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Composing for the gamelan

By Symon Clarke

Introduction

Composers are usually interested in forging an individual musical language to express their ideas; part of this activity is intuitive, but part of it is about learning the technical craft of composition. The ‘tools of the trade’ need to be acquired, and made subservient to the imaginative processes of composition. This means gaining an understanding of how the instruments in any given ensemble work and making decisions about what is going to be effective in a particular piece.

Exposition

Creating new music for the gamelan presents a number of interesting challenges for composers trained in western traditions. The gamelan has no direct equivalent in the west and, although traditional Javanese music works with thematic, structural, harmonic and dramatic processes that are related to those in western music, it has its own unique musical language and cultural context. To begin composing for the gamelan it is important to come to terms with how the instruments can function and, to do this, the obvious starting point is to look at what the Javanese do themselves.

First subject

Ultimately, it is up to the composer to accept, reject or otherwise develop what is learnt from studying traditional Javanese music and to absorb it into his/her own language. This is always a perpetual process of personal discovery and the few observations made below are a reflection of this. The gamelan is a largely homogeneous orchestra. Most instruments are metallic and produce their sounds by being struck with a variety of beaters. Each instrument has characteristic degrees of ‘attack’ and ‘decay’, depending on the nature of its resonance and how it is played.

The gamelan has few sustaining instruments, such as the winds and strings that make up the bulk of the western orchestra. But it is not simply a percussion ensemble; it is an integrated collection of melodic instruments, tuned to specific pitches, most of which are capable of producing linear thematic material in their own right – even the kethuk and kempyang!

Second subject

However many pieces in the traditional repertoire give the impression of continuous, sustained sound and this is achieved by creating elaborate textures of varying density based upon interlocking melodic figurations. There is almost no doubling of parts and, even for the saron, there is frequent use of imbal and pinjalan. The Javanese use of texture, and the manipulation of harmonic movement within it, is subtle and illusive and depends upon musical processes that are generally unfamiliar in mainstream western art music.

Third subject

At first glance the scope for producing contrasting textures in an ensemble with an apparently uniform tone colour would seem to be severely limited. But the Javanese use of texture is full of contrasts, minute shifts of density and colour as well as more dramatic changes. Studying how this works is a revelation and offers much fertile ground for the composer. There are several compositional angles which are worth examining in more detail in relation to Javanese musical textures.

Development

In western music, tempo is generally about changing the speed at which things happen. In Javanese music the loosely related concept is irama, which is inextricably linked with texture, pulse and structure, to the extent that changing irama automatically prompts changes to all these other elements too. Although tempo can have major consequences for phrasing, orchestration, structures and harmonic movement in western music, it is generally thought about as a separate controlling factor, affecting all instrumental parts at the same time, without necessarily forcing changes to other elements

of the piece.

For the Javanese changes to speed mean changes to the rate at which things happen, and this affects instruments in different ways. The tempo ratios between musical parts change and so then does the overall texture and, very often, the structure. Although these changes shift the weight and points of emphasis in the music, they always preserve its overall unity and balance.

Recapitulation

There are, of course, plenty of other ways of managing orchestral texture and some orthodox western principles can work very well with the gamelan. Irama is an unusual concept in western music and one that provokes thinking about compositional processes in a different way. The same is true of harmonic movement.

Further development

In western music harmony is conventionally thought of as a vertical process; a melodic line can be underpinned with some kind of supporting harmonisation. Chords are traditionally constructed by departing from, and returning to, tonal centres by means of voices; that is, musical parts moving against the same overall pulse according to the 'rules' of harmonic progression. Harmonic movement is thus generated by the desire to resolve or prolong the vertical tensions between voices. This process is not easily transferable to the gamelan because the unequal intervals between the notes of untempered gamelan scales cannot create the same kind of tensions. Also, because of the inability of most gamelan instruments to individually sustain their notes, vertical tensions and resolutions are usually the result of contrapuntal interactions rather than chordal progressions.

In traditional Javanese music there clearly



are harmonic tensions and resolutions, but their effects are markedly different from those experienced in the west and cannot be understood in western terms. They arise as a result of the manipulation of pathet, padhang-ulihan phrase structure, bentuk and textural relationships between voices, which are all compositional processes that seem to be conceived horizontally rather than vertically. Each instrumental line provides an individually decorative, but organically constructed, part in the texture. The cumulative effect of these creates an overall resonance that is continually generating small-scale tensions and resolutions as pitches collide and coalesce, but which operates within a larger structural framework which has its own tensions, finding resolution at strokes of the gong. This procedure never disturbs the large-scale balance and shape of the music. Every musical event operates within the context given by still larger structures and this, for me at least, is the key to understanding the gamelan and how the Javanese use it.

Codetta

The formal structure of traditional Javanese music relies on a relatively small range of predetermined cyclical forms which are frequently linked together to create larger pieces or suites, the design of which depends on the performing context – dance, wayang etc.

It is a constant surprise that the Javanese seem content to stick with this limited range, although there is staggering diversity within it. The repetition inherent in cyclic structures confines the potential for musical development, in western terms, to quite specific territory. This is, however, a peculiarly western interpretation and there is a significant divergence of view between Java and the west over what might be meant and understood by musical ‘development’.

Exposition and interlude

In somewhat over-simplistic terms, musical development in the west is about argument (dialectic) whereas in Java it is about balance (proportion). This is reflected in the differing ways that music is put together. In the west, for example, musical ‘argument’ is explicit in sonata form, in that first and second subjects are juxtaposed, distorted, inverted, presented with countersubjects, dismembered, subjected to modulation and otherwise treated in ways that undermine their integrity. Musical material is taken on a journey but there is an overwhelming desire to reach a goal, to return to the home key and, in so doing, to make a statement in terms of that journey. Of course much has changed in the 20th century, and there are plenty of examples of developmental processes that are not goal-directed, but the notion of musical dialectic is still very strong.

Further recapitulation

The Javanese seem to have a different attitude. It is the norm to repeat the same passage numerous times and then move on to another section and do the same. There is however an evolving musical journey underway (for example, the rise in pathet throughout a wayang) but developmental processes are less concerned with a dialectic that wrenches musical material about in order to make a statement, than they are with ordering things to perpetually preserve balance and unity when musical material does change.



Coda

Examining the way traditional Javanese music works, in order to learn something about the gamelan for the purpose of writing for it, has led me (inevitably?) to a reappraisal of western compositional processes. What started as a technical study has now unearthed a series of fundamental issues about the nature of musical language. The Javanese approach to music cannot

be absorbed into a composer's musical vocabulary as a set of technical devices. Asking how it is done becomes a fairly meaningless activity unless you are also prepared to ask why it is done.

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