From Performance to Pedagogy: Transforming the Role of a Freelance Gamelan Teacher

by Meghan Hynson, with Gusti Komin

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, gamelan activities everywhere were either brought to a screeching halt or re-envisioned for remote instruction. Many gamelan instructors continued teaching their ensembles and did so in innovative ways—by creating digital gamelan, playing virtually on pots and paper plates, or converting performance-based classes to an academic study of gamelan and Indonesian culture. In the midst of finding creative solutions for the teaching and learning of gamelan, however, another problem was looming—the question of how we continue to financially support master teachers and keep professional freelance performers and instructors employed.

Some freelance artists, whose work typically takes the form of in-person teaching and the production of concerts and performances, have found themselves without a job. There is a political element in who continues to be paid as a gamelan teacher and who does not. Those holding salaried positions will remain employed, continuing their classes in some form, while freelancers without a contract may have to find alternative ways to make a livelihood.

I thought about the effects that the pandemic might have on the ecosystem of gamelan teaching and learning. Will our methods for instruction and the content we are able to teach be changed by this pandemic forever? As we continue to search for ways to engage with gamelan and Indonesian culture, can we also parlay this into a search for ways to support freelance teachers? How might we re-envision the role of the freelance teacher if in-person instruction continues to be dangerous? These were the questions I asked as the Balinese gamelan angklung group I had been directing with I Gusti Nyoman Darta (hereafter referred to as Komin)[1] was cancelled.

Our gamelan group was running smoothly and the students had even performed in a winter concert. But when the university shut down, all ensembles had to stop meeting. I was able to move my academic classes to virtual instruction and retain my salary and position; this was not the case for Komin, who was teaching at Monmouth with

the support of a Creativity and Research Grant. Since the gamelan ensemble could no longer meet and rehearse, we could not fulfill the conditions of the grant: the proposal had stipulated that grant funds would be used to hire Komin to teach gamelan to Monmouth University students and produce two concerts and a lecture-demonstration during the spring semester.

It became clear that this was not going to be possible, and that it would be necessary to find another way to continue to support Komin, something that would use his skills. As others around the nation and the world slowed down and spent more time analyzing gamelan and reflecting on the cultural, social, and historical circumstances surrounding its performance, we turned inward for solutions.

I wrote to the grant committee with a revised proposal, suggesting that instead of paying Komin solely for his role a performance-based instructor, we would draw on his wealth of knowledge to produce transcriptions and recordings of the pieces he had been teaching, which could be used by other gamelan teachers or students for

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analysis or as a learning tool. The proposal included a plan for publishing these materials in *BALUNGAN*. Converting the grant in this way was a means of transforming Komin's role as a freelance gamelan instructor to that of an academic resource, composer, transcriber, and producer.

This alternative proposal was approved, and we shifted gears. What resulted was a re-envisioning of the creative output for the spring semester, to consist of two transcriptions and multitrack recordings of the pieces Komin had been teaching to the students at Monmouth: the Balinese piece "Oyod-Oyod," and a composition by Komin, "Gilacak."

I was excited by this project, because I enjoy learning and analyzing music through notation. This process allowed me to thoroughly learn every part and understand more concretely how each one functioned within the whole. As a specialist in gender wayang, I was also new to the teaching of gamelan angklung and hoped that the transcriptions and recordings could prove useful for teaching the ensemble in the future. I had played and performed gamelan frequently in the past, but unlike Komin, I did not have a large bank of pieces memorized. As we produced these resources, I considered the role that they might play in helping someone teach these pieces to a Balinese gamelan ensemble.

At first Komin was a little resistant to this idea, as he doesn't condone the use of notation for teaching. When it became clear, however, that we were not going to be able to rehearse in person, he worked diligently to transcribe every detail of each piece. We had hoped to distribute the materials to our students so that they could be prepared in the event of a return to in-person instruction, but the semester ended and we never had the chance to play together again. Still, the transcriptions and multi-track recordings Komin made in his home studio might be valuable to others interested in these pieces.

Komin made multi-track recordings using Ableton Live.[2] Since he no longer had access to the instruments to sample the sounds, Komin chose a set of synthesized sounds from the Ableton library that resembled the gamelan—mostly xylophone and marimba sounds, synthesized piano for the *pokok* [main melody], drum sounds for the kendang, high-hat sounds for the *reyong kecek* [when the player taps on the side of the pot with the mallet to make a percussive sound rather than playing the knob of the pot to produce a tone], and hand clapping for the kecak parts in "Gilacak." These recordings are part of his creative approach to navigating the challenges of COVID-19.

Komin is an exacting instructor who has very precise ways of teaching gamelan. Throughout the process of transcribing music and creating recordings, Komin shared several valuable insights concerning his teaching methodology and the use of Balinese gamelan angklung for beginners. According to Komin, "the obvious advantage of using angklung in America is one of practicality, since the size of the instruments makes them very easy to transport and store." Our gamelan angklung (kindly lent by Jody Diamond who had borrowed it from Dean Poulsen) was a small and compact set of instruments built in 1979.

