

The Gong: Harmony in the religion of Java

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For the Javanese, it is the obligation of man to maintain the harmony of reality. This is expressed in the ancient high Javanese language as the virtue of *mamayu hayuning bawono* or “preserving the beauty of the world.” Harmony is the primary pillar of Kejawen, the indigenous mystic religion of Java.

The cyclic properties of Javanese gamelan music and its relationship to the traditional perception of time in Java has been well considered by scholars such as Clifford Geertz, Alton and Judith Becker, Stanley Hoffman and David Goldsworthy, among others. These have illuminated the phenomenon of a musical system that perfectly reflects its culture’s organisation of time into cycles, subdivisions of cycles and concentric cycles rotating simultaneously within each other. Gamelan translates the complex layering and converging of cyclic time structures into a system of music. This system does more than simply point to and describe an idea of time, rather it *is*, in its most fundamental nature, time.

Within this system the gong, as Goldsworthy observes, serves as the harmonising element, whose stroke functions as the time-marker of each musical rotation, ‘bringing all together temporally in harmonious agreement’.¹ This paper expands upon previous findings by demonstrating that the gong can in fact be understood as the ultimate symbol of the paradoxical unity of all things.

Harmony is the balance of opposing tensions. It is worth distinguishing this from the idea of equilibrium, which is the central point of the “beam” held in balance, so to speak. Equilibrium is thus a singularity, the unity of God. The state of harmony is, as it were, a bi-unity. It is what the Christian writer, Nicolas of Cusa, called the

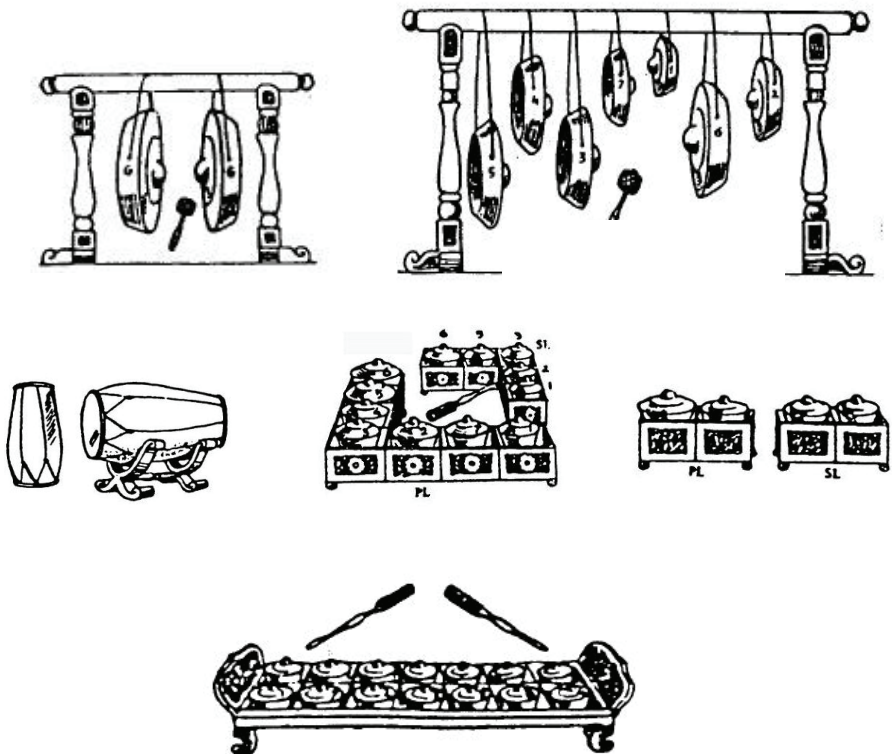
¹ D. Goldsworthy, ‘Cyclic Properties of Indonesian Music,’ *Journal of Musicological Research*, October 2005, p.311.

coincidentia oppositorum, the point of resolution of contraries, of dissolution of duality into Unity. The striving for harmony is present in every element of Javanese life and is elegantly embodied in the music of the gamelan orchestra. The Javanese believe that cosmic harmony can be reached by constantly undertaking to maintain a correct relationship firstly with others in society, secondly with one's own physical and spiritual self and lastly but most importantly, with God. The gong's relationship to the rest of the gamelan orchestra represents each of these levels, thus constituting a comprehensive symbol of harmony. If the instruments of the orchestra and their music symbolise the struggle for harmony, it is the gong which incarnates the point at which these conflicts or dualities meet. The gong is the paradox of stillness within movement.

