

HISTORY

Gamelan in Canada: An Overview

by Laurent Bellemare

Editor's Introduction

The bulk of the following article was adapted from the author's 2021 MA thesis, "*La dissémination du Gamelan Indonésien au Canada: Perspectives historiques et caractéristiques régionales à Montréal, Vancouver et Toronto.*" Some changes were made to update the text as well as streamline it for this abridged English-language version. Accompanying this article is an updated directory of Canadian gamelan ensembles both past and present. (For more information, detailed case studies of three groups—Giri Kedaton, Vancouver Community Gamelan, and Evergreen Club Contemporary Gamelan—in chapters 5, 6, and 7 of the original thesis, which is available online through the Université de Montréal.)

In a perhaps unsurprising parallel to the USA, gamelan activity in Canada is concentrated in coastal (or at least, waterway-adjacent) urban centers—Vancouver to the west, Montreal and Toronto to the east. Likewise, the historical development of gamelan in Canada is inseparable from both evolving diplomatic relations with Indonesia and the growth of ethnomusicology in the latter half of the 20th century. Beyond these general observations, however, the respective trajectories of American and Canadian gamelan are indeed distinct. Readers will note the comparatively strong presence of Balinese gamelan in Canada, including long-standing gender wayang, semar pegulingan, and gamelan semaradana ensembles. Furthermore, the dissemination of gamelan in Canada owes much to the interests of contemporary composers rather than institutional or community ensembles dedicated to performing traditional repertoire.

Despite significant and ongoing exchanges between Canadian, American, and Indonesian gamelan communities, the author notes that "awareness of gamelan in a specifically Canadian context remains limited." It is hoped that this article, along with its accompanying directory, will help improve that awareness by shedding light on the unique history of gamelan in Canada.

—Ethan Schwartz, editor

THE EARLY HISTORY OF GAMELAN IN CANADA

First Encounters

Prior to the institutionalization of gamelan at Canadian universities beginning in the 1980s, the traditional arts of Indonesia were represented only sparingly in Canada. With the exception of Toronto's Evergreen Club Contemporary Gamelan (ECCG, est. 1983), all performances of Indonesian arts during this early period were imports rather than local initiatives. These various one-off events highlighted traditional artistic forms within either a tour or festival framework. It was not until the opening of gamelan classes in 1987 at the Université de Montréal (UdeM) that there was an opportunity for Canadians to engage with gamelan on a regular basis.

In 1957, three nights of Balinese performing arts were presented at the Théâtre Saint-Denis in Montreal with the title "*Danseurs de Bali.*" This troupe of artists from the village of Tabanan was organized by Hungarian impresario Paul Szilard and featured famous dancer I Ketut Marya. The same production reappeared on a subsequent tour in 1962, this time on Canada's west coast. "*Danseurs de Bali*" was presented twice in Vancouver and once in Victoria during April of that year with the support of the Indonesian government (Devries 2021). This form of cultural deployment was in line with then-president Sukarno's diplomatic vision for promoting Indonesia. Coverage of the Montreal event appeared in a *Le Devoir* article along with a note that "UNESCO has determined this year's [1957] objective to be cultural exchanges between the East and the West."¹

In the aftermath of the harrowing events of 1965–66, General Suharto became the second president of Indonesia (Margolin 2001). As a result of the political situation in Indonesia, gamelan performances in Canada were nonexistent during the late 1960s, and no Indonesia pavilion was organized for the 1967 Expo in Montreal. Gamelan did not resurface in Canada until the 1970s, when a Balinese sanggar from Sabtu toured North America in 1973 and 1977.² On both occasions, the group

1. See Pierre (1957). Thanks to Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre for providing this reference.

2. Andrew Timar (pers. comm.) recalls attending a Javanese gamelan performance circa 1970/1971 led by Dutch musician Bernard Suryabrata. However, this author could not retrieve any information confirming the details of such a performance.

stopped in Montreal to perform at the prestigious Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier.

The opening of the Darmasiswa scholarship in 1974 demonstrated the Indonesian government's renewed interest in having the outside world become directly involved in learning about their nation's arts and culture. It was during this same decade that a contingent of Quebec composers—Gilles Tremblay, Claude Vivier, John Rea, and José Evangelista—completed their trips to Indonesia, funded primarily through grants from the Canada Council for the Arts.³ Representing more than a diplomatic exercise, the involvement of these foreign actors in the dissemination of Indonesian arts contributed to training a generation of cultural ambassadors.

After their trip to Indonesia in the summer of 1976, Evangelista and his wife Matilde Asencio wasted no time in promoting Indonesian arts by co-programming nights of Javanese and Balinese wayang kulit in 1979 and 1982 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.⁴ These events were part of the couple's "*Traditions musicales du monde*" [Musical Traditions of the World] program. As a professor of composition at the University of Montreal, Evangelista taught the course "*Panorama des musiques du monde*" [Survey of World Music] for several decades, in which he introduced his students to a great variety of musical cultures, including those of Indonesia.

Expo '86

Prior to the 1986 World Exposition on Transportation and Communication in Vancouver, the few gamelan brought to Canada from Indonesia—in particular, those housed in the Indonesian consulates in Toronto and Vancouver—were rarely used and never showcased in public performance.⁵ In 1978, California's Berkeley Gamelan, directed by Daniel Schmidt, came to Vancouver and gave a performance of contemporary works at the independent art gallery Western Front. The 1985 Asia Pacific Festival in Vancouver, in which dozens of countries were represented through the performing arts, featured Balinese puppeteer I Wayan Wija as a guest artist. He performed a wayang tantri show adapted for North American audiences and accompanied by musicians from Sukawati village.⁶ This performance

3. Serge Garant, belonging to an older generation of composers, also visited Bali and Indonesia prior to the aforementioned individuals. However, he concluded that despite being fascinating, gamelan had no relevance for Western contemporary music.

4. The 1979 Javanese wayang event featured Sumarsam as dhalang, accompanied by the Wesleyan University gamelan group led by RM Sukanto, S. Darsono, and S. Ngaliman. The 1982 Balinese wayang event featured CL Reed as dhalang with musicians John Badanes and Andrew Toth.

5. This information is taken from page 5 of a document titled "Indonesian Gamelan at Simon Fraser University – History, present uses, and future projects," written in 1989 by Martin Bartlett for RB Brown (Dean of Arts). This document is part of the Martin Bartlett archive of the Special Collections at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver.

6. Wayang tantri is a subgenre of Balinese wayang kulit created

was emblematic of the cultural policies of Suharto's New Order that were on full display the following year at Expo '86's Indonesia pavilion. Despite their small number, these gamelan performances in the 1970s and early 1980s reveal a shift in Indonesia's attitude toward the promotion of its arts overseas. The earlier North American tours, in which the Indonesian government was only passively involved, gave way to a more aggressive promotion of arts for economic gain within the Canadian "mega-events" scene.⁷

Indonesian performing arts have long been a customary part of world expos, serving various interests depending on the era and balance of power in Indonesia. The first Canadian exhibition to showcase Indonesian arts, Expo '86, was no exception to this trend. It brought together more than 40 countries with the aim of promoting the city of Vancouver as a strategic trans-Pacific exchange hub. Indonesia maintained its own pavilion where a troupe of artists specially formed for the event presented daily concerts from May 2nd to October 13th. For this purpose, the Indonesian government brought over two Balinese and one Javanese gamelan with which the troupe performed a mixed repertoire as an overview of Indonesian music and dance.⁸

In conjunction with their artistic residency at the Expo, Javanese choreographer Sardono W. Kusumo and artistic director Amna S. Kusumo organized an international gamelan festival. This event brought together ensembles from Indonesia, the United States,⁹ Japan, and Europe, and featured Sumarsam, Sudarsono, Hardja Susilo, Rustopo, Shin Nakagawa, I Made Bandem, Rahayu Suppangah, Dieter Mack, Alex Roth, Jody Diamond, Michael Tenzer, Vincent McDermott, Barbara Benary, Daniel Schmidt, José Evangelista, and Martin Bartlett as speakers. The resulting First International Gamelan Festival and Symposium took place from August 18th to 21st and focused on the contemporary reality of gamelan in Indonesia and around the world. A day devoted entirely to lectures stimulated exchanges and reflections on new composition for gamelan as well as the legitimacy of Western involvement in these traditions. The concerts presented within the framework of the festival highlighted contemporary composition in Indonesia, with the marginal portion devoted to traditional repertoire performed by the Expo's resident troupe.¹⁰

in the early 1980s by Wija. It notably features pelog-tuned gender wayang. One of the performers in this production was I Nyoman Wenter, who would teach the following year at Simon Fraser University's summer workshop for gamelan and dance.

