Gamelan Lessons: Study, Teach, Create, Share

Jody Diamond

Nines on teaching beginning gamelan[1]

G ong is in the first place, we start there.

A nd gong in the last place—journey's end.

M elody is in contour not pitch.

E very contribution has value.

L istening is of prime importance.

A ttention's paid to drums leading time.

N ever feel bad, keep your heart open.

My journey with gamelan has had many phases. Starting with a singular personal experience, expanding to cultural study, teaching, publishing, and eventually composing. At fifty years and counting, I am more convinced than ever that "gamelan [is] a cross-cultural, creative, community context for music making" (Diamond 2018/2019).

First Encounter

The first time I saw a gamelan was in 1970 at California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. I had chosen this multi-disciplinary experimental art school because I was interested in alternative education. My portfolio had been poetry and photography—I did not intend to study music. I had done well in high school, writing most of my papers in one night, and thought—in the way only a 17-year-old can—that I already knew everything I needed to know. Then a friend said, "You have to see these instruments."

When I entered the gamelan room, the lights were off, and there was no one playing. I had no idea what I was seeing. I knew Java had something to do with coffee, but I wasn't even sure what. I remember thinking, "I could stay up all night for a week, and I still couldn't explain what this is."

[1] "Nines on teaching beginning gamelan" is a syllabic verse, in which every line has the same number of syllables. I learned about this kind of poem from Lou Harrison.

Seeing the gamelan hit the reset button on my brain: I knew I was going to learn more.

The program's director, Robert E. Brown (Bob Brown), was in Java arranging for teachers to bring to the school. Cal Arts had just opened, and Brown had invited some experienced students from other universities—Wesleyan, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, University of Washington—to join the program. One of them, Andy Toth, agreed to give me a lesson.

It was just the two of us. We sat on opposite sides of an instrument with seven bronze keys. He didn't tell me anything—that there would have been a gong or what any of the other instruments would have been doing. He just handed me a mallet, and started playing a seemingly endless flow of notes—it was a gongan of *Ladrang Bimakurda*, Yogya style, I would find out later—that moved up and down across the seven bronze keys.

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5 6 3 5 2 3 5 6 5 7 6 5 6 3 5 3 2 6 5 6 7 6 5 3 2 1 2 1 6 5 3 6 ...
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I did not know how to go about "learning" this long parade of tones. Kind of confused, I asked myself: how do I do this? Then I either gave up, or got it, or something, because this is what happened: all of a sudden I looked down and my hand was playing by itself, the right notes. I remember watching my hand move, but "I" was not doing anything. It was like the gamelan was playing me, and had borrowed my hand. I sat totally still, watching my hand move, and feeling the music move around me. I had never experienced this state: a peaceful stillness, in which I myself was not active, but just observing, while I sat in the center of the circling sound. Then I heard a little voice in my head say, "I'm going to play this music for the rest of my life."

It took me a long time to understand the structure of the music, struggling through instructions like "just listen to the drum," (I heard nothing), and "play the kempul on 3, 5, and 7" (of what?). As I learned more, and, more importantly, heard more, I reflected on how things might have been better explained.

Learning and Teaching

After my first trip to Indonesia in 1971, I continued to study Javanese and Balinese gamelan, following this passion into music, anthropology, linguistics, and interdisciplinary education. I thought a lot about the challenge of not just learning myself, but teaching beginners how to hear and understand a music that they had little preparation for musically or culturally. Wondering why it felt

so good to play gamelan, I investigated how gamelan is learned in Bali, talking to many musicians and observing children in various contexts. This resulted in my master's thesis, with the ambitious title of "Modes of Consciousness and the Learning Process: an alternative model for music education" (Diamond 1979).

I became very interested in not just the external presence and sound of the gamelan, but in what shapes the perception and experience of someone playing for the first time. I came to feel that beginning gamelan required an art of its own, consisting not only of teaching external actions, but of finding steps to create an initial internal experience that would open the ear, the spirit, the heart.

