

A Lou Harrison Reader

Edited by Peter Garland



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“In the Beginning Was the Melody”:

The Gamelan Music of Lou Harrison

by Jody Diamond

“In the beginning was the melody?”

This is how Lou Harrison begins his demonstration of the layers of sound that comprise gamelan music. By “the melody” he means what is sometimes referred to in Java as the *balungan*: the melodic framework, the bones, the skeletal melody, the fixed melody, the nuclear theme. In Javanese music, the *balungan* is not the only melody, nor is it necessarily conceived of as *the* melody—it is one of many representations of the melodic identity of a piece of music. In Lou Harrison’s gamelan music, however, the *balungan* is the melody. It is where Lou Harrison spends his compositional energy, it is what he writes and re-writes, it is what has to “work” before adding the other layers of the piece and preparing a performance.

Harrison has a startling ability to absorb the spirit of music born in Asian cultures and express it with Western instruments. How else could he have made one movement of *Pacifika Rondo* sound so much like a Korean orchestra without actually being one? His approach to gamelan, however, went further: he studied and played on Javanese instruments, and used them as models to build the instruments for his own gamelan. His music for gamelan shows the same artistic integrity as his other works. They are gamelan pieces by Lou Harrison, not imitations or approximations of Javanese tradition. Lou Harrison, along with other gamelan composers, is creating a new tradition, not compromising an old one. All of the history and development that created Indonesian gamelan music is a part of the inspiration giving birth to many new works by international composers, but these new children reflect the character and heritage of both parents.

I first met Lou Harrison at San Jose State University in 1976, where the Javanese gamelan Kyai Udan Mas (now at U.C. Berkeley) was then in residence. I was assisting my Javanese teacher, K. R. T. Wasitodipuro (a.k.a. Wasitodiningrat); Lou was one of our students. When Lou began to compose for gamelan, at Wasitodipuro’s invitation, he asked me to instruct him. He would bring in a *balungan* and we would work on the parts to accompany it. I would explain the conventions of Javanese performance practice, and suggest ways that the *balungan* could be realized on various instruments of the gamelan.

One of the pieces we worked on at that time was *Bubaran Robert*. The piece has some similarity to Javanese music, but it is also different in several ways. A discussion of these contrasts might shed some light on the gamelan music of Lou Harrison.

In the piece *Bubaran Robert*, there are several elements in Javanese style. The form *bubaran*, a set of 16 beat phrases marked at the end by a gong, is traditional to Java, and is specifically associated with the Central Javanese city of Yogyakarta. Javanese form is also defined by a particular sequence or relationship of smaller punctuating gongs. The *bubaran* has four beats to each stroke of the *kenong*, indicated here by “γ”. Every fourth *kenong* stroke is also played by a gong, indicated here by “()”. Other punctuating or form-defining instruments, like *Kempul* (P) and *ketuk* (T), also play their Javanese roles in this piece. Keeping this Javanese form intact allows certain other gamelan instruments to play traditional parts. The *kendang* (drum) has a specific pattern that always accompanies a *bubaran*. Other instruments as well, like *peking* (high pitched metallophone), can play a fairly predictable part given a sequence of tones in a Javanese form.

The balungan (written below in numbered pitches) of Bubaran Robert follows somewhat normal Javanese contours. The pairs of notes are either adjacent pitches or repetitions of a tone: both are common in Javanese practice. The convention of filling in the beat between two strokes on the same note with a damped double stroke (indicated here by xx over the notes) is also found in Javanese music, although rarely so frequently as in this piece.

Bubaran Robert, laras slendro

T	W	T	N	T	P	T	N	T	P	T	N	T	P	T	G	
		<u>xx</u>							<u>xx</u>							
5	6	•	6)	5	6	3	5)	3	5	•	5)	3	5	2	(3)	
2	1	2	3)	2	<u>xx</u>	•	2	3)	2	1	2	3)	2	3	5	(6) 2123 moves to several positions
5	6	<u>xx</u>	•	6)	5	6	3	5)	3	5	2	3)	2	1	2	(3)
2	•	<u>xx</u>	2	3)	2	1	2	3)	2	3	5	6)	5	<u>2535</u>	(6)	

(• indicates a beat of silence, an overline indicates that two notes share the same beat)

