

Gamelanhuis: A Collective Home in Amsterdam

by Elsje Plantema



About the “Gamelan House”

The idea for a *Gamelanhuis* started to develop in 1990, when the gamelan groups Widosari and Mugi Rahayu found a home for our instruments in the fourth floor attic of Pakhuis Wilhelmina, a deserted and neglected warehouse on the waterfront in Amsterdam. It was a huge space with wonderful acoustics, almost like a pendhopo. Extremely hot in summer, very cold in winter and with a leaking roof, but we loved that space.

The group Wiludyeng from the southern part of the Netherlands lost its gamelan room several years later, so we offered to share the attic with them. Multifoon, Sinta Wullur’s chromatic instruments from Java, joined us in 1995, and in 2000 we added the Flying Gamelan, an iron set for schools, one of several “mini-gamelan” designed by Suhirdjan.¹

When the city authorities wanted to demolish the building in 2002, the Wilhelmina Foundation, an artists’ collective, managed to buy it for a symbolic price. The warehouse was then renovated and all the gamelan groups moved from the attic to the ground floor.

The new, now official *Gamelanhuis* has two halls. All the gamelan sets are in the Java Hall, which is used for rehearsals and workshops. The Bali Hall, which is the same size but mostly empty, is for concerts, rehearsals, and lessons in music and movement (percussion, choir, yoga, Pilates, dance). There is also a kitchen and a dressing room. Plus, we have the added benefit of being able to move instruments without carrying them down four flights of stairs!

Elsje Plantema is the founder and director of Gamelan Ensemble Widosari, founder of Mugi Rahayu, and both initiator and co-founder of the Gamelanhuis.

The year 2020 started so well! On January 5th, my group Widosari gave its annual *Nieuwjaarsconcert* [New Year’s Concert], one of the regular events in our *Gamelanhuis*. We had studied *Gendhing Kembang Mara laras pelog pathet lima*, an old favorite, and were happy that our dear friends Dóra Györfi (pesindhen) and her sister Agi came from Budapest to join us. Another dear friend, saxophonist Yukari Uekawa, happened to be in Europe, so we played some compositions and arrangements for gamelan and saxophone, including Lou Harrison’s “Cornish Lancaran.”² It was a happy and fulfilling afternoon for both the performers and the audience, some of whom thought it was our best concert ever.

I was going to celebrate my 70th birthday, plus the anniversary of “50 years of gamelan in my life,” in the *Gamelanhuis* on March 28th. Widosari was booked for some gigs and concerts from April to June; other groups in the *Gamelanhuis* were preparing their own house concerts. But in the middle of March, all gamelan activities in the *Gamelanhuis* came to a sudden stop. These included weekly rehearsals of the Javanese groups Mugi Rahayu and Wiludyeng, and of the Bali fusion group Gong Tirta, along with lessons at the Conservatorium of Amsterdam, and all primary school programs.

All gigs and concerts were cancelled or postponed. Widosari concerts were initially rescheduled for September, and eventually cancelled. Just like my anniversary celebration. Neither the final performance of the



Mugi Rahayu, with the Gamelanhuis upper right.



Widosari.

Conservatorium students, nor the annual performance of Mugi Rahayu in the Gamelanhuis, was possible. Special concerts with Multifoon had been scheduled for August 15 and 17—to commemorate the Japanese capitulation and the beginning of the Indonesian Republic. These were cancelled, too. Projects planned for September through October were rescheduled for 2021.

Widosari—my selection of players from among the Dutch Javanese gamelan groups—does not rehearse on a weekly basis. We schedule rehearsals as needed for upcoming concerts and projects, but we now faced an empty agenda. We shared some online performances and looked back on projects of the past, but we missed terribly our core activity: getting together and devoting ourselves to the MUSIC. Over time, the Widosari players were eager to gather and play. With the ones who felt okay about traveling and getting together following the coronavirus guidelines, we could have formed a nice gadhon (rebab, gender, gambang, slenthem, kendhang, gong kemedhong, and gerong), but as singing was strongly discouraged we decided to wait a little longer.