7. To borrow a term from Roche (2000).

8. Dancers from the ad hoc troupe Pesta Nusantara showcased styles from regions as diverse as Sulawesi and Sumatra in addition to performing Balinese and Javanese dances. Individual dancers are unfortunately not credited in official programs and source documents.

9. The US ensembles in attendance were Sekar Jaya, Berkeley Gamelan, Boston Village Gamelan, Gamelan Son of Lion, Bay Area New Gamelan, Gamelan Si Betty, Gamelan Pacifica, and Kyai Guntur Sari/Portland Gamelan Ensemble.

10. The Indonesia Group Expo '86 featured the following artists:

While many important Indonesian and American members of the international gamelan community participated in the festival, Canadian presence was quite limited. Indeed, the only local participants of the festival were José Evangelista¹¹ and Martin Bartlett, composers teaching at UdeM and Vancouver's Simon Fraser University, respectively. Evergreen Club Contemporary Gamelan,¹² representing the emerging Toronto gamelan community, had intended on participating in the festival but canceled due to lack of funds. It was only as speakers that Evangelista and Bartlett took part in the festival, meaning that they were not representing any performance ensemble. Evangelista presented an analysis of his gamelan-inspired work *Motionless Move* (1980), whereas Bartlett offered a critique of the appropriation of gamelan within Western composition. In particular, Bartlett argued that the main interest of learning gamelan in-depth lies in the unprecedented access it offers to a more communal dimension of music, an aspect not always emphasized in Western traditions.

The First International Gamelan Festival and Symposium was significant in several respects. In addition to being the first large-scale event in Canada devoted entirely to gamelan, it was also the first major event for promoting exchanges and reflections on gamelan from a transnational perspective. It also offered a platform for several Indonesian composers to present their works, some of which were radically experimental. This event had a singular role in raising awareness of Indonesian contemporary music among the North American community (Cohen 2020:264–265). It was a key element in the promotion of Indonesian artists as creators and not just teachers of tradition, a dynamic that has since become well-integrated into North American gamelan circles.¹³ Pragmatically, this event provided a pretext for many experts scattered around the world to meet and develop long-term ties.¹⁴ For Canada, the involvement of Evangelista and Bartlett gave rise to the Montreal and Vancouver gamelan communities, which subsequently flourished.

Sardono W. Kusumo (director), Rahayu Supanggah, I Pande Made Sukerta, I Wayan Sadra, Blacius Subono, Nano Suratno, Karjono, Roesdiyantoro, Hadi Budiono, Supardi, Bambang Ginting, Sri Nartutik, I Wayan Sudana, I Ketut Partha, I Nyoman Catra, I Ketut Sudhana, Barlen Sutrisna, Rian Syafarina, Tri Nardono, Trustho, Sarjiwo, Sumaryono, I Ketut Saba, I Wayan Beratha, Bambang Sunarto, Suroto, Sukamso, Prasadiyanto, Mahdi Bahar, Siradjuddin, Andy Tiar Bachtar, and Sukasman (puppet designer).

11. Evangelista's wife Matilde Asencio (personal communication) has explained that Ed Herbst played an important role in the networking that facilitated the composer's participation at Expo '86.

12. At this time, the ensemble was known as Evergreen Club Gamelan Ensemble (Andrew Timar, personal communication, 6 June 2023). For the sake of consistency, this article uses their current name throughout, abbreviated ECCG.

13. These thoughts were also shared by Jody Diamond as part of the Gamelan Seminar given at the University of Montreal on 27 February 2020.

14. Testimony of Michael Tenzer from an interview conducted by Jonathan Goldman and Jeremy Stachan in 2019.

GAMELAN IN CANADIAN INSTITUTIONS

Gamelan as curriculum

Behind the scenes of Expo '86, a process of cultural diplomacy was underway between Indonesia and Canada. I Made Bandem, former rector of the Balinese arts academy ASTI Denpasar¹⁵ and government official, was tasked with forming the Expo's resident gamelan troupe. In his welcome address, he shared a history of contact between Indonesian music and the Western world. Furthermore, as part of the Suharto regime's established practice of gifting gamelan to overseas institutions in order to spread knowledge about Indonesian culture (Cohen 2019:269), the three gamelan present at Expo '86 were donated to Canadian universities the day after the event ended, on the condition that the instruments would be used in perpetuity. This diplomatic gesture on the part of the Indonesian authorities was ultimately made possible thanks to the efforts of Bartlett and Evangelista.

Looking to enrich the music departments of their respective universities, Bartlett and Evangelista saw an opportunity to expedite the otherwise complex process of acquiring a gamelan, effectively bypassing some of the administrative negotiations normally required to secure such an investment. While both Bartlett and Evangelista were keen to obtain the Javanese instruments, the Indonesian ambassador to Canada, HE Adiwoso Abubakar, ultimately chose to give those instruments to Simon Fraser University (SFU), a gesture that recognized the institution's involvement in the creation of a Javanese music workshop (described below) during Expo '86.¹⁶ Thus, SFU inherited the Expo's Javanese gamelan, whereas UdeM obtained the Balinese gong kebyar and gamelan angklung. While it was already customary for the Indonesian government to bequeath gamelan to host countries of diplomatic events, such a gift was not self-evident. The relocation of these gamelan to SFU and UdeM, and their continued use ever since, can be attributed to the efforts and expertise of individual professors rather than university administrations. In this way, Expo '86 had a major impact on the subsequent development of the Canadian gamelan scene.

Although SFU's Arts Center had no formal affiliation with the Expo's Indonesia pavilion, they took advantage of the daily performances and the presence of gamelan experts to set up a workshop through the university's Summer Institute that would enable participants to develop practical knowledge of gamelan, thus broadening their appreciation. This four-week intensive workshop took place in June, coinciding with the Expo but preceding

15. Today, Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Denpasar.

16. In fact, Evangelista had already submitted a proposal for the purchase of a Javanese gamelan in the Faculty of Music's 1981–1982 budget. In 1985 he had numerous exchanges with Dean Pierre Rolland on the subject, and planned to take advantage of his sabbatical in Java that same year to network and settle a number of logistical issues. The events of Expo 1986 preempted the outcome of these proceedings.



Figure 1. I Wayan Suweca teaching the Atelier de gamelan in the winter of 1988. Photo courtesy of Giri Kedaton.

the International Gamelan Festival and Symposium that August. Welcoming twenty musicians and ten dancers, the workshop focused primarily on learning the Central Javanese repertoire. Participants played on instruments lent to SFU by the Indonesian Consulate General and were taught by master musician K.R.T. Wasitodipuro.¹⁷ Several types of Balinese performing arts were also taught, such as gender wayang, kecak, and dance. The latter was present alongside Javanese dance thanks to the joint presence of teachers I Nyoman Wenten and his wife Nanik Wenten, daughter of Wasitodipuro.

While the program relied primarily on these guest teachers, musicians from the Expo's Indonesia pavilion nevertheless contributed by visiting workshop sessions and joining in a special closing event. Utilizing the Consulate General's gamelan, this four-hour performance of Javanese wayang kulit at Western Front was attended by a well-informed audience who had been practicing Javanese gamelan for a month.¹⁸ After the four-week workshop, some students who wished to continue learning gamelan were able to study with a few of the Expo's resident musicians for the remainder of the summer.¹⁹ A resounding success, this workshop set a precedent for learning gamelan at SFU even before the institution had officially established a practical

17. Named KPH Notoprojo or familiarly, Pak Cokro.

18. Led by dhalang Blacius Subono and featuring a sub-group of the Indonesia Group Expo '86 musicians. In this case, mainly students were attending. An informal student performance of Indonesian music and dance occurred earlier that same day, as reported by Martin Bartlett in a 1990 report.

