

Gamelan in Texas

by John H. Chalmers, Jr.

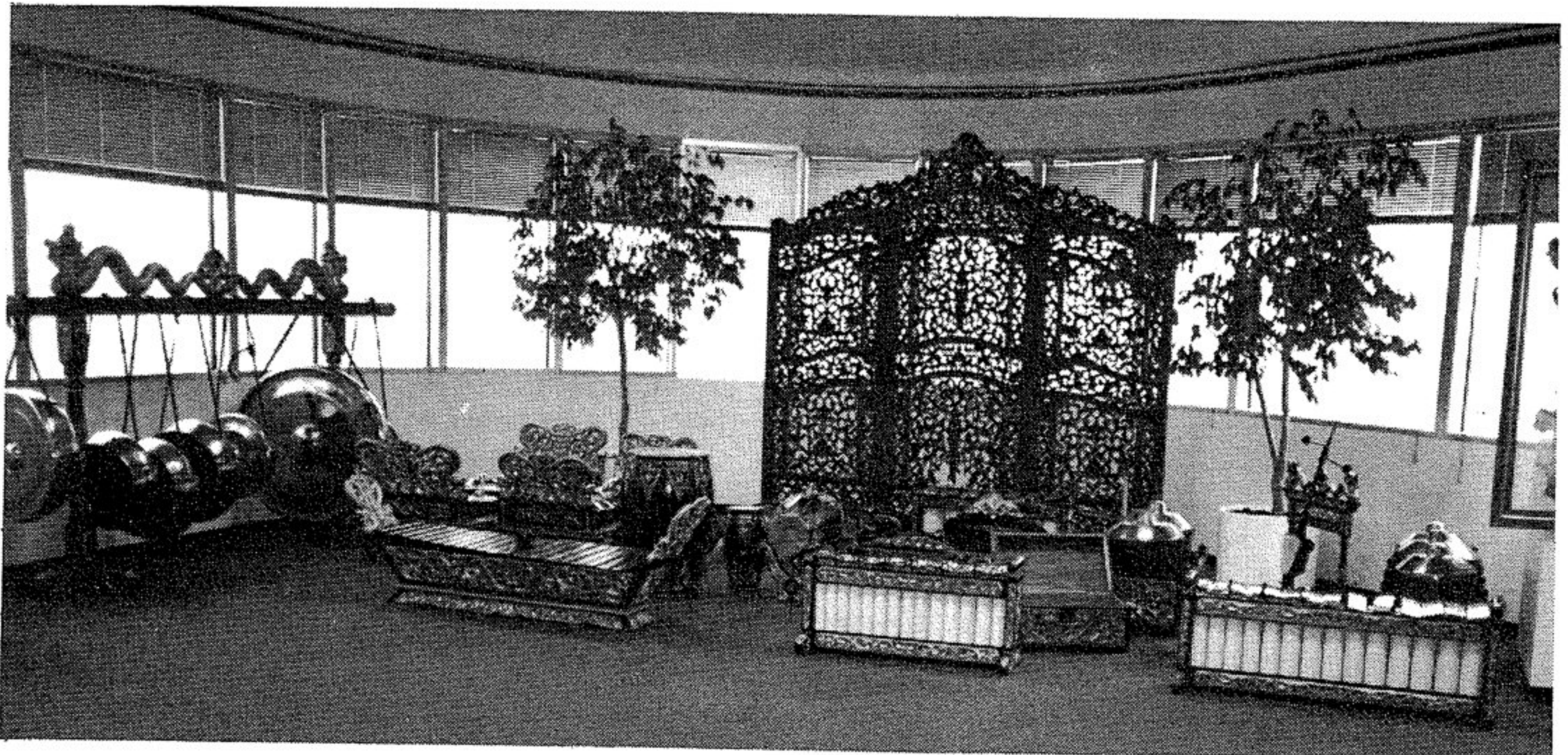
Indonesian musical arts have occasionally been presented in Texas, but it was not until recently that gamelan became domiciled in the state. There are now two permanent gamelan, one in an educational setting, and one at the Indonesian Consulate General in Houston. In 1983, Dr. Robert Schietroma of the School of Music, North Texas State University in Denton acquired a set of instruments built by Daniel Schmidt and began to offer gamelan classes to his percussion students. In early 1984 the Consulate General of The Republic of Indonesia in Houston received a Sundanese gamelan degung as a gift from the governor of West Java; a Central Javanese Gamelan was purchased in Jakarta and arrived in January 1986. In addition to these instruments, the Consulate General also possesses a set of bamboo angklung and an Arumba orchestra from West Java.

