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## CROSS-CULTURAL PRACTICE IN CREATIVE PERSPECTIVE: NEW ZEALAND COMPOSITIONS FOR CENTRAL JAVANESE GAMELAN INSTRUMENTS

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### Abstract

In July 2013, Wellington-based gamelan group Gamelan Padhang Moncar embarked on a performance/study tour of Java, Indonesia. The group's tour repertoire comprised conventional music from the central Javanese gamelan tradition as well as new compositions by five members of the group, all emergent composers in their twenties. These new gamelan compositions were also performed to audiences "at home" in Wellington, and were subsequently recorded and released on Rattle Records' *Naga* in 2014. Discussing these works provides an excellent opportunity to reflect on current cross-cultural compositional practice in New Zealand, and the creative processes of the composer-members of the group. Because Padhang Moncar performed upon numerous sets of gamelan instruments whilst on tour, each with its own distinct *embat* (tuning schema), this study also provides an opportunity to elucidate the composers' perspectives on the fluid nature of the performances of their works, since melodies and harmonies are subtly transformed by the distinct intervallic structures of each set of gamelan instruments—an exciting aspect of composing for gamelan.

*Keywords:* Central Javanese gamelan; musical composition; musical aesthetics; cross-cultural music; New Zealand composers; Gamelan Padhang Moncar

### I. Introduction

Central Javanese gamelan orchestras are percussion ensembles of gongs, gong chimes, metal xylophones, and hand drums. Other instruments that feature include male and female voice, two-stringed fiddle (*rebab*), bamboo flute (*suling*), wooden xylophone (*gambang*) and plucked zithers (*siter* and *celempung*). Some Western instruments, such as cymbal and snare drum, have recently become incorporated by some central Javanese ensembles. Typically, performers are seated behind their instruments in a cross-legged position (*sila*). Traditional gamelan repertoire maintains musical conventions and forms that give rise to a distinctive sonic character—a cyclic, stratified, multi-tempo

#### Editor's note

Members of the New Zealand Asian Studies Society acknowledge the passing this May of Professor Jack Body (1944-2015) and his enormous and creative contributions to fostering understanding and appreciation of musical cultures of Asia over many decades.



Figure 1. Budi S. Putra: gamelan teacher, singer, and drum (*kendhang*) maestro.  
Photograph courtesy of Gamelan Padhang Moncar.

heterophony quite unlike the typical forms of classical Western art music. For lucid descriptions and discussions of gamelan music and instruments see, for example, Spiller (2008); Pickvance (2005); Sorrell (1990); Sutton (1991); Lindsay (1992).

Gamelan music has a forty year history in Wellington, New Zealand (see e.g. Thomas 1986; Pond and Wolfram 2011; Johnson 2008; Johnson and Moloughney 2006). Gamelan Padhang Moncar is the community gamelan group based at Victoria University of Wellington. The group comprises approximately twenty regular members, receives regular tuition from central Javanese gamelan expert Budi S. Putra (see Fig. 1), and has, until recently, benefitted from the management and creative leadership of the late Jack Body, one of the key figures in promoting Asian music in New Zealand (see Johnson 2014; Shennan *et al.* 2015). The group is now (as of 2015) managed by ethnomusicologist, composer and broadcaster Megan Collins. The word “padhang” refers to *daylight*, or *brightness*; “moncar” (pronounced “mon-char”) to *developing* or *growing*. So together, they can refer to the sunrise (“growing light”)—nodding to the fact that New Zealand, and thus its gamelan, is first to see the new day—or to harmony and growth, reflecting the group’s aspirations.<sup>1</sup>

Padhang Moncar is a regularly active musical ensemble. The group performs frequently in and around Wellington, as well as elsewhere in New Zealand. The group has performed at the 2003 and 2012 Taranaki WOMAD festivals, the 2006 Nelson Arts

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1 See Gamelan Padhang Moncar’s website <[www.gamelan.org.nz/](http://www.gamelan.org.nz/)>.

Festival, the 2011 Auckland International Cultural Festival, the 2013 Voices of Sacred Earth Festival, and the 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, and 2015 ASEAN Southeast Asian Night Markets in Wellington, among many other public festivals/events on the one hand, and countless university, Indonesian embassy, and independent/private functions on the other. The group has provided the gamelan sounds for soundtracks to films *Rubbings from a Live Man* (2008) and *The Hobbit 2: The Desolation of Smaug* (2013).

In addition to Padhang Moncar, there are several other community gamelan groups based in Wellington (and there is much overlap between members). These are Taniwha Jaya (a Balinese Gong Kebyar ensemble, directed by composer Gareth Farr), The First Smile (a Cirebon gamelan ensemble, coordinated by Jennifer Shennan), and Ngripto Raras (an Indonesian community-focused group, directed by Budi S. Putra, that performs on the same instruments as Padhang Moncar).

In July 2013, members of Padhang Moncar embarked on a study/performance tour of Java: through Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Solo, and Malang.<sup>2</sup> The group performed at various festivals, schools, universities, cultural institutions, and concert venues in Java. The centre-piece of the tour, the 18th Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival, has long established itself as a key outlet for new gamelan music.<sup>3</sup> As well as showcasing new compositions performed by local gamelan groups (alongside conventional gamelan music from the central Javanese tradition), the festival regularly attracts guest international groups, fostering a spirit of creativity and cultural exchange.

