

Joining the Gamelan in Theory and Practice

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The first time the deck of cards appeared in the gamelan room at The Evergreen State College, the deck was met with silence and looks of shock. The cards landed on the small table, around which at least a dozen students were clustered while the rest of their classmates sat at the instruments of the *gamelan degung*, a small Sundanese ensemble of West Java. “If I don’t hear some noise and the sound of cards,” I warned, “I will be quite disappointed.” I then returned my attention to the students at the instruments, who looked equally alarmed. Within a few minutes, however, they were lost in the sounds of the gamelan and struggling to learn their parts, apprentices at their sides. Several minutes later, chatter, shouts of triumph, and cards slapping against the table were added to the sounds in the room.

During my time of doing fieldwork with musicians in the Sundanese region of West Java, Indonesia, I studied the local genre of *tembang Sunda*, an aristocratic genre that had as its instrumentarium the large zither (*kacapi*), small zither (*rincik*), and bamboo flute (*suling*). I lived in the capital city of Bandung at a compound with the members of a performing arts organization – Jugala – and heard a variety of musical genres on a weekly basis. From *gamelan degung* to *tembang Sunda* to the comedy routines of *calung*, the place was lively with music and dance both day and night. A recording studio on the premises brought in outside performers: pop stars, experimental artists, musicians from remote villages on their first visit to the big city, recording engineers, politicians, and hangers-on of all stripes. It was a hothouse environment.

A key adjective – *ramai* – was in operation most days at Jugala. The concept of *ramai* represents a life that is busy, fun, lively, noisy, and just chaotic enough to be exciting. For a place to be *ramai*, it requires a critical mass of people from different class levels, different families of origin, different musical training, and different perspectives to be present at the same time. It requires a number of distractions, both musical and social. In a context that is suitably *ramai*, musicians and dancers are at ease to focus on their music or their movements, knowing that what they practice in that context is being simultaneously judged and held in a low-stakes environment. While traffic jams may also be characterized as *ramai* because of the noise and potential to socialize with other drivers, the use of this word in the context of a performing arts organization is critical in locating Sundanese pedagogy within the confines of a small liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest.

The Evergreen State College is celebrated for its interdisciplinary work within the context of full-time, year-long “programs.” Over four years, a student might join only four programs but receive 180 diverse credits in (for example) ethnomusicology, forest ecology, marine science, postcolonial literature in translation, Asian dance, and Irish studies. Rather than employing the use of departments, majors, and grades, the professors instead work on small teaching teams and develop a narrative evaluation for each student at the end of each year. Within any given program, the professors are able to create virtually any pedagogical model with which to experiment, particularly through experiential learning, and the curriculum is created anew each year.

As the sole ethnomusicologist at this intensely creative and experimental place, it has been my goal to bring my students into playing *gamelan degung* through the use of Sundanese pedagogy. Living in West Java for several years, and absorbing the sounds of the gamelan slowly – through osmosis, as it were – is not an option for my American college students. Their work in an interdisciplinary program, however, requires that they combine their gamelan work

with reading Indonesian literature in translation, watching films, learning to speak Bahasa Indonesia, and exploring history, religion, and politics through lectures and readings. The luxury of working with these students for a full year, sixteen hours a week, is unparalleled. Since we all work on teams, the norm would be to work with professors who specialize in Asian dance and theater, so the students develop a broader sense of Asian performing arts culture.

It is the responsibility of each faculty member to work with approximately 25 students. The college's Sundanese *gamelan degung* seats students for just six instruments: the *bonang* (gong chime), *go-ong* (large hanging gong), *jenglong* (set of six small hanging gongs), *panerus* (large metallophone), *peking* (small metallophone), and *kendang* (set of one large and two small barrel drums). The *suling* (bamboo flute) is too challenging to teach to beginning students, so it is the one reserved for me. The disparity between the six players and the 25 students is solved by developing a system of players, apprentices, and listeners. After a short lecture in which the students learn about the ensemble and the basic etiquette for playing (e.g., not stepping over the instruments), the first brave souls come forward to play, and six more come forward to be apprentices. The rest have to wait, and listen. Within a few minutes, the cell phones appear and the listeners are lost to the allure of the internet.

After the deck of cards comes out, a marked difference settles in the room without fail. While the room itself is bright and cheerful – with windows opening onto an evergreen forest on two sides – it remains a classroom with a chalkboard. The sounds grow in volume from the card players, which takes the pressure away from those struggling to learn their parts on the musical instruments. Cell phones slip back into pockets and backpacks, completely forgotten. The instrumentalists physically relax and begin to make light of their mistakes, shrugging them off and simply learning from them rather than wishing they could sink through the floor in shame. Their apprentices, who hover next to them ready to assist with pointing out the right notes or phrases, or remind them of where they are, also tend to lighten up and occasionally make light-hearted comments of support and encouragement. Most importantly, laughter and teasing form the bulk of the conversation. Indonesian ginger candy is shared and remarked over, as is tea from West Java. Students learn to help prepare the flowers that stand near the gong, and come to respect the gong by playing just firmly enough to release the specific sound waves at the right speed.

In a traditional Sundanese pedagogical context, teaching at home through actually playing together while being welcoming, light-hearted, and humorous is the gold standard. Students slip up, learn from their mistakes, gain very specific skills, and develop an understanding of performance practice through layers of practicing, apprenticing, and listening through conversations, card (or domino) games, dancing, eating, drinking tea, and hearing occasional admonitions to play better from those nearby. An otherwise debilitating mistake is simply released and replaced by better practice. A missed gong or the failure to repeat a specific line results in shrieks of laughter rather than silent mortification. The group is favored over the individual musician, and every student learns to play every piece on every instrument.

By using this *ramai* pedagogy, the result is that students come to understand that they are not receiving credit for playing cards and telling jokes; they are receiving credit for acquiring skills through a very different form of teaching and learning. Performances, when they do happen, are assured and relaxed, with neither the ponderous sense of grinding through a repeating gong cycle (again and again), nor the panicked anxiety of being onstage for the first time. During one performance for approximately 800 people at the Seattle Folklife Festival, one student forgot what he was supposed to play, and another one calmly went up to him from her

place on the sidelines, lightly cuffed him on the shoulder with a smile, and took over his part without missing a beat. The audience saw what happened, and chuckled, then applauded. The acclaim for *both* students backstage was warm and heartfelt.

In Sundanese contexts for *gamelan degung*, participation is essential in ensuring a successful performance. Having audience members step in to play (or sing) adds to the pleasure of the players and audience members alike (most of whom are wrapped up in conversation, just as one might experience during a rehearsal). To join a gamelan rehearsal is to agree to be casual and (somewhat) noisy, to cheer and laugh at mistakes and successes alike, and to stop taking oneself as seriously as in those ensembles in which a single mistake is enough to send a student out in tears. Whether it is a deck of cards, shared ginger candy, or working with apprentices and listeners, the noisy, *communitas*-building sense of *ramai* Sundanese pedagogy works almost below the threshold. Before they even realize it, students who had never even heard of *gamelan*, let alone *gamelan degung*, are playing, socializing, and being more Sundanese than they could possibly have imagined six weeks before.