

INTERVIEW

Komang Astita: the performance of sound

by Elaine Barkin

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STSI, Denpasar, Bali

Barkin: Maybe we should start with these pieces that you just finished: *Pencon* [Knobbed Gong] and — what was the other?

Astita: *Ngombak Buluh* [Waves of Bamboo].

Barkin: Tell me about the influences in *Pencon*, where the various rhythms and the sounds and the timbres came from.

Astita: Well, first we have to choose the kind of instrument, so what we do is observe what instruments we have.

Barkin: What you have *here*? [at STSI, Bali's Advanced Academy of the Arts]

Astita: What we have around that's possible to use, the kind of instruments we have at school: Balinese, Javanese. And finally I saw the gong ... it's interesting to make something different from what we usually do for the *karawitan*, in Bali or Java. Instead of using many kind of instruments, my idea is make it more simple. I like to make the material more effective, rather than just doing too many things. [*Karawitan* refers here to the codified system of traditional Balinese gamelan music.]

Barkin: So you mean to limit the timbre, limit the kind of instrument?

Astita: Yeah. Limit the kind of instrument, the timbre, and also limit the musician.

Barkin: Okay. A small group.

Astita: Yeah, a small group. For a big group our music is no problem. We can have doubling, or include different kinds of instrument, and that makes it very crowded.

Barkin: You mean like for a traditional Gong Kebyar ensemble?

Astita: Uh-huh, or Gong Gedé which needs many more musicians I got these ideas from my first piece, actually [a first] in Balinese contemporary music. That was *Eka Dasa Rudra*, the



Komang Astita at UCLA, 1995

first piece I made for the young composers' concert [*Pekan Komponis*] in Jakarta in 1979. And that time I used many more instruments

The ideas came from the one very big ceremony in Bali, for Balinese Hindus, at Besakih [Bali's mother temple]. That ceremony [meant to purify the universe] only comes once in a hundred years. Of course, in that kind of ceremony, there's just too many things going on. There's a lot of special activities, music, dance, different kinds of religious ceremonies. What impressed me is the organisation of the ceremony. The process starts maybe six months before.

Barkin: To prepare for the ceremony?

Astita: Yes. And, you know, what is very attractive is the performance of sound. People

sounds, walking sounds, and gamelan from many, many different ensembles that we have in Bali, including instruments for performing both sacred and secular music.

Barkin: All going on at the same time?

Astita: Yes. That situation gave me an idea: to put it together, to combine all these different kinds of activities. And that time I used many instruments. It's based on gamelan Semar Pegulingan; why Semar Pegulingan? Because Semar Pegulingan has a seven-tone scale. I can manipulate that with a different kind of ensemble, angklung, add some other big cymbals, so it becomes a Belanganjur [marching band ensemble].

Barkin: I see.

Astita: It's a different kind of gamelan. Also, with the seven-tone scale, we can make more mood changes, according to the theme of the ceremony. Of course, this is still based on the Balinese character, the technique of playing, the music, the composition. What is new is the way of arranging the instruments, the structure of the composition, and how the gongs were hung.

Barkin: Oh, Michael [Tenzer] told me about this. You had a lot of people moving around?

Astita: Yes. Usually when we play gamelan in the Balinese tradition, we stay on one instrument. But I made the players move. We didn't have many instruments or people, but we can move things around. This concept is like theatre music. That was my first success. After that, I made things a lot simpler, with fewer musicians ...

Barkin: So that piece was for the full Semar Pegulingan plus the gongs...

Astita: — plus the rice-pounding instrument, and a lot of wood, what you call *sapu*—

Barkin: A broom?

Astita: A broom, from *sapulidi*, yes. And a big bamboo flute, a *gambuh*. I illustrated the music with some dance movements, which makes the concept more complete. There are a lot of new pieces from other composers like Windha, Rai, and my brother [Ketut Gdé Asnawa]. This brings the contemporary music scene in Bali to life. The challenge first came from the Arts Festival. The last five years, we have included a Balinese contemporary music program.

Barkin: Maybe before we talk about *Pencon*, we should return to *Ubitning Selunding*. The first performance was in 1988, and then there was the performance on the "Fantastic Gamelan" cassette. I was interested in the differences between the two

performances. What were the circumstances of the first performance — were you trying something different? The voices in that are so different than on the subsequent cassette.

Astita: For the first performance, for the Walter Spies festival, I was trying to create a new piece for Selunding, because I know it is a very old gamelan ... sometimes we feel Selunding is a very sacred instrument. In this piece, we don't think about the sacred, we think about the possibilities of the instrument, we can play different music from what is usually played in a ceremony. The piece has a fixed structure already, but the vocal part in that piece comes from *kidung* style.

