

Siswå Sukrå

Javanese gamelan

Siswå Sukrå is a community gamelan group of fifteen or more players, based at the Royal Festival Hall in London. The group has grown out of the Southbank Centre's resident gamelan programme, which began in 1988. It is tutored by Pete Smith, one of the UK's leading gamelan musicians and teachers.

Siswå Sukrå plays pieces from the central Javanese gamelan repertoire, both classical and modern, in moods ranging from solemn court ritual to exuberant village celebration. Its programmes are designed to introduce new audiences to a great musical culture that has fascinated composers from the West for over a century.

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The name Siswå Sukrå literally means 'the Friday students': the group rehearses on Thursday evenings, or Friday in Javanese terms, since days begin at sunset in the Javanese calendar.

The gamelan allows players of mixed ages, abilities and experience to play together. Siswå Sukrå resembles a typical community group in Java, some players being relatively new to the music while others have studied in Java.



What is a gamelan?

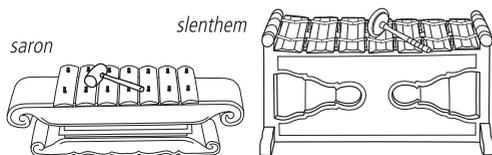
A gamelan is a set of tuned percussion instruments, mainly in bronze. Gamelan takes different regional forms – different ensembles and different music. Siswâ Sukrâ plays in the central Javanese style, based on the cultural centre Surakarta, although it has half an eye on Yogyakarta, its rival city, and on Semarang, the capital of central Java. In the UK, Balinese gamelan is also widely played, and the Sundanese style from west Java can be heard too. Several other styles exist.

Tuning

A single gamelan conforms to one or other of two tunings: *sléndro*, a five-note scale, or *pélog*, which is a seven-note tuning that allows various five-note scales. In *sléndro* there are no intervals smaller than one tone in the diatonic scale. A full gamelan has sets of instruments in both tunings. Each gamelan traditionally has a unique tuning; instruments from different ensembles cannot be mixed. For practical reasons, Siswâ Sukrâ normally uses a *sléndro* gamelan when away from home.

Melody section

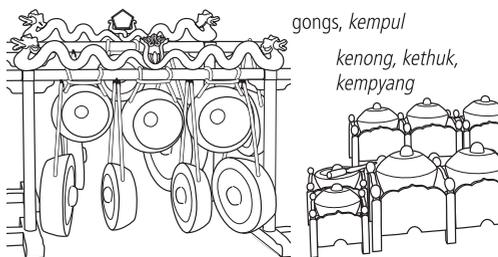
It is usual in the West to think of gamelan music in terms of layers. The basic melody (*balungan*, literally ‘skeleton’) is carried by a group of metallophones: two or four *saron*, and half as many *demung*, which are the same shape but larger and pitched an octave lower. The *slenthem* is another metallophone but with tube resonators, and pitched an octave lower still. All these instruments usually play the basic melody or simple decoration. The *peking* is smaller than the *saron* and pitched an octave higher: it usually plays simple decoration.



Punctuating instruments

Behind the melody section are the punctuating instruments, which mark structurally important points in the music. The largest, and the least

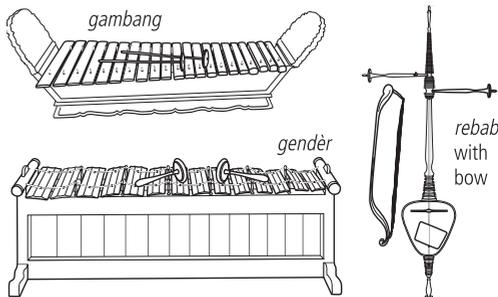
often heard, is the great gong (*gong ageng*) with its beat note. When gong strokes come close together, they are played on the slightly smaller *gong suwukan*. Intermediate points are marked by the *kenong* and *kempul*. The smallest instruments of this section, and most often heard, are the *kethuk* and *kempyang*. In some pieces associated with solemn dances, a pair of hand-held banana-shaped punctuating instruments (*kemanak*) are heard.



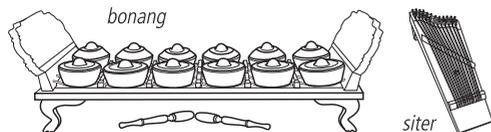
Elaborating instruments

At the front are the elaborating or decorating instruments. Each realises or elaborates the *balungan* in its own characteristic style, playing anything up to 32 notes for each note of the *balungan*. The player has a repertoire of patterns to choose from, so that there is an element of improvisation, but this is not improvisation as in jazz, for example.

