

# Suhirjan: musician and gamelan maker

by Joan Bell Cowan

Many people living outside of Indonesia have wanted to acquire an entire gamelan or certain gamelan instruments for use in performance ensembles or educational settings. *Balungan* is interested in presenting information about instrument builders and their activities, both in Indonesia and elsewhere. (See *Balungan* 1(2):5-7 for an interview with composer/instrument builder Daniel Schmidt.)

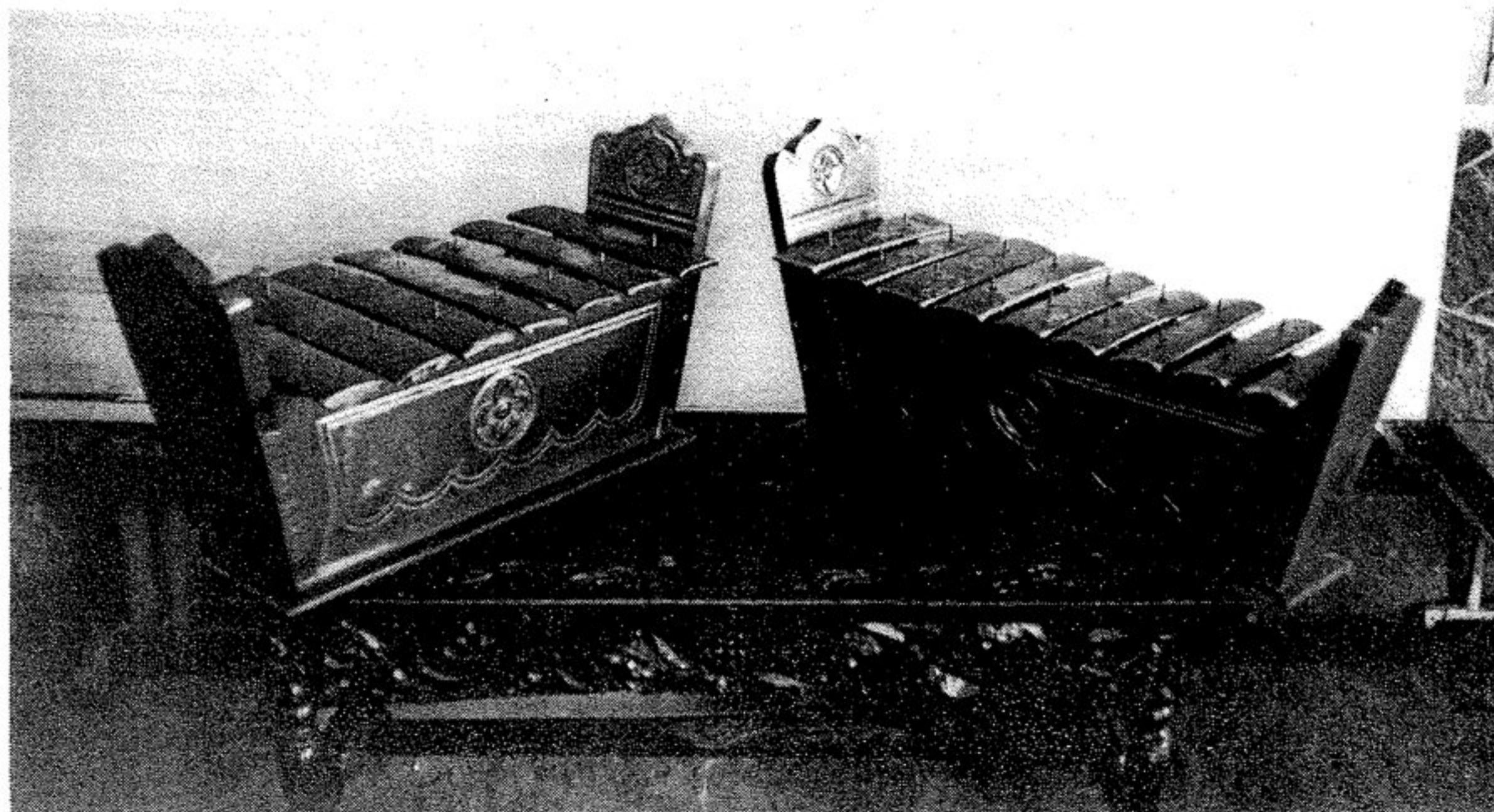
Near the Kraton Yogyakarta, just a few blocks from Jalan Gamelan, is one source for Indonesian gamelan instruments: Suhirjan, a musician and gamelan maker. He and his wife, Joan Suyenaga, are both actively involved in the musical life of Yogya. Suhirjan has been the kendang player at R.R.I. Yogya (Radio Republik Indonesia) since 1978, and Joan frequently plays rebab in the Paku Alaman gamelan in addition to her research activities in wayang and Javanese literature.

