

In 1977, during a rebab lesson at Wesleyan University, my teacher, R.M. Soekanto S. Darsono (a wonderfully articulate court musician from Surakarta) told me that he did not think the sound of the rebab was 'melody' but was 'rasa' (feeling).

Kodály, Kinaesthetics and Karawitan: towards a paedagogy of Javanese gamelan in the West

Wayne Forrest reviews Nikhil Dally's recent paper

Attempting to teach 'feeling' in music may be the most difficult task of all and, coupled with teaching the music of another culture, anyone who really makes a serious effort to do so should have our warmest admiration. In 'Kodály, Kinaesthetics and Karawitan: towards a paedagogy of Javanese gamelan in the West', Nikhil Dally, an experienced gamelan teacher for the South Bank Centre and Berkshire Maestros, and a member of the South Bank Gamelan Players, tackles some very large and important questions about teaching music within a cross-cultural context that are often bypassed in our 'get it done now' culture.

If gamelan were merely a percussion ensemble, convenient for teaching people with little musical training, as it is sometimes miscast, I suspect he would have had little motivation to leap into such a difficult topic. But for those who have studied with a Javanese teacher, or experienced the power and majesty of a gamelan in its natural context, the 'collective voice' of these gongs and metallophones is also a pathway to greater spiritual and cultural awareness. What Dally has to say will be of interest to anyone involved with cross-cultural education of any kind, not just the gamelan teaching community.

From a Western musical perspective, Javanese gamelan is vocally-inspired modal polyphony and to teach it through the inspiration of Zoltán Kodály's vocal pedagogy (and to some extent the eurhythmics of Jacques Dalcroze) rather than the instrumental pedagogy of Carl Orff (who modelled his instruments after a gamelan) is not only brilliant but culturally and musically sensitive. The Javanese have their own rich musical terminology (*cengkok, wiletan, pathet, lagu, padang-ulihan, balungan* etc)

and these concepts are not simple to present to students. But Dally makes a strong case for Kodály as a pathway in.

But whether or not non-Javanese teachers of gamelan will follow Dally's methods directly may be less important than grasping his main insights: gamelan is vocal, gamelan is spiritual, and a combination of osmosis and direct teaching methods, with minimal use of notation, works best. Coupled with his strong ethical obligation that Javanese gamelan not be expropriated for some other purpose outside the country, Dally shows us (with many examples) a sensitive way to teach it.

In 1975 when I lived in Solo I asked the great gambang player of the time, Warsomloyo, for a lesson and I was astonished when he responded,

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'Why me? I can't read notation'. His embarrassment taught me more than he could have known. Anyone teaching gamelan has to be aware of the paradox that the best musicians in Java play from memory and from cues inherent in the music. The two big things I liked immediately about Dally's paper are: first, his flat out sense that gamelan is inherently a multi-tasking, vocal ensemble (hence his ubiquitous use of singing and hand signals in his lessons) and second, that if you are going to teach it in the West, you must try to make it a transformational experience for your students. Dally writes, 'The most important thing is not just that "we teach gamelan", for gamelan is but a path on a far greater journey.' How true, but how often ignored in an impatient society.

In making his essential points Dally takes us on a wonderful tour of Western civilization and teaching philosophies with many references to ethnomusicological tomes, pedagogical literature and interviews with Indonesian and non-Indonesian gamelan teachers. Although he may be guilty of oversimplifying comparisons between East and West (even Dally suspects this), I still found it useful to read his comparative analysis and would imagine that university or advanced secondary students would also benefit from a close reading of the paper, perhaps in smaller doses.

I once thought that only Javanese should hold gamelan teaching positions outside Indonesia, feeling that Westerners would naturally cut corners and remove elements of the cross-cultural experience under the influence of the eagerness of their students or employers. Dally's paper renews my faith that it is possible for the Western gamelan teacher to be both music instructor and cultural 'therapist'. If you are seeking practical and detailed suggestions on how to bring your teaching of gamelan to a higher consciousness, you need to read this paper. ■

Nikhil Dally's paper is available to download at
www.dally.org.uk/kkk.pdf

Wayne Forrest began studying gamelan in 1970 with Javanese master musicians, Prawoto, Sumarsam, R.M. Soekanto Darsono, I.M. Harjito and Ki Warsitodiningrat in the USA, and went on to study in Surakarta with the principal court and radio station musicians, Warsomloyo, Martopangrawit, Turahyo, and Wahyupangrawit.