Padhang Moncar's tour repertoire contained traditional gamelan pieces as well as seven new works by five members of the group—all emerging composers in their twenties, each of New Zealand and/or European background. These works were also performed by Padhang Moncar to audiences "at home" in Wellington, and were subsequently recorded and released by Rattle Records in New Zealand on the album *Naga* (2014) alongside several new compositions for Balinese Gong Kebyar, performed by Taniwha Jaya.<sup>4</sup>

These seven compositions by members of Padhang Moncar—and the composers' creative processes and perspectives—provide an excellent opportunity to reflect on issues and ideas of musical aesthetics, current compositional practice, and cross-cultural collaboration, in a positive cross-cultural perspective. How do the composers (re)conceive of the instruments in their works? What compositional approaches do they

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2 This was the group's fourth Java tour, after tours in 1993-94, 2002 and 2007. Members of Gamelan Taniwha Jaya were also present on this tour (which ended with a week-long stay in Bali), although this article focuses only on the activities of Gamelan Padhang Moncar in order to present a more specific research target.

3 Traditionally, in Java, gamelan orchestras accompany dance, dance-dramas (*wayang orang*) and shadow puppet performances (*wayang kulit*), as well as perform at rituals, celebrations and social events. However, over the last couple of decades, *klenangan* (music concerts held for their own sake) have become increasingly popular in Java, functioning at least in part as an outlet for contemporary Indonesian composers whose new works eschew traditional forms, opting instead for innovative and fresh expressions of creativity and originality.

4 *Tinggal* by Megan Collins, *Padhasapa* by Jason Erskine, *Headrush* by Gareth Farr, *Szunn* by Jack Hooker, *Delirious Euphoria* by Briar Prastiti and *From Shadows* by me.

employ? How can the Indonesian-New Zealand cross-cultural sensibility expressed in these works best be understood? In retrospect, what did the composers think of the performances of these works on the different sets of instruments encountered throughout Java?

Several research methods are utilised for this essay. I eschew the overtly historical angle that much composer-focused research tends to emphasise; this methodology would hardly be fruitful in this case since very little about the target composer-members of Padhang Moncar, let alone their musical approaches, has been published or archived anywhere. Instead, I offer my own *musicological* descriptions of the seven works that form my target sample—the seven new gamelan compositions performed by Padhang Moncar on tour and on the album *Naga*—and my own categorisation of them into a taxonomy of compositional approaches. My research method also incorporates *person-centred ethnography* (Johnson 2008; cf. Sapir 1958, p. 509): in my case, that is, personal communications with the target composers, striving to understand their perspectives and their own creative musical practices, mixed with my own first-hand testimony as one of the five target composer-members of Padhang Moncar. I include extensive quotations from the composers not only to add a personal touch, but to add a voice of first-person authority. It is my belief that this authority is indispensable in research that concerns artistic practice, so I endeavour to keep the individual works and musicians in the limelight throughout. Indeed, biography-oriented research methods inform much recent musicological scholarship (see e.g. Stock 2001; Pekacz 2004; Johnson 2014); here, I follow suit. In my view, one's best attempt at understanding trends in composition is via the practitioners themselves.

In the next section, I pause to provide a brief general background on the target repertoire and composers. The subsequent discussion is divided into two further sections. The first explores the musical compositions and the creative processes of the respective composers. The second offers a case study: I discuss the composers' retrospective thoughts on composing music for performance on various sets of instruments that have distinct *embat* (tuning schemas).<sup>5</sup> No two gamelan-makers tune their instruments alike. While on tour, Padhang Moncar encountered many different sets of instruments, some with significantly different tuning schemas from the Wellington-based instruments on which the compositions were developed and rehearsed. My aim throughout these sections is not to provide a deep analytical or theoretical perspective on composing for gamelan, but rather to lay the foundations for a framework for elucidating cross-cultural artistic practice, by considering a specific sample of it *in action*. In the final section, I draw some conclusions from my analysis.

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5 Ethnomusicologist Marc Bernamou defines *embat* as 'the exact intervallic structure at the microtonal level, of a gamelan tuning or of a musician's personal inner tuning (like a temperament in Western music)' (Bernamou 2010, p. 235).





Figure 2. Members of Gamelan Padhang Moncar with friends in Malang, Java, July 2013. Photograph courtesy of Gamelan Padhang Moncar.

## 2. Background

Five members of Padhang Moncar—Tristan Carter, Jack Hooker, Annika Naschitzki, Briar Prastiti, and me—contributed new compositions to the target repertoire. Carter, Hooker, and Naschitzki contributed one composition each to the repertoire; Prastiti and I contributed two each.<sup>6</sup>

All seven of these compositions were rehearsed prior to the tour using Padhang Moncar's gamelan instruments in Wellington. They were notated using *cipher notation* (rather than typical Western staff notation), a form of musical notation that groups numerals together representing relative pitches and basic rhythm/pulse.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as various members of Padhang Moncar are proficient performers of other instruments, some composers opted to feature violin, accordion or musical saw along with gamelan instruments and vocals. For instance, Prastiti's *De la Noche*, *De la Muerte* combines European folk style vocals, accordion, and violin, with a pared-down, chamber-sized gamelan ensemble. Her *A Clockwork Dancer* on the other hand, combines the two musical scales of the gamelan orchestra, *pelog* scale (a 7-note scale comprising narrow seconds and wide thirds) and *slendro* scale (a 5-note scale, comprising wide seconds and narrow thirds), together with voice, handclapping, violin, and musical saw.

