

**Tradition and Innovation in Balinese Gamelan Angklung:
Issues in the Development of Angklung Kebyar
and the Music of American Gamelan Tunas Mekar**

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Introduction

Balinese *gamelan angklung* is one among many different types of *gamelan* found on the island of Bali, in Indonesia, each with its own instrumentation, repertoire, and characteristic sound. Like most (but not all), types of *gamelan*, *angklung* is centered around metallophones, hanging and horizontal gongs, and drums. Unlike most, it has no traditional association with the royal courts but is a “folk orchestra” completely identified with village ceremonial life. Belonging to the oldest layer in the multi-tiered Balinese structure of cultural tradition, it is used to accompany religious ceremonies, especially cremations. Its traditional repertoire is simple in style, generally eschewing the complicated interlocking *kotekan* parts used in other types of *gamelan* in favor of unison elaboration of a basic melody. It uses only four notes, the relative tuning of which is fairly consistent from one orchestra to another, and is fairly close to the intervals between “do, re, mi,” and “so” in the Western diatonic system.

Gamelan gong kebyar, by contrast, is a wholly modern ensemble, created in the twentieth century for a twentieth century audience. With no inherent ceremonial function, it is devoted to a self-consciously dramatic style of music full of extreme contrasts in texture, dynamics and tempo. Its trademark is the jarring, metrically unstable passages called “kebyar,” or “bursting into flame.” Its style emphasizes virtuoso display, and the development of its repertoire has taken place hand in hand with the development of the idea of composer as an individual artist. *Gong kebyar* has become the musical face that Bali shows to the outside world, and the vehicle through which she has asserted her artistic modernism. It is everything that *angklung* is not. Traditional styles like *angklung* have meanwhile fallen into relative disregard by comparison, although some still have important ritual functions.

Recent decades, however, have seen the emergence of a hybrid style called *angklung kebyar*, using the instrumental resources of the *gamelan angklung* to perform music in *kebyar* style. Linda Burman-Hall dates this trend to the 1950s, with the *gamelan angklung* appropriating pieces from the *kebyar* repertoire. Such borrowing and transcription between types of *gamelan* is common in Balinese music, but *angklung kebyar* has developed to the point where composers now create pieces in *kebyar* style specifically for

angklung.

In this essay I will examine the case of an American *gamelan* group named *Tunas Mekar*, based in Denver, Colorado, under the direction of I Madé Lasmawan. I will show how *Tunas Mekar* is representative of these contemporary trends in Balinese music, and show that these currents have not only influenced but been influenced by *Tunas Mekar*; thus demonstrating the global character of Balinese musical culture.

Tunas Mekar

Tunas Mekar is a community orchestra formed in 1988 by a small group of Denver-area musicians with an interest in Balinese *gamelan*, to play a set of *angklung* instruments acquired by Colorado Women's College in the 1970s and later inherited by the University of Denver when CWC was sold to DU. Their first instruction was from American *gamelan* expert Wayne Vitali, and in 1990 some members of the group traveled to Bali to study in Peliatan village with a teacher named Pak Madri. In 1992 Balinese composer and teacher I Madé Lasmawan became artist-in-residence of the group, a position he still holds today. Under his direction they issued a first recording in 1993 and a second in 1995; in 1996 they were invited to perform at the 18th Annual Bali Arts Festival in Denpasar, where their performance was broadcast on television and warmly received by the audience and the press.

Since that time *Tunas Mekar*, under the continued tutelage of Pak Madé Lasmawan, has been active as a performing ensemble throughout the Rocky Mountain area and is currently (2007) preparing the release of a new recording. All members participate on an unpaid basis, and the group is organized as a non-profit educational organization. Over the years the group has supplemented the *angklung* orchestra with several new sets of instruments, including a *gamelan gendèr wayang*, a *gamelan semaradana*, and a *gamelan belanganjur*. However the four-key *angklung* instruments, because of their relative portability and ease of playing, remain at the core of the group's performing repertoire.

Problems in Colin McPhee's Account of *Gamelan Angklung*

Although important recent studies have been made of *gong kebyar*, *gamelan belanganjur*, and *gender wayang*, no book-length study has been published on *gamelan angklung*. Thus the most detailed description of the *gamelan angklung* in the English literature may still be that presented in Colin McPhee's book, *Music in Bali*, published in 1966 and based on research conducted between 1930 and 1939. This work is unparalleled in its encyclopedic breadth and depth; however it is also dated in some ways. It makes no mention of the influence of *gong kebyar* on *gamelan angklung*, and so fails to describe important aspects of the instrumentation and performance practice of a modern *angklung* group like *Tunas Mekar*.