Barkin: Kidung?

Astita: Kidung is a ritual vocal part in Bali. And kidung has a free rhythm because the vocalist can sometimes take a lot longer to sustain a tone, or sometime it just depends on the situation. And this time, in *Ubitning Selunding*, that vocal of course should be fixed within the melodic theme I created. Sometimes it depends on the vocalist also. The first performance is different from the commercial cassette recording because the vocalist was different.

Barkin: But the style was also very different. In the first performance it was very avant-garde, you know? And then it gets much more conventional on the cassette.

Astita: Yeah, I think so. The first one is more free; I felt it was good that time. But in the second, the vocal is much more strict, more metrical.

Barkin: I had written a note to myself that in the first version, the rhythm was also freer in the ensemble. And then it gets to be more like a *Kreasi Baru* piece on the cassette. Is that right?

Astita: Yes, I think if I performed it again it would again be different. But if you compare the two, the second one is shorter.

Barkin: It's about two minutes shorter.

Astita: I mean the repetition is different, it's more free. I've already fixed the first one, because that's my first performance. And for subsequent [performances], I made a different order.

Barkin: What does *Ubitning* mean, by the way?

Astita: *Ubit*? That means a kind of intricate thing, for example in the carving; like leaves on a flower, right? Some parts of the leaf come out like this [he makes hand motions], what you call spiral.

Barkin: Spiral, that kind of pattern.

Astita: Yes, the pattern in fact. In Bali we have

patra, the name of different patterns. This is *patra Belanda*, which comes from Holland [he points to a part of the building decoration].

Barkin: So it's the different pattern, the ornamentation?

Astita: Yes. In that case, we have *ubit-ubitan*, kind of how the line comes from one center, for example, and starts on this end, and you make elaborate ornamentation. That is *ubit-ubitan* ... [hand motions] the sense is like ornamentation.

Barkin: Let's talk about *Pencon*. That piece was such a success, you know. Everybody loved that piece. I would be interested to know how you started with the limited timbre and small group of players, and then where the ideas came from.

Astita: When I was exploring the ideas with my musicians, we were trying to feel what the sound was like ... the sound is very deep, mostly soft. The possibility of playing the interlocking patterns has great breadth. I feel this music should not be very loud, if you play very loud, the sound is not right. [*Pencon* is for seven large gongs.]

Barkin: Yeah, the sound gets very diffused; it's not as clear as when it's soft.

Astita: In observing that, I tried some different patterns. We have a very rapid, very tight pattern. And the sound is not good, because if we hit too many — for example, with four gongs playing interlocking patterns, the sound is not so clear and we feel that the sound is not right.

Barkin: Are they all Javanese gongs?

Astita: Yes. I tried Balinese *trompong* from *Gong Gedé* [an older Balinese gamelan with very large instruments], but the sound was not deep enough.

Barkin: It's very resonant, so that's one of its characteristics.

Astita: After I saw that the rapid rhythm is not correct, we tried to make it more simple. What we do is not just hit the knob, but we compare it to hitting the body of the instrument, even on the rim.

Barkin: That's a new idea for playing those gongs for you?

Astita: Yes, yes. Before when we played a lot on the knob, the sound was not so good. We would like to have a more simple sound, and I'm trying to combine the body and the knob. The knob is still essential. We hit it a lot on the body, near the rim also. So, this idea is expanded and developed. It's very interesting when we try something like that.

Barkin: And hitting the stick of the *panggul* [mallet] on the rim was a wonderful passage.

Astita: We feel that if this is going to be played throughout with sticks, we should have another possibility, playing by hand. I think by slowing down, and using a different tempo, we play with a different technique. When we play that, something else comes up — we need vocal. First I tried it with *cak*, because the pattern of this is similar to the *Cak*. [A Balinese choral form of interlocking vocal parts, also known as *Kecak*.]

The players were saying “cak, cak, cak,” each according to his rhythm. And my friend Pak Sumandhi comes in, and says we're abusing *Cak*. *Cak* already has its own character.

So we included the idea of [the sound of] frogs [and other birds and insects] in the rice field — you hear them at night. Then you get the idea of the old *kotekan*. *Kotekan* [Balinese interlocking parts] is a combination of different sections, different parts, a combination of rhythm patterns and skill.

Barkin: I sometimes think that some of the patterns of Bali come from the frogs, because it sounds as if they're singing *kotekan* in the rice field.

Astita: Yeah, well, I don't know if that's true.

Barkin: Maybe not ... Also, there were *many* different rhythmic patterns in *Pencon*. The tempi were different, slow and fast, and there were very different kinds of rhythm. Some of them sounded as if they were influenced by African jazz.

