More than merely music, gamelan is an experience

By Christopher Chiu

"They look in Webster's Dictionary, you'll find the following entry: gamelan [gam-e-lan]. n. [Jav] 1 a Japanese instrument resembling the xylophone, 2 a flute, string, and percussion orchestra of southeast Asia.

Most people would find that to be an adequate explanation. This would be a pity, for in reality, this definition is far from complete. A gamelan is an orchestra, and more. With the help of Professor Evan Ziporyn and Aaron Woody "95, here is more a complete outline of just what a gamelan is.

Let's start with this second part of the original definition, which says that a gamelan is an orchestra. It is native to Indonesia, and includes several key instruments: two gongs, 20 metallophones, two drummers, a beatkeeper, and a dancer (optional). In order to understand what part each instrument plays in this orchestra, however, you have to understand some of the ground rules — the structure of the music, to be exact.

This is where the definition of a gamelan requires some expansion. The music played in a gamelan is quite different from most forms of Western music. For one thing, Western music tends to be linear and tightly rigid in structure. A piano solo, for example, consists of a primary theme (exposition), a development group where the theme is broken down and expanded upon, a restatement of the theme, another development group, a restatement of the theme, and an ending (coda). A typical rock/pop song will have a verse section, a bridge, a chorus, a solo section, and a outro section that brings things to a close. The classic gamelan, however, is often referred to as "cyclical," because it all begins again. What is important is that the order is not easily changed in either of these pieces; this is not the case with the gamelan.

The music played by a gamelan is cyclical. It is much like a palindrome: it can be played backwards or forwards and still sound the same. This is because each piece is balanced; the melody or theme that begins the piece will also be the melody that ends the composition. Any idea that is played in an earlier part of the piece will be repeated during a later part of the piece. Repetition is a very important part of this musical form, much more so than in Western music. This repetition comes in cycles that are delineated by the gongs. Much as the rising and setting of the sun mark the start and the end of a day, so the gongs mark when a theme will be played or repeated, depending upon where the ensemble is during the course of a piece.

The metallophones are much like xylophones, only they are all set to different registers and are tuned in pentatonic scales. The lowest metallophones provide the core melody, the middle metallophones provide the core melody, and the higher ones play parts that revolve around this central theme. The highest two metallophones have their own special relationship; their melodies often interlock, with each playing alternating notes. In this way they two instruments may sound like just one instrument, played twice as fast.

This arrangement of the metallophones points to another chief characteristic of gamelan music: stratification. Each instrument has its own pattern to play, but some instruments are more important than others. In this case, the gongs are absolutely essential to the group. If he fails, the whole ensemble will not only fall into chaos, but will grind to a halt — and with frightening swiftness.

At last, we come to the dancer. The primary responsibility of the dancer is to serve as a kind of a gambler in the lower registers take precedent over their higher tuned counterparts. The drums take this idea of stratification one step further. Their playing affects the volume level of the ensemble. If they speed up, the gamelan must get louder; if they slow down, then the ensemble must get softer. Furthermore, if the drummer stops, so must the orchestra. Thus, the metallophones must play very close attention to the drummer; otherwise the gamelan may go out of control.

One instrument that is always present, however, is the beatkeeper. His role is vital to the gamelan, for he, even more than the gongs, keeps the tempo. No matter how fast, slow, loud, or soft the orchestra gets, he must keep the beat constant. He is like the atomic clocks against which all other clocks are set; everyone including the drummers must pay attention to his pattern. A good beatkeeper is absolutely essential to the group. If he fails, the whole ensemble will not only fall into chaos, but will grind to a halt — and with frightening swiftness.

Thus, through the dancer's role we can see this then is a more complete description of a gamelan, but words cannot explain the power of this orchestra and its performances. To fully understand the gamelan and its music, you must go to a concert and experience everything for yourself. MIT now has its own gamelan named Galak Tika — one of only a handful of such groups outside of Indonesian — led by Professor Ziporyn. This ensemble was formed only three years ago, and their next concert will be at 8 p.m. on March 30 in Wellesley's Jewitt Center. Check them out!