Gamelan, architecture sonore (et Gamelan mécanique)

Review of the website http://www.cite-musique.fr/gamelan

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Website: http://www.cite-musique.fr/gamelan

Concept and texts by Catherine Basset (as complement to her book Musiques de Bali à Java : l’ordre et la fête); interactive features: Oliver Koechlin; graphics: Grégory Pignot; production: Cité de la Musique, Paris.

Reviewed by Michael Tenzger

Form and content are a universal yin and yang. While the subject of this brief essay is the above-named website’s content – a theory of structure and cultural meaning for the gamelan traditions of Bali, Central Java, and Sunda – the form of their presentation deserves its own consideration. A site’s content cannot be considered separately from the manner in which it is displayed, and this distinction necessitates an opening digression.

**BOOKS AND WEBSITES**

What websites share with books and articles is a certain organized density of language and graphic, presented to maximize the likelihood that the content will transmit efficiently and with minimum distortion from author to reader. In this time-honored way understanding is created, codified and disseminated, and communities (cultures) of shared interests grow more rapidly and authoritatively than they otherwise would. But many authors spent the early days of the Internet in an
uneasy mixture of fear and curiosity. It was “in the air” that the web was on its way to supplanting books as society’s primary means of transmitting knowledge. As a teaching tool websites were new and unproven, yet the web was cheaper, more multimedia, less environmentally intrusive, and, of course, more up-to-the-minute. Books were said to be heading to obsolescence: flat, clumsy, non-interactive, and too linear to function in the digital age, while the very structure of our minds was constantly being cast as analogous to the multidirectional action of computers. But these anxieties were aimed at least partly in the wrong direction. Traditional book publishers may know hard times, but the culprit is now more likely to be seen as television and mass-market global capitalism than the Internet per se. The web has not replaced books, but developed an independent life as a medium for learning and for sharing research results.

Meanwhile, a conventional wisdom emerged concerning the differences between books and website learning. A website’s components are typically linked to one another cyclically, or at least in multiple possible orderings. The authorial voice is partly suppressed by such open form, just as John Cage and Earl Brown claimed to have suppressed compositional intentionality with their open-form musics of the 1950s. Nowadays books, by progressing mundanely from start to finish, represent more than ever a directed narrative that is as much about the author as it is by the author. We go to websites when we seek something that we can structure for ourselves, to which we are free to commit ourselves as much or as little as we like. We read books when we want something that is structured for us, and where the effort is required not just to understand the form, but the creator of the form. Though web-based interactivity is said to involve the user more, in fact it merely involves the user differently, by offering choice. It is debatable, of course, whether these distinctions reside in the forms themselves, or in the way they are characteristically used. One “reads” a book from cover to cover, presumably; one “explores” a website as one wishes.

By modeling the brain’s delta-like neural pathways, might web learning lead to new perspectives and higher awareness? Or, on the other hand, do websites provide “mere” information, whereas books, by entraining us to linearity, provide “truer” and arguably superior knowledge? One can neither prove nor refute such assertions. Perhaps the one thing to be said with certainty is that the web demands critical attention because it exists, because it is an inexpensive, democratically accessible medium, because it is what people everywhere are doing, because it is pointless to shun it, and because, in the end, books and websites are not competitors but, ideally, collaborators.

All of this is why one should not critique a website innocently. Different strategies are called for. Here are my primary ones:

- A book’s linearity approximates temporal flow, and one critiques a book by asking how its narrative “develops.” A website is static; one asks instead how deep, thoroughly interlinked, and multidimensional its representation is.
- A book aspires to poetic eloquence, often to create intentional ambiguity or multidimensionality; whereas a website’s eloquence should serve clarity and the multidimensional links among parts of the site.
- A website displays and demonstrates; a book deepens an argument.
**Gamelan in the West**

Catherine Basset’s site complements her 1995 book; and the two together have received extraordinary exposure as a required part of the curriculum for the 2003 Music Baccalaureate for France. Nearly 30,000 students studied them, which is something unprecedented for a non-Western music tradition in a public education system. But it is not surprising. Internationally, gamelan music has become closely associated with many aspects of music education over the past several decades. With the help of imported instruments and teachers, many people in Europe, Japan, and North America now have the opportunity to study and perform the music directly. This experience provides what is perceived as a crucial window into radically different systems of musical thought and, as a by-product, social organization. And Basset’s website is already widely known and admired in the international gamelan community. During a trip to Singapore recently, where I collaborated with Singaporeans on gamelan, I found that Basset’s site had already been downloaded into everyone’s laptop.

