Beginning Gender Technique

by Soedarsono Wignyosaputro
collected by Jody Diamond

These exercises were written by S. Wignyosaputro, a former government worker who lives in Surakarta and specializes in teaching beginning gamelan. He has several prize-winning "ibu-ibu" groups -- women's social organizations that meet regularly to play gamelan and which participate in many festivals and national competitions. He also teaches beginning gamelan to other organizations, such as a group of telephone company employees that meets one afternoon a week.

Pak Wignyo has several distinctive elements in his teaching style. He places great emphasis on all students singing the balungan, both before and during the actual playing of the instruments. He has also developed an approach to the technically more demanding instruments that begins with a series of exercises and then moves to the actual patterns that are used in playing pieces. Many students can be overwhelmed by the effort to achieve both technical ability and musical understanding at the same time; Pak Wignyo found that separating these efforts into two steps made the initial challenge easier for many students. (For proof of his method, Pak Wignyo explains that his son, who had no other training that his father's teaching, is now a junior instructor at ASKI, the highest ranking conservatory in Solo.) The exercises themselves are not used in actual performance, but they incorporate many of the techniques and hand motions that are involved in actual **cengkok.**

Damping of keys is an extremely important aspect of gender playing. The exercises presented here can serve as a vehicle for practicing the different types of hand motion necessary when damping keys while moving to the right and to the left. These exercises also reflect the fact that most most melodic activity on the gender is executed by the left hand.

In the following exercises, the right hand (R) is on the top line, and the part played by the left hand (L) is one the bottom. The dots (.) indicate a rest, and the lines above two notes ($\overline{65}$, $\overline{.2}$) indicate subdivisions of the beat. The photographs show the hand positions; each note is damped by the heel of the same hand that played it. Tones should be damped at the same time as, or immediately after, the next note is played. If the note following a rest is a repeated tone, however, that note should be damped on the intervening rest (1 $\overline{23}$.3.).

The slendro gender usually has 13 or 14 keys, with tones that fall in three different octaves, indicated by dots:

6 1 2 3 5 6 1 2 3 5 6 1 2 3

Since the musical challenge of the gender is even more formidable for Western students who do not have the advantage of a lifetime of exposure to the sounds of gamelan, perhaps these exercises may serve as an introduction to the instrument whose sound has been described as "the blood pulsing through the veins" of the music. It is too often the case, particularly in the situation where no Javanese teacher is regularly available, that the more difficult instruments are left unexplored. Unfortunately, this is synonymous with ignoring some of the most complex and beautiful, as well as essential, elements of Javanese music.

I. Cadence on gembyang (octave)
From high to low, from right to left.

A. R: . 3 . 2 . 1 . 6 . 5 . 3 . 2 . 1 . 6
L: 6 3 5 2 3 1 2 6 1 5 6 3 5 2 3 1 2 6

B: R: . 3 . 2 . 1 . 6 . 5 . 3 . 2 . 1 . 6
L: 653 532 321 216 165 653 532 321 216

From low to high , from left to right.

C. R: . 2 . 3 . 5 . 6 . 1 . 2 . 3
L: 612 123 235 356 561 612 123

From high to low, from right to left.

D. R: . 2 3 2 . 1 2 1 . 6 1 6 . 5 6 5 . 3 5 3 . 2 3 2 . 1 2 1. 6 1 6
L: .53232. .32121. .21616. .16565. .65353. .53232. .32121. .21616

II. Beginning patterns to cadence tones. From high to low.

A. R: 1 2 1 3 6 1 6 2 5 6 5 1 3 5 3 6 2 3 2 5 1 2 1 3 6 1 6 2
L: 1 2 3 . 6 1 2 . 5 6 1 . 3 5 6 . 2 3 5 . 1 2 3 . 6 1 2 .

B. R: 3 2 3 1 2 1 2 6 1 6 1 5 6 5 6 3 5 3 5 2 3 2 3 1 2 1 2 6
L: 3 2 1 . 2 1 6 . 1 6 5 . 6 5 3 . 5 3 2 . 3 2 1 . 2 1 6 .

III. Further development of the beginning pattern

A. R: 1 2 1 3 6 1 6 2 5 6 5 1 3 5 3 6 2 3 2 5 1 2 1 3 6 1 6 2
L: 1 23.3. 6 12.2. 5 61.1. 3 56.6. 2 35.5. 1 23.3. 6 12.2.

IV. An actual pattern (to pitch 6) and variation
This would be used in irama II.

A. R: 5 6 5 . 5 6 5 1 5 6 5 1 5 6 1 6
L: . . 5 6 1 . 1 . . 5 . 3 . 5 . 6

B. R: 5 6 5 . 5 6 5 1 5 6 5 1 5 6 1 6
L: . . .56 1.161.1 . 5 6 3 . 56.6.