

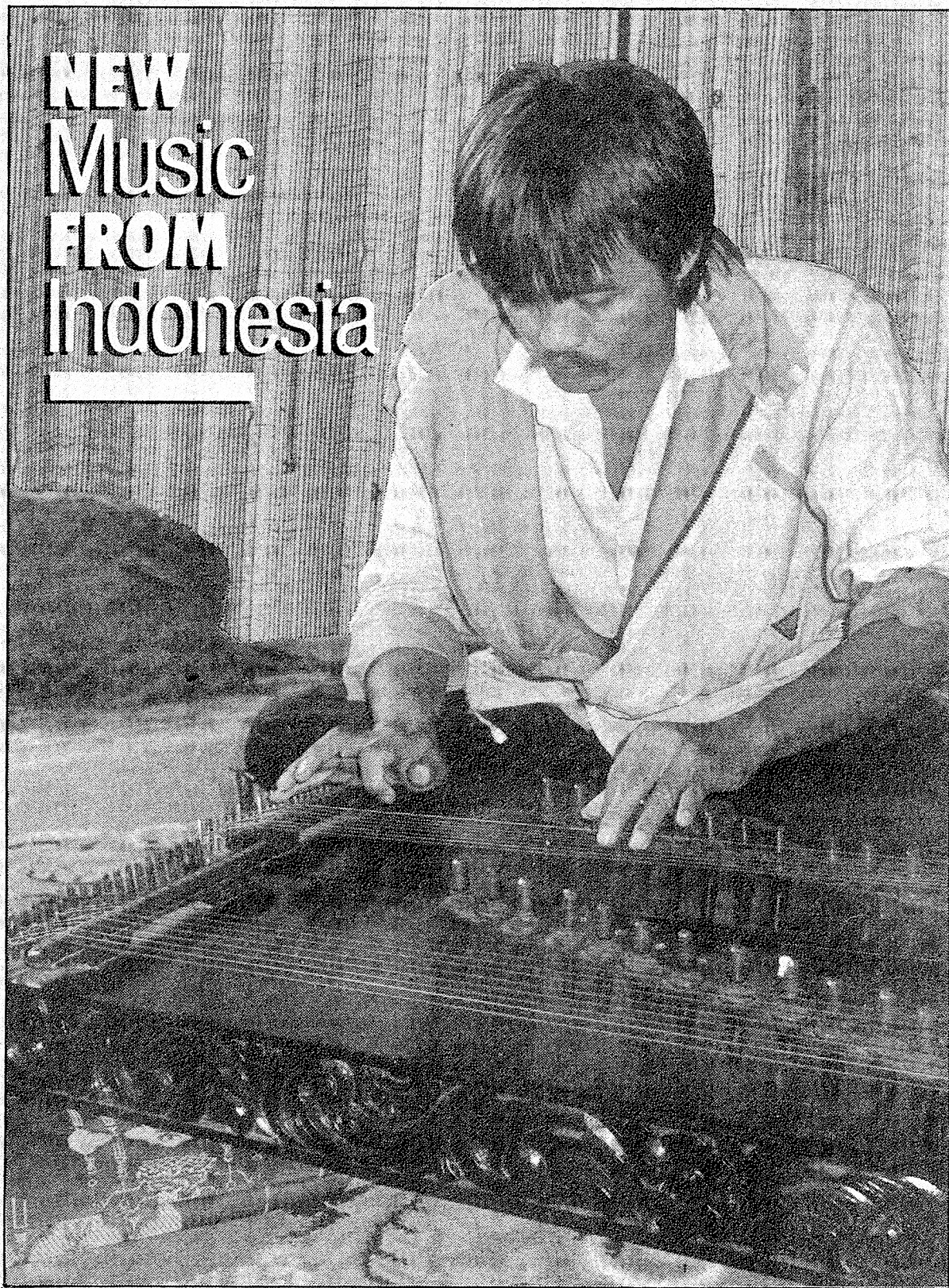


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NEW Music FROM Indonesia



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By Jody Diamond

THE PLANE FROM MEDAN approached the Padang Airport three times before we were able to land. The rain over the mountains of West Sumatra seemed less than welcoming, but when we were finally in the cab of the little white truck, an unbelievably spicy meal warming our stomachs, the friendly and enthusiastic faculty members of the National Music Academy of Indonesia cheered us up. "Tomorrow morning you will see a demonstration of traditional Minangkabau, instrumental and vocal music from West Sumatra. Then we will hear tapes of new compositions by our faculty and students and have a discussion of the problems facing composers today. In the afternoon you will give a lecture on your work with Indonesian composers and on new music in general, and then later we can plan for a concert where both of you will present and discuss your compositions. If there is time, we would like to ask your help with a new piece of equipment recently acquired by our music department: a DX-7. Do you know how to use it?"

So began a densely packed week of interviews, lectures, concerts, discussions, workshops, copying of audio tapes and books from the library, viewing of video tapes of new music that I had made in other parts of Indonesia, and generally being part of the action on campus at ASKI Padang Panjang, West Sumatra. The National Music Academy was one of the many centers of experimental music that I and my husband, composer Larry Polansky, visited during our year-long survey of Indonesian composers and contemporary music.

When asked what I planned to do with all the tapes of music I was acquiring, I answered, "Play them on the radio. Study and listen to them, and distribute them so the rest of the world can hear new and experimental music from Indonesia as well as the wonderful traditional music."

"Play them on the radio," the questioner, an Indonesian composer, asked, a bit incredulous. "We can't get our new pieces recorded by the cassette companies here, let alone get them played on the radio!"

"American composers have those problems too," I told him, "but we also have KPFA!"

In the almost twenty years I have been studying, performing and teaching Indonesian music, I find that less and less frequently do I have to define "gamelan" in order to tell people what I do. Growing numbers of people

