* music of Bali, and the highly refined dance with which it is performed, rank among the world's richest cultural traditions. Balinese performing arts have evolved over several hundred years to a level of development that dwarfs its physical and demographic dimensions. Though no larger than the state of Rhode Island with a population of about 3 million this tiny island has developed a tradition of music, dance and theater of enormous depth and vibrancy, which has attracted Western artists, scholars and audiences ever since the late 19th century.

No celebration, religious holiday or festival, private ceremony or large social gathering is considered complete without a performance of *gamelan* music and dance. Especially in the religious sphere, there is a general consensus that an event cannot reach its proper conclusion without a performance. In the eyes of the Balinese, such a performance satisfies the need of both the gods and men alike: through the enjoyment and diversion created by music and dance, both can “return home” with a feeling of well-being.

There are well over 1500 active troupes on Bali, all satisfying the constant demand for performance. The performing arts are practiced and developed incessantly, thereby maintaining the extraordinarily high standards of playing technique, ensemble and integration between music and dance. On almost any given evening, 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 a nearby village *gamelan* prepares for and upcoming temple ceremony.

People of all ages participate and many groups may eventually reach the maturity of an ensemble that has practiced and performed for 40 or 50 years with essentially unchanged membership. Some *gamelan* groups, just as Western symphonies, even outlive their original members and continue to exist for hundreds of years.

The performing arts are not solely intended to “maintain a tradition,” that is to continually practice and refine a static repertoire of compositions. New works are continually being created and premiered to audiences eager for new combinations of sound and dance movement, to be added the existing repertoire of the group if deemed worthy. In the metaphor of the Balinese, there is a desire to “graft new flowers onto the tree.” In doing so, the Balinese expand their tradition through a balanced attention to both new and old.

About Gamelan

The music of the *gamelan* is an intricate blend of sonorities, structured and patterned in unique rhythmic and melodic systems. More or less synonymous with the term “orchestra,” *gamelan* refers to the entire ensemble of bronze metallophones, gongs, flutes and drums, played by as few as four and as many as 40 people, with the majority of groups at about 25 members.

The term gamelan derives from gamel, an old Javanese word for handle or hammer, appropriately so since most of the instruments in the orchestra are percussive. The interlocking rhythmic and melodic patterns found in gamelan music are said by some to originate in the rhythms of the lesung -- stone or wooden mortars used for husking rice. Others ascribe these patterns to the rhythmic chanting of frogs in the rice fields after dusk or the wonderful cacophony of roosters crowing at dawn.

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The bronze instruments are all hand forged in Bali, using the ancient techniques of the highly respected guild of blacksmiths. Each *gamelan* is carefully tuned by filing or hammering the bronze keys and gongs to a pentatonic (5-tone) scale which is unique to that set of instruments; while all *gamelans* of a similar type will approximate the same scale, there is no standard of reference to bring them into exact uniformity. This is a clear expression of the Balinese belief in a *gamelan*'s individual vitality and spirit; each ensemble has a unique character.

Working almost completely without notation, the Balinese have evolved a unique and highly complex musical language that is based on the concept of *kotekan*, or interlocking parts. In this system, the intricate melodic figuration of the music is never played by a single musician or group of musicians; it is divided into two complementary parts, which when played together, form the composite figuration. Aside from the sheer sonic complexity that such patterning affords the music, it also allows the orchestra to play at tempos that would otherwise be impossible to achieve.

The basic principle underlying all *gamelan* music is that of stratification. It is essentially a technique of orchestration in which the density of notes played on each instrument is determined by its register -- higher instruments play more notes than lower ones. In addition, instruments are grouped according to their function. Gongs, for example, maintain the basic structure of the music, while mid-register metallophones (*gangsa*) and the horizontal tuned gongs (*reyong*) predominantly carry the theme and other instruments provide ornamentation. The *kendang*, wooden drums with skins stretched over both ends, lead the orchestra by controlling the tempo of the piece. All of these parts contribute to a core melody which is woven not harmonically (as are the independent voices of a Bach fugue), but heterophonically. Essentially, all the voices are variants of a single melody.

