

THE DECLINE OF THE EAST *

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I THINK it is safe to say that the musical situation which still prevails in Bali today is unique in the history of the world. It is impossible to imagine a more music-conscious race or a society which even remotely approaches it in the high percentage of practising musicians. And yet, curiously enough, in spite of the fact that music seems more than ever the most satisfying outlet for the Balinese, their most natural, spontaneous form of expression, it is, as an art, in a state of rapid decline and apparently doomed to complete disappearance.

The beauty, the strength, the artistic significance of Balinese music lay in its formalism, in the tradition which kept it the anonymous but individual expression of a race. Its development was slow and logical, the changes which gradually gave it a distinct Balinese quality were imperceptible. But in the past twenty years a new form, known as the *Kebiar* style, feverish and melodramatic, has suddenly arisen out of the old. While spectacular in its brilliance and occasional extraordinary virtuosity, this new music carries within it all the germs of decay. Tradition has been thrown overboard, and law and order discarded for innovations which, though at times beautiful in themselves, can in the end lead only to empty, aimless forms of expression.

That the Balinese first developed this musical style shortly after their final liberation by the Dutch from the tyranny of the petty radjahs (Bali was completely "conquered" only in 1908) seems to me of real significance. As each of the radjahs was vanquished, tradition and formalism, hitherto maintained in their courts in rustic imitation of the great courts of Java received a series of death-blows. The protective power of gods, priests and magic weapons proved of no avail. Such spiritual defeats under-

*On his previous return from the Orient, Mr. McPhee wrote an article, *The Absolute Music of Bali*, which appeared in *MODERN MUSIC*, May 1935, Volume XII, No. 4.

mine the faith of a people, and while creating, perhaps, the illusion of freedom, spell cultural death.

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Let us take a quick view of Bali today. The island, about the size of Corsica, has a population of over a million and a half. It is governed by a combination of Dutch and old Balinese law. Radjahs still rule their provinces under the illusory title of "self-government," although each one has a Dutch *contrôleur* always beside him as delicate reminder of a higher authority. Bali is well supplied with primary and secondary schools, hospitals, leper colonies, and even a few disguised Christian missions. Taxes to maintain these luxuries, the concrete proof of any invader that he is bringing light and civilization, are extortionate and money has become a major problem. The common folk live by growing rice, by general farming and the export of copra, pigs and cattle. But the markets for these products have recently taken a considerable drop.

Now imagine the situation fifty years ago. No roads, no schools, no hospitals, no tourists; imports coming largely from China, as they had for centuries. The island is divided into six or seven kingdoms, each ruled by a radjah, generally sworn foe of his neighbor. The court of each radjah is a cultural center, where traditional drama, dancing and music flourish. Lesser nobles also have their own gamelans* and are patrons of drama and dancing. Music and dancing have their established style, obey definite artistic laws belonging to a tradition originating in Java.

The villages, too, have their own gamelans, their dancers and actors. Partly these are for amusement, but more important and particularly in the case of music, they are a necessity for ritual. The art-forms draw much inspiration from the courts. But there also exist certain indigenous types of music and dancing that are much more primitive, dating from far earlier times. (The extent to which all this has been influenced by the Chinese or by Hinduism, historians cannot determine.)

What really gave unity to this rich Balinese life was religion. While the Balinese village is fundamentally communal, its law is permeated by religious concepts. The gods laid down the laws, and the honoring and propitiation of these unseen forces condi-

*The gamelan is the Balinese orchestra. It consists of large and small gongs, drums, cymbals and a variety of metal-keyed instruments.

tion the most trivial acts. Over this ancient background the aristocracy, chiefly of Javanese origin and representing today about three percent of Bali, imposed a more or less artificial culture. At times one feels that this has never been truly absorbed by the Balinese people, never more than half-felt or understood.

