

Gamelan at Rockland Project School

by Barbara Benary

This is a brief account of my experience in bringing gamelan into the music curriculum of a small, private elementary school in Valley Cottage, New York, about thirty miles north of Manhattan.

The curriculum at Project School is geared to alternative education. I cannot say whether it was an asset or a liability that I began teaching music to a group of fourth and fifth graders without having had previous experience with standard school music programs. Both the experience and expectations of these students were rather different from the kinds of backgrounds textbooks seem to assume.

Their listening experience was extremely limited. Only two out of eight had ever been to a concert of any type whatsoever. A few had participated in the school's folk-singing choir for some years. Other than this, mass media had provided the sole musical exposure for most of them. Having heard little other than rock music, they assumed they didn't like anything else, and didn't have the physical patience to sit still and hear any new kinds of music.

Listening activities in class thus had to be limited, even though they were a bit more patient with listening to me singing than with listening to recordings.

The children's interest and ability to participate in music activities also had its limits. We tried clapping exercises to focus on basic phenomena such as unison, acceleration, etc. We also tried singing along, or singing while clapping. Some successfully participated, others were reluctant. For some weeks we also worked on basics of notation, which was successful as a workbook exercise, but most of them could not transfer this skill to practical application.

Thus at the end of two months I still felt I had not hit on the right thing for them — something which could actively involve them all.

During this time I had been reluctant to introduce my gamelan instruments even though I had an angklung set at home. Perhaps I was too absorbed in the ethos of traditional respect. I envisioned the children siezing the tabuhs with eager cries of "Oh, let me try it!"; going crash! crash! bang! bang! as loudly as possible for about one minute; then stopping abruptly and asking, "Is class over yet?"

Eventually I did decide to bring in a few of the little four-note gangsa. The group had always been eager to touch and make noises with any new-found musical apparatus. And after all, I reasoned, it was a sturdy, home-made set and they weren't likely to break it. The set is a replica of a Balinese Gamelan Angklung, with four-note metallophones covering three octaves built more

or less according to Dennis Murphy's design with steel keys and PVC resonators. Now I believe my angklung gamelan has magic properties: if it does not soothe the savage beast, at least it helps to socialize it.

My first happy discovery was that not a single child was reluctant to try gamelan. Kids who refused to blow into a recorder or sing "Jingle Bells" with a group would pick up a tabuh. The first class was spent improvising, learning to damp keys and exploring what the instruments could do. One child began to pick out tunes she knew on recorder — "Hot Cross Buns" and "Mary Had a Little Lamb". Others of course had to try "amok-amokan"; fortunately the math class next door was not unduly disturbed.

The response was positive enough that I continued to bring the instruments in. Soon after, we moved them to a small loft with a rug, added a gong and drum and made the space available to all the older children to use as they liked in their free play time. To their credit, not a single piece has been lost or broken. I also began to use a tape recorder as part of class — they love to record and hear their work.

A format evolved. The basic processes taught were musical in the Greek philosophic sense — social cooperation was the goal, and organized sounds the means and by-product. The skills were:

- 1) How to create a tune — that is, to improvise a sequence and fix it in a way they liked, and repeat it consistently enough that others can imitate it. Since I worked with cyclical pieces, this also involved figuring out how many spaces (rests) were needed to link the end of the piece to the beginning again. Although the last involved some guided attention, all the children were admirably spontaneous at composing and preferred to make their own pieces rather than work on arrangements of a known tune.

- 2) How to wait patiently while another child who is the composer works out his piece, and how to listen before trying to jump in and play along. This was difficult and involved constant reminders and interventions, but paid off. Sometimes the group ended up correcting the composer, reminding him to be consistent, asking him questions that clarified his piece.

- 3) How to play in a rhythmic unison; to be attentive to another player while playing; to catch up if they get lost or fall behind. This goal was self-evident to them although it required constant work for those whose physical coordination was slower or who were not experienced in mutual attentiveness.

- 4) How to start and stop together. This involved creating signals by pre-arrangement; sometimes these were knocks

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on the wooden frames of the gangsa, sometimes a count of "1, 2, 3," and sometimes a visual cue of watching a tabuh begin to strike or an arm wave to signal a cutoff. When a new piece had reached a degree of togetherness, other parts were added: gong, ketuk (small hubcap) and/or drum. At this point we rehearsed the piece to be sure it was sufficiently cohesive, then recorded it. Pieces were also given names, which I felt gave the child a sense of having created a personal entity. These names tended to reflect their culture; just as a Balinese child might have picked titles like "Jasmine Blossom" or "Golden Frog", these children chose names like "Funky Rock" or "1980's Song" and once "Picking your Nose".

We notated the songs, as a last gesture, on index cards which were kept in our repertoire box. Numbers 1-4 indicated the pitches, dots showed rests or extensions, and "G" or "H" were written beneath the melody to indicate the striking of the gong and hubcap. We also used the symbol "X" for a knock of the tabuh against the wooden frame, a favorite device for counting out rests or rhythmic emphasis.

In addition to student compositions, various improvisational structures were invented. For instance, adding parts: The first child makes up a simple ostinato; the next adds a different one; then the third adds a third different part, etc. A regular drum rhythm usually formed the background of improvisations. They were based on short, repetitive fragments with game plans for changing orchestration or dynamics. Little reference was made to the specific orchestral skills of Indonesian gamelan (although one could certainly develop improvisations to this purpose).

After two months of gamelan, the original class settled into two small groups of 4-6 players. (I am fortunate to work in a school which allows the teacher time to work in small groups.) Combined they would have made a more impressive performing group, but they steadily chose to maintain their separateness. Several children with severe social difficulties had been excused from the class, but a few older students came in to replace them. Sometimes a much younger child would spontaneously

Jittergong

by Jonathan Freger

1 2 3 4 • 2 1 •
G

appear and join in, since school policy was that students with "free time" were allowed to come into other classes as long as they weren't disruptive.

Each of the class members has periodic chances to be the leader, to compose and determine the parameters of his or her own piece.

"Congratulations, Mr. Composer," I said to the least attentive boy when he managed to complete and record his piece.

"What's a composer?" he asked. None of the children answered.

"You are," I said.

Barbara Benary is a composer, performer, and ethnomusicologist living in New York. She has a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University, was on the faculty at Rutgers University, and is the director of Gamelan Son of Lion. She has built three sets of instruments; the one used at Rockland project school is Gamelan Tabanan, which she decided to construct after a brief period of study with I Wayan Suweca in 1975.

WONTON by Lily Williams

4 3 3 4 2 • • •
G H

(untitled) by Vidai Huynh

1 2̄ 2 2 1 3̄ 3 3 1 4̄ 4 4 1 2 3 4 • •
4 3̄ 3 3 4 2̄ 2 2 4 1̄ 1 4 3 2 1 • •
G G