19. This information is taken from a report written by Bartlett in May 1990, in which he describes the first two years of the gamelan's existence at SFU. For instance, Michael O'Neill remembers taking one Balinese rebab lesson from Pande Made Sukerta (e-mail exchange with the author, January 2024).

course in Javanese music as part of its curriculum. These summer workshops were held annually at SFU until 1997.²⁰

Immediately after the Expo, a community group unofficially located at SFU formed under Bartlett's tutelage. The first gamelan course for academic credit was offered in the fall of 1987 as a special subject, taught by Bartlett and his assistant Kenneth Newby, an experienced gamelan student. Having proven successful, a regular gamelan course was implemented at the frequency of one semester per academic year. However, according to a 1992 report by Bartlett, only two visiting professors were funded in the first six years of the course. At that time, the summer workshops remained the most reliable platform for studying gamelan with Indonesian teachers. This reality hindered the continuous learning of Javanese music in Vancouver. Nevertheless, a core group of musicians had formed what is now known as the **Vancouver Community Gamelan Society (VCG)**. By 1989, this group of students and summer workshop participants, many of them composers, had achieved a level of ability that enabled them to perform both traditional repertoire and contemporary works.²¹

Following the acquisition of its gong kebyar and gamelan angklung, in the fall of 1987, UdeM became the first and only French-speaking university in North America to offer a gamelan course, the "*Atelier de gamelan*." In that first year, Professor I Wayan Suweca, a virtuoso musician and teacher at ASTI (later ISI) Denpasar, took on the role of lecturer for the Atelier de gamelan under the

20. From 1994–1997, Western Front acted as the official host of these workshops.

21. A 1989 report written by Bartlett for composer Rudolph Komorous notes that the group gave a concert of traditional music at the Vancouver Board of Trade Indonesia Night and a series of ten performances of Alec Roth's contemporary work *The Tempest*.

supervision of Evangelista. The success of this arrangement prompted Evangelista to establish a formal agreement with ASTI. UdeM's Faculty of Music thus benefited from the residencies of various Balinese gamelan teachers between 1987 and 1995. In addition, it became the practice for such teachers to travel to Montreal with their wives and daughters, many of whom were skilled dancers.²² Taking advantage of their presence, the Faculty of Music developed a partnership with the physical education department at their home university and the dance department at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) to offer a unique training program in Balinese dance. With good institutional support and strong media interest, gamelan at UdeM enjoyed great popularity in its early years.²³

Following the model of music departments in the USA, the University of Montreal and Simon Fraser University began introducing cohorts of students to Indonesian music in 1987. By including gamelan among their course offerings, these institutions provided many students a window into Indonesian music. Additionally, the practical, performance-based dimension of these courses enabled a sustained representation of Indonesian culture within Canadian academic communities, notably through end-of-year concerts.

An Academic Asset

At UdeM the *Atelier de gamelan* [Gamelan Workshop] proved a great success from the moment it entered the music program. It was the first large ensemble performance course to be offered outside the classical and jazz curricula, as well as the only opportunity to learn a non-Western musical form. Over time, a core group of students formed Sekar Giri Kedaton.²⁴ This advanced division of the *Atelier de gamelan* began to give concerts outside the institutional framework of the course, greatly increasing the representation of Balinese culture within the Montreal music scene. Shortening its name to **Giri Kedaton**, the group gained the status of ensemble-in-residence at the Faculty of Music in 2002, alongside the *Nouvel Ensemble Moderne*. While Giri Kedaton's personnel has changed over the years, many musicians active during this early period have retained close ties with gamelan, even if they no longer frequent the ensemble or its parent institution.

22. I Nyoman Astita with Ni Putu Lastini and Ni Wulan Tisandi (1988–1989); I Wayan Suweca (Batubulan) with Ni Ketut Mariatni (1989–1992); I Wayan Suweca with Ni Ketut Suryatini (1992–1993); I Ketut Gedé Asnawa with Ni Putu Oka Mardiani (1993–1994); I Wayan Berata with Ni Luh Putu Kartika (1994–1995).

23. Information taken from a report entitled "Organization of the gamelan workshop," written by Evangelista in the autumn of 1988. This report is part of the private archives of José Evangelista and Matilde Asencio.

24. Balinese for "flower of the royal mountain," a name given by Professor I Wayan Suweca (from Denpasar) during his second teaching contract in 1992–1993. It references Montreal's Mount Royal, at the foot of which the university is located.

In Vancouver, the Vancouver Community Gamelan developed along similar lines, with Bartlett initially developing gamelan classes and workshops as an alternative to Western music at Simon Fraser. This group of gamelan students began giving off-campus performances in 1989. At that time, the ensemble went by both **Simon Fraser University Gamelan** and **Kyai Madu Sari**, the name of its instruments. The collective also incorporated other instruments acquired by some of its members, such as a smaller gamelan gadhon bought by Bartlett in 1990 and a set of gender wayang owned by Michael O'Neill.²⁵ The latter's **Beledrone** and **Turtle Bliss** are just two examples of projects started by students who fell in love with gamelan through SFU's classes. With the proliferation of gamelan ensembles in Vancouver and their cross-fertilizations, the VCG network has rapidly outgrown its original institutional framework.

Several other universities followed a similar path, often thanks to the initiative of a teacher versed in Indonesian music. Upon moving to Canada from the United Kingdom, where she had previously taught gamelan for five years, ethnomusicologist Annette Sanger was hired in 1990 by University of Toronto's Faculty of Music. Her expertise in the study and teaching of Balinese music encouraged the university to purchase a *semar pegulingan* in 1993, which Sanger used for performance courses as well as the student group **Gamelan Dharma Santi**.²⁶ Additionally, Sanger taught gender wayang privately to interested students. In 2007, she formed the gender wayang quartet **Sekat Rat Nati** with her husband James Kippen and musicians John Carnes and Albert Wong, performing regularly around Toronto. That year, additional instruments were also purchased in Bali so that **Gamelan Dharma Santi** could learn *angklung* repertoire.²⁷ With financial support from the university, Sanger was able to bring guest artists on three occasions to teach and perform with her students. I Wayan Sinti and Cokorda Istri Nilawati were visiting artists in 2006 and 2008, followed by Vaughan Hatch and Putu Evie Suyadnyani of **Mekar Bhuana**. After a 25-year career at the University of Toronto, Sanger retired in 2018.

Michael Tenzer, a specialist in Balinese music, has been in charge of the gamelan course at Vancouver's University 25. Michael O'Neill owns this set, which he uses in his ensemble **Turtle Bliss**. He also founded the **Beledrone** ensemble, which uses some of the instruments of **Kyai Madu Sari**. In 1990, Martin Bartlett acquired a second gamelan in order to have more extracurricular freedom.

26. The *semar pegulingan* gamelan ensemble course was inaugurated in the fall of 1993. That launched the first Balinese music course in Canada west of Montreal, one which she led for a remarkable 25 years.

27. Although **Gamelan Dharma Shanti** primarily performed *semar pegulingan* repertoire, gong kebyar pieces were also studied. With the purchase of two small *kendang*, a *kempur*, and a *gentorag* in 2007, *angklung* pieces were incorporated in the group's programs. Gambuh and older *semar pegulingan* repertoire was taught during the **Mekar Bhuana** residency in 2013. The group also performed a Balinese arrangement of a Javanese piece with Toronto-based artists Wiryawan Padmonojati and Ita Dwi Lestari on several occasions.

of British Columbia since beginning his teaching position in 1996. This course laid the groundwork for **Gamelan Gita Asmara**, an ensemble focusing on the gong kebyar and semaradana repertoire that split off from the university in 2005. Gita Asmara has hosted several resident Balinese teachers and artists over the years, including Dewa Ketut Alit (2001–2004), I Wayan Sudirana (2004–2013), I Putu Gede Sukaryana “Balot” (2017–2021), and I Putu Swaryandana Ichi Oka “Ryan” (2022–2025). In 2003 and again in 2006, Tenzer brought members from Gita Asmara to Pengosekan village to create contemporary pieces with Gamelan Çudamani.²⁸ The ensemble completed yet another tour of Bali in 2013 under the direction of Sudirana in the final year of his teaching residency. In addition to performing a variety of Balinese repertoire (owing to its tonally-expanded Semaradana instruments), Gita Asmara often commissions contemporary works from its visiting artists. **Gamelan Bike-Bike**, founded by George Rahi, stems from this lineage of Balinese music-making in Vancouver. Complete with Balinese gongs and kendang, Gamelan Bike-Bike uses instruments made of recycled bicycle parts and features current and former Gita Asmara members. The group performs contemporary works, including several composed by I Putu Gede Sukaryana, also known as Balot, during his residency at the University of British Columbia.

