

Sonic Explorations: On the Analysis of Intercultural Experimentalism

Andrew Raffo Dewar (Wesleyan University)

Email: adewar@wesleyan.edu

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Abstract

Intercultural musical experimentalism has likely been happening for as long as human music has existed. Most of the recent studies about this type of creative work have been regarding an approach Steven Feld has called “curation” -- a Western artist hiring a group of 'Other' musicians to fill out their band or do a concept album based upon the exotic musical materials of their culture. This paper will focus on another kind of intercultural music-making through the discussion of "*Maya*," ("Hallucination") a collaboratively composed piece of new music created in Java in 2004 by a group of seven composer/performers from Indonesia and North America, including seminal Indonesian experimentalists A.L. Suwardi and Pande Made Sukerta. The composition combines a number of elements and approaches from varying musical traditions of Java, Bali, and Sumatra, and also uses the sounds of live chickens, homemade instruments and electronics, which, through thoughtful construction and collage techniques, eludes simple interpretation. Existing models of analysis from several scholars regarding the use of traditional material in new work are placed in dialogue with this new piece. As a result, some of the many layers of intention, meaning, and result in the composition and its collaborative creation are highlighted, while also calling attention to problems and issues with the methodological tools currently available to discuss this kind of work.

Today I am speaking about the creation of a collaboratively composed piece of new music from 2004 entitled *Maya*, or *Hallucination*, performed by an ensemble of Indonesian and North American composer/performers, of which I was a member. I will focus this discussion on the first section of the 20 minute piece that I feel most embodies the form of intercultural music I highlight in this paper. In the course of my discussion I also mention existing models of analysis from other scholars in an effort to show some of

the analytical tools available to ethnomusicologists when discussing this type of collaboration.

Intercultural music is being discussed with increasing frequency, (Erlmann 1993, Garofalo 1993, Goodwin & Gore 1990, Guilbault 1993, Hamm 1989, Keil & Feld 1994, Lipsitz 1994, Meintjes 1990, Rothenberg 1998, Stanyek 2004) no doubt because of the increase in the flow of music and musicians circulating the globe. Most of these studies have focused on examples of what Steven Feld (2000) has called “curation,” or a Western artist choosing a group of Other musicians to back up their band or do a concept album based upon their (in many cases, traditional) musical materials, in the style of Paul Simon’s *Graceland* album.¹ In 'new music' circles, the discourse has for the most part centered upon the Western composer's incorporation of 'non-Western elements' (cf. Wen-Chung 1971, Diamond 1992), the non-Western composer's use of 'Western elements' (cf. Chung 1978, Feliciano 1983), or both of these lines of analysis (Corbett 2000). What this paper illuminates is a fertile area for study that lies somewhere between these approaches, focusing on collaborative collective exploration. There is a danger in this of aligning oneself to problematic concepts like trumpeter Jon Hassell's "Fourth World," (cf. Hassell 1982), composer Chou Wen-Chung's (1968, 1978) slightly less problematic "re-merger of East and West," or the carefree "happy hybridity" post-colonial theorist Jacqueline Lo (2003) cautions against, epitomized in her little 'song', "I love the world, the world loves me, let's party on interculturally" (2003:172). The artists involved in *Maya*, however, entered this "distinctly utopian interzone" -- as Corbett (2000) has characterized Hassell's concept -- with eyes wide open, and in the process created a collaborative music that has implications beyond its stylistic boundaries worth considering.

The compositional template within which *Maya* was created is different in a number of ways from the bulk of intercultural music made today. *Maya* was at the outset planned as a collaborative work, roughly comparable to the Surrealists’ “exquisite corpse” writings, in which one artist wrote a bit of a story, with the next adding to that, and so on, rather than a single composer charting the direction of the piece. Also, although there was a “curatorial” process involved in the selection of who would

¹ Jason Stanyek's (2004) article on Pan-African intercultural music is a notable exception to this.

participate, the decisions were made by the artists themselves, based upon existing creative relationships, a mutual understanding of varying aspects of traditional music in Indonesia, and informed aesthetic and interpersonal considerations -- though the decision was made by the North Americans. Economically, this collaboration offered a substantial honorarium to the Indonesian composers (equal to, in some cases, 5 months' wages) for the two month project, of which *Maya* was the beginning. This should be kept in mind because of its possible impact on the creative dynamic of the group. It is important to acknowledge that there is still a power imbalance at the fundamental level in this collaboration, like so many others, simply because of the positions of Indonesia, the U.S. and Canada in the global economic and cultural pecking order. As Indonesian choreographer Sal Murgiyanto has said, "the problems one has to face in interculturalism are not only aesthetics but also ethics: of equality, of representation and appropriation" (Murgiyanto 1995:95).