The principle of cosmic oneness or monism, is at the heart of many of the world's mystical belief systems and Kejawen is no exception. It is necessary and always will be, to use symbols and metaphors to comprehend the paradox of unified Being—that is no-time/no-space, all experience occurring simultaneously, nothing being separate from anything else and all things being one. How we express these inexpressible ideas varies from culture to culture. Theologically speaking, the indigenous Javanese religion had a deity who represented this concept, known as Sang Hyang Tunggal, or the “Divine Oneness.” According to Javanese mythology, the gamelan orchestra originated from one gigantic gong which was created by the god Syang Hang Manikmayu for the purpose of communication with the other gods. As the need for more articulate communication arose, more and more gongs were created in different pitches. Finally the gamelan orchestra as we know it today came into existence, and still serves as a means of communication with divinity.

The Javanese gamelan orchestra consists of mostly bronze percussion instruments, mainly in the form of gongs and special types of xylophones, as well as drums and a few stringed and wind instruments. The gong plays the crucial role of the phrase marker in the music of the gamelan. The *gong ageng*, or big gong, marks the longest phrase of music in a gamelan piece. Sometimes smaller gongs, known as *gong suwukan*, mark the end and simultaneous beginning of each repeated phrase or *gongan* within the piece.

The gong as an expression of a Unified Being or “Divine Oneness,” expresses Java’s unique organisation of time and society. It represents harmony in a number of ways. Firstly, in form: the circle shape symbolises eternity and balance, and its single-material body bears the quality of uniformity. Secondly, in the role that it plays within the music of the gamelan, which symbolises both time and timelessness. The gong’s strike indicates the coincidence of start and end, birth and death, or, as the Indonesians say, *lahir batin*, that is, body and soul. Thirdly, in the actual energy that it creates: a self-perpetuating vibration which produces an undifferentiated and complex dissonance.



Several instruments of the Gamelan Orchestra
Clockwise from top left: *Gong Ageng*, *Kempul*, *Kethuk Kempyang*, *Bonang*,
Kendang, *Kenong* (centre)

The Sacred Circle: Shape and Form as Metaphor

Let us consider the form of the gong itself. Already, without even hearing the sound that it makes, or its presence within a piece of gamelan music, we are presented with the universal symbol of the circle. The oldest, simplest, most accessible of all symbols is here in the bronze body of the gong. The circle is the visual representation of the concept of the continuum of cyclic time. Here we should distinguish time extended for perpetuity from the idea of Eternity, which properly refers to the Timeless.² The continuum of cyclic time is, in the words of Plato, a ‘moving *image* [my italics] of eternity.’³

To talk of the circle is to talk of the centre, which is its origin and principle. The centre “point” is in reality non-spatial, for any spatial representation of a point immediately entails dimension and distinction and hence is no longer a point.⁴ Insomuch as a visual representation of the centre is expressible the spatial point may be employed. Technically this is a circle. The point is the visual symbol of Eternity which “abides in Unity.”⁵ The circle—circumference and centre—is an eloquent symbol of what the Mediaeval Scholastics referred to as *aeveriternity* (or *sempiternity*), that state which participates in the natures of both the continuum of time and Eternity.⁶

The circumference is in turn a “line” comprised in indefinite points, each imagining the centre. All points on the circumference are equidistant from its centre and thus harmonised by reference to it. This feature, unique to the circle, suggests constant and homogenous expansion. The centre of the circle is also a circle so that the form repeats itself endlessly inward and outward, like radiating ripples. The seeming static shape of the circle is in fact constantly in motion, a ‘moving image of eternity.’ In this way, the concept of Eternity is manifested not only in the parameter of the circle but in the dimensions

² See A. Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity: Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings* Vol.1, New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1990, § Eternity and Aeviternity, pp.74-75.

³ Plato, *Timaeus* 37D.

⁴ The only true point is the “metaphysical point.” See K. Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach*, Thames and Hudson, 1976, § 1. The Point of Departure; with respect to our current considerations see also § 8. The Circle and Cosmic Rhythms.

⁵ Tim. 37D; Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.7.4.

⁶ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity*, p.75.

of the circle as well. The spatial image of the circle adequately symbolises the notion of cyclic time which underpins traditional Javanese ways of understanding the universe. Harmony is innate in this form because of its union or balance of beginning and end. The circle form conduces to the expression of this concept because it begins where it ends, and so it embodies both extremes. It contains every extreme opposite and balances them all.

The circle shape also suggests a wheel. The Javanese term, *Cakra Manggilingan*, means the ever-turning wheel or cog, the image used to express the Javanese philosophy of the constant revolving of the life process.⁷ Indeed, daily life in traditional Java is bound to the revolving cycle: farming villages conform to the rotation of the reaping and harvesting seasons; fishermen and sea-farers must observe the cyclical movement of marine conditions. The importance of the cycle of human existence is obvious in the ceremonial patterns which not only feature events such as births, deaths and circumcisions but a considerable amount of anniversary celebrations, marking for example 1000 days since a death or every 35 days following a birth.