The most obvious modification in *Tunas Mekar*'s instrumentation is the expansion of the gong section. The group uses a set of three hanging gongs to articulate the metric structure of its music. These are the large gong ("gong"), the small gong ("kemong"), and the medium gong ("kempur"). The large gong provides the primary structural articulation, while the two smaller gongs subdivide the large gong cycle in various regular or irregular ways. McPhee's description of *gamelan angklung* includes only the *kempur* and states clearly that "no secondary punctuation subdivides the melodic period in any way. The *kempur* supplies the only structural accents..." The reason for this discrepancy is that the large and small gongs have been added by the group to the original instrumentation, which did indeed include only the *kempur*. The large gong is borrowed from the *gong kebyar* itself, and the small gong is borrowed from another ensemble, the *gamelan pelegongan*. Pak Madé describes the gong section now incorporated into the orchestra as "*gong kebyar* style." He points out that when the group plays traditional *gamelan angklung* compositions such as *Sekar Sandat* (which you will hear in a little while) only the *kempur* is used. This modification of the gong section is one typical of modern *angklung* orchestras, which allows them to play the structurally more complex *kebyar* repertoire.

Another, slightly less obvious but rather more important modification is the use of larger drums. Here too the modification facilitates the performance of pieces from the *gong kebyar* repertoire. For these

pieces the group uses one or a pair of *kendang gupekan* played with the hands; while for traditional *angklung* pieces the smaller *kendang angklung* played with sticks is used. The *kendang gupekan*, like the small gong, is borrowed from the *gamelan pelegongan*, and is smaller than the drums used in *gong kebyar*. Playing the drums with the hands allows a more virtuosic style and is an important marker of *kebyar* style in *angklung* performance.

A more subtle distinction is the use of *kecek* instead of *rincik*, both of which are cymbal instruments of the *ceng-ceng* family, used to articulate surface rhythms along with the drums. Pak Madé pointed out to me that the *gamelan angklung* he directs at Colorado college uses a *rincik*, which is the type traditionally used in *angklung*. The *kecek* is slightly larger, and like the drums and small gong, is borrowed from the *gamelan pelegongan*. However it should be noted that this discrepancy goes back to the original set of instruments; they included the larger *ceng-ceng* when they were originally acquired in Bali. Either it was substituted prior to that time, or it was included when the *gamelan* was first created.

Apparently incidental discrepancies with McPhee's description also include the use of the time-keeping *tawa-tawa* and the high-register melody instrument *curing*, neither of which he mentions, and the *suling* bamboo flute, which he describes as rare. These are apparently all common in traditional *angklung* (indeed the *tawa-tawa* is necessary), so McPhee's omission of them may reflect an inconsistency in his observation or reporting, or the influence of some unusual local practice.

An important modification in performance practice concerns the tuned, knobbed kettle-gongs called *reyong*. In the traditional *angklung* these are mounted on either end of a wooden rod or crosspiece and carried, two to a player. This arrangement facilitates their use in procession but severely compromises their volume and resonance. Also in the traditional *angklung*, they are used exclusively as a melodic instrument, playing elaborated versions of the basic melody. In *Tunas Mekar* these have been removed from their wooden crosspieces and placed side-by-side in a low wooden stand for superior acoustic performance. This also allows the player to use two sticks on one *reyong* when they are used percussively, as they often are in the *kebyar* repertoire. This percussive use of the *reyong* is another important marker of

kebyar style.

An instrumental modification *Tunas Mekar* has not made is the inclusion of *ugal*. This is a *gangsa*-type instrument in the *gong kebyar*, larger and more prominent than the rest, which plays a special, “lead” part. The *ugal* player is responsible for cueing the other players in order to achieve the high level of ensemble accuracy that is required in *kebyar* repertoire, especially in the metrically irregular *kebyar* passages that are its hallmark. In the words of Lisa Gold, “The *ugal* player plays a critical role in keeping everyone together by gesturing with his elbow and flashing his mallet in the air before striking the keys, working in close tandem with the lead drummer. Absolute precision is required in these passages.” Some *angklung* groups have adopted the innovation of including a pair of *ugal* instruments, *kebyar*-style. *Tunas Mekar* has not, but assigns the role of *ugal* to one of the senior *gangsa* players, who executes the part on a normal instrument.