6 An additional work was developed by Jason Erskine but was never performed or recorded, so it is discounted from the discussion herein.

7 Traditionally, gamelan music is learned without the use of musical notation; however cipher notation has now become a familiar method for transcribing traditional gamelan music (both in Indonesia and abroad) for use as an aid to memory (in both rehearsals and performances) and as a scholarly tool.

All five composer-members of Padhang Moncar (myself, Carter, Hooker, Naschitzki, and Prastiti), importantly, are also *gamelan players*. Each of us has been studying the traditional gamelan music of central Java under expert tutor Putra for several years.<sup>8</sup> Thus, as gamelan players, the composer-members of Padhang Moncar approach composing for the gamelan ensemble from within the general context of learning its traditional music, rather than in ignorance of it. I mention this to dispel a common criticism of some cross-cultural musical enterprises, namely ones that go on with, at best, a superficial or naïve understanding of the musical culture (think of crude appropriation of non-Western musical materials by, say, blockbuster film composers in order to give a particular character an “exotic” flair), or with seeming disrespect to the instruments (or “instrument abuse”, see Davies 2003). Whatever ethical, aesthetic, or socio-cultural considerations there may be for and against such cases, I do not think that this kind of complaint can be fairly levelled against the target composers. Of course, though, none would claim to be expert gamelan players—all are enthusiastic *acolytes* of gamelan, sharing in a fascination of gamelan music. Furthermore, senior composer and Asian music scholar Jack Body, who has a sub-oeuvre of successful gamelan and gamelan-inspired compositions as well as a long connection, both artistic and personal, with Indonesia (see Johnson 2014, 2008; Shennan *et al.* 2015), oversaw the rehearsal process of these new works, offering critical feedback to the composers along the way.<sup>9</sup> No composer was creating music in a vacuum—the contributions of Body, Putra, and other members of the group fed back into further developments of the composers’ works-in-progress during rehearsals. Developing the repertoire was a community affair.

At another level, for the target composer-members of Padhang Moncar as *composers*, the process of cross-cultural composition in particular is also a journey of introspection; creative output and personal reflection are closely intertwined. Body captures this well: ‘You can only really understand yourself and your culture by stepping outside and placing yourself in another social and cultural context... I believe musical composition should be the exploration of new worlds of aural sensibility’.<sup>10</sup> The works under discussion in this article take up Body’s challenge.

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8 The exact level of experience depends on the individual composer-member, but as of July 2013, by which time the group was on tour, all of the composers fell within two to nine years of experience (in Padhang Moncar). Three of us (Hooker, Prastiti, myself) had completed university courses in gamelan performance, and two (Carter, myself) had visited Indonesia on musical/cultural study trips before.

9 Following on from a guest lectureship at Akademi Musik Indonesia Yogyakarta in 1976–1977, Body taught composition at Victoria University of Wellington (and then the New Zealand School of Music), from 1980 until his retirement in late 2009, and has been involved with gamelan in Wellington since the 1970s. As an unabashed exponent of cross-cultural musical composition and transcription (see Body 1998), he encouraged his composition students to explore avenues of musical creativity with gamelan instruments, he produced Gamelan Padhang Moncar’s discography—featuring many new works by New Zealand composers—and he was a prolific advocate of new music in Wellington.

10 Jack Body, quoted in Dando 2009, online at <<http://www.listener.co.nz/culture/sing-the-body-electric/>>

### 3. Works and processes: gamelan composition as cross-cultural endeavour

In this section I discuss the target works and examine the compositional approaches of Carter, Hooker, Naschitzki, Prastiti, and myself. This section could be seen as a specific case study in Wellington composition for gamelan more generally—after all, for as long as there has been gamelan in Wellington, local composers have been writing new music for it. Distinguished Wellington composer and music professor, David Farquhar, wrote pieces *Ostinato for Gamelan* and *Palindrome for Gamelan* in 1976 and 1979, respectively. Many other prominent Wellington composers—such as Jack Body, Michael Norris, Garth Farr, and Ross Harris—have composed for gamelan instruments, over the years. A broader history of New Zealand composition for gamelan is covered in Johnson (2008); in this essay, I continue Johnson’s line of research by focusing on a specific, recent sample of composers.

There are a variety of strategies for approaching composition for gamelan. First, the ensemble could be approached “as is”; that is, as it is conventionally conceived in the central Javanese musical tradition. On this compositional approach, the one-octave *balungan* instruments play the main structural melody, while the embellishing instruments (e.g. *bonang*, *gambang*, *gender*) play conventional musical patterns over the top, and the colotomic instruments (e.g. *kenong*, *kempul*, *gong*) punctuate the work’s formal structure. This is reminiscent of some of the compositions by veteran American gamelan composer, Lou Harrison—compositions that conform to a particular conventional structure or invent a new one similar to the established ones.<sup>11</sup> In works such as these, the players perform musical patterns as they would usually, within the context of performing conventional gamelan music; *as if* they were realising a conventional central Javanese gamelan piece from typical cipher notation. Note that this approach is little more than composing an original work that in all other respects seems, more or less, like conventional gamelan music.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of the composer-members of Padhang Moncar opt for this approach. One might suggest that this “pastiche”-style approach to composition discounts the novelty, originality, and contrast that composers of new music typically value. Although composing with more than one cultural audience in mind, the composer-members of Padhang Moncar are not attempting to achieve “Indonesian authenticity” in their own gamelan works. First and foremost, they are generating *new music*, not new Indonesian music. That’s what makes this a trans-cultural enterprise.

