

## REPORT

# Pekan Komponis VIII: a national composers' festival

by Nikhil Dally

The *Pekan Komponis* has been an annual event in Jakarta for almost a decade, since it began as the *Pekan Komponis Muda* [Young Composers' Festival] at the Taman Ismail Marzuki Cultural Center in 1979. Sponsored by the *Dewan Kesenian Jakarta (DKJ)* [Jakarta Arts Council] and coordinated by Suka Harjana, it has become a major forum for *komposisi baru* [new composition] in Indonesia.

This year's Festival lasted three days, November 10-12, 1988, and comprised two concerts, two symposia, and a final discussion. Five composers had been commissioned by Hardjana and invited by Irawati M. Sudiarso, DKJ's current director, to compose, rehearse, and perform their works for the Festival: Trisutji Kamal, one of Jakarta's best-known composers and pianists, now a teacher at Institut Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ); Elizar, teacher of karawitan at Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia (ASKI), Padang Panjang; Soewarmin, teacher at Sekolah Menengah Karawitan Indonesia (SMKI), Surabaya; Al. Suwardi, teacher

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of karawitan at Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia (STSI), Surakarta; and I Nyoman Windha, teacher of karawitan at Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia (STSI), Denpasar, and one of Bali's most popular composers, particularly of dance music. Two papers were read at the symposia: "Sekitar Komposisi Musik" ["On Musical Composition"] by I Wayan Sadra, composer and teacher at STSI Surakarta, and "Sekitar Masalah Komponis Indonesia Masa Kini" ["On the Problems of Contemporary Indonesian Composers"] by Trisutji Kamal.

The most interesting parts of this Festival were the performances themselves, and consequently it is a pity that there was not room in the budget for more of them. Six works by five composers, lasting a total of little more than three hours, can hardly hope to represent adequately the diversity of new music in Indonesia. This diversity was more than apparent in the pieces performed at the Festival. As I Pande Made Sukerta of STSI Surakarta remarked at the final discussion, each of the composers' works had a very distinctive character, one which was often particularly associated with the place of origin of the composer. Kamal's *Lakon*, a short cantata for female choir, two pianos



From left to right: Trisutji Kamal, Elizar, I Nyoman Windha, Suka Hardjana, Soewarmin, Al. Suwardi.

(six hands) and percussion, was the only piece of Western-influenced *musik*, as distinct from traditional Indonesian *karawitan*—perhaps a reflection of the more internationalist flavour of Jakarta arts in general, as well as of Kamal's training in Amsterdam, Paris and Rome. Soewarmin's *Lalongedhan* was a light-hearted stage work incorporating Madurese and East Javanese vocal melodies. Despite the very traditional nature of its melodic material, it was obviously attempting to break new ground in its dramatic concept. Elizar's *Bakucimang*, an arrangement of various traditional Minangkabau styles, and Windha's *Bali Age*, for *gamelan selundèng*, gave a more satisfactory impression than Soewarmin's piece, perhaps because they were content to remain rooted in tradition and did not attempt any self-conscious experimentalisms.

The two works which were most favourably received by the audiences in general were Suwardi's *Sak-Sake* and Windha's *Palapa II*. Suwardi's considerable experience as an instrument-maker and tuner was evident. All the instruments used were designed and built by Suwardi himself: a *gambang* incorporating a separate resonator for each key, often played with a pair of double mallets, each with two heads fixed a *kempyung* [a musical interval, approximately equivalent to a Western musical fifth] apart; a sort of *gambang besar* with large logs instead of keys; *suling*, the air for which was passed through small tins of water prior to entering their respective pipes; an oversized *rebab*; a type of 'thumb-xylophone' with large resonating tubes; and various assortments of tuned pipes; some struck partially submerged in water or while being moved in and out of water. The inspiration for these instruments, recounts Suwardi, came when he was tuning a *gendèr* and he accidentally dropped one of the resonators into a bucket of water, "producing a very attractive sound." Prior to the first rehearsals for *Sak-Sake*, Suwardi had already designed and built most of his instruments, though he admitted he "didn't know yet how to play them." He had also written some musical motifs for the piece, which were gradually explored in rehearsal with his group. When it became evident that the resulting piece would not be long enough for the purposes of the Festival, Suwardi invented another instrument, learned to play it, and used it as the basis for a new section of music—in the process, completely reordering the piece. Suwardi made no secret of the improvised origins of the piece or of its flexible performance practice, aspects that were commented upon in the final discussion, and that are enshrined in the title of the work, loosely translated as "Whatever You Like."

Considerable light was shed upon Suwardi's compositional process by remarks made by Sadra in his paper. Sadra described the compositional process as consisting of three principal stages: exploration [*penjelajahan*], realization [*penggarapan*], and synthesis [*sambung rapat*]. Stage one he saw as characterized by two main objectives: "determining the extent to which one's instruments have potential as sources of sound, to create



*I Nyoman Windha.*

colors which. . .differ from the original ones," and "broadening or narrowing. . .the traditional vocabulary."

