

INTERVIEW

Harja Susilo

26 years of flexibility & tolerance

by Geraldine Diamond

Harja Susilo taught in the first university gamelan program at UCLA in 1958, and has been particularly well known for his skill as a dancer and kendang player (drummer). He is presently teaching in the Ethnomusicology Department at the University of Hawaii. After twenty five years of teaching gamelan to American students, his eloquence and patience are well developed.

In the following interview, conducted in Honolulu on June 18, 1983, Susilo talks about the Hawaii gamelan club and its repertoire, and his views on notation, teaching beginners, the learning of Javanese culture through gamelan, and new directions in musical composition.

Geraldine Diamond: Susilo, can you tell me a little about these particular instruments (at the U. of Hawaii)?

Harja Susilo: The gamelan was purchased in Jogja in 1969 and brought here in 1970. It has been here since then.

GD: It seems to have a gentle mystical sound, more than other gamelan.

HS: It could be the gamelan itself, or it could be the way we play it. The point that try to I make here with my students is that you are not supposed to hit the instrument, you are supposed to play the instrument. A lot of the group consists of beginners — usually they are so busy thinking about the notes that they don't have time to think about the quality of the sound. But also, this gamelan is a good set.

GD: Speaking of beginning students, could you talk about your approach to teaching beginners of gamelan?

HS: My approach is more or less to return to the traditional approach, playing without notation. The advantage of this, and of memorization, is that one hears the paraphrasing of the patterns, the melodic patterns. Another advantage is that, while it takes longer, it tends to stick a lot better. Also everybody has time to listen to each other. I think that half the performer's role in gamelan playing is playing, the other half is listening to the others. And if you can listen and respond to each other it sounds tighter, it sounds more like the real thing.

edited by J. Diamond and L. Polansky

GD: So in the beginning you play without notation?

HS: Since you don't really have much time, you have to start from the beginning. It's amazing that when you try it hard enough you will be able to remember and you can remember the music as tunes rather than as a set of numbers. Today you can go to Java and a lot of people use notation but that's more the influence of western culture. If we use notation then we are just imitating somebody imitating us, so why do that? What I want to do is play directly from sound to sound, rather than from sound to symbol and retranslated into sound.

GD: What kind of people play in this gamelan?

HS: They are former students who have taken gamelan for at least two semesters, and then since we don't have a third semester, anyone who is interested after that can join the club. In the club you don't get credit and the teacher doesn't get paid. It's strictly for fun and for further enjoyment and further understanding.. You don't get too far with two semesters, it's not enough time.

GD: Tell me a little about yourself.

HS: I'm from Jogjakarta, Java. I first came to UCLA in 1958 to study western music, and to earn my keep I taught gamelan. I got my Master's degree in music in 1968. Most of the learning since then has been on my own. Occasionally I go to Indonesia to see whether or not I have gone astray, but so far I haven't.

I think the U.S. is a place for the student to learn the basic technique, the basic music understanding of Javanese culture. If they are interested further then they just have to go to Indonesia. Something I can offer here is to prepare them to go to Indonesia, but there is nothing which can replace that. It's only there that you can learn about the context. When you go to Indonesia you actually see different sets of gamelan, different clubs, and so on, and you find out that it is not just a theoretical thing, that you do have to be flexible.

That's one of the things that I try to stress here, to be flexible, to not to do the same thing twice in the same way. If we've done it one time in one tuning system, the next time we'll do it in another tuning system. One time in this tempo, another time in another tempo. The concentration is on learning treatment rather than repertoire.



GD: Is this how gamelan would be learned in Indonesia? Would one approach gamelan with this attitude?

HS: This is where I make a bit of an adjustment. In Indonesia you would join a club and perhaps you'd play ten pieces in one night. Of course you cannot learn ten pieces in one night, so you would actually go home not having learned anything. The next week when you met again you would play that same ten pieces, so now it's second recognition; maybe by the tenth week you'd learn ten pieces.

