

## THE "ABSOLUTE" MUSIC OF BALI

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FROM a musician's viewpoint the island of Bali is the legendary *isle joyeuse*, where music and dancing are not only loved by all, but play a most important part in the life of the people. Day and night the air is vibrant with the golden, metallic sounds of the *gamelan*—the orchestra peculiar to Java and Bali—accompanying either religious ceremony or the performance of dance or drama for the celebration of some domestic or religious event. Here is a music which has successfully achieved the absolute,—impersonal and non-expressive, with a beauty that depends upon form and pattern and a vigor that springs from a rhythmic vitality both primitive and joyous. But more even than this perhaps, what inspires the musician with wonder and envy, is the satisfactory *raison d'être* of music in the community. The musicians are an integral part of the social group, fitting in among ironsmiths and goldsmiths, architects and scribes, dancers and actors, as constituents of each village complex. Modest and unassuming, they nevertheless take great pride in their art, an art which, however, is so impersonal that the composer himself has lost his identity.

What can be the reactions of an Occidental, after prolonged contact with such a music, so essentially different from his own? What influences will penetrate his growing acquaintance with it? For four years the writer has lived in Bali, in an isolation broken only by brief trips to Java, Siam, China and Japan, where the approach to music is fundamentally like that of Bali, abstract and anonymous. During such a period of time one's conceptions inevitably experience some change, become, it is hoped, broadened and purified. The original nature of music reveals

itself with ever greater clarity as a phenomenon of sound rather than of language, as something springing from the urge to rhythmic expression, spontaneous and physical, rather than as a means for unembarrassed self-revelation.

In conception Balinese music is static, whereas ours is dynamic and generally the expression of a crisis, a conflict. In execution Balinese music is extremely dynamic, while paradoxically much of our own music, especially that of the nineteenth century, seems by comparison, turgid and lethargic. The very phrasing of our music is declamatory; our orchestras are heavy and lack buoyancy. A breath of fresh air needs to be let into the concert halls.



The innumerable religious and domestic rites of Bali and the wide variety of dance and dramatic performances demand many different kinds of music and instrumental combinations. As many as ten different types of *gamelans* exist in Bali today. Most villages are equipped with one, if not more, of each type of *gamelan* required for such domestic ceremonies as tooth-filings, weddings and cremations, or such religious rites as temple-anniversaries, carrying of the gods to the sea, or purification of the village from a curse or disaster. The apotheosis of percussion, these orchestras consist of many forms of gongs, large and small, cymbals, drums and a great variety of metal-keyed instruments,—an ideal medium for the abstract but at the same time dynamic nature of the music. It is not unusual for the larger villages to possess as many as twenty-five or thirty *gamelans*, each of from ten to thirty instruments, (though not all of these may have players, for organizations often break up, and the instruments will be stored away until the time when a new organization is formed). I mention these details only to give some hint of the scale upon which music exists in this island which, though small, has over a million inhabitants.

The variety of orchestras and their different styles of playing offer the stranger a constantly new experience. With certain limitations accepted—such as the now almost exclusive use of one or another form of the five-note scale—the music reveals untold

riches, which are gradually disclosed on greater familiarity with the different repertoires and their individual idioms. Technically it is highly sophisticated; the melodic and formal structure is generally simple but always flawless, while the complex, extremely syncopated, rhythmic undercurrent, and the brilliant, percussive quality of the orchestration infuse a galvanic energy impossible to describe. It is precisely this union of a primitive and joyous vitality with a cultural sophistication which gives to Balinese music a great deal of its freshness and distinction.



The absence of the composer (as an individual urged to self-expression) may be better understood when one has some idea of the nature of the art and its leisurely development during the course of time. The sculpture in the temples presents scenes from the old mythology, and varies through the centuries only in style and treatment. So also the music; retaining its traditional melodies and phrase formulae it receives new treatment by successive generations of *gurus* (teachers) who take the place of the composer. The present tendency, especially in the secular music, is to break up the old compositions and weld fragments or episodes from these into new works which, though they may lack the unity of the older music, glow with fresh life and vitality. Only the most sacred and ceremonial music remains static and archaic—a sharp contrast to the extremely energetic and colorful modern technic. Thus one may say that in Bali music is not composed but rearranged,—a series of ever changing variations upon melodic formulae whose sources have long since been forgotten.

The primarily utilitarian nature of this music not only eliminates the "composer," but emphasizes a conception rather different from ours,—that music may be something which is *not to be listened to in itself*. It may be marched to, danced to, or used to precipitate a state of trance by its hypnotic power; but never will it become personal, or contain an emotion. At a ceremony its presence is as necessary as incense, flowers and offerings. The festive note may even be dissonant and confused, for often four or more types of *gamelans* will be assembled within the

temple walls—each with its separate idiom of music and instruments—to resound simultaneously at the climax of a ritual, in a barbaric splendor of clashing tonalities. Here a *state of music* is required for a certain length of time, nothing more.

