

Mekar Bhuana Conservatory

Royal Court Gamelan & Dance

'Antique Seven-tone Semar Pegulingan Orchestra accompanying Gambuh Dances'

The Gamelan Semar Pegulingan—Music & Repertoire

The concept of the semar pegulingan 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 semar pegulingan 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, semar originates from the word for 'love' and pegulingan means 'a way of sleeping'—this is probably how this ethereal orchestra got its name.

Since the fall of the courts as administrative authorities—due to colonialism, reformation and now modernisation—royal art-forms such as semar pegulingan 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, semar pegulingan orchestras and the associated repertoires for the most part faded away and in many cases disappeared 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 at ritual ceremonies. In fact, in some villages, due to their ritual function, some old semar pegulingan orchestras have been sanctified.

A semar pegulingan orchestra has quite different instrumentation from the common modern ensembles such as gong kebyar and semarandana. The ensemble is characterised by the use of a terompong (long row of kettle gongs with 13 to 17 pots) as the lead instrument. The instruments specific to a complete semar pegulingan ensemble are: a kempur gong (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 played on the terompong (16-17 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 semar pegulingan is normally higher in pitch than a regular gong kebyar ensemble, but this is not always the case.

Semar pegulingan orchestras can have five, six or seven tones, depending on preference and function. However, 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 semar pegulingan 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 semar pegulingan 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 classical semar pegulingan 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.

Gambuh Dances—a Showcase of Court Characters

The genre of pegambuhan is said to be Bali's oldest dance-drama genre¹ and dates back to Bali's 'golden era' of artistic creativity: the 15th–16th centuries, centred upon the kingdom of Gelgel in Klungkung. Over the centuries, gambuh troupes were established under the support of the courts all over Bali. In Denpasar, there remains only one troupe that still actively performs in the Denpasar court style: in the village of Pedungan. Gambuh is a long dramatic tale of the great Majapahit Kingdom that once controlled much of the Indonesian archipelago. Instead of presenting this story in dramatic form, this performance will showcase some of the characters—at the same time presenting once-extinct repertoire—on an international stage.

Gambuh dance was traditionally accompanied by giant bamboo flutes and small percussive instruments, but around the 17th century a bronze court ensemble called semar pegulingan was created—probably based on counterpart instruments in Java—and in some regions this was used to accompany this royal art-form. Even though the scale relationships are quite different between the two ensembles, talented court composers were able to transfer the melodies to suit the nuances of the bronze instruments.

¹*Bandem & deBoer 1978*

Mekar Bhuana Conservatory

Based in Kertalangu, Denpasar, Mekar Bhuana Conservatory was established in 2000 by New Zealand ethnomusicologist Vaughan Hatch to document, revive and conserve rare performing art-forms in Bali for future generations. 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 (as the microcosmic '*bhuana alit*') but also across the globe (as the macrocosmic '*bhuana agung*').

Mekar Bhuana's members learn with senior guru from the villages, as well as from vintage recordings of rare and extinct styles. With this background and knowledge, the conservatory has not only been able to more accurately reconstruct and revive, but also educate the younger generation about the value of 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.

www.balimusicanddance.com

Performance Notes

Gineman Terompong (*Pagan Kelod, Denpasar style, tembung scale*)

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

Kawitan Tembung (*Kamasan, Klungkung, tembung scale*)

Tembung was chosen as the opening piece for this performance because it has an exalted and regal atmosphere about it. Traditionally played to accompany a male dancer in the gambuh drama, Mekar Bhuana presents only the *kawitan* (opening section) of this long composition. On two occasions you will hear brief modulation into the *selisir* and *sunaren* scales.

Gabor (*Welcome Dance*) (*Denpasar style, tembung scale*)

Two of Mekar Bhuana's best young dancers will perform an old-fashioned welcome dance that is made up of four sections of varying lengths and tempos. Gabor was traditionally performed in temples as an offering to the pantheon of Hindu gods. In the final quick section, the dancers will throw flowers to express their religious devotion. Originally the melodic line of Gabor dance was performed on the terompong, and that is how it will be presented tonight.