One way to think about gamelan is as something fundamentally different from Western music. Gamelan is collective, learned through memorization and intensive practice in large cooperative groups. The music is largely cyclic and repetitive. It is tightly linked to other Javanese and Balinese art forms, as well as to ritual practice and religious belief. It is bound up with meanings and referential symbols that remain inaccessible without prolonged linguistic and anthropological study. A Westerner exposed to gamelan learns different music, radically different structures and principles, and comes face to face with wholly different perspectives. Few would deny the value of this contact, even if the cross-cultural bridge it proposes can only be partially crossed.

But there is another side. Representative as gamelan is of distant ways of life, it also shares a great deal with Western music. It is an art music featuring large ensembles in many ways congruent to the orchestral ensembles of the European tradition. Like these, gamelan embodies cultural systems developed in elite (court or monarchic) contexts over a period of 500 years beginning roughly at the same time as the Renaissance. In the twentieth century, Bali and Java confronted many of the same rapid advancements in communication, travel, and technology that the West did. Their monarchic system broke down, colonialists were driven out, and the nation-state of Indonesia founded. Later, as in the West, music came to be distributed in academies and commodified via recordings. Stylistically, dramatic changes occurred, that reflect the discontinuous, accelerated, multidimensional character of contemporary life, much in the same way as music changed in Europe and America. Coming in increasing contact with the West, gamelan musicians have eagerly sought out places in the global musical arena, wishing to be part of international exchange rather than be labeled an isolated, pre-modern phenomenon.

It is an open question as to whether it is preferable, when coming in contact with different ways of life, to emphasize our differences as a path to mutual understanding, or to emphasize our similarities as a way to recognize a common humanity. Basset
mainly stays close to the first approach by focusing on pre-modern traditions as opposed to their recent descendants, and by depicting a cosmologically ordered, court-centered world, rather than the messy and fractious Indonesia of today. This world’s strikingly rational consistency of structure, interlinked among musical, literary, and philosophical domains, cannot fail to remind the user of the cross-referenced architecture of websites themselves. It is a perfect fit with them. Here is how Basset organizes her material.

**CONTENT, DESIGN, AND CRITIQUE OF THE SITE**

The site has at its heart a powerful unifying concept, elucidated through texts, graphics, sound, photograph, and animation. It is that the stratified, cyclic musical structures of Bali, Java, and Sunda can be thought of as reflecting a culture in which social or aesthetic power is distributed from an “exemplary centre” (to use Clifford Geertz’s 1980 phrase) outward along radii and around concentric circles. The system is said to represent the still-influential world view of Hindu-Javanese dynasties, particularly Majapahit (9th to 14th centuries), and is effectively symbolized by the mandala. Basset and her team have designed dozens of these mandalas to illustrate various features under discussion, and they are visually spectacular. They not only reflect the music but they also are “iconic” (as Becker and Becker influentially described it in a 1981 article) with many other cultural epistemologies. More “linear” aspects of the culture, as seen in poetry and sung vocal melody, are described, but these are portrayed as subservient in overall function to the primary image of concentricity.

In the music, for example, the large gongs are thought of as spiritually and functionally primary. They are sounded least frequently and are shown at the center of the mandala. Instruments that play more rapid figuration and have a subsidiary functional role – but do the crucial work of *arborescence* (Basset’s term, based on a Balinese metaphor), that is, enlivening and developing the structure – are shown at the circumference, always linked to the gong via radii. Instruments playing at intermediate speeds in the stratified structure are shown along concentric circles emanating from the center. In terms of social organization, one may imagine royalty in place of the gongs, and lesser nobility or commoners as analogous to the surrounding circles. In spatial organization, for Bali at least, sacred mountains are at the center, humanly-populated lowlands in intermediate zones, and the demon-infested sea at the edge. Architecture is a case of another traditional epistemology that can be portrayed in terms of the same kinds of symmetries. There are many more possible analogies, and they add up to a prismatic, unified concept of gamelan’s cultural context.

