

All-State: Java Beat

by Beth Becker

Where was I? Exotic bronze percussion instruments in ornate teakwood frames filled the stage. Twelve xylophone and marimba-like instruments of varying sizes comprised the first two rows, while large bronze pots cradled in three elaborate frames the size of twin beds lined one side. Four conga-like drums were arranged carefully in the center and behind them and on an arch adorned by a fierce dragon, hung six huge gongs. Thirteen barefoot musicians sat quietly on reed mats waiting for the performance to begin.

Gamelan. What did it mean? Where was this music from? Wasn't this the type of ensemble that so impressed Debussy at the 1889 Worlds' Fair that he created music which we now call impressionistic? Attending a performance by the Schubert Club Gamelan Ensemble at St. Cloud University on August 10th generated a lot of questions and inspired me to search for some of the answers.

A gamelan is an Indonesian orchestra of mostly percussion instruments that are built and tuned as one unit. Ensembles are either Javanese (the

Schubert Club group) or Balinese (which inspired Debussy) and usually consist of instruments with blades and gongs, drums, cymbals, recorders and a stringed instrument called the rebab.

Joko Sutrisno, drummer and the leader of the Schubert Club group, explained the organization of the ensemble. Each instrument has a set pattern that is intricately connected to the other instruments. Patterns can be varied slightly and individualized by musicians but must always fit into the greater fabric of the ensemble. Patterns vary considerably by instrument. Some are quite slow and only five notes long while others are elaborate and up to four times as fast. There is no baton-waving conductor; rather the drummer signals changes of tempo and ends of sections through various cues on the kendang, which are reinforced by the gongs.

The number of repetitions and cycles that are played is very flexible. Joko explained that he is often asked how long a piece will last. "How long do you want it to last?" is his standard reply. Gamelan performances are much less formal than the concert hall etiquette

of western music. The audience is free to come and go during a performance. The music often accompanies dancers or serves as a backdrop to the wayang kulit (shadow puppet) show and can last several hours or all night.

The best way to understand gamelan music, though, is to open your ears and your mind and to just listen. Soon the hall was filled with the bright pings of the metal and wooden xylophones (saron and gembang), the elaborate patterns of the marimba (slentem gender), the steady pulse of the kettles (bonang), and the deep bong of the kempul and kenong gongs. Some musicians stared intently at the metal in front of them while others closed their eyes and only rarely glanced at another musician; yet the music ebbed and flowed as one instrument and the ancient spirit of the gamelan came alive.

(Thanks to Margaret Schmidt, member of the St. Cloud Gamelan Ensemble, for assistance with this article.)

Beth Becker teaches in La Crosse WI and participated in the All-State Teachers Workshop in St. Cloud. †