The circular gong is suspended from a wooden frame or *gayor* by two ropes. The tension of the two ropes again expresses the principle of balance. The vertical pillars of the *gayor* describe a “doorway,” so that the gong is suspended between two worlds; the world of time and space, and the world of Eternity and Unity. The gong, hanging between them, is the point of union. Whitall Perry describes a similar reading of of the “split gates” of the Balinese northern temple, Meduwe Karang, at Kubutambahan.⁸ These “gates” are iconographically carved on either side, both facing outwards and inwards; however, the opposing faces between the gates are smooth, expressing the state of non-distinction “within” this unity.⁹

⁷ S. S. Negoro, *Kejawen: Javanese Spiritual Teaching*, Surakarta: CV Buana Raya, 200, p.40

⁸ W. N. Perry, *The Widening Breach: Evolutionism in the Mirror of Cosmology*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995.

⁹ On this symbolism see A. Coomaraswamy’s essay, ‘Symplegades’ in *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. R. Lipsey, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977, which offers an extensive bibliography on this subject. See also the related essay in the same volume, ‘*Svayamātmnā: Janua Coeli.*’



The gong itself is made from a single material expressing a sense of homogeneity and self-sufficiency. Crafted from one piece of metal, the gong is undivided in form. Of all the instruments of the gamelan, the gong, fashioned from one single piece of material and generating sound from its own uniformity, is the most self-determining and independent. Yet it is not detached or unconnected to the rest of the gamelan; on the contrary, it is the axis upon which the gamelan turns. Sounding at both the beginning and the end of each revolution of music it is inextricably tied to each and every element of the music.

The process of gong-forging warrants its own treatment. A few comments demand our attention, being relevant to the mysticism of the gong and its importance as a symbol of harmony. Traditionally gong-forging was a sacred art. Indeed, the very first gong-smith was the god Sang Hyang Manikmayu, the Lord of Heaven, son of Sang Hyang Tunggal, the Divine One. According to the mythological origins of the gong, before Java was populated by humans Sang Hjang Manikmayu made a gigantic gong for the purpose of communicating with the other gods. A state of chaos resulted after the gong strokes developed into a fairly complex vocabulary. To make his messages more clear, Sang Hjang made a higher-pitched gong and used the two of them in alternation. This too became complicated, so he fashioned yet a third gong, still higher-pitched. Later, Sang Hjang was reincarnated as the god-king Sri Panduka Maharadja Dewabuddha and in this human form invented a musical art reserved for sacred occasions that would appeal to mortals as well as to the gods. Thus the gamelan was born. This myth illustrates the sacredness of both music and of language for the Javanese. Both are truly divine arts because both emanate directly from God's creative process and parallel creation itself.¹⁰

The task of the gong-smith is elevated to that of a priest. Similar to the role of the blacksmith in other traditions, (for example Hephaestus in Greek history), the Javanese gong-maker is microcosmically creating

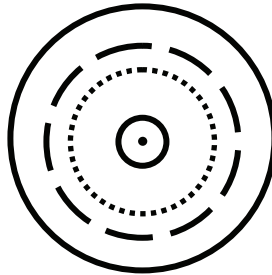
¹⁰ D. Irvine, *Leather Gods and Wooden Heroes: Java's Classical Wayang*, Singapore: Times Editions, 2005, pp.218-219.

the universe and ‘can only flourish under the special patronage of higher powers.’¹¹

Not only does the gong carry with it the mystical significance and sacred geometry that exists within the shape of a circle, but as the axis of a wheel that conveys a constant revolving motion, suspended in the air, simultaneously self-perpetuating and inseparable from the environment around it, the gong is undeniably the perfect microcosm or *jagad cilik*, of the universe, *jagad gede*.



The Javanese sense of self is connected to a belief in the mystical paradox of unity. One’s centre is where all emotions are still and the individualised self is disintegrated. The centre is where God or the unqualified Self resides. In his book, *Religion of Java*, Geertz recalls an account of the following diagram drawn by a Javanese man:



“This,” he said, “is a picture of a man... Where is “*kula* (I/me)”?” That’s what the last solid circle represents, the essence of the self. Fixed and unchanging...”¹²

The picture is also a gong. The outer solid line, representing man’s physical body, is the circumference of the gong. The broken line (emotions and perceptions) and the dotted line (conscious desire) are

¹¹ J. Kunst, *Music in Java*, 3rd ed. E. L. Heins, Martinus Nijhoff, Netherlands: The Hague, 1946, p.137.

¹² C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960, p.315.

either edge of the ridge running around the gong's face, midway between the parameter and the central knob. The inner unbroken line, depicting the unconscious origin of desire, is the outline of the knob and the centre dot is the furthest protrusion of the knob. In this way the form of the gong presents a comprehensive account of the totality of the self.

The single central point, or *kula*, is the Eternal coincident with the Self. Given the multivalent nature of symbolism, this image also represents the self within the community. Given that the self and the community are inextricable linked in a traditional Javanese society, the gong, as a symbol of self, also becomes a symbol of community.

