

FIELD NOTES

New Gamelan Music at ASKI Solo

by Arthur Durkee

During my stay in Central Java, 1985-86, I was closely tied to the college-level national conservatory of music, Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia in Surakarta, often referred to as ASKI Solo. I studied and observed gamelan classes, and also observed the process of change in the Javanese traditions, including the creation of new gamelan music.

At ASKI Solo, new music is created fairly regularly. Each student is required to create a new work in order to complete the degree program. These pieces are played for the *penyajian*, the final exam, in all three divisions of the program: *Tari* [dance], *Karawitan* [music], and *Pedhalangan* [puppetry].

In the Karawitan division, a student may choose one of the following to complete the final exam: pass a traditional practicum test of knowledge of *karawitan* [classical gamelan music]; present a completely new *kreasi baru* [lit. new creation], usually called a *komposisi*, using a wide choice of styles, techniques, effects, unusual instrumentation, experimental instruments, etc.; or arrange a sequence of traditional pieces in a new way. (Some ASKI teachers say that in the last case, it is important to make new transitions, exciting sequences, and lively arrangements. I heard several presentations in this category that included pieces from regional gamelan repertoires, especially the Banyumas and Semarang styles, as well as East Java.)

In the Tarian division, the dances ranged from purely traditional material with new choreography to works incorporating Western modern dance techniques (I saw at least one derivative of Martha Graham dance style). The music tended to reflect the origin of the dance: a variation on a traditional dance, like a new *Lawung* choreography, would tend to have more traditional *iringan tari* [dance accompaniment], while a "modern dance" piece (i.e. Western style) sometimes used Western musical instruments and sometimes gamelan, or even a combination of Western instruments and gamelan.

One of the most memorable *Penyajian Tari* pieces I saw had as its centerpiece a simultaneous performance of several dance styles: a strong-style male character, two

refined-style male characters working in parallel forms, and a *bedhaya* dance of nine women. They all crossed fields and overlapped on the single stage. In the music used for this scene, one *gongan* [gong phrase] on the gamelan alternated with several *gongan* of solo *pesinden* singing in *barang miring* (using tones between the fixed pitches of the gamelan) while the bonang imitated *kemanak* [banana-shaped bronze idiophones] (as in the *Bedhaya Ketawang* or *Srimpi Anglirmendung* dances at the Kraton Solo.) The overall effect was enthralling and magical. The new musical element was the use of *barang miring* that gradually moved further and further away from its original tuning, then returned to *slendro*. Also notable was the sheer elegant simplicity of the musical materials and their realization; great restraint was shown in the process of composition.

New music in the *Pedhalangan* area was most often combined with new puppets or ways of presenting puppets, special effects, or new storytelling methods such as the *wayang padat*, a short wayang of one or two hours. The music was used for dramatic or storytelling effect. There was humor, too, as in the clown scenes, when a current pop tune (such as "Madu dan Racun") was sung by one of the clowns; the borrowing and rearranging of music for topical or local effect was common, along with writing of new songs and new *gendhing* for the gamelan.

Outside of the context of *Penyajian*, there was still a need and desire for new music, some of it functioning purely as art, and some of it functioning as entertainment in conjunction with other activities, including dance. There were occasional performances of new music and dance, sponsored or produced by ASKI, that were open to the public as well as to students and faculty.

The program at ASKI stresses the importance of mastering the traditional musics of Indonesia. At the same time, there is interest in combining those traditional skills with new music and experimentation. ▶