have become familiar with the complex layered sonorities of the multi-timbred melodic percussion orchestra that is part of the rich arts heritage of Java and Bali. There are dozens of American groups performing traditional music, dance and puppet theatre from diverse areas of Indonesia, good recordings in the ethnic music bin at local record stores, dynamic touring groups of Indonesian artists who never fail to perform for Bay Area audiences, resident Indonesian artists, and of course, music programs on KPFA. All of these have increased American appreciation for Indonesian culture.

Composers and many other artists have been inspired by Indonesian arts, and this in-

spiration can be seen in American works for mask and puppet theater, compositions for gamelan and for Western instruments, dance, video and the building of new gamelan instruments. Some of the more than 100 gamelan groups in the United States have been expanding their concert repertoire, adding pieces by composers from the U.S., Canada, Japan and England in programs usually balanced by "traditional" music from Java or Bali. Recordings of these concerts, as well as tapes from Indonesia, books, videos and an international/Indonesian arts journal, *Balungan*, are distributed by the American Gamelan Institute in Oakland.

But what about composers in Indonesia and the growing tradition of experimental music by Indonesian artists?

In July, 1988, Larry and I moved to Surakarta, Central Java, sponsored by a Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship. Our research "counterpart" was I Wayan Sadra, a composer and music critic on the faculty of STSI Surakarta, the Indonesian National College of the Arts. With his help, we eventually collected interviews with over sixty composers from Java, Bali, Sunda, Sumatra and Sulawesi, and hundreds of video and audio tapes, books and scores. These materials illuminate the situation of new music in Indonesia, the process of creating, rehearsing and performing new works, the thoughts and problems of composers today. Sadra also participated in our commission/recording project: an open invitation to nine composers to prepare a piece of their choice and have it recorded in the studio. This was in response to the need for more opportunity and money to create, and for better documentation of the pieces.

