

COVID REPORT

The Gongs Hang Silent: Gamelan in New Zealand

by Jo Hilder, Megan Collins, Budi Putra, and Gareth Farr

In New Zealand, the quick government response to COVID-19 was a national lockdown early in the pandemic, which meant there were few new cases of the virus. Even so, our gamelan activities were restricted, with many changes for us to respond to throughout the year as different lockdown levels were announced. There are several gamelan groups in New Zealand and each has been affected in some way by COVID-19. We wish to share our experiences of the activities and ideas that came out of the challenges faced by our various groups.

It has certainly been a challenging year, but we count ourselves very lucky as we have not been faced with high cases of the virus like some other countries. Despite the severe early restrictions, we were all very fortunate to later be able to reconnect and play gamelan together again. As the pandemic continues to lessen its impact in New Zealand, we hope the situation improves elsewhere in the world as well.

Gamelan Padhang Moncar and Gamelan Taniwha Jaya, Wellington

Gamelan Padhang Moncar (Javanese) performs many concerts each year and also conducts workshops for schools.

We are used to meeting on a regular basis and have a strong membership. Gamelan Taniwha Jaya (Balinese) is also a very active group and specializes in contemporary music for Gamelan Gong Kebyar, and frequently incorporates western instruments into the ensemble. The set of instruments was bought by composer Gareth Farr in 2003.

It was really disappointing that our Wellington groups were unable to meet in person at all during the four weeks after the initial Level 4 lockdown that began on March 25. This situation continued even as the country eased restrictions through the subsequent levels 3 and 2 in early June.

Just two weeks before lockdown began, Gamelan Padhang Moncar was lucky to have completed an exciting program at the New Zealand Festival 2020 with American experimental composer and performer Laurie Anderson. On the other hand, Gamelan Taniwha Jaya was due to play at Wellington's popular CubaDupa Festival in late March, but this was cancelled. We are hopeful that the festival will take place next year.

In-person rehearsals were not possible during the various stages of lockdown, so Gamelan Padhang Moncar met online through weekly Zoom sessions at our usual



Gamelan Padhang Moncar.



Udgita Canda in concert in Christchurch, with Wahyudi Suryawan dancing via Zoom from Bali.



Gamelan Taniwaha Jaya with dancer Sri Mulyani, at Victoria University of Wellington in March, 2019. Photo: Stephen Gibbs.

rehearsal time, giving us the opportunity to catch up, have a chat, and stay connected. Occasionally, members of Taniwaha Jaya joined us. We shared YouTube performances from Indonesia, and at one meeting we even wrote COVID-19 poems! Life has by no means been smooth sailing, despite New Zealand not having many cases.

In June, with no community transmission in the country and restrictions eased, we were able to resume our practices—with contact tracing and lots of hand sanitizer—at Victoria University of Wellington, where Gamelan Padhang Moncar is based. It was wonderful to play again! But we had hardly started our short burst of rehearsals when it all came to a sudden stop again in early August! Auckland had a COVID-19 cluster, so metropolitan Auckland went to Level 3 (work/school from home), while the rest of New Zealand went to Level 2 (social distancing, masks on public transport).

In Wellington, the restrictions meant that the university did not allow anyone except staff or students on campus, so we were unable to meet. We resumed our Zoom meetings for another six weeks but it was clearly a poor substitute for playing. In late September, lockdown rules returned to Level 1, and we thankfully resumed meeting weekly.

Budi Putra's undergraduate Javanese gamelan class scheduled for the second half of the year was able to go ahead as normal, and continued during Level 2 restrictions. Gamelan Padhang Moncar played in support of the students at their final concert on October 14.

There are usually many gamelan workshops in schools, engaging 100–150 students each year, but most of these were cancelled or postponed, which was a real shame. Eventually, we were able to work with just one school.

Gamelan Padhang Moncar submitted a video performance to participate in the online 25th Annual Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival in November. And since the most restrictive levels have been lifted, we are happy to be meeting in person again!