Bubaran Robert also demonstrates a melodic motif found in Javanese music: shifting particular tones or pairs of tones to different structural points of varying strength. In gamelan music, the strong beat is conceived of as being on the fourth beat of each group of four, i.e., at the end of the "measure" instead of the beginning. A tone placed on this beat will be felt as a strong one. For example, in the balungan of Bubaran Robert, the following pairs are seen in both weak and strong positions: 5 6, 3 5, 2 3. Given four groups of four beats (each group called a *gatra*), the fourth and second units are considered strong, while the first and third are much weaker. The *gatra* 2 1 2 3 occupies several different positions: the two weakest positions in the second line (called a *gongan* because it is a phrase that leads to and ends with a stroke on the gong), the strongest position in the third *gongan*, and the second strongest position in the fourth *gongan*.

This same shifting of pairs can be seen in the Javanese *bubaran Rediguntur*. The pair 3 6 occurs three times in the second *gongan*, each time in a different place, until it is finally divided by a stroke of the *kenong*. A similar sequence of shifts happens to the pair 2 1 in the third *gongan*, with the pair being broken by the third *kenong* and being repeated once more before the *gong*.

Bubaran Rediguntur, laras slendro pathet manyuro

T	W	T	N	T	P	T	N	T	P	T	N	T	P	T	G
2	3	2	1)	2	3	2	1)	6	5	3	2)	5	3	5	(6)
•	3	6	•)	3	6	•	3)	6	5	3	5)	6	1	2	(1) the pairs 36 and 21 change position
•	2	1	•)	2	1	•	2)	3	5	3	2)	1	2	1	(6)
2	3	2	1)	2	3	2	1)	6	5	3	2)	5	3	5	(6)

This analysis may seem simple, but it points out that Lou Harrison has absorbed, whether intellectually or intuitively, some of the principles that shape Javanese balungan. At the same time, he has introduced certain elements of his own. If he were purely trying to imitate classical Javanese music, he might not have added all the damped accents that occur on different notes throughout the piece, nor structured so many *gatra* with a rest on the second beat, or put two doubled pairs right before the *gong*.

Lou Harrison also made his own mark on the melodic elaborating parts that "decorate" the balungan. In *Gendin-Gending California*¹ he notates the bonang part for Bubaran Robert (one subject of our lessons at San Jose State). In the *gatra* where a note is held across a rest, Javanese practice would call for a melody comprised of primarily of octaves. Lou Harrison's bonang part has sequences of tones that move four sequential steps up the slendro scale (marked below in italics), leading to the tone that is being held. This particular approach might seem odd to a Javanese musician, but after thought and deliberation, this is the melody that Lou Harrison wanted.

		T	W	T	N	T	P	T	N							
bonang	5	6	5	6	2	3	5	6	5	6	1	6	3	5	6	5
	'	'	'	'	'	'	'	'	'	'	'	'	'	'	'	'
balungan		5		6		•		6)		5		6		3		5)
		T		P		T		N		T		P		T		N
bonang	3	5	3	5	1	2	3	5	3	5	6	5	2	3	5	3
	'	'	'	'												
balungan		3		5		•		5)		3		5		2		(3)

(marks below a number indicate a lower range; no marks, a central range; a dot above, a higher range.)

There are other gamelan pieces by Lou Harrison that show both his understanding of Javanese practice and his deliberate departure from it. In *Lancaran Samuel*, he very closely echoes the character of the Javanese *Lancaran Singanebah*, using a sequence of pairs that change at each gong stroke.

Lancaran Samuel, laras pelog

TWTN	IPTN	IPIN	TPT	G
5 7)	5 7)	5 7)	5	(4)
5 4)	5 4)	5 4)	3	(1)
3 1)	5 4)	3 4)	5	(7)

Lancaran Singanebah, laras pelog pathet barang

5 3)	5 3)	5 3)	6	(7)
6 7)	6 7)	6 7)	3	(2)
3 2)	3 2)	3 2)	5	(3)

The formal structure is the same, again allowing the use of traditional elements such as the drum pattern and elaboration of some instruments. But the mode is one quite foreign to Indonesian practice. Pitches 1 and 7 to be appearing as gong tones in the same piece is downright radical, since most Javanese pieces in pelog focus on the scale 12356 or 72356. Lou Harrison has, in effect, invented new modes to convey his melodic ideas, defining a non-traditional pitch set within a traditional form.