To hear the differences we are talking about, we might choose a few examples from the recently recorded repertoire. An unreleased recording by *Tunas Mekar* of the traditional *angklung* composition *Sekar Sendat* shows clearly the relative simplicity of the ceremonial style. Note that the *gangsa* metallophones, playing an elaborated version of the steady low-register melody, are all playing in unison and in exactly the same rhythm, without any hint of the interlocking *kotekan* patterns normally associated with *gamelan*. Tempo and texture contrast is almost entirely absent, and dynamic and timbral contrast serves mainly to distinguish different repetitions of the gong cycle. On the other hand, an unreleased recording¹⁷ of Pak Madé’s original *kreasi baru* composition for *gong kebyar* entitled *Negara Gunung* vividly demonstrates the irregular rhythms, unpredictable contrasts and ensemble virtuosity characteristic of the *kebyar* style. The jagged and irregular passage at the beginning of the piece is a *kebyar* proper, and constitutes the most important marker of the style compositionally. Of course the scale and timbre of the two ensembles also makes for an unmistakable difference in the way they strike the ear.

A recording by Ubud-based *Gamelan Semara Ratih* of *Oleg Tambulilingan*, a warhorse of the *kebyar* repertoire, may be instructively compared to *Tunas Mekar*’s recording of the same piece on

angklung (from the group's 1995 CD *Music from Bali, Indonesia*), to see how the characteristics of the style sound when they are expressed in a different medium. This is a fairly long piece, but I will play the three-part introduction from both recordings to demonstrate. This meeting of *kebyar* style with the timbre and tuning of *angklung* is what is meant by *angklung kebyar*.

Gamelan Tunas Mekar and Angklung Kebyar in Bali

When *Tunas Mekar* performed at the Bali Arts Festival in Denpasar, Bali in 1996, it was a milestone for the group, being only the second American *gamelan* to receive this honor. However it was also a milestone for *angklung kebyar* in Bali. *Tunas Mekar's* performance was the first full-length concert of *angklung kebyar* ever presented at the festival, and created a stir among the Balinese audience.

Pak Lasmawan's efforts to promote *angklung kebyar* began in the 1970s. As Burman-Hall has pointed out, the genre is controversial for some because they feel the melancholy associations of the *angklung's* role in the cremation ceremony make it inappropriate for *kebyar* repertoire (Burman-Hall 178).

Pak Madé plays down the idea of controversy surrounding *angklung kebyar*:

“Anything new will encounter resistance at first. When I started doing *angklung kebyar* in 1975, very few people were doing that. When I started that in Denpasar, I chose the best teacher and the best dancer to work with me. This made people pay attention to what we were doing, and think about whether they agreed with it or not. When I transposed *Oleg Tambulilingan* and *Panyembrama* to *angklung*, it inspired people to play it who did not have a *gong kebyar* in their temple. They had never thought to try it before. I even debated with myself whether I should do it, but I loved *angklung* and I wanted to try something new, so I transposed them, and also *Baris* and *Jauk*.

“The first performance was inside a temple in Denpasar, and that made everybody pay attention. I also invited the teacher of Denpasar's first independent dance studio to come to the concert. After that, the idea of playing these pieces on *angklung* spread rapidly. At that time, around thirty years ago, not every *banjar* in Bali had a *gong kebyar*” (I Madé Lasmawan, 25 Feb 2007).

As already noted, *angklung kebyar* as an artistic trend can be traced back to the 1950s according to Burman-Hall, and McPhee describes the influence of *kebyar* on the *angklung* as early as the 1930s, at

least in north Bali. Pak Madé's comments, however, imply that this trend had waned considerably by the mid-1970s. He believes that his efforts spurred considerable activity in this realm. "After that I was invited to teach those *angklung kebyar* arrangements to four different *banjars* in Denpasar. I am considered, if not the first, maybe the second in Denpasar to do this."

