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Ardhanariswara: A Composition-as-Research Project for String Quartet and Dance

Nicholas Gray

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Ardhanariswara is a composition-as-research project by Nicholas Gray. The video shows the first performance of the work by the Piatti Quartet with choreography by Kali Chandrasegaram on 9 July 2017 in the Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre at SOAS, University of London, as part of the *X-Drifts Festival*, which was run by the Anglo Asiatic Arts and Heritage Alliance.

As a composer-researcher, my work maintains a continuous dialogue between three elements: performance, composition and writing/theorising about music. I was deeply changed musically by the period during which I lived in Bali from 1987–1989 on a Dharmasiswa scholarship from the Indonesian government. Whilst in Bali I studied *gendér wayang* with master-musician I Wayan Loceng in the village of Sukawati, and later returned to undertake doctoral research on this ensemble, which led to the publication of my book *Improvisation and Composition in Balinese Gendér Wayang: Music of the Moving Shadows*. Much of my composition work is influenced by Balinese music and Balinese ideas about music: for instance *The Birth of Kala* and *The Watchers by the Well* (both of which use *gendér wayang* in combination with other instruments, storytelling, and movement); *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* for solo violin together with Balinese dancers, and my rock project *My Tricky Spirit*.

Balinese Gendér Wayang

Gendér wayang is the name given to a small duo or quartet of bronze metallophones that are used in Bali to accompany the shadow play (*wayang kulit*) — a sacred drama based on stories from ancient Indian epics. It also serves as a ritual ensemble that is played for life-cycle ceremonies, temple festivals, purification rituals and cremations as part of Bali's rich Hindu heritage. The playing technique in this miniature gamelan ensemble is very demanding, as players must damp the ringing notes with their wrists while executing high-speed figuration that interlocks between the instruments. Bamboo resonating tubes

beneath the keys give the sound a unique resonance. *Gendér wayang* pieces reach extraordinary levels of contrapuntal complexity, even by Balinese standards, and the ensemble's style informs most, though not all, of my work.



Fig.1: Two Balinese *gendér wayang* instruments, bronze keys, bamboo resonators within wooden frames with wooden mallets, Tenganan, Bali. Photo: Nicholas Gray, 2002.

The Piece

Ardhanariswara, or *Ardhanarishvara*, is the name of the joint female-male form of the Hindu God Shiva, which appears in both Indian and South East Asian iconography. The music uses interlocking techniques inspired by Balinese music within the format of the string quartet, which itself mirrors the registers of a soprano, alto, tenor, bass (SATB) choir. Susan McClary has argued that Western instrumental genres have carried over many gendered aspects from vocal music, in terms of narrative structure, for instance. The combination of the implied male and female voices within the string quartet parts seemed particularly fitting for this subject. This also provided a link with *gendér wayang*; interlocking parts in

Balinese music, too, are often considered ‘male’ (*lanang*) and ‘female’ (*wadon*), though other terms are also used (including *polos*, ‘basic’ and *sangsih*, ‘different’).

The piece is structured in several sections of varying metre and intensity: an introduction using tremolo (fast back and forth movement of the bow); a slow-walking-tempo passage featuring string harmonics; a ritornello (recurring passage) in 6/8 time; an animated dance section in 7/4; a pizzicato-based dance in 13/8; ritornello again, and a final fast section, followed by a return to the walking-tempo style with string harmonics.

The Dance

The music became the basis for a choreography that uses the spatial arrangement of the string players to provide a focus for the dancer, who emerges at the centre. The choreography was created by Odissi choreographer and dancer Kali Chandrasegaram, with the guidance and support of Singapore-born festival organiser, theatre producer and choreographer Hi Ching. Kali was born in Malaysia and is interested in exploring links between Indian and South East Asian concepts. Hi Ching described the process of creating the choreography thus:

When conceptualising the performance, a fundamental consideration was the spatial aesthetic of the piece. Frequently, live musicians and stage performers are split, both inhabiting their specific separate areas. The positioning of a quartet of musicians would be an exciting way to frame a solo dancer. The four musicians were placed in a shallow semi-circle so that they could still maintain an intimate relationship with each [other] plus interact with the central dancer. Compass points and the musicians’ positions played an important role in helping the dancer structure his movements to reflect the duality of the character. He was also centrally sited directly within the aural sphere of the music performance. This provided a strong visceral bond between music and dance. The dancer contemporised his improvisation within the classical language of Odissi. This led to an exciting collaboration between musicians and dancer in a palpable creative shaping of the performance.

Aims, Objectives and Research Questions

The project aims to explore a conceptual space between post-minimalist and contemporary gamelan styles, and particularly builds on my experience of playing Balinese *gendér wayang* and Western violin. I also attempt to approach string quartet writing in a way that moves it away from the realm of self-

contained, absolute art music by pairing it with dance, and by approaching it from a perspective that is influenced by South East Asian arts, which allows the dance to grow directly from it.

McClary argues persuasively for strongly (and problematically) gendered narratives within the musical structures of the Common Practice Period (roughly 1650-1900). This work attempts to explore other more positive gender aspects within a string quartet structure that follows a Balinese-influenced approach to instrumental symbolism based on complementary opposites with a mediating centre. Dualistic symbols in Bali are often mediated in this way: for instance, the left and right sides of the shadow play screen by the *kayon* tree of life figure the *polos* and *sangsih* of gamelan, (on occasion,) by a binding part; while, besides the male and female dance styles, there exists a *bancih* (hermaphrodite) style. The focus on the instrumental lay-out of the instruments and dancer within the physical space also reflects my experience of playing in the *gendér wayang* quartet of metallophones, whose four musicians symbolically represent the four spirit siblings of the *dalang* shadow puppeteer.

Artistic and Research Contexts

The work is particularly informed by string quartets by the following composers: Terry Riley (in terms of an improvisationally informed, and thus flexible, approach to minimalism); Kevin Volans (in terms of patterned textures derived — in his case — from southern African tradition, and in mine, from Bali); Sofia Gubaidulina, and Harrison Birtwistle (in terms of extended string techniques used to create distinctive sonorities and atmospheres). As already mentioned, the piece is influenced by the interlocking musical style of *gendér wayang*, described earlier. It also grew out of my own interest in multi-layered performances that incorporate movement and sometimes storytelling, such as *The Birth of Kala*, which was, in turn, informed by Japanese movement artist Suprpto Suryodarma and Balinese composer Ida Wayan Oka Granoka.

This project is both a continuation of my own work, which uses composition as a tool to explore certain Balinese concepts, and also reflects the work of fellow composer-researchers, such as Francis Silkstone, who composes inter-culturally with South Asian music styles. UK-based composers such as

ourselves are situated in a globally interconnected musical world which produces new conceptual spaces, within which new kinds of work can take place.

Conclusion

I believe that composition is a well-placed research tool that enables nuanced and unique explorations of these issues and brings new perspectives to this field of enquiry. This starting point highlights yet further questions surrounding gender identity and its relationship with musical structure, religion, movement, and dance, which may be explored and developed further in a range of written and sonic media. Both myself and the performers aim to develop this project through further performances in conjunction with presentations and workshops. I aim to further develop approaches to writing for Western instruments that are influenced by Balinese music, as well as combinations with Balinese instruments, including works for strings and *gendér wayang* or other gamelan instruments.

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