Astita: I think that type of sound is common in different kinds of music here. Also [in *Pencon*] there is a kind of *slendro* scale. You see the four of us are always playing interlocking parts ... not four, five of us ...

Barkin: Five of you and the two gong players.

Astita: Yes, the two [large] gongs. They play a *colotomic* [punctuating] part.

Barkin: Yeah, I know, because at the end they have that *ostinato* [sings] that went on maybe a little too long; that last part could be a little shorter. Don't you think so?

Astita: Yes. Lots of our friends also say that.

Barkin: *Just* at the end when you get to that *ostinato* pattern.

Astita: I think that's because of the repetition, you know. Maybe, if I don't repeat them, it's fine.

Barkin: So these are all *slendro* gongs?

Astita: Yeah, because that's the gong we've got.

Barkin: You don't have a *pelog* ensemble?

Astita: Well, there is a *pelog*, but when we explore the instrument, we [used what] we have ... I don't think it necessarily has to be *slendro*.

Sometimes we may have only the pelog gong, that would be fine, too ... the idea here is the pattern. We can make it even freer if we use some Western gongs, or Chinese gongs or something like that.

Barkin: Did the players have to learn a different playing technique?

Astita: They have a different kind of technique for playing *gangs*a or playing the drum, or playing cymbals. They just combine that. There are some drum ideas, playing on the rim. I think most of them are already experienced playing drum.

Barkin: I was very impressed with the players. I thought they were just wonderful.

Astita: Another possibility, if I play this on Western instruments, maybe we'd use a tom-tom, , and some big gong, that would be fine. There is no problem with changing the instrument set.

Barkin: But it was very special because of the resonance of that gong sound.

Astita: Well, the character of the sound can be different.

Barkin: And what about the *Jegog* [ensemble of bamboo tube instruments] piece *Ngombak Buluh*? What struck me was the part where *you're* playing a rhythm on the top and the others are playing something else — two rhythms simultaneously. That was very different, for me at least.

Astita: Well, I love jazz music also. I think that, to create a jazz character, it doesn't matter what instruments we use here. But the feeling of jazz is like that. For this piece we have melodic or rhythmic ideas and then we elaborate. That's the idea. We use the big bamboos to define the character of the piece. Also, the idea of this piece is to use a limited number of musicians.

Barkin: To get the most out of the least.

Astita: I like to do that now, you know, instead of playing with a lot of musicians.

Barkin: That was a good idea, to have three players on one instrument, and four players on the other. Was that a totally new idea?

Astita: Well, that's an idea I like, because what I did here is going to be observed by our students, you know, and they'll get some other ideas ... Not just the conventional things they have been doing,. Sometime there will be a solo performance ... this is really different from our music. We have a dearth of solo performance in Balinese music.

Barkin: Solo performance is such a Western idea.

Astita: Yes, I know, but sometime we can do

that too. This is a way of expanding our ideas, exploring some more things. In this *jegog* piece, I have deep bass rhythm, a simple bass melody, then it is augmented by another rhythm; we also changed our tune; that makes the feeling different, changes the mood.

Barkin: Especially when you played the frame of the bamboo. What did you play with? It looked like *angklung* ...

Astita: Well, it is part of *bumbung* instruments. [bumbung is the generic term for bamboo] We can hit with our palms, hit the instrument itself, or otherwise we use a stick. Bumbung can be slender or pelog. But this time, I chose only four tones to express the rhythm, according to what we have on the big instrument.

Barkin: And the *jegog* itself is a four-tone scale, isn't it?

Astita: Yes. But in this piece, the scale is not necessary, just the sound.

Barkin: It's like layers of different rhythms happening simultaneously: that was very clear in the piece. So what do you think you'd be interested in going on to do? Any ideas?

Astita: I would like to do more new things.

Barkin: Would you to stay on this track of restricting yourself, to see how much you can get from a limited number? Or maybe mix something?

Astita: Maybe I'd like to mix, make something big. For me, I think a lot more is possible here, because we are getting used to new ideas.

Barkin: And what about the response to the new music, is it generally good?

Astita: I think it is very positive. I feel that, in the future, I would like to bring this kind of idea of music more to the village, you know?

Barkin: Absolutely.

Astita: Spread out the ideas, instead of keeping them in the academy.

Barkin: Yes, new music, whatever it is, is usually limited to an academic environment. Sometimes it goes out somewhere, but I had thought that it would be difficult to take it to the villages.

Astita: No, not so difficult. That's what we are now hoping to do more of, bringing our music to the villages. ▀

(transcribed by Wanda Bryant)