

# PROFILE

## University of Michigan: an interview with Judith Becker and René Lysloff

**Balungan:** Would you tell us about the gamelan program at the University of Michigan?

**Judith Becker:** The current system we've had for only one semester and it's been working very well. I can say that because René is doing all the work.

**Balungan:** He's doing all the hauling.

**Becker:** [laughs] Yes, René is doing the actual running of the rehearsals and arranging the programs. He does most of the teaching except when we have our visiting Fulbright teacher, which we have this summer.

**Balungan:** How did you originally get involved in gamelan?

**Becker:** Oh, absolutely through the back door. I was a graduate student in the ethno[musicology] program here in the mid-sixties and Bill Malm had a chance to buy this gamelan—which he got the University to buy—and he ran it for one semester and decided that it was too much work. So, he sort of said, "You do it." At that time I had had one semester experience with him [laughs] and what we did was bring Susilo in for a month of intensive work. Basically he worked with me intensively because I was absolutely green, and I would spend the rest of the year teaching the group what he had taught me. We did that for two years and then I went to Java. Then when we came back I was a little more able to do things on my own. And because we haven't been able to get the University to hire a teacher, in the last six or seven years we've really been dependent upon our Fulbright teacher, whom we have for one semester out of the year. And that's what we're still doing.

**Balungan:** I understand that you've organized a three-way sharing of Fulbright scholars with the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Oberlin College. How did that come about?

**Becker:** Well, the first one we got by ourselves, but then the Fulbright program began to tighten up. What I wanted to do was to make our Fulbright proposal more attractive. I thought it would be more attractive if we had a partner because they love inter-university cooperation. So, we got Wisconsin to be our partner, and that worked fine for about three years. Then Fulbright changed their rules and said, "we will only give Fulbright teachers to small schools who don't have developed programs." I could see our Fulbright going down the drain again so we brought in Oberlin—because that's a small school with an undeveloped program—to be the third partner. On the strength of that we were able to go on for a couple of more years. Then, Fulbright changed the rules again and now they will give Fulbrights to established programs. But, now that we've got this three way program going and it's been so successful—and the Fulbright committee is so supportive of

this sharing—that it's just the way we're doing it now. It's worked very well, and I think that part of the reason it has worked so well is that we have had people other experienced people in the group, like René, and before him Alan Feinstein, and before him Andy Sutton. It isn't just the Fulbright teacher and me. We've always had these people to help. And I hope that continues.

**Balungan:** Can you tell us a little bit about this particular gamelan here and where it's from?

**Becker:** Well, it's a Solonese gamelan as you know, but there's some mystery [about] where it's from. I haven't been able to trace it in Java. I have not been able to find the source. I think it is one of the pair that came over in the New York World's fair in 1965, the other one going to Wesleyan, and now [on loan] to the Boston Village gamelan. So, that in a sense is the sibling of ours. They look alike, except that one is red and ours is dark brown but basically the *ukiran* [carving] is the same. So, they do look like a pair.

**Balungan:** Do you know how old the instruments are?

**Becker:** No, except it has to be fairly old because when we retuned it in about '75 it had already been retuned at some point. And they get tuned how often? Every twenty, forty, fifty years? So, we really don't know. It's not new. We know it's not new.

**Balungan:** I noticed that in your past programs there seems to be a lot of emphasis on presenting many different regional styles of music from throughout Java. Would you say the gamelan here has a regional focus?

**Becker:** The regional focus really is René's interest and since he became interested in regional music we just decided to use the gamelan to, in a sense, pursue his interests. Also it's interesting for them to do different styles. We have also been fairly regularly playing pieces by American composers in the last few years. We really have tried to make some accommodation to what's happening in this country. We're not "pure" in the sense ... and we certainly don't play only one style. And, of course, that is partially because our Fulbright teachers are from different places, and if it is a Yogya person we play Yogya things and if it is a Solo person we play Solo things. It has kind of been our philosophy that we don't just do one thing whereas at Wesleyan, where you have a teacher in one tradition, he teaches that tradition—which is understandable.

**Balungan:** What American composers have you played?

**Becker:** Lou Harrison. And then we played a piece by Arthur

Durkee, our own local composer. We were part of a Lou Harrison festival that we did jointly with the Music School a few years back in which half of the program was his gamelan pieces and half the program was other kinds of pieces that he had written.

