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Core Western Music History II

9 April 2017

Lou Harrison's Incorporation of Gamelan Music Into His Own

While gamelan music has been an integral part of Indonesian culture, Lou Harrison reconciled it with Western music by incorporating elements from the original style into his own writing. In his lifetime as a composer, Harrison worked with Asian instruments and other worldly influences as he strived for aesthetic perfection. His oeuvre provides a fine addition into the repertory of Western Art and American music, as Harrison sought a unique, yet immaculate fusion of world sounds, especially with gamelan instruments that produced the most tonal and timbral variety. (Kartomi & Mendonça, 2017) Furthermore, he accomplished writing prominent works using microtones, as he explored the sonority of metallophones and texture of the percussion ensemble, while avoiding unethical appropriation of the Indonesian culture.

A couple of noteworthy differences between what Harrison thought he did with gamelan in his original music and traditional gamelan music are the context of utilizing the gamelan and the hybridizing of cultural instrumentations. In the performance of most of his pieces, such as his *Concerto for Piano with Javanese Gamelan*, there is no traditional ceremony of any sorts, nor any dancing or choreography that pertain to Indonesian culture. Gamelan music is played in the Muslim country for a variety ceremonies and programs, including weddings; several genres of dance, called beksa; theatre, called wayang; and the annual Garebeg Mulud, the commemoration of the birth and death of the Prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam. (Perlman, 2004) Harrison merely created a musical work that manifests aesthetic pleasure through percussive sounds. He

found his distinct sound as a composer by implementing gamelan into works that also feature Western instruments, (Miller & Hanson, 2017) such as in the piano concerto, where he takes a grand piano, tunes it to the just temperament of the gamelan ensemble, and writes in an imitative manner of karawitan. In a way, one can argue that this hybridized ensemble is conceptually different than jangkep, the complete gamelan ensemble. (Spiller, 2004) Jangkep is the largest and most versatile of the court tradition, encompassing a plethora of timbres, (Sutton, 1998) however, the vocal parts are absent, and in its stead, a solo grand piano. Nonetheless, his works are genuinely American, with the unique, yet novel essence of gamelan music in the Western Art tradition.

Harrison drew his inspiration from assorted Western and world cultures, particularly Indonesian music from his youth that led to his distinction as a composer. In the beginning of his career, he wrote for percussion instruments, often mere found objects. Several works also involved the tack piano. He studied with a few notable musicians, but perhaps Henry Cowell impacted Harrison's gamelan-based compositions the most. Additionally, Virgil Thomson and Colin McPhee also had minor influence on the composer. After evolving out of twelve-tonalism from studying under Arnold Schoenberg, Harrison turned to the use of microtones, which is especially heard in his gamelan music. At the maturity of his writing style, he relied on melodicals, short motifs that invert and evolve, to provide the texture of the music. His continued fascination with gamelan music led to his invention of the American gamelan, a percussion ensemble comprised of aluminum keys and tubes, oxygen tanks, and other sundry percussion instruments. (Miller & Hanson, 2017) On a personal level, Harrison was a pacifist, non-judgmental, and viewed quite amicably, which reflected on his professional development as he favored communal performing ensembles, such as gamelan. (Miller & Lieberman, 2006) When

he was a young adult, he performed in a variety of percussion ensembles without formal training, and later toured around playing Korean and Chinese instruments and taught gamelan regularly. (Miller & Hanson, 2017) This work demonstrates Harrison's lifelong passion for Asian music and percussion instruments.

One specific piece by the composer that manifests an intricate understanding of gamelan music is the *Concerto for Piano with Javanese Gamelan*. In this particular work, the piano is tuned in just intonation, as opposed to the conventional equal temperament, and harmonically resonates with the gamelan ensemble that replaces a traditional symphonic orchestra. Also because of this tuning system, the instruments produce microtones, which allow for a wider array of colors deriving from percussive motives that dominate the three-movement work. Microtonal modes, seemingly divergent from jazz and Gregorian chant, affect the melodic behavior of ensemble and soloist, a sound quite familiar to Javanese and Balinese culture. (Harnish, 1998) He replaced the traditional part of unaccompanied singing, the tembang, (Sutton, 1998) with the solo pianist, alluding to the concept of the Italian Concerto, with the gamelan ensemble representing the orchestral force against the soloist. It is implied through interviews with Harrison that he was aware that he took the original music out of context of karawitan, even going further to develop the American Gamelan for use in other compositions, but insisted on his virtuous endeavors to fuse the cultural musics together. (Miller & Lieberman, 2006) Additionally, one could argue that Harrison's implementation of overlaying metallophones is similar to the Russian compositional style of overlapping ostinati together, such as in Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* opera. Musical elements from cultures across the world are diverse, but with similar intentions in affecting the spirit of music making. (Bonds, 2010) In karawitan, each instrument may be categorized into three groups: form defining instruments,

instruments that bear the melodic framework, and elaborating parts. (Perlman, 2004) For this concerto, the piano provides the melodic framework and soloistic content. Harrison has sought the aesthetics of high art while imitating traditional Indonesian music in the Western Art idiom. (Becker, 1980) Ultimately, Harrison demonstrated a myriad of techniques that focus on rhythm, melody, and tonality, but obfuscated the importance of harmony.

Harrison's love for Asian music and experience as a percussionist has led to an oeuvre of worldly sounds incorporated into the American composer's writing, such with the *Concerto for Piano with Javanese Gamelan*. He wrote in just intonation, borrowed the heterophonic texture of the gamelan ensemble, and integrated it into a Western concerto-like form. While there are clear differences between his music and authentic Balinese and Javanese music, Harrison approached his compositions with an understanding of the intricacies in the gamelan music. His personal background and sophisticated exposure to world musics led to his successes in composing music with gamelan, adding to the American music repertory, but alluding to Indonesian culture with dignity.

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