I noticed that when my teacher Pak Cokro played one instrument he was always singing another.[2] That taught me that gamelan is a music of relationships, not parts. That realization led to some of the ways that I teach. I evolved a system of singing the names of the structural instruments with their corresponding pitches, a process that resembled building an internal gamelan of all the parts, and then, with just the two hands that we have, playing one of the parts in relation to those we hear inside. I have shared this insight with other teachers of gamelan.[3]

***Eling-Eling*: a treasure chest of musical ideas**

Pak Harjito, a Javanese artist-in-residence at Wesleyan University, changed what I teach beginning gamelan students, and opened my eyes to the musical possibilities of a single piece. In California we had often used *Lancaran Ricik-ricik* as the first piece, because it seemed quite easy; the balungan was short and repetitive, and kids could make up words, like "We sing up high to hear the gong. We sing down low to hear the gong."

Lancaran RICIK-RICIK laras slendro, pathet manyura

buka bonang: 6 ·356 ·532 6̊·6̊(·)

·3·5·6·5·6·5·i·(6) [x2] ·3·2·3·2·3·2·i·(6) [x2]

In 1990 I moved to Hanover, New Hampshire, to teach at Dartmouth College. Early in the term, I invited Harjito to meet the class. I told him that I usually start with *Lancaran Ricik-ricik*. He responded,

[2] reference Perlman

[3] "Jody Diamond (a metaphorical bapak) revolutionized my whole approach to the teaching of gamelan over the course of three days in Jakarta in 1989." (Dally 2005:4)

a bit incredulously, “Why would you want to start with a lancaran? It doesn't have any melody, or any shape, it is so abstract. I like to start with *Ladrang Eling-Eling*. It has a very nice melodic shape that goes down and then up, it's really beautiful, easy to understand, and good for learning damping. And you can start teaching bonang with mipil instead of gembyang [which is easier for the beginner to learn].” I considered his recommendation and thought he made some good points.[4] So I started using Ladrang Eling-eling as the first piece for teaching Javanese gamelan. I have used it ever since. I was struck by how many musical ideas and concepts are encountered by playing this piece, making it a rich experience for the beginner.

Ladrang ELING-ELING, laras slendro, pathet manyura

buka: 22..2356 5352 5356

i 6 5 3 2 3 5 6

i 6 5 3 2 3 5 6

2 2 . . 2 3 5 6

5 3 5 2 5 3 5 6

The balungan first goes down four notes, then drops one, and come up four notes in a straight line that is easy to grasp, and give a clear sense of *gatra*, the groups of four notes that form the melodic structure. Then the next line does that same thing, but at the end of that line we learn about *kenong plesetan*, that the kenong is telling us to “slide” into two 2s at the beginning of the next line. Then the doubled 2 followed by two rests at the beginning of the third kenongan teaches about *gantung*, which is a new idea about “hanging” on a note, before going back up the same way as before. The last kenongan teaches about *pancer*. While the important tones are 3 2 3 6, we learn that you can put a note before each of those notes that is not important enough to change the melodic structure of the piece, yielding:

5 3 5 2 5 3 5 6

I was amazed that one piece could contain so many musical ideas for students to encounter in

[4] At a conference on Indonesian Music at Cornell University, Sumarsam told me that he and Harjito had together discussed the best piece for beginners. (personal communication)

their first lessons. Not only that—this piece can be played in *four* pathet[5]. Pedagogically, Eling-eling is a treasure chest of musical ideas, and it has permanently replaced the shorter lancaran as my first piece for beginners. (A confession: for short workshops or demonstrations, I sometimes use only the first kenongan of Eling-eling, and treat it as a lancaran.)

In the way that this one piece contains so many melodic concepts, the gamelan itself makes possible a richness of human experience that goes far beyond the learning of a musical practice.