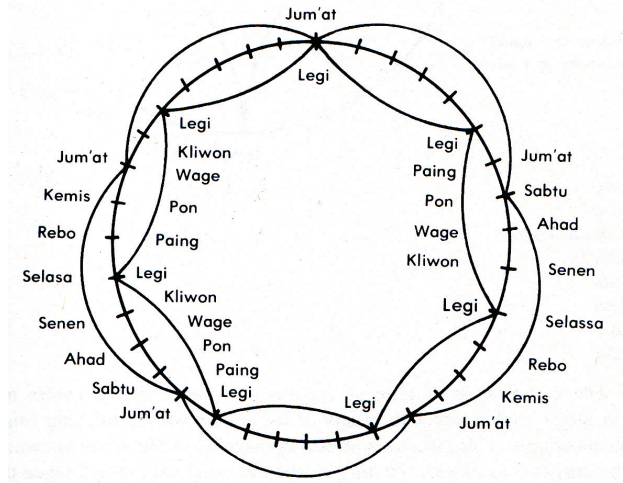
The Gong and the *Gongan*: Function as Metaphor

Like the shape of the gong, the structure of the Javanese song or *gending* is cyclical in nature. The gong punctuates and perpetuates these cycles, its function mirroring its form. It is the timekeeper; it ensures the continuum of the piece. An obvious analogy arises between the relationship of gong and *gongan* (one musical cycle) and that of sun and day. As a day is signalled by the rising and setting of the sun, so each *gongan* begins and ends with the crash of the gong. Similarly the *gongan* expresses the span of a human life; the gong simultaneously indicating birth and death with each strike. These are just two of the countless metaphors applicable to this relationship.

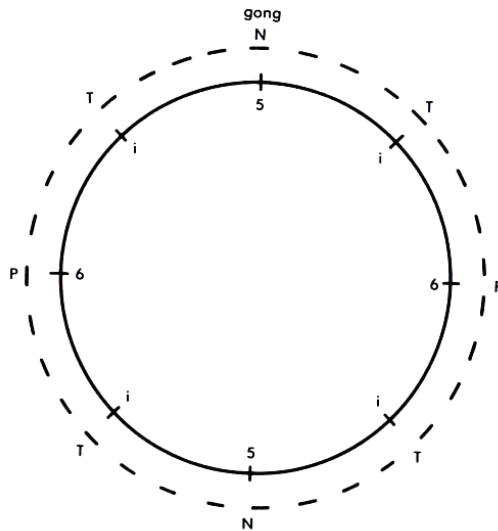
The various calendar systems found in Java clearly convey not only the fundamental significance of cyclic recurrence, but of cycles operating within cycles. In her essay, 'Time and Tune in Java,'¹³ Judith Becker maps the connection between time cycles and musical cycles (see diagrams opposite). As she shows, Javanese time is structured according to concurrent five and seven-day week cycles. These cycles converge every thirty-five days, shown falling on *Jumat Legi*. The numbers five and seven are significant to the two musical modes of the gamelan: *slendro* mode, consisting of five notes and *pelog* mode, consisting of seven notes. The subdivisions of the *gongan*, shown in the second diagram, are the strokes of the other time marking instruments, and the outside broken line represents the beats of the *balungan*, or melodic line. As she illustrates the gong relates to the thirty-fifth day of the calendar.

¹³ J. Becker, 'Time and Tune in Java' in *The Imagination of Reality* ed. A. Becker & A. Yengoyan, Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1979, pp.199, 201.

Miatke: *The Gong*

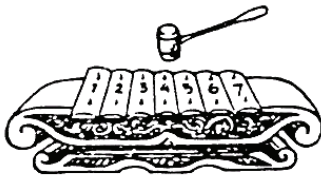


The Javanese organization of time into concurrently running five-day and seven-day week cycles.

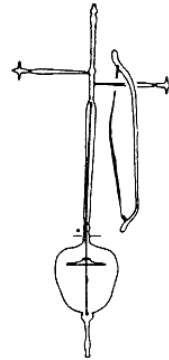


The *Gongan*—one cycle of music which repeats over and over. The musical instruments play their respective melodies at differing speeds but converge at the beginning/end of each cycle, marked by the gong.

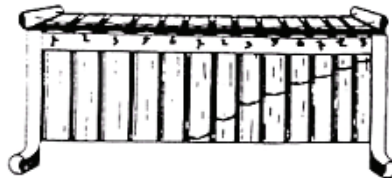
The central melody of a *gending* is infused with exquisitely complex elaborations, rippling configurations of ranging speed and pitch, over and underlapping harmonies, all woven together to create a textural tapestry of sound. A vivid polyphony, now clamorous, now delicate: we are listening to the colour and complexity of life itself. Each new phrase, though based upon the same *balungan* (the “skeleton” of the melodic line), brings us something new. The central melody is invariable but the elaborations, the rhythm, the tempo of the other gamelan instruments around this melody, change constantly. The dramatic clanging of the *saron*, which plays the *balungan*, the agonising restraint of the *rebab* and the playfully convoluted tinkling of the *gender*, each elaborating on the *balungan* and acting as melodic leaders in the ensemble—all these elements merge over and over in endless combinations, creating unique effects and infinite possibilities. Then finally, to the rising tension of the musical phrase, the gong stroke delivers blessed release. Amidst the lively interaction of the various components of the orchestra, the gong conveys union and transcendence.



