

## Letter From Banyumas

by René T.A. Lysloff

Banyumas (a mountainous area in West Central Java, about 200 kilometers from Yogyakarta) is a fascinating place with a lot of musical activity. My activities here have been quite diverse. I've been performing regularly with a troupe of musicians that accompanies one of the most popular dalang in Banyumas. This has allowed me to study the socio-economic background of individual musicians and the social framework of such performances — they almost always occur within a ritual context, known as a *hajjat* (usually a marriage, circumcision, fulfillment of an oath, etc.). Most of the musicians are self-taught and unschooled, with an incredible amount of raw talent. Most are also farmers, of either cloves or some other cash crop. Top musicians are drawn to wayang kulit troupes because this is where they may find regular employment; wayang is particularly popular in this region. A typical performance of a popular troupe will have an audience of one to two thousand people.

This is the year of wayang kulit, it seems. There is a lot of activity among the Americans here who are researching wayang kulit. In Solo, Alan Feinstein led a large scale project in documentation which is now finished, although he is still looking for a publisher (the

results have been published by ASKI, but in manuscript form). In Yogya, Roger Long and Joan Suyenaga are completing an extensive documentation and translation project of wayang kulit recordings Roger made several years ago. Kent Devereaux, who is both a scholar and a composer, is researching wayang kulit primarily in Solo, but also in Yogya, Banyumas and other regions in Java. I find Kent's approach intriguing. He's carefully examining the realm of Javanese performing arts in a search for compositional resources, as well as documenting certain aspects of Javanese performance practice and collecting bibliographical material on the performing arts of Java, particularly wayang kulit.

Here in Banyumas, together with two Indonesians, Rasito and Eko Punto Aji (my teacher and my assistant, respectively) I am transcribing and translating three wayang kulit stories along with their music. One story is already complete and has been typed onto computer disk. I am also investigating the history of wayang kulit Banyumas, which is somewhat different from the styles of Solo and Yogya. I learned that three different styles of wayang kulit are actually performed here in Banyumas: 1) "standard," (the acknowledged) Banyumas



*Calung ensemble. Instrument in foreground, called kenong, plays kenong and kethuk parts. Behind it is a gong bambu, or gong tiup, which is blown to produce a low-pitched sound remarkably like a gong.*



*Lenggèr performing at a wedding ceremony.*

style, 2) Banyumas-pesisiran (southern coastal Banyumas) style (as yet unacknowledged), and 3) Solonese style. By style, I mean unique characteristics in music, dialect, text, story, puppets and even puppet movement. I've had around 60 detailed drawings of puppets made by two well-known puppet makers and photographed old puppets to illustrate differences in the way characters are depicted here. Banyumas wayang kulit even has several of its own characters. The two best known are Bawor (who replaces Bagong), and Srenggini (an illegitimate son of Bima).

#### **Lenggèr, èbèg and other types of performing arts**

Other performing arts traditions flourish as well. The most famous one is lenggèr, a tradition involving one to three, usually two, dancing girls accompanied by *calung*, an ensemble of suspended bamboo-chime instruments. Needless to say, I am studying the wherefore's and how-to's of these instruments. Performance involves interlocking melodies at fast tempos by the two main instruments, *gambang barung* and *gambang panerus*, accompanied by virtuosic drumming (which I am trying to learn). Other struck bamboo instruments function as *slenthem* and *kethuk/kenong* (indeed, they go by these

names). Finally the end-blown *gong tiup* or *gong bambu* punctuates the main melodies. The ensemble accompanies the lenggèr — the dancing girls who also sing. It's all rather upsetting to Western sensibilities since these girls (and they are quite young) are on stage mainly as sexual objects. They are reputed to be of loose morals, although this is ridiculous in modern-day Islamic Java. They may have been part-time prostitutes in previous days, but the greatest titillation a male of today's audience gets is bare shoulders under a silky scarf and swaying (rather boyish) hips. Nowadays, the dancers no longer invite men and boys on stage to dance as they did in days gone by; this was deemed a threat to the peace and order of village life — perhaps rightly so as it often led to fights (I am told) between jealous rivals. I still saw one fight that resulted from the sexual tension of a lenggèr performance despite boys not being invited to dance, but it was the exception rather than the norm.