Music Lessons Transmit Life Lessons

What are the priorities in our practice? We're not just teaching notes. We're trying to convey the musical and the cultural richness that can be conveyed by studying gamelan. How does one do that when you're not in Java or studying with a Javanese? I look for elements in the structure of the music itself that teach important cultural lessons without elucidating them. Hardja Susilo had a famous quote. "When I was eight years old my teacher said, 'Children, we are going to learn to refine our behavior, and so we will begin our study of [gamelan] and dance.'" (Susilo 2010:45). I think the experience of playing gamelan does that.

One of my favorite Indonesian words is *kebetulan*, sometimes translated as coincidence or serendipity[6]; I like to think of it as a "convergence of correct things." As I was preparing this talk, I went outside and sat down next to Danis Sugiyanto, a musician and teacher of gamelan and keroncong in Surakarta, Central Java. He started talking about when he and Sadra[7] taught gamelan in prisons in Java, and said "People learned things from gamelan that we didn't have to tell them." This

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[5] http://www.gamelanbvg.com/gendhing/index.php has notation for several versions of Ladrang Eling-Eling. Here are some, with the first kenongan transposed for each pathet.

Eling-eling pelog lima 6532 1235

Eling-eling Badranaya slendro nem i653 2356

Eling-eling Kasmaran slendro sanga 3216̣ 5̣6̣12

Eling-Eling Suralaya slendro manyura i653 2356

Eling-eling Kasmaran pelog barang 3276̣ 5̣672

[6] The root word *betul* means correct; add the suffix -an to get a collection of things with that quality (cf gamel means hammer, and gamelan is a collection of hammered things); the prefix ke- makes it into a noun [[is this the right way to explain this?]]

[7] I Wayan Sadra (1954–2011) was an important experimental composer and arts activist who, while born in Bali, spent his professional life teaching at ISI Surakarta in Central Java.

is his list of those lessons: playing together, helping others, eliminating egoism, learning humility. *Kebetulan*, Danis elucidated beautifully what Harja Susilo's teacher had in mind. These are all lessons that can be received just by playing the music, without talking about them.

An international community

I realized that the process of teaching and learning gamelan was taking place in many countries outside of Indonesia. So in 1981 I founded the American Gamelan Institute (initially called the American Gamelan Institute for Music and Education), to gather information about Indonesian gamelan and its international counterparts, and create a network to share it with others who were on the same path.

In addition to conveying concepts of Javanese culture, the gamelan interacts with elements of its new home outside of Indonesia to create another kind of culture. Many decisions must be made when creating a context for the study of gamelan outside of Indonesia. Are you going to make offerings before concerts? How do you explain why people take their shoes off? What will you tell students about the spirit of the gong? I think, however, that the gamelan itself teaches things that don't have to be stated. And looking beyond what will be learned about Indonesia, we must also consider how the gamelan will interface with local artists and the creativity informed by their own background and experience?

When a gamelan group is created in a new cultural home, it is not a singular phenomenon, but part of a very large international network. I wanted to know: How big was the world of gamelan? How are people all over the world dealing with questions of local and distant cultural elements? How are they determining their "priorities in practice" as they shape the experience of gamelan in their own locale?

I started to investigate gamelan programs in as many places as possible, to observe, document, and understand what I call "local flowers with distant roots." To share and disseminate the results of this research, in 1984 I founded, as editor and publisher, the journal *Balungan* to document "all forms of gamelan and their international counterparts." Each issue has articles, interviews, scores, concert programs, reviews, and letters. I had an additional mission as well: to create a dialogue between scholars and artists, because I recognized that there was a divide between these communities that I

thought need to be bridged. Scholars have deep knowledge about the music, and artists want to be deeply inspired by gamelan. I thought: what if they informed each other rather than being separate? In that way, the work of the scholars would have a much larger audience, and benefit more people. The work of the artists could be deeply informed and inspired by the more complex ideas present in the music. It was my hope that such communication would lead to shared awareness and mutual respect.