A newspaper article by Lom, "Suhirjan, Gamelan Tuner and All-Around Musician," published in the Yogyanese newspaper *Buana Minggu*, describes Suhirjan's musical heritage. "Suhirjan's talents and skills seem to have been inherited from his grandfather, Raden Bekel Mandrawa, a gamelan musician and tuner in the Yogyakarta palace during the reign of Sri Sultan

Hamengkubuwana VIII, who tuned the palace gamelan, and even once retuned a glass gamelan made by K.R.T. Joyodipuro.

"Suhirjan's musical training was informal. For a number of years, he listened to many master musicians at *Madukusuman* (a popular gathering place for Yogyanese musicians), and studied books published by ASKI Solo. He learned the Solonese style by listening to cassette recordings. He also received guidance from Suhardi, director of the gamelan at R.R.I. Yogya, and from senior musicians such as Mujiono and Gonjang.

"His father, Pak Mangunwinoto, said that Suhirjan showed musical talent at a very early age. 'If he heard something just once, he could immediately play it, and when listening to gamelan broadcasts on the radio he would comment if the tempo was incorrect or unusual. When he was in his mother's womb, I was obsessed with karawitan,' Pak Mangunwinoto reminisced. [Translator's note: It is a popular Javanese belief that a parent's thoughts, emotions and actions, particularly those of an intense nature, influence the development of their unborn child.] 'After he was circumcised, I bought him an iron gamelan. With those instruments, he began to



*Demung and saron sanga, in kijingan style, of teak, iron keys, light varnish, with polos (simple linear) carving.*

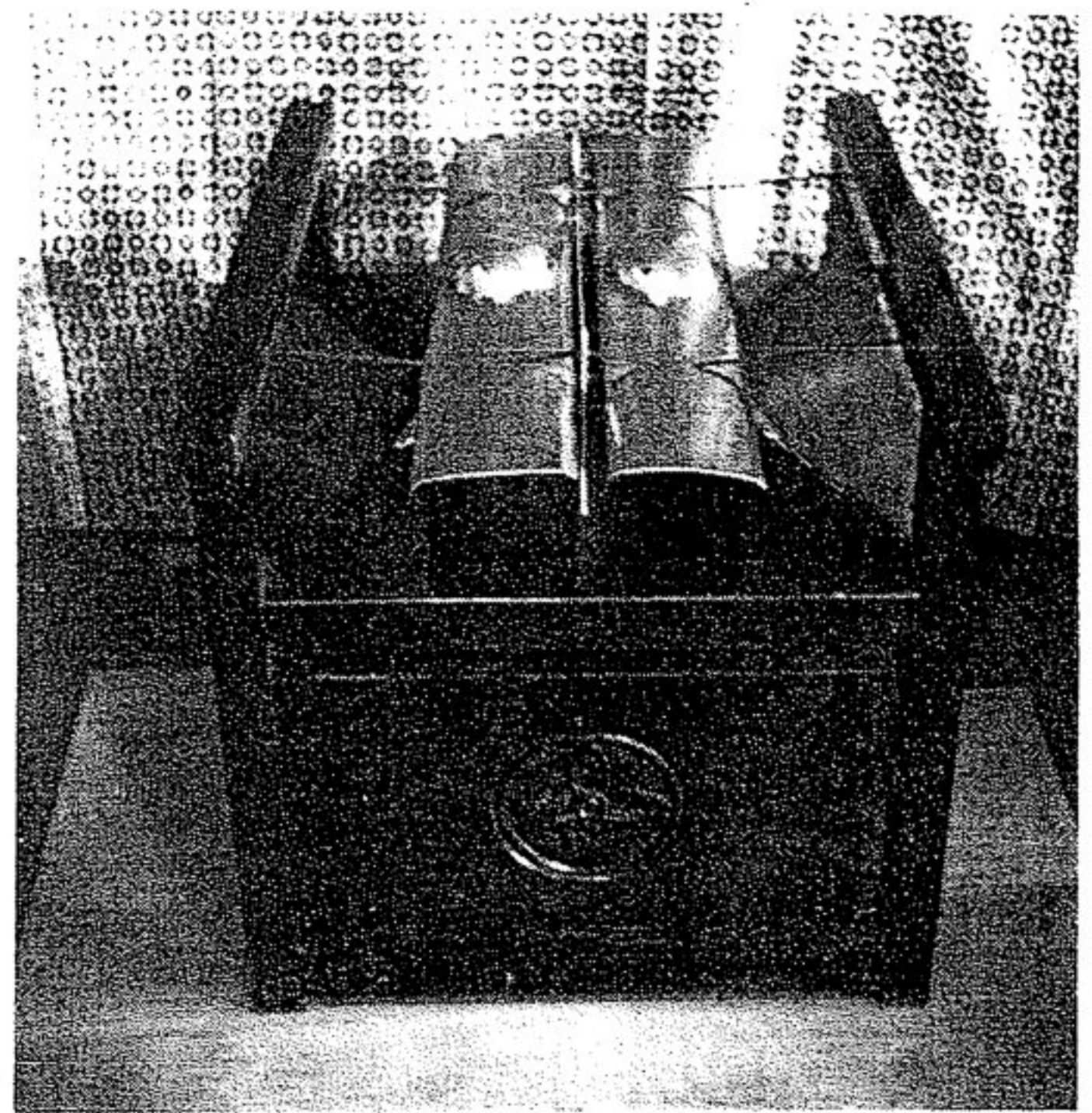
experiment.' Suhirjan's experiments included building his first instrument, a gender.