**Balungan:** In your gamelan ensembles, do you end up having a beginning ensemble and a more advanced ensemble?

**Becker:** Yes, we have a beginning class that lasts one year and then they automatically advance. We don't have any kind of audition. If you spend a year in the beginning class you move on if you want to.

**Balungan:** In the beginning class do you work towards a performance or is there a particular curriculum you try to cover?

**Becker:** We try to cover the forms *lancaran*, *ladrang*, *ketawang*. We try to give them a basic idea of the formal structure and we have them move around and play everything—all the simple things—so they get a grounding in all the simple things. Then there are always a few that want to do the hard things, and we try to accommodate that.

**Balungan:** How often does the advanced group perform?

**Becker:** Basically we aim for two concerts a year and sometimes it's more. I think recently it has been decidedly more, but basically we think of a winter concert and a summer concert.

**Balungan:** How successful have you been in maintaining your advanced group? I know elsewhere it's always a problem maintaining a stable ensemble in the face of the mobile American lifestyle.

**Becker:** Well, there's always that, but we've been lucky. I think for the most part we have had a lot of sustaining people; people who are here for several years. And, of course, our *pesindhen* [Susan Pratt Walton] lives here.

**Balungan:** What are your feelings about the current Western trends in gamelan and how do you see it as being either the same or different from what is happening in Indonesia today?

**Becker:** My feeling is that the gamelan tradition in America has to be something other than just an imitation of the gamelan tradition in Java. I shouldn't say "has to be" because I certainly have no objection to the gamelan in this country that play only traditional things, I think that's fine, but I think you also have to have ensembles that are available to local composers. In other words, I feel there has to be an adjustment to the place and the time that you are in and I think it is important that the big, well established gamelans give some sort of opportunity to American composers. I don't think that we should cut them off and say, "no, we're only going to do traditional stuff."

**Balungan:** How important is it for Americans playing gamelan to learn the traditional approaches to gamelan?

**Becker:** Oh yes, in the beginning class we don't ever teach anything but traditional things. I think that's very important, and I think that's important for gamelan composers too. It

gives a kind of grounding. It gives a kind of base.

**Balungan:** Do you encourage your more advanced students to compose for the gamelan?

**Becker:** No, I don't encourage them. They don't have to be encouraged. [laughs]

**Balungan:** As a gamelan teacher teaching Americans, how much stress do you place on transmitting the social, philosophical, and cultural setting of the gamelan?

**Becker:** That's a hard question. Well, we observe things like taking off shoes and not stepping over instruments. I think we do try to explain the context of this in Java and the meaning of this in Java, although not formally. I do think that people very soon get the feel that this is a communal ensemble and that there are no stars. That the point is not to make yourself look good but to help the ensemble and support the ensemble. One of the things that I always say is, "if the ensemble gets off and you know you're right, don't just hang in there with your right-ness, get with the ensemble." We try to teach that the adjustment to the ensemble is more important than any one person's correctness, which of course, is part of the Javanese tradition.

**René Lysloff:** One thing I like that you sort of established here as a tradition is that the gamelan is an extension of the University and it is a part of learning about Java. There's not a pseudo-professionalism that sometimes is found in some of the other schools, at least in my experience. And that is one thing I've tried to maintain here so that there is something for all the students. This kind of professional mentality where there is a lot of competitiveness, also exists, of course, in Java, but ... if the concerts or playing the music becomes so much more important than the social event I think you lose something.

**Becker:** I think by social event you mean the type of interaction that goes on between people.

**Lysloff:** Yes, it's part of that communal atmosphere that's very important; no single person is more important. Even as a teacher you don't stress the authority of the teacher. That is something also I try to maintain with the students; I'm just another student of gamelan as well and we are all in it together. It's an event rather than [saying] there are set goals that you have to reach and those who can't quite do it will be discarded.

**Becker:** Yes, and the idea that, traditionally, playing gamelan was for one's spiritual development so therefore you don't say, "you're hitting too many wrong notes therefore you can't be a part of this ensemble", because that is to deny that every individual is at a different place and every individual has different abilities. We try to accommodate everybody. As René says we don't discard anybody just because they aren't doing very well. We have had some striking successes. Some people who were struggling for a really long time, we just hung in there, and eventually they began to be more of a contributor. But, it takes a lot of patience and it definitely takes an ideology that says you don't exclude people because they aren't doing very well.

