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# BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND THE BALINESE GAMELAN

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Indonesian gamelan music has had a fairly widespread influence on the music of twentieth-century Western composers, ever since Debussy made his pioneering attempt to evoke the atmosphere of the Javanese gamelan he had witnessed at the famous Paris Exposition in 1889. Debussy's musical imagination was captured not only by the gamelan's haunting sonorities (which must have sounded much more exotic to a late nineteenth-century Western audience than to today's more cosmopolitan and eclectic musicians), but also by the astonishing range of structures and atmospheres which could be accomplished with musical scales containing as few as five different notes. Debussy skilfully incorporated gamelan effects into his piano writing, and the idea was quickly adopted by his younger contemporary Ravel, whose genius for orchestration allowed him to refer convincingly to gamelan sonorities by using only the normal instrumental resources of a Western orchestra. The gamelan continued to influence later French composers. Francis Poulenc borrowed from Balinese music in his *Concerto for two pianos* (written after the appearance of a Balinese gamelan at another Paris Exposition during the 1930s), and more recently Messiaen's music has combined gamelan-inspired sonorities with complex tonal procedures far removed from Indonesian scale systems.

In spite of the prominent gamelan influence on French music, perhaps the most thorough and consistent use of Indonesian musical material in a Western compositional idiom is to be seen in the work of an English composer: Benjamin Britten (1913-76). Two features of Britten's lifelong interest in Balinese music make his achievements unique amongst those Western composers who have been influenced by the gamelan. Firstly, he spent some time researching and analysing Balinese music, which allowed him to reconstruct gamelan sonorities and procedures in his own compositions with an unusual attention to authentic details. Secondly, however, he went beyond this technical accomplishment by putting ideas borrowed from Bali to much more creative and idiosyncratic use where this seemed appropriate.

Britten first encountered Balinese music at second-hand, long before he was able to visit Indonesia for himself. While staying in the United States during the second World War, he met and befriended Colin McPhee, a Canadian ethnomusicologist and composer who had recently returned to the USA from Bali. McPhee had spent several years investigating Balinese music, and his own compositions had begun to incorporate elements borrowed from the gamelan. He had also arranged for two pianos some of the gamelan material he had transcribed during his stay on the island. These arrangements, entitled *Balinese ceremonial music*, were performed by Britten and McPhee several times in the USA, and the two men recorded them on a set of 78rpm discs in 1941. When Britten returned to England, he gave McPhee's transcriptions their first English performance at the Wigmore Hall in 1944. Even at this early date, there is evidence to suggest that Britten was putting some of this Balinese material to his own use. His famous opera *Peter Grimes* (1945) contains an interlude entitled "Sunday morning" in which the sounds of chiming Suffolk church bells are in fact directly borrowed from a McPhee gamelan transcription entitled *Taboeh teloe*. In several other pieces composed at this time, Britten borrowed Balinese pentatonic scales and used them as compositional raw material. He also began to show an interest in the possibilities of heterophony, a feature of much South-East Asian

music in which different versions of essentially the same melody are presented in simultaneous combination.

Britten's early but tentative interest in Balinese music surfaced with renewed vigour when he had the opportunity to visit Bali for himself during a worldwide concert tour in 1956. He spent two weeks touring the southern part of the island, spending most time in the central town of Ubud and being escorted by a Dutch musicologist named Bernard Ijzendraat who had played for a time in the famous *gamelan kebiar* at the village of Peliatan. This particular gamelan had toured the West in 1952 under the entrepreneur John Coast, and Britten owned copies of the two gramophone recordings they had produced during their tour. Britten could now visit Peliatan for himself and hear their gamelan in live performance. The composer was accompanied on his travels in Asia by Prince Ludwig of Hesse, who kept a detailed travel diary in German which offers many intriguing insights into Britten's growing appreciation of Indonesian culture. Britten's understanding of the structural basis of gamelan music is evident from his very first experience of the gamelan in live performance, which took place in Java on 9 January 1956. Prince Ludwig relates in his diary how Britten could distinguish aurally between the melodic basis of a composition and the improvised decorations added by the performers, and he goes on to describe how the composer caused some amusement by correctly singing out to the players the scale on which their piece was based.