The size of the ensemble proved to be a major advantage for Monmouth's small university music program, as the instruments had to be stored on a shelf in my office, and the students had to carry them down a flight of stairs to a dance studio for every rehearsal. The small angklung instruments were also an advantage for our group of beginners; with only four keys to deal with, the students could concentrate on their playing and damping technique. According to Komin, this is a great way for beginners to start, because they are learning the same playing skills that would be used to play other kinds of gamelan. Despite these advantages, Komin did not advocate for gamelan angklung as the best ensemble for starting a small group of beginners. Instead, he was very adamant that any kind of Balinese ensemble of any size can work well if you have a methodical approach to teaching it.

This philosophy was evident at our first rehearsal. Komin is very specific about how he teaches; although we had only four students, he was able to scale the ensemble down and prove his point. [See the box on the next page for instrument names and terms.]

He began by showing the students how to hold the panggul and how to damp. Once they seemed comfortable with these skills, he began teaching the pokok, a 16-beat core melody played on the jegogan, for "Oyod-Oyod." All the students learned to play this 16-beat cycle. Komin or I then accompanied the students on the gong and tawa-tawa

The Monmouth University Gamelan Angklung in their Winter Concert.

so they had a beat to follow and could start to feel how the pokok melody coincided with the gong cycle.

As students progressed and demonstrated proper damping, Komin split the group into two; one half continued playing the pokok melody, while the others started to learn the slightly more difficult kotekan, beginning with the kantilan polos. The third step introduced simple kotekan on the kantilan sangsih by having the students play the kantilan polos part following a half beat behind. Once students were comfortable with these three steps, Komin introduced the kotekan of the pemade polos.

By this point, one student would be playing the pokok, one student the kantilan polos, another the kantilan sangsih, and another the pemade polos. The genius behind his methodology is that it makes the students learn all the parts, so they become flexible and able to play any part. I played the gong and tawa-tawa, while Komin played the pemade sangsih or the kendang. In this way, even with a small group, we had a fairly complete ensemble that could play the main cycle of the piece. We then taught the introduction and the transition, added the drumming and the angsel and then—the piece was complete.

Komin took a similar approach with "Gilacak." He wrote this piece in 2014, when gamelan students from Union College (under Jennifer Matsui) came to work with him in Bali. It was inspired by the traditional Balinese gong gede piece "Gilak Sasak," combined with the Balinese *kecak telu* [kecak pattern with three sounds]. According to Komin, the first section is drawn from the melody of "Gilak Sasak," but with added kotekan. The second section was composed by Komin. While "Oyod-Oyod" is suitable for a group with few members, "Gilacak" is a great piece for a large ensemble of students, as students who do not have access to an instrument can chant the kecak parts. This introduces them to singing cyclical interlocking ostinato parts, and to the art of Balinese kecak.

Notation is one way for a composer to look at a piece during the creative process, and also a way to transmit the piece to other players. For composing, Komin used a spreadsheet, with individual cells representing beats. For teaching and remembering the piece, we transcribed the parts into cipher notation, and made scores using the font *Kridhamardawa* (recently released by the Kraton Yogyakarta). [An example of Komin's spreadsheet notation, and the cipher notation for the two pieces he taught are on the following pages.]

We learned that there are creative ways to continue to support master teachers in a time of crisis. Many freelance teachers are not employed because of the pandemic—it is more important than ever to transform their roles so they can continue to make a living from their art. More importantly, it helps artists sustain their traditions, and creates an even richer library of resources to draw on once gamelan activities return to normal. ◗

Endnotes

1. I Gusti Nyoman Darta (Komin) is a Balinese musician, artist, composer, and gamelan teacher, who from an early age started studying music with his father, renowned musician I Gusti Ketut Kerta. Komin began playing gender wayang professionally at age 10, and as a teenager was accepted at the Indonesian Institute for the Arts (ISI today, but then called STSI). Komin is an acknowledged master of gender wayang and one of its foremost contemporary composers, blending traditional and modern music in imaginative ways. He is an exacting teacher with a rebellious spirit; his compositions explode conventions and push the limitations of even the strongest performers.

As a founding member of the virtuosic Balinese gamelan ensemble Çudamani, Komin has toured Europe, Japan, and the United States. For 25 years he taught gender wayang and Balinese gamelan to local and foreign students at his family home in Pengosekan, Bali, and as a freelance gamelan instructor in the United States. Komin currently lives in the U.S. where he leads his own innovative gamelan group, Saiban, and directs, teaches, and performs at several American universities, including Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Bucknell University, Monmouth University, and the community-based group Gamelan Dharma Swara in New York City.