In 1999, Evergreen Club Contemporary Gamelan (ECCG) founder Jon Siddall, who had moved to British Columbia to work for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as a radio music producer, re-acquired his gamelan degung, **Si Pawit**.²⁹ Since then, Siddall has used this gamelan to teach a studio music course at Vancouver Community College. Siddall often has his students learn his compositions as well as other contemporary and experimental works.³⁰ This penchant for new works echoes Siddall’s initial motivation for acquiring a gamelan when forming ECCG in 1983. Moreover, the presence of an active gamelan degung at the Vancouver Community College adds a Sundanese flavor to the array of gamelan in the city today.

Many more instructional programs have since been opened up around the country, whether in an academic context or otherwise. One notable example is the Javanese group spearheaded by Sutrisno Hartana at the University of Victoria during his doctoral studies in 2009–2017. The **Busy Island Gamelan** (dubbed The Victoria B.I.G. Band) played on a slendro gamelan borrowed from the Consulate General. Busy Island Gamelan performed its Yogyakarta-

28. Eleven musicians from Vancouver participated in the project, some of whom played western instruments. The result of this collaboration is the experimental piece *Underleaf* (2006).

29. ECCG then ordered a new bronze degung set from Tentrem Sarwanto in Surakarta. Uniquely, this gamelan degung was designed with an additional sorog tone in the melodic instruments. ECCG musicians Andrew Timar, Mark Duggan, and Paul Ormandy traveled to Pak Tentrem’s workshop to negotiate details of the new degung’s range and tuning.

30. Notably, a performance with a hip-hop dancer at the event “Gamelan at the Roundhouse” (26–27 April 2018).

style repertoire at SFU for a 2012 diplomatic event celebrating 60 years of Indonesia–Canada relations.

Percussionists Ken Shorley and Bill Brennan both opened up classes in Sundanese music at the University of Acadia (Wolfville, Nova Scotia, 2009–) and Memorial University (St. John’s, Newfoundland, 2013–), respectively. They both use degung instruments manufactured by Tentrem Sarwanto (who also built ECCG’s current gamelan) and are informed by their experiences as former members of ECCG. These cases reinforce the pedagogical potential that all styles and types of gamelan embody while affirming higher education’s role in supporting the existence of these traditions outside of Indonesia.

IN DIALOGUE WITH INDONESIA

Gamelan as Influence

Gamelan has long been a source of inspiration for Western composers, including those hailing from Canada. The 1970s in particular were rich with trips to Java and Bali that informed new musical works. Since gamelan’s implantation in the country’s musical networks in the 1980s, engagement with Indonesian music has flourished. Over the course of four decades, such proximity has spawned various interactions with gamelan, ranging from the use of gamelan instruments as a novel sound source to the formation of deep bonds with Indonesian teachers. This section examines the different ways in which Canadian students and artists have engaged with Indonesian music.

Similar to the aftermath of Claude Debussy encountering gamelan during the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris,³¹ the works of several Canadian composers are also marked by the influence of gamelan. First among this group is undoubtedly Colin McPhee, a Montrealer by birth who lived in New York and composed within the modernist movement. His interest in Asian musical traditions—and more specifically, his curiosity for the music of Bali—led him to live on the island for extended periods between 1931 and 1939. His activities there, which were mainly concerned with the documentation and preservation of endangered forms of gamelan, largely kept him away from composing.³² However, he left behind one symphonic work from these years, *Tabuh-Tabuhan* (1936), that makes direct homage to Balinese gamelan. In this piece, McPhee imitates Balinese gamelan through the use of ornamentation techniques and pentatonic modes. This influence is also reflected in his transcriptions of Balinese gamelan pieces for two pianos,

31. Much has been written about the problem of identifying the type of gamelan Debussy witnessed at the Exposition. In all likelihood, what Debussy witnessed was a performance of Sundanese gamelan, on which an unusual mixture of Sundanese and Javanese repertoires was played, along with arrangements of American tunes. In this show, four dancers from the court of Mangkunegaran in Surakarta joined a troupe of musicians from West Java. For more details on this group, see Sumarsam (2013:92–106).

32. See the testimonies of those close to him in Michael Blackwood’s 1985 documentary *Colin McPhee: The Lure of Asian Music*.

grouped under the title *Balinese Ceremonial Music* (1934). These works by McPhee were pioneering, exemplifying the active study of gamelan in conjunction with its use as a compositional resource, thereby paving the way for subsequent generations of composers.³³

In 1973, composer Gilles Tremblay traveled through Asia and recorded various musical excerpts that would later be published as part of Radio-Québec's *Musique Sacrée: Coup D'Oeil Sur Les Expressions Du Religieux* (1977), an educational LP box set. Notably, it includes recordings of various types of Balinese and Javanese gamelan. Tremblay subsequently gave several lectures and made radio appearances to educate the public about these musical traditions. Among his compositions, gamelan manifests itself abstractly in the chamber work *Oralléluiants* (1975)³⁴ and explicitly in *L'Arbre de Borobudur* (1994), a work for chamber ensemble and gamelan degung performed by ECCG.

In 1976, composers John Rea and José Evangelista traveled together with their spouses to Bali, followed by Claude Vivier. The three composers were friends and part of the collective responsible for "*Les Événements du neuf*," a series of thematic concerts held between 1978 and 1990 that featured a diverse array of contemporary music. Early among these concerts was a tribute to Colin McPhee, presented during the premier season on April 9th, 1979. Balinese music, in addition to being showcased through

33. This author acknowledges the work of earlier Eurasian composers Paul Seelig and Constant van de Wall, although their contribution goes beyond the scope of this article. See Wibisono (2012).

34. For a detailed analysis of *Oralléluiants*, see Goldman (2018).

artwork and audiovisual projections, was later integrated into Vivier's and Evangelista's respective compositional languages. For Vivier, this influence is most evident in *Pulau Dewata* (1977), a work for open instrumentation that borrows many orchestration techniques, ornamentations, and rhythmic articulations from Balinese music.³⁵ His *Cinq chansons* (1980) for solo percussionist also highlights this influence through its use of gamelan instruments. The tragic death of Vivier in 1983 coincided with the peak of his cultural and compositional interest for Indonesia and its music. An iconic figure in Quebec composition, his work remains emblematic of contact between Western and Asian musical traditions.

A common feature of musical traditions around the world, heterophony describes musical textures in which several variations of the same melody occur simultaneously, producing interactions lying somewhere between monophony and polyphony. Passionate about a wide range of musical traditions, José Evangelista adopted heterophony as the main element of his compositional language. In addition to founding the Balinese gamelan course at UdeM in 1987, Evangelista composed orchestral works referencing gamelan, such as *Ô Bali* (1989) and *Ô Java* (1993). His involvement with the university's Balinese gamelan culminated in 1998 with the premiere of *Concerto Kebyar*, a work for gong kebyar and *ondes Martenot*.³⁶

35. For a detailed analysis of *Pulau Dewata*, see Marandola (2008).

36. From 2002 to 2006 José Evangelista gave a course on Balinese music theory as a complement to the Atelier de gamelan. In 2004 he composed a work for gong kebyar and orchestra in collaboration with I Nyoman Windha and Gamelan Sekar Jaya in California.



Figure 2. Busy Island Gamelan at the "Inspired by Java" earthquake relief concert in 2012. Photo courtesy of Timothy Gosley.



Figure 3. ECCG performing with Trichy Sankaran in December of 1984. Photo courtesy of Andrew Timar.

