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Meguru Panggul and Meguru Kuping; The Method of Learning and Teaching Balinese Gamelan

I Wayan Sudirana



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“True musical experience is the experience of trust”—trust between the student and teacher. Whatever teaching method a teacher applies, it will not work without any trust. “It is only when we learn to trust one another, to dissolve in the realization of our shared humanity, will the music finally play.” This is an autoethnography. It exhibits the long process of musicianship in a traditional Balinese community. Also, I explore how, as a modern Balinese musician, my musicianship fit in with the new musical setting of a Western community. The paper is divided into three parts: the first part is an exploration of the traditional learning process and Balinese musical pedagogy called *meguru panggul*. The second is an exploration of my experience in continuing my studies at ISI Denpasar (the Balinese Arts Institute)— how the teacher conducts the learning process in a formal setting, and my own discovery in learning with ear (*meguru kuping*). And lastly, the third explores the development of my perception and conception of a new learning and teaching style, when I was exposed to the Western way of teaching and learning music at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

Keywords: Meguru Panggul, Meguru Kuping

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Introduction

This is an autoethnography. It exhibits the long process of musicianship in a traditional Balinese community. Also, I explore how, as a modern Balinese musician, my musicianship fit in with the new musical setting of a Western community.

The paper is divided into three parts: the first part is an exploration of the traditional learning process and Balinese musical pedagogy called *meguru panggul*. The second is an exploration of my experience in continuing my studies at ISI Denpasar (the Balinese Arts Institute)—how the teacher conducts the learning process in a formal setting, and my own discovery in learning with ear (*meguru kuping*). And lastly, the third explores the development of my perception and conception of a new learning and teaching style, when I was exposed to the Western way of teaching and learning music at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

Meguru Panggul, The Basic Learning Process

My life as a musician began when I was only a child. Although neither my parents nor my grandparents were musicians, I have always been naturally drawn to music. Traditional Balinese way of life supported my early engagement to music—gamelan music was everywhere. My father used to bring me to music and dance performances—the commercialized version designed for tourists, which featured many different gamelan groups and was held every night at the palace. In addition to that, he also brought me to attend rehearsals of the community gamelan that was taking place almost daily. To put me to sleep, he would sing and play recorded gamelan. I remember how he smiled at me every time I tried either to imitate dance movements or to move to the rhythm of the gamelan by moving my body to the beat of the music. The body is the first perfect medium in expressing musical sensibility. This is because “the human body is a rich and versatile personal resource for musical expression” (Malloch and Trevarthen, 2009:476).

The sound of the gamelan was already in my blood because of all my indirect involvement to musical activities mentioned above. As John Blacking wrote: “in societies where music is not written down, informed and accurate listening is as important and as much measure of musical ability as is performance, because it is only means of ensuring continuity of the musical tradition” (1973:10). My indirect involvement led me to unconsciously understand the construction of the music. In other words, I was able to follow—unconsciously without practicing—how one part works together with another in completing musical phrases. Thus, by listening and seeing the process in rehearsals, I became aware that Balinese music is not merely about learning a rhythm and a melody. The music plays a deeper philosophical role—it functions to keep everyone together

and to sustain Balinese tradition and culture.

When I was eight years old, music was taught to me in a playful way, interacting with other children in my village’s gamelan. Before I really became involved with playing in a group setting, however, I was a very shy boy. I knew I wanted to play gamelan like other boys, but because of my personality, I did not take the opportunity to become involved with the children community gamelan group. I refused to join, not because I was less musical than other boys, but because rehearsals were situated so that every single person from the village would stand and watch the children learning to play gamelan. Because I excluded myself from the gamelan, I became upset every time there was a rehearsal. I was crying without reasons, refusing to admit that I wanted to play gamelan. After a while, my father figured that my tantrums were because of the gamelan. He talked to the gamelan teacher, Sumadi, and the next day, Sumadi came by my house to invite me to the rehearsal. Despite being a shy boy, I was very happy because I finally got the chance to play music with my friends.

Sumadi sat in front of the *ugal*, the lead metalophone instrument, and used the *ugal* to teach melodic patterns for *gangs*a, the group of metalophone instruments. All of the *gangs*a players would copy what Sumadi showed them. The players were focusing on Sumadi’s *panggul* (mallet), and tried to imitate it perfectly. In this case, Sumadi functions as “a modeler of ideal music whose methods are decidedly anti-analytical” (Bakan 1999: 282). He conveyed musical information to the students and oriented the entire learning process. Everything he taught was “right”: no need to analyze the parts. Students just need to look at him, and to copy what he was doing without questions. This process is called *meguru panggul*, which literally means teaching with mallet. *Meguru panggul* is an orally transmitted musical knowledge from teacher to student; it is based on the teacher’s demonstration of musical parts and the student’s direct imitation of those parts. During gamelan rehearsals, this process of demonstration-imitation is sufficiently repeated by the teacher based on the need of the students.