Though all the composers involved have a background in traditional music, they were split amongst varying aesthetic camps of modern composition. The group included Solo-based composers A.L. Suwardi and Pande Made Sukerta, both considered part of the first generation of modern Indonesian experimentalists and known for their sound-based compositional explorations and Suwardi's homemade instruments. Suwardi and Sukerta's work falls mostly into the category of *Musik Kontemporer*, or "Contemporary Music," whose relationship to traditional materials is generally considered to be more fluid than the other categories of Indonesian new music (cf. McGraw 2005). West Sumatra-based Balinese composer I. Dewa Nyoman Supenida and I. Bagus Widyana, a young Balinese composer, rounded out the Indonesian portion of the ensemble. Both Supenida and Widyana have compositional aesthetics that run more towards the *Kreasi Baru*, or "new creation" style. Two North American composers (myself and fellow Wesleyan ethnomusicologist Chris Miller) were present for the entire compositional process of *Maya*, while a third Wesleyan alum, Andrew McGraw, was present for the final rehearsals and performance.

The compositional process took place in Solo, Java at the STSI university campus a week before its premiere at the Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival. This extremely short gestation period undoubtedly affected how the piece was composed, as well as its final

form. One of the concerns we discussed at the first rehearsal was making a piece that was a mix-and-match approach that seems all too prevalent in this type of music-making, characterized by a musical representation of the 'salad bowl' analogy for multiculturalism that was popular in the 1980s. As a group we were more interested in forging a collective identity, rather than exhibiting a 'sum of parts' with visible seams.

Before getting to the music of *Maya* and my thoughts on it, I would like to briefly mention three existing models for the analysis of intercultural music -- the basic components of which are printed on the handout. Two of these models, interestingly, were conceived to discuss the use of Indonesian musical materials. All three were conceived to help articulate varying relations of experimental art music to traditional forms. The first I will mention is an article by Kwabena Nketia from 1982, in which he outlined his ideas regarding how African traditional music had been and could be used in a Western contemporary music context by African composers. The three broad categories he presents, however, can be abstracted to discuss other instances of intercultural musical creation, though clearly these three descriptors, "reversal," "syncretism," and "re-interpretation" do not cover all the possibilities available to composers. Jody Diamond's 1992 article uses a larger lexicon of categories (six as opposed to Nketia's three) to outline a new composition's relationship to traditional music that are effective, and encompass a broad range of possibilities. Despite its greater flexibility, it is still a taxonomy, with its own special problems simply due to its need to define and label. In addition, both the Diamond and Nketia models' effectiveness is dependant upon relationships to traditional materials. Peter Hadley's (1993) work on new music for gamelan by North American composers attempts to resolve some of these problems by creating a "sound/structure continuum" with two axes that illustrate the flow of musical ideas, materials and instrumentation to and from 'Western' to 'Indonesian'. Using this analytical technique, a piece may be placed somewhere in this virtual space to help visualize how the piece relates to musical ideas, what Hadley calls "software," and instrumentation, or material departure points, which he dubs "hardware" (1993:134). It is a fluid, elegant solution to the problems of typological modes of analysis, though it lacks

the specificity that Diamond's contribution excels at, and takes for granted the ability to isolate the sources of these "musical ideas," or "software."²

In calling these three approaches 'models,' I should stress that my use of these systems takes them out of their original contexts, which were not (except Hadley's, perhaps) intended as generalized typologies or analytical models. The point to be made here is that while none of these tools are individually an authoritative answer to the problem of analyzing intercultural creative work, when viewed together, they do provide a helpful theoretical framework to build upon. With these hijacked tools in mind, then, I turn to the music.

[Play musical example of *Maya*, 1st Section, ~1'30"]

http://adewar.web.wesleyan.edu/audio/maya_excerpt1.mp3

What you just heard is a combination of bowed *gender* (a metallophone with suspended bronze keys used in *gamelan*) and A.L. Suwardi's homemade *gong duduk*, or sitting gongs, which are bowed monochords using flat gongs as resonators that 'sit' on the floor, while harmonic nodes on the string are activated by the performers. There is also soprano saxophone, an amplified cage of baby chickens, computer-based electronics and bamboo flutes held from one end while being 'whipped' through the air to create a 'whooshing' sound with the fingerholes.

