

WHAT IS GAMELAN?

Have you ever played the GAMELAN? Do you know what a GAMELAN is?

The gamelan is an ensemble of forged bronze percussion instruments, comprising a variety of metallophones, chimes and gongs, and forming the basis of most of the traditional music of Java, Bali and other parts of Indonesia. Its popularity has spread rapidly in this country, where there are some fifty sets of these instruments dotted around the country. Some are based in cultural centres and universities, others in schools or county music centres. Many are available for the members of the public to come and learn to play. I have played Javanese gamelan for some 20 years now, and have found it one of the most exciting forms of music-making around.

Here is some of the feedback I have received over the years from my gamelan students:

"wonderful ... for those of us who were Quakers to make a big noise on Sunday morning for a change!!"

"Great instruments and sounds... Lovely to play a complex piece... We all had to concentrate like mad!"

"the feeling of working and achieving together as a group"

"What I took away from the morning's work was a very specific sense of well-being."

"My aural memory has improved tremendously ... as has my listening ability."

Thus, playing gamelan enables groups of people to *work together, concentrate like mad, play a complex piece, make a big noise*, experience *great sounds*, improve their *memory and listening*, and leave with a *sense of well-being*. These are more or less the impressions one should gain from playing any kind of music. Why then is gamelan special?

Firstly, Javanese gamelan is conceived and structured vocally, and learnt through singing. This is, I feel, just what our increasingly songless society needs. Live communal music-making should be one of the most important ways in which society functions. In pre-industrial societies all over the world it still is. However, in this country, fewer and fewer families take the time to sing together, and in our schools music is often relegated to the bottom of the list of priorities. Increasingly our children grow up unchallenged to develop that intuitive sense of musicality which is their birthright.

Good music-making depends on inner musicality. The automatic translation of notation-to-fingerings is its antithesis. And musicality depends on our learning to listen to ourselves and each other as we play. Two things can help us. One is an absence of mind-clogging visual information; thus, listening can be helped by using not written notation but "aural notation" (i.e. singing) instead. The other is to feel music acting on us personally and physically, which is precisely what singing does. Thus singing is *the* key to developing our children's seed of musicality. The Javanese word for melody also means song. The instrumental sounds we hear on the gamelan are but arrangements based on melodic ideas sung by musicians "in their hearts". The gamelan player *sings* in order to play, and also *listens* in order to play, because whatever is played is dependent on all the other players in the ensemble. Thus gamelan is an ideal way to develop the practical multiple-aural skills which are so essential to any music-making.

In learning Javanese gamelan, the "boring" aspects of learning music, such as exercises, etudes, even beginners' pieces are not needed, because many of the greatest pieces in the repertoire are sufficiently technically simple to serve these purposes. Beginners, children and adults alike, are immediately plunged into the world of real, *living classics*.

The instruments of the Javanese gamelan cover a wide range of technical difficulty, and success at gamelan depends far more on inner musicality than on technical prowess. One starts with the simple instruments and moves on to the more difficult when one is ready. Thus Javanese music is ideally suited to mixed-ability, even mixed-age groups. The most gifted players need not be held back, and the slowest need not feel out of their depth. The divisions between "fast learners" and "slow learners", or between the "musical" and the "non-musical", become irrelevant. Gamelan musicianship develops only with slow, patient learning, in an ensemble setting. The Javanese aesthetic contradicts the individualist, achievement-oriented, assessment-obsessed predilections of our society. Gamelan players learn together. The good player is the one who can fit comfortably and co-operatively into an ensemble.

Gamelan is also incredibly beautiful. It overturns our expectations of what percussion sounds like. Children especially, and those with learning difficulties, who may not yet have the technique to produce beauty out of, say, a violin, should not be allowed to make do with the artificial, lifeless, one-dimensional sounds of many so-called "classroom" instruments. The sounds of the gamelan are real and richly complex, which is just what any learner of music deserves.

One of the privileges of living in a fragmented and de-musicalised society is that the world is genuinely our oyster, and we should explore it without prejudice. Learning gamelan can teach us to re-assess many of the presumptions which we are handed down by our musical sub-culture. It can enrich *all* our music-making. It is not just "world music", or a politically correct gesture. Give it a try!

If you need help finding your nearest gamelan, e-mail me on nikhil@dally.org.uk. Or have a look at my website, www.dally.org.uk/gamelan.

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