

# Musical Transcription: from sound to symbol and back again

by Jack Body

My interest in transcription has developed in recent years because, as a composer, I am continually striving to understand this sonic phenomenon called music<sup>1</sup>. Notation is a tool, the medium by which I can examine my own perception. I hear a piece of music that attracts my ear but which my brain is unable to decipher. I long to unlock its secret, to uncover its magic, and I can only do this by pinning down the music in some graphic form. I know that I am the victim of my Western acquisitive intellectualism, but I have learned simply to accept that this is the way my brain works. I want to understand what is happening in this music, and notation is my way of trying to achieve this.

Through this exercise I expect to learn something that I might be able to apply in my own compositions. In practice, however, I frequently find myself so astonished by and in admiration of the music I am transcribing that I have little inclination to compete with it. Instead I try to recreate it in another form, and through this recreation transmit something of those qualities to which I first responded. My arrangement is not a replica of the original, nor is it a substitute.

I am aware that I seldom come close to an understanding that might be called objectively truthful or real. What I am confronting is my own perception of the music, and the particular character and bias of the notational system I am using. It is the very process of double-transcription from sound to symbol and back into sound again that fascinates me. I am forced to be painfully specific about what I think I am hearing and about what my brain processes from what my ears receive. I try to distinguish the essential from the unessential — the speed of vibrato might seem more important than concepts of fixed pitch, for instance. I make only scant reference to cultural context. I consider the music simply as a sound phenomenon about which I trying to make sense.

In attempting to notate, often with great difficulty, what I hear, I am made very conscious of the conventions of notation, how these conventions function and the limitations they impose on the music we make and how we listen. For example, the conventions of staff notation impose

on our thinking and listening the idea of an octave divided into twelve equidistant intervals. When we hear other intonations, and especially when we try to notate them, we categorize them according to their deviance from this norm (i.e. a neutral 3rd, a slightly sharp major second), a standard which is itself one of the most artificial and unnatural intonational systems ever devised! Once I have some kind of abstract notation I am free to consider how it might be made playable by Western musicians, more or less following the conventions of Western notation, and yet preserving what I imagine to be some of the essential qualities of the original music.

As a composer, I have found this whole process of deconstruction and reconstruction invaluable for the insights it has given me and the skills I have had to learn. The process has proved to be a rewarding experience for my students as well. Each year I assign a transcription project for third year composition students. I always expect to be asked to justify the inclusion of such a requirement in a composition course, but I seldom am; it doesn't take long before students become equally fascinated by transcription. At the very least it's a superb ear training exercise, and all composers know the value of sharp ears!

Initially I select a pool of material from which the students can make their individual choices. I generally try to use material that I myself have recorded. This perhaps gives the students a chance to identify personally with the music, since the recorded performance is unique. The students' completed work is deposited in our ethnomusicological archive as supplementary documentation for future reference. One of these early student exercises was the transcription by Andra Patterson (Figure 1) of an excerpt from *Gending Lanjalan* as played by the Ngik Ngok ensemble (on *Music of Madura*, CD ODE 1381, Ode Records, New Zealand). The notation reveals a very interesting difference in function between the lines of the two *sronen* [double reed wind instrument], a fact which was not obvious from an initial listening.

When I first introduced this project for students I asked them to use their transcription as the basis for a written analysis of the music's structure. I soon realized that this was too formal and conventional an approach for composition students. I now offer two options: recreate a performance of the music from their notation, or compose a new composition, based in some way on their transcription.

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♩ = 132

Seronen

Small terompet

Medium terompet

Med. large terompet

Large terompet

Drums

Kencer Jidor

Figure 1. Excerpt from Lanjalan.

In the first case students might have access to instruments that approximate the original instrumentation, but more frequently they have to resort to timbral combinations which, in terms of the original, are exotic indeed. Kroncong Langgam Java *Pancen Ora Disedyaya*<sup>2</sup> was transcribed by Ross Carey (Figure 2). It should have been reproducible in the original instrumentation (voice, violin, ukulele, guitar and cello); due to the lack of performers it was played on two violins, and harpsichord, with a piano playing the guitar and pizzicato cello parts. But the spirit of the music remained remarkably intact (one almost felt it was enhanced) in this unusual combination.

