

PROFILE

Northern Illinois University: an interview with director Han Kuo-Huang

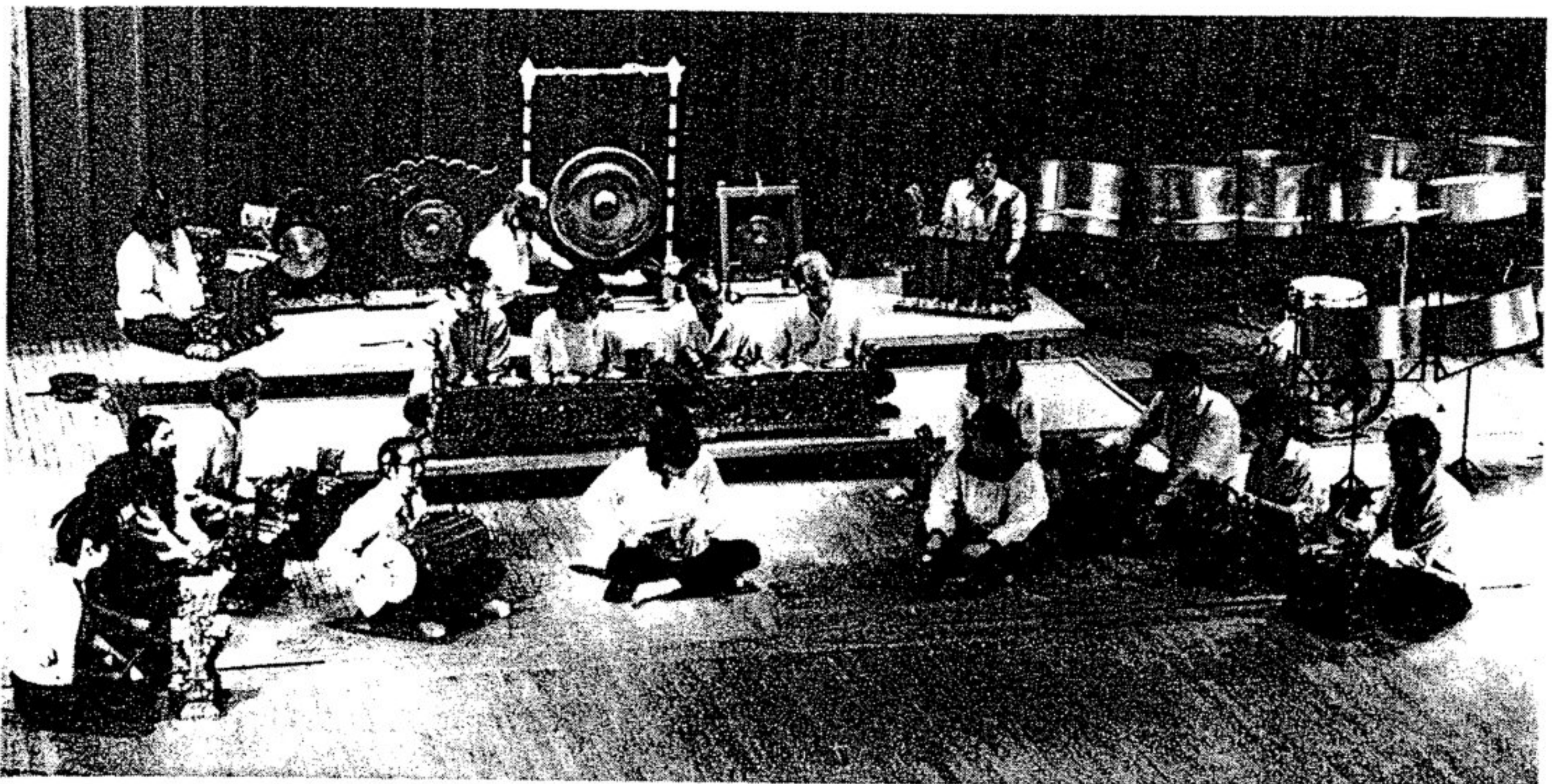
Balungan: Tell us about yourself and your background.