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North Texas State Gamelan

The gamelan at the North Texas State University (NTSU) School of Music is part of a percussion program in which about a hundred students are enrolled. NTSU has the largest music school in Texas and is known throughout the state for its jazz studies program, including the famous "One O'Clock Lab Jazz Band." Less widely-known is its very considerable strength in new music; in 1981 the University hosted the International Computer Music Conference, under the direction of Professor Larry Austin. There is also a very active World Music program including a complete Thai Pi Phat orchestra and a number of instruments from East and West Africa.

The instruments in the NTSU gamelan of Daniel Schmidt's design have been supplemented by several constructed locally; the ensemble can accommodate thirteen players. The new instruments include a gambang kayu made out of paduk wood and a set of drums. The ensemble, however, lacks gender, kethuk and kenong. The



Javanese gamelan at the Indonesian Consulate General in Houston.

sound of the gong ageng is approximated by striking three metal key-gongs simultaneously, a solution analogous to that of the Javanese gong kemedong. Schmidt's design provided both a pelog and a slendro tuning in just intonation. The repertory consists of traditional Javanese and Balinese pieces as well as new music, especially the compositions of Lou Harrison. NTSU also has a set of bamboo angklung which is very popular with the students.

The Consulate Gamelan

The larger gamelan of the Indonesian Consulate General is of the Central Javanese court style, probably of Solonese manufacture. It is made of bronze and decorated with red and blue paint in addition to gold leaf. At the moment, it is still unnamed, but the Consul General, Soekadari A. Honggowongso, is in the process of selecting an auspicious one ("Kyai Bintang Penyendiri"?). The ensemble has about eighteen instruments, all in slendro, and is set up in an auditorium which also contains a piano and the Arumba. Sad to say, the instruments are not being played, but the Consulate General may consider a community gamelan club. Students and members from the local community have taken part in other musical activities at the Consulate General; perhaps only an energetic musician-teacher is needed as a catalyst.

The gamelan degung is also of bronze and is kept in a nearby room. Like the Central Javanese ensemble, it is not currently being played, although it has been used to accompany dancers in the past. It is tuned to the five-tone pelog-like degung scale.

The Arumba orchestra and the angklung from which it was developed are the ensembles played most frequently at the Consulate General in Houston. The Arumba, an abbreviation of the phrase, "Alunan Rumpun Bambu", consists of a set of high pitched angklung that play the melody, four gambang arumba xylophones made of



Arumba instruments.

bamboo tubes that provide harmony and rhythm, and a bass angklung. The instruments are tuned chromatically to twelve-tone equal temperament and span more than four octaves. There are usually seven or eight players.

The Arumba ensemble was invented in West Java in the 1960's by Jaka Burhan and Udjo Ngalagena as a smaller alternative to the traditional angklung ensemble which requires thirty or forty musicians. The gambang arumba is sometimes called *calung*, after a traditional West Javanese instrument tuned in slendro. In Indonesia, Arumbas are often played on television, for government holidays and as background music for banquets. In Houston, the instruments are played by staff, students and members of the local Indonesian community for entertainment at social functions, receptions, and other festive occasions. "The Yellow Rose of Texas" is a popular feature of their repertory.

In October of 1986 forty of the dancers and musicians of the "Nusantara Dance Troupe and Gamelan Orchestra of Indonesia" came to Houston from the Indonesian Pavilion at EXPO '86 in Vancouver, B.C. They performed at the Consular Ball, which is given each year by the Junior Chamber of Commerce for the Diplomatic Corps; this year Indonesia was the honored country. The visiting artists also presented a public concert of music and dance from Bali, West Java, Central Java, and North Sumatra at the INNOVA Design Center under the joint sponsorship of The Asia Society/Houston and the Indonesian Consulate General. This was moderated by Houston resident Jennifer Gillespie-Malone, a dance ethnologist trained in Indonesian dance at UCLA and at The Tropical Museum in Amsterdam.

For those fortunate enough to get tickets it was a wonderful experience to hear and see these artists perform. The quality of the music and dance was of the same high standard which characterized their performances at the International Gamelan Festival, and the costumes of the dancers were spectacular. [The concert program is listed in this issue under "Programs."] The group's other local appearances included a dance workshop for the students of the High School for Performing and Visual Arts and a presentation for the travel industry. The instruments used in these performances were borrowed from the Indonesian Consulate General in Los Angeles and thus increased, alas only temporarily, the number of gamelan in the Lone Star State.

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