2. Listen to Komin's MIDI versions of Oyod-Oyod and Gilacak.
<gamelan.org/balungan/balungan14/media/oyod2.mp3 . . . gilacak.mp3>

Gamelan Angklung instruments

Gong

Tawa-tawa: single knobbed pot [beat-keeper]

Jegogan: lowest 4-key slendro metallophone

Pemade: mid-range 4-key slendro metallophone

Kantilan: highest 4-key slendro metallophone

Reyong: 4 small knobbed pots

Kendang Lanang: high pitched drum

Kendang Wadon: low pitched drum

Musical terms

kotekan, a melodic figuration of interlocking parts

polos and *sangsih*, the two parts of the kotekan

angsel, a short break in the kotekan

pokok, core melody

panggul, mallets

Excerpt from OYOD-OYOD, arrangement and score by Gusti Komin

Guide to Reading the Score (notes by Meghan Hynson)
Each box in the transcription graphs below has the time value of an eigth note. The letters in the kendang part indicate the stroke used on the drums. For *kendang lanang*, the "T" indicates a "tung" sound produced by striking the larger drum head with the stick in the right hand. The "t" indicates a "tek" sound produced when you hit the larger drum head with the stick in the right hand and mute the smaller head with the left hand. For the *kendang wadon*, "D" indicates a "ding" sound produced by striking the larger drum head with the stick in the right hand. The "k" indicates a "kek" sound produced when you hit the larger drum head with the stick in the right hand and mute the smaller head with the left hand. All parts in one section of boxes should be played simultaneously and cycled for as long as the ensemble wishes. *[The complete 14-page score is in the Online Resources for this issue of BALUNGAN.]*

Periring (Part 1) (repeat as many times as desired before moving to the transition) Play the angsel parts when the kendang player gives the cue.

Gong	G	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	. :‖
Tawa-Tawa	P	.	.	.	P	.	.	.	P	.	.	.	P	.	.	.	P	.	.	.	P	.	.	.	P	.	.	.	P	.	.	. :‖
Jegogan	2	.	.	.	.	.	3	.	5	.	.	.	.	.	3	.	2	.	.	.	.	.	3	.	1	.	.	.	.	.	3	. :‖
Pemade Polos	2	3	5	.	5	.	5	.	5	3	2	.	3	2	.	3	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	1	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	1 :‖
Pemade Polos Angsel	2	3	5	.	5	.	5	.	5	3	2	.	3	2	.	3	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	1	2	.	1	2	3	.	.	. :‖
Pemade Sangsih	2	3	.	3	.	3	.	3	.	3	.	5	3	.	5	3	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	5	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	5 :‖
Pemade Sangsih Angsel	2	3	.	3	.	3	.	3	.	3	.	5	3	.	5	3	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	5	.	3	5	.	3	.	.	. :‖
Kantilan Polos	2	.	2	.	2	.	3	.	5	.	5	.	5	.	3	.	2	.	2	.	2	.	3	.	1	.	1	.	1	.	3	. :‖
Kantilan Sangsih	.	2	.	2	.	2	.	3	.	5	.	5	.	5	.	3	.	2	.	2	.	2	.	3	.	1	.	1	.	1	.	3 :‖

Reyong 1 Polos	2	.	1	2	.	1	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	2	1	.	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	1	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	1	:‖
Reyong 2 Sangsih	.	3	5	.	3	5	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	.	5	3	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	5	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	5	:‖
Reyong 3 Polos	2	.	1	2	.	1	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	2	1	.	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	1	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	1	:‖
Reyong 4 Sangsih	.	3	5	.	3	5	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	.	5	3	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	5	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	5	:‖
Reyong Polos Angsel	2	.	1	2	.	1	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	2	1	.	2	.	1	.	2	1	.	1	2	.	1	2	.	.	.	.	:‖
Reyong Sangsih Angsel	.	3	5	.	3	5	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	.	5	3	.	3	5	3	.	5	3	5	.	3	5	.	3	.	.	.	:‖
Kendang Lanang	T	.	t	.	t	.	T	.	T	.	t	.	t	.	T	.	T	T	.	T	T	.	T	.	T	.	t	.	t	.	T	.	:‖
Kendang Wadon	.	k	.	k	.	D	.	D	.	k	.	k	.	D	.	D	.	.	D	.	.	D	.	D	.	k	.	k	.	D	.	D	:‖
Kendang Lanang Angsel	T	.	t	.	t	.	T	.	T	.	t	.	t	.	T	.	T	T	.	T	T	.	T	.	T	.	t	.	t	.	.	.	:‖
Kendang Wadon Angsel	.	k	.	k	.	D	.	D	.	k	.	k	.	D	.	D	.	.	D	.	.	D	.	D	.	k	.	k	.	.	.	.	:‖

“Oyod-Oyod” (“Swaying”)

Arrangement by Gusti Komin
Score by Meghan Hynson

INSTRUMENT ABBREVIATIONS

Jg	Jegogan	KL	Kendang Lanang
K	Kantilan	KW	Kendang Wadon
P	Pemade	Kot	Kotekan
p	Polos	Ugal	solo pemade
s	Sangsih	G/TT	Gong/Tawa-tawa
Ry	Reyong		

PERFORMANCE NOTES

1. In the kawitan intro part A there is no repeat.

   The jegogan plays with the ugal on notes marked above with (‿)

2. In the kawitan intro part B there is no repeat.

3. After cycling the periring section several times, the ensemble will angsel when given the drum cue as notated in the angsel system. The pemade, reyong, and kendang players will then rest for a cycle, and come back in on the next gong; the kantilan continues playing.

