

COVID REPORT

The Upside of Chaos: Bard Gamelan Gets a New Home

by Sue Pilla

Like many community and college gamelan organizations around the country, and for that matter around the world, the Hudson Valley Gamelan groups Giri Mekar and Chandra Kanchana at Bard College hit a bump in the road as pandemic protocols rapidly took hold on college campuses across the nation. As the first couple weeks of cancelled classes blew by in mid-March, the reality of the situation began to sink in. Fortunately, it coincided with a week off for spring break, giving us some much needed time to process the changes we were facing. Still, the obvious news that we would be unable to meet in person for the foreseeable future hit us hard.

Since Bard College is in upstate New York, relatively near the country's pandemic epicenter, it was certain to implement cautious COVID-19 protocols. For our gamelan members and students, it was time to rethink everything related to our way of life, doing business, and what would and should happen with our ensembles.

We needed to quickly learn a number of new tricks in order to restart teaching and rehearsing remotely. The challenge, at first, seemed daunting. Exactly how were we going to rehearse Balinese gong kebyar in the virtual world, and without instruments for people to play at home?

We soon realized that our spring concert, always the pinnacle of our performance-based classes, would be canceled. The College told us to plan for an end of semester concert just in case we were able to resume in-person classes, but some students had opted to return home during spring break, assuming they would finish the semester virtually.

Days passed in a blur. There was so much news and so many variables to process. My gut reaction, as a long time advisor, gamelan member, and assistant instructor, was that the pandemic in the U.S. would continue to escalate through spring, into the fall semester and even beyond. This pandemic was here for the long haul. There wasn't a manual for dealing with the situation. We were in a collective discovery process. Back in the spring, we needed to react, respond, and reinvent what we were doing. It was time to come up with something completely

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In the lobby of Olin Hall before a performance. Nyoman Suadin, center, arms crossed; Sue Pilla, left, with kendang.

new. Immediately! Friends and colleagues in our extended gamelan world began to chatter about how to approach the challenges of teaching remotely. The primary topics of discussion seemed to be the ins and outs of running online gamelan rehearsals and classes, tips for overcoming the limitations of the virtual rehearsal space, and what safety protocols would be necessary should we eventually be allowed to hold in-person rehearsals.

Further topics arose. How do we save our community and student gamelan groups during this strange time? How do we keep our members engaged when we were, by necessity, being forced to be on an extended pause? How, when the world and our personal and business lives seemed to be melting down into chaos, would we and our ensembles survive? When we learned of the illness of friends, and in some cases, deaths of loved ones and former colleagues, how would we carry on? As the next semester began, would students even choose to enroll in a virtual ensemble class? Would our community members sustain their interest if they were required to "take a pause" indefinitely? The questions multiplied but we needed to carry on.

After a crash course, we learned to navigate Zoom and investigated other possible teaching platforms, although in reality we knew our ensembles depended on the immediacy of sound interaction and hands-on instruction techniques that relied on close proximity between student and teacher

It was obviously a time to be creative—and a time to learn from what others were doing. Further conversations ensued. Suggestions from friends in the field intensified with inspiration coming from near and far.

As time passed, some solutions were obvious while others required more thought, more effort. Many of our guest artists and instructors rose to the occasion. Before we knew it, Balinese ensembles around the world were teaching kecak via Zoom. Some groups were engaging students in discussions of assigned readings or watching and discussing relevant video recordings. Others were hosting live-streamed interviews and mini-lecture sessions with expert guests. Some organizations had more backup support than others in the area of tech support. The activities of our colleagues encouraged us.

Our gamelan, composed of both a long-standing community organization and Bard College students, managed to host a number of robust virtual kecak rehearsals led by I Nyoman Suadin, who has been the group's guiding light for many years. We sang in our living rooms, dorm rooms, bedrooms, and yards. We practiced pronunciation of the lyrics. We learned the value of raising a hand to speak in the virtual rehearsal room. We learned how to listen to each other in new ways. Ultimately, we spent more time than usual supporting and talking with each other, and far more time exploring kecak than our usual semester allowed. In a sense it was a success.

