

INTERVIEW

Beat the gong “until it laughs”: Panggiyo Resowiguna

by Yono Sukarno



Panggiyo Resowiguna tuning instruments of the Otago University gamelan in New Zealand. Here, he uses the gong as a tuning reference while adjusting the pitch of a kenong. Photo by Henry Johnson.

Two gamelan housed at the School of Music, Victoria University of Wellington, were tuned by Panggiyo Resowiguna, an expert from Solo who teaches karawitan (gamelan) at STSI Surakarta. [Panggiyo was born in Sukaharjo, Surakarta in 1952. Before his study at STSI (Performing Arts Academy) in Solo, he attended an SMEA (Secondary School for Economics).]

Panggiyo arrived when the Victoria University gamelan group was busy rehearsing for a wayang kulit (shadow puppet) performance with dhalang (puppet master) Joko Susilo. The group was able to enjoy not only the resonance of the gamelan's restored tuning, but also an ensemble enhanced by Panggiyo's eloquent rebab playing.

The two sets of gamelan instruments at Victoria University (Cirebon and Central Javanese) have had a full and sometimes stressful life, used for school workshops, performances and annual tours around the country. Complicated by the addition of new slendro instruments to the ensemble, the deterioration of the overall sonority has been exacerbated by various attempts to correct wandering pitches and to

“rationalize” the tuning of the pelog Cirebon gamelan to the pelog of the larger Central Javanese set.

So, instead of having a particular sonic character, each set had become a shadow of its true sound. Panggiyo's task was to restore the two sets to their original tuning. As the son of the late Bapak Resowiguna, the maker of the additional slendro instruments, Panggiyo had a personal investment in the project. His visit was arranged by the gamelan leader, Joko Sutrisno, and ethnomusicology lecturer Allan Thomas.

I enjoyed helping with the tuning by holding the Cirebon gong for Panggiyo while he beat it “until it laughed.” I talked to him during his smoking break. (YS)

Yono: Do you come from a musical background?

Panggiyo: Yes. My late father made gamelan; he understood tuning systems without actually playing the instruments. I became accustomed to the sound through hearing it, day in and day out. Gamelan tuning was not something I learned at STSI, but now that I have finished

studying, I teach gamelan making, as well as tuning.

Yono: Are there many gamelan tuners in Java? Is it a specialized job?

Panggiyo: Gamelan makers are the tuners. You can learn to do the job, although not everyone is able to tune a gamelan. At present there is one other person at STSI who can *nglaras* [tune]: he is my apprentice.

Yono: Can you tell me about the techniques involved?

Panggiyo: First, you have to be familiar with *slendro* and *pelog*. Choose which *laras* [tuning system] you are going to tune, since you can't do both at once. You must also ask the owner of the gamelan what sort of character is desired. For instance, for a *slendro* set, you can offer to make it *mbranyak kenes* or *luruh*: happy and lively sounding, or peaceful, but full of power. As you often use your gamelan to accompany wayang, I tuned your *slendro* and *pelog* sets midway between the two, so they're just a little bit lively.

Yono: I saw you tuning just now. It was quite a physical exercise. How do you alter the sound of the instruments?

Panggiyo: In gamelan, there are basically two shapes: the long shape of the keys and the round gong shape. Since the keys of the gender can only be made thinner, we must know which section of the key is to be reduced. If the middle part of the key is made thinner, the pitch falls, and if either or both ends are made thinner, the pitch rises. I used a *kikir* [file] for scraping the keys of the gender and borrowed an electric grinder for all the *balungan* instruments (members of the *saron* family), because I thought a *kikir* would not be as efficient. You have to be extra careful though, because it heats the instruments very quickly and you cannot hear the result immediately: you have to make an approximation, imagining how it will sound when it cools, or you have to wait for the instrument to cool down before checking the note.

Most gongs are beaten, so that the overall mass is not reduced, although sometimes (very rarely), I also use a *kikir* to thin them. In general, you must not scrape the *kempul* [small hanging gongs].

Yono: So the gender is the basis for tuning?

Panggiyo: It acts as a mother, the trunk or the starter for *nglaras*. You begin with the *gender barung* and *gender panerus*, listening to the tuning to see if it feels comfortable, especially the lower and upper *gembyang* [octaves] of each pitch.

It is crucial to make the sound of the gender pleasant to your ear, as the rest of the instruments are then adjusted on the basis of the gender. The problem is that some notes can't be taken from the gender; for these the *saron panerus* [high-pitched *saron*] is used.

After the gender, the *slenthem* [low-pitched metallophone] is tuned, using the lowest keys of the *gender barung* as a guide; then the *demung*, which is an octave

higher than the *slenthem*. For the *saron barung*, the *gender panerus* is used as a guide. In tuning the *saron panerus*, pitches 1, 2 and 3 are taken from the *gender panerus*; but 5, 6 and high 1 or 7 are problems [i.e. they are above the range of the *gender panerus*]: for these we have to make our own octaves by ear.

Yono: What are the differences between the Cirebon and Javanese tuning systems?