A melody for piccolo trumpet part was added to *Bubaran Robert* in 1981. This part is based more on western contrapuntal harmony than it is on a Javanese notion about melody. True to Javanese practice, the trumpet melody is in unison with the balungan at the most important structural points, namely, the four gong tones. Yet the relationship between trumpet and balungan elsewhere in the piece displays harmonic progressions, conjunct and disjunct motion, and other western concepts that have always informed Harrison's melodic writing.



It is this collaboration of western instruments and gamelan that Harrison is often considered to be most successful. The two parts inform each other, but neither is enslaved by the associated style. The gamelan sounds, for the most part, like a Javanese gamelan might; the trumpet melody could stand on

its own as a joyous march³. Lou Harrison finds a way for them to interact without compromise on either side. He musters his creative energies equally for both parties. No one can deny his skill in writing for western instruments. And those who might wonder at his somewhat newer involvement with gamelan instruments should consider this: Lou Harrison is a composer who knows what he likes.

Harrison "generally prefers the styles of Yogyakarta and Semarang"⁴ He is attracted to this strong style of gamelan, perhaps because it gives the balungan, the melody that interests him, more prominence. An attraction to these styles is a reasonable development from his percussion music for ensembles that often hinted at gamelan. The predominance of the strong style saron, demung, and bonang *imbal* (interlocking parts) in Lou Harrison's gamelan pieces reflect his long standing love of the "decorated melody," which he learned also from his study of Chinese and Korean music.

Even the gamelan instruments that Lou Harrison has built along with partner William Colvig show his commitment to and focus on the balungan. In Javanese practice, the instruments that play the balungan are little more than one octave in range: ̣ 1 2 3 5 6 1 in slendro, and 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 in pelog. A melody that moves across the limits of that octave, and many do, must be transposed, implied, or heard across the range of two adjacent instruments. Harrison and Colvig, however, have built these instruments in an extended range: 5̣ ̣ 1 2 3 5 6 1̣ 2̣ 3̣ 5̣ in slendro, and 5̣ ̣ 7̣ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1̣ 2̣ 3̣ in pelog. These balungan instruments have allowed his entire melody to be realized on one instrument, by one player. This range also makes possible balungan with large steps and new modal or scalar constructions, like those found in the first gongan of *Gending In Honor of Aphrodite*.

3̣ 1̣ 7̣ 1̣ • • 3 4 1̣ 7 • • 3̣ 1̣ 7̣ 1̣ 3 4 7 (6)

Lou Harrison could have written pieces for twenty *rebab* (bowed spike-fiddle) and massive choruses if he had wanted to; these particular choices were made by the great Javanese composer K. R. T. Wasitodipuro, whom Harrison very much admires. Every composer writes the music that he or she wants to hear. Artistic vision is expressed with the tools at hand, not necessarily determined by them. Lou Harrison's gamelan music and instruments express his own particular affinity for a clear and strongly stated melody. His music does not educate an audience about Javanese gamelan as much as it informs them of a creative spirit and an open heart.

A discussion of Lou Harrison and gamelan should not fail to mention his warm friendship and generosity to many. He has personally supported and assisted many musicians, composers, instrument builders and gamelan instructors, through both direct contributions and creative use of his influence. He has caused new music for gamelan to be performed in locations that would have once been thought impossible: at the Saratoga Springs retreat of the Philadelphia Symphony, to a sold out audience at Hertz Hall on the U.C. Berkeley campus, in countless radio broadcasts and guest lectures. He has purchased more gift subscriptions to the international gamelan journal *Balungan*² than any other single person.

Lou Harrison is often called the father of gamelan in America, but perhaps this assigns maturity too hastily. Gamelan has been available to us as a musical discipline for only a quarter of a century, and even shorter as a compositional medium. We are all its children, still learning and experimenting. Lou Harrison is our benevolent sibling, playing along with the rest of us and sharing his discoveries.

NOTES

¹ A book and tape of gamelan compositions by California composers, including Harrison, Trish Neilson, Peter Huboi and Mark Veregge. Available through the American Gamelan Institute at Box 9911, Oakland, CA 94613.

² The international journal of gamelan and related arts published by the American Gamelan Institute.

³ Bubar Robert with piccolo trumpet is often played as the "traditional" procession music for the annual graduation ceremonies at Mills College in Oakland.

⁴ *Gending-gending California*, notes.