The resurgence in *angklung kebyar* activity following Pak Madé's experiments in the 1970s was followed years later by another resurgence following *Tunas Mekar*'s 1996 Denpasar debut. All members of the group agree that the Balinese audience was taken aback by their temerity in performing a full-length concert with dance, all on *angklung kebyar*. Pak Madé describes the effect of the performance:

"When *Tunas Mekar* performed a program of *angklung kebyar* at the Bali Arts Festival in 1996, we had never had *angklung* in the festival. If there was *angklung*, it was only traditional. We were the first. Every newspaper, every magazine in Indonesia said, 'Oh, *Tunas Mekar* is calling us to wake up.' At that time, we only had *angklung*. ... We played a lot of pieces, including *Teruna Jaya*, the most difficult piece in the *gong kebyar* repertoire.

"Everything that starts in Denpasar spreads easily. Now it has become more popular. Even *Sekar Jaya* has performed *angklung kebyar* in Bali. But after *Tunas Mekar*. We did it first. At that time *Sekar Jaya* had some *angklung kebyar* pieces but not so many.

"Now there is an *angklung* competition in the festival. You can see two groups play against each other every day. They are required to play one traditional piece, one *kreasi baru*, one or two dance pieces. They allow you to choose from a short list of dance pieces.

"They still talk about *Tunas Mekar* in Bali. Many people in Denpasar ask me when *Tunas Mekar* is coming back. Bali TV still has the videorecording of our performance and plays it sometimes."

Pak Madé's comments are corroborated by members of *Tunas Mekar* who participated in the 1996 concert, all of whom agree that it caused a small sensation among the Balinese audience. Frankie Anderson relates that she and others were approached by strangers in the street and congratulated for their playing, and that Pak Madé was interviewed repeatedly by the Indonesian press. An article entitled "Denver Awakens Bali" that appeared in the July 7, 1996 edition of Jakarta-based *Gatra* newsmagazine. Translated for *Tunas Mekar*'s promotional kit, it reads in part:

"*Tunas Mekar* bravely performed gamelan *angklung*. This type of orchestra has received

little attention from the Balinese artists themselves. In Bali, *angklung* refers to a four-tone gamelan which is usually played for funerals. As opposed to *kebyar*, which is readily found throughout the island, *angklung* does not occur in every village. However, ‘We want to awaken the Balinese, especially composers, to examine the *angklung* more closely,’ said I Madé Lasmawan, 38, *Tunas Mekar*’s teacher and an alumnus of S.T.S.I in Surakarta.

“In recent years, the Balinese have been caught up in a *kebyar* trend, so *Tunas Mekar*’s very deliberate performance of *angklung* surprised the audience. (...)

“The sound can be odd due to the limited tones of *angklung*. ‘My feeling was not quite right when dancing with gamelan *angklung*,’ said Ida Bagus Pujawatra, 24, a student at S.T.S.I. Denpasar who danced *Oleg Tambulilingan*. I Ketut Partha, 39, a former teacher of *Sekar Jaya* who helped *Tunas Mekar*’s performance by playing *kendang*, realized that he needed extra concentration, being unused to playing *kebyar* pieces with *angklung* tones. But the Americans of *Tunas Mekar* are able to play and enjoy *angklung* with their entire spirits.”

What these comments strikingly illustrate is the mainstream position claimed by an American group among currents of stylistic development within Balinese music. *Tunas Mekar*’s unusual concert has inspired Balinese performers to follow their example. Of course, this has taken place within the context of a general long-term trend toward the development of an *angklung kebyar* style, but the evidence indicates a significant invigoration of that trend through the impact of the 1996 concert. *Tunas Mekar*’s influence, although originating outside of Bali geographically, exists squarely within contemporary and ancient Balinese tradition, specifically as seen through the artistic vision of I Madé Lasmawan. Their modest but unmistakable impact on Balinese music represents the completion of a cycle of reciprocal influence between points on almost exactly opposite sides of the planet, all within an evolving tradition of indigenous music specifically Balinese in origin, a tradition which has now expanded to the point where it includes groups in Asia, Europe and the Americas.

In this way we can see the robustness of Balinese musical tradition, and acknowledge its position on the world stage as a mature, sophisticated and global artistic style. In this sense, Bali (like “the West”) is no longer a place but a state of mind. By having the confidence not only to incorporate ensembles formed in strange lands by strange people but also to assimilate their perspectives, Bali reveals herself as a cultural player on the global stage.