Returning to Debussy's exposure to gamelan, Nicholas Cook (2013) clarifies the nature of this influence on the composer's work and challenges some common assumptions. Cook explains that Debussy's knowledge of Western composition functioned as a cognitive filter, allowing him to interpret the gamelan's orchestration as similar to the counterpoint of European classical music. It is from this same angle that Jonathan Goldman (2018) approaches the analysis of Tremblay's *Oralléluiants*, in which the gamelan is likewise "recomposed" according to the personal background of the composer. These approximate incorporations of the musical language specific to gamelan are similar to the notion of "creative mishearings," as theorized by Andrew McGraw.³⁷ Such creative mishearings occur when concepts are borrowed from the music of another culture and transformed into new creative ideas that do not belong exclusively to either tradition (McGraw 2009:12–22). Whether understood as cognitive filters or creative mishearings, these misinterpretations are generators of innovative ideas rather than pale imitations. It is this type of interaction between Western composition and gamelan that took place in Quebec starting in the 1970s. In this way, gamelan has left an impression on academic composition circles in Quebec, just as it has elsewhere.³⁸ Evangelista expressed a similar conviction in stating that "All modern composers have been interested in the music of Indonesia because it is one of the most beautiful in the world. . . ."³⁹

Gamelan as a Resource

Contemporary works incorporating gamelan within more conventional formations have led many percussionists to become technically proficient at playing such instruments without necessarily becoming gamelan specialists. This

37. The concept of creative mishearings is itself adapted from creative misreadings, a concept theorized by literary critic Harold Bloom.

38. Several Canadian composers have experimented with parameters from the gamelan, such as its pentatonic modes and timbres. Note the vocal piece *Gamelan* (1976) by Raymond Murray Schafer, the piece *Kebyar* (1976) by Robert Aitken, as well as the piece *Galungan* (2010) by electroacoustic composer David Berezan. These examples are still in line with the gamelan as material and source of inspiration.

39. This quote comes from an interview with Evangelista following a gamelan master class organized by the Faculty of Music in 1987. This interview, the media of which is not identified, is part of the private archives of Evangelista and Matile Asencio.

addition of bronze percussion to the arsenal of sounds available to Western contemporary music can also be observed in the activities of certain Canadian ensembles.

ECCG, the majority of whose musicians began as percussionists with little prior knowledge of gamelan, illustrates this dynamic. With over 200 commissioned works, according to Blair Mackay's estimate, ECCG provides unprecedented access to gamelan for composers in Canada. An overview of the ensemble's discography reveals works by Walter Boudreau, Linda Caitlin Smith, James Tenney, Ana Sokolović, Alain Thibault, Gilles Tremblay, Lou Harrison, James Tenney, and John Cage, among others. Over time, ECCG has also strengthened its commitment to traditional gamelan. In order to explore Sundanese culture and music firsthand, Siddall studied in Bandung and Yogyakarta for nine months in 1987–1988 with the support of the Indonesian government's Darmasiswa program and the Canada Council for the Arts. Siddall's return to Toronto was quickly followed by his appointment as the Council's Music Officer in Ottawa. That year, composer and performer Andrew Timar, who had already served as ECCG's suling player for four years, traveled to Indonesia and received "two quite brief lessons on Sundanese suling" in Bandung (Ages 2009). Timar then served as ECCG's Artistic Director for over four years, after which he passed the torch to group member and percussionist Blair Mackay, who still leads the ensemble.

For its tenth anniversary concert season in 1993, ECCG organized a six-week degung teaching residency in Toronto for Sundanese master suling soloist Burhan Sukarma, holding rehearsals nearly every day. At the end of that period, they jointly performed a concert at the Glenn Gould Studio of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation which was later replayed on national radio. Followed by individual study trips by ensemble members as well as a group tour to Indonesia in 2002, the 1993 workshop with Sukarma infused the group's members with a core knowledge of degung repertoire and technique.^{40, 41}

The Nexus ensemble, whose commissioning network intersects with that of ECCG, owes its affinity with gamelan to the interests of its founding members. John Wyre, a seasoned percussionist, has long organized World Drums events, which blend percussive traditions from around the globe. The 1986 edition of this event presented

40. That knowledge was further increased in 2000 with a recording residency at the Banff School for the Arts in Alberta, Canada with Sukarma, as well as a Toronto artist residency in 2008 with renowned Sundanese composer and songsmith Nano Suratno and two subsequent residencies with Bandung musician-composer Ade Suparman in 2016 and 2018. These residencies focused on new Sundanese repertoire acquisition, adding singers to the group (a feature of Nano Suratno's residency), culminating in public concerts and studio recordings.

41. ECCG has done significant community outreach by lending its gamelan degung to community groups and workshops, most initiated and directed by Andrew Timar. For example, see the video [A Story From Clinton Street Public School](#) (Toronto: Inner City Angels and Evergreen Club Contemporary Gamelan).

at the Expo featured several musicians playing Sundanese drums. Wyre has also composed for ECCG. Bob Becker, another founding member of Nexus, owns Javanese gamelan instruments and formerly taught gamelan at Wesleyan University in the USA.

The Sixtrum ensemble, in residence at UdeM since 2007, uses several Balinese gongs and regularly borrows additional gongs or metallophone keys from university's Atelier de gamelan. Sixtrum's activities overlap with those of several other concert organizations and contemporary music ensembles, such as the Société de Musique Contemporaine du Québec and the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne. Also at UdeM, composer and professor Ana Sokolović established an annual competition in which a select student composes a work to be performed by the Atelier de gamelan. This initiative also contributes to the inclusion of gamelan as a reference ensemble in composition circles.

Gamelan as a Cultural Bridge

The bilateral relationship between UdeM and STSI Denpasar that formed when the Atelier de gamelan first opened enabled a number of students to further develop their gamelan and dance skills in Bali. Among them, Francine Aubry, Alain Kourie, and Sandra Wong were in Bali at the same time in the fall of 1989. It was through STSI that they developed their artistic networks, which included such notable figures as I Wayan Suweca from Kayumas and I Wayan Suweca from Batubulan, as well as Ni Ketut Suryatini and Ni Ketut Mariatni. Aubry is an important link in the transmission of Balinese dance in Montreal, having taught through the bachelor's program in contemporary dance at UQAM.⁴² Wong, who developed her skills between 1986 and 1995, likely represents Montreal's first virtuoso of Balinese music and dance. Her repeated stays in Bali led to her giving gender wayang performances alongside Balinese masters, notably during a 1995 North American tour.⁴³ More recently, Giri Kedaton's long-term collaborations with I Made Dewa Suparta and I Putu Arya Deva Suryanegara have strengthened Montreal's connection with Bali and its network of musicians.⁴⁴ In the case of Balinese dancer Ni Komang Swijani, her relocation to Montreal in the 1990s was independent of any artistic pursuit. She quickly found in Giri Kedaton an opportunity to keep her artistry close,

42. In turn, some of Aubry's students then went on to study in Bali, like dancer Annick Brault, who was active for many years with Giri Kedaton and the Atelier de gamelan. Information taken from a semi-directed interview with Annick Brault in Montreal, 24 January 2021.

43. The tour was facilitated by Éric Da Silva and led by dhalang I Wayan Wija and his musicians: I Ketut Agus Partha, I Ketut Buda Astra, I Komang Ariawan, and Sandra Wong.

44. I Dewa Made Suparta is a former member of Çudamani from Pengosekan village, whereas I Putu Arya Deva Suryanegara leads Naradha Gita, an ensemble he founded in his home village or Kerobokan.

and she has been dancing with the group and training new dancers for over thirty years.

For Canadian artists who may enjoy only passing contact with artists-in-residence, the training trip to Indonesia represents a logical, even inevitable, step in the development of the aspiring gamelan or dance specialist. While gamelan communities in Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto benefited from the knowledge of Indonesian experts relatively early in their development, overseas travel contributed greatly to diversifying the knowledge and raising the overall skill level within these ensembles. It is these contacts and cultural exchanges that have steered Canadian gamelan ensembles through the years, in some cases exerting a decisive influence on the evolution of their repertoires.

Gamelan communities in Canada, while not a direct product of the Indonesian diaspora, nevertheless represent privileged spaces for cultural exchange between Canadian and Indonesian artists. The number of Indonesian artists whose international careers were launched or enhanced by a stay in Canada speaks for itself. Sutrisno Hartana, hired over 25 years ago by the Indonesian Consulate General in Vancouver to teach Javanese gamelan, remains a central figure in the promotion, teaching, and dissemination of this artistic culture. Hartana's presence and sustained involvement in the Vancouver community has enabled the latter to benefit from the expertise of a Javanese artist and scholar on a regular basis.