So there are at least two guises to Padhang Moncar’s general artistic and creative approach. On the one hand, the members of Padhang Moncar strive to recreate authentic gamelan music in Wellington through the study and performance of central Javanese gamelan music under an expert tutor. On the other hand, the group fosters creativity and originality, not by artificially transplanting new works into an Indonesian idiom, but rather by creating new original music *upon* those Indonesian instruments. The composer-members of the group create Wellington compositions for Javanese

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11 Consider Harrison’s *Lagu Sociseknum*, *Bubaran Robert*, and *Ketawang Wellington*, for instance; see e.g. Harrison 1989; Harrison and Neilson 1981.



gamelan, bringing examples of novel Wellington artistic culture into an Indonesian context, on Indonesian gamelan instruments.

Another possible compositional approach is to politely eschew traditional Javanese musical conventions and treat the instruments as *sound-producing tools*. American composer John Cage's "prepared piano" pieces are an example of this kind of strategy; that is, approaching the piano as a great, curious box with many possibilities for generating novel sounds. The eminent avant-gardist, Karlheinz Stockhausen, explores this approach too in his infamous 1964 composition for tam-tam, *Mikrophonie no. 1*.

This "sound tools" strategy—though not in a manner potentially damaging to any instruments—is taken up in Jack Body's 1989 gamelan composition *So Short the Life*, which, for example, teases unconventional sounds out of the lowest-register metal xylophone (*slenthem*) by requiring the instrument's performer to touch the keys of the instrument at their node and strike them close to the end, rather than at their centre. This technique results in the ringing out of upper partials rather than the typical, low-pitched fundamental note. Such a compositional approach embraces an exploration of the instruments that 'moves beyond traditional cultural practices' (Johnson 2014, p. 231).

I take up this strategy in my composition *Lagu Improvisasi*, a directed improvisational piece for gamelan instruments (both *pelog* and *slendro* scales, simultaneously) and accordion. In this piece, the *kenong* (large gong chime) player *rubs* the instrument's node with slightly damp fingers, rather than striking it with a *tabuh* (beater). Like Body's *slenthem* technique in *So Short the Life*, this *kenong* technique teases an unconventional sound out of the instrument. Throughout this piece's performance, together the accordion, *rebab* (two-string vertical fiddle), and *kenong* provide a drone with intermittent ornamentative flourishes, which grounds the soundscape. My physical gestures (as composer-conductor) shape the density and dynamics, in real-time, of the improvised notes played by the rest of the ensemble. That is, players strike notes as they please, in accordance with the conductor's gestural signals as indicated on the work's graphic score. A specific gestural signal, however, brings all players into synchronicity for single, shimmering cadences along the way.

For me, the idea behind the piece is to add a theatrical "Western role", that of a Western-style conductor, into the context of gamelan. But this conductor does not beat time and direct a realisation of an authoritative, fully-notated, "top-down" work—rather, the conductor brings the sounds of the instruments to life in an improvised, "bottom-up" sense; liberating the music from any imposed, formal structure. The title, *Lagu Improvisasi* hints at a kind of "anti-song".

Carter, in his sparse/minimalist *Naga*, approaches the gamelan ensemble as a kind of *meta-instrument*, with almost all instruments realising a single melodic line (each at their respective octave registers). The exceptions to this are the largest gong (which sounds at particular points through the work's structure), the smaller gong-chime (*bonang*) instruments, which have a short solo feature about a third of the way in, and the high-register metal xylophone instrument (*peking*), which emphasises particular higher-pitched notes in the final section of the piece, letting them ring out. *Naga*'s melody is slow moving and soft—repetitive and cyclic—but with occasional irregular pulses which evoke a sense of asymmetry and instability.

Throughout the course of the piece, its *pelog*-scale melody subtly shifts in terms of perceived “modality”, and it seamlessly transitions between perceived tonal centres. Around this melodic line, improvised dissonances provided by *rebab* and violin attempt to loosen further any sense of fixed modality or tonality perceived by listeners. The result of this approach is a musical experience that is somewhat reminiscent of the micropolyphonic “cloud cluster” pieces associated with composer György Ligeti (and the fluid movement between musical centres achieved in those works), though utilising fewer musical materials: the minimalism and haunting quality of the string melody is reminiscent of the music of *toanga puoro* and traditional Māori song that utilises only a few close-range pitches, both among Carter’s major musical influences.

Naschitzki’s *Volcano Song* is a programmatic piece, also in the *pelog* scale. Naschitzki approaches the instruments as a means to depict volcanic activity—to paint an imagined narrative of an event—in sound. The music begins with a soft, cyclic gamelan pattern (the main melody is original, but over the top a wooden xylophone (*gambang*) plays conventional patterns borrowed from the traditional repertoire), which gradually becomes louder and faster, giving way to interlocking melodic patterns, and sharp, assertive moments of ensemble synchronicity—reminiscent of *gangsaran* (a category of traditional gamelan music in which a single pitch is heavily stressed).

This *programmatic approach* to composition has a rich history in the classical Western art music tradition. For instance, Claude Debussy’s *La Mer* paints a sonic picture of the sea; Richard Strauss’s *Alpine Symphony* tells of the scaling of a mountain; Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* musically narrates a plot of unrequited love, a foray into the hallucinogenic, death, and damnation.

