PROFILE

Gamelan Angklung in Denver

by Wayne Vitale

1) Start with two jazz/rock/blues/electronic/salsa/ rockabilly musicians from Denver, Colorado. Choose carefully: be sure that their names are Mark McCoin and Mark Fuller.

2) Allow to ripen, by letting them steep for many years in dark basement rehearsal spaces with other like-minded musicians, then put out in the sun for several more years until they float to the top of the mixture. (Set other like-minded musicians aside for the moment.)

3) To add a touch of Asian flavoring, send them to Singapore as part of a big band tour from the Denver/ Boulder area.

4) Very important! Just when they are beginning to achieve a balanced seasoning, blow apart their minds by sending them to Bali for a two-week vacation to hear gamelan music.

5) Return fermenting mixture to Denver, Colorado; recombine with other like-minded musicians. After a short time, the initial ingredients will act as a catalyst, and the natural juices formed will heat up the mix.

6) To further promote the fermentation process, enclose the mixture in a container with a tight lid, well away from any gamelan instruments.

7) After a few months, critical mass will be reached. At this point it will be impossible to keep the ingredients from uniting with gamelan instruments, no matter how far away they have been placed.

In March of 1988, more than eight months after he had returned from Bali, Mark McCoin heard from a friend that Denver University actually owned a Balinese gamelan—a complete set of *angklung* instruments that had been stored away in the basement of the music building for several years. When Mark finally saw the gamelan, intact but unused, it became clear that this was the opportunity he had hoped for since his return from Bali. With the help of Professor John Trainor, an ethnomusicologist teaching at Denver University (DU), he was able to convince the Music Department to lend out the instruments, so that he and several other musicians could start rehearsals. By September the gamelan was sitting in his living room.

By the time the instruments arrived, Frankie Anderson, a percussionist and member of the Colorado New Music Association (and the one who originally told Mark about the DU gamelan), had completed a grant proposal to the Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities to invite a teacher for the group. Although they

had made some progress in teaching themselves some basic playing techniques, they felt it was time to study traditional angklung music.

As their first teacher, I was able to experience first-hand the degree of enthusiasm that had already been generated. Starting almost from scratch, the group rehearsed every night for two weeks, often into the middle of the night. In that short amount of time the players were able to learn all the *gangsa* and *jegogan* parts to three complete angklung pieces. (These had been taught to me originally by I Wayan Sujana during his year in California as Gamelan Sekar Jaya's guest artistic director.) In fact to say "learning the parts" doesn't do justice to their playing: by the time I left they were able to master the difficult *kotèkan* patterns of Balinese angklung music so that they sounded like one unified ensemble with a high degree of rhythmic synchronization, proper phrasing and dynamics, and even a sense of feeling for the music. It was clear from the start that these were musicians who had been playing together for many years, and were already attuned to one another in the kind of ensemble work that is so critical in playing Balinese music.

Rehearsals have continued steadily since that time, without any loss of momentum. In addition to refining the pieces that were learned in the first two weeks, the group has been able to add other pieces to their repertoire by learning the individual parts from a four-track recording. By dubbing each track successively with one of the four primary parts—the *polos* and *sangsih* of the gangsa and the two *réong* parts—we were able to record two more compositions in such a way that they could later be learned part by part, and then checked against the total mix. It seemed the best solution until the group is able to invite a Balinese teacher who will then be able to work with them on an advanced level. This method also has the advantage of avoiding the use of written notation, which often hurts more than it helps by diverting attention away from the unity of ensemble and rhythmic precision necessary in playing interlocking figuration.

The angklung group is also encouraging its members to compose new music integrating Indonesian forms with Western music. In June of this year Mark Fuller and Mark McCoin created a new work, entitled *Snoring Dog* (named for the reaction of one player's pet to the first rehearsal of the piece). The composition makes use of the full gamelan angklung, as well as three new instruments built by artist and craftsman Fred Metz. These are modelled after the angklung instruments, but use iron keys and PVC resonator tubes to replace their bronze and bamboo counterparts, tuned in a different (but compatible) scale.

The group should have no problem generating other new compositions as well, considering that at least five of the members are experienced composers with a wide range of backgrounds. In this connection the group is collaborating with the Colorado New Music Association, a tax-exempt organization which is involved in the presentation of diverse styles of music, including cross-cultural idioms, by Colorado artists and composers.

This new ensemble is a good illustration of a community-based group that is propelled totally by their enthusiasm and fascination with the music that has enabled them to become a competent performing ensemble within the span of a year (see the list of recent performances below). The contrast with many university programs is clear. Although these programs are often able to generate a great deal of excitement and attract many talented students, the turnover in players from one semester to the next makes it difficult to maintain high playing standards over any length of time. The momentum the gamelan angklung group in Denver has created, combined with the musical talent of its members, promises to carry it much further. They are currently making plans for participation in the Festival of Indonesia, a nationwide celebration of Indonesian arts and culture that will take place in this country in 1990-1991.

Co-director Mark McCoin is a percussionist, synthesist and composer with a background in many diverse styles of music and theater. He has collaborated with Bruce Odland in the music for the David Taylor Dance Company production of *Anasazi Dreams* and the *Bruce Odland Big Band*. An album of his music has recently been released by Prolific Records. Mark was commisioned by the Colorado New Music Series in 1987 to create a new work, entitled *Transition: Music in Motion*. He is a also member of the Gitanaji Music Ensemble.

Co-director John Trainor, is a Professor of Ethnomusicolgy at the University of Denver's Lamont School of Music, as well as a teacher of instrumental music for the Denver public schools. Dr. Trainor received his Ph.D. from the University of Washington in Seattle and has done field work in Vietnam, Hungary, Spain and England. He is the ethnomusicological consultant to the Denver Museum of Natural History, where he has worked extensively with the Crain collection of Amerindian musical instruments.

Group members are Frankie Anderson, John Cheney, Mark Fuller, Mark Harris, Glenn Nitta, Greg Painter, Michael Stanwood, Dane Terry, Valerie Terry. The group's repertoire includes the traditional pieces *Madu Suara, Nedes Lemah, Nakula Sedih, Tabuh Dung,* and *Panyembrama* as well as the new composition *Snoring Dog*, and another untitled work in progress.

Between January and June 1989, the group performed at the University of Denver; Alliance Francaise de Denver; Smoky Hill High School; Heatley's Teahouse; Denver Botanical Gardens Amphitheater; Capital Hill People's Fair; and David Taylor Dance Theater, involving impressions of Balinese culture, music, and dance in an outdoor performance, Tuscany Building Fiddler's Green.

For further information on the Denver Angklung Group, please contact Mark McCoin, 3340 Wyandot Street, Denver, CO 80211, telephone (303) 455-3074. ◗