About Balinese Dance

Balinese dance reveals essential differences of technique and orientation when compared to Western dance tradition. Balinese dance and music are integrated to the point of unification. Instead of only a general correspondence or overall unity of mood and expression, each movement and gesture of Balinese dance is tightly interwoven with the moment --to-moment rhythmic impulse and character change of the music. In fact, the Balinese word for dance, *ngigel* means as much to “play *gamelan*” as “to dance.”

The critical link between the dancers and the musicians are the drummers. Through his intimate knowledge of the dance, the lead drummer -- who often performs and teaches dance as well as music -- is able to provide the cues and signals necessary to translate the detailed movements of the dancers' eyes, hands, torso and feet into musical gestures.

To achieve the absolute synchronization and unity of ensemble, both within the music and in its relationship to the dance, long hours of rehearsal are necessary. Like the music, dance is not “scored” or notated. The dances are passed from the masters of an older generation to the practitioners of the new.

Like the dances, the various parts of a *gamelan* composition are learned directly from a teacher, who repeats each individual musical strand until, through imitation, it is mastered by the orchestra player or group concerned. The parts are then combined so that the interlocking figurations sound as a unified whole. Finally the piece comes to life with subtle shadings and tempo changes coordinated every detail of gesture and accents of the dances.

About Bali

The Balinese take a spiritual view of their environment. Abundant harvests are attributed to the benign efforts of the goddess of rice and fertility, Dewi Sri. Divine spirits dwell in the mountains; dark forces lurk in the seas. Man's rightful place is in the middle ground between these two extremes, and each home, village and kingdom in Bali has traditionally been aligned along this mountain-sea axis.

Bali is one of the few non-Indian Hindu societies in the world. In Bali most concepts are divided into polarities: heaven and earth, sun and moon, day and night, gods and demons, men and women, hot and cold, strong and weak. The interaction of all these contrasting pairs works in harmony with each other, the world and one's fate.

There are more than 20,000 temples on Bali, each the focal point of many religious celebration and rituals. The basic tenet of the Balinese religion is the belief that the world belongs to the supreme god Sanghyang Widhi. The Balinese worship of life and the gods encompasses a wide range of art forms, making an art out of even the very simple necessities of everyday life.

History shows that Bali has been able to absorb and adapt foreign elements into its own resilient and flexible living tradition. The polyglot nature of Balinese art, with Indian, Hindu-Javanese, Chinese, Islamic and European influences all in evidence, is a striking example of the Balinese ability to digest and integrate.

Pre-performance Lecture/Demonstration

By **Rachel Cooper** and the dancers of Dharma Swara.

Rachel Cooper has been at the Asia Society since 1993 and is the Director for Cultural Programs and Performing Arts. She has extensive experience in the presentation of traditional and contemporary Asian performing arts. Current special projects include a three-year project titled *Creative Voices of Islam in Asia*. She directed the *Festival of Indonesia In Performance* which brought over 300 artists from Indonesia to venues across the United States. She is the co-founder and former director of the San Francisco Balinese Music and Dance company Gamelan Sekar Jaya which was formed in 1979. She lived in Indonesia from 1983-89.

Program

Tabuh Pisan Bangun Anyar was composed in 1978 by Bali's foremost living composer, I Wayan Beratha. In this prize-winning work Beratha extended the compositional possibilities of the ancient *lelambatan* repertoire—long-form instrumental works performed in temple ceremony contexts. For his *Tabuh Pisan*, Beratha incorporated elements of interlocking and orchestration from the dynamic kebyar repertoire while maintaining the languorous extended melodies of the classic form. Music arranged by I Nyoman Saptanyana. (17 min.)