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All these cultural strata of so many periods are curiously reflected in the music of modern Bali. Gamelans with instruments and music which one has every reason to believe have survived unchanged for five hundred years, exist beside the most recently developed instruments and technics of playing. Linking these two extremes one finds every intermediary step of development. This heterochronic state not only gives an observer a complete cross-section of Balinese musical history, but makes it possible to evaluate later developments, to see what has been gained and what lost in the process.

The earliest forms of music and dancing in Bali apparently were all ritualistic. The surviving gamelans of simple, primitive type still play only during the most significant religious ceremonies. They are sacred, and sometimes even taboo to non-members of the village. Offerings must be made when their instruments are taken out; their music, whose origins go far back into the past, is remote, archaic, stiff, and primitive in technic. At the same time the musical form is sure, simple perhaps, but clear and satisfactory in melodic outline.

Later developments are more gracious in character, more fluid and lyrical, more sophisticated in structure and type of instruments. Form develops, grows broader, but always retains a clear, logical shape. Metrical formulae are largely responsible for this; music must conform, above all, to the demands of fixed metres, which seem to have been created in a purely balanced, mathematical design. There is a great variety of these metres, music is classified as belonging to one type or another. Although compositions vary according to mode, tonal centres and note-sequence, those belonging to the same metre will be of the same length and have the same drumming. There is plenty of room for individuality both in music and execution, however, despite these fixed conventions.

And by conforming to such restrictions, or logically extending them, the Balinese have developed a musical art which is individual and of a high order. Most compositions that are considered as pure music only (not to be danced to, or to accompany any set rite) are based upon an emotional program of restraint and liberation (my interpretation, not that of the Balinese) which seems to me extremely significant in relation to the general Balinese character. These compositions, which may differ in length or metre, nevertheless are all modeled on one form, basically two-part. The first section, the "body," is slow in tempo, static in mood, with harsh, dry drumming that simply scans the musical phrase, measuring it off in a purely mathematical manner. In this section one feels that all is emotionally controlled, chained, frozen. The second part is the "animato;" here the metre becomes shorter, the tempo livelier, the drumming agitated. This movement progresses, is urged on to a finale, a short ostinato where tempo and dynamics gradually increase, while the drumming grows loud and furious. With a relentless but marvelously controlled *accelerando* the piece gathers momentum and ends in a terrific climax of sound. Here is the liberation, the throwing off of bonds, the reversion to an earlier freedom, the expression of life and energy which seems to me so typically Balinese. The musicians wake up, eyes sparkle, bodies move in rhythmic sympathy to the accents of cymbals and drums. Is this the subconscious rebellion from the formalities of Javanese tradition? One finds no parallel in the music of Java, no trace even of such a dynamism.

The greatest development in Balinese music has been in its individual instrumental technic. Metres and melodies have remained fixed over a long period, but new instruments have been created and *with them an ever-increasingly elaborate embellishment* of the music. Nevertheless, there are old people today who say that they distinctly remember these developments as having taken place in their time. The earlier music was simpler in orchestration, and much slower in tempo. Elaboration of superficialities and speeding up seem to fall within the twentieth century, oddly coinciding with Dutch occupation. While significant

creation is at a standstill, there is a steady climb in emotional charge in the interpretation of the classical music. This increases in intensity, until musical form in 1938 is, in the case of the most popular and modernized gamelans, shattered forever. Long compositions will be pieced together by individual and famous professionals. These formless potpourris of the classics are played with that truly sensational brilliance which has made Bali famous, but which is fundamentally weak and empty so far as significant art-values are concerned.



To seek the reason for this collapse we must again examine the state of Bali. The radjahs have now given up all pretense of elaborate court-life; they are no longer interested even in encouraging Balinese arts. Nearly all their gamelans have been discarded; now they buy cars, motorcycles and European clothes, send their sons to school in Java or even Europe, discuss the price of sugar and Hitler. The minor nobles, long since ruined by similar expenditures, by gambling and taxes, have pawned or sold their gamelans. Today they are chauffeurs for tourists, keep coffee stalls or, if lucky, work as petty clerks in government or business offices.