The *saron*.



The *rebab*.



The *gender*

The time-marking instruments bear little, if any, elaboration and this part of the gong is never malleable or subject to improvisation. Its constancy and stability are crucial to the piece. Its sound does not conduce to elaboration, nor does it need it. Its distinctive timbre demands a dignified solitude which reinforces the quality of unity and oneness that the gong embodies.

For the Javanese, a life starts, returns to the void, and then starts again. The name of the first month is Sura or Rijal, which means “beginning.” Suryo S. Negoro, drawing upon the mystical teachings of the *Priyayi Sepuh*, the “Wise Elders” of Kejawen who are believed to have reached perfection, remarks, ‘Every existence of new human life always begins with Rijal, the light of life created by the mystical power of god.’¹⁴ The last month of the year, Besar or Suwung corresponds with the end of an existence and a returning to the start again: ‘The last is suwung, which means void, the life goes back to where it came from.’ This image of the constantly turning wheel, returning and returning again to the void, as well as the unmoving central axis of that wheel, is exactly the musical role that the gong plays within the gamelan.

As explained, the musical phrases between each strike of the gong are based on a *balungan* (“skeleton”). In this way, the music is related to the human form. The musical parts of the instruments of the gamelan make up the physical organisation of the human body, growing and flourishing around this central skeletal melody, like flesh and blood. The gong is the steady beating heart of the organism, the primordial rhythm of the body, enabling and perpetuating the circulation of the life-giving elements of blood and breath to the rest of the body. The circulatory system of the body, regulated by the beat of the heart is the circulatory nature of the Javanese song, regulated by the beat of the gong. In fact, the practice of what is known as “breath rhythm”¹⁵ is usually employed by the gong player—that is the momentary delay of the strike of the gong at the end of a *gongan*.¹⁶ The aesthetic effect of the delay adds to the suspense and drama of the piece. It emphasises the gong’s ability to suspend time thereby revealing the illusion of time.

¹⁴ Negoro, Kejawen: Javanese Spiritual Teaching, p.47.

¹⁵ Goldsworthy, ‘Cyclic Properties of Indonesian Music,’ p.311.

¹⁶ The start and conclusion of each *gongan* (cycle) is distinct from the start and conclusion of the *gending* (song). This delay acts like a *cæsura*, as these operate in Greek and Latin poetry.

The gong simultaneously establishes time by marking it, and negates time by uniting past, present and future. This contradictory nature of this has been seen as ambiguous. Yet, it is precisely this feature which makes the gong the paradigmatic metaphor for the paradox of reality.

It is interesting to note that while the gong signals the start and end of each *gongan* cycle within a *gending*, it does not begin or conclude the *gending* itself. The *gending* opens with a phrase known as *buka*, usually played on just one or two of the instruments, which then leads to the first striking of the gong, indicating the end of the *buka* and the start of the first cycle of the *gongan*. Similarly, at the conclusion of the song, the final sound is not the gong, but the last note of the *balungan*, struck a moment after the final gong. All of this confers a sense of continuance. The cycle has no beginning or end, but is continuous; the gong is just one point along the cycle. For the purposes of practicality, the song has a beginning and an end, but theoretically it just goes on indefinitely. It is as though the song takes up in the middle of a rotation and leaves off in the same way, unfinished. Unbegetting and unbegotten, if you like. The presence of the gong after the opening and before the conclusion emphasises this continuum or eternally cyclic characteristic manifested in the Javanese *gending*. The gong marks time, but time itself has no boundaries. This view of time is typical of Eastern philosophies and goes a some way in illuminating the differences in Eastern and Western styles of music. Western music tends to express a more linear mentality, conveying movement from A to B, a climax and a resolution, a narrative. This too, in a sense, is a re-establishment of harmony and order, but the underlying value here is progression. In a cycle there is no progression. Each gong is a return, not an advance. Of the multitude of characters within the gamelan, none will “win” or “lose,” but all will defer to the justice of the gong.¹⁷ It is a reminder of the timelessness of Eternity, the illusion of progress and movement, the simultaneousness of all time and space. This notion is at the heart of Javanese mysticism, or Kejawen.



¹⁷ The East/West contrast is an obvious generalisation and this expression of cycles is found in Western music—an obvious example being Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana* with the dramatic *O fortuna* returning periodically to play the part of “Justice.”