A Javanese gamelan combines two ensembles: loud-style and soft-style. Most of the decorating instruments belong to the soft style – *rebab* (bowed spike fiddle), *gendèr barung* (long, 2½-octave metallophone) and *gendèr panerus* (similar but an octave higher), *gambang* (xylophone), *siter* (zither) and *suling* (end-blown bamboo flute). The *rebab* is the melodic leader in



soft-style pieces, introducing the piece and signalling some of the transitions within pieces. In loud-style pieces the **bonang barung** (2-octave gong-chime) fills the equivalent role; it too has a higher-pitched version, the **bonang panerus**.



The **rebab** also has the roles of keeping the female solo singers (*pesindhèn*) up to pitch and telling them when to use *miring* notes, which are 'in the cracks' between the notes of *sléndro*.

Roles of instruments

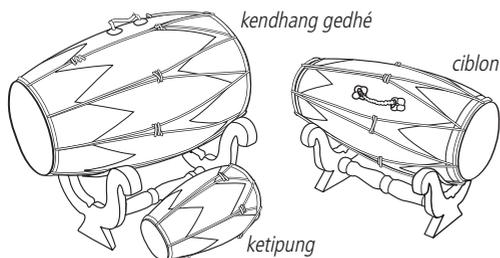
While the instruments have fixed roles, there are no soloists and no rank-and-file players: all play their part in the texture of the music, in what would be called heterophony in Western classical music.

Vocal parts

When present, vocal parts are usually just another strand or layer in the texture of the music. As with the instruments, there are fixed roles for the singers: men usually sing as a chorus, but women usually sing as soloists in rhythmically free style. Mixed choruses also occur, with men and women singing in unison at the octave. The texts sung are often generic and unrelated to the particular piece.

Drums

In the absence of a conductor, the players must respond to audible signals alone. The drums control the tempo, and signal changes of decoration style and some transitions between sections of a piece or between pieces in a suite.



Gamelan music

Within its two tunings (*laras*), gamelan music is composed in different modes (*pathet*) that are associated with different times of day and the different 'acts' of dramas. In order of rising pitch, the *pathet* in *sléndro* are called *nem*, *sângâ* and *manyurâ*. The corresponding *pathet* in *pélog* are respectively called *limâ*, *nem* and *barang*.

A concert programme will ideally follow this sequence of *pathet*, and will alternate between *sléndro* and *pélog* if both tunings are available.

Every note in the music is part of a pattern that ends at the next structurally important point – the final such point being a stroke on the *gong ageng*. The music therefore appears to work backwards compared to Western music, where the first beat in the bar is the strongest.

Gamelan music is composed in fixed forms (***bentuk***) and generally works in repeating cycles, marked off by gong strokes. The melodic material may be repeated exactly, but may also be played on different time scales (***irâmâ***) and with a variety of different elaborating techniques, so that it may not immediately be recognisable as the same piece. The changes of *irâmâ* are signalled by the drums, and a switch to the middle-sized *ciblon* from the other two drums generally indicates a transition to livelier treatment by the other instruments.

Ayak-ayakan, srepegan, sampak In the accompaniment of drama and dance, the gamelan is obliged to follow the action. For this purpose there are the *ayak-ayakan*, *srepegan* and *sampak* forms, all of which have multiple exit points so that whoever is in control can bring them to an end within a few seconds. The *ayak-ayakan* form is the most refined, and the *sampak* the most intense; the *srepegan* is in between. *Srepegan* and *sampak* are associated with vigorous action such as fight scenes.

Dangdut is a form of popular song that is now performed by various types of ensemble in Indonesia. It takes its name from a characteristic drum beat said to have been borrowed from Indian film music.

Gangsaran is essentially a one-note ostinato,

Interlocking patterns

A pervasive feature of gamelan music is its use of interlocking rhythms – patterns of notes that are split between two instruments, two players on one instrument, or even the two hands of one player. In this way, faster patterns are possible.

Each region has its own patterns, going by names such as *imbal*, *kotekan* and *caruk*. In central Javanese gamelan, *imbal* between the two *bonang* (in a variety of styles) and between two *saron* is very common, but other forms will be heard; also interlocking patterns between the hands are part of regular *gendèr* and *siter* style.

derived from the repertoire of one of the ancient ceremonial gamelan in the royal palaces. It is used in suites and is again associated with fight scenes.

Gendhing This is the longest form, and can last over an hour; the shortest take nearly a quarter-hour. *Gendhing* are divided into two basic types according to the leading instrument: a *gendhing bonang* is in the loud style and has no vocal parts, whereas a *gendhing rebab* involves all the soft-style instruments and has vocal parts, sometimes of several kinds: at least female solo singing, sometimes choral parts throughout, or possibly a combination of both. A *gendhing* has at least two sections, the first being relatively refined, and the second always more complex and lively. The second half of a *gendhing bonang* always starts in a restrained manner but gradually speeds up, sometimes changing its melodic material along

the way. *Gendhing bonang* are used as welcoming pieces at the start of a concert or ceremony.