**Lysloff:** There seems to be a place for everyone here. It's very similar once again to Java. It's simply a matter of finding

your niche in the group. And some people find it even by not playing but participating in other ways—some by being involved in cooking for the concert or whatever. And once they find that they feel very good about it. That's the part that I feel is very important. From my own experience in other groups, sometimes that's forgotten and you sort of lose the magic when it becomes too professionally oriented. Especially in America, you can never even hope to be professional so why try to pretend that you're a professional performing group.

**Balungan:** It seems you're also quite fortunate here in having the Center for Southeast Asian studies and this Fulbright program because it allows a lot of other opportunities to put the music, as a separate entity, into context with an understanding of the rest of the culture.

**Becker:** Yes, and of course the focus changes not only with the teacher because of his regional style but his interests. Like last year, our Fulbrighter was a *dhalang* so we worked on wayang kulit repertoire. And before that we have had people who were interested in dance dramas so we worked on that repertoire. So, what we are working on changes.

**Balungan:** What are the plans for the gamelan program in the coming year?

**Lysloff:** I think after this summer we will be preparing ourselves for our next Fulbrighter. That's the main thing. We have some students who are working with Suratno to develop skills that we can use on our own for the fall semester. Pretty much every semester we do it by the seat of our pants. We prepare the group as best we can given the fact that there are instruments we don't play ourselves. Then we bring in a local guest artist like Andy Sutton or Roger Vetter, and they'll work with the group a week to do the final polishing and to add the various things that we haven't been able to teach. And it seems to work quite well.

**Balungan:** Who do you have coming for this next year?

**Becker:** Suwardi is our next Fulbright teacher and he'll be here in the winter term. And of course by that time René will have gone to the field. Luckily we have another experienced person [Marc Benamou] who can take René's place as the one who guides the regular rehearsals because I'll be on sabbatical. I guess I'd like to say a little bit about this aspect of inter-gamelan cooperation which has been so essential to our program, not just in terms of the Fulbrighter, but in terms of visiting artists. For instance, we have brought Andy Sutton and Roger Vetter from Wisconsin and lots of our people quite regularly go down to Oberlin because the Oberlin program is newer than ours. This kind of non-competitive cooperation has been very important to us because none of us have a resident artist. Without the cooperation of other gamelan ensembles it would be harder for us and it would be harder for other people as well. And it has meant that all of our performances are better than any one ensemble could have managed by themselves because we don't have a full contingent of people who are expert on all the instruments. Then of course there is this constant problem of transients. We get somebody who is really good on the *rebab* and then they are gone.

**Balungan:** How about repertoire?

**Becker:** In terms of repertoire, of course, Lou Harrison has had a strong input and will again this year. The University here is making a record of Lou Harrison's non-gamelan pieces. They've got some time left over and they want to put on one of his gamelan pieces. He's going to send us something.

**Balungan:** What do you think about the big blossoming of gamelan in the United States in the last fifteen years or so? Is it all good or are there some cautions to be taken? Is it a fad?

**Becker:** No, I don't think it's a fad. I just think it's very American of us. Our strength is in, a sense, our eclecticism and our openness to new things, and I see this gamelan explosion as a further manifestation of this openness to new cultures, to new musics, to new sounds. I think it was inevitable once it was possible, and once it was available, that this would happen. I don't see it as dangerous because, I guess, I'm not a purist. If I were a purist then I might because, of course, all of these gamelans are not going to be playing as well as the gamelans in Java. That's not going to happen and there are going to be distortions. And there are going to be misunderstandings but I guess I don't see that as a very big problem.

**Lysloff:** Also, I think it's fascinating that in America you see composers of gamelan who compose to use the timbre, just the sounds of gamelan. Then there are composers like Lou Harrison and Arthur Durkee who are actually using principles in gamelan, not only the sound. I think you'll see more of this—and to a certain degree you see it in the works of Lou Harrison—where principles of gamelan are used in compositions for Western instruments. It may even go a step further, in the style of Cage, where just the aesthetics become the basis for composition. So I think it will be really interesting to watch what will happen in the next ten, twenty years with American composers of gamelan. How will they treat that? Because as they become more skilled and knowledgeable themselves, how will that influence them in terms of how they compose for gamelan or other instruments? We are only at the beginning right now. This is just the start. It may be that in twenty or fifty years from now there will be Javanese students coming to America to study American style gamelan playing. That would be fascinating. That's the neat thing with gamelan in America, because it can go so many ways. I think what's important is that America is at least staying in contact with Indonesia so it's not as if we were totally isolated and going off in our own direction. There are some that are going off and at the same time there is certainly a school of people who are trying to maintain the tradition.