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

Most probably named after the West Javanese city of Cirebon, Jerbon is an instrumental piece which can be played in any mode, but Mekar Bhuana has chosen the highest and sweetest mode, *selisir*, to perform this melody. The introduction is particularly interesting because the terompong player moves down the scale in fifths, across almost the entire length of the instrument. At the end of each long 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.

Condong (*Courtier's Dance*)

Condong is one of the servants of the palace, in this case the senior courtier for the Princess. She is a motherly, yet energetic figure who is always concerned about the well-being of the Princess. In this gambuh dance, she engages in a dialogue with the Princess using high Balinese language.

*Accompaniment: **Condong Perong Subandar*** (*Pagan Kelod, Denpasar style, selisir scale*)

Condong Perong Subandar is a piece of music that is rarely performed in its original village because there are no dancers to accompany. Originally taken from the gambuh repertoire, the sweet tuning of *selisir* was chosen for this piece, probably because it is feminine and sprightly.

The piece is divided into six sections: *Bapang* (quick-step meter), four short-length *pengawak* (body) sections, *pengalihan* (connecting the body and final sections) and *bapang* (final section in quick-step

meter with an addition from the first section). The music is dynamic in tempo and throughout the piece briefly touches on another scale, *lebeng*, but never fully modulates just giving the listeners a taste of a different mode.

Putri (*Princess's Dance*)

Putri, meaning 'daughter' in Balinese represents one of the princesses of the court. This gambuh dance portrays an interaction and dialogue between her and one of her courtiers (Condong). The Princess dances, speaking in the ancient Balinese Kawi language and her seated courtier translates in high Balinese to the audience, as she praises her divine beauty and wisdom.

*Accompaniment: **Sumambang Jawa** (Pagan Kelod, Denpasar style, lebeng scale)*

Mekar Bhuana learnt this piece from a field recording made by Balinese researcher, Prof Pande Made Sukerta, in 1977. Once extinct in Pagan Kelod, the musicians reconstructed this piece and now after many years it can be enjoyed once more. It is played in an unusual, yet mysteriously beautiful scale called *lebeng*, with modulation into two different modes, *selisir* and *sunaren*. Sumambang Jawa is made up of three sections: *pengalihan* (introduction), *pengawak* (slow body section) and *pengecet* (quick tempo ending). If played as an instrumental piece, it is longer with another long *pengawak* section. However, often when it is performed with dance, only the first long section is used—this is how it will be presented here.

Patih (*Prime Minister's Dance*)

Patih represents a Prime Minister, the top advisor to the King. When he dances, he has a commanding, authoritative presence; however, his movements display a gamut of emotions, including masculinity, arrogance, self-confidence and uncertainty. He will be presented wearing a mask and his utterances are in the ancient Balinese Kawi language.

*Accompaniment: **Sekar Gadung** (reconstructed from a recording of a yet unidentified village, baro scale)*

In Balinese, *sekar* means 'flower' and *gadung* is the type of flower. The piece 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. You will hear brief modulation into the *selisir* scale in the opening section. Mekar Bhuana reconstructed this piece from a 1972 recording of a yet unidentified semar pegulingan orchestra that played this piece in the *selisir* scale. We present it in a lower, more majestic, almost haunting scale called *baro*.

Ginanti (*Titih, Denpasar style, tembung scale*)

Mekar Bhuana learnt this cheerful piece from a 1928 record, the oldest commercial recording ever made in Bali. Sadly, in the village where it was recorded the gamelan set was melted down and can never be heard again. This fact encouraged the musicians from Mekar Bhuana to bring the piece to life once more. Inspired by a devotional hymn (*pupuh*), Ginanti is played in an old-fashioned style called *nguncang* that is only heard in some remote villages in Bali.

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