

The Gamelan Semara Pagulingan and its Music

The concept of the semara pagulingan orchestra and its repertoire is thought to have originated in the kingdom of Gelgel in Klungkung (circa 1515–1686). The repertoire is primarily derived from its musical predecessor, gamelan gambuh an ensemble dominated by long flutes. In palaces across Bali, the refined semara pagulingan orchestra was played on the gamelan pavilion in the courtyard for the pleasure of the royal family and to lull the king to sleep. In Balinese, ‘Semara’ means ‘love’ and ‘pagulingan’ means ‘a way of sleeping’—this is how this ethereal orchestra got its name.

Since the fall of the courts as administrative authorities due to Dutch colonialism and then reformation and now modernisation, royal art-forms such as semara pagulingan experienced a decline in popularity. The general populous no longer felt indebted to the courts for their land, nor were any longer in a subordinate position. So, semara pagulingan orchestras and the associated repertoires for the most part faded away and in many cases were destroyed forever. Today, a few traditional ensembles exist, but their function has been modified. They no longer play for the pleasure of royal families, but solely for the gods. In fact, in some villages, due to their ritual function, some old semara pagulingan orchestras have been sanctified.

A semara pagulingan orchestra has quite different instrumentation from the common modern ensembles such as gong keybar and semarandana. The instruments that are specific to a complete semara pagulingan ensemble are: a kempur gong (kempur, 55-70cm in diameter), a bell tree (gentorag), four squat metallophones called gangsa jongkok, a kempyung consisting of two pots, kangsi cymbals and two to three gumanak, bronze tubes that are struck with thin metal rods. To enhance the melodic line of the melodic line that is played on the trompong (17 bronze kettles played by one musician), the three to four large flutes and the rebab (spiked fiddle) play an important role. The tuning of a semara pagulingan is normally higher in pitch than say a regular gong kebyar ensemble, but this is not always the case.

Semara pagulingan orchestras can have between five and seven tones, depending on preference and function, but the most interesting from a melodic standpoint is the seven tone because not only is there an opportunity for more modulation but compositions can be also presented in seven different modes, each with its own colour and feeling.

The traditional semara pagulingan playing style is relatively unadorned and the melodic line is enhanced and reinforced by the eight gangsa metallophones and the four gangsa jongkok. Complicated interlocking patterns that you may hear in modern semara pagulingan ensembles are a new innovation and are directly influenced by the gong kebyar style that swept Bali in the 1920s, as well as additions by academically trained composers.

The most unadorned semara pagulingan styles in Bali are found in Klungkung, Karangasem, Denpasar and Singaraja. These slower and simpler playing styles are likely representative of the way musicians were trained to play in the courts across Bali during the feudal period. There are only a few villages left in Bali where you can still hear this type of music.

The orchestra you hear is a complete seven-tone semara pagulingan played by 26 musicians, playing semara pagulingan and pelegongan compositions from five different villages in Bali. Either learnt from expert guru or reconstructed from old recordings, the repertoire has been retained in its strictest classical form, with no modern nuances.

Mekar Bhuana Conservatory

Mekar Bhuana Conservatory was established by New Zealand ethnomusicologist Vaughan Hatch in 2000 based on the belief that rare Balinese performing art forms need to be revived, preserved and conserved in Bali. In 2004, Putu Evie Suyadnyani, now his wife, added the dance component to the conservatory, involving herself in the preservation of more unusual forms of legong dance. *Mekar* in Balinese means 'to blossom' and *bhuana* means 'the world' and it is hoped that one day these rare traditional art-forms will not only blossom again in Bali but also across the globe.

The concept behind Mekar Bhuana was based on a vision of revival, preservation and conservation by exposing and re-popularising court gamelan and dance traditions. Their members do this through research and study, as well as collecting recordings and video of old styles. With this background and knowledge, involving senior guru together with young professional musicians and dancers from the villages, the conservatory has been able to more accurately reconstruct and revive these art-forms.

Mekar Bhuana ultimately believes that over time and with more international exposure, more and more people will rediscover the value and beauty of these rare, yet wonderful, cultural treasures.

Track list Notes

Kawitan Tembung (Kamasan, Klungkung style, tembung scale)

‘Tembung’ was chosen as the opening piece for tonight’s performance because it has an exalted and regal atmosphere about it. Traditionally played to accompany Arya in the gambuh drama, we present only the *kawitan* (opening section) of this long composition. On two occasions you will hear brief modulation into the selisir scale.