Panggiyo: The Cirebon set you have is *pelog*. Here, pitch 1 is very far from pitch 2, while in Solonese gamelan, the distance between 1 and 2 is small (in East Javanese tuning, the distance between 1 and 2 is even smaller). Also in Cirebon gamelan the interval between 6 and 7 is wide, while it is narrow in Solo. In Cirebon gamelan 4 is pitched right in the middle of 3 and 5, while in Solo it is closer to 5 than to 3. In Yogyanese tuning, the interval between 5 and 6 is large.

Yono: What sort of tuning do we have here in Wellington?

Panggiyo: It's Solonese, or at least it has been made into a Solonese tuning. I aimed to tune the Javanese *pelog* set to Solonese tuning, because the *slendro* which was added recently (which happened to be from my factory) is also Solonese. I made the *slendro balungan* based on the two keys (6 and 2) which Joko Sutrisno brought with him when he came home to Solo. When I arrived in Wellington, I was amazed to find how accurate the *slendro* set was; in particular, the *slendro gender* (which is borrowed from the Indonesian Embassy) almost matched my *balungan*. I was able to bring them all into alignment immediately.

Yono: I remember Joko taking those keys to Indonesia. I still find it wonderful that you are able to make an approximation of the whole set on the basis of only two notes.

What about the Cirebon set? Joko said that you had problems with the instruments.

Panggiyo: The *kempul* were the main problem: they are very old and can only be hammered, but not too hard or they will break. There are two ways to deal with the *gong kempul*, however; unlike the smaller *kempul*, they can be both scraped and hammered. If they are scraped, the pitch falls; if hammered, it rises. One *kempul* has a hole and cannot be tuned higher: this needed to be pitch 5. I have made it sound 5 exactly, but it's not a clear, sonorous tone. In order to be clear-sounding, it would have to have been lowered, but then it would have been pitch 4, and there is no such thing as *kempul 4*! It's better left as it is.

Yono: Can't you just put some wax in it?

Panggiyo: If you apply wax, it will lower and become pitch 4. Anyway, wax is only used for temporary adjustments. After you apply the wax, you listen to the instrument and then hammer it; when you have found the sound you want, you get rid of the wax. All the Cirebon instruments were waxed when I arrived. I think *Midiyanto*

wanted to whole set to be lower-pitched.

There was another problem with the Cirebon gamelan. I wasn't very sure about the *kethuk* [low-pitched kettle gong]. It sounded like 7 or 6, but it wasn't clear exactly which. Kethuk are usually pitch 6, but this one was closer to 7; however it already has a flaw and I didn't want to make it worse and run the risk of breaking it just to make it sound pitch 7.

In the end I reached the conclusion that it had to sound pitch 7 because the second kethuk is 3, and usually the two kethuk are a *kempyung* (Javanese fifth) apart. So I made the kethuk 7 more clear, even if it isn't exactly right. Now both kethuk are nice to listen to. Just don't break them!

The *kenong* [horizontally-suspended kettle gongs] were also a problem. One of them already has a crack and does not resonate; if you want it to sound clearly, you must put a towel or some sponge underneath, just to keep the air inside the space.

Yono: The material is not very strong.

Panggiyo: The bronze is very brittle, and besides, it is hundreds of years old. But I think it is possible for this particular set to have a good sound, and for me this is more important than its "exact" sound.

Yono: It is often said that playing glissando on the balungan may damage the laras.

Panggiyo: It doesn't affect it at all. We have new compositions which use glissandi, and they sound fine. Thai and Cambodian ensembles use a lot of glissandi on the gambang and bonang. But it is true that in the *keraton* [palace] gamelan are venerated, and we have to respect them. We can't kick the gongs just because the composer says so. Gamelan are still called "Kiyai" or "Nyai" as if they are sacred.

Yono: Joko said you undertook a special meditation the other night.

Panggiyo: The other day I had a big problem with the Javanese kempul 3, which was in such a bad condition that it did not sound like pitch 3 at all. It's a difficult instrument to deal with as it often does the opposite of what you want: when you want it to be higher, you hammer it, and instead it goes lower; when you want it to sound lower, it goes higher! This is characteristic of kempul 3 everywhere, not just in your gamelan. It is a strange phenomenon; sometimes gong suwukan 2 is also like that, except it is easier to fix.

Anyway, having failed to produce a good "3" sound, I left the kempul, with the intention of continuing with other instruments, and went home frustrated. Before I went to bed, I did what any Javanese in trouble does: I took a quiet moment and called my late father's name, that's all. You see, comparing my father with myself, I feel he was much more experienced, a better gamelan tuner than I. He didn't reveal himself to me or come to meet me in the night,

but the next morning — I don't know how or why — my mind was very clear, as if I was being guided: "First, make that one sound lower, then reverse it... scrape this side, and then that side..." and I found the sound at last! Now the kempul 3 sounds very focused and beautiful; it fits with the rest of the instruments and I am proud of it. I was being guided — amazing, isn't it? ▀