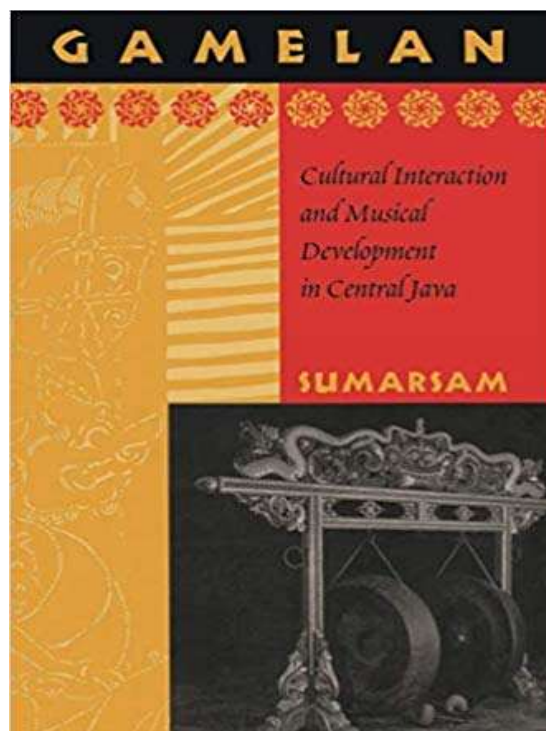


Book Review

Title : *Gamelan: Cultural Interaction and Musical Development in Central Java.*
Writer : Sumarsam
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This book was a revised edition of Sumarsam's 1992 Ph.D. dissertation entitled "Historical Contexts and Theories in Javanese Music". He has studied the art of Javanese gamelan since childhood and became a master which led him to the opportunity to work and serve in his current position as Winslow-Kaplan Professor of Music at Wesleyan University. He was among the first Indonesian to publish scholarly work on Javanese gamelan.

In this book, Sumarsam focuses his discussion on the development of the Javanese gamelan throughout history which is a result of acculturation, adaptation, and syncretism through various agencies and institutions coming from Java as well as outside of Java. Becoming a professor in a United States university, Sumarsam was able to access the intellectual community and academia in the field of ethnomusicology which became the basis in his research method. As a native Javanese person, Sumarsam was able to get deep enough as an insider to provide an emic approach in his fieldwork. This book consists of four main chapters that chronologically build up the history and development of Javanese gamelan.

In the first chapter, he traces cultural and religious contact that occurred in Java since the pre-Hindu until the Hindu-Buddhism period which was spread throughout Java amongst kingdoms such as Majapahit, Sriwijaya, and Mataram around the 8th century. Courtyards became the fulcrum for the flourishing of religion, literature, and arts. Consequently, members of the palace must have adequate skills in performing rituals and arts as they were the guardian and looked after by the society.

During the weakening of Hindu influence, Islam was spread out in Java through traders that taught Sufism. Islam became more recognizable through teachings conducted by the Wali Sanga which used arts and performances especially wayang as their media for communicating. During this era, an interesting phenomenon occurred where there was an exchange of musical ideas between the traditional Javanese music and Islamic Sufism. It did not separate itself, on the contrary, the fusion between these two practices enriches the repertoires in Javanese culture.

Marking the division of the Mataram Kingdom through the Giyanti treaty becoming two kingdoms in 1755, namely Kasunanan Surakarta and Kasultanan Yogyakarta, each kingdom had its own identity in literature and arts. Sumarsam points out the cause of these differences is by political alliances as a reaction to the rivalry between courts. Regardless of the division among the two kingdoms, it was considered the renaissance period in Javanese culture caused by the flourishing and development of the Javanese literature, new music compositions based on *macapat* were created, and the presence of *pakem* used in wayang performances.

Interactions between members of the courts with foreign people that stayed in Java, such as Europeans, Indos - or mestizos -, and the Chinese gave significant impacts to the culture. The *Prajuritan* music was a concrete example of the Dutch influence which combined European and local instruments and used a military outfit in its appearance. Other adaptations include the performance of *Monggang* that was played at the same time with rifles on important occasions and also the use of pistols in the Bedhaya dance. Besides the Dutch, the Chinese had an essential role in the development of Javanese culture too. Through their grandeur knowledge in business, Chinese became patrons that contributed to the publication and promotion of commercialized art groups.

In his third chapter, Sumarsam speaks about the development of the scholarly world on Javanese musical theory. Throughout the 19th century, there was an attempt conducted by Javanese aristocrats and European intellectuals to elevate Javanese music as a 'high art form' equal to the Western orchestra. One major development to support that idea was the invention of notations. At first, notations were made as a tool to preserve Javanese *gendhing* from extinction. Subsequently, notations were used as a point of entry for developing systematical musical theory for Javanese gamelan. From this time forward, there have been many concepts on Javanese gamelan that rose from local and foreign scholars.