Naschitzki reflects:

My plan was to write something simple, plain and in that sense quite poppy. I felt early on that a concept might help me to find my way through composing. I wanted to find a theme fitting for our tour, so I thought about themes that connect New Zealand with Indonesia. I came to the theme of volcanoes, which resonated with me because of its rich associations. Words like magma, rock and fire drew a picture of a heavy, loud song, which promised to be translated well by the heavy, loud, percussive keys of the gamelan.

Starting slow and light, I thought of the surrounding nature of a volcano and called the first section “Plain”, imagining striding through a sweet summer forest. Next I wanted to up the ante, so in the next section, “Rise”, I added more complexity and increased the pace. I wanted to clearly break the theme and bring on the volcano in the way that it naturally does—loudly, sharp and abruptly. With that in mind, the next section, “Rock”, contains small variations played by the *saron* [mid-register metal xylophones]. Rather than being tough and loud, the next section, “Fire”, is playful and more complex. I wrote a number of variations of “Fire” until I finally felt I had found one that suited the theme and the other parts. (Annika Naschitzki, personal communication 2013)

Prastiti's approach in composing *De la Noche, De la Muerte*—also in *pelog*—is to bring together myriad influences from gamelan and European gypsy folk music in a *song-form* that combines a pared-down, low-end gamelan ensemble with accordion, violin and voice. Two low-register metal xylophone instruments (*demung*) play in an interlocking “hocket” style suggestive of slowed-down *imbal* technique from traditional Javanese gamelan music (but, according to Prastiti, inspired by the interlocking *kotekan* hocket technique of Balinese Gong Kebyar). The resultant melody is grounded by a soft bass line provided by the *slenthem*—which operates much like the bass instrument of a folk band—and is punctuated by gongs. The combination of Western pitches with gamelan pitches is purposefully dissonant in order to create a rough and folky, yet gloomy and uneasy, atmosphere.<sup>12</sup> This sonic character is captured and expressed in the song's original lyrics. The composer says:

*De la Noche, De la Muerte* uses a fairly even blend of Western and gamelan instruments. I was definitely going for a particular sound—haunting, gypsy, folky, serious, poetic, ambiguous. I felt that gamelan, especially the lower registered instruments, could offer a special kind of tone to the piece. The slightly off-balance tuning between the Western and gamelan instruments gave it a somewhat sad and uneasy feeling to it, which I was aiming for. One may notice that the interlocking rhythms used in the *demung* parts are actually typical rhythms used in Balinese Gong Kebyar music, but slowed down. This to me has a really interesting impact because it is taking something that is normally meant to go very fast, but it is very slow instead, becoming very lethargic and depressive, almost frustrating. So in a way I am taking traditional techniques and then distorting them to create a sense of unease. With the Western instruments I was using them mostly as an addition of colour. I don't think the piece is focused more on one or the other (Western or gamelan), but rather, the sounds chosen were meant to work together to create a unique collective texture. (Briar Prastiti, personal communication 2013)

Prastiti's other composition, *A Clockwork Dancer*, is an energetic, episodic and rhythmically-driven piece, in a more open, through-composed form. The music moves from punchy, mechanical rhythms and modal juxtapositions (incorporating both *slendro* and *pelog* scales) to a softer, contemplative soundscape where gamelan instruments provide a lax, shimmering backdrop against which vocals and ornamentative gamelan flourishes come and go.

Prastiti began *A Clockwork Dancer*'s composition by improvising at the instruments, developing key melodic motifs and rhythmic figures, which over the course of a year were further developed in group rehearsals before its final score was produced. She says:

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12 When the tuning of a solo (Western) instrument is purposely different from that of the gamelan instruments, the superimposition of what is effectively two *embat* is reminiscent of that of *pesindhen* (female vocal soloists). A *pesindhen* will often have her own personal vocal *embat* which she superimposes over that of the instruments of the gamelan ensembles that she sings with.



Figure 3. Members of Gamelan Padhang Moncar perform Prastiti's *De la Noche, De la Muerte*. Photograph courtesy of Gamelan Padhang Moncar.

With *A Clockwork Dancer* the compositional process, funnily enough, began on the *gambang* [wooden xylophone]. I often begin writing gamelan pieces through improvisation and performance. I begin without any ideas or initial concept for the piece and just start hammering out rhythms and melodies and patterns until I find something that I like and get absorbed in. The 5/4 - 4/4 rhythm in the piece became a central figure as I began to expand and develop the piece by adding other instruments. I wasn't really thinking about whether my music was "traditional" or "non-traditional" but I am sure that both sides came into the process subconsciously. Just by listening to the piece you can hear how traditional colotomic structural elements are present, or perhaps interlocking patterns on the *bonang* [gong chimes], but I would say that this piece is far more contemporary than traditional. It uses both *pelog* and *slendro*, irregular rhythms, extended techniques, Western instruments (violin and musical saw), experimental vocal techniques, and a shift in beat emphasis (in traditional gamelan music the fourth beat is emphasised whereas, in my piece, it is not). This piece took the longest out of all of my pieces to write—it dragged on over a year or more, with many small changes and additions, many suggestions and feedback from other composers to improve it.

