Orchestra performs celebratory cross-cultural show

GAMELAN SEKAR JAYA
With Gamelan Galak Tika
La Sala de Puerto Rico
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By Ann Ames

IT's Gamelan Galak Tika opened the show last Thursday for Gamelan Sekar Jaya from the San Francisco Bay area. With imaginative, elaborate costumes, and the adept performance of music that was to many of us new and exotic, the evening's entertainment pleased more than just the ears of an audience that packed La Sala de Puerto Rico.

Gamelan Tika, led by MIT Professor Evan Ziporyn, proved its dedication to this Balinese art in two traditional pieces. Playing entirely from memory, as all gamelan orchestras must, the musicians provided a wonderful introduction to the intricately intertwined rhythmic patterns of the form. In addition to the music, the second piece involved the work of four dancers, one of them Desak Made Suarti Laksmi, currently a guest director of Galak Tika.

After its first trip to Indonesia (they have made two), Sekar Jaya was touted in the Indonesian press as "clearly the finest Bali- nese gamelan outside of Indonesia." To imagine that Indonesian groups must therefore be better than this ensemble is mind-boggling.

The group's visual presentation was equally thrilling, with each member clad in vibrant costumes, illuminated on the small stage by lights of the same orange, magenta, and violet hues of their clothes. In addition, three of the six pieces on the program incorporated a dancer, with a different one in each work. Like the music, the style of dance was very different from Western forms, with far more emphasis placed on shifting postures and facial expressions than on whole-body movement.

The first dancer to perform with Sekar Jaya, eight-year-old Balinese prodigy Wayuh Indra, took the stage in Barry, the third piece of the first half. His motions followed strictly in time with the beat of the music, displaying mature control over his own movements and an insensible sense of time. So serious was this diminutive performance that even after the piece, when the crowd erupted in appreciative applause, he did not so much as smile, but solemnly led the grinning adult members of the ensemble in a bow.

After intermission, the group premiered Tire Fire, Ziporyn's new piece for gamelan, two electric guitars, electric bass, and electric mandolin. Ziporyn described this piece as "a statement about crossing borders," and it certainly is that. The orchestra begins in trad- itional, energetic form, but then the electric strags crash in, crushing every exotic note in their cloudy, ugly path. The gamelan tries for a time to hold out against this technological monster, but the assault proves too much and for a while the guitars are left to thrash on alone.

Eventually the gamelan's beatkeeper sub- tly re-enters, not with the usual rigid beat, but in a Western rhythm, as if grasping at accep- tance by assimilating this new, more aggres- sive culture. The strings fall into a sort of soulful lament, with the last seconds of the piece gradually dying away, exhausted by the struggle. Then in a transition so simple it is barely discernible, everything comes together. The electric and acoustic sounds still do not quite blend, and the resultant compromise of East- ern and Western cultures is almost comical. Nevertheless, it is an undeniable celebration of diversity and cooperation, and the humor in the sound suggests a chorus of joyful human voices bringing the piece to an optimistic close.

Tradition returned in the next piece, Tapping Heaven, a dance drama that has exist- ed in Bali for at least 150 years. At this time I was 1 Nyonman Catta, also guest director of Galak Tika, his face masked so that only his dark eyes were visible. Still, an incredible amount of his "story" was told solely with those dancing eyes, which roved back and forth around the room, shifting and snapping in perfect time to the music. Draped in a man's elaborate costume, his actions were those of a fast-talking and quick-witted fellow, his rapid-fire actions eliciting madly-thought from the orchestra.

All the talents of the ensemble exploded in Tereng Jaya, the final piece on the program. The music raced forward faster than it had at any other point in the evening, and when dancer Emiko Saraswati Susilo took the stage, she captured the full visual attention of an audience whose ears were already captivated by the speeding rhythms. A stunning per- former, she turned spectators and musicians alike with an array of expressions that encom- passed the entire spectrum of emotion. A coy smile here, into wild-eyed, almost demonic rage, which then melted into a sexy, saucy smile. She was exquisite. She has been a member of Sekar Jaya since 1990, and yet her pres- ence on stage may well have been the only thing all evening that threatened to overshadow the efforts of the group's musicians as they beat furiously the rhythms her move- ments explored.

Several works written for Sekar Jaya by American composers are available on a CD entitled American Works for Balinese Gamel- an Orchestra, recorded by the group in 1993. The CD, like this performance, is unique and fascinating, even without the extended sensi- tivity dimension provided by the visual element often found in this genre. Unfortunately, for such the only places to get the full treatment are San Fran- cisco and Indonesia. After last Thursday evening, I've decided to start planning my trip as soon as possible.