

PROFILE

Ethnomusicology at Oberlin College

by Roderic Knight

In 1884, when the Oberlin Conservatory of Music was still in its infancy, a piano student named Frances Densmore from Red Wing, Minnesota enrolled. At the time there was little way that she or the Conservatory could have known that what she learned would ultimately prepare her to become one of the great pioneers in the field of ethnomusicology, known at the time (among its few practitioners) as comparative musicology. Upon leaving Oberlin, she found an immediate practical use for her skills: transcribing from Edison cylinder recordings the songs and drum rhythms of Native American musicians throughout the country. Before she died in 1957 at the age of ninety, she had produced some ninety books and articles under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, setting a standard for scholarly discussion of non-Western music that is respected to this day.

In 1969, almost one hundred years after Frances Densmore came to Oberlin, Molly Johnson, having just completed graduate studies in music at the University of Michigan, came to Oberlin to live. One of her areas of specialty at Michigan had been the music of the gamelan orchestra. In the spring of 1970, quite unsolicited, Johnson received a letter from her Michigan

professor, Judith Becker, who had gone to Indonesia to conduct field work. She had learned of a *slendro* gamelan for sale, and wondered if Oberlin might be interested in it.

This proposal was welcomed with enthusiasm; interest had been sparked by a touring performance of the Michigan gamelan a year earlier, the first such performance at Oberlin. Without further delay, the entire set of instruments was purchased for the incredible price of under \$1000. Some repairs had to be made on the instruments before they were shipped. Many of the wooden cases were in bad repair and had to be refurbished and repainted. In the meantime, Johnson arranged to borrow Michigan's instruments and for the Winter Term 1971, offered the first gamelan instruction at Oberlin. In the Fall of 1971, Oberlin's instruments arrived and were given temporary quarters in one of the Conservatory classrooms. With this, Oberlin became the first purely undergraduate institution of its size to own a gamelan.

Oberlin's newly-acquired gamelan was first heard during Winter Term 1972. The performance was also the occasion for a *selamatan*, a blessing ceremony to assure that the instruments, formerly owned by the Kho family of Malang, East Java, would



The Oberlin College Javanese Gamelan in performance.

never be "orphaned" again, and would enjoy much use. Judith Becker, recently returned from Java, played the dance drum part, and her son and daughter, age 11 and 9, danced. It was apparent from the start that the instruments were of very high quality. They were over one hundred years old, and the sound quality of the bronze was excellent. That fall, Molly Johnson began teaching gamelan, supported at first only on a temporary basis.

Meanwhile Oberlin had taken one more important step towards recognizing the academic importance of non-Western music studies: at the urging of Music History professors Richard Murphy and Sylvan Suskin, Dean Emil Danenberg and Acting President Ellsworth Carlson created the first teaching post in ethnomusicology, in 1971. Sara Stadler, a UCLA graduate student who had just returned from field work in India, was hired to start the program at Oberlin. Jazz studies were also begun with the appointment of Charles Moore in 1972. He was succeeded by Wendell Logan in 1974. Related to jazz studies, the seventies also saw the funding of the Black Arts Workshop, the Black Ensemble (an a capella choral ensemble), and several student-run performing groups associated with African Heritage House, Third World Dorm, and Asia House.

For Winter Term 1975, Stadler, with the cooperation of East Asian Studies, the Shansi Memorial Association, and the Great Lakes College Association, organized a multi-part Asian Theatre project. The Javanese dancer and gamelan teacher Hardja Susilo was invited to teach gamelan, and the Japanese Kabuki actor Onoe Kuroemon II also taught for the month. Several other scholars were invited for weekend programs.

In 1976 Sara Stadler left Oberlin to pursue other interests, and I replaced her, bringing a specialty in the music of the Mandinka of West Africa. At the same time, Molly Johnson was given a regular part-time appointment to teach gamelan one semester each year.

In 1977 I organized the Mandinka Ensemble, a study group for the performance of West African music played on the *kora*, a 21 string harp, and *balo*, a xylophone. Another performing ensemble began in 1980: the Oberlin Can Consortium, as it is now known—a Trinidad style steel band. From the start this was a student-run organization, spearheaded by two students who had learned the tradition in their New York high school, and it continues today, as with the South Indian drumming, with great success.

Over the years, beginning even before the gamelan arrived, Shansi representatives returning to campus have contributed to the non-Western music activities on campus. In the spring of 1978, Carl Jacobson, then Shansi Program Planner, took a step to involve Shansi more actively in promoting the study of non-Western music at Oberlin by inviting R.M. Wasisto Surjodiningrat, of Gadjadara University in Yogyakarta, Java to teach gamelan. This allowed gamelan to be offered both semesters. While here, Wasisto, as he was known, produced a book, *A First Introduction to Javanese Gamelan Music*, which sold close to 400 copies and helped greatly to publicize Oberlin's gamelan program around the country.

In the Spring Term 1981, the Shansi Association became more directly involved again, this time inviting Edward Van Ness and his Indonesian wife Shitalakshmi to teach Indonesian music and

assist with the gamelan. During that semester, quite by coincidence, the college received a grant from Paul J. Appell earmarked for "Asian arts." It was an amount sufficient for the purchase of a set of gamelan instruments. Oberlin's gamelan consisted of only slendro instruments, and since the Van Nesses would be returning to Indonesia and could arrange for a complementary *pelog* set to be purchased or built, the stage was set for another improvement in Oberlin's offerings. Everything proceeded according to plan, and early one cold February morning in 1984, a flatbed truck carrying a huge crate pulled into the Service Building dock. In preparation for the event, Professor Knight had seen to the expansion of the gamelan room, formerly a narrow cubicle in the basement of Asia House, and there was now ample room for the new double gamelan. Given the long-distance nature of the project, *tumbuk* [a common tone between slendro and pelog instrument sets] was not achieved, pitch 6 being a step apart on the two sets, but it was not too bad.

In 1982 Oberlin embarked on a joint venture with the University of Michigan and University of Wisconsin to share the services of a Fulbright teacher of gamelan. The teacher was Sri Djoko Rohardjo, from Surakarta, Java. The grant was renewed in 1983, so that spring terms 1983 and 1984 saw a flourishing gamelan program, having been prepared in each case by Molly Johnson in the fall terms. The educational value of this program has been fully recognized by the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars, which administers the Fulbright program, for they renewed the program again for 1984 and 1985.

Molly Johnson, our main teacher since 1971, has a full-time library job now and isn't teaching, but perhaps she will in the future. In the fall, the third Fulbright scholar, A.L. Suwardi, will be at Oberlin, so there will be a concert in December, and a spring concert as well. The gamelan plays outdoors at Mayfair, a campus event on the first Saturday of May, and then a final concert a week or two later. I will be on leave this year, but a recent Wesleyan doctorate, Tom Ross, will be take my place.

[A version of this article originally appeared in the alumni magazine of Oberlin College.]

Roderic Knight is Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music.