As Campbell notes, “children as young as three years of age display complex musical components in their spontaneous music” (Campbell in Malloch and Trevarthen, 2009: 482). I remember that in earlier stages of my musical development—when I was four—I always “composed” new songs on the *tingklik*, a 10-key bamboo xylophone, and often tried to make it as difficult as I could. I felt upset when other people were able to learn my tunes with ease. The ability to compose felt innate to me. Like Campbell’s observation, I was able to compose and play simultaneously—moving my hands and body while writing the melody, and based on that first melody, further create interlocking rhythmic patterns. Thus, unconsciously, I understood the complexities of the *kotekan* (interlocking figuration). My



Figure 1. Children Gamelan Rehearsal

method of listening and composing simultaneously mirrors the musical structure of a traditional gamelan piece. Based on my musical ability, I was able to internalize every pattern Sumadi taught, and learned each one in no time. I learned and played it by heart too. However, learning gamelan is not an individual process but a communal one. I cannot just focus on my own playing; it is more important to be aware of the parts other children play in order to be perfectly synchronized. Thus, synchronicity is always a problem for a beginner group. As a children gamelan group, we spent much more time learning to coordinate with each other than learning individual parts. Within the group, mutual assistance and a communal learning process helped us become more synchronized.

Meguru Kuping, The Next Stage of Learning Process

My career as a musician grew rapidly since my first debut in the *gong kebyar* festival—the most prestigious gamelan competition in Bali. It was in 1992, when I was selected as a drummer to represent my village in a festival. Soon after the festival, people began to recognize me, and I became more confident of my musical skill. At that moment, I decided to continue my journey as a gamelan musician.

This path led me to decide to continue my studies at STSI Denpasar (now ISI Denpasar), the Arts Institute of Bali. However, my father insisted that I studied to become a medical doctor; my high school grades were high enough to apply for medical school, and that choice would give me a better future. Despite what I wanted, my father barred me from studying at ISI—he hoped for success in my future and becoming a musician would jeopardize that. At first, I obeyed his wishes. I applied to the medical science program at Udayana University. At the same time, I also secretly applied to the music program at ISI. By the time of the announcement, I found out I was accepted to both programs. Evidently, I was faced with a hard decision—either to be a good son or to follow my own desire. Ini-



Figure 2. The teacher is showing the interlocking figuration parts, and imitated by the student.

tially, I picked the medical science program at Udayana University. However, after attending Udayana for about a week, I began to regret my decision. A question kept coming to my mind: why am I doing this? This is not what I want to study! Bothered by this, I talked to my father and convinced him that I would have a better future if I followed my desire. Therefore, I started my first day at ISI Denpasar, just a day after my father gave me his approval to become a musician. Although studying at Udayana University would be impressive, I chose to study at ISI Denpasar because I believed I would be happier doing what I wanted to do.

There is not much difference between a formal and a non-formal context in learning gamelan. The practical classes are designed so that students are able to experience the traditional ways of learning gamelan. The only difference is that students are examined on their playing technique, ability to memorize musical parts, and synchronization with others—something that has never been done traditionally.

Students also learn music theory and composition. Musical patterns are broken down into smaller sub-patterns in order to understand their constructions. In general, students learned to analyze music and then discuss. Based on my experience, no one at ISI was very good at analyzing or talking about the music. This is because, traditionally, musicians were only taught to learn the music, not to analyze or talk about it—they were trained to become good players, not good music thinkers. Based on this idea, almost all Balinese musicians today have a passive knowledge of music rather than an active one.

However, for me, active listening is the next stage in the learning process. As Emile Jaques Dalcroze states, “... musical education should be entirely based on hearing, or, on the perception of the musical phenomena: the ear gradually accustoming itself to grasp the relation between notes, keys, and chords, and the whole body, by means of



Figure 3. Rehearsal's situation at ISI Denpasar

the special exercise, initiating itself into the appreciation of rhythmic, and agogic nuances of music” (1966: 55). Like Dalcroze’s suggestion, I was able to train my ears to become more sensitive in receiving melodic patterns produced by the teacher’s mallet when hitting the instrument. After deciphering a melodic pattern, I transfer the sound to my brain as I analyze it. Then, the brain signals my hands to play the exact same pattern as played by the teacher. I consider this learning process, called *meguru kuping*, more effective than the *meguru panggul* process, since you gain complete understanding of a pattern’s construction, rather than just imitating it. *Meguru kuping* literally means learning with ears. It is the process of learning a musical pattern first using the sensitivity of the ears, then analysis of it in the brain, and—if the analysis is successful—played instantly by the hands. Unlike *meguru panggul*, the visual aspect of imitating the teacher’s mallet is ignored.