Another tradition found here and elsewhere in Java is known as *èbèg* (also called *jaran kèpang* or *kuda lumping* in other areas): a village-style trance performance of dance, animal imitation, and feats of superhuman strength, accompanied by gamelan (slendro tuning, made of iron). The gamelan usually has no "front row" instruments (*gender*, *gambang*, *rebab*) or *pesindhèn*, though sometimes there might be a *pesindhèn* and even a double reed *terompet*. The leading melodic instrument is the nine key *saron sanga* or *saron wayangan*, which opens the pieces and plays elaborating patterns. The music is somewhat crude compared to other traditions, but virtuosic and, because of its repetitive nature (usually a *lancaran* played over and over and over . . .), is highly hypnotic. There are other traditions, not as well-known, that are unique to the area, but I won't be able to discuss them now.

All the traditions here share the same repertoire and even borrow styles from one another. A wayang troupe may play a piece in *èbèg* style or a lenggèr troupe may perform Solonese *gendhing* (I once heard a *calung* rendering of *Kinanthi Padang Bulan!*). The gamelan tradition of Banyumas is pluralistic — good musicians perform both in Banyumas style and in the acknowledged Solonese style (the standard). Yogya style had a strong place in Banyumas until the early 1970's but has since been on the decline. Vestiges are still found in wayang kulit — Yogyanese style *playon* (or *sampak gara-gara*) and *ayak-ayak* are often heard performed in Banyumas alongside Solonese-style *ayak-ayakan* and *srepeg*. The Banyumas-style pieces tend to be in smaller forms, mostly *lancaran*, a few *ketawang* and one or two *ladrang*. Many, I learned, once existed in the Yogya-Solo repertory but have fallen into disuse (I thank Marc Perlman for this information). Other pieces popular in Banyumas are common, curiously enough, in East Java. All of this makes it difficult to determine which pieces are Banyumas in origin and which are not.

## Vocal music

Banyumas style *sindhenan* is somewhat different from other areas, and, I'm told, more difficult. The register tends to be higher than that of Solo and Yogya. One still often finds gender with a high pitch 5, although I've never seen it used. The *minur* or *barang miring* of Banyumas singing is also interesting—any slendro pitch can be flatted and the *pesindhen* (as well as the chorus) may wander far from the main melody. A piece has three types of vocal parts: 1) *sindhenan*, 2) *senggakan*, and 3) *alokan*. The *sindhenan* is similar to Solonese style, perhaps freer and higher in range. *Senggakan* is sung by a chorus and is made up of major refrains of pieces with riddles in the text, or humorous sayings, catchy phrases, etc. *Alok* are nonsensical syllables or vocables, ie. é-a-o, dua lolo, often exchanged between male and female singers. All three types of vocal parts may occur simultaneously, though usually no more than two occur at any given time. There is no separate male *gerongan* in Banyumas; all the musicians sing when a piece calls for it. A group, however, usually has at least three *pesindhen*; the norm seems to be five, but occasionally there are as many as seven. They act



*Rice pounding music is perpetuated solely for tradition's sake, since the hybrid of rice grown nowadays no longer needs to be pounded.*

as a chorus and assist in *senggakan* and *alok* as well as provide clapping and rhythmic vocal parts, such as imitating frog croaks to keep the music lively. I've never seen *pesindhen* work so hard for their money!

## Drumming

I've been investigating Banyumas style drumming lately. It involves two drums: a *ciblon* (much like those of Solo and Yogya) and a *ketipung* (smaller than those of Solo and Yogya). In performances, the *ciblon* is on a stand as usual, but the large head is often not on the drummer's right side. That is, some drummers play it "reversed," (I heard that this is quite common throughout Central Java.) The *ketipung* is stood on end, next to the small head of the *ciblon*, with its small head facing up. In many pieces, strokes on the small head of the *ciblon* are replaced by strokes on the *ketipung*. The *ketipung* is played with most of the same strokes as those usually played on the *ciblon* (*tak*, *lung*, *tong*, and the various combinations with the large head of the *ciblon*). However, the *garapan* [arrangement, treatment] differs radically from Solo or Yogya drumming. The *ketipung* serves as the repetitive part called *ajeg*, "constant", while the large head of the *ciblon* is reserved for the fancy, decorative part. I'm trying to work out a logical notation, using standard drum symbols (like those used in Solo). This may be of interest to some of the readers of *Balungan*, since the drumming is quite lively but easier to memorize than Solonese *ciblonan*. Most patterns are for *lancaran*-size *gendhing*. Here's an example of one *sekaran* [pattern, lit. "flower"] for *lancaran mlaku* [a musical form with a sixteen-beat gong cycle] in *irama dadi* (*irama II*). The right hand (RH) plays the *ciblon*, the left hand (LH) plays the *ketipung*.

