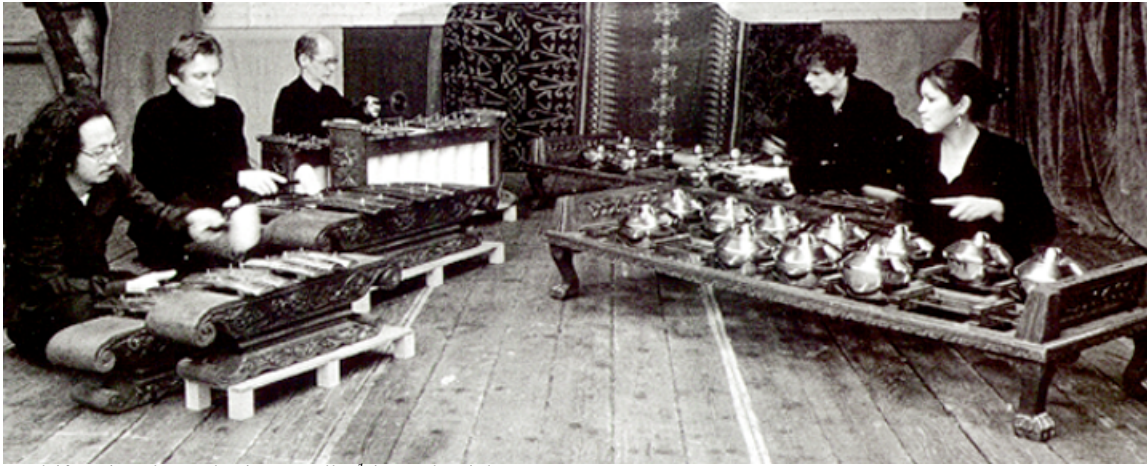


INTERVIEW

Sinta Wullur and the Diatonic Gamelan

by Huib Ramaer



Multifoam in rehearsal. Sinta Wullur¹ is on the right.

This is the story of a new gamelan tradition that was born in 1998 on western soil. On the 11th of November 1998 a fascinating musical event took place in the Tropical Museum in Amsterdam. Sinta Wullur presented the official premiere of her new project with the gamelan group Multifoam. They used a new set of gamelan instruments, built in Indonesia and tuned in the western diatonic system. This tuning allowed Sinta Wullur to invite a string quartet to join her gamelan group in an crossover experiment for which music still had to be written, or perhaps we should say 'invented', as there was no precedent. Wullur and the other composers were pioneers in creating and notating this new music.

How did Sinta Wullur happen to order gamelan instruments in tune with the piano? What led her to this idea? Of course she didn't get there "crossing one night's ice" as they say in Holland (where ice skating is a national sport). Sinta's development as a musician and as a composer is as crossover as anyone's career could possibly be: western influence in the east, followed by eastern influence in the west. She was born in Indonesia on November 16, 1958. Her mother was a piano teacher, so classical piano playing was Sinta's main musical influence. At home in Indonesia she heard Schubert and Beethoven,

whilst outside or on the radio sometimes the sounds of the gamelan got to her from a distance. By then she couldn't possibly know those instruments would determine her future life as a composer. When she was ten years old, she moved with her parents to Holland and after high school, she ended up at the Amsterdam conservatory, studying classical piano. When she saw a set of glittering gamelan instruments in the percussion department of this institution her perspective changed on the spot. She thought, instead of endlessly practicing the piano, it might be far more exciting to embark on a musical journey to her homeland, by playing the gamelan and so it appeared to be. We'd better let her tell us the story of how she developed as a gamelan musician and composer herself.

"Though I was born Indonesian, I only started to play the gamelan in Holland during the Javanese gamelan workshops led by Elsje Plantema when I was studying classical piano at the Conservatory. After getting my piano degree in 1983, I decided to study composition with Ton de Leeuw. A couple of months a year I went to Bali to study Balinese gamelan, [although I believe that] in search for new composition techniques using Indonesian characteristics, one should get

acquainted with the gamelan traditions of Java as well as Bali.

"I started to study gender wayang in Denpasar with I Nyoman Sudarna, learning the basic repertoire. When I returned to Holland I taught these pieces to the gender wayang ensemble "Irama", which I set up with Henrice Vonk. After a few years I extended the gender wayang-repertoire to include the gender wayang Batèl-repertoire (with added percussion parts). The "Irama" group had reached its peak in 1994 with a Wayang Tantri production with the participation of the dalang I Wayan Wija and gamelan leader I Nyoman Sudarna."

After ten years of experience with playing gamelan music in Holland, Sinta wanted to explore new areas, expanding her own possibilities as a performer as well as the musical possibilities of the gamelan itself.

"I started to get interested in vocal techniques in Indian and Javanese traditional music.s, which I learned and practiced in Amsterdam. [My interest in vocal music] was one of the reasons I left the Balinese gamelan ensemble. The other reason was the rise of a new idea—to set up a chromatic gamelan orchestra in well-tempered tuning. This idea came to me after I composed crossover pieces for both the Javanese gamelan and the western ensembles I worked with in Holland. For the modern gamelan group "Ensemble Gending" I composed two pieces Ganantara and Kaleidoscope. For the percussion ensemble "Slagwerkgroep Den Haag" I made the piece 10 Bulls, which uses a mixture of western percussion instruments,



gamelan instruments and female voice.