4. After cycling the periring section with the angsel several times, the drum will give a cue (getting loud and nodding) signaling the transition. (This typically follows an angsel.) Play the transition one time, then return to the periring.

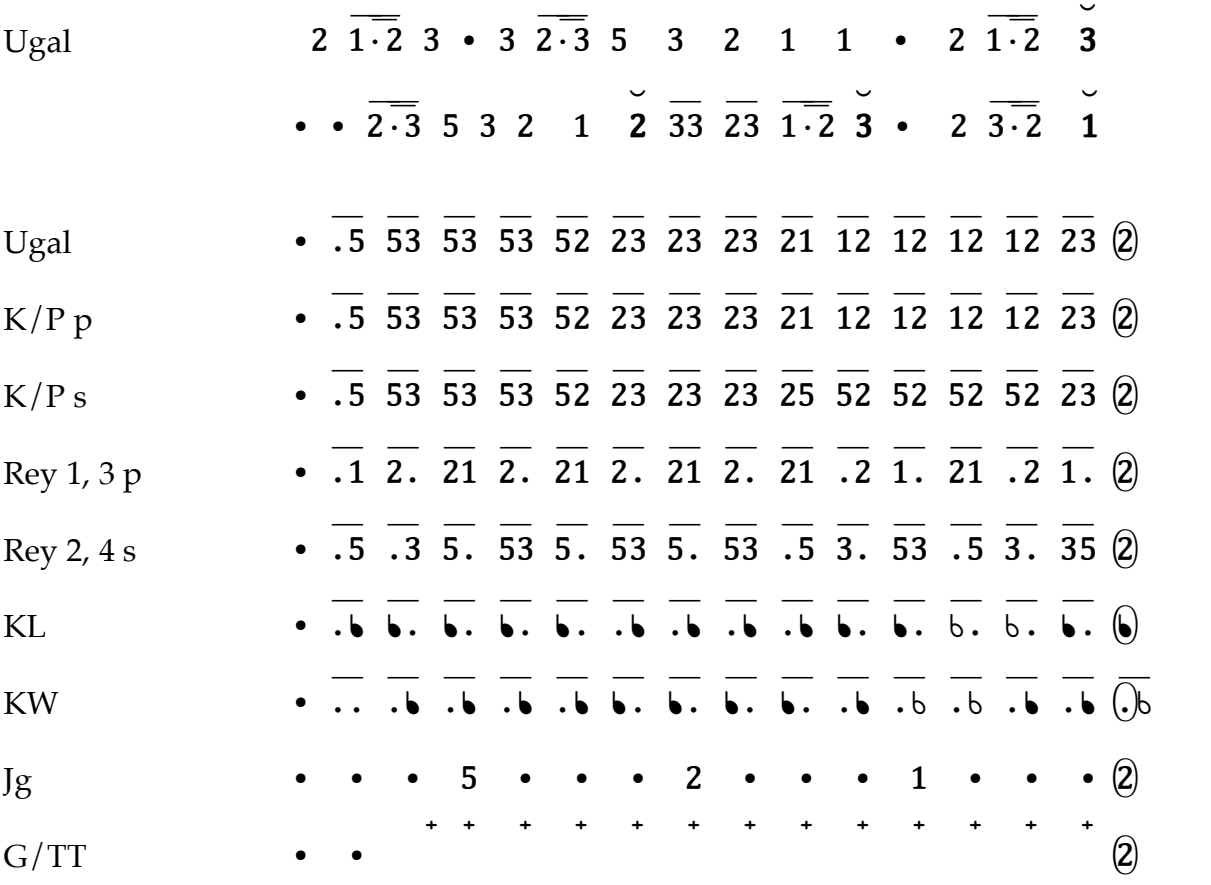
5. Play the periring-with-angsel section several more times until the final drum cue (drum gets loud), then slow down and end on gong.

6. For the kendang, 𝅘𝅥 indicates the sound produced by striking the larger drum head with the stick in the right hand; 𝅘𝅥 indicates the sound produced by striking the larger drum head with the stick in the right hand while muting the smaller head with the left hand.