There is one key aspect of this worth emphasising: that Prastiti does not take her approach to be "traditional", but nor does she take it to be "non-traditional". She is writing new music for gamelan instruments that does not link up to any conventional structural forms, but nor does counter the nuances of central Javanese musical sensibility. It utilises repetition, cycles, short structures—all typical musical materials of conventional central Javanese gamelan music. But these materials have been played with: stretched, altered, distorted, juxtaposed against Western musical materials. Her approach—in both of her compositions—thus results in a kind of contemporary "gamelan/chamber-music" style of composing that fuses the musical materials of Indonesia and the West.

The two remaining compositions exemplify the approach of *arrangement as an adjunct to composition*. This approach to composition is championed by Jack Body (see Body 1998). For example, in the second movement of his 1983 composition, *Melodies for Orchestra*, Body utilises a melody from another traditional Indonesian music tradition, that of the Minangkabau people from Western Sumatra. Body passes a transcribed fragment—taken from the repertoire of the *saluang Darek* (a four-holed bamboo flute; see Collins 2002)—from instrument to instrument in the orchestra, under which Body provides a novel ‘orchestral fabric whose purpose is to create coherence and continuity within the work’.<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 4 shows a passage from this work in which the *saluang* tune fragment is passed from flute to clarinet, and back to flute—with harp and cello accompaniment underneath.) Moreover, this is the approach behind Body’s 2007 composition *Polish Folk Dances*, for gamelan instruments, clarinets, and saxophone. The wind instruments carry the folk tunes; the gamelan instruments accompany, providing a harmonic context—but a rather “skewed” version of Western harmony, given the distinct tunings of the gamelan instruments. The following compositions by myself and Hooker follow Body’s lead here.

Hooker’s *Green River* is in two parts: the first half is inspired by a riff from a rock song, reconceived and arranged for gamelan, while the second half is quiet and calm, based on an original cyclic structure provided by *slenthem* and *bonang*, above which a female vocalist (Prastiti) sings Hooker’s original lyrics. The piece is in *slendro*, and is

Figure 4. *Melodies for Orchestra*, bb. 213–215, from Body (1991).

13 From the programme note for *Melodies for Orchestra* (see Body 1991); also, see online <<http://sounz.org.nz/works/show/10415>>



Figure 5. Members of Gamelan Padhang Moncar perform my *Two Transcriptions*. Photograph courtesy of Gamelan Padhang Moncar.

the only piece from this sample that is exclusively so. My *Two Transcriptions* is also in two parts—first, a rather liberal arrangement of Bartók’s “Peasant Song” followed by an arrangement of a 16th century canon, both shifted into *pelog*. The latter section features improvised musical saw, which weaves in and out of the music’s canonic texture.

In both of these compositions, the adopted melodies are transformed by their gamelan application, removed from the Western context and “skewed” by the distinct tuning schemas of gamelan, as per Body’s *Polish Folk Dances*. Hooker shifts his source material into *slendro*, and I shift mine into *pelog*—and with each performance on a different set of instruments, the source material is transformed further (see discussion in following section), an exciting prospect, to be sure. Hooker reflects on his compositional process:

The bulk of the work was written over two full days spent in the gamelan room (about 15-20 hours). For the most part, the work was a product of the so-called “burst of inspiration” style of composing, whereby the piece rapidly comes together with little conscious thought on my part. It’s like the domino effect, i.e. the first melodic fragment I used then sparked a new idea, which then sparked another, until the work is rapidly shaped over the course of a day or two.

I can only think of a few very basic traditional gamelan techniques/devices which consciously entered the piece. For instance, on a really superficial level the *bonang* line is somewhat similar to some traditional



technique (i.e. straight rhythm). The piece doesn't utilize any of the more in-depth gamelan devices (such as *irama* [systems of stratified tempi]). Very little from the traditional repertoire consciously came through.

Apart from the standard instrumentation, the piece also featured vocals (Briar Prastiti) and violin (Tristan Carter) in the second section of the piece. Both of these were partially improvised. Briar and Tristan have both been involved with the gamelan for a number of years. Both are exceptional musicians, composers and improvisers in their own right; I knew from the start that rather than writing out lines for them, the best option was simply to convey the atmosphere I was after, give them a basic framework and let them do their thing. I think it worked out really well. I often think giving the right musicians the freedom to do their own thing leads to the best musical results.

I composed entirely with the gamelan instruments themselves. For reasons I haven't quite figured out I've never been comfortable composing for the ensemble while away from the instruments—even when using a custom sample library of the instruments the results are still disappointing (and disheartening). I set up a nice stereo room microphone facing the gamelan, which was connected to an audio interface/my laptop (running Logic Pro), which I was able to move around the room. Using headphones, I recorded every line as I went and composed from there. For instance, I would record a melodic fragment on the *bonang*, I would loop this line, and then write a *balungan* line over the top, which I would record. Using this technique, I could really hear the piece as it was being composed. Considering the composition method I chose for this piece, this was great as it kept me constantly motivated and sparking new ideas. The downside was, as the work progressed I had to go back and forth re-recording lines. (Jack Hooker, personal communication 2013)

In this section I have described the musical compositions and compositional strategies—and considered some of the composer's own perspectives—of the target repertoire. As outputs of avid gamelan enthusiasts, these works exemplify a positive exploration of cross-cultural music. They are Wellington works for central Javanese instruments, utilising an array of approaches to contemporary gamelan composition: from conceiving of the instruments as “sound tools” or a “meta-instrument”, to using them in a programmatic setting, a song-form/chamber-music setting, or as a means to transcription and arrangement. In the next section I explore the perspectives of the composer-members of Padhang Moncar on the topic of creating music that is transformed every time it is performed on a different set of gamelan instruments—due to the widespread variation in tuning schema—a phenomenon absent from typical Western musical composition experience.

