



(LAS 7301)

JAVA: MUSIC OF MYSTICAL ENCHANTMENT

The island of Java, one of the 3,000 islands in the Indonesian archipelago, has been influenced by several waves of immigration and culture throughout the course of its history. Hinduism, Buddhism, and a kind of mystical form of the Islamic faith permeated Javanese culture to the greatest extent.

Throughout each of the waves of immigration, Java experienced an important relationship between music and other aspects of Javanese culture, such as religion, literature, theatre, dance dramas, and puppet shows. This relationship has been, and still is, encouraged and practiced by the royal courts as well as Javanese cities, towns, and villages. Music is, without question, an integral part of Javanese life.

There are two basic musical scales in Java. Slendro is a five-tone scale and pelog, a seven-tone scale, although a five-tone pelog is frequently employed. Slendro is considered to be more masculine, exalted, and festive, while pelog is felt as being feminine, friendly, and somewhat sad in character. There are a number of basic types of tuning used in both the slendro and pelog scales. No two orchestras use the exact same intervallic scale structure, whether it be a huge, regal court orchestra, or a small ensemble of a humble village. Each orchestral tuning is devised to fit the particular character of the ensemble.

Each scale contains modes, known as patet. There are three modes or patet in slendro: patet nem, patet sanga, and patet manyura. Pelog has four patet: patet lima, patet nem, patet barang, and pelog patet manyura. Each patet has a different set of principal and

secondary tones that receive particular emphasis as well as its own special introductory and cadencing melodic patterns. In addition, each patert is associated with certain times of day or night, specific times within the presentation of a dance drama or puppet play, and particular moods.

The Javanese gamelan, the generic name for orchestra, includes a variety of ensembles which differ in size and purpose. However, in general, every gamelan performs three basic functions. First, a basic melody is performed, usually a relatively slow, unornamented melody, but possibly one that might contain short note values with frequent rhythmic irregularities. Second, many strata of ornamentations are constructed around the nuclear melody. Third, the melody is divided and subdivided into different temporal sections by a set of interpunctuating gongs.

The fixed melody of a gending, or composition, is executed by a family of instruments known as saron. The saron, a metallophone with bronze keys that rest over a resonator box, comes in three sizes, and is played by being struck with a wooden mallet. Simultaneous variations of the fixed melody are realized by a family of instruments, also made in three sizes, known as bonang. Each bonang, which is played by being struck with two wooden sticks, consists of a double row of metal kettles suspended on crossed cords. There are also three different sized genders, metallophones with bronze keys that are suspended by strings over individual tube resonators. The gender is played by being struck with two sticks with padded disks at the ends. This results in a mellow, non-percussive sound. By playing complex simultaneous variations, the gender also functions to ornament the nuclear melody.

Other instruments that decorate the melody are the gambang, a xylophone whose wooden keys lie across a wooden trough, the chelempung, a thirteen double-course zither which is played by plucking the strings, the suling, an end-blown bamboo flute, and the rebab, a two-stringed bowed lute. Solo and unison chorus singing are also frequently used to ornament the melody.

The solotomic structure is provided by the intricate drum patterns of the kendang and by various members of the gong family. The principal gongs are the large hanging gong ageng, the kenone, a large inverted kettle suspended on crossed cords, the kempul, a smaller haging gong, and the ketuk, a small inverted kettle gong.

A large gamelan could have as many as twenty-five distinct strata of sound. Whether large or small, the Javanese gamelan produces a sound that is new and exciting to the Western ear. Its mystical, ethereal, enchanting sounds certainly occupy a unique position in the world of music.

THE TRACKS

1. Untitled Composition (2:02)

Recorded in the town in Yogyakarta, this short excerpt from a very lengthy composition, serves to illustrate the typical sound of a small, but traditional Javanese gamelan. This piece, like many other compositions, is sung in an old Javanese poetic language.

Although these pieces are generally understood to be about famous epics, myths, and love stories, the average Javanese audience is usually not able to discern the exact meaning of the words being sung. This composition is performed in the slendro scale, patet sanga.

2. Gending Kututmanggung (18:41)

Also recorded in Yogyakarta, this composition begins with an introduction that includes a male singer and gamelan. The major part of the gending or composition illustrates typical female vocal style, which is highly decorative and nasal. This composition, performed in the slendro scale, patet mayura, is entitled Gending Kututmanggung, meaning “Turtle Dove Sings”.

3. Gending Anglirmendung (17:54)

The Gending Anglirmendung is traditional music used to accompany the slow, stylized movements of the classical Serimpi court dance. This highly revered ceremony was at one time only performed in Javanese courts and palaces. More recently, it is being performed for public audiences. The composition, played in pelog scale, patet barang, employs ancient, poetical Mavanese texts, usually about historical battle scenes. The texts are sung by a mixed male and female choir, known as sinden. The hypnotic effect created by the rhythmic pattern that is repeated throughout the gending, produces a style that is quite different from other Javanese gamelan music.

4. Manggala Gita (3:44)

This excerpt is part of a lengthy bawo, or vocal introduction to a gamelan composition. The song of this partially improvised bawo is entitled Manggala Gita. It is a fine illustration of a decorative male vocal line performed in traditional, classical style.

CREDITS

Cover photo and liner notes: Doreen Powers, an ethnomusicologist, who made these recordings while doing field work in 1974.

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