But here I try to work with one or two pieces. I find certain types of pieces, typical repertoire, and we learn to treat each composition in certain ways. The next time we encounter another piece we can say "treat it like such and such."

GD: Are the students initially resistant to memorizing and learning in this way? Do some simply need notation?

HS: Some are like that, and some are very willing to get into a new experience. My feeling is that we are in college, and if all the accomplishment in gamelan was to be able to read one through seven, my goodness, that is hardly an accomplishment. You ought to be able to read that when you finish grammar school! This isn't just a matter of stubborn belief, it does make an artistic and educational difference.

GD: How long have these performers been playing with you?

HS: It varies. Some of them have been with us since 1972, and for some this is only the third semester.

GD: How often do you perform, and who does the performances?

HS: We perform once every semester. The gamelan has a name, Khyai Gandrung, the Venerable One in Love. The club itself is called the University of Hawaii Gamelan Club.

GD: I've heard that the gamelan is quite popular in the Hawaii area. Do you have dance and theater as well?

HS: We used to have more dancing, but now we are concentrating more on music. The dancing attracts more audience but the concert pieces present a different kind of challenge. When you accompany the dance you are at the mercy of the dancers. You learn to accompany, you learn to be flexible.

My feeling is that the student's education is the most important objective, and the audience comes next. To only please the audience doesn't take very much. But sometimes you can do that at the expense of learning. We want to do something that is challenging for the musicians even at the risk of it being less exciting for the audience. Occasionally you simply have to take that stand. "This time, this piece is for us." Of course we hope the audience will like it, but if not then they may like the next piece.

If people do not take the gamelan seriously, it is our fault, for presenting it as too simple. We want to communicate to the audience, so we tend to resort to the lowest level. We make it simple so they will

understand, and then they misunderstand. Perhaps they think, "If you can perform gamelan after one semester then it can't be very hard." So I try to first give them something that can be structurally understood, like a piece where every eight beats there is a gong. Then the next piece will have 128 beats before the gong. This takes a great deal of concentration on the part of the musicians. And of course, learning short sentences is easier than learning sentences that are a whole paragraph. The music has got to be memorized and those who are playing elaborating instruments will have to work four times as hard.

What can you show the audience in one hour? I do demonstrations, but I must also show the audience that there is more to gamelan than they can understand. It would also be a disservice to the players, for if the audience can understand the music in twenty minutes, why should the players study for five or ten or twenty years?

I have taught gamelan to Americans for quarter century and have learned much. So I must ask, not how good the performance looks to the audience, but whether the musicians really understand what they are doing.

GD: Do you have a permanent repertoire?

HS: We do dance music, or rather theater music, which also would include music for wayang kulit, and concert music, and each gives the students a different kind of challenge. Theater music would tend to use more dynamics, and have lots of changes, and audiences tend to like it a bit more. The concert pieces take a little longer for the audience to understand. One of our goals is to educate the audience, and to get them to accept the music the way it is accepted by the carriers of the tradition in their own terms.

GD: My experience is that many people come to hear gamelan in search of the tradition, looking for things that have been unchanged for centuries.

HS: In any oral tradition, even a western tradition, there are changes. The way Renaissance music was played in its time is different from the way it is played now. For example, their experience of speed is perhaps a horse running wild, but our experience of speed is beyond the speed of sound, so there will be fundamental differences. Change is part of the tradition. I wouldn't only do it in the old style, but also in the way it is done today.

GD: How do you feel about American gamelan, and about new American composition for gamelan?

HS: In America, gamelan is, I suppose, like western instruments — trumpet, trombone or whatever. You can use them to perform Glenn Miller, a classical symphony, or even avant-garde music. The gamelan itself is an instrument, and it is my job here to give as much background on the traditional music as possible. If I had more time to experiment, but ... there is barely time to cover the traditional music. So it's a different kind of mission.