Jineman is a solo song with an accompaniment from soft-style instruments.

Ketawang is another short form, basically vocal, always performed in a slower *irāmā* and the refined soft style.

Ladrang This form is a major category covering a wide range of pieces: some in the loud style, some in the soft style, and some that switch between the two.

Lancaran This short, simple form is the one that beginners usually cut their teeth on. It is basically in the loud style, and may have vocal parts – typically light-hearted and popular.

Langgam is a curious exception. Basically a solo song with accompaniment, it is derived from the Portuguese-influenced *kroncong* – a type of sentimental popular song accompanied by a mainly string ensemble. In *langgam*, the strumming and plucking of the stringed instruments are imitated by *imbal* on the *peking* and special *imbal* patterns on the two *bonang*.

Palaran is a vocal form, but takes its structure from the *srepegan*: a solo singer sings classical Javanese verse in a flexible style against the fixed structure provided by the *srepegan*, without the loud-style instruments.

Suites Pieces are often combined into sequences or suites, some becoming standardised. For example, a *gendhing* is often followed by a *ladrang* or *ketawang* that forms a sort of third section.



Dance at the Pakualaman Palace, Yogyakarta



Ni Madé Pujawati with Siswā Sukrā, St Ethelburga's, London

History

The cliché happens to be true: the origins of the gamelan really are lost in the mists of antiquity. The archaeological record shows that some types of instrument found in the gamelan existed 2000 years ago. It is equally certain that others were added quite recently, even in the twentieth century. The usual Javanese account tells of gamelan ensembles created over 1500 years ago, but lacks corroboration. From Westerners visiting the East Indies early in the sixteenth century we have reports of ensembles that were clearly some kind of gamelan, together with descriptions of the art forms – drama and dance – linked to them.

A history of performance practice is also missing. Until the end of the nineteenth century, transmission of compositions was entirely oral. After the arrival of notation, it was still only the basic melody of the piece that was notated. None of the instruments plays exactly what is written: the *balungan* players must fold the melody to fit it into the single-octave range of their instruments; the decorating instruments play far more than is notated; and the punctuating instruments only mark selected points. Therefore, in the case of an

old composition, we have almost no idea of how its sound has changed over the years. 'Traditions' can only be traced back to the early twentieth century.

The fabrication of bronze gongs by casting and then hot-forging and filing is a skill developed by the Javanese gong-smiths in the first millennium AD and maintained to this day. Some instruments have also been made in brass, and steel is often used to reduce costs at the expense of tonal quality.

The gamelan in society

It is often assumed that, since Indonesia is a Muslim nation, the music of the gamelan must be Islamic in some way. This is a non sequitur. Islam traditionally has had no place for instrumental music, and it would be highly exceptional to find a gamelan in a mosque in Java.

Islam arrived in Java only in the fifteenth century, by which time the gamelan already had a long tradition. Previously the Hindu religion had predominated, and characters and events from the Indian epics – the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* – provided the cultural base for Javanese drama and dance, as they continue to do.



A relaxed rehearsal at the Mangkunegaran Palace, Surakarta

Gamelan music in Java is therefore basically independent of religion: Islam has very little influence on it. In Bali the situation is entirely different: the population, including many exiles from Java, continued to practise Hinduism, and gamelan performances are an integral part of religious ceremonies.

The gamelan was probably confined at first to the royal palaces, from where it spread out into almost every *kampung* (village or local community). Java's colonial masters, following a divide-and-rule policy, encouraged splits in the royal family, with the result that Yogyakarta and Surakarta each have both a senior and a junior palace, all with competing musical styles. Mutual influence between palace and village continues today.

Gamelan music is strongly associated with drama and dance; a Western-style public performance without either of these elements is the exception not the rule in Java.

The most important form of drama in central Java is the shadow-puppet play (*wayang kulit*), using stories from the Indian epics or Javanese legends. Traditionally a *wayang kulit* performance starts at 8 or 9 p.m. and ends just before dawn, but abbreviated performances lasting 2 to 3 hours are increasingly common. These dramas remain hugely popular. The puppet-master (*dhalang*) is essentially a shaman, bringing the spirits to life in puppet form, and therefore belongs to the animist

tradition. He manipulates the puppets, narrates the story, gives all the characters distinctive voices, cracks jokes, and controls the progress of the music. He may act as an official mouthpiece for advice or news, but also enjoys licence to criticise – even, with caution, the central government.