He added that if the composer's discoveries as a result of this exploration "do not satisfy his wishes, he must search, explore again, or make his own musical instruments." Stage three he described as the process of "connecting one discovery [*temuan*] with another. . . .There are several situations which are often met in the course of this synthesis, [for example:] how to connect a melody with a different sound colour; how to join a melodic form in a slow tempo with a melodic form with a more dynamic beat; how to join voices with instruments. . . . Answers to the above questions might take the form: collide the two elements. . .the different tempi can intersect. . .[or the] voices and instruments can be superimposed."

Thus, in both Sadra's theory and Suwardi's practice, the parts come first and are later joined together; there is no concept of an overall form which precedes the composer's discovery. Apart from the initial exploratory stage, then, there is little difference between *komposisi* [composition] and *penataan* [arrangement], which perhaps explains the complaint that many Westerners have of the 'sectionalized' nature of many Indonesian compositions—*Sak-Sake* being no exception.

The title of Windha's piece refers to the *sumpah palapa*, the oath taken by Gadjah Madah, prime minister of the fourteenth-century Majapahit empire, to unite all the major islands of the archipelago under Majapahit control. The term has since come to be used as a symbol for the unity of Indonesia, a theme which Windha obviously wished to emphasize in his piece. *Palapa II* was a brilliant compilation of musical styles from several parts of Indonesia. Played on a Javanese gamelan with Balinese *gong gedé* mallets and using *kebyar* and *pelegongan* drums, it encompassed vocal

and instrumental styles from Java, Bali, Sunda and Minangkabau. The piece was also a *tour de force* of new instrumental and vocal techniques, including fast melodies for sets of *kempul*, tremolo *bonang* chords, melodies ranging across the three octaves encompassed by the whole *saron* family, rapid alternation between *pélog* and *sléndro*, falsetto singing, and polyphonic vocal counterpoint. Despite the heterogeneity of its constituent elements, *Palapa II* had a great degree of cohesion. Certainly in the light of Sadra's theories of form it stood out as particularly original. The piece contained many elements which might, in Western terms, be called motifs. They were repeated, developed and continued in various ways. Instead of being merely 'connected,' they were often alternated to create forms (e.g. ABAB, etc.) that had an internal logic independent of the nature of their ingredients.

For one used to Western methods of musical analysis and criticism, the Festival's final discussion was trying, at best. Its three and a half hours might have provided an ideal opportunity for coming to terms with the various styles of composition represented over the preceding two days, or attempted to place the works performed in some sort of pan-Indonesian or even worldwide context. It also could have provided a forum for constructive criticism of the works, and for making suggestions as to possible directions for development in Indonesian music.

Unfortunately, many of the comments made at the discussion were subjective in the extreme, and consequently oscillated between the vague and the trivial. Atik Soepandi, theorist and teacher of karawitan at Akademi Seni Tari Indonesia (ASTI), Bandung—one of the official Festival *pengamat* ['observers']—gave as his main criterion in judging the pieces presented at the Festival, "Were they communicative or not?" Thus, Kamal's piece was deemed "not very communicative," while Elizar's musicians "moved around too much," and Suwardi's instrument frames "could have been improved," etc. Further time was used up in requiring each of the composers to defend himself against the criticisms levelled.

A glance through the DKJ's book of the proceedings of the previous composers' festivals, *Enam Tahun Pekan Komponis Muda: Sebuah Alternatif* [Six Years of the Young Composers' Festival: An Alternative], suggests that this unashamedly subjective style of criticism was not peculiar to the 1988 festival. However, while such subjective criticism may work well when discussing traditional karawitan, it conspicuously fails when applied to komposisi baru; the old aesthetic certainties no longer apply. Some of those present at the discussion voiced similar doubts. One of Soewarmin's East Javanese supporters asked how objective a critic one could be when trying to judge music incorporating elements from traditions different from one's own. Thus, by implication, Soepandi's style of criticism was called into question, and Suka Hardjana felt the need to come to his defense: "Pak Atik has been to various places. . . . I am certain that he communicates well



Composer Trisutji Kamal.

with. . . karawitan, not only works from Sunda but also Java, Bali, and so on."

Despite these problems, several interesting topics arose. The first of these concerned the degree to which composers should remain faithful to traditional music. The word 'tradition' raised a certain amount of confusion. Kamal referred to herself as the only 'non-traditional' composer present, presumably because she wrote for Western instruments rather than for gamelan-type ensembles. Perhaps, however, the terms 'musik' and 'karawitan' are more useful for drawing this distinction. Sukerta's view was that the terms 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' were best not used at all in relation to the compositions presented at the Festival.

One of the few people who was prepared to commit himself to a course of development for Indonesian music and to state what he saw as a realistic alternative to traditional styles was Bagong Kussudiardja, one of Indonesia's foremost choreographers, and a *pengamat* at the festival. He saw Indonesian music as developing towards the future but firmly rooted in tradition: "Don't forget that you already have old music at your command. Continuity is a process of building and development." He complimented Windha and Suwardi for "being familiar with the past, knowing the present, and taking into account the future." He particularly complimented Windha for *Palapa II* and its pan-Indonesian [*nusantara*] consciousness: "Music," he said, "should be written. . . for the whole of Indonesia and for the world." This latter point became the subject of quite heated discussion, its most vociferous opponents coming from among Soewarmin's supporters, who argued that regional styles remain valid within their respective areas of origin,

and that new compositions are an important way of preserving regional styles; people from the regions of Indonesia "have to be selfish in order to allow works from their own regions to flourish." They suggested that composers cannot hope to write good *nusantara* music before they are able to do justice to their respective regional styles.