Han Kuo-Huang: I graduated from Northwestern University School of Music and I got my Master's and Ph.D. in Musicology there. Believe it or not my dissertation was on renaissance motets. I had two assistantships at the time. One was in music history under John Hohl, and the other one was in ethnomusicology under Claus Wachsmann, who just died last year. He was the one who encouraged me to study ethnomusicology when I was at Northwestern. I was already working on music history. The reason was quite simple: even though I played many Chinese musical instruments when I was a kid, in my time, say twenty five or thirty years ago, back in the Orient—I grew up in Taiwan even though I was born in mainland China—all the people looked at me as a weirdo playing all these things. It was like Western music was the supreme music of the whole world. So, of course I learned violin and played in the symphony orchestra and all that. It was after I got into Northwestern that I met Wachsmann who encouraged me to study ethnomusicology. Then there was a job opening at Northern Illinois University, a temporary job to teach music history for one year. When they renewed it for another year and asked me if I wished to stay, of course I said

yes, job-wise. However, I told them that I had another interest in ethnomusicology, and that I would like to set up a program. And since I had some training and I could play, they let me do it. That's how I started out here. It was 1974 when I got my Ph.D. degree and that was the summer that I went to the Center for World Music in Berkeley and studied gamelan. I had had an interest in gamelan for many many years but I was not able to do any studies because there was not any [gamelan] in the Chicago area at the time. I started the world music program in 1975. This is a crucial date because now it is 1985 and it has been ten years. However, when the world music program started I was doing both music history and the program, and it was getting very difficult. Finally, I had to ask for relief from the music history part.

Balungan: So the Center for World Music was your first actual playing experience?

Han: Actually, even touching a gamelan! At the time I studied with Pak Kanto and there was also a Sundanese musician there, I think Pak Nugraha. I went there in '74 and again in the summer of '75. Also, in the summer of 1980; in other words, off and on. In California I also started to learn the Balinese



Northern Illinois University Balinese Gamelan Angklung
Repertoire: Gineman,, Ngedeslemah, Sekar Uled, Pendet, Barong, Margepati,
Kebyar Angklung, Tabuh Empat, Baris, Gegilak Gede, Jaran Siring, Bebranangan.

gamelan angklung with Pak Suweca and in 1980 I studied with Pak Sinti. And when Susilo came to Chicago to set up the gamelan here [the Field Museum gamelan] for the opening concert in 1978 most of the players were my students here, because by that time we had our own gamelan angklung already. My students and I drove to Chicago during the month of December in '77 or '78, to study under him. In 1978, Andy Toth helped me acquire this present set of gamelan angklung. [It was made by I Made Gableran of the village of Blahbatu, Bali.]

Balungan: Tell us more about the World Music program at Northern Illinois University.

Han: The program is very much performance-oriented, and the reason is that the school itself is very much performance-oriented. We don't have a Ph.D. program. We only have a small Master's program, and the whole school very much leans toward performance, with very high standards. We don't have a degree in world music or ethnomusicology. We set up kind of combined degrees with Education, or there are some other possibilities to develop if there is someone interested in this field. We have the following ensembles: The Chinese Orchestra, which is the only one of its kind at a university in the United States (although right now it's closed because I just couldn't handle it—last semester I had eight ensembles to take care of plus academic courses); the Balinese Gamelan Angklung ensemble; and the Sundanese Bamboo Angklung ensemble. I take care of these three major Asian ensembles. In addition, from time to time we have smaller ensembles such as the Chinese Percussion Ensemble, or the Sumatran *Gondang Tua*, that's a small ensemble, or sometimes we do a little Philippine *Kulintang* and Thai ensembles, but our instrumentation is not quite complete. Then we have an African [Ewe] drum ensemble, taught by another faculty member, Al O'Conner, who also teaches Caribbean steel bands; we have two steel bands here. And there's Indian tabla, and an East African xylophone ensemble taught by yet another faculty member, Robert Chappel. He and Al O'Conner teach the non-Asian world music ensembles or musical instruments. So, it's a relatively small program but very active. You would enjoy my instrument room; I have over a hundred instruments, and over fifty video tapes relating to world music from all cultures. Twelve hours were recorded last summer, in 1984, in Sumatra, Sunda, Central Java, and Bali. And then there are about 800 slides for world music; about half of them are related to Indonesia!