By the end of the spring semester, we felt grateful for what had turned out to be meaningful and personal interactions with our students and community members. It also seemed that those who joined in were satisfied with the experience, and forgiving when we fumbled. The consensus was that a virtual interface was definitely not the same as the exuberance of in-person rehearsals and an end-of-semester performance, but it was

something to look forward to during a collective time of unknowing. Though a number of members clearly experienced some amount of shock as our communities went into lockdown, we still had each other's virtual company to look forward to once a week.

It may be noted here that the experience did not work for every member of our ensemble. As we gathered each week, some were unable to join us for one reason or another. Sometimes, unfortunately, we learned that family members or friends had the virus. These revelations were not easy to handle.

For many of us long-term folks, gamelan has served as a kind of lifeline. It provides a sense of community and extended family reaching across the U.S., into Indonesia and beyond. Locally, we've developed a group rhythm that's well established, revolving around the academic calendar, with a concert at the end of each semester. Rehearsal time provides an anchor to most. Some years, we've extended our community ensemble's season into the summer with off-campus concerts. We regularly invite guest artists for our two annual campus performances.

Our concerts have become celebratory in nature as the years have gone by, publicized by the local press and attended by the Bard College and Hudson Valley community at large. Losing these events, even temporarily, was a disruption and loss keenly felt by the students and gamelan community members, who did not hesitate to express those feelings. It was especially painful for our graduating seniors, who were assured that they would always be welcome to assist with a concert in our collective future.



Bard gamelan with guest artists, December 2019. From left: I Nyoman Catra (standing), I Nyoman Triyana Usadi (kneeling), I Nyoman Suadin (standing center), Ketut Ika Inggas (kneeling, center), Ni Made Yoni Maniasa (kneeling, right), Latifah Alesgaf (kneeling, far right). Also in this performance but not pictured: I Gusti Ngurah Kertayuda.



Bard Hall, our new home.

On the Bard College campus, the gamelan had been located in a tiny green room behind a performance hall. To rehearse, we had to move a piano and a harpsichord into a side room, and take all of the gamelan instruments out of a wall of cupboards, then put everything back afterwards. Balinese gamelan was not meant to be played in a tiny room, and we had a big bag of cotton balls that made their way into many ears to survive the intense sound.

Who would have thought that something wonderful would have come out of all this chaos? The upside of the COVID restrictions was that, due to needing to meet social distancing requirements, we were able to move the gamelan from our formerly cramped quarters to a new space on campus in Bard Hall, a stand-alone building that had formerly been a chapel. The wooden floors and large windows of the gamelan's new home create a nurturing space that suits the ensemble perfectly, affording us a central location on campus where we will be heard by passersby. There is room for dancers and for additional instruments, and, of course, plenty of space for social distancing.

With guidance and training from Bard's COVID-19 Task Response Team, we worked on refining safety procedures and protocols for instruments, equipment, room sanitization, and most importantly, personal safety measures to protect our students and staff. Thanks to the move into our new space, we were finally able to hold some long awaited in-person rehearsals, but just for the students.

Unfortunately, in order to protect those on campus no outside visitors were allowed, so our community ensemble, Gamelan Giri Mekar, was asked to take a temporary pause. Although disappointing, this didn't mean the community group couldn't continue in spirit. Some members, while experiencing gamelan withdrawal symptoms, could look forward to an eventual reunion. We made inquiries into purchasing small practice instruments from Bali for individual home use to augment future learning, virtual and otherwise. At this time, patience and vigilance is required. We will stay the course.

As new issues surface around this current wave of the pandemic, we wait for answers to our many questions. We steadily make preparations for the day when we may

safely gather both of our ensembles together again. With optimism, we envision celebratory outdoor concerts set either on the lawn beside our new home or just below the building in what appears to be a natural amphitheater.

With a little imagination and some great tech support, the possibilities are endless. Perhaps we'll be able to hold a concert in the spring. Possibly under a tent. Time and enrollment will tell.

Most importantly, we carefully follow all the rules for safe conduct to protect ourselves and others. We vow we will remain open to rethinking our approaches as necessary, exploring our processes and new teaching methods. We will remain ready and willing to share our passion for gamelan with our community at large when the situation allows. For now, though, we will wait. We will wait and imagine and learn with the rest of the world. ▀