The opening of the Atelier de gamelan at the University of Montreal in 1987 led to five Balinese master musicians coming to teach over an eight-year period. Often accompanied by their wives and children, these artists both shaped the city's understanding of Balinese gamelan and developed the international side of their careers. The residency of I Wayan Suweca "Kecil" from 1989 to 1992 is significant, as it gave him the opportunity to teach while obtaining a master's degree in percussion. From 2009 to 2013, I Dewa Made Suparta's position as a lecturer for the Atelier de gamelan was the cornerstone of his immigration to Canada. After moving to Waterloo in 2013 and assisting his wife Maisie Sum in the development of a gamelan course at the University of Waterloo, he was officially hired by the institution in September 2015. The presence of gamelan at UdeM prompted I Putu Arya Deva Suryanegara to pursue a graduate degree in composition while remaining artistically involved with Giri Kedaton. Also on the institutional side, Annette Sanger was able to secure funding to bring Balinese artists to Toronto on three occasions, including virtuoso I Wayan Sinti and his wife Cokorda Istri Nilawati, who stayed for a full university term in 2008.

As for Sundanese music, its most influential ambassador has been Burhan Sukarma via ECCG. The suling virtuoso settled in the United States in 1988 and has since been invited on numerous occasions by ECCG to teach and perform works with the ensemble. In 1993, Sukarma

served as the group's mentor for a six-week teaching residency. In addition, several of his compositions and arrangements feature among the recordings of Sundanese music produced by ECCG. The group also invited Nano Suratno for a shorter ten-day period to produce a concert of Sundanese folk music in 2008. More recently, ECCG organized artistic residencies for I Putu Arya Deva Suryanegara and Iwan Gunawan.⁴⁵

This review of Indonesian participation in the Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto gamelan communities provides only a rough sketch of the concrete impact such relationships have had on the careers of Indonesian artists. While some of these artists eventually emigrated to North America, others who taught on a temporary or periodic basis would later return to their homeland, their artistic practices having been nourished by these exchanges. This dynamic has also led some Canadian gamelan ensembles to travel to Indonesia. For some of these trips, presenting concerts was the primary objective, such as Gita Asmara's 2013 Balinese tour. Other trips have focused more on intercultural collaboration. Michael Tenzer's 2002 and 2006 projects with Çudamani and musicians from Vancouver are of this type. Even more emblematic of this trend is the long-term project *Semar in Lila Maya*, which artistically united VCG with the Javanese group Wargo Laras for over two years (2006–2007). This production, developed through a series of collaborative workshops, was presented in both Java and Canada.

These interactions clearly demonstrate how gamelan today functions as an international cultural network that enables artists from distant countries such as Canada and Indonesia to interact and exert a mutual influence on their respective environments. Although the nature and magnitude of such exchanges often depend on external constraints such as institutional support or grants, gamelan in Canada goes beyond the representation of Indonesian arts. Rather, it acts as a vehicle for artistic and cultural exchange around a tradition in perpetual development.

THE MISSION AND CULTURAL POLITICS OF GAMELAN IN CANADA

Converging Interests

With the First International Gamelan Festival and Symposium at Expo '86 as its catalyst, the institutionalization of gamelan in Canada found itself at the heart of a global debate on the place of gamelan outside Indonesia. Removed from its original cultural context, gamelan as practiced in North America, whatever its style and repertoire, inevitably distinguishes itself from traditional practice. Canada offers several models for the use and creative reappropriation of gamelan that go beyond the ethnomusicological objective of bi-musicality promoted by Mantle Hood beginning in the late 1950s. The

45. In Bandung, Iwan Gunawan founded the group Kyai Fatahillah, a leading ensemble in contemporary music for gamelan and in Sundanese music more generally.

present section will attempt to show how the three major gamelan communities that emerged in Canada from the 1980s onward negotiate these interests in different ways to create distinct places for themselves in the Canadian musical landscape.

From the outset, ECCG manifested as a new music ensemble with a modest connection to Sundanese musical repertoire and Indonesian culture. While half of the ensemble's inaugural concert in 1984 consisted of Sundanese pieces, Andrew Timar estimates that 90% of ECCG's overall repertoire today is made up of new works (Ages 2009). ECCG founder Jon Siddall first encountered gamelan when studying with Lou Harrison at Mills College in Oakland, California. While Siddall did not go as far as Harrison in terms of building instruments from scratch (just constructing the wooden frames with his father), the ensemble ultimately followed the model established by Harrison and William Colvig, who were more interested in composition, alternative tunings, and instrumental invention than reproducing traditional repertoire.⁴⁶ Lacking affiliation with any teaching establishment, ECCG was free from the pedagogical or scholarly pressures affecting other gamelan ensembles. Although ECCG's path has been to increase its expertise in traditional repertoire over time, the group's career is built around commissioned works by composers not necessarily versed in gamelan. Perhaps most importantly, ECCG developed before there were any resources in Canada to learn gamelan and was thus on its own in terms of finding and cultivating a sustainable model. Its inception occurred within a context differing greatly from that of the Vancouver and Montreal ensembles appearing in the aftermath of Expo '86.

For the Vancouver Community Gamelan, compositional motivations also played a part in the group's genesis. In his lecture at the Gamelan Festival in 1986, Bartlett expressed his skepticism about the motivations that lead Westerners to learn gamelan, explaining that interest in gamelan was above all pedagogical and that gamelan should not be the object of superficial appropriation for purposes of musical creation (Bartlett 1986). Bartlett did not compose for gamelan until 1993, shortly before his passing, and avoided any deliberate gamelan influence in his music. The early years of Gamelan Madu Sari, VCG's first constituent ensemble, were largely devoted to learning traditional Javanese gamelan with few exceptions (Miller 2005). Made up primarily of students who attended summer workshops at SFU, in which gamelan was presented as an alternative to Western forms of music (Bartlett 1986), the group's activities were nonetheless at least partially oriented toward the interests of composers.

46. Siddall was also influenced by the Steve Reich and Musicians ensemble in having his own percussion ensemble with which to compose and create new works (from an interview between Siddall and Goldman in 2013).

Indeed, the summer workshops of 1988 culminated in the production of a contemporary work composed by Kenneth Newby and choreographed by Linda Rabin. The ensemble continued to perform new works the following year, giving ten performances of *The Gamelan Tempest*, with music by British composer Alec Roth. According to former VCG member Christopher Miller, most of the ensemble's musicians waited around seven years before venturing into gamelan composition, in the meantime acquiring a good knowledge of the Javanese idiom. This negotiation between Javanese tradition and contemporary creativity enabled the ensemble to avoid the schism between purism and new composition. VCG also remained virtually impervious to the influence of Lou Harrison and other American gamelan proponents, distinguishing it from Toronto's ECCG (Miller 2005).

In Montreal, one of José Evangelista's main concerns was to expand the ethnomusicology course offerings by providing access to practical learning in the music of another culture. Critiquing the state of the program at UdeM at the time, Evangelista wrote a letter in 1985 to faculty dean Pierre Rolland in which he invoked the bi-musical learning that prevailed in many American ethnomusicology departments. In particular, he highlighted the varying levels of difficulty offered by a Javanese gamelan ensemble and underlined the popularity of his own theory course, "*Panorama des musiques du monde*." It was with this desire to make the gamelan accessible that Evangelista opened a course at the Faculty of Music, the Atelier de gamelan.

As with VCG, there was a restrained approach to the use of gamelan instruments for composition at UdeM. While most of the Balinese teachers invited through the STSI-UdeM partnership were accomplished composers, the focus of the Atelier de gamelan was on deepening

knowledge of the traditional Balinese repertoire, not on composition.⁴⁷ A 1992 report reveals the popularity of the course among the various music programs offered at UdeM at that time. Students majoring in composition made up a considerable share of participants, whereas musicology students were relatively few in number despite the fact that the primary motivation for opening the course was to enhance ethnomusicological studies at the university.⁴⁸ 1992 also saw the release of *Bali à Montréal*, a collaborative CD featuring a selection of original compositions and traditional pieces for gamelan, as well as gamelan-inspired pieces for Western ensembles.⁴⁹ This portrait of Montreal's gamelan community in the early 1990s shows that new composition for Balinese gamelan was already a growing phenomenon at that time.