The "and for the world" part of Kussudiardja's proposal might have been forgotten had it not been for Jody Diamond (director of AGI, in Indonesia as a Senior Fulbright scholar conducting a survey of contemporary Indonesian music and composers), also a *pengamat* at the festival. She pointed out that there is a "serious lack of awareness of new music in Indonesia in the educational and artistic communities abroad. . . . Too few Indonesian composers are represented in the expanding international repertoire of new music for gamelan. . . . It is the responsibility of the composer to see that their creations can be communicated and understood. . . so that the music itself can have a life and identity. . . . But if a new composition is played only once. . . how will it become a tradition of its own?"

Had Diamond's remarks been restricted to aesthetic vagaries, they would probably have been accepted no less readily than Kussudiardja's. However, she went further: "It is possible that through the development and distribution of. . . various forms of notation, good quality audio and video recordings, written descriptions of ideas and processes, and [through] personal interaction with the composer[s]. . . artists and audiences around the world can have a more vital, direct experience of Indonesian contemporary arts."

Opposition to Diamond's remarks came mainly from two quarters: First, there were those who objected to the

suggestion that Indonesian composers should resort to using written notation in order to communicate their works to foreigners; notation was seen, even by Kamal, as an obstacle to creativity. Diamond tried to assuage these fears by clarifying two points: first, that she was not necessarily proposing notation as a panacea, but merely that means had to be found to communicate Indonesian compositions and that it was up to Indonesian composers to find them; second, that her proposals were not made merely for the benefit of foreigners, but that the communication of musical ideas and processes between the regions of Indonesia was important for the nation as a whole and an essential factor in the realization of Kussudiardja's *nusantara* ideal.

A more fundamental objection came from Hardjana, who contended that even if the notation question could be overcome there were too many areas of incompatibility between Indonesian and Western musical processes. Indonesian methods of composition, he said, are mainly communal and involve the gradual working out of a piece by the group, whereas in the West a piece is fully determined prior to the start of the rehearsals. According to the Indonesian concept, a work has its identity not only in the notes played but in its performers, its function, and the circumstances of its origin, whereas in the West a work is seen as having a life of its own, independent of whatever external considerations might act upon it. Finally, he said, the Indonesians think intuitively, while Westerners tend to conceptualize musical ideas in rational, factual terms. That these reservations have a certain validity is clear. Otherwise, Diamond's pleas would not have been necessary in the first place. Diamond suggested, though, that the stereotype images of the difference between East and West were less relevant to modern composition than to



Members of the group from ASKI Padang Panjang performing Elizar's "Bakucimang."



*Suardi's group at dress rehearsal.*

traditional or classical styles, and that now, more than ever before, new music and composition could serve as a door through which contact could be made between Indonesian and foreign cultures.

In the last section of his paper, Sadra summarized the condition of new composition in Indonesia as a "half-hearted revolution [*pemberontakan setengah hati*]. . . a revolution born from a fistful of money. When that gift reaches our hand, only then do we demonstrate our individuality, our radical musical ideas. When this Festival is over, we wait for commentaries and accolades. . . then melt back into a massive shadow of tradition." Thus he saw as the principal problem of Indonesian composers their inability to make a clean break with tradition. Hardjana concurred, although with an explanation as false as it was irrelevant: "In the West, composers of new music do not work with traditional music. . . they break the connection. . . but here, in our new music, the roots of tradition can still be traced." Surely though, there is no reason why a traditional musician cannot also compose effective new music, even if that music incorporates traditional elements—as Windha, Suardi, and many others have proved. The influence of tradition was particularly evident in Suardi's *Sak-Sake*, which used balungan melodies in regular four-note *gatra*, and even incorporated a *pathetan* for water-suling and gambang in parallel kempyung.

If there is a half-heartedness in the Indonesian composition revolution, it lies not in the compositions themselves, which are as rich as those of any other country, but in the communication of those compositions. Will Indonesian composers continue to allow their works to be forgotten after their first performances? Or will pieces be written to last? Will performances of compositions be limited to the groups for which those pieces were first created? Or will works spread throughout Indonesia and the world? The late S. D. Humardani, former head of ASKI Surakarta, said in 1972, "We have already determined the direction of development we want, that is to be culturally active in a modern way in the midst of the contemporary world." Was he right? Or would Indonesian composers, in the process of making themselves "active in a modern way," lose part of their essential identity as Indonesians? It is left to the composers to answer these questions.

#### Postscript

In December, 1988, Windha's *Bali Age* and *Palapa II* were recorded by Bali Stereo and are now available in Indonesia and through AGI. Suardi's *Sak-Sake* was given its second performance in January, 1989, at STSI Surakarta. Audio recordings of all the Pekan Komponis and videos of 1988's performances are in the AGI Archives. ▀