The home page offers two main sets of links. The first connects to a series of texts, each of chapter-length and magnificently designed with graphics, charts, and parallel columns used to compare, for example, concepts in gamelan and Western music. The various “chapters” (“Introduction”; “Instrument collectif : Gamelan au sens large”; “Instrument collectif : Gamelan au sens restreint”; “Instruments individuels”; and
“Conclusion”) describe general cultural principles. These are designed to be read sequentially, but are also effective in any order. Each develops, in parallel but distinctive ways, the central theme.

The opening invocation sets the tone: “Pour approcher la signification profonde de la construction musicale, il faut passer les portes du palais et pénétrer dans la culture savante indienisée des royaumes concentriques.”

What follows is consistently mandala-like in relating concentrically back to this central concept. Under “Harmonie universelle,” gamelan sensibility is described in terms of religious concepts that align powerful symbols along the radial axis of a concentric view of the universe. Music history is portrayed as a series of concentrically layered, diachronic developments originating in ancient gamelan forms. Each successive historical stage utilizes the same principles that underlie the elemental ancient music, in progressively more elaborate ways. The many illustrations in the text are also consistently linked to the central theme. Under “Pivots et symétries,” one finds six awesomely inventive visual representations, all based on a symmetrical partitioning of geometrical space, of a melody originating in the Balinese gamelan angklung.

The site’s other main link is to the Gamelan mécanique, a set of photographs of gamelan animated to perform a set of five simple Balinese, Javanese, and Sundanese compositions. No people are seen playing the ensembles and it is not a film. Rather, like a music box or player piano linked to a light show, the instruments play themselves. Each key or gong of the melody illuminates in perfect rhythmic precision as the notes that it plays fly by, glowing like photons. The result is a ballet of light and rhythm that cleverly translates the discrete, percussive design of the music as a visual, almost tactile experience. Alternate notations – mandalas and grids, also animated with lights and movement – are available with a click. Instruments can be isolated and the tempo adjusted. The effect is enchanting, and should be revelatory for those new to the music.

In terms of the criteria listed earlier, this site does what a website should do; it is remarkably unified. The central idea of music with concentric structure unfolds via visual, sonic, and textual links that elaborate a single, highly focused and well-defined idea in progressively greater detail. Unlike in a book, one may view any part of the site and find an aspect of the central idea explained or demonstrated there, always with attractive combinations of graphics, text, and sound. The particular eloquence of the site is the strength of the congruence between its content (the gamelan as mandala) and its form (concentrically organized displays of the content, all linked back to the home page). Interlocked, tightly networked structures are thus surprisingly revealed as characteristic of both gamelan and cyberspace. The fact that one of these structures developed in old Java and the other in the contemporary West is by no means a strange coincidence, however – it is merely evidence for the bio-psychological universality of hierarchically organized cognitive frames. It is to Basset’s credit that she was able to select and isolate a structural essence in gamelan music showing such a strong affinity for the web as a medium for knowledge transmission.
But this raises further critical questions. Basset’s *univers concentrique* is static. Her representations are distillations of what I view as a more unstable and irregular world of music, one that it might have been difficult to show with such clarity on the web. The gamelan mecanique performs only very simple melodies, where more elaborate ones might have shown a weakening or even a breakdown in some of the concentric perfection. In Basset’s depiction, the culture of gamelan is wholly dependent on principles established centuries ago, and one is left to imagine how it has changed or developed since. While the idea of the gong cycle is as influential for gamelan as harmonic tonality is to Western music, there is more to these structures than perfect regularity, just as there is more to tonality than balanced tonic and dominant functions. Recent gamelan music, which in many ways breaks down these conventions even more, is noticeably absent from the site, as is discussion of the lives of gamelan musicians today and the many ways that twentieth-century Indonesian life has altered the music’s meaning and context.

A site representing all of this with the clarity evident in *Gamelan, architecture sonore* could be too vast and unwieldy. Were it possible, what it might show is a gamelan culture not wholly isolated in its own milieu, but one that has evolved in interaction with the wider world, one that is currently undergoing mutation and change. To portray this would require substituting ambiguity for clarity, similarity for difference, and fuzziness for precision. Presently, it is unclear whether the Internet is suited for these qualities. For this site, however, Basset shaped a successful marriage of form and content, and realized it with clarity, care, and aesthetic power.

**References**