Gabor A sacred offering dance performed throughout Bali. Within ceremonial temple contexts *Gabor* is performed within the sanctified inner courtyard of the Balinese Hindu temple. Dancers: Marantha Dawkins, Phoebe Dawkins, Anya Rome, Jenny Tanudjaja, Noopur Singha, Shoko Yamamuro (8 min.)

Tabuh Kreasi Abhinava composed by Andrew McGraw. An experimental instrumental that incorporates parodies and mashups of traditional gamelan techniques and musical patterns. Americanisms include quotes of jazz tunes, afro-American rhythms, and game show themes. If, as a listener, it helps to have a metaphor to hang on to, listen for the growth of an individual from the cellular level through adolescence, adulthood and finally dementia. (10 min.)

Intermission

Music Demonstration— a journey into the architecture of Balinese gamelan music

Kebyar Legong was composed in 1914 by Pan Wandres during the heady days of radical musical experimentation that coalesced in the *kebyar* music and dance style. The work, originally performed by boys but now by young women, portrays the sudden shifts of mood and the volcanic energy of youth. Several members of Dharma Swara studied this work in July, 2009 with Wandres' grandson, I Madé Keranca. Dancers: Ida Ayu Ari Candrawati (Dance Director), Phoebe Dawkins, Noopur Singha, Shoko Yamamuro (Dance Coordinator). Music arranged by I Nyoman Saptanyana. *35 min.*

Gamelan Dharma Swara Players

Lela Chapman, Bethany Collier, Elizabeth Behrend, Nick Cudahy, Vivian Fung, Eric Hung, Ardi Kuhn, Elizabeth Leininger, Michael Lipsey, Victoria Lo, Ellen Lueck, John MacDonald, Richard Marriott, Andrew McGraw (Executive Director), Joel Mellin, Nicole Reinsour, Willa Roberts, Christopher Romero (President, Arts Indonesia), I Nyoman Saptanyana (Artistic Director), Kadek Bagus Bhayu Saptanyana, Putu Bagus Krisna Saptanyana, Nabeen Singha, Peter Steele, Matthew Welch.

About our teachers

I Nyoman Saptanyana (Music Director) began playing gamelan at the age of seven, performing with his neighborhood ensemble in the village of Ubud. He obtained a bachelors degree in music from the Indonesian National Conservatory (ISI) in Denpasar, Bali in 1989, and went on to lead the Sadha Budaya group in Ubud from 1986-2000 as well as the ARMA ensemble, Kumara Sari, from 1995-2000. In 1999, he led the children's gamelan at ARMA to victory in the gamelan gong kebyar competition at the island-wide Bali Arts Festival. Mr. Saptanyana has performed in international tours in Asia and Europe. He is currently a cultural attaché at the Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia in New York.

Ida Ayu Ari Candrawati (Dance Director) began dancing the challenging *pelegongan* repertoire at age seven under the renowned teacher Cok Istri Agung of Singapadu village. Her professional dancing career began with the Sadha Budaya group of Ubud in 1982. In 1992 she graduated from the Indonesian National Conservatory (ISI) in Denpasar, Bali. She has performed in international tours in Asia and Europe. From 1995-2000 she danced with the ARMA ensemble, Kumara Sari, and in 1999 choreographed a new work that was performed at the island-wide Bali Arts Festival.

About Dharma Swara

Gamelan Dharma Swara is a part of Arts Indonesia (501c3), Christopher Romero, President, Jennifer Mangles, Treasurer. The ensemble is a community organization and rehearsals, held each Sunday between 1:00-5:00, are open to the public.

Ask us: info@dharmaswara.org

Join us: join@dharmaswara.org

Book us: concert-booking@dharmaswara.org

Gamelan Dharma Swara is in residence at the Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia in New York City and wishes to thank the consulate staff, and especially Consul General Trie Edi Mulyani for her years of consistent support of the ensemble and her commitment to the Indonesian performing arts.

Asia Society Staff

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