These three communities reveal quite different attitudes and approaches to gamelan. If there is one thing that ECCG, VCG, and UdeM's Atelier de gamelan have in common, it's that their establishment stemmed from compositional interests. It is no coincidence that all the people who first oversaw these burgeoning networks were indeed composers. However, these compositional interests have manifested differently between the three ensembles in accordance with their respective degrees of attachment

47. *Kreasi Baru* by I Wayan Suweca (from Batubulan), premiered in 1990, was one of the few pieces composed for the Atelier de gamelan by a guest teacher. Entirely in the Balinese musical idiom, this work is not particularly radical. In comparison, Professor I Nyoman Astita, who taught in Montreal in 1988–1989, created several experimental works for the gamelan at the University of California in Los Angeles.

48. In terms of academic programs, UdeM does not distinguish between musicology and ethnomusicology.

49. These include McPhee's *Balinese Ceremonial Music* (1934), Vivier's *Pulau Dewata* (1977), and Evangelista's *Ô Bali* (1989). The compositions for Balinese gamelan are *Sasih Kapat* (1990) by I Wayan Suweca and *Tat Toam Asi* (1990) by Robert Valin.



Figure 4. Vancouver Community Gamelan / Gamelan Madu Sari in rehearsal. Photo courtesy of Kenneth Newby.



Figure 5. *Gamelan Semara Winangun* circa 2004–2005. Photo courtesy of GSW.

to tradition. In Montreal, the pedagogical dimension and the academic benefits of disseminating non-Western music prevailed. In Vancouver, it was the offer of an “alternative” musical practice for students that was valued. In contrast, Jon Siddall and ECCG were in search of a unique identity within Canada’s contemporary music scene. Far from being pigeonholed into one or another American model, Canadian gamelan ensembles sought early on to authenticate themselves through distinct trajectories and ideologies. Thus, the identity negotiations that began to take place within these ensembles in the 1990s obscured their position on the spectrum between ethnomusicology and composition.

Negotiating Representation and Individuality

It may be said that the learning and performance of a musical tradition by a group of cultural outsiders constitutes a leisure activity that does not always fit in well in North American urban societies. In an ecosystem where art is standardized, compartmentalized, and commodified, much of the spiritual, communal, and ritual content integral to gamelan risks being lost or misappropriated. Moreover, the pace of urban life leaves little room for long-term investment in community projects, which partly explains the membership drain experienced by Canadian gamelan groups. ECCG has found a formula adapted to this context by establishing itself as a professional ensemble. For *Giri Kedaton* and *VCG*, which remain essentially volunteer projects, strict immersion in Javanese or Balinese music becomes an issue. Indeed, it is reasonable to wonder about the significance of a purely performance-oriented course in traditional music from Indonesia when the Canadian artistic milieu has so few reference points for these musical genres. As Mark Parlett put bluntly to this author: “People say idiosyncratic, but there’s a beauty in that too . . . I’m pointing at you as a Balinese [gamelan] musician: How long does one keep playing *Baris*? What does that mean to you?”⁵⁰

50. From an interview with Mark Parlett on 19 February 2021. Parlett is a puppeteer, musician, and interdisciplinary artist who

This reality has led many gamelan practitioners to reappropriate tradition in order to create original works and projects. With firm roots in Southeast Asian heritage and culture, however, gamelan nonetheless encourages a certain balance to be maintained between the presentation of new works and those drawn from traditional repertoires. In academic terms, this translates to the choice between compositional and ethnomusicological priorities. Canadian gamelan ensembles, which historically have not received the same level of support as ensembles in the US, do not necessarily have the luxury of confining themselves to a single orientation. As such, most Canadian ensembles fall somewhere between these two approaches. The nature of their activities fluctuates according to the resources available and the interests of their respective members.

In Vancouver, the performance of traditional repertoire has declined over the years. *VCG* projects have increasingly focused on original creations, as evidenced by the collective’s recordings and interdisciplinary projects. For *Giri Kedaton*, the traditional Balinese repertoire still occupies the lion’s share of concert programs, but creative projects are becoming more frequent. The personnel and artistic direction of a given period influence the space given to new works. At the time of this writing, the collaborative work between composer I Putu Arya Deva Suryanegara and *Giri Kedaton* has produced numerous projects mixing Balinese instruments and electronics. Maintaining its emphasis on commissioned works, ECCG chose to expand its repertoire to include more traditional Sundanese pieces from 1993 onwards.

An Expanding Scope in the Cultural Fabric

With almost four decades of activity under their belts, the first Canadian gamelan ensembles have had a profound impact on their local artistic networks and on the national cultural scene. Indeed, many of the newer gamelan groups are closely related to those discussed earlier, making it has been involved in the Vancouver gamelan community since its inception.

possible to trace a gamelan genealogy in Canada. This can be seen both in the proliferation of active gamelan in the cities of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, and in the creation of new, related ensembles in other regions (see Canadian Gamelan Directory).

ECCG has had a major impact on the integration of gamelan into educational programs in Toronto through the work of Andrew Timar, one of the ensemble's founding members. From 1999 to 2003, Timar oversaw a Javanese gamelan performance course at York University. A lease agreement between York and the Consulate General of Indonesia in Toronto allowed the university to use the Consulate's gamelan slendro for the course.⁵¹ It was also Timar who founded and coordinated the activities of Gamelan Toronto, a community group active from 1995 to 2007. After Timar's departure, the York gamelan course was taught for a few terms by Nur Intan Murtadza.⁵²

Timar launched another gamelan music program in early 2000, geared toward Toronto elementary and high school students. The project has an interesting origin story, featuring a surprising gamelan-centered partnership between the public and private sectors. At the invitation of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the Dufferin Shopping Mall, Timar developed the Gamelan Program, borrowing instruments made by puppeteer David Powell. The Program's pilot having proven quite successful, Timar designed and ordered two large Javanese gamelan for the TDSB from the innovative Yogyakarta gamelan maker Suhirdjan.⁵³ By later splitting the gamelan slendro into two sets, adding some instruments, and frequently rotating the resulting three gamelan among host TDSB schools, the program reached tens of thousands of students across over a hundred Toronto schools. Timar continuously developed and supervised the Gamelan Program for its first seven years. Since then, David Powell has served as its instructor, even experimenting with online lessons during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁵⁴

51. Some of the gamelan instrument stands had to be repaired and repainted. In addition Timar traveled to Java to oversee the order of missing instruments. The instruments were given the Javanese honorific Nyai Mirah Kencana (Lady Brilliant Vermilion).

52. York University no longer offers a gamelan course and the instruments are currently in storage.

53. Suhirdjan made one pelog gamelan and one slendro gamelan. For elementary and middle school music education purposes, Timar did not include the more difficult to play gamelan instruments such as rebab, gender, or gambang in his TDSB gamelan. Instead, he ordered an additional number of saron, demung, and a lower-octave bonang panembung to accommodate more learners.

54. Powell thus rented out his homemade gamelan to the TDSB for the pilot phase of Timar's Gamelan Program before their Javanese instruments arrived in 2001. This full Javanese gamelan, named Anak Enak, was pieced together between 1983 and 1997 from a combination of sheet aluminum, cooking pots, Orff instruments, and other materials. The pelog half of the gamelan was later re-tuned to slendro in order to accommodate larger

Even more remarkable are the links between ensembles in Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto, and those that have developed in other cities. Gamelan Semara Winangun, in residence at the Indonesian Embassy in Ottawa, is the result of Éric Da Silva purchasing a semar pegulingan in the early 1990s.⁵⁵ Active for several years with the *Atelier de gamelan* in Montreal, Da Silva had tried, with mixed success, to found his own ensemble in Montreal.⁵⁶ He eventually moved his project to Ottawa, as the embassy was ready to offer him the necessary space to hold regular rehearsals. In 2005, Da Silva sold his instruments to Gamelan Semara Winangun's members, who still perform as a collective. The University of Waterloo's gamelan ensemble also shares a connection with Montreal. Its founder, ethnomusicologist Maisie Sum, had joined Giri Kedaton as a musician during the years when the ensemble was under the direction of her husband, I Dewa Made Suparta. In 2013, Sum was asked to open and lead a gamelan class at the University of Waterloo, with Suparta acting as a guest artist and teacher. The couple settled in the city, and in 2015, I Dewa Made Suparta was formally hired by the university.

