

# NOTATION

## Notation or Not: Some musings about writing it all down

by Jarrad Powell

Seeing is believing, or so we are often told. This sentiment extends into music, where, at least in the West, one often feels compelled to see with the eyes what might be better left to the ears. Sound is an aural expression and experience. The organization of sounds needs only time in which to present itself, while the making of sounds needs only space in which to resonate. Nothing more is needed. Why then have complex notational systems for music evolved? And what is the relationship between notation and the learning, writing and disseminating of music?

There are different reasons for the introduction of writing into a system of knowledge. Curt Sachs (1943) suggests that only one reason has validity in relation to music: "The fear that in times of distress, tradition might weaken and, by an inexact rendition of the sacred songs, endanger the efficacy of worship." In other words, the initial reason for the advent of notation in a musical tradition is mnemonic—a way to aid the memory in calling forth what is already known. The concept of history as a chronology of past events posits another reason for notation: preservation—to fix what is essentially transitory into an object, so that it will not be lost. Perhaps such a function of notation better serves scholars and historians than artists.

Once notation has been established, it can serve as an educational tool to impart new information. When this step is taken, the process of oral tradition begins to break down. The process of "how" is replaced by the knowledge of "what". This is a qualitative difference from the original mnemonic intent of notation. Notation becomes at once stultifying and liberating. It takes the emphasis away from group process and places it on individual decision making.

Enter the composer. Notation allows manipulation of musical ideas free from the context of performance. At the same time, a notational system may engender constraints of its own, by establishing a perceptual bias or emphasizing certain parameters of the music.

In the West, the issue is really more simple. A teacher is faced with a practical decision: to teach by rote or use notation. As Judith Becker (1980) has pointed out, we must not confuse the concept of "oral tradition" with memorization; one is a learning process, the other is learning content. The teacher in the West cannot create the sense of an oral tradition by asking students to play from memory. One can, however, emphasize learning as an aural rather than visual process, which can be useful to students who do not have that emphasis in their normal studies. But one should not make the assumption, I think, that one learns to listen better through learning by rote. If it is desirable for students to learn to listen while reading,

that too must be practiced. A simple axiom might be: people learn to do what they practice. If the teacher wants a student to learn to play without notation, they should teach without it, while if they expect students to read notation, that must be offered to them also.

One must decide on the value of memorization in a given context, as well as what the relationship is between notation and the composition being presented, and what one is ultimately trying to teach. There is a qualitative difference between the notation of a through-composed piece and the codified notation of a cyclical piece. Students who are primarily involved in playing through-composed music can find great insight and enjoyment in learning to play cyclical music from memory. Above all, however, gamelan classes should focus on developing basic musicianship skills. That means precise rhythmic execution, sensitive tone production and the ability to listen and hear one part in various relationships to the overall fabric of the sound. Accurate reading should probably be an adjunct to these skills.

For the composer the question of expedience always arises. What does one notate and what does one leave to performance practice? The axiom is simple: when in doubt, notate. Every question asked diminishes the amount of available rehearsal time. If one is writing in a traditional Javanese style, then perhaps only notation of the balungan may be necessary. However beyond that, some clue must be given as to performance practice. When preparing a piece there are many things to consider: the amount of rehearsal time, the nature of the composition, the experience of the group. The foremost concern should be what will make the most effective, accurate and musical performance in a given situation. The *internalizing* of a cyclical piece, where form and elaboration are a matter of convention, is far different than *memorizing* a lengthy through-composed piece. At the same time, the basis of gamelan performance practice in the West is primarily the traditional gamelan music of Central Java; it seems appropriate that rote teaching should be incorporated into the learning process of this music. This provides many students with a much needed alternative experience and makes gamelan far less forbidding to those who do not read well.

In my experience, students who have learned only by rote tend to flounder a bit when first using notation. Often they have developed the habit of watching the keys of their instruments while they play and become disoriented when they must fix their eyes on a score. In turn, the student who has learned only from notation may not internalize information as well or will have difficulty in a rote learning situation.

On the educational side, teachers will deal with the question of

notation as conscience and expedience dictate; philosophically, the forces of musical change will find their own path. It is clear that something very unusual has happened with gamelan music in the West. Some combination of factors has inspired individuals in the West to adapt these instruments to their own personal music making, breaking the bond with a purely ethnomusical approach. Yet at the same time, a strong bond still exists with the traditional repertoire, since it provides the basis of performance practice. (Is this really so different than the case of players of traditional Western instruments who play contemporary music, but whose performance practice is based largely on the music of 18th and 19th century Europe?)

One's interest in notation may vary with one's role as a performer, composer, teacher, or scholar. There are philosophical considerations as well as practical ones. As notation becomes more widely used in places like Java, in response to changing educational processes and needs, the broader question of its effect on the evolutionary process of music in an oral tradition must be addressed. Scholars will be

sensitive to the problem because of their interest in semiotics, while artists will engage in the process of change as they always have, utilizing the means at hand. The automobile may have replaced the horse as our primary means of travel, but it has not supplanted our need for transportation. Notational systems may replace oral traditions, or perhaps vice versa, but neither will eliminate our need for music.

#### References

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1943 *The Rise of Music in the Ancient World* New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

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