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RH: . P b P . P .P.P . P b P . P .P.P
LH: o t o . o t o . o t o . o t o .
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- p = dhung (right hand, thumb damps head and first three fingers strike center of head)
- o = tong, but on the *ketipung* can be played like *lung* (left hand, pointing finger strikes center of head)
- t = tak, but louder on the *ketipung* (left hand, open-handed slap, without allowing the head to ring)
- b = dhen, bem or dhah (right hand, four fingers strike about four or five inches in from edge to create deep and full ringing, both heads allowed to sound)

The above pattern is one of the simplest of many patterns, including several that are functionally similar to Solonese *sekaran* like *ngaplak*, *magak*, etc. Most drumming here has developed out of the *lenggèr* tradition.

## New gamelan compositions

Another area I'm exploring is the many new compositions for gamelan and *calung* in Banyumas. In other areas of



*The Banyumas version of Petruk has a "tattooed" face and carries an opium pipe.*

Central Java, few new pieces gain widespread popularity, even within one region (with the exception of compositions by the late Nartosabdho). Most new music in Central Java is performed in specific contexts, such as during wayang kulit performances (sometimes during the *gara-gara*, the scenes where the clowns make their appearance about 2:00 A.M) and in ASKI Solo concerts (Arthur Durkee's article is a good description of such concerts [*Balungan II* (3):38]). Outside of these contexts, new music is rarely performed or recorded.

In Banyumas, on the other hand, new music for gamelan and calung has been widely popular since the advent of the local cassette industry (cassette recordings of local music began appearing about 1974). Indeed, it is the cassette industry which is perhaps responsible for a flourishing of the Banyumas traditional performing arts, and for the popularization of many new compositions. The new gendhing of Banyumas are diverse; they range from adaptations (drawn from pop music, kroncong, children's songs, etc.) to new settings of the vocal part of old pieces, to completely new creations. These pieces sell very well here and they are widely performed—in wayang kulit, lenggèr, even the trance dance èbèg.

I'm not sure why new music does so well in

Banyumas, but I suspect it is due to the nature of the traditional Banyumas gamelan and calung music. The traditional music tends to be made up of smaller and light-natured pieces — the new pieces follow this trend. Perhaps more importantly, the courts of Yogya and Solo have less influence here in Banyumas. Although court-style gamelan music is often performed by both gamelan and calung ensembles, it doesn't command the same reverence and awe here as it does in Solo and Yogya. Another feature of Banyumas traditional music is its text orientation — the title of the piece is something referred to in the text. The voice is not simply another instrument here, it forms the focus of the piece. The text has specific content in many cases, as opposed to acting primarily as a vehicle for the vocal melody. New music tends to follow this tradition, and it continues to use traditional characteristics of Banyumas music and Banyumas drumming. It also often borrows from Sundanese drumming, especially *jaipongan* style.

I hope my research here will encourage others to pursue particulars of music in Banyumas. Other areas of Indonesia that need to be explored are Cirebon, Tulungagung (East Java), Banyuwangi and Blambangan, and the mountain areas of Bali, just to name a few. I also hope that more composers such as Kent Devereaux and Arthur Durkee come to Indonesia to find potential resources. I would encourage others to apply for the Fulbright fellowship to study music in Indonesia.

P.S. *Calung*, the suspended bamboo-chime ensemble, are very inexpensive. A good set can be purchased for about \$300-400. Shipping is not expensive because the instruments can be disassembled and nested within each other to take up less room. Interested people should contact me (c/o Music Department, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor MI 48104). ▶