Innovations in Indonesian performing arts take many forms. An outstanding example is Wayang Sandosa, a shadow puppet theatre with nine puppeteers instead of the usual one, a movie-theatre size screen, colored lights and flames, and music by B. Subono that combined "the sacred and the profane." Another experimental area is instrument building, exemplified in Surakarta by the work of A. Suwardi, a teacher of Javanese classical music and head of the music department at STSI. He described his compositional approach in an interview:

"(When I do a new piece), I use the standard [gamelan] instruments, but with new techniques, to bring into being different sounds. For example, I take the *bonang*

(small pot gongs), turn them over and fill them with water. Sometimes other composers use techniques that I discovered, like bowing the keys of the *gender* (metallophone with tube resonators) instead of hitting them. Later, maybe I'll try making a drum with a metal membrane instead of skin.

"First I look for a new sound, then that becomes a motif, and from that develops a large motif. Then all the large motifs are connected to become the composition. If after this process the piece is still not smooth and doesn't flow, I have to change it until it does. But sometimes, actually, I intentionally make a piece that does not flow."

There is an interplay between "tradisi" and "komposisi," the commonly known and the newly created. So we took lessons in traditional Javanese court gamelan, and I frequently performed with my teachers, usually singing. My research on new music and training in traditional music were mutually informative: so many of the new compositions are variations on specific traditional ideas and techniques, that often you can't understand one without knowing the other. This problem was a frequent topic of discussion, particularly with Pande Made Surkerta, a teacher of composition and Balinese music at STSI Surakarta:

"We know our tradition, it is our capital. If we want to "buy" something, we already have money saved up. But I think we must have two pairs of glasses. If we are going to play traditional music, we wear the glasses of tradition. But if we wear those glasses [for a new piece], like something by Suwardi, there will be a conflict, an [inner] war. In traditional music, we know what things are called, we know certain patterns and forms that must be followed. In a new composition, there is a form, but it is not like the ones we know already. Many things can happen. If we are doing a composition, we must ask questions continuously."

There are many Indonesian composers who write for Western instruments, who have attended or taught at schools with Western music departments, or who have studied out of the country. These composers have an awareness of Western traditions, but are also working in styles uniquely their own, from pop/rock to classical to electronics. One of the most active artists is Harry Roesli, who studied in Holland for eight years before returning to work in Indonesia as a composer and music columnist:

"My first composition was for guitar, when I was twelve. It was truly a creative work, because I did it spontaneously before I had been influenced by others... To tell the truth, I am influenced by lots of people, but then, who isn't? I feel that perhaps I like John Cage too much, both his music and his way of thinking - he pervades my thoughts."

"Some Indonesians have said that my music was too modern, that it didn't have roots in the tradition. They said that my music was too far out, almost to the point of absurdity, and that I didn't care about the audience. But I'm not someone who doesn't care about the audience - I'm really sad if my work is not enjoyed! I tried to find a way to compromise, but the music I created to be a compromise actually became a new style, different from my earlier work that had been called "supra-modern." I tried to accommodate them, but ended up making a music even more unique, which they still didn't like!"

Considering the audience's reaction, making a living from art, finding the time to create new works - these problems are faced by artists everywhere. But Indonesian artists do have some particular problems: great economic hardships, limited information and resources, the lack of funds and opportunity to travel. Yet in spite of these difficulties, they continue to flourish and create.

In November and December, KPFA airs three programs that present the music of Indonesian composers and their works, brought out of that nation of islands, and set free on the airwaves of Pacifica radio.

Listen to 'The Thin Edge of the Wedge: New & Experimental Music by Indonesian Composers' on Friday, November 17th and 24th and December 1st at 9:00 am.

Jody Diamond was a Fulbright Senior Research Scholar in Indonesia in 1988-89. She is widely known as a performer and scholar of Indonesian music and of new music for gamelan.



Cover: Dody Satya Ekagustiman playing the kecapi. Photos: Diamond & Polansky