

ESSAY

The Gifts of the Pandemic

by Jody Diamond

When the pandemic hit, I was playing in a different gamelan group five days a week. Monday was Balinese gamelan at Bard College with Nyoman Suadin and Sue Pilla. Tuesday I took the train to New York City to play with Gamelan Son of Lion. Wednesday I taught at SUNY New Paltz with the instruments of Gamelan Si Betty. Thursday was gamelan degung across the river in Kingston with Dorcinda Knauth and the Catskill Mountain Gamelan. On Friday I went back to the city, joining Kusuma Laras at the Indonesian Consulate to play the classical music of Central Java. All of these came to a complete stop.

—Jody Diamond¹

For people who love playing gamelan, the pandemic was a disaster. Canceled concerts, inaccessible instruments, no social gatherings. How would we survive? A gamelan group might be defined as “people sitting near each other in a closed room and playing instruments.” When those activities are prohibited, how will this identity be transformed?

Life Online

Getting together online for lectures in the Nusantara Arts Gamelan Masters series² was a significant start to a new sense of membership in a global community. Participating in these online events expanded our identity beyond geography and created an international gathering of “gamelan lovers” (as Sapto Raharjo named us long ago) unified by a musical passion, although residing in disparate locations.

Desperate to continue sharing, gamelan teachers and artists invented new formats for the online world. Asnawa taught from his living room. Sekar Jaya hosted bilingual presentations. Wayang in Java changed dramatically, from Purbo Asmoro’s solo wayang to the live streaming and permanent posting of performances by many dhalang.³

Collaboration Redefined

As people adjusted to interacting virtually, new ways of collaborating emerged. Gamelan Naga Mas of Scotland devised a way to compose together by simultaneously coding online.⁴ Five Javanese friends, separated from each other, entered a singing contest by recording single lines that were later compiled into a whole verse.⁵

For the *Pekan Komponis* new music festival in Jakarta on November 6–7, 2021, I was honored to be invited to make a presentation with these two requirements: it had

to be all new work, and the files were due in four weeks. Wait—what? We had been in pandemic lockdown for over a year. I had no access to musicians, and no compositions in progress. As a composer steeped in the collective compositional processes of gamelan music, I would need a group to stimulate my creativity.

Fortunately, the pandemic had shown me that there was another way to compose—collaboration via online interaction. I invited several Indonesians to record a one-minute song in their regional language. Eighteen singers responded, some of whom I had never met. My arrangement of these vocal gems became the video BAHASAS.⁶ In addition, Wahyu Thooyib Pambayun and I collaborated on a new composition by integrating elements we admired in each other’s work with new material from each of us. I attended rehearsals on Zoom (at 5 am in my time zone!), and the final performance of “Asmarantaka” was recorded at ISI Surakarta.⁷

Neither of these pieces could have been conceived or created without the pandemic having normalized interaction on Zoom, making the online domain a place for artistic communication.

Mixing Modalities

Eventually, some group rehearsals were allowed, with strict social distancing protocols but no observers, and performances were re-imagined for an entirely virtual audience. Galuh Dewi Sinta Sari of Ndalem Sunartan Studio in Solo reconstructed older classical dances and interviewed elder dance masters.⁸ The gamelan at Wesleyan University, guided by Sumarsam and I.M. Harjito, presented a concert series with a smaller ensemble. For these events, I and many others experienced the gift of witnessing performances we would not have been able to attend in person.

New formats for online festivals exploded the options of possible participants. The 25th Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival 2020 interspersed five live performances with fifteen videos from groups in New Zealand, the USA, France, and other parts of Indonesia.⁹

Daring vs. Luring

Increasing familiarity with Zoom laid the foundation for conversations between people previously living separate lives. I enjoyed sitting in on meetings with Gamelan Dadali in Moscow, the only gamelan in Russia.

Without the pandemic, and without the widespread practice of gathering online, this pleasure would have been unthinkable. But the day arrived when my newly discovered Moscow cohort told me I would not be able to attend any more sessions because they were returning to “offline” rehearsals. I was sad to see the end of our cross-continental camaraderie, and sadder yet to see more groups who stopped sharing their activities online upon being allowed to perform for a local audience.

Our experience of pandemic restrictions changed how we conceptualize and locate our activities. The vocabulary for the return to in-person performing strikes me as significant. Instead of referring to public performances as “live,” this activity garnered the new nomenclature “offline,” revealing the duality of our Internet-centric lives and the pervasiveness of online activity during the pandemic. In Indonesian, the term for online is *daring* (from *dalam jaringan*, inside the net), later juxtaposed with *luring* (from *luar jaringan*, outside the net). So even when a return to previous formats became possible, the pandemic affected our conception of public performances. We define new activities by what they are not, instead of what they had been before.

The Gifts of the Pandemic

Although the pandemic wreaked havoc on two seasons, it has left us with the gifts of new contexts for our music. An international audience added to a local one. Performances permanently online in a domain not defined by time or space. An expanded community to admire and advance the arts that all of us—in every country, and every configuration of listeners and performers—care about so deeply.

Now that we have the technology and knowledge to make cyberspace a familiar neighborhood, I hope our newly-forged global connections will be maintained. To the new friends I discovered in this strange timeworld: I know you only because we co-inhabited cyberspace.

The most valuable legacy of the pandemic is the gift of ourselves to each other. Together, we can ensure that everyone in our new global family can always have a seat at the table. ▀

Endnotes

1. Diamond, Jody. “Gamelan Si Betty”, *Balungan* Vol. 14 2020, p. 89.
2. Dunning, Matthew, and Linda Hibbs. “Nusantara Arts Gamelan Masters Series.” *Balungan* Vol. 14 2020, pp. 27–33.
3. Diamond, Jody, and Linda Hibbs. “Only the Shadows Know: the evolving performance of wayang in Java.” *Balungan* Vol. 14 2020, pp. 41–43.
4. Waumsley, Katherine, Simon van der Walt, Heather Strohschein, Martin Sewell, and Bill Whitmer. “Golden Dragons Online: How Do We Keep Resonating?” *Balungan* Vol. 14 2020, pp. 38–40.
5. Majdi, Astita, and Linda Hibbs. “A Thousand Singing Voices: the Power of Javanese Macapat.” *Balungan* Vol. 14 2020, pp. 44–45.
6. Diamond, Jody, and Robin Richardson. “BAHASAS.” <https://youtu.be/Qv7pzPafpHA>
7. Diamond, Jody, and Wahyu Thooyib Pambayun. “Asmarantaka.” <https://youtu.be/qS2T0v1FHVo>
8. Sari, Dewi Galuh Sintia Sari. “Our Identity and Our Heritage: the Preservation of Javanese Dance.” *Balungan* Vol. 14 2020, pp. 36–37.
9. Wulu, Ari. “Gaung Gong, and the 25th Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival 2020.” *Balungan* Vol. 14 2020, pp. 94–95.

[Balungan Volume 14 2020](#) covered gamelan and related arts during the COVID era. One hundred pages, 70 contributors, and one global community.