#### 4. Reflections: musical fluidity and creativity

Though the general sound of the *pelog* and *slendro* scales is regulative, no two gamelan makers tune their instruments alike. Not only is there a lack of standardisation externally (i.e. no “A-440” or equivalent), *internal intervals* (*embat*—microtonal intervals between notes within a scale) also vary across sets of gamelan instruments. This means that melodies are not only *transposed* but are *transformed* in performance by the pitch structure of the gamelan set in concert.

Obviously, this has implications for composers working on new musical pieces that are to be performed on various sets of instruments whilst on tour. Padhang Moncar did not travel with their Wellington-based instruments, but performed upon sets of instruments provided by the various venues, each with a distinct tuning schema. Consequently, this study also provides an opportunity to elucidate the composer’s perspectives on this aspect of composing for gamelan: the variation in relative pitch and intervallic structure prevalent across sets of gamelan instruments, and thus the fluid nature of the performances of their works.

Since sets of gamelan instruments have distinct tunings—yet conventional pieces from the traditional repertoire are “played the same” on any set (albeit with regional variation in some cases)—the differences in tunings between ensembles has become an important part of the aesthetics of traditional gamelan music for Indonesian audiences.<sup>14</sup> Benamou quotes the eminent central Javanese gamelan musician, Sukanto: ‘If the *wiledan* [ornamentation/elaboration of the *balungan* (structural melody)] is nice, but the *embat* [tuning schema] and tone are not, it’s not going to do anything for you as a listener’ (Sukanto in Benamou 2010, p. 121; text in square brackets is mine).

Consider an analogy: Western art music aficionados compare aspects of performances beyond the “musical work” performed, for instance, when aesthetically or critically reflecting on their artistic experiences, they might compare distinct interpretations of the same score by different orchestral conductors, or the qualities of the tones of one soloist’s Stradivarius versus another’s Yamaha in different performances of the same composer’s violin concerto.

However, in the case of gamelan tunings, because the melodies of the music are transformed by the tuning schemas of sets of instruments—beyond that usually possible in the context of the classical Western art music canon—evaluation of the tuning schemas is an especially important aspect, and the fluid nature of tuning schemas across gamelan ensembles seems to be deep-seated in Indonesian attitudes towards gamelan. The following passage from McDermott’s classic essay elucidates this:

In 1978, I asked Rahayu Supanggah, then the chief of the gamelan department at ASKI, how tuning was decided upon when the school ordered a new gamelan. At the time the school had perhaps eight or nine gamelans,

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14 For much more on Javanese musical aesthetics see e.g. Benamou (2010).

but one of them was especially respected. Knowing the decision was his and pointing to it, I asked, “Will you have the tuning of the new gamelan match that one?” He looked puzzled, paused, and responded, “No.” I waited for him to expand on this but, as nothing was forthcoming, I continued, “What tuning will it be then?” Again, a pause, and then a single word, “Different.” I said, “Different than the special one? Different than the others?” “Yes,” he replied, “Different.” Now I was becoming shrill, “Different how? In its general pitch height?” “Yes.” “Different in interval gapping?” “Yes, of course.” Thinking my frenzy was giving way to understanding, Supanggah calmly proceeded “You see? Different.” “Different,” I muttered, resigned to agree. This Javanese aesthetic and analytic perspective is built, I believe, upon the renowned tolerance that runs through its culture, socially, philosophically, and artistically. Gamelans, like people, have individual characters with their own distinctive tunings. Replication is seen as unnatural regimentation. Differences are expected, tolerated, and prized... It is all right to be different; and it is unavoidable (McDermott 1986, p. 22).

It is these differences that characterise each distinct set of instruments; they shade each set of instruments with a distinct sonic “colour”. Although very small microtonal differences may not be directly perceived and evaluated, the “colour” of the tuning schemas of different gamelan ensembles certainly is. Musical tension and release, for instance, is not consistent across sets due to the different way distinct pitch-frequencies react with each other. This can be an exciting prospect for composers (and also it can reveal frustrations, too).

My *Lagu Improvisasi* is not melodic, so the tuning schemas of different ensembles merely give a different colour to the improvised cacophony achieved by the piece, and a subtly different pitch to the drone that lasts throughout it. My *Two Transcriptions* on the other hand—and in it, my adoption of external source material—openly embraces the fact that different ensembles have distinct tunings. My approach exploits a Western folk peasant melody and a two-part canon from Western repertoire, with the express intention that that source material will be multiply realised by its performances on different sets of instruments, each time “skewing” the source material differently. Carter’s meta-instrument approach also openly embraces this aspect of gamelan; *Naga*’s slow, repetitive single melodic line gives emphasis to the tuning schema of the instruments being performed upon, while dissonances provided by *rebab* and violin loosen listeners’ perceptions of modality that might emerge from that schema.

Consider the remaining three composers’ perspectives in their own words. Hooker reflects:

The first section of *Green River* is very melodic. The entire first section is constructed around the main melody. I composed using Gamelan Padhang Moncar’s instruments in Wellington. When composing the work I was only thinking about how the work sounded on those instruments, I didn’t take into consideration the variety of tunings we would encounter in Indonesia

(as I had never been and had no experience, I couldn't really comprehend that issue on a practical level). The second section of the piece however is sparser and utilises dissonant note clusters, so the tuning isn't as important.