Friendly Gamelan Orchestra, Auckland

Budi Putra gives online lessons to the new Javanese gamelan at the Auckland University of Technology, headed by Robyn Bennitt. In-person workshops that had been set for April to rehearse *Rasa*, a new work by Megan Collins for Javanese gamelan, were unfortunately cancelled due to the Level 4 Lockdown. Whenever Auckland levels allow the students to get together, the group has online rehearsals with Budi and Megan, in preparation for a concert next year.

The First Smile, Wellington

The First Smile is a set of antique gamelan instruments and an accompanying set of wayang kulit puppets from Cirebon, West Java, which were brought to New Zealand in 1974 by Allan Thomas. The gamelan is now housed at The Long Hall in Roseneath, and is played regularly by a small group of dedicated musicians. They were able to meet during Level 2, with contact tracing and optional mask use.



Gamelan Puspawarna in concert, and Joko Susilo rehearsing wayang in Wellington (below).



To My Gamelan Friends

长街何故空遗灯
冬至一到同灾祸
家人共在相扶持
同享饕餮其乐融
友人相聚云上诉
万里把酒解寂寥
众心齐力抵病灾
若能回初宁愿无

Bo Yang

Gamelan Puspawarna, Dunedin

Gamelan Puspawarna is a community-based Javanese ensemble, led for the last 25 years by dhalang and composer Joko Susilo (who even cooks for them!). They were able to meet only during Level 1. Joko Susilo works regularly with groups in other countries, but with restrictions on international travel, he has been unable to teach overseas. Online, he is teaching several subjects to students at Nanterre University in Paris, via Zoom three times a week from his living room: gamelan, *sindhenan* (female vocal), Javanese language, and wayang puppet manipulation. The group here has benefited, though, because he is around a lot more!

Udgita Canda, Christchurch

Udgita Canda is a Balinese gamelan group based at the University of Canterbury, currently led by I Made Kartawan. Gamelan classes went completely online during the first half of the year, and included learning and performing kecak via Zoom, which they found quite challenging. The group lost quite a few students during that time, but recovered later when they were again able to offer in-person classes, with appropriate physical distancing and proper hygiene protocols. They were more active in the latter half of the year, with a concert in late July and a performance of *Topeng Keras* with dancer Wahyudi Suryawan joining via Zoom from Bali. ▀

[On the next page, we have included a chart of the alert levels in New Zealand, which were posted on the government website. It is likely that other countries also had a version of these protocols. —Eds.]

Eight Haiku

Pandemic looms large
In our bubbles we remain
The gongs hang silent

In Zoom world we talk
Keep community alive
The gongs wait for us.

Jo Hilder

On quiet hillside
Tuis, fantails, kereru
Zoom, I wait for you

Across the ether
I say hello to you all
Fine Gamelan friends

The sound of a stream
Flowing over small pebbles
Gamelan, that's you

Alisa Hogan

Hushed days of virus
The gamelan stops playing
Still the birds sing on

In lockdown — silence
One day soon we play again
Gamelan will ring

Paul Nuttall

So, COVID – 19
Not the song we chose, but sing
The music goes on

Hazel Barrett

The Devil Unseen

COVID-19, the Devil unseen,
Snaking and weaving towards us.

Our bubble is sovereign, we break it for no one,
Respecting the gains it affords us.

The music we play, must wait for the day,
A crowd can return as an icon.

Online we can sing, but it's not the same thing.
As the face-to-face scene we rely on.

The delicate lives, of our musos survive.
And the improv we love remains still.

As the sounds of the bronze,
and the skins and the gongs.
Sit tight in their bubble on the hill.

Megan Collins

COVID-19 LOCKDOWN LEVELS FOR NEW ZEALAND

On 21 March, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the introduction of a country-wide alert level system, similar to the existing fire warning systems. There are four levels, with 1 being the least risk of infection and 4 the highest. Each level brings added restrictions on activities or movements. Alert levels are cumulative; each level includes the restrictions of the level below it.

Level 1 – Prepare

COVID-19 is uncontrolled overseas. The disease is contained in New Zealand and there are sporadic imported cases, but isolated household transmission could be occurring. Border entry measures to minimise risk of importing COVID-19 cases.