Wayang kulit is now typically performed with a large gamelan and as many singers as money allows. A top *dhalang* with his specialist performers is expensive, so performances are commissioned to celebrate major life events such as weddings and circumcisions, and may be adjusted to the means of the sponsor. Sometimes a whole community will contribute to the costs. At other times or for less important occasions there will only be a gamelan performance, perhaps by the local community group.

Several other forms of drama exist, using stories drawn from the same sources or others. Dance too can be based on scenes from these dramas, but other dances belong to specific categories, e.g. the flirtatious *gambiyong* for a female dancer, and the *gandrung* dances representing lovesick heroes. Certain solemn dances (*bedhāyā* and *srimpi*) are treasured cultural heirlooms of the royal palaces. All these dance forms are dance-as-performance or dance-as-ritual. *Tayuban*, in which women were paid to dance with men, is an example of a somewhat disreputable social dance.



Ancient Sekatèn gamelan at Yogyakarta, 1888



Dance rehearsal at arts high school, Surakarta

Gamelan in the United Kingdom

The first possible English contact with the gamelan occurred in 1580 during Drake's circumnavigation:

One day amongst the rest, viz., *March 21, Raja Donan* coming aboard us, in requitall of our musick which was made to him, presented our Generall with his country musick, which though it were of a very strange kind, yet the sound was pleasant and delightfull ...

This does not definitively indicate a gamelan, but we can be fairly sure that the music played for the Javanese visitors would have come from a consort of viols or of recorders.

After the establishment of the East India Company in 1600, English ships began to make regular voyages to Java and the Moluccas. It is tempting to see sailors' reports from Java in Caliban's description of his island in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (a play dating from the teens of the century)

Sometimes a thousand twangling Instruments
Will hum about mine ears.



Shadow-puppet performance in London

with the words 'twangling' and 'hum' perhaps hinting at the novelty of hearing melodies carried by percussion instruments. East India Company employees' writings sometimes mention music.



Siswā Sukrā at Myatt's Fields Park, Lambeth, London



Ronggèng dancer, from Raffles, *History of Java*, 1817

After the Napoleonic Wars, Java was briefly governed by the polymath Sir Stamford Raffles. He brought back to England two gamelan, now in Claydon House, Bucks, and the British Museum. Only one Javanese musician came with them, so they were never played properly, though the instruments were much admired by Western musicians.

It is likely that the first full gamelan performance in the UK was in 1882, when an impresario rather improbably hired a troupe of Javanese gamelan players and dancers for a season at the London Aquarium, a popular place of entertainment near the Houses of Parliament. This event preceded the Paris Exposition of 1889, when Debussy and other French composers were famously smitten by the sounds of the gamelan.

It was only in the 1970s, rather later than in other Western countries, that the first gamelan for playing and teaching purposes was acquired by a British university. A gamelan is now considered essential for any university ethnomusicology department.

Most of the recent expansion of gamelan activities in the UK has been due to schools, which have found the gamelan a useful way of delivering the National Curriculum. The gamelan in various arts centres reach a wider clientele. With its simple playing techniques, the gamelan has proved to be accessible to people with physical impairments or learning difficulties. The charity Good Vibrations (www.good-vibrations.org.uk), founded by a

member of Siswå Sukrã, uses the gamelan in prisons to develop basic skills that prisoners lack.

Influence of the gamelan

The sounds of the gamelan are evoked in several compositions by Debussy and Ravel. Later composers who have been inspired similarly, or made use of the compositional principles of gamelan, include Bela Bartók, Benjamin Britten, John Cage, Henry Eichheim, Percy Grainger, Leopold Godowsky, Charles Griffes, Lou Harrison, György Ligeti, Olivier Messiaen, Colin McPhee, Carl Orff, Francis Poulenc, Steve Reich, Erik Satie, Dirk Schäfer and Peter Sculthorpe.

Further reading

- Benjamin Brinner, *Musical in Central Java*, Oxford University Press, 2008. A detailed introduction with accompanying CD.
- Neil Sorrell, *A Guide to the Gamelan*, Faber, 1990, and Jennifer Lindsay, *Javanese Gamelan*, Oxford University Press, 1979 and 1992 (the later edition has better photos). Good short introductions, but out of print.
- Richard Pickvance, *A Gamelan Manual*, Jaman Mas Books, 2005. A comprehensive guide for players.

The Southbank Centre's gamelan programme,* founded by composer Alec Roth, offers an array of one-off family taster sessions, introductory workshops for groups, classes for adults of all abilities, and performances of both traditional and contemporary gamelan music. It provides opportunities to play and learn both from Javanese visiting artists and from British musicians who have spent many years living and studying in Java. Its main gamelan is a large court-style bronze gamelan – Kyai Lebhdhãjiwã – in both *sléndro* and *pélog* tunings, a gift from Indonesia.

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