When discussing this first section of *Maya*, one question that may spring to mind -- especially after the previous discussion -- is how these sounds relate to various traditions or concepts (Indonesian or otherwise). In fact, this section of the piece sonically resembles Western electronic music or electroacoustic improvisation. However, can it really be said that the Indonesian collaborators are using Western electroacoustic music as their departure point, when they have either not heard examples of it, or have not had their aesthetic significantly influenced by that music? It seems preposterous.³ This section of the piece was described as *explorasi bunyi-bunyi*, or sonic

² For a more lengthy critical discussion on Hadley's model, see Miller (2005).

³ For a detailed and informative discussion of this very issue, see Diamond 1990 and Miller 2006.

exploration, by several of the Indonesian members of the ensemble – no mention was given to specific traditions, techniques, or cultural markers. But does that mean it is free of these things? Balinese composer I. Wayan Sadra describes *explorasi* as a way to both "...find different sounds from those produced by conventional techniques" and "a broadening or narrowing...of the traditional musical vocabulary" (1991:21). He has also said that *explorasi* "has the important function of creating new dimensions of experience and *kemantapan* [successful experiments]" (Ibid.).

The real question this so-called 'Western sonic signature' asks is who owns this aesthetic approach, this sound, if anyone? The tone of this section of *Maya* was formed through group improvisations, which began with the bowing of the *gender* -- a relatively common extended technique -- and Suwardi's *gong duduk*. The introduction of the electronics and saxophone came after the other elements of the section were in place, as an embellishment to the texture already created. As a result, the music was developed through a collective exploration of high frequency sounds, the overtone-rich texture of bowed metals and an abstract, pulseless soundscape. The primary generating elements of this music, then, were instruments of Indonesian origin, performed by both Indonesian and non-Indonesian performers, while using the Indonesian concept of *explorasi bunyi-bunyi*, or sonic exploration, as the driving compositional force. This creation of work during the course of rehearsals is common among Indonesian new music composers, as has been noted by a number of scholars (cf. Roth 1986:75-77). *Maya* clearly followed this approach on its path to achieving aesthetic consensus, or *mantap* -- literally translated as "steady," "stable," or "constant." This is the word Sadra used to describe successful *explorasi*, and that Alec Roth has also identified as the "ultimate goal" in Indonesian new music composition, though he also says, "when this happens is not possible to define in precise terms, being a matter of feeling" (1986:77).

Given this set of tools, approaches, and sounding results, what is their relationship to the varying traditions in play here? Though Diamond's idea of "bypassing tradition" or using traditional instruments as found objects or "sound-making tools independent of cultural custom or style" (1992:129) certainly fits, there is more at work here than that. The fact that the group composed in a style common to Indonesian composers and aimed toward an aesthetic goal of *mantap* is significant, since the sounding result is not

"Indonesian" in any conventional sense – though that is a red herring, in any case. Of course, the imperialist spectre in this is the instance in which, as Soegijono has said, “the Western composer takes over Eastern musical values, transfers them into a musical context whose syntax is characteristically Western, and calls the result multicultural innovation” (1995:32). What is used in *Maya* is a collection of both individual resources and cultural resources. These individual resources are in some ways metacultural, though they can also be seen as a manifestation of what Slobin has called an "affinity interculture," (1993:68) in this case centered around a shared experimentalist aesthetic. My use of 'metaculture' here is not meant to signify a 'culture-free' zone, but a situation in which the artists aim toward a non-idiomatic transcultural sonic communication. The result, then, is a bending of the individual toward a common goal, which in the case of *Maya* is magnified by the fact that there were indeed a number of aesthetic sensibilities in play, something perhaps impossible to hear in this section of the piece, but which is evident upon hearing the whole composition.

What can we learn through this discussion of *Maya* and sonic exploration? I believe it is further evidence that there continues to be something worth consideration in both Jody Diamond's (1990) statement that "there is no they there" and Tenzer's (2003) discussion of Jose Maceda's belief in a modernist emancipation of sound that goes beyond the rhetorical pitfalls of transcendence. I am not trying to suggest that this music is not ultimately tied to a web-like combination of cultures, because clearly it is. I am suggesting, however, that there is something at work here that allows us to, for a moment, focus on the transparency, flexibility, and spaces between these strands of web.

