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# Bentuk Basics

Abridged from an article by Daniel March

In discussion of central-Javanese gamelan music, the word *bentuk* is usually translated as ‘form’. However this term can create some confusion, as the features to which it refers are distinct from what is usually understood by form within Western music.

While particular gamelan forms may be characterised by a number of features, including types of melodic line and specific mood, the most important factor in determining *bentuk* is the colotomic structure (the position of the various punctuating instruments, kempul, kenong and kethuk) and the length of a *gongan*. A number of shorter *bentuk* have specific names, whereas larger structures use the general term for a gamelan composition, *gendhing*.

For those brought up on Western music, the perception of the various structures seems to fall into two types: a clearly rhythmic pattern, and an overall sense of scale and balance. Such a distinction is somewhat arbitrary, but may be helpful in forming a sense of the various patterns involved.

## Lancaran

The *lancaran* form is the most familiar of the first type, as the tempo is relatively fast, and strokes on the punctuating instruments occur quite frequently. The *balungan* may either involve a rest between each note or consist of a continuous stream of notes. In both cases each *gongan* is made up of four *kenongan*. The *gongan* is usually marked by the smaller gong *suwukan*, with the gong *ageng* reserved for ends of sections and whole pieces.



In *irama wiled* (and *rangkep*) the *balungan* may be expanded, but the same principle of four kenong, three kempul and eight kethuk still applies.

### Ladrang Pangkur slendro manyura

#### First two kenongan - irama tanggung/dados

3̄ 2̄<sup>+</sup> 3̄ 1̄    3̄ 2̄<sup>+</sup> 1̄ 6̄    1̄ 6̄<sup>+</sup> 3̄ 2̄<sup>~</sup>    5̄ 3̄<sup>+</sup> 2̄ 1̄<sup>^</sup>

#### Irama wiled

·    · 3̄ · 2̄<sup>+</sup>    · 3̄ · 1̄<sup>~</sup>    · 3̄ · 2̄<sup>+</sup>    · 1̄ · 6̄<sup>^</sup>  
 1̄ 1̄ · ·    6̄ 6̄ 1̄ 2̄    3̄ 2̄ 6̄ 3̄<sup>+</sup>    · 2̄ · 1̄

Due to their wider spacing, it becomes more difficult to hear the kenong and kempul as a distinct rhythm; instead, they punctuate a much slower melodic motion, and it is this lack of a rhythmic profile that can cause a player literally to become ‘lost’.

### Ketawang

The ketawang is marked by having only two *kenongan* per *gongan*, and its structure is basically half of a *ladrang*. Both *ladrang* and *ketawang* usually consist of a number of *gongan*, and often fall into two sections, the first of which (the *ompak*) may be repeated, while the second (the *ngelik*) often includes a *gerongan* (or sung chorus).

#### Ketawang form

· ·<sup>+</sup> · ·    · ·<sup>+</sup> · 6̄    · ·<sup>+</sup> · 2̄<sup>~</sup>    · ·<sup>+</sup> · 1̄<sup>⊙</sup>

### Larger gendhing

The larger pieces fall into a number of structural types. These *gendhing* mostly consist of two sections, the first, *merong*, being generally calm, with the second, *inggah*, being more lively and usually involving *irama wiled* and *rangkep*.

Their basic structure is announced as part of their full title, and indicates the number of kethuk beats per *kenongan*, for example, ‘Gendhing Gambir Sawit, *kethuk 2 kerep*, *minggah kethuk 4*, *laras slendro*, *pathet sanga*’. Here the name of the piece is ‘Gambir Sawit’, with its structure involving two closely-spaced kethuk per *kenongan* in the *merong* - *kethuk 2 kerep*; rising to four in the *inggah* - *minggah kethuk 4*.



A *kenongan* of each section is therefore:

**merong:**

. . . + . . . . . . . + . . . ∩

**inggah:**

- + - . - + - . - + - . - + - ∩

Each *gongan* of this piece contains four *kenongan*; a piece with only two *kenongan* would be termed *ketawang gendhing*, a clear link to the shorter *bentuk* discussed earlier. (Such a piece might also use a *ladrang* for its *inggah*).

If the form were *kethuk 4 kerep, minggah 8*, the result would be as follows:

**merong:**

. . . + . . . . . . . + . . . ∩  
. . . + . . . . . . . + . . . ∩

**inggah:**

- + - . - + - . - + - . - + - .  
- + - . - + - . - + - . - + - ∩

The *kethuk* spacing within the *merong* may also be *arwis* or *arang* (literally rare) involving a more sparse punctuating structure. For example *Gendhing kethuk 2 arwis minggah 8*:

**merong:**

. . . . . . . + . . . . . . . . . .  
. . . . . . . + . . . . . . . . . ∩

**inggah:**

- + - . - + - . - + - . - + - .  
- + - . - + - . - + - . - + - ∩

These large *gendhing* are often further extended by the addition of a *ladrang* or *ketawang* (or a number of such shorter forms) at the



end, thus involving a further type of 'form', that of a 'suite' where a number of related or complementary pieces are joined together. This final type of form is also apparent in, for instance, a *ladrang* with two distinct sections.

The aural significance of the various structures discussed here (and no mention has been made of *ayak-ayakan*, *srepegan* and other less regular forms) can be overstressed; as the length of pieces rises and the punctuating instruments play less frequently, a number of other features, particularly a sense of phraseology created by melodic motion, becomes increasingly important in the articulation of time.

However, in moving from the control of form from a number of seconds in the case of one *gongan* of a *lancaran*, through several minutes in a larger *gendhing*, to an overall duration of music of maybe 20-30 minutes, the colotomic structure of Javanese music provides a framework suitable for a vast array of music.