Sumarsam criticizes concepts that were inadequate in the Javanese gamelan. He criticizes scholars that were interested in Gamelan but did not have background and ability of a *pengrawit*, such as works from Ki Hadjar Dewantara and Poerbatjaraka. Also works from foreign scholars such as Jaap Kunst, Mantle Hood, J.S. Brandts Buys, and Judith Becker were analyzed and criticized. One concept that gain high criticism from Sumarsam was Kunst misinterpretation of comparing the *balungan* concept with cantus firmus that provides the basis for melody. He also compared and analyzed other scholars' opinions from Rahayu Supanggah, Martopengrawit, and Sutton regarding this concept. He argues that the term *balungan* arose as a consequence of the need for shorthand elucidation of *gendhing*. *Balungan* should be understood not so much as the central part of *gendhing* but rather as a useful reference for learning a *gendhing*.

Despite having different opinions with earlier scholars, Sumarsam highlights the importance of intellectual contacts as following "between Javanese and Western

modes of thoughts, directly or indirectly, has consistently fostered the development of the gamelan theory written by Javanese (p. 144)". These interactions have helped elucidate the sophisticated concepts in the Javanese gamelan in a more systematical order with various methods and cross-cultural analysis.

In Chapter 4, Sumarsam questions compositional methods offered by foreign scholars and purposed his perspective. He argues that vocal element was an important part of the culture and mainly neglected as an alternative way to compose *gendhings*. His argument was based on old Javanese literature such as *Serat Centhini*, *Serat Gulang Arya*, and *Serat Sosorah Gamelan*. To elucidate his point, Sumarsam analyzed the melodic contour of the *sekar* songs and compared it with instrumental pieces in the Javanese gamelan repertoire. He was able to find several connections that were parallel between the vocal melody and the gamelan melody. Other concepts that were also analyzed and reinterpreted by Sumarsam were the concept of *gatra*, *cengkok*, and also instrumental elements of *gendhing* and *gendhing bonang*.

In summarizing this thought, Sumarsam argues that the "compositional process cannot be explained in only one particular way (e.g. the creative act of manipulating *gatra*). Composing *gendhing* is a complex process consisting of (1) reformulation of vocal melodies, (2) creative use of existing melodic material (the result and expansion of process [1]), and (3) consideration of instrumental elements (p. 229)."

Despite providing comprehensive data in this book, several issues need to be questioned. It is quite vague that Sumarsam did not provide strong limitations about Javanese cultures which are different from cultures that live in Java. In a musical approach, Javanese music only refers to court music around the Kasunan Surakarta and Kasultanan Yogyakarta, it does not cover other cultures that grow outside the court walls. While such limiting of scope is justifiable given the purpose of the study, it needs to be acknowledged so that readers do not get a mistaken impression regarding the actual range and diversity encompassed by Javanese music broadly conceived.

Furthermore, in chapter one he speaks about eroticism and homosexuality which he quoted from *Serat Centini*. This topic has been a very sensitive issue in Indonesia, and especially in Java. He posits himself as a person not to discuss these

issues as probably maintaining his “Indonesianess” which sees this matter as taboo. I argue that he should provide his interpretation regarding how society perceives this issue which could lead to an interesting discourse. The next issue regards the utilization of wayang for spreading Islam by the Wali Sanga. It is quite clear that Wali Sanga had a significant role in Java, nevertheless, Sumarsam did not provide robust data on how the Wali Sanga utilized wayang, what stories it used, or how the music plays take place.

Another part of the historical account that I thought was camouflaged involved the violent colonial act from the Dutch. In Indonesian history, there were wars between natives and the colonies everywhere including Java. Sumarsam mentioned mostly the bright side of the interactions but there were minor discussions on incidents caused by war and how art was perceived in times of tension. This too is an important part of history that affected the Javanese culture.

Although having several imperfections, this book is still an important reading. Sumarsam has made a major contribution to the development of the Javanese culture, especially regarding writings coming from a native scholar. He had the advantage to go deep inside the culture and uncover concepts that many foreign scholars neglect on such as *sekar* as a method for composing *gendhings* and also counter foreign scholars concepts such as Kunst’s thoughts that identify *balungan* is equal with *cantus firmus*. All of his thoughts strengthens the theory of Javanese music. Above all, the figure of Sumarsam gave political impact, especially within the Indonesian intellectual world. Coming from a small village in Java and becoming a professor at an American University, Sumarsam shows exemplary values that should be echoed by other Indonesians to take their place in a global scholarly world.