**Balungan:** In your book [Becker, *Traditional Music in Modern Java*, Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980] you discussed many of the changes that were taking place in music in Java at that time. Do you think that what you observed happening then is continuing in Java today?

**Becker:** I haven't been there for extended periods as recently as René and some of my students, but I have the feeling, and I may be wrong, that there is a conservatism going on in Java. There is this great interest in going back and looking at old traditions, which, of course, is not something that oral traditions generally do. In a sense it is a further movement in the direction of the West.

**Balungan:** Exactly--it takes a conscious perception of yourself as separate from the past, and distinct from the tradition, before you want to go back and look at the past.

**Becker:** Yes, which certainly shows that people's attitude toward gamelan is changing in Java. It is becoming much more, as you say, a self-conscious tradition there, and so you get these revivals of various forms.

**Lysloff:** What do you think about regionalism in Java now?

**Becker:** Oh yes, that was another thing I talked about in my book a lot because when I was there everybody was trying to imitate Solo or Yogya. Now it seems that there is much more of a "roots" tradition in Java. People are beginning to say, "hey, we don't have to be like them, we can do our own tradition and that's acceptable." For instance, when I was in Malang [East Java], there wasn't an east Javanese gamelan in Malang, in the city. They were all central Javanese ensembles. Now, I understand that's not the case, that you can study east Javanese gamelan in the city where as before you had to go out into the remote villages where they didn't have access to central Java.

**Lysloff:** What's more the so-called court traditions are imitating the so-called regional styles now. I'm finding more and more cassettes of *Gendhing Banyumasan* [Gendhing from Banyumas, the rural, agricultural part of Java that lies between Yogyakarta and Bandung] or *Gendhing Jawa Timur* [Gendhing from east Java], so it seems to indicate there is an interest, even in the central court areas, in the regional music.

**Becker:** Which would also seem to indicate that the courts no longer see themselves as the center of the world. Because, if you are the center why imitate the periphery?

**Balungan:** Do you think that in some ways American ideas of "art as an institution" have entered Javanese society and that we are seeing a shift from the court to the government as the "preserver" of that tradition?

**Becker:** Yes.

**Balungan:** And in that way very Western.

**Becker:** Yes, very Western. In fact the word *seni* [art] is in a sense a new word. The original meaning of the word is something fine or delicate, but the idea of seni as art is a Western borrowing. So now they suddenly have "art" in the Western sense, which is something apart from your normal life. Traditionally, I believe, it was much more integrated.

**Balungan:** Because of that self-conscious recognition, is the separation between the art-form and its social function becoming larger, and in that way many of the things that attract Americans to studying gamelan are at the same time being torn apart?

**Becker:** They're going in the other direction, yes. We noticed that particularly last summer when we had an artist who very much felt that gamelan performance was "seni", and that everything was geared toward the performance, much less toward the interaction. You were aiming towards a finished product, not the process. It seems to me that traditionally the process has been so important and now more and more it is getting to be the product that you present to the public. I think they are moving in a direction which is certainly understandable and maybe inevitable but it makes gamelan more like what we do and, in a sense, makes it less of an alternative to our Western traditional ways of treating the arts.

## SCORE

# Five Inventions for Two Bonang & Percussion

by Robert Lombardo

*These notes accompany the score on pages 24-25.*

"Five Inventions for two bonang and percussion is the first in a series of chamber pieces I wrote for gamelan with other instruments. Movements one, two and three are written for bonang barung, bonang panerus and one or more different percussion instruments. The fourth is written for bonang alone and the fifth for bonang and all of the percussion instruments used in the first three movements. I used cipher notation in the percussion part which seemed to work fine for the first three movements but became somewhat of a problem in the last. I have been trying to expand cipher notation in my gamelan compositions in order to incorporate musical ideas that seem difficult if not impossible to express with the existing notation."

Inventions I and II are published here. The entire score is available through the Archives of the American Gamelan Institute, or from the composer. This work was written under a grant from the Illinois Art Council.

Robert Lombardo studied composition with Philip Bezanson, Boris Blacher and Arnold Franchetti. He received his B.Mus. and M.Mus. from the Hartt College of Music and his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. He had written over 140 works in many media. This year he is a Visiting Professor at Oberlin Conservatory; in the Fall he will return to Roosevelt University in Chicago where he is composer in residence and Professor of theory and composition.