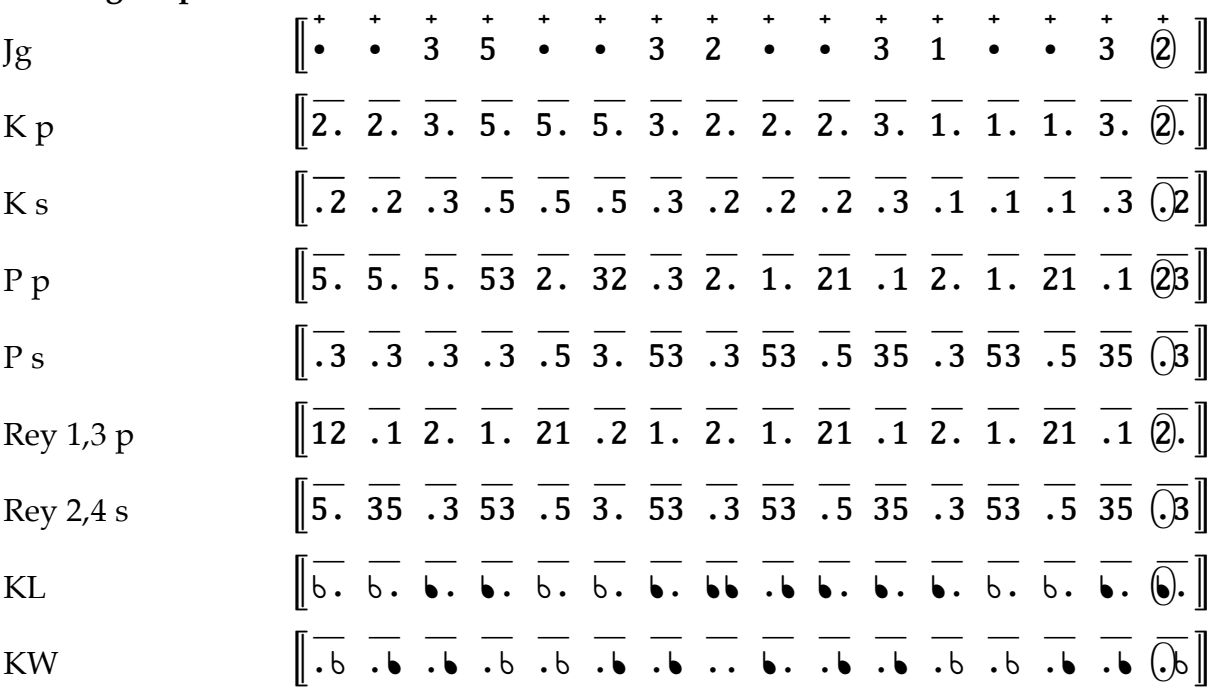
[This score is written in what might be called “front-weighted” notation, in which the subdivision of time is shown *after* the beat. Notation that shows time subdivided *before* the beat might be called “end-weighted” notation. —Eds.]

Listen to Komin’s MIDI versions of Oyod-Oyod and Gilacak.

