

## ESSAY

# Recipe for an Independent Gamelan Group

by Barbara Benary

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To any and all readers of this list: I just read notes from Pershall Becker in Cincinnati and Andy McGraw in Kansas City expressing a shade of despair over the prospect of starting up a gamelan group in their cities. Well, groups come and go in this country, even when anchored to the illusory security of an academic institution, but there's no harm in trying to get one in gear. Be the first in your state! In fact, independent gamelan groups have a few little advantages, all in all, and a couple, like my group, have managed to stay active for as long as twenty years. For those who want to take the plunge, here's my thoughts on how to get going, based on what I know of present American groups:

### **1. Get instruments. Either your own, or access to an existing set.**

You may decide to purchase Indonesian-made instruments, new or second-hand. Recently some iron sets have been imported which are less expensive than bronze and sound quite good. Or you can make a home-made set out of iron or aluminum or brass, or some mixture thereof. To my knowledge no one is commercially producing gamelan instruments right now in this country, but there are a few makers around (myself, Daniel Schmidt in California, Dennis Murphy in Vermont, to name a few) who would be happy to advise you on a do-it-yourself project. You may be able to make an arrangement with an individual or institution that owns an authentic gamelan set. If your city

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*Barbara Benary (1946–2019) was a composer, ethnomusicologist, and instrument builder. Benary built her first set of gamelan instruments in 1973, and was later the co-founder (with Philip Corner and Daniel Goode) of Gamelan Son of Lion, an independent gamelan composers' collective. She also constructed more than five other Central Javanese- and Balinese-style ensembles, including the instruments of Gamelan Encantada in Albuquerque, New Mexico. As artistic director of Gamelan Son of Lion for over four decades, Benary led the group in regular performances in the greater New York area, and arranged international tours of North America, New Zealand, Eastern Europe, and Indonesia.*



has an Indonesian consulate, they may have instruments not yet being put to good use. Sometimes colleges purchase instruments and then they fall into disuse when the purchasing professor retires or the college runs out of funding for a teacher; sometimes the percussion teacher may know where gamelan instruments are to be found. Or there may be private individuals or collectors or museums in your area who have purchased instruments but have not yet thought of putting them to use. In these cases it is a matter of negotiating access; the instruments' owner may be happy to have some concerts in exchange for their use.

### **2. Get musicians.**

Invite friends. If you have a circle of musician friends where you live, this is a good place to start. The advantage of community groups is that of stable membership. People are less likely to quit during exam time or graduate and disappear. If instruments can be housed in someone's home,

you'll have rent-free rehearsal space. There have been gamelan groups with a single organizer, but there is more likelihood of group longevity if the organizing effort is shared among two or more people. (It can get exhausting to do it by yourself.)

Recruit strangers. There's nothing like a public performance, even a trial one or a casual demo at the local library, to draw the interest of available people in the community. Likely candidates include: ethnomusicologists, Asian travelers, Asians, percussionists, composers, performing musicians with broad curiosity. Try posting notices or advertisements at music stores, local colleges, community music schools, etc.

### 3. Get a repertoire and/or teacher: either yourself, or a qualified outsider.

You may have the background to lead a group, either from having studied with a gamelan teacher or played in a group. Or you may be a very good transcriber who can make arrangements from recordings. There is an increasing amount of repertoire available in transcription of some sort. The American Gamelan Institute is a good place to begin looking. Contact Jody Diamond or the leader of a gamelan group with similar instrumentation for repertoire exchange. (See the directory of gamelan in North America at <http://www.gamelan.org>). If you are a composer or have composers in your group, you can of course generate your own repertoire.

Find a teacher. There is a scattering of Indonesian teachers around the country, and some experienced American leaders too. They can be invited for a residency or workshop to kickstart the group into action, or if you have the means, you can invite them to come and teach periodically. Check the resources mentioned above for leads.

### 4. Set up your form of organization and financial identity.

The organization: Most independent gamelan function as a club, for the pursuit of learning and experience of sharing the music. Some groups require dues for membership, and generally use such funds to invite guest teachers. Others raise funds for teachers through performing fees. Yet others pay their own players for performing and do not hire a teacher. The financial format can be decided once a quorum of enthusiastic people is assembled. Get a legal identity. This helps you handle cash flow and presentations. A number of independent groups that have been in existence for some time have incorporated as not-for-profit corporations. This enables one to have an independent bank account, tax-free status, and access to various kinds of public funding: federal, state, city and private. Or you might find an existing nonprofit to act as the ensemble's umbrella. If a member of the group belongs to a college, he or she may be able to use the institution as a cover organization for the group.

### 5. Play and perform as much as you can. ▶



*The instruments of Gamelan Son of Lion in their rehearsal/concert space in New York City, December 2018. Photos: J. Diamond.*