Gadung Melati (Kamasan, Klungkung style, tembung scale)

In the gambuh dance drama, this accompanies Prince Panji and is named after the jasmine (melati) flower (gadung). It is one of the rarest semara pagulingan melodies and it seems that is only played in one village in Bali. Mekar Bhuana reconstructed Gadung Melati from a record published in the early 1970s where it was performed by musicians from Kamasan, Klungkung. The Kamasan style is very slow and unadorned, and is probably highly representative of how the court music was originally played. The style also features the use of gumanak (bronze tubes struck with metal rods) and gangsa jongkok (four squat metallophones played by two musicians). These instruments were once important elements in the orchestration of semara pagulingan, but are today almost extinct. Gadung Melati is the longest piece in tonight’s performance and there are many incidences of modal shifts from tembung to selisir in both of the long *pengawak* sections, as well as in the *pengecet* section. The style of gangsa (small metallophones with suspended keys) playing configuration in the *pengecet* section is called “*nguncang*” and is typical of old music found in East and North Bali.

Gambang Kuta (Banjar Teges Kanginan, Ubud style, lebeng scale)

This lively piece was composed by I Wayan Lotring of Banjar Tegal Kuta in 1926. The introduction is based on a gamelan gambang melody called Pelugon, however the rest of the piece has been skilfully re-crafted into a refreshing pelegongan form. The version you here is the Teges Kanginan, Ubud version, but is a reconstruction of a recording from 1941 and is different in a number of ways from the current version in Teges. Here it is played in the lebeng mode, with a brief gracing of the *penyorog* tone in sections one and three.

Sekar Gadung (Reconstructed from recording of gamelan set from an unidentified village, baro scale)

In Balinese, *sekar* means ‘flower’ and *gadung* is the type of flower. Traditionally performed to accompany the minister’s entrance in the gambuh dance drama, this beautiful composition can also be played as an instrumental piece. It is structured in four parts: *kawitan* (first section of short repetitive gong cycles, suited to dance); two longer and slower *pengawak* sections; and one final *pengecet* section of short repetitive cycles. Mekar Bhuana reconstructed this piece from a 1972 recording of a yet unidentified semara pagulingan orchestra that played this piece in the selisir mode. Here the group play Sekar Gadung in the baro mode. You will here brief modulation into the selisir scale in the *kawitan* section.

Bopong (Banjar Tegal, Kuta style, tembung scale)

Bopong is one of I Wayan Lotring's rarely performed compositions that remained until Mekar Bhuana learnt and recorded it. The group studied Bopong with one of Lotring's star pupils, I Wayan Kelo from Kuta. Short in structure, it is a charming piece, with exciting rhythmic changes and witty melodic lines, typical of his style of pelegongan composition. In the second ostinato section, you can here clear reference to a pattern found in the Balinese Gabor dance.

Semarandana (Banjar Pagan Kelod, Denpasar style, baro scale)

Most of the semara pagulingan repertoire is taken from that of gamelan gambuh, the precursor of this court gamelan that features large flutes; however, not all. This piece, Semarandana, meaning 'love' is the work of an anonymous court composer from Denpasar. It is played in the Banjar Pagan Kelod style, in the baro mode. It is structurally short with just one *pengawak* and one *pengecet*. A feature of the Pagan style is the use of the kempyung, two medium-sized pot gongs. Only found in a few villages in Bali, this instrument is used to punctuate the melody and is normally played in a certain pattern, but sometimes also follows the melodic line.

Unduk (Kamasan, Klungkung style, selisir scale)

Originally a dance piece from the gambuh repertoire, Unduk consists of four sections: *pengawak*, *pengalihan*, *pengecet* and *batel*. An unusual feature of this piece is the 'hanging' melody in the *pengalihan* section and then the transition to the faster *batel* section that includes only the drums, gong, kemong, kelenang, suling and rebab. The other instruments join together only on the final gong.

Gambang Kuta (Banjar Teges Kanginan, Ubud style, tembung scale)

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Jerbon (Banjar Pagan Kelod, Denpasar style, selisir scale)

In classical Balinese court music, each performance would begin with an introduction on the lead melodic instrument: the trompong (a row of 17 kettle gongs played by one musician). This would set the scene – the mood for the performance. Here the trompong is accompanied by several large flutes (suling penyalah), a spiked fiddle (rebab) and punctuated by the bass notes of the jegogan.

Jerbon is an instrumental piece which can be played in any mode, but Mekar Bhuana have chosen the highest and sweetest mode, selisir, to perform this melody that is most probably named after the West Javanese city of Cirebon. The introduction of this piece is particularly interesting because the terompong (row of 17 kettles) player moves down the scale in fifths,

across almost the entire length of the instrument. At the end of each long 128 beat gong section, you will hear brief modulation from selisir mode into the baro scale. The final section (*pengecet*) is lively and the terompong player seems to dance as he skims across the bronze kettles.

Tabuh Gari Penutup (Banjar Pagan Kelod, Denpasar style, tembung scale)

In a classical performance, this short piece is normally played last of all. In fact, many Balinese know this particularly piece of music so well that within hearing the first few notes they have already headed off home.

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