The *coincidentia oppositorum* expressed by the gong is starkly highlighted by the dichotomy of movement and rest. The perceived division between movement and rest constitutes the difference between the phenomena of myth and ritual, or between music and dance. Music uses word or language and is thought of as passive; dance is physical and activity. They are both, of course, simply two sides of the one coin. The gong, as a centre, is both movement and rest. It is still, but radiates. The gamelan music, expanding outwards on either side of the gong's strike, is like concentric ripples, radiating from a tranquil centre. The music is multiplicity, life, creation—emanating from a single point within which all things are implicit. The music is the explosion of the Unity, yet the Unity remains intact. Finally then, the music reveals the illusion of an explosion, or disintegration of the centre. 'These gongs possess a sound that grips one through the splendour that emanates from them, spreading an atmosphere of truly lofty restfulness and power,' observes Kunst.¹⁸ Rest permeates movement; the Gong is ubiquitous in the music of the gamelan.



During my time in central Java I had the opportunity to study the *gender* privately with a lecturer from the National Arts Institute, ISI Yogyakarta. Pak Teguh had a wonderful teaching style that consisted of spending half of our sessions instructing me in the practical technique of the *gender*, and the other half imparting the many beautiful and polysemic meanings of the gamelan, posed in the form of graceful metaphors which articulated the essential Javanese view of life and the world. For Pak Teguh the gamelan is analogous to the social system, an idea deeply rooted in the cultural subconscious of every Javanese person. '*Peking dan kendang, sama pentingnya*' he would say. 'The *peking* (the smallest of the glockenspiels) and the drum are of equal importance.' This is not an original observation by Pak Teguh but a natural and immediate association that all Javanese make, subliminally or consciously, that comes from a heightened sensitivity to social harmony. The need for this sensitivity to other elements of the whole in

¹⁸ J. Kunst, *Music in Java*, p.142.

order to create harmony is clearly replicated in the playing of the gamelan.

Java does not have a strict hierarchical caste system, but central to the Kejawen concept of harmony, and the understanding of its preservation, is the wisdom of knowing one's place and one's social obligations. To a certain extent the maintaining of the order of the universe rests upon the fulfilment of social duties and observation of social etiquette. An obvious reflection of this can be seen in the intricate language of Java, basa Jawa. Acknowledged as 'exhibiting the most elaborate use of language levels in the world',¹⁹ the complexity of basa Jawa lies not only in the existence of many levels of language, but in the infinitely complicated and subtle combinations of these levels, which are carefully and skilfully blended depending upon the relationship between the two speakers. This combination of language levels then differs to some extent when any new combination of speakers interacts, reflecting the uniqueness of their particular relationship. This remarkably elaborate system, based upon acknowledging and respecting every person's unique place in society, attests to the importance of social awareness and harmony in Java. The accurate acknowledgement of particular relationships and the skill of appropriate interaction within these relationships, is intricately maintained by correctly combining the levels of language to use. By this harmony is maintained. This skill is highly regarded within Javanese society.²⁰ It is considered a sacred skill to master, as it corresponds to the virtue of *Jumbuhing Kawulo Gusti*—harmonious relationship between servant and God.²¹

¹⁹ L. Berman, *Speaking though the Silence: Narratives, Social Conventions, and Power in Java*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.12.

²⁰ This type of language etiquette is also highly developed in Japanese society.

²¹ This language is strikingly similar to the Islamic imagery of servant and master, or Lover and Beloved. In fact, this imagery existed in Java before the introduction of Islam, as seen in the phrases which originate from the beliefs of Kejawen. Ancient Javanese believed in one god, referred to as Gusti. This word was adapted by both Islam and Christianity to denote the godhead and is used in liturgy and prayer within the practice of both these religions in Java. Ancient Javanese religion and Islam, or more particularly its mystical branch, Sufism, share this mystic feature of characterising the relationship between man and god as that of two reciprocal halves of a whole. This is where the concept of harmonious relationship, on any level, becomes representative of Divine Union.

The moral and philosophical values of a culture are also expressed and reinforced through its creative arts and the gamelan is no exception. Here we find the perfect microcosm of the well-functioning and completely inter-dependant social network. Each instrument performs its role, all equally vital and valued. If the musicians are skilled, they understand and fulfil their obligations, not drudgingly or with any sense of forced duty, but with the joy and dignified grace that comes from knowing and doing one's job well. The success of the gamelan also depends on the skill of the musician to understand the work of his fellow musicians, which accordingly helps him to understand and execute his own. Certain roles allow for creativity and elaboration, others depend on stability and constancy, others again upon initiative and leadership. All however must be aware of and open to changes in tempo and timing and in sudden movement from one section of the composition to another. These changes are not notated or agreed upon prior to the playing of the piece therefore successful transition hinges upon each player's ability to respond accordingly to the movements of his fellows. This is described in Javanese as *pada rasakake* which can be translated as "shared feeling" or "sense of sameness." What is required of the musician here is a sensitivity to his community, essentially, a skill in maintaining harmony at all costs. In this way, playing and listening to the gamelan is considered a kind of practice in spiritual discipline. In refining one's ability to harmonise socially through the music, one refines one's relationship with God. This is how the gamelan and indeed any music can be considered sacred and a powerful form of worship.