I did one composition with the Honolulu symphony that was co-composed with one of my colleagues in composition; a sort of concerto for gamelan. It was in four movements, about twenty minutes long. And only





about fifty percent of it gave me satisfaction, The rest was not rewarding enough for the pain and effort that I underwent.

GD: What was the rewarding part?

HS: The rewarding part was that I found a new way of using the gamelan that is harmonious with my aesthetic. My idea is that being different is not in itself commendable or virtuous; being in tune with yourself is what I am looking for. If that happens to be different, well, that's well and good. It's just a different way of looking at it.

GD: Do you have much contact with other gamelan teachers?

HS: Not enough, for this is very valuable. The trouble is, for example in the case of California, the only time I go to a certain place to teach gamelan is because Pak Cokro is not there, or some other teacher is not there. So we never meet. If they are there then there is no place for me.

GD: So you know Pak Cokro?

HS: Oh yes, and he is top-notch. A highly revered musician. Some American students might be very spoiled. When the student goes to Indonesia, not all gamelan are as nice as the one here. And for those who have studied with Pak Cokro — when you go to Indonesia there are so many teachers, but in fact I can only think of a few people who would be his peers. Some people don't realize that you have one of the best in him. He was the leader of the gamelan at Radio Station Jogja, and also the inspector of all the other radio station gamelan. He is one of the best in the country.

GD: You seem to teach not only the musical tradition, but to give your students a feeling for the gamelan's social and philosophical context as well.

HS: I have tried to get people to observe some of the things that are considered good Javanese manners. This room is a Javanese pocket: you don't hand anyone something with your left hand and you don't accept it with your left hand; you bow a little if someone is sitting on the floor; you don't step over the instruments or over food, and so on. This is part of understanding the culture as a total entity. We don't play the gong on Thursday night, a Muslim holiday. We try to always have some kind of tea or coffee, something to eat during rehearsal, this is also part of the tradition. The gamelan to me is the door to enter into a culture, and just how much you can learn after you enter the door is up to you.

When I was in the fifth grade the teacher said, "It is time for you to refine your behavior. It is time to study gamelan and dance." Now, in retrospect I understand what that meant. Essentially, when you learn to play gamelan or to become a dancer, even when you are a good player or a good dancer, you are only half way. The ultimate goal is to be a better human being, to be a better member of the society. To be tolerant, regardless of whether you understand or not.

That is my buzzword — tolerance — even if I don't understand a person. There's a lot of things going on in the gamelan, mistakes and so forth. How are you going to react to that? Are you going to scream and yell? Or are you going to tolerate it and try to fix it in a gentle way. When I do it that way, that part of the culture will get to the students. It is not my intention to change anyone's attitude, but I am offering an alternative behavior and aesthetic sense, an idea of another way to do it. Use it if you like. It's important to have a choice.

I also try and teach my students to be disappointed in a Javanese way. For instance, sometime I intentionally leave out the gong. If they don't notice, if they don't feel anything about it when the gong is not there, then they have not learned it. If you don't even hear it how can you understand it?

GD: When did gamelan first come to the United States?

HS: The gamelan was introduced in the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, about the same time chewing gum was introduced, and only ten years after the phonograph and the zipper. At that time the avenue of the fair was not as effective [for introducing gamelan] as the academic community avenue seems to be. It was introduced again in the 1930's as show biz, and again at another world's fair. But it seems that the university is the best, though not the most dramatic setting. There was interest in Javanese gamelan at UCLA in 1956, and in 1958 they got a more complete set. In 1958 there was only one gamelan in the U.S, and now there are so many. [Currently over one hundred in the United States.]

GD: Do you think gamelan will become part of the Western music world?

HS: I would not like to see gamelan become a fad,



because fads have a tendency to come and go very fast, and the gamelan has a uniqueness which makes it very difficult to be a fad. It takes a lot of effort to build a gamelan.