So music, in its twofold capacity of ceremonial accompaniment and secular entertainment, happily functions as one of the necessities of communal life. The musicians are valuable members of the village organization, not artists but artisans.



Just how much, and in what manner a so-called primitive music can be utilized by the occidental composer is a question for each individual conscience. The difference between a pastiche and a creative work in which foreign material has been so absorbed by the artist as to become part of his equipment is something which has never been completely recognized. It can, however, be detected in the variety of influences which jazz has exercised on the composers of today. By Europeans jazz has never been convincingly assimilated or more than superficially felt; but it has entered the blood of the Americans and become a tonic whose stimulating virtues are well established. That a primitive culture may contain certain desirable qualities which, through re-creation, will express the artist's emotion with precision is apparent from the vigorous, if temporary influence of African sculpture among those painters, in the early part of the century, who found in its simplicity and strength something more than the merely exotic.

In Balinese music there seem to be many elements and even technical details which can stimulate a composer from the Western world, without of necessity alienizing his work. To begin with, it is strangely rational; it has little of that exoticism or oriental mysticism usually connected with Eastern music. Its chief strength is its rhythm which, while containing certain elements found in both Hindu and African music, has a daring and animation definitely Indonesian. No voice in the *gamelan* is without its rhythmic function. Let us take the most simple ex-

ample, the part played by the gongs and cymbals in an ostinato which opens one of the warrior-dances (*baris*).

melos

small cymbals

big cymbals

muted gongs

gongs

drums

Such treatment lends an incredible excitement and animation to the orchestra, a masculine accompaniment to the menacing postures of the dance. In other types of music, polyrhythmic procedure is more developed.

(muted gongs)

Gong

Gong

These fragmentary examples are but brief indications of the orchestral texture against which the drum, with its ever-chang-

ing accents and its great variety of sounds, creates the pattern that holds the logical development of the music. They can give no idea of the tone color or the sonority obtained by the doubling of many of the parts in two or three octaves.

The orchestra is not always divided thus into many parts; often it plays in unison highly syncopated passages which, although bewildering enough at first hearing, upon analysis resolve themselves like mathematical problems. It is impossible here to do more than cite one or two comparatively simple examples. A common device is the shifting of the accents in certain passages so that they sound as though composed of units of five notes.



Sometimes these shifted accents cause the temporary displacement of a passage which, however, regains its original point of gravity on the final note of the phrase.



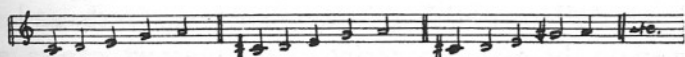
It is not within the scope of this article to analyze the technic of Balinese music, or to do more than hint at its most salient characteristics. The examples above indicate to what an extent it is pervaded with syncopation. The innumerable complexities of this syncopation, and its endless variety are convincing testimony to the eternal vitality of the 4/4 bar (as we express it), so dominant in all Eastern music, and upon which all Balinese music is based. Rhythmic formulae which here are part of every drum-player's equipment are as yet undreamed of in our world.

The polyphonic nature of the orchestration rises spontaneously from a musical idiom uncontaminated by any conception of harmony. A singularly aerial sonority results, which is intensified by the percussive nature of the *gamelan*. In the presence of such a wealth of percussion instruments, and the luminous color



achieved by their many combinations, one can only regret the poverty of that group in our own orchestra, and the limitations of its expression. The Balinese drum, for instance, which is played with the hands, is a warm and palpitating voice that translates into sound the beating of the heart, the course of the blood racing through the body. Alas, our drums are by comparison graceless objects, finding their true eloquence in bombastic and military utterances. Furthermore the number of players in the percussion section of our orchestra is so restricted that, even with the few instruments at their disposal, they must continually divide their attention among the various parts, so that their technic lacks ease and resilience.

The absence of harmony or modulation illustrates clearly the inherent power of music to sustain itself through purity of line and vitality of rhythm. The melodic outline is generally restricted to some form or other of a pentatonic scale, for the old heptatonic scales are today almost obsolete. The melody, however, does not become static, for each of the five notes of the scale may be a point of gravity, thus forming five tonal centres through which the melody may pass at will. Although the melodic contour is always sure and often exceedingly beautiful, the scales, perhaps because of their strong characteristic flavor, offer fewer possibilities to the occidental.



It has not been possible to give more than a faint indication of the technical resources of Balinese music. But the writer is convinced that in the rhythmic spirit of this art lies something that is strangely related to the world of today; the metallic resonance of its orchestration has stirred his imagination with the sense of new timbres and sonorities. The integrity of the music, the complete absence of the personal or the pathetic commands admiration. But most of all, perhaps does the example of the island of Bali inspire the longing for a similar condition in our own country, one in which music might play a more vital role in the life of the people.