Thinking back, for the most part (with one major exception) the various *slendro* scale differences were subtle and added a slightly different colour or quality to the sound. The instruments still sounded like *slendro*, and the piece still maintained its tonal quality. In the context of this tour, it was quite exciting to hear the different ensemble's scales.

The tuning which stands out the most was [one of the sets of gamelan instruments in Malang]... The piece still sounded okay, however the tonal/emotive quality of the piece changed completely, and in my opinion, not for the better. (Jack Hooker, personal communication 2013)

Prastiti reflects:

I was a little bit nervous at the prospect of the tunings being completely different because I actually didn't take that into consideration when writing the pieces. They are fairly melodic, especially *De la Noche*, *De la Muerte*. However, I was also very interested in hearing what all of the compositions would sound like on different gamelan sets. I was most concerned about *A Clockwork Dancer* because it uses both *slendro* and *pelog* together. My main worry was that the relationship between the two scales on another set would be *completely* out and different to what I am used to hearing, and that the melodies and harmonies would be terrible! I suppose now that I think about it, when I wrote *A Clockwork Dancer*, there was a lot of focus on harmony—and so when intervals are vastly different, it kind of undermines the initial aesthetic of the piece! However, in Indonesia, I was delightedly surprised by the way our compositions were transformed by the different gamelan sets. (Briar Prastiti, personal communication 2013)

Finally, Naschitzki reflects:

Looking back, we only played *Volcano Song* a few times and on most gamelan it sounded fine and interesting to me. I could certainly tell the difference, but to a certain extent, that was half the point. However, [one of the sets of gamelan instruments in Malang]... had such a different tuning that I felt the piece sounded awful being played on it. The tensions that I had anticipated did not happen, arrangements that I made to form harmonies felt not just like different kinds of harmonies, but they sounded off. In that sense, the variation in pitch can cause me as a composer a bit of worry. That would never keep me from composing for gamelan or from playing in Indonesia though, since most of the times on our tour, the pitch difference was interesting, not awful. (Annika Naschitzki, personal communication 2013)

The challenge that gamelan's non-standardised tuning presents to New Zealand composers, educated in the fixed-pitch tradition of Western music—that is, an openness to new works being transformed in an unknown way—has been taken up by these composers, even though Hooker and Naschitzki both recall a set of instruments with a tuning that did not work for their compositions, in their view (the *embat* of different sets of instruments being an aspect of the gamelan phenomenon ripe for critical/aesthetic evaluation). The composers, however, found the pitch unpredictability a fascinating aspect—“exciting” (Hooker), “interesting” (Naschitzki) and “delightedly surprised” (Prastiti)—of realising their compositions on different instruments from the ones that the pieces were composed and rehearsed on.

## 5. Conclusion

The cross-cultural creation of music within New Zealand academia is a rich, cutting-edge topic which has received little attention from scholars. I hope this article can generate further discussion and analysis. Wellington-based composer-members of Gamelan Padhang Moncar have drawn on central Javanese gamelan, as well as other influences, for inspiration in the creation of their new musical compositions. Moreover, Padhang Moncar contributes to New Zealand's general cultural engagement with Asia. These new works for gamelan instruments contribute to a growing phenomenon, establishing gamelan—in and outside of its conventional/traditional Indonesian context—as a truly trans-cultural musical category. Gamelan music is still Indonesian music. But when non-Indonesian groups play traditional repertoire or new works for gamelan instruments, they are crossing cultural boundaries through artistic practice—bringing a bit of their culture into an Indonesian cultural context and bringing a bit of Indonesian culture into their own cultural context. It is a development of a Wellington music, albeit one that acknowledges its Javanese cultural roots. It is a fostering of musical creativity, originality, and novelty, in conjunction with a promotion of gamelan in an international context: audiences in both New Zealand and Indonesia have experienced these compositions and celebrated the group's cross-cultural musical endeavours.

Composers take various positions along the conception continuum between authenticity and creativity. As has been discussed, gamelan instruments can be used purely as sound sources, or they can be used in line with their traditional/conventional sonic forms and functions. They can be used as a meta-instrument, together delivering a single melody, or they can be used as a vehicle for song-forms, or for transcription and arrangement—or, no doubt, in numerous other ways. The composers discussed above, to varying degrees, look to the musical culture of Indonesian gamelan to inspire and inform their works, as well as to other influences, whether Western art classical, folk, or rock. Nevertheless, they are each inspired, musically, by the gamelan sounds that they hear—sounds that they embrace, replicate, transform and adjust for the purposes of their own original musical creativity—sounds that they encounter in their own study, rehearsal, and performance of traditional gamelan music. The flexible nature of the tuning systems within the gamelan tradition has important implications for composers. Gamelan melodies are not fixed, but are transposed and transformed with every performance on a different set of instruments. That emergent Western composers embrace this exciting and somewhat unpredictable aspect of composing for gamelan is, I hope, particularly striking.

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**Discography**

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**Biographical note**

Anton Killin is a Wellington-based musician and SOUNZ-represented composer. He has been a member of Gamelan Padhang Moncar since February 2005. Anton is PhD candidate and guest lecturer in philosophy at Victoria University of Wellington. His essays have been published in periodicals such as *Biology & Philosophy* and *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.