

Gamelan in Britain: the story so far

by Neil Sorrell

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Although British interest in gamelan has lagged behind American, Dutch, Australian, and Japanese (the list could go on), the first person from the West entranced by gamelan music appears to have been Sir Francis Drake,¹ an Englishman, while Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles' contributions, in the form of writings and the importation of gamelan instruments and puppets into this country, were of enormous value. Nor should we overlook the extraordinary cross-fertilization of Benjamin Britten's genius with that of Balinese gamelan music.

Sadly, however, little or nothing was achieved in the scholarly study and practical performance of Indonesian music. When I returned to England in 1972 after a stay in America and my first trip to Java (studying gamelan performance in both countries), the only oasis in the desert was Dartington College, where the New Zealander, Allan Thomas, borrowed a gamelan for an exhibition and some workshops. When the gamelan, and subsequently Allan Thomas himself, departed the lull resumed. The major breakthrough came about in two ways. The first Durham Oriental Music Festival was held in 1976. Professor Eric Taylor was especially enthusiastic about Javanese gamelan, yet for this festival a lecturer (Ernst Heins) had to be brought over from Holland, and it was not possible to include any live performance. Still, this festival created a new climate, and it was as a direct consequence that the Indonesian Ambassador ordered a complete Javanese gamelan, so that in the future it would be possible to organize performances without the prohibitive cost of ferrying instruments in and out of the country.

As soon as this gamelan (named *Kyai Rawameja*) arrived in London late in 1977, I contacted the Information Attache at the Embassy, Mr. Kapto Sunoto, with the request to take my students to play simple pieces on it, thereby clarifying the theory I had been teaching. Kapto Sunoto readily agreed and was unfailingly helpful, then and since.

Neil Sorrell was educated at the University of Cambridge and at Wesleyan, where he undertook research into Indian music and developed a strong interest in Javanese gamelan. Since the mid-seventies he has been a lecturer in the music department of York University.

It is no exaggeration to say that without the help and good will of the Indonesian Embassy over these formative years, it would have been very difficult, not to say impossible, to launch the study and performance of gamelan music by British students.

The first workshop, over a weekend in December 1977 with students from the University of York, was followed by others, with students from the University of East Anglia and a Birmingham adult education class run by Jan Steele. As a result of the enthusiasm generated by the latter session, Jan Steele proposed that we organize a group who could meet on a more regular basis and attempt to progress further. He and I invited friends who had already shown an interest in gamelan music, or were otherwise involved, as composers or performers, in the kinds of experimental music which had affinities with it. We first met as a group for intensive rehearsals (at the Embassy) in May 1980, and put on a preliminary concert at Lauderdale House, Highgate, on June 1, under the name of the English Gamelan Orchestra. Partly because we had time to learn only a few gamelan pieces, and partly because we were keen to demonstrate the relevance of the music to Western composition in this century, two piano works with gamelan connections were included. Subsequent concerts mixed traditional Javanese pieces with new works for the gamelan by Western composers. These were usually by members of the group, but there were also works by the American composer, Lou Harrison, and one piece specially composed for us by Michael Nyman. This last work, featured in a tour by the orchestra on the Arts Council Contemporary Music Network in October 1983, marked the climax of the English Gamelan Orchestra's activities in its original format. We were fortunate to have with us five Javanese musicians, one of whom, Sri Hastanto, had worked with us for two years while a British Council scholar at Durham.

During the three years of the English Gamelan Orchestra's work with the Indonesian Embassy gamelan, important developments took place outside London. My new gamelan for York, bearing the appropriate name of *Gamelan Sekar Petak* (White Flower) arrived in York at Easter 1982, and was the first complete Javanese gamelan to be used in a British teaching institution. By this time, Dartington had acquired a set of Balinese instruments, and shortly afterwards Durham received a selection of Javanese instruments in the slendro tuning. Thus the three centres

(Dartington, York, and Durham) which had been striving for so long to realize their interest in Indonesian music in a practical way were able to include performance in their curriculum. Early in 1983, the University of Cambridge was made a present of a Javanese gamelan by the Indonesian government. Fortunately, one of the English Gamelan Orchestra members, David Posnett, was living in Cambridge at the time and could generate enthusiasm for the music and form a group to rehearse and perform. About a year after the arrival of this set, a complete gamelan *gong kebyar* arrived from Bali at the Queen's University in Belfast, for more than a decade at the forefront of ethnomusicological studies in the British Isles. Annette Sanger, who has recently completed her field work in Bali and who now holds a lectureship in Professor John Blacking's Department of Social Anthropology at Queens, organized the acquisition of this set and is in charge of it.

Not only are British college and university students familiar with the basic technique of Javanese and Balinese music, but also hundreds of school children all over the country, and quite a few adult "amateurs" (aren't we all?) have been given opportunities to play. At first workshops were promoted and run by the English Gamelan Orchestra, using the Embassy gamelan, but Dartington has also organized such events, and other sets now in the country have been used by visiting groups from Indonesia. For example, the York gamelan was played by the Sasono Mulyo group from Surakarta in 1982, and the Cambridge and Belfast sets have been borrowed for concerts by Indonesian musicians.

The educational relevance of these workshops is at least equal in importance to actual concerts. There are few types of non-Western music that lend themselves so readily to study and development of musicianship at its basic, crucial level in the West as these ensemble traditions of Indonesia. We are thus at a very exciting juncture in the development of gamelan in Britain, and the assistance given by the graduate students Aryasa (Belfast, 1987-88) and Joko Purwanto (York, 1988-89) to gamelan performance studies cannot be overestimated.

Thanks to another generous donation by the Indonesian government, the Gamelan *Kyai Lebhdhajiwa* was established at London's South Bank Centre in 1988, and a large educational programme begun under the direction of Alec Roth. He has been assisted by several expert musicians, among them Joko Purwanto, Sriyanto, Ben and Djumilah Arps, and Simon and Oom Cook. The current Indonesian ambassador, Suhartoyo, an accomplished *dalang*, has performed *wayang kulit* with the South Bank players and also with the York group. It would be true to say that the centre (or at least the biggest programme) of gamelan studies in Britain has moved back to the capital, while the regional Universities (Belfast, Dartington, York, Durham, Cambridge and Oxford) continue to flourish. ■

Notes

1. "Raia Douan coming aboard us. . . presented our Generall with his country musick, which though it were of a very strange kind, yet the sound was pleasant and delightful."

References

Drake, Francis.
1854 *The World Encompassed by Sir Francis Drake*. London: Hakluyt Society, 16.