Balungan: Do you find most of your students coming from the Southeast Asian Studies program?

Han: Oh, no. We have students from all over the campus. The students from Southeast Asian Studies usually take my academic courses rather than my performing courses, but our students actually come from all fields. The Sundanese angklung ensemble has about thirty people and is 95% Malaysian students. We have 400 Malaysian students here. The Southeast Asian Studies and Anthropology departments, and our own Music department, are very supportive of what I'm doing.

Balungan: Can you tell us a little more specifically about the two angklung ensembles you have?

Han: One is a complete Balinese gamelan angklung, to begin with, but I also purchased a large gong, a *gong ageng*,

for it. Of course it's not a Balinese gong, I got it in Solo. But at least it's a big gong in order to play the *kebyar* repertoire. We do play both styles, that is, the old style with the *kempul* as the main gong with two little drums, *kendang angklung*, a 19th century or early 20th century repertoire; and then we also play a few modern pieces influenced by the kebyar style. We also have a dancer from Bali, who lives in Rockford Illinois, who sometimes works with us.

Balungan: And in the bamboo angklung ensemble at N.I.U., what repertoire do you play?

Han: We are doing the old style music, the ostinato music, as well as, of course, more modern style with harmony, because that's what they're doing nowadays. We play *The Saints go Marching In*, and we play some old-style music. Both. I also purchased a *gambang arumba*, which is a bamboo xylophone, and we use that to play with the bamboo angklung. That is also the way they do it there.

Balungan: Do you encourage your students to compose for the ensemble?

Han: Only recently have I encouraged students to write pieces for these instruments. Right now we have just two pieces written for this gamelan and one piece written for a different combination of gongs, based on Sumatran musical ideas. I just started it last year. Oh, by the way, one important thing is that we may have Suratno here, and we will be renting a Javanese gamelan for a year. Then we are going to buy an iron gamelan like the one in Chicago at Friends of the Gamelan. So, hopefully a year and a half from now we will have our own iron gamelan and more activities related to Indonesian music.

Balungan: In teaching, how much do you rely on notation or do you teach completely by rote?

Han: All by rote. Except the modern composed pieces, but usually I force them to memorize.

Balungan: And do you run into any problems teaching non-musicians as well as teaching those with a music background?

Han: In this case we're talking about the gamelan angklung. For the bamboo angklung I do use number notation, but only for the non-music majors. For the regular gamelan angklung repertoire we don't use notation. About half of the students involved in different ensembles are non-music majors. Although it is true that some musicians can learn faster and play faster, I don't see a major difference between music- and non-music majors. In general I find that musicians can pick up things better but then this is not 100% true, because some non-music majors can do quite well, and some music majors can't do as well as I had expected. The reason I said earlier that I had take care of eight ensembles last semester is that we had so many people signed up for gamelan angklung that we had to divide them up into seven sections. Seven gamelan sections plus one angklung ensemble. So last semester we had a total of about eighty people involved in various world music ensembles.

Balungan: I realize you're the only gamelan angklung around. Are you in touch with other gamelans in the midwest, and do you exchange repertoire?

Han: Not much. Mantle Hood had an idea to establish a gamelan club for all the gamelan angklung teachers and students, but it never materialized. I think I was the only one who replied. There are about a dozen of them. Hopefully, after this summer I will learn more and I can start exchanging stuff, maybe through *Balungan*. The closest by is in Bowling Green, Ohio. They were hoping to trade repertoire with me, and I said, "Oh fine." We can play almost twenty pieces, and I'll be learning more this summer.

Balungan: And once you have a Javanese gamelan you're close to Wisconsin and Chicago...