If we superimpose the social system onto the gamelan orchestra, the gong is the undisputed king. Gong is the Raja of the Kerajaan, the ultimate authority. An exemplary leader, it is steadfast and wise in its reign. It keeps pace with the flow of social activity but provides solid constitution and an unwavering justice to its subjects. Each striking of the gong is the loving law of the king restoring harmony and reassuring his subjects of his continual and eternal protection.

Each striking of the gong brings with it all the possibilities of the dawn of a new day. And at the same time all the assurance and constancy of the setting sun at the end of the day. We can be sure, that if nothing else remains the same, the gong will call the end to one period of percussive drama and invite the beginning of another. At that moment, whatever has occurred in the previous *gongan* is brought to

balance. The slate is wiped clean, the scales are reset. The gong calls the universe of the gamelan back to order. That primary Javanese virtue of harmony is re-established with each striking of the gong.

Musical Harmony as a metaphor for universal order is not unique to Java. The theory is most well known as postulated by Pythagoras in his work *Harmony of the Spheres*.²² According to this theory, the mathematical ratios to which our physical universe conforms can also be understood musically. Our cosmos is like a musical composition, made up of perfectly proportioned harmonies, the immense and subtle beauty of which is replicated in actual audible music. This ancient Greek theory is strikingly similar to the Kejawen cosmological view. The beauty of the natural universal order is undeniably reproduced in the music of gamelan. But what is unique about the gamelan is that while it certainly relies on these ratios, representative of the ratios of the cosmos, it also requires an irrationality or movement beyond the ratios: the *ganti irama* or transition phase. The music of the gamelan is constructed from ratio-determined elaborations, and one song or *gending* will move constantly between these different ratios. For example, the first phrase or *gongan*, may feature particular instruments playing two strikes to every one of the main melody or *balungan*. Upon a certain signal and a large amount of intuition, the instruments will move into a different ratio (*irama*), maybe four beats per one of the *balungan*, for example. This ratio or *irama* change may occur numerous times throughout a *gending*. The music may move between three or even four different *iramas* within a *gending*, each *irama* with its own name: *irama lancar* (*ratio one*), *irama tanggung* (*ratio two*), and so on. *Irama* is not tempo. Each *irama* has an established density of rhythmic/melodic behaviour with relation to the central melody, specific to each instrument. The timing of transitions are determined by certain instruments, namely the *kendang* or the *rebab*, who give a signal or cue. The smoothness of these transitions depends upon intuition and feeling—it cannot be conveyed by notation or guaranteed by any kind of mathematical approach. Rational thought will take you very close, but only a sheer non-rational intuition or faith can deliver you from one *irama* to the next.

²² See J. Godwin, *The Harmony of the Spheres: The Pythagorean Tradition in Music*.

In this way then, the music represents not only the rational harmony of the cosmos, but also the transcending of the rational cosmos. It relies on supra-rational intuition. Ratio, and by extension rational thought, demands at least two elements or entities. The ratio 1:1, for example, requires that for every one item, there is another one. It necessitates separation or division. Music, as an audio expression of ratio, embodies dualism or pluralism; it represents the manifested cosmos. But a music which switches from ratio to non-ratio, from dualism to monism—in this music is not just the harmony of the physical universe, but also of metaphysical reality. Absolute Oneness transcends the separation of manifestation. It is the source of ultimate Truth. This truth can only be accessed through non-rationality, just as the transition between *iramas* occurs not through calculated formula or applied reasoning, but through instinct. This is analogous to the process of attaining enlightenment in many religions and philosophies. This departure from reasoning and leap of faith thrusts one into the realm of the Absolute. Indeed, the actual experience of sliding from one *irama* into another is nothing less than blissful. There is a split second of something like understanding and connectedness almost beyond the control of one's own physical actions. It is quite joyful and reminiscent of those fleeting moments of extreme stillness which are sought through meditation.

Where then does the gong fit into this profoundly mystical dichotomy of ratio/non-ratio that is present in the gamelan? While the music moves between rationality and irrationality, the gong remains unchanging. Its function is to supervise or uphold the continuity and flow of the music itself. It balances the two extremes. It is neither one nor the other, but both. The harmony that is so precious to the Javanese, that must be acknowledged and even worshipped, is here in the gong. The word harmony then is synonymous with Truth because it is the result of two becoming one. To strike the Gong is to enable the worship of the Divine One. It is to ensure the continuation of the Divine Cycle. It is to acknowledge the eternity of Being.

