

## ESSAY

# Gamelan: a cross-cultural, creative, community context for music-making.

by Jody Diamond (2000)

### Thoughts on gamelan in education.

**Gamelan:** a set of melodic percussion instruments, originating in the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali. This multi-timbral ensemble represents one of the most beautiful, complex and highly developed classical orchestral traditions in the world. Gamelan is used in social and religious contexts, and in the most prominent arts institutions and performance venues in Indonesia. The instruments themselves display a pinnacle of craftsmanship, particularly in bronze. The music theory is fascinating and multi-layered, as it is intertwined with the cultural meanings inherent in the theater and language traditions of Java and Bali, particularly the multi-hour performance of shadow puppet theater.

**a cross-cultural:** In bringing a gamelan into a school, we establish a visual and sonic environment that by its very nature—the decoration, the shapes of the gongs, the positions of the players together on the floor with the instruments—begins immediately to teach about the cultural milieu of the land of its origin. The incredible richness of the music and associated arts of dance, theater and puppet theater can then be learned on this set of instruments. This gives students a direct experience of the art forms of another culture, and personal insight into the world view contained in those arts and the instruments on which they are expressed, whether a gong or a shadow puppet.

**creative:** The music flexibility of the gamelan, the ingenious structure of its instrumentation, and the unique beauty of its sounds all contribute to making the gamelan an ideal and fertile environment for creative exploration. The foreign student's inexperience with the gamelan actually

becomes a distinct advantage, as preconceptions both musical and personal are set aside in the process of entering a completely new musical environment. Composers find in the gamelan an orchestra that they can freely experiment with; musicians find new and unanticipated uses of their musical skills.

**community:** Happily, those with little previous musical experience find that the gamelan presents an opportunity to discover one's innate but previously undeveloped musicality. The many instruments of the gamelan differ in their musical and technical complexity. This allows the experienced player to be challenged and the beginning player to be useful; all players find themselves equally valued and essential. This social aspect of gamelan—a place for everyone—is quite attractive in an educational institution that wants to foster a sense of community and positive interaction among its members.

**context:** The gamelan creates a world of its own, a world into which a group of people may enter, discover, learn, create and perform together. The gamelan also serves as a node of connection to other areas of study: music, theater, acoustics, composition, language arts, area studies, humanities, and more.

**for music making:** Undeniably, the gamelan is an orchestra, an ensemble that is Indonesia's gift to the music-making world. All manners of sound that emanate from these tools may be experienced as music. All manner of music that may be conceived of might be expressed on these instruments in some way. When we place ourselves in the artistic environment of the gamelan room, we are at the center of an adventure that is just beginning. ▀

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*Jody Diamond (b. 1953) began to study gamelan at California Institute of the Arts in 1970; her first teacher was Pak Cokro (KPH Notoprojo). She has taught gamelan and Indonesian studies at many schools and universities, researched Indonesian composers and contemporary music for gamelan, and worked for many years with Lou Harrison. She founded the American Gamelan Institute in 1981, and the journal Balungan in 1984. Her first composition for Javanese gamelan was made on a Casio music calculator in Bora-Bora, French Polynesia.*

*This essay is from [www.gamelan.org/jodydiamond/writing](http://www.gamelan.org/jodydiamond/writing)*