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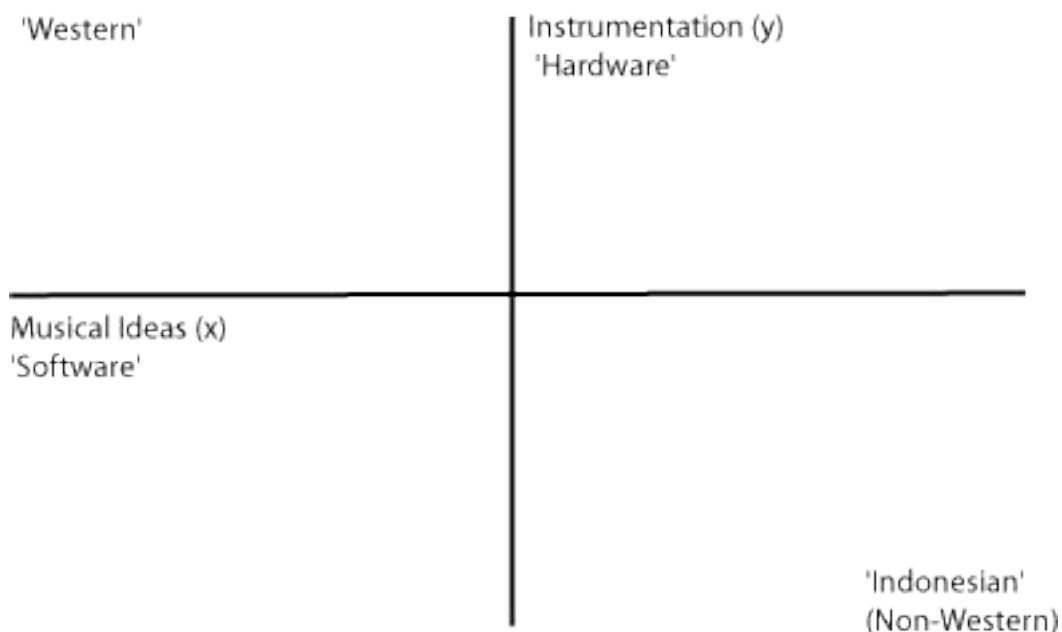
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Three Models of Intercultural Music Analysis

J.H. Kwabena Nketia. 1982. “Developing Contemporary Idioms out of Traditional Music”. *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, T.24, Supplementum: Report of the Musicological Congress of the International Music Council: 81-97.

Compositional Technique	Description
Reversal Techniques	"Making the regular irregular, and vice-versa."
Syncretic Techniques	"Going to traditional music...for creative ideas, sources of sound, themes and procedures that may be used for expanding one's modes of expression."
Techniques of Re-Interpretation	"Enables a composer to stay within his culture and give contemporary relevance to its musical tradition...by working on fresh integrations of musical elements from within the culture..."

Peter Hadley. 1993. “New Music for Gamelan by North American Composers.”
M.A. Thesis, Wesleyan University.



Jody Diamond. 1990. "Making Choices: American Gamelan in Composition and Education (from the Java Jive to "Eine Kleine Gamelan Music")." In Kathy Foley, ed. *Essays on Southeast Asian Performing Arts: Local Manifestations and Cross-Cultural Implications*. 115-139. Berkeley: Center for South and SE Asia Studies, University of California.

Compositional Technique	Description
Emulating the Tradition	"The composer tries as much as possible to employ the musical practices of the...[other] tradition with which he or she is most familiar.
Interpreting the Tradition	"Composers with extensive experience in a...tradition...attempt to make elements of that tradition more obvious to an...audience, serving as a kind of artistic translator."
Embellishing the Tradition	"...A meeting of styles, a kind of dialogue or partnership between two musical practices, where [one] practice is embellished by the addition of musical ideas or elements from other traditions."
Modifying the Tradition	"To draw inspiration from...traditions without attempting to duplicate them."
Acknowledging the Tradition	To "create pieces that, while not imitating [other] musics directly, use elements or instruments that show awareness of the...source."
Bypassing the Tradition	Composing for instruments "...as a set of 'found instruments' -- sound-making tools independent of cultural custom or style."