On the other hand, everybody has their own reason for doing things, and I think I can communicate my own culture at least from the point of view of one person.

GD: Perhaps there is room for traditional gamelan and all that it means, not just playing the instruments, and also for musical innovation and experimentation. I noticed last summer at the American Gamelan Institute program at Mills College there were students who came from New York and Chicago, composers who just wanted to spend the summer experimenting with composition, using the gamelan as simply another way of exploring sound.

HS: As long as they don't offend, like treating it roughly or breaking it, anything that does damage to the instruments.

It isn't so much that I am against innovation, I can compose too, if it is necessary. For example, if we do a dance drama, and need a certain piece — Sendratari is a new innovation, so I give myself the liberty of composing something for that purpose.

When we do a concert here we put on Javanese dress. We are not trying to be something that we are not, but

that is another aspect of the culture. People know what is a hat that fits, what is considered looking good. When you put on a different costume and different dress, you observe a different code of ethics. What kind of batik are you wearing?: Is it striped? Are you a woman or a man? If you're a woman, the stripes go one way, if a man the other, except when it's for dancing this type of dance, when it goes the other way. It's something which is happening in the dressing room which the audience does not join in.

A friend of mine said he would not like his musicians to dress like this, trying to be what they're not, and looking funny anyway... Yes, they do look funny. Imagine if you had the Jakarta Symphony Orchestra and they were wearing tuxedos, but some of them are too small, some are too big, sure, they're funny, they don't fit. They put on these things without knowing what they are all about.

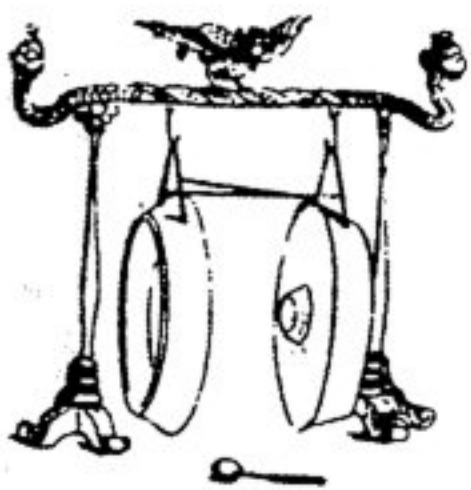
Before a concert we have a selamatan, a ritual feast. We look at it as a ritual, as a get-together so we can think positively and emit that kind of emotion. We have a Javanese costume with a special batik design that means "togetherness with love."

(Geraldine) Jerry Diamond is a sociologist and businesswoman with a strong interest in Asian culture, and has recently divided her time between Los Angeles, Berkeley, and Honolulu.



NETWORK

Everyone is welcome to send in announcements of interest to **Balungan** readers. These might include instruments for sale, availability of guest artists and teachers for performances or workshops, fieldwork information, or gamelan gossip. Just another way to keep in touch.



A fine set of Balinese **gender wayang**, brought to America by Wayan Suweca in 1981, are for sale for \$800. Contact Michael Tenzer at (415) 533-2168 or 1730 10th Ave., Oakland, CA 94608.

Udyana Warta is a monthly calendar listing "cultural event and news of interest to the Indonesian arts community." If you live near the west coast, or you simply must know about gamelan activities from Seattle to Honolulu, contact Rucina Ballinger in the Information Section, Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia, 351 California, Suite 700, San Francisco, CA 94104, (415) 982-8966.

The Center for World Music is sponsoring an **Indonesian Tour** and School from June 17 - August 13. The tour goes to Sumatra, Java, and Bali, and the school offers a wide range of subjects. For information, call (619)265-4243/440-7200.

Mills College will begin its first **community gamelan** for staff and local residents, this fall on Tuesday evenings. This will be in addition to the classes that will be taught by Lou Harrison and Jody Diamond. In late August, call (415) 430-2171 to find out more.