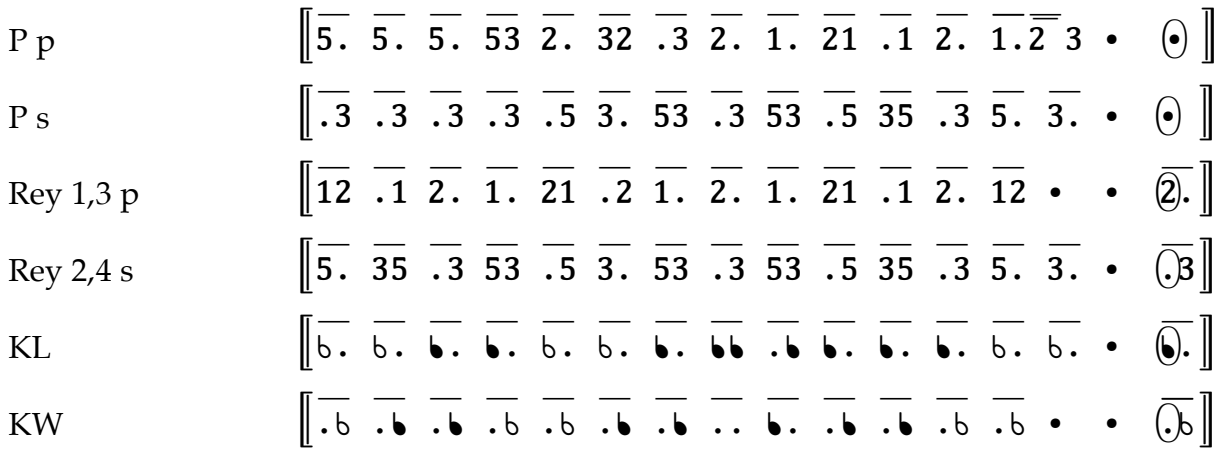
Kawitan (Introduction), played once



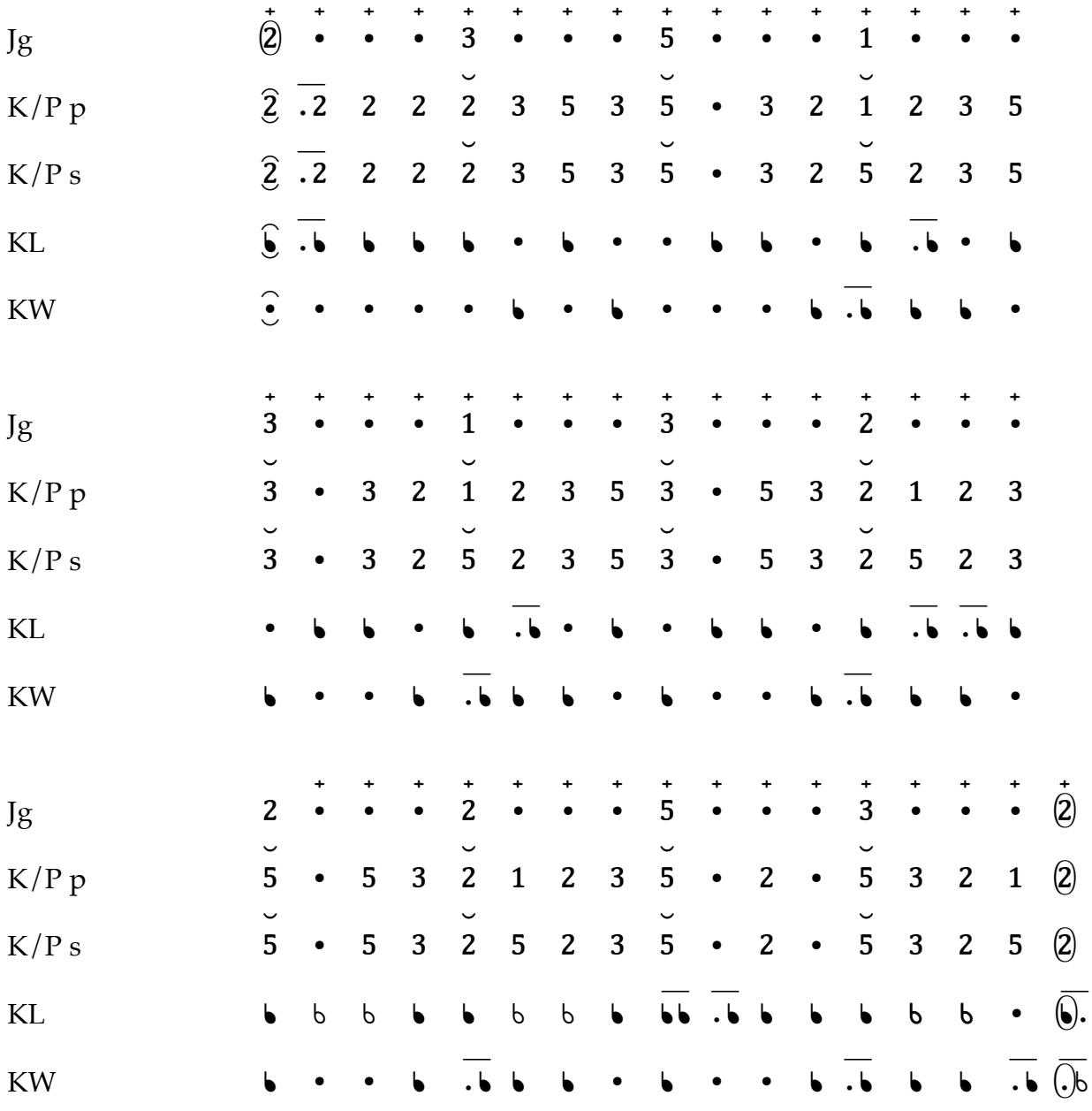
Periring (repeated)



Angsel



Transition (played once)



"Gilacak"

INSTRUMENT ABBREVIATIONS

Jg	Jegogan
K	Kantilan
P	Pemade polos
p	Polos
s	Sangsih
ny	Nyanglot
Ry ck	Reyong kecek
KL	Kendang Lanang
KW	Kendang Wadon
G/TT	Gong/Tawa-tawa
Kot	Kotekan
C	"cek" sound for producing kecak

PERFORMANCE NOTES

1. The form of this piece is as follows:
    a. Kawitan: played once
    b. Gilak part 1: this section is cycled with angsel as many times as desired until moving to the Perahlihan 1 transition
    c. Peralihan 1: this is a transition to Gilak part 2, played once.
    d. Gilak part 2: this section is cycled with angsel as many times as desired until moving to the Perahlihan 2 transition
    e. Peralihan 2: this is a transition to Gilak part 1, played once.
    f. Gilak part 1: this section is cycled with angsel as many times as desired until drummer gives the signal to end.