"Suhirjan, like his grandfather, is a respected gamelan player in the Yogya area, and is often contracted by P.L.T. Bagong Kusudiardjo for special performances. Suhirjan also formed his own group, *Kridha Mudha Wirama*, which performs locally at various gatherings." [Translated by Joan Suyenaga.]

Suhirjan uses a combination of materials in his gamelan instruments. The gongs (all knobbed instruments such as kempul, kenong and bonang) are of iron with brass coverings on the knobs. Saron keys are of iron (sometimes obtained from automobile leaf springs), and suspended keys are of brass (on gender, slenthem, kenong renteng and gong kemodong). For the gambang he uses either *selangking* or *ulin* wood (*selangking* is usually used for the palace gambang). The advantages of iron and brass over bronze are the comparatively inexpensive cost, as well as the fact that both iron and brass are not subject to the considerable pitch instability of new bronze keys and gongs are easier to retune. Suhirjan has, however, recently undertaken the assembly of bronze gamelan as well, offering both new and older instruments. The initial manufacturing is contracted out to craftsmen and ironworkers in the area; bonang and gong come from Wonocatur, a village east of Yogya. The design, assembly, finishing work and tuning is all done at home by Suhirjan and members of his family.

A complete gamelan, slendro and pelog, would contain the following instruments: 1 gong ageng, 4 gong suwukan, 11 kempul, 3 gong stands, 13 kenong, 6 1/2 kenong frames, 2 kethuk, 2 kempyang, 2 enguk kemong, 2 bonang barung, 2 bonang panerus, 2 saron demung, 4 saron barung (including a slendro saron sanga with nine keys), 2 saron peking, 2 slenthem, 3 gender barung, 3 gender panerus, 2 gambang, 3 kendhang (gendhing, batangan, ketipung), 1 rebab, 2 suling, 1 siter, and a box of mallets. Other instruments are available with the bronze gamelan, or for those wishing an even more extensive collection: bonang panembung, celempung, bedhug, kemanak and kecer.

Gamelan prices will vary, and can be influenced by many factors. A complete slendro and pelog gamelan of iron and brass costs approximately \$3,500, while a slendro set alone might be \$2,000. Bronze gamelan range in price from \$8,750 to \$18,750, depending on instrumentation, the age of the bronze and the quality of the wooden cases and stands. Individual instruments can also be ordered. The cost of shipment by sea freight depends on the destination and the size of the shipment. Current estimates for a crate to the West Coast of the United States are: \$155/cubic meter for shipping, plus \$75/cubic meter for handling and packing. The shipping charge for instruments taking up 13-15 cubic meters when packed would be from \$2,990 to \$3,450. When Dr. Han of the University of Illinois ordered a gamelan, the price of



*Gong kemodong, with brass keys, teak frame, light varnish and polos carving.*



*Suhirjan and Joan Suyenaga in a formal wedding portrait.*

the instruments was about \$2,500. But in order to have the gamelan arrive in time for summer classes, it had to be shipped airmail, which cost \$5,000.

Gamelan ordered through Suhirjan have been shipped all over the world: to the Haifa Museum in Israel, to Simon Cook in London, to Gamelan Pacifica in Seattle, and to Northern Illinois University in De Kalb, Illinois. Anyone interested in acquiring gamelan instruments may write (in English, Indonesian or Javanese) to: Suhirdjan, Jl. P. Mangkurat 158, Panembahan, Yogyakarta 55131, Indonesia.