By combining *meguru kuping* and *meguru panggul*, I learned faster, and was able to internalize complicated passages easily. In addition to learning my own musical parts, I became aware of what others play. In other words, these learning processes help me understand the whole construction of the music—a crucial ability for a Balinese gamelan teacher. Whenever someone made a mistake—one that untrained ears would not be able to hear—I was able to instantly detect it with my ears. This is because I knew the correct rhythmic or melodic parts that he (the musician) was supposed to be playing in a particular musical passage.

As I developed these abilities, a member from the village of Subali, located North West of my village, invited me to teach their gamelan ensemble. It was an honor for me to be asked to teach an ensemble even though I was still a teenager. I took the opportunity and started to apply what I learned as a student at ISI Denpasar. My method of teaching was essentially the same to that of other Balinese teachers. Like them, I focused more on the *meguru panggul* pedagogy, and applied the *meguru kuping* at the next stage of the learning process. In 2000, I founded Cenik Wayah, a children’s gamelan ensemble. This group was a reflection of my desire to share the music I learned at ISI. As my teaching style matured, I tried to teach them not



Figure 4. The video of the author gives a gamelan workshop to Western students.

only about the music but also the deeper aspects working behind it. I led them to victory at the Bali Arts Festival in 2005.

I gained more knowledge about my culture through teaching the gamelan. This is because the music—particularly in Balinese society—is attached to the culture. Almost all our ceremonies are not considered to be successful without the accompaniment of the gamelan. In other words, music functions as an integral part of Balinese rituals. As my teaching style developed, I found more opportunities to teach in other villages, even very distant ones. I completed my degree at ISI in 2002. Being the only person holding a music degree in my village, I shouldered a lot of pressure, since I am responsible for preserving, sustaining, and developing my musical culture.

The Combination of The Teaching Styles

The moment that changed my life was when the Canadian group Gita Asmara came to Bali in 2003. Under the direction of Dr. Michael Tenzer, they came to work on a project with my group Cudamani. I had the chance to talk with Michael, and told him my dream of studying abroad, and about my strong desire to improve my English. With luck, in the spring of 2004, I was invited as a visiting teacher to the UBC School of Music. I was very happy as I saw this as a gateway to gain a Master’s Degree.

In 2006, I applied to UBC School of Music for admission to the Master of Arts program in Ethnomusicology. I was a little worried—with my lack in English, I felt that there was little chance for me to be accepted into the program. Fortunately, I was wrong. I used this opportunity to learn more about music from all over the world, and to learn new ways to study classical and contemporary Balinese music. I also continued teaching in two Balinese gamelan ensembles in Vancouver.

I have always looked both inside and outside my culture in order to understand the music I love from different perspectives. I feel it is important for me to continue my education by pursuing a graduate degree. Although I have

worked in Canada for several years as a teacher and a composer, I have never had the opportunity to be a student. This was an exciting and important change of perspective for me.

Studying at UBC is important for me to better understand world music beyond Bali. It helps me meet the challenges of the constantly developing arts in modern Bali. UBC has given me a wider world-view and a better understanding of Bali, both in theory and in practice, in relation to other kinds of music. This inspires and challenges me to learn more about other music as well as their history, society, arts and culture.

When I was here abroad, the first thing that struck me was how differently musicians—here in Vancouver and the Western world in general—learn and play their music. Whereas in my tradition, I learned music orally and by rote, musicians here learn and play by reading the score—this was something special for me. Initially, I thought that musicians here were much smarter. Given a score, they were able to play spontaneously and without rehearsal, giving me the impression that they learned the music faster. Sitting in front of a score, it also looked as if they completely understood the music, something that amazed me as a gamelan musician. However, I felt that something was missing in this particular way of learning and playing. At that time, I did not know what it was.