2. In the Kawitan, the jegogan plays with the ugal on notes marked above with (‿).

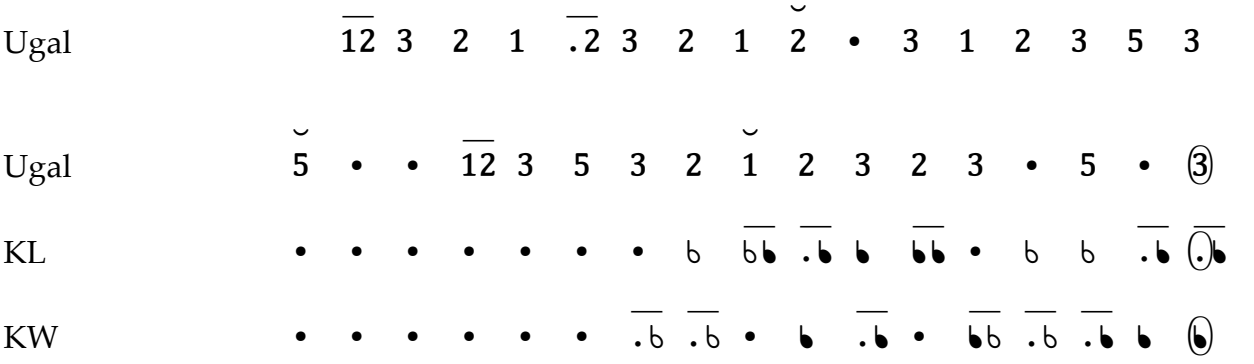
3. The ugal part is played by the lead pemade player.

4. In the reyong cecek part, the letter "c" denotes tapping on the side of the pot with the left hand, and "k" denotes tapping on the side of the pot with the right hand.

5. For the kendang, 𝅘 indicates the sound produced by striking the larger drum head with the stick in the right hand; 𝅗 indicates the sound produced by striking the larger drum head with the stick in the right hand while muting the smaller head with the left hand.

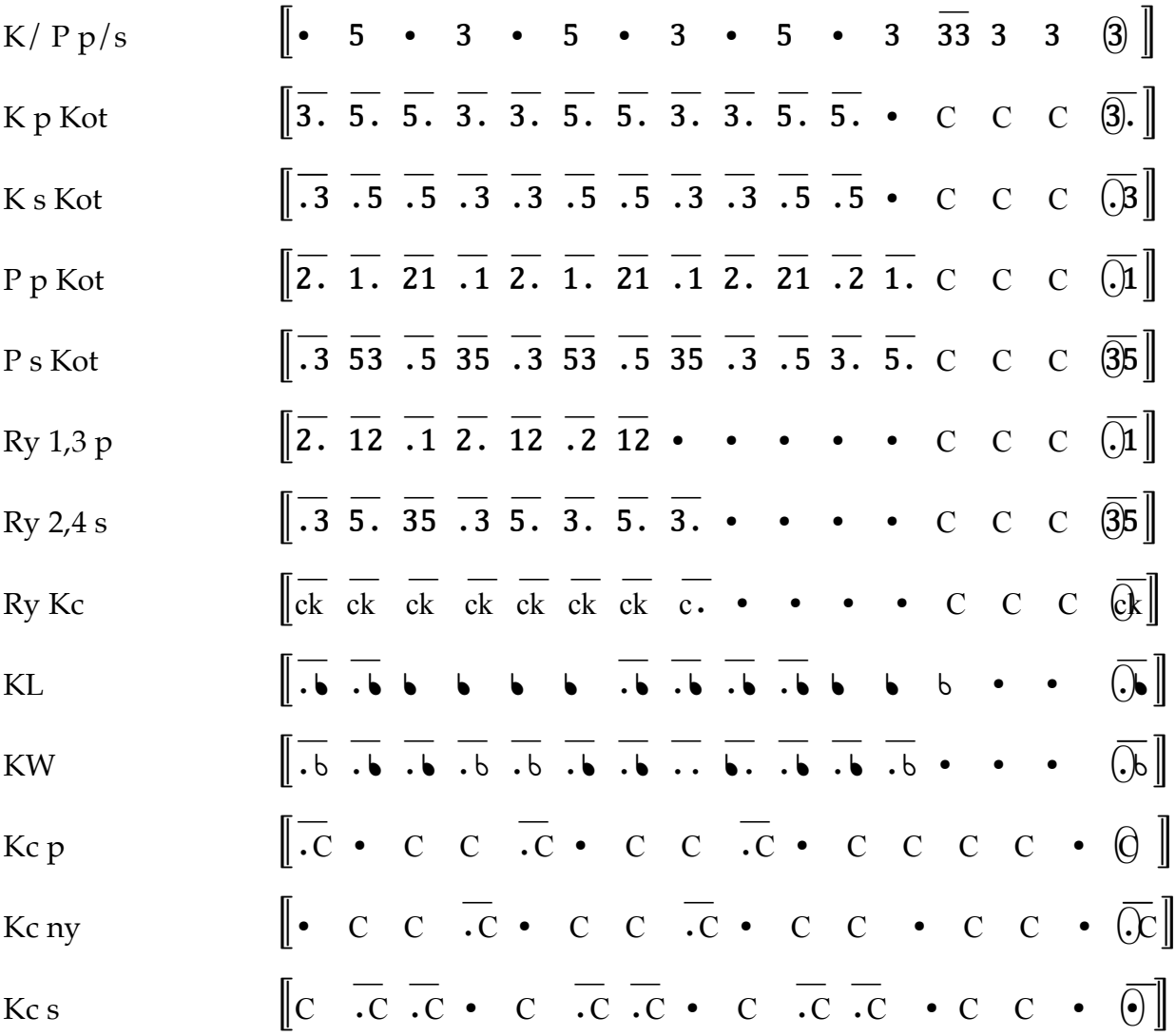
[This score is written in what might be called "front-weighted" notation, in which the subdivision of time is shown *after* the beat. Notation that shows time subdivided *before* the beat might be called "end-weighted" notation. —Eds.}