Intensive testing for COVID-19. • Rapid contact tracing of any positive case. • People arriving in New Zealand without symptoms of COVID-19 go into a managed isolation facility for at least 14 days. • People arriving in New Zealand with symptoms of COVID-19 or who test positive after arrival go into a quarantine facility and are unable to leave their room for at least 14 days. • Mandatory self-isolation may be applied. • Schools and workplaces open, and must operate safely. • No restrictions on personal movement or gatherings. • Stay home if you are sick, report flu-like symptoms. • Wash and dry hands, cough into elbow, do not touch your face. • No restrictions on domestic transport; avoid public transport or travel if sick. • Businesses and public transport must display QR codes to allow for contact tracing.

Level 2 – Reduce

The disease is contained, but the risk of community transmission remains. Household transmission could be occurring, and there are single or isolated cluster outbreaks. People can connect with friends and family, go shopping, or travel domestically, but should follow public health guidance.

Physical distancing of two metres from people you do not know when out in public is recommended, with one metre physical distancing in controlled environments like workplaces unless other measures are in place. • No more than 100 people at indoor or outdoor gatherings (subject to any lower limit, e.g. fire regulations). • Sport and recreation activities are allowed, subject to conditions on gatherings, contact tracing, and—where practical—physical distancing. • Public venues can open but must comply with public health measures. • Health and disability care services operate as normally as possible. • Businesses can open to the public, but must follow public health guidance including in relation to physical distancing and contact tracing. • Alternative ways of working encouraged where possible (e.g. remote working, shift-based working, physical distancing, staggering meal breaks, flexible leave). • Schools, early childhood education and tertiary education providers can open with appropriate public health measures in place. • People at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (e.g. those with underlying

medical conditions, especially if not well controlled, and seniors) are encouraged to take additional precautions when leaving home. They may work, if they agree with their employer that they can do so safely. • Face coverings are required on public transport and aircraft, but not school buses or Cook Strait ferries. Children under 12 are exempt along with passengers in taxis or rideshare services and people with disabilities or mental health conditions.

Level 3 – Restrict

There is a high risk the disease is not contained. Community transmission might be happening. New clusters may emerge but can be controlled through testing and contact tracing. People instructed to stay home in their support bubble other than for essential personal movement—including to go to work, school if they have to or for local recreation.

Physical distancing of two metres outside home (including on public transport), or one metre in controlled environments like schools and workplaces. • People must stay within their immediate household bubble, but can expand this to reconnect with close family / *whānau* [Maori: extended family], or bring in caregivers, or support isolated people. This extended bubble should remain exclusive. • Schools (years 1 to 10) and Early Childhood Education centres can safely open, but will have limited capacity. Children should learn at home if possible. • People must work from home unless that is not possible. • Businesses can open premises, but cannot physically interact with customers. • Low risk local recreation activities are allowed. • Public venues are closed (e.g. libraries, museums, cinemas, food courts, gyms, pools, playgrounds, markets). • Gatherings of up to 10 people are allowed but only for wedding services, funerals and *tangihanga* [Maori funeral]. • Physical distancing and public health measures must be maintained. • Healthcare services use virtual, non-contact consultations where possible. • Inter-regional travel is highly limited (e.g. for essential workers, with limited exemptions for others). • People at high risk of severe illness (older people and those with existing medical conditions) are encouraged to stay at home where possible, and take additional precautions when leaving home. They may choose to work.

Level 4 – Eliminate

It is likely the disease is not contained. Sustained and intensive community transmission is occurring, and there are widespread outbreaks and new clusters. People instructed to stay at home (in their bubble) other than for essential personal movement.

Safe recreational activity is allowed in local area. • Travel is severely limited. • All gatherings cancelled and all public venues closed. • Businesses closed except for essential services (e.g. supermarkets, pharmacies, clinics, petrol stations) and lifeline utilities. • Educational facilities closed. • Rationing of supplies and requisitioning of facilities possible. • Reprioritisation of healthcare services.