I noticed that, based on watching this particular way of learning and teaching, as well as playing in an orchestra, there was a lack of synchronization both within and between the musicians. Each player, while learning or playing, paid much attention to the score, but tended to “ignore” other players’ parts. For me, this actually lessened the communal feeling in music making. I also felt that there was little enjoyment when music was played in such a way. While musicians certainly interacted with one another, it seemed that a player had two major goals—to complete the given musical passages and to be synchronized with the conductor. The more I was exposed to this way of learning and playing, the better my understanding of its processes. Because the musicians needed to focus on the score, the conductor, in this case, was responsible for synchronizing the different parts of the orchestra. After learning the way in which people make music here, I learned to appreciate the Western way of learning and playing music that was so different than my own.

In teaching the gamelan to Western students, I had to adapt my teaching method to meet the needs of the students while, at the same time, preserve some traditional aspects of learning the gamelan. I considered applying the two Balinese teaching methods—*meguru panggul* and *meguru kuping*, but they proved to be too difficult to execute for non-Balinese musicians. I needed to find a new style of teaching that also embraced my traditional way of learning and teaching.

In Bali, the gamelan teacher seldom explains the basic music theory, or even what a student is going to learn. This is because nothing needed to be explained, and students—at the early process of learning—will not understand either. As Suzuki states, “the development of ability cannot be accomplished by mere thinking or theorizing, but must be accompanied by action and practice” (1969: 29). Students are asked to sit in front of an instrument and begin first by learning melodic parts, rather than by learning the basic music theory of gamelan. The goal is so that students are able to play as a group under the teacher’s direction, without needing to analyze the music. In other words, practice is more important than theory. The teacher expects that students internalize the music, and be able to analyze it only after they have mastered the music.

However, this process cannot be applied when teaching non-Balinese musicians. As Dalcroze states, “a child should be introduced to study the basic elements of the music before he/she starts to study an instrument” (1966: 47). The students—who are completely unfamiliar with gamelan music—need to know what are they going to learn and, more importantly, how to do it. In particular, they insist on knowing the basic theory and technique before playing the instruments. Therefore, at the beginning of the learning process, I would explain to the students what I was going to teach. While Western musician might find this helpful, Balinese musicians would consider this a waste of time. Thus, it was a difficult habit for me to develop.

In the traditional Balinese rehearsal, the teacher is revered as much as a king—he is always right. Every note he plays is considered to be the “correct” one, and students must obey him. A teacher’s display of anger during a rehearsal is normal, sometimes even expected, since intimidated students usually have more focus, resulting in a smoother rehearsal. When a student makes mistakes, a teacher will go as far as to throw the wooden mallet at him, and even this is completely acceptable. Having this habit, I have to put aside my Balinese “alter-ego” when I am teaching gamelan to Western students. Here the context is different—the teacher-student relationship, as well as the class setting, is different; I have to be patient and to be sure not to be angry whenever students make mistakes.

I discovered four interesting facts while teaching gamelan to Western students. The first one is that for some students, linear order is important in learning music. In other words, I have to start teaching the piece from the beginning; whereas in Bali, it is oftentimes normal that the teacher starts teaching the piece from the middle, or even from the end section. Here, students are confused if I start to teach them from the middle of the piece. Secondly, I must always tell students where the beat is in relation to the melodic line. Without announcing this before I teach the melody or its interlocking figurations, the player becomes lost,

and is usually unable to realign the melody to the beat. Thirdly, I have to tell the students the name of the piece, and what the name means in English at the beginning of the lesson. This is something that a Balinese teacher will never do, and that a student will never ask. If the teacher chooses to announce the name of a piece, he will do so after having finished the piece, and it is never in a student's place to question the teacher such things. Lastly, melodies I teach here are broken down into very small sub-patterns, and the next pattern is not taught until the previous pattern has been learned. Furthermore, students expect a lot of direction from the teacher, and patterns are sometimes learned note-by-note. Because Balinese musicians learn long stretches of the melody at a time, usually with little instruction from the teacher, teaching gamelan to Western students in comparison is very time-consuming.

With all of these new perspectives and conceptions in learning and teaching, combined with my own traditional methods, I have developed my own teaching style; I believe that it is not only suitable for Western students in learning gamelan, but for Balinese students as well. This new method is a middle ground between students of two different backgrounds, native and foreign, which I feel, will be effective in helping them to better understand the music and become more informative. Although skillful players, Balinese students need explanations of the basic concepts of music, rather than just simply playing the instrument without knowing in theory what they are learning. "True musical experience is the experience of trust" (Bakan 1999: 333)—trust between the student and teacher. Whatever teaching method a teacher applies, it will not work without any trust. "It is only when we learn to trust one another, to dissolve in the realization of our shared humanity, will the music finally play" (1999: 333).

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