Kawitan (Introduction), played once

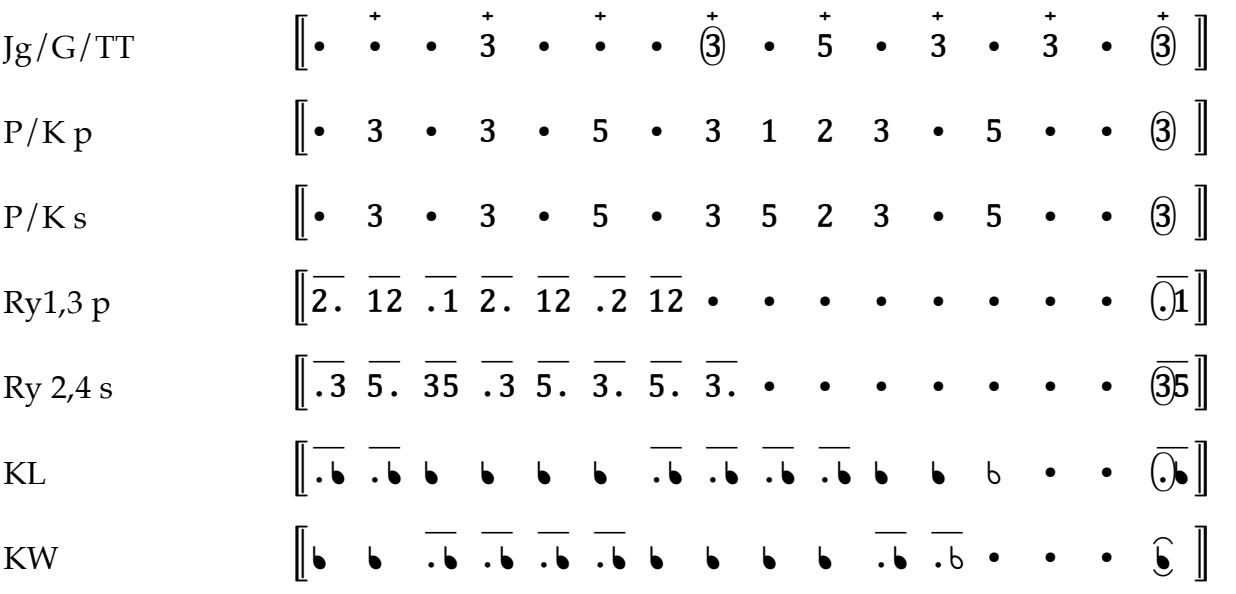


Gilak Part 1

Gilak Part 1 Angsel

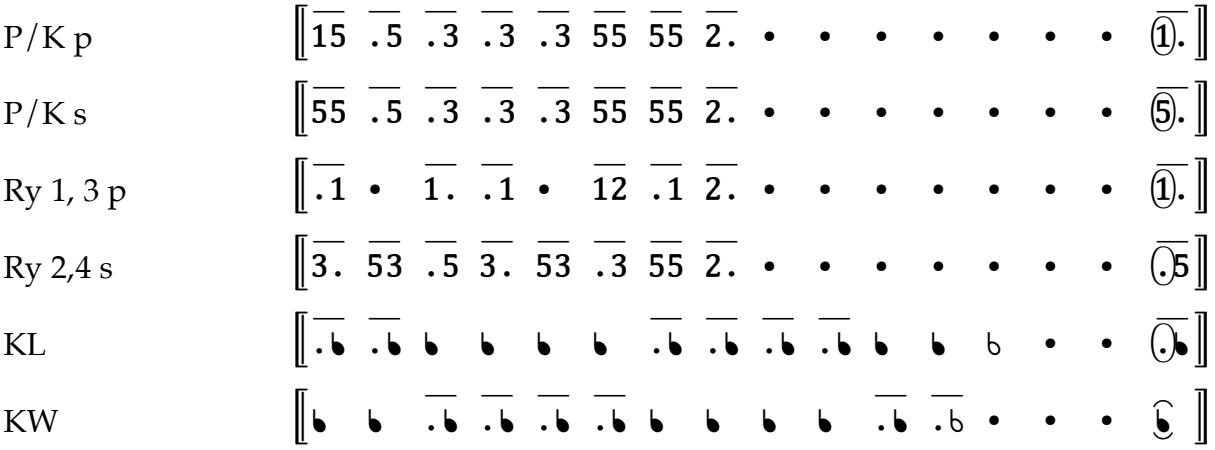


Peralihan 1



Gilak Part 2

Gilak Part 2 Angsel



Peralihan 2