Han: Yeah, now we can communicate with them. [laughs] But right now, gamelan angklung-wise, we're the only ones in the Chicago area. Incidentally, we also have a Balinese marching gamelan. Now a Balinese marching gamelan is relatively easy to form as long as you have four kettles, because each player plays one kettle and then we just add all other kinds of gongs, and drums, and cymbals. So, that's it. It's called a *gamelan bebonangan*.

Balungan: In pelog?

Han: We can play both slendro and pelog, because we use the kettles of the gamelan angklung. And that's what they do in Bali. I heard slendro style also. The summer of 1981 I was in Bali and I hit the new year season. Oh boy, all over the place were marching gamelans.

Balungan: In respect to your gamelan ensembles, do you have a more advanced ensemble?

Han: Usually we have one ensemble that goes out to perform.

Balungan: I know at other educational institutions it's always a problem maintaining a stable ensemble through the years. How successful have you been in maintaining your advanced group?

Han: As far as my gamelan angklung, it's very successful, because most people who have played in the gamelan angklung stay in the group until they leave the DeKalb area. So with that part I'm quite successful, but not with the Chinese orchestra, because first of all it takes so long to teach students the instruments, and then they leave.

Balungan: How often does the gamelan ensemble perform?

Han: Nowadays, not too often. About one concert inside of school and one concert outside of school every semester.

Balungan: Where else has the ensemble performed?

Han: Outside of the DeKalb area? Well, recently we went to St. Louis, Missouri. We have performed at the Field Museum in Chicago. We have also performed at Northwestern; Bloomington, Indiana; Purdue University; and Grinnel College, Iowa, because they have a small ethnomusicology program there. Various places. And the Chinese orchestra has performed all the way to Hong Kong.

Balungan: Were they well received there?

Han: Oh yeah, [laughs] I mean to see the red hairs and the brown hairs playing Chinese music in China was something real exotic for them. By the way, we had an album out on Folkways, one side is the Chinese orchestra and the other side is the gamelan angklung. It's called *West meets East: Chinese and Balinese music performed by the Asian Music Ensemble, Northern Illinois University*. The Chinese orchestra on the record was the best that I could do. The gamelan was not the best; the gamelan is much better now simply because I have learned more. This summer I will be concentrating on learning gamelan angklung in Bali, especially the kendang, the gamelan drumming. I also will be learning *gamelan selundèng*. It's an older style iron gamelan. Selundèng is a very rare gamelan. There are only a couple in Bali.

Balungan: What do you know about it now?

Han: I don't think there are any outside of Bali at all. It's a religious gamelan and the melody players use two hammers, no damping, like playing a xylophone. [Readers are advised to refer to Colin McPhee's *Music in Bali*, pp. 256-265 for more specific information on the gamelan selundèng. -Ed.] Then I will go to Sunda, actually Bandung, where I will do a small research project on the use of bamboo in music, and also learn the repertory of bamboo angklung music, concentrating on one or two styles. Randy Baier has helped me a lot. Endo Suanda, who was my former Sundanese gamelan teacher, will be helping me there.

Balungan: So you will be in Indonesia the whole next year?

Han: Oh no, not the whole time. I will be in Taiwan also, because I am doing research on the making of gongs, the type of knobbed gongs found in Taiwan. I'm trying to connect that idea to Southeast Asia, because Chinese gongs are usually flat, but there is one kind of Chinese gong that looks just like an Indonesian gong. So, I'll be in Taiwan also. I'll be purchasing a gamelan angklung for the National Institute of Arts there. I'll be getting them this set now, a steel band the following year, and the year after that a Javanese iron gamelan. You see Taiwan is still open, it's still easy to do it. Mainland China is still hard but I've been invited to go there and talk about Southeast Asian music in the future. And there are also gamelan in Tokyo now. One gamelan angklung and one gamelan kebyar at the Tokyo Fine Arts University. I studied Japanese music too in the summer of 1983 with William Malm.

Balungan: It must be wonderful to have that perspective.

Han: Oh, not really. [laughs] I spread myself too thin. When people ask me what I do, I tell them I'm a "chop suey" musician, because I'm doing so many different things.