Balungan began as a print journal (fiber-space), and added an online edition (cyber-space) starting in 2004 with Volume 9–10, which meant that each issue could have associated media files (sound and video), as well as manuscripts in Indonesian and longer materials that would have been difficult to print. The current and all back issues, as well as related media files, are on line[8].

The CD "Mahambara," with notes and sound files published in *Balungan* (Diamond 2017), is an example of international collaboration, and one answer to another question that is important to me: How do we build bridges with Indonesian artists that can be crossed in both directions? A group of composers at ISI Surakarta recorded new pieces, and sent me sound files and program notes. Producing the CD, as well as publishing the notes and sound files in *Balungan,* has been another way for me to make the world of gamelan and our engagement with it larger, and for us to all be more connected. *Kebetulan*, Danis, who is present today, was part of that project. In this vein, I spent 13 months in Indonesia in 1988–9 interviewing nearly 50 Indonesian composers about their work and their lives, working to further expand what we know about the global possibilities of gamelan. (Diamond, 19xx LMJ; New Music Indonesia CDs)

The Wall of Timbre

In 1980, soon after I started teaching gamelan with Lou Harrison at Mills College, I curated a gamelan performance in Berkeley. I say "curated" because I designed this concert specially to show the incredible range of musical styles that a gamelan is capable of conveying. We played a Javanese piece, a Balinese piece, a process piece—compositions that I felt were clearly distinct from one another. I anticipated that after the concert, audience members would say, "Wow, I didn't know a

[8] The current and back issues of *Balungan*, with a list of contents and corresponding media files, can be accessed at www.gamelan.org/balungan.

gamelan could play so many different kinds of music. But that is not what happened. People came up to me and said, "Oh man, those gongs are so mellow, I just laid back and let the sound wash over me."

I called this problem "the wall of timbre." The resonance of the instruments combined with their uninformed musical understanding made it impossible for that audience to hear any of the musical structures in these different works. When the gong played—a moment of significance felt by the musicians—the audience had no idea why the gong was being played. That meant that they had no insight into the experience we were having as players.

Javanese musicians talk about the musical feeling of an "inner melody" when they play. I knew that this experience was not possible for my audience. How could I give them a sense of what we felt at the moment the gong is played and all is unified in that moment? I often describe the gong as "the period at the end of a beautiful sentence." How could I create that perception for my audience?

I decided to compose a piece for Javanese gamelan that would invite the listeners to share in this experience. I began with a melody that they *would* have internalized, and would be able to "feel" while listening to the gamelan: the tune from "Wayfaring Stranger."[9] I then made a balungan (melodic framework) that could be realized with Javanese practice, and added the song in English. My hope was that when the gong was sounded at the end of the final phrase—"in that bright world to which I **go**"—my audience would experience that as the culmination of a complex musical journey. Then, I hoped, the next time they heard Javanese music, they would know the meaning of the gong. (I composed several works in this way, and was fortunate to have them recorded in Java. Diamond 200?)

Even in the act of composing, I was "teaching" about gamelan, looking for ways to shape the inner experience of the listener so they could better understand the music that surrounded them.[10]

The Wheel Continues to Turn

Imagine a bicycle wheel: in the center, the hub is a gong. That is our starting place—the music,

[9] This process was described in the article "from the song to the gong: an american's compositions for gamelan" in the journal KETEG, published by the Karawitan Department at ISI Surakarta.
[10] A list of compositions, recordings, videos, and writing can be found at www.gamelan.org/jodydiamond.

and a deep personal connection to it. The spokes extending from the center represent the different directions people have taken in relation to their affinity with gamelan. And as the spokes reach out and connect to the rim, each in its own way, it trues the wheel, and that makes it possible for all of us to move forward together.

The little voice was right. I will play this music the rest of my life. I think gamelan is an incredibly fertile place for us to learn lessons about music, about culture, about ourselves, and about each other.

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