Britten saw a wide selection of Balinese dances during his fortnight's stay on the island, including the *rejang*, *joged*, *legong*, and *baris*. He also encountered the *barong* (taking a miniature model of one back to England with him), and found time to see the *wayang kulit* in addition to making tourist excursions to Klungkung, Selat, and — inevitably — Sanur and Kuta beaches. Britten clearly took an active interest in the techniques of the gamelan music he heard during his stay on the island since he compiled four sheets of musical sketches from various live performances. These sketches are accurately labelled, and show that Britten was well acquainted with Balinese musical terminology. He also went to the trouble of having an entire gamelan from Ubud transported down to a recording studio in the capital Denpasar, just so that he could have a tape recording made of pieces which particularly appealed to him. A few years ago I was lucky enough to unearth these tape recordings in the Britten Archive at Aldeburgh: they had been sent to England by diplomatic mailbag shortly after the end of the composer's world tour, and the covering note from Bernard Ijzendraat revealed that they had been made under the auspices of Radio Indonesia.

The fruits of Britten's Balinese visit were to be seen when the composer arrived back in England in the spring of 1956 and set about completing the score of his ballet *The prince of the pagodas*, which he had left unfinished and very much behind schedule before embarking on the world tour. Britten now decided to incorporate into the second act of the ballet some of the material he had brought back with him from Bali. This was dramatically appropriate, since the act is concerned with the allure of the strange and exotic Pagodaland for a kidnapped princess. To accompany the princess's adventures, Britten composed a brilliantly effective pastiche of Balinese gamelan music using only conventional Western percussion instruments such as vibraphone, celesta, xylophone, piano, and gong. The themes he used were borrowed from his gramophone recordings of the Peliatan gamelan, and also from the sketches he had jotted down for himself in Bali.

During the 1960s Britten pursued his equally strong interest in Japanese music, and both the No theatre and Gagaku (court music) influenced his operatic output from 1964 onwards. He also had a brief flirtation with Indian music at this time. Towards the end of his life, however, he turned once again to the Balinese gamelan. One interesting project, which never materialised, was a commission to compose a score for a film version of Shakespeare's *The tempest* which was to have been shot on location in Bali. There can be little doubt that Britten would have provided music in an appropriately Indonesian idiom,

but unfortunately he was too ill to undertake the commission. The most important of Britten's later gamelan-inspired works was his last opera *Death in Venice*, composed in 1972. Here, as it had in *The prince of the pagodas*, the gamelan represents an exotic attraction — this time the allure held over the ageing writer Gustav von Aschenbach by the beautiful but remote Polish boy Tadzio. When Tadzio and his friends play on the beach, they do so to the accompaniment of music which strongly recalls the gamelan sections of *The prince of the pagodas*, but which is no longer based on specific Balinese models. The choice of gamelan sonorities to represent a group of adolescent boys probably had its origins in one of Britten's experiences on Bali in 1956, when he had been particularly impressed by a gamelan entirely made up of boys aged around fourteen. The composer reinvestigated his 1956 sketches in 1972, and he drew up a check-list of all the gamelan-inspired effects he had used in *The prince of the pagodas* to help him with his work on the new opera.

In *Death in Venice* Britten's use of Balinese material progresses much further than the relatively straightforward gamelan pastiche he had accomplished in the earlier ballet. Balinese scales are now a symbolic compositional resource which are modified and developed in a highly intellectual scheme of musico-dramatic representation. The young boy Tadzio is represented by his own Balinese scale (which Britten borrowed from his 1956 gamelan sketches), and this scale is increasingly distorted to represent the growing corruption surrounding him. At the same time, Britten's continuing interest in the sonorities of the gamelan is reflected in the music he composed for the opera's beach games, which employs a wide variety of tuned percussion instruments and directly recalls the "gamelan" scoring of *The prince of the pagodas*.

The creative and often subtle use of Balinese material in *Death in Venice* is an artistically satisfying conclusion to the composer's involvement with Indonesian music for more than thirty years, a period during which the gamelan influence profoundly affected his compositional style and resulted in perhaps the most intriguing cross-cultural synthesis in twentieth-century Western music.

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