The groups that usually had weekly rehearsals in the Gamelanhuis looked for creative ways to continue. Renadi Santoso, teacher and artistic leader of Gong Tirta, started

developing online lessons and études with homework for every player. These were combined with Zoom sessions, for studying together. Not everybody was happy with Zoom; some players preferred getting together in the Gamelanhuis with a small group, studying the same material. One of the activities was a group composition, started by one member, to which each player added a part. We call these “spekkoek compositions” after the Dutch spice cake with many layers, known in Indonesia as *lapis legit*, or Thousand Layer Cake. Mugi Rahayu and Wiludyeng, who work together often, started experimenting with online rehearsals but soon discovered that the audio delay made it almost impossible to play together. Moreover, not all players had an instrument at home, and even if they did, the tunings were not always the same.

From the moment classes stopped at the Amsterdam Conservatory, Michiel Niemantsverdriet (my former student who became the teacher there) sent the students audiovisual material, along with some assignments. The students were particularly enthusiastic about watching an online wayang kulit performance in Java, with Kitsie Emerson doing simultaneous English translation.

In May, players started gathering at the Gamelanhuis in small groups, at first now and then, and, starting in June,



Wiludyeng.

twice a week. Michiel, who leads the two Javanese groups in cooperation with Wulan Dumatubun, made sure the same repertoire was studied in both groups, on just half of the instruments at a time. This allowed for options such as teaching a bonang barung part on Tuesday and a peking part on Friday, so that the small groups could be easily combined whenever restrictions would finally be over.

Michiel and Renadi both found that working in small groups has some advantages: online sessions—shorter than the usual rehearsal—result in better concentration, and both online lessons and small group rehearsals allow more time to give attention to individual players. Small group rehearsals make it easier for some players to hear and listen to the other instruments. The Javanese and the Bali Fusion groups, having been forced to stop meeting for all of March and April, decided to skip the usual summer holiday and just continue rehearsing!

Multifoon's chromatic gamelan instruments have a unique set-up that made it possible for players meeting in corona-time to have enough social distance: almost every *pencon* [knobbed horizontal pot] has an individual stand, and the gong and kenong stands are on wheels. Sinta was able to make a new plan for the August events: no choir, only gongs, with music supporting a selection of Indonesian and Dutch texts reflecting 300 years of history.

August became a month of joy. Widosari was invited to perform several times with a very small ensemble of 3–5 musicians; and together with Multifoon we performed *Ritual Bells*, Sinta's new "corona-proof" work with singer Astrid Seriese, who rendered the texts and sang a deeply moving song about her great grandmother, a Javanese *nyai* [Javanese concubine (of her Dutch grandfather)]. It was so special for all of us in Widosari and Multifoon to get on stage and perform. It felt as if the blood started running again—as if all senses woke up in joy. One of the musicians, Tatiana Koleva, wrote:

"There are no words to describe the feeling of walking into a theater hall again after such a long time. We were allowed to perform for a very special occasion in The Hague: commemorating



Gong Tirta.

75 years of Indonesian independence, yet in combination with so many traumatizing shades and consequences. Music by Sinta Wullur, starring Astrid Seriese and a wonderful ensemble of dedicated percussionists!"

Sinta also gave two workshops called "Meditative Music."

When I was asked to do a workshop on Javanese gamelan soon after our collaborative performance, I decided that it would be safer to use the separate gongs of Multifoon, choosing the five notes Eb, F, A, Bb, and C. It was my first experience representing pelog on chromatic instruments, but for this project it worked well. I assigned players to individual instruments—gong, kempul, kenong, kethuk—and gave four players a set of five small gongs as a one-octave bonang.

In September, all lessons and rehearsals at the Gamelanhuis, Conservatorium, and in the primary schools were allowed to resume. Social distance was observed and groups took good care to provide ventilation and regular cleaning of *tabuh*. But with an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, protocols were re-instated. Wiludyeng had planned a small-scale presentation with a very limited audience; even this had to be cancelled because of new restrictions.

Our future is unclear. We can only hope that some of the postponed concerts that are not yet canceled will become reality. Let's hope for the best—for everyone, for the whole gamelan world, and for all art everywhere. ▮

ENDNOTES

1. See [Suhirdjan mini-gamelan](#) for information on and photos of this clever ensemble. **Keywords:** Suhirdjan, mini-gamelan.

2. A complete and annotated score for "Cornish Lancaran," edited by Jody Diamond, is in [Balungan Vol. 12, 2017](#), pp. 47–60. **Keywords:** harrison, cornish, lancaran.



The instruments of Multifoon, set up for a Javanese gamelan workshop.