Primordial Vibration: Sound as Metaphor

Harmony in a musical sense is problematic when applied to the gong. Indeed, the harmonics of the gong, that is, the composition of the sound

it produces, does not conform to a conventional understanding of musical harmony.²³ What we hear when the gong strikes is a compound tone made up of many different notes. Goldsworthy observes, 'The Javanese gong is tonally all inclusive and non-discrete in pitch and rhythm, providing an undifferentiated drone against which the other instruments provide specific melodic and rhythmic direction.'²⁴ On the level of the actual sound produced, the music of the *gongan* is specific and the gong is non-specific. Put another way, the music is the manifested world of separated things, time and space; the gong is undifferentiated all-time and all-space.

The sound of the gong does not fit the classical notion of harmony because the combination of notes which make up its tone are considered dissonant. To be consonant, a tone must contain notes between which are certain intervals. The notes must relate to each other in accordance with a particular ratio, producing a sound that is considered natural and pleasing to hear. We naturally and immediately accept the relationship between the notes of a consonant tone. It is a rational sound. A dissonant tone however, like the gong stroke, is one in which the notes seem unrelated and the effect is unnatural; even unsettling. It is an *irrational* sound. The degree to which we cannot comprehend the relationship between the notes of a dissonant tone directly corresponds to our inability to recognise reality as interconnected and unified. That is, when we perceive things in the world as separate, unrelated and differentiated, it is the same as when we believe a tone to be dissonant. Dissonance then, like the world, is illusory.²⁵ Consider, for example, the possibility of experiencing all

²³ Ethnomusicologist Margaret Kartomi remarked to me of her scepticism regarding the idea of the harmony of the gong due to its discordance with musically contrived harmony. This scepticism, however, overlooks the idea that dissonance is contrary to harmony only in a rational sense and that it is this very discordance which lends the gong its transcendental quality.

²⁴ Goldsworthy, 'Cyclic Properties of Indonesian Music,' p.311.

²⁵ D. Rudhyar, 'Dissonant Harmony—A New Principle of Musical and Social Organization' in *HAMSA Seed Ideas No.1* (1928): 'Absolute dissonance really does not exist. No interval is absolutely dissonant; it is only more or less so. When two tones are sounded, the relation between which cannot be felt by the hearer, a discord is thus produced. We might say to precise the meaning which we give to these basic terms that a consonance is a relation which can be easily reduced to unity; that a dissonance is a relation the terms of which are constantly pulling apart; that a discord is produced by the absence of any perceived relationship between two units.'

thoughts, moments and places at once: the impression is that it would be cacophonous, incomprehensible and even frightening. It would seem impossible to make sense of anything at all because the relationship between any two elements would be unclear. In the same way, a discordant note can seem unpleasant because the relationship between its notes is not one we easily or naturally accept. This phenomenon, termed dissonant harmony by early 20th century American composer and philosopher Dane Rudhyar, characterises the gong's sound. So, for the truly enlightened being, one who recognises the world as pure undifferentiated unity, every single sound would be beautiful harmonious music.

For the unenlightened majority however, a consonant or “natural” harmony sounds pleasant because it appeals to our rational side; it is in accordance with the ratio of the physical universe. Dissonant harmony though has a power beyond physical beauty. It communicates to our profound intuition, the divine or eternal within us—that which is purely non-rational. Physically speaking, the vibrations of dissonant harmony are stronger than that of natural harmony and so the effect is more potent. The gong's sound waves feature this kind of vibration. They are jagged and random. The vibration pattern is not a regular, rational waveform and thus creates an energy which seems to rejuvenate itself for a long period of time, rather than burning up and dying out like natural harmonic sound energy.

Gong jumeplug mandul-mandul
Gumulung obaking wareh.

The sound of the gong, beaten heavily,
Rolls on its ponderous beats like the ocean tide.²⁶

The lasting vibration of the gong creates a rhythm of its own. It is the same primordial vibration, that very first movement which, according to various creation myths, brings the world into being. Rudhyar explains: ‘Sound is, in ancient religions and cosmologies, the divine

²⁶ J. Kunst, *Music in Java*, p.141.

creative power, the energy inherent in the creative Word, the Logos.²⁷ That sound, within which all of creation is innate, is the omni-tonal vibration of the gong. It is also this sound that has traditionally been used in meditation and healing techniques because of this creative, rejuvenating quality and its ability to restore physical harmony and balance from a divine source.

To understand dissonant harmony is to transcend the rational material world and access the truth and healing power of the Divine realm. The gong possesses cyclical rejuvenation not only symbolically but at the level of physics as well. It is quite literally an instrument of perpetual or immortal energy. In this sense, it is as close to infinity as a finite object may get.

²⁷ D. Rudhyar, 'Descending and Ascending Musical Progressions' in *The Magic of Tone and the Art of Music*, London: Shambhala Publications, 1982. p.48.