

PROFILE

West Java Arts the spirit of Sunda

by Henry Spiller

In Sunda (West Java), a staggering variety of music, dance, and theatre traditions flourish. Many of these traditions are studied and performed in the San Francisco Bay Area by a loosely-knit group of people called West Java Arts.

West Java Arts is fortunate to include Undang Sumarna, a master musician from Bandung, West Java. Pa Undang first came to the United States to teach Sundanese music in 1974, and has been on the faculty of the University of California at Santa Cruz since 1976. Pa Undang directs virtually all the musical activities of West Java Arts, and most members of West Java Arts are Pa Undang's students.

Sundanese traditions performed by West Java Arts include gamelan salendro (a type of gamelan similar to Central Javanese gamelan) for accompanying dance and wayang golek (rod puppet theatre), gamelan degung (a small, elegant gamelan tuned to the pelog-like degung scale), kacapi/suling (zither and flute ensemble), angklung buncis (angklung are shaken bamboo rattles; angklung buncis is a rural "marching band" tradition that includes angklung), and penca silat (self-defense dance accompanied by drums, a small gong, and a reed instrument). In addition, West Java Arts performs Topeng Babakan, a masked dance and gamelan tradition from the villages near the city of Cirebon.

West Java Arts concentrates on Sundanese music; with a few exceptions, no American music is performed. Pa Undang has composed a few new pieces, including the unorthodox "Bubukaan," which features each gamelan instrument playing a "break." Performances of wayang golek occasionally include unusual pieces for comic effect. The author has arranged such songs as "Shortenin'

Bread," "Jumpin' Jack Flash," and "Morning" from Greig's Peer Gynt Suite for brief inclusion in wayang performances.

Public performances often feature several Sundanese traditions. A typical concert of this type opens with quiet and intimate songs, such as "Mupu Kembang" and "Jeruk Manis," accompanied by kacapi (a kind of zither) and suling (bamboo flute) or rebab (spike fiddle). The next segment features Bandung-style gamelan accompanying dances such as "Kawitan," "Gawil," "Kandagan," "Kencana Wungu," and "Gatotkaca," which represent a variety of Sundanese "classical" genres. Penca silat (self-defense dance) then is performed by Herman Suwanda, a master of Penca silat, and students from his penca school. The final segment features two or three of the five masked dances that comprise the exciting Topeng Babakan repertory.

West Java Arts also has presented concerts that feature Topeng Babakan exclusively. The group currently is preparing to present a complete topeng performance that includes all five topeng babakan dances at the Mask Festival in Los Angeles, as a part of the Olympics Arts Festival.

It is Pa Undang's extraordinary musicianship and versatility that permit West Java Arts to present such a variety of traditions. Pa Undang was trained by his grandfather, Pa Kayat, in gamelan salendro and dance-drumming. Pa Undang distinguished himself at an early age as a major exponent of the difficult and exciting Sundanese dance drumming style. To expand his students' horizons and introduce American audiences to a variety of Sundanese traditions, Pa Undang also became proficient with kacapi, gamelan degung, and angklung buncis. When Pamela Rogers Aguiniga studied with Topeng Babakan master Sujana Arjao, Pa Undang applied his talents to master the fiendishly difficult gamelan pieces and drumming that accompany topeng dances. When Kathy Foley joined the U.C. Santa Cruz Theatre Arts faculty after studying wayang golek for several years in Bandung, Pa Undang revealed himself to be a drummer and gamelan director for wayang. When Herman Suwanda, a venerated young master of the Sundanese art of penca silat, a genre that combines self-defense, dance, and music, moved to the Bay Area from Bandung, Pa Undang's skill as a penca drummer surfaced.

Pa Undang's mastery of so many genres of Sundanese music is enhanced by his teaching abilities. Sundanese music is at once deceptively complex and deceptively simple for Americans. Pa Undang has developed a

teaching method for his American students that allows for Americans' peculiarities while retaining significant aspects of Sundanese pedagogy.

Sundanese pieces are based on very abstract themes. An instrumentalist realizes the abstract theme by selecting appropriate variations from his personal repertory of variations and fitting them to the theme. It is very difficult for a Sundanese musician to play a piece the same way twice. Americans, of course, do not have the requisite personal repertory of variations, and become frustrated when two apparently different musical patterns are said to be the same.

Pa Undang has managed to create and standardize a basic variation repertory for his beginning students. He attempts to make each student comfortable with the idiom of each instrument. With this rudimentary knowledge and understanding, students are able to play many pieces on several instruments. Only then does Pa Undang slowly expand the students' personal repertory of variations. After a certain point, students are expected to grow musically in the same way Sundanese musicians grow; they must listen to other musicians and imitate their styles. In the United States, of course, this growth requires listening to recordings as well as other students.

Listening is the key to Pa Undang's teaching. Notation is used only sparingly in classes and discouraged in performances. Musicians are expected to respond appropriately to cues from the drummer and dancer. Pa Undang frequently points out that musicians cannot respond to such cues if they are concentrating on notation (dance cues are especially difficult to catch when reading notation). Furthermore, use of notation contradicts the spontaneity that characterizes Sundanese performances.

Many members of West Java Arts have spent time studying in West Java. Students return from Indonesia with expanded personal repertoires, new dances, instrumental skills that Pa Undang does not teach (such as rebab and suling), and frequently new gamelan or other instruments. Most importantly, they return with a clearer idea of the spirit of Sundanese arts: While the arts are solemn, profound, and deep, they also are lively and informal. This synthesis of relaxation and serious purpose adds greatly to West Java Arts performances.

West Java Arts' major goal is to introduce American audiences to the beauty, excitement, and variety of Sundanese music, dance, and theatre, which for some reason are not as well known in the United States as Javanese and Balinese traditions.

Henry Spiller is currently a technical editor at SRI International. He has studied and performed Sundanese and Javanese music since 1976, and has taught ethnomusicology at several universities in Northern California. You can get more information about West Java Arts by writing to him at 545 University Drive #1, Menlo Park, California 94025 or calling 415/327-5510.

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PENCAK SILAT means "movement with art." It is an Indonesian martial art and a traditional dance form. For centuries it was inaccessible to outsiders and only recently is being taught abroad.
HERMAN SUWANDA has been accorded the title *Pendekar Muda* ("Venerated Young Master") in his native Indonesia, having studied *Pencak Silat* since the age of seven from a wide range of master teachers including both of his parents. He arrived in the U.S. and began teaching in June 1981.