The second option, to compose an original work inspired by the transcription exercise, appeals to many students. Having struggled to get inside the music that they

have been transcribing, a free composition allows them to extricate themselves again and perhaps reassert their individual creative identity, while expressing some kind of commentary on the music that they have been so deeply involved with. A striking example was a piece for two pianos by Michael Avery which grew out of a transcription of *Re Jaere* (also on *Music of Madura* CD), from a cycle of Madurese Samman chants, which I recorded in Pengarengan, near Pamekasan, in 1983. While overall the music is far removed from its original reference point, the "borrowed ideas" have clearly taken root and produced a work of considerable freshness and originality.

I have used this approach to hearing and seeing music in my own compositions as well. An example is *Melodies*. In this excerpt (Figure 3), the opening of the slow

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Pancen Ora Disedyaya'. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes a Singer (Tenor) with lyrics 'Pan - cen O ra — di - se - dya Wong wis la -', a Violin with a *pp* dynamic marking and a triplet of eighth notes, a Ukelele with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, a Guitar (at pitch) with a similar rhythmic pattern, and a Cello with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics '- li — te - ka nye - la nye - la Ka - ton' and continues the instrumental parts. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C).

Figure 2. Excerpt of Pancen Ora Disedyaya.

middle section is a transcription of *saluang* [West Sumatran end blown flute]. Whereas the main melodic characteristic of traditional Minangkabau music is a kind of rhythmic pulsation among pitches at a close range, the opening

phrase of the *saluang* introduction invariably had this very expansive line which includes an upward leap of a ninth. In transcribing this melody I was also aware of its timbral changes, caused by the technique of circular breathing that

The musical score is divided into three systems, each starting with a measure number in a box: 213, 215, and 217.

- System 1 (Measures 213-214):**
  - Fl. 2:** Starts with a dynamic marking of *f* and a slur over six notes.
  - Cl. 2:** Starts with a dynamic marking of *p* and a slur over nine notes, with the instruction "(sempre legato)".
  - Harp:** Provides harmonic support with sustained notes.
- System 2 (Measures 215-216):**
  - Fl. 2:** Features a complex melodic line with triplets and a dynamic range from *mp* to *ff*. It includes the instruction "(legato)" and a measure number "18".
  - Cl. 2:** Mirrors the flute's melodic line with triplets.
  - Vcl.:** Provides a sustained harmonic background with dynamics ranging from *pp* to *f*.
- System 3 (Measures 217-218):**
  - Fl. 1:** Plays a short phrase with the instruction "(breath only, no tone)".
  - Fl. 2:** Plays a phrase with the instruction "(no vib.)".
  - Cl. 2:** Plays a phrase with the instruction "(no vib. (sempre legato))".
  - Vcl.:** Plays a phrase with the instruction "(sul D) *p* < *f*".

Figure 3. Excerpt of Melodies.

permitted a continuous uninterrupted tone. As the player breathed in through his nose while sustaining the sound by using the reservoir of air in his cheeks, the upper partials disappeared from the *saluang* tone. I tried to recreate the tiered timbre by alternating between a loud alto flute and soft clarinet.

In my own work and in my interaction with students I have seen that the study of transcription has some very useful lessons for anyone involved in the craft of musical composition. ▶

#### Notes

1. See also Jarrad Powell, "Notation or Not?" in *Balungan* II(1-2):6-7.

2. Recorded on *Music for Sale: Street Musicians of Yogyakarta* on LP and cassette HLS-91 from Kiwi/Pacific Records, New Zealand [available from AGI]. Also released in the USA on CD by Original Music as *Street Music of Java* OMCD006.

Compositions by Jack Body based on transcribed sources of Asian music:

- 1983 *Melodies for Orchestra*, based on the Greek "Horos Sera," the Minangkabau *saluang* flute, and an Indian street band.
- 1987 *Three Transcriptions for String Quartet*. Based on pieces played on the multiple jaws harp of the Yi nationality of South China, the *valiha* tube zither of Madagascar and a village band from the Shopsko area of Bulgaria.
- 1987 *Interior*. For chamber ensemble with tape of field recordings made among the Miao and the Yi of Guizhou and Sichuan, South China.
- 1991 *Arum Manis*. For string quartet and a tape of a cotton candy seller in Madura playing a rebab.
- 1995 *Campur Sari*. For string quartet and Javanese musician playing gender, kendang, and singing.