Although never quite reaching UdeM despite Evangelista's best efforts, Javanese gamelan did eventually make its entrance into the Montreal gamelan scene. John Gilbert, who had discovered gamelan through recordings, traveled to Java in 1998 as an English teacher in hopes of discovering the local culture. While in Semarang, he was invited to try out a few instruments. This direct contact with gamelan sparked an interest in learning to play Javanese music. Upon returning to Montreal, Gilbert joined Giri Kedaton for some years while researching about Javanese gamelan on the side. Over the course of

groups of students. Some of Powell's instruments were later purchased by the TDSB when the Gamelan Program expanded to include three full gamelan.

55. This gamelan is a replica of the set used by I Madé Grindem in Teges and featured on the 1972 Nonesuch album *Gamelan Semar Pegulingan/Gamelan of the Love God*.

56. The group did manage to organize a few educational workshops and perform sporadically, including at Andrew Timar's 1997 Gamelan Summit in Toronto.



Figure 6. Bill Brennan plays Gamelan Sagara Asih's bonang. Photo courtesy of Bill Brennan.

several trips to Java, he brought back enough knowledge and instruments to start his own ensemble, **Sanggar Larasati**.⁵⁷ Although its line-up frequently changes, Larasati performs sporadically in and around Montreal. As a fluent player of difficult instruments such as gender, suling, rebab and kendhang, Gilbert remains Montreal's primary exponent of Javanese music.

In Eastern Canada, two former members of ECCG followed in the ensemble's footsteps by purchasing Sundanese instruments and founding groups of their own. In 2009, percussionist Ken Shorley opened a Sundanese gamelan course at the University of Acadia in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. He also founded the group's community affiliate, **Acadia Gamelan Ensemble**, which he runs with musicologist Jeff Hennessey. Using these same instruments, Shorley launched a professional gamelan ensemble called **OMBAK** in 2021. In St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, musician Bill Brennan founded a similar ensemble in 2013. With private funding, he purchased a gamelan degung on behalf of Memorial University to found the student group **Gamelan Segara Asih**, which has since received instruction from Sundanese musician Adi Suparman on a number of occasions. Ken Shorley and Mark Duggan have also been invited to Gamelan Segara Asih as resident artists, reinforcing the link between the Wolfville, St. John's, and ECCG gamelan. With the activities of Jon Siddall and Si Pawit at Vancouver Community College, ECCG's influence on the Canadian musical landscape extends from one coast to the other.

Nevertheless, it's important to highlight a few cases where the presence of gamelan on Canadian soil has had virtually no connection with the communities in Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver. The **Balinese Gender Wayang Ensemble** of Calgary, Alberta, has been active since 1999. It was founded by Brita Renée Heimarck, an American ethnomusicologist specializing in gender wayang and music from Sukawati, who was working at the time for the University of Calgary. Heimarck introduced Balinese music as part of the university's World Music Ensemble. Despite Heimarck's departure in 2005, gender wayang is still practiced in this context under the tutelage of her former student, Rod Thomas Squance.

Until a few years ago, **Gamelan Gong Sabrang**, a community group which formed in 2001, rehearsed on the Consulate General of Toronto's Javanese gamelan. They performed mostly traditional pieces under the guidance of Wiryawan Padmonoati.⁵⁸ Playing on the same gamelan and similarly led by Padmonoati, **Gedhong Maple** (2007–2018) held weekly rehearsals for members of the KJRI staff and the local Indonesian community. Also in Toronto, Keiko Ninomiya, a

professional dancer who has played with **Gamelan Dharma Santi** and **Gamelan Toronto**, established the gong kebyar group **Gamelan Kayonan** in 2011 following a study trip to Bali.⁵⁹

Located in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Jim Hiscott and Andrew Ratuski's gender wayang practice has little connection with Vancouver's gamelan scene, although the couple have often formed a complete quartet with Michael O'Neill and Ann Hepper (of VCG) on various occasions. More recently, Dustin D. Wiebe built a reduced gong kebyar ensemble in collaboration with the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Architecture. These instruments were used to collaborate with a troupe of Balinese artists in 2018 and give a series of concerts in Winnipeg. These isolated cases all resulted from individual efforts and not from the presence of this music elsewhere in Canada.

CONCLUSION

Gamelan has gone from being an object of curiosity to an integral, if marginal, part of Canada's cultural scene in just a few decades. It first took root in three cities, then flowered into diverse communities across the country. Operating with varying degrees of autonomy, these communities have generated unique projects and repertoires that could not have emerged from any other context, thereby making significant contributions to the Canadian musical landscape and broadening the international network of Indonesian arts.

For composers like Tremblay, Vivier, and Evangelista, gamelan served primarily as a source of inspiration or compositional material for a style ultimately rooted in the European classical tradition. While it is well known today that gamelan is practiced in universities, many within the artistic community remain unaware of the stylistic diversity of such ensembles or the creative projects they give rise to. The fact that Canadian artists are now treating gamelan as a vocation and means of achieving artistic fulfillment represents a new, participatory mode of engagement, an approach that goes far beyond treating gamelan as compositional material or a musicological case study.

The access gamelan grants to intercultural artistic spaces is a phenomenon perhaps difficult to grasp from the outside. While the globalization of gamelan is well documented, awareness of gamelan in a specifically Canadian context remains limited. In comparison with the United States, gamelan is scarce north of the border. Groups exist mainly in large cities, which are themselves few and far between. Gamelan's four decades of presence in the country includes only a few dozen ensembles, not all of which remain active today. With limited resources, gamelan in Canada has had to negotiate between individual motivations and institutional support based on vastly different contexts from one city to another.

59. Information from an e-mail exchange between the author and Keiko Ninomiya.

57. Some of John Gilbert's instruments were lent to him by the Indonesian Embassy in Ottawa.

58. They also occasionally performed compositions by non-Indonesian composers, such as Lou Harrison's *A Cornish Lancaran*.

Sustaining Indonesian performing arts in Canada has almost always depended on the passions of a few individuals. Beyond diplomatic and academic initiatives, it is really grassroots involvement and community spirit that fuel such a rich history. Despite the great geographic distances separating the various gamelan networks in Canada, practitioners remain connected via their shared enthusiasm. The 1997 Gamelan Summit in Toronto was the first event celebrating this pan-Canadian community. With the support of the Consulate General of Indonesia in Toronto, this series of performances and lectures was spearheaded by Andrew Timar and presented by ECCG, then in its 15th year. Many groups from across the country traveled to Toronto to perform at the festival, strengthening existing ties as well as creating new ones. One can almost see the Gamelan Summit 1997 as the spiritual successor to the events at Expo '86, but this time with full Canadian participation.

It is worth noting that while Canadian gamelan ensembles have continuously reached out to native practitioners, their existence has never stemmed directly from the Indonesian diaspora in Canada. The complicated logistics of transporting a gamelan overseas is but one of the factors explaining why Indonesian performing arts tend to be established through domestic institutions rather than the international movement of practitioners. Rather, the presence of gamelan in Canadian cities has facilitated the visit or even relocation of Indonesian artists who came specifically to teach music and/or dance. Sutrisno Hartana and I Dewa Made Suparta are notable examples of this phenomenon. Participation in gamelan also allows members of the Indonesian diaspora in Canada to connect or reconnect with an aspect of their national heritage.

Nevertheless, Indonesian performing arts have found a place in the Canadian cultural landscape, just as they have across the globe. At the time of Expo '86 in Vancouver, cultural dialogue between Canada and Indonesia occurred primarily at the diplomatic level. But over decades of Canadian engagement with Javanese, Balinese, and Sundanese music, this dialogue moved into a more personal arena. While interactions between Canadian and Indonesian practitioners have never been free from geopolitical forces, there is no doubt such interactions have contributed positively to the vitality and diversity of the art form as a whole. Whatever challenges practitioners, ensembles, and institutions may face now and in the future, all evidence suggests that gamelan will continue to thrive in Canada. ■

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