"Each time I made a composition I searched for a creation that could carry the identity of Indonesian as well as Western culture. But when I composed for a traditional gamelan orchestra I missed the possibilities of the 12 tones in an octave, and felt limited by the tuning problems when combining western instruments with the gamelan. When I composed for a western ensemble though, I missed the tone qualities of the gamelan instruments. Which percussion instrument can replace the sarons, the slenthem and the bonang? Certainly not the tubular bells or the vibraphone!"

A colleague of Sinta's told her of a chromatic gamelan ordered by Danish percussionist Ivan Hansen.

"During my visit to Denmark in 1990 I got the opportunity to see and hear this chromatically tuned set of Balinese gamelan instruments. After that I was convinced that the chromatically tuned gamelan would solve a lot of my problems in the search for the ideal crossover music.

"I ordered a basic set of chromatically tuned Javanese gamelan instruments from Pak Suhirdjan [of Yogyakarta]. To determine the tuning, I gave him a set of tuning forks that are normally used by piano tuners. The cases were built to hold the equivalent of "white and black keys."

Demung (left) and bonang (below). Note the top row of groups of two and three corresponding to the "black notes" of the piano.





Multifoon performing with string quartet.

The gamelan instruments and their ranges² were:

- 2 saron barung (c2 - c3)
- 2 saron demung (c1 - c2)
- 1 slenthem (c - c1)
- 1 peking (c3 - c4)
- 2 bonang (c1 - c2 and c#2 - c3)

"In 1995 the instruments were ready for the first concert. My composition *Lingkaran* for chromatic gamelan and percussion was performed as a part of an international ESEM conference for ethnomusicologists in Amsterdam. This project was called Gongs & Strings, and the group was called Multifoon, meaning "varied tones". I created four new works for chromatic gamelan and string quartet, one work for chromatic gamelan alone, and one piece which is a sort of concerto for chromatic gamelan and cello solo. "

After the concert series, Multifoon and the Odyssey String Quartet recorded those pieces [making perhaps the] first chromatic gamelan CD, with compositions for chromatic gamelan and string quartet by Christiaan D  telfsen, Hans van Zijp and Sinta Wullur.

In the composition *Mata Angin* Sinta explores the possibilities of integration between eastern and western musical cultures. In this respect *Mata Angin* isn't any different from her previous works for western ensembles or traditional gamelan ensemble.

Mata Angin in Indonesian means "the direction of the wind" and in the different sections of this work the "wind" of musical tradition in turn blows from the east as well as from the west. The first part functions as an overture and shows influences by Barton and Stravinsky set in a traditional gamelan framework. The second

movement slowly starts with melodic lines derived from Javanese gamelan tradition, and colored by expressive chords. This is followed by a very fascinating metrical section in which the gamelan instruments translate the Javanese tradition to modern times, whilst the strings feed the music with glissandi and trills, spiced with quartertone deviations in tuning. The last movement grasps the listener with a mixture of fighting music from the gamelan repertoire and the heroic gestures that are so typical for western romantic piano tradition. This also has a political connotation. While composing this piece Sinta Wullur followed the hectic revolution that was taking place in Indonesia, the developments of which are mirrored in *Mata Angin*. The overture is optimistic and shows the relief felt at the end of the Suharto regime. The middle section is a sad *funebre*, lamenting the victims of the Suharto regime, but also the new innocent victims of the revolution, like the Chinese inhabitants of Indonesia who are blamed for their welfare and education. With the fighting spirit of the last section Sinta Wullur stresses the fact that the atmosphere of dissatisfaction and chaos has not yet come to a halt. The following months Sinta Wullur starts a concert tour with the second project around the chromatic gamelan which is called "A Meeting of Two Traditions." In the compositions and arrangements for this project, the characteristics of western and Indonesian musical tradition confront each other. Existing traditional music of Indonesia as well as Europe is rearranged for chromatic gamelan in combination with the clarinet and violin. For instance Debussy's *The Snow of Dancing* will be brought to life on the chromatic gamelan whilst a Sundanese song will get an accompaniment on chromatic gamelan, violin and clarinet, in a musical style for which

the treatment of folksongs of the Italian composer Luciano Berio serve as a source of inspiration. Another arrangement is the composition *Kyrie* of the Dutch composer Jan Rokus van Rosendaal, originally composed for carillon. The project also features premieres of new works for chromatic gamelan and clarinet and/or violin by Christiaan Dètlefsen, Renadi Santoso, Sinta Wullur and the British composer Symon Clarke. Wullur's new chromatic gamelan has caused quite a stir in Dutch musical life. The fact that Peter Schat, one of Holland's most outstanding composers, has already written a composition for the "Koninklijk Concertgebouw Orchestra" with a chromatic gamelan as the percussion section proves that we are only at the beginning of a new refreshing period in music history. As the borders between European countries are torn down, so are the musical borders between east and west. ►

Notes

¹ For more information on Sinta Wullur and Multifoon, see <http://www.sintawullur.nl/>.

² As listed on their website <http://www.sintawullur.nl/> on July 31, 2004, the chromatic gamelan instruments of Multifoon consist of:

- 2 extended saron with a range of 2 and a half octaves: c" - f111

and one each of the following

- gendèr panerus
- gendèr barung
- slenthem: c – c1
- peking: c"1 – c""
- bonang panembung: c# - b
- bonang barung divided in 2 frames: c1 to c" and c#" to c"1
- bonang panerus divided in 2 frames: c" to c"1 and c111 to c""
- set of kempul: c – c1
- set of kenong: c1 – b1