The perpetuation of music has been left almost entirely to the villages, where more and more the gamelans are falling into the hands of the young, the boys and young men. Music becomes a recreation; gamelan "clubs" are formed, much in the same spirit as college jazz-bands. Dancing and drama are still intensely popular, but they are taught and organized in a more or less haphazard way. These young people have a new outlook on life. They go to school, wear shirts, pajamas, felt hats; they love imported novelties, dangling collar-buttons, a gold tooth, black spectacles. Celluloid flowers from Japan find their place in the hair or as temple offerings, a substitute superior to mere gardenias, jasmine or orchids. The visible general effect of all this is sordid, deplorable. Balinese youth today tends to become unsettled mentally, and is filled with a vague discontent. An increasing consciousness of the outside world develops for the first time in their history, an inferiority complex. "White men make

cars, battleships, planes, tall buildings. We Balinese know only how to work the ricefields." They grow selfconscious about their simple houses, their darker skins and refuse to believe an outsider finds their music beautiful. A growing insolence, a braggadocio strangely at variance with their natural charm and good manners may be noticed. They defy parental authority, disregard obligations to the village, care less about religious formalities and, most serious of all, refuse to work. Impatient with tradition, they have found nothing to take its place. In the larger towns they lounge about, play billiards, and spend their last cent on a Japanese flashlight or sweater.

The native desire for musical expression still persists however and is perhaps even more intense. Organized groups will practise new music with a patience and passionate enthusiasm that is truly remarkable. But although much money may be spent in getting a teacher, they want only the new music, the *kebiar* style, and they refuse to learn more than the minimum amount of the old music required for ceremonies. The teacher of today is essentially an individualist; the demand for him is in ratio to the number of new compositions he knows, his novelties in figuration, the dynamics and orchestration he can impart.

Jealous rivalry exists between the new gamelan clubs; bitter quarrels arise when one club lures a leading musician away from another, to teach them the latest compositions. Musical competitions are popular; three or four gamelans will play, one immediately after the other, and wait impatiently for the verdict of who is best. Success is measured by purely non-musical devices, sensational increases in speed, new tricks in ornamentation, and never by standards of musical form. The several "best" gamelans of Bali know it, are proud of their reputation, sneer at the others. This growing spirit of rivalry, which is such a new and aggressive note in Bali, has of course been facilitated by the network of roads, by busses and bicycles. Today Balinese travel all around their island. There is a greater exchange of ideas and a tendency to outdo, if possible, someone else, whether it be in music, dancing, or the erection of a new club-house. There is no powerful Balinese to take a stand for the preservation of tradi-

tion, for a return to the precepts of artistic balance. It is heart-breaking to see gamelan after gamelan of the old style disorganized, the keys melted down, to make completely new instruments, all for playing *kebiar* music.

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The word *kebiar*, which refers especially to the new type of composition, also indicates the new style of dancing which it may accompany. The nearest equivalent in English is perhaps "rhapsody," in the Lisztian sense of the word. The *kebiar* is essentially a medley, a loosely connected series of melodies which, snatched at random from the classical repertoires of the different gamelan-types, have lost their original significance. Its most interesting feature is the development of syncopation to a remarkably complex state. Orchestration, too, tends to have an increasingly bold brilliance and dramatic contrasts. The music is played with diabolic energy, a dynamism that can be at times extremely thrilling. The gamelan may soar into radiant, Scriabine-like trills, or break into a graceful lyricism of great sweetness and charm, only to suddenly release an unaccountable fury of speed and sound. This capricious change of mood is utterly baffling. There is no direction, no intention; melodies are never allowed to reach their termination, but are always broken into with something else, of a completely different character. The older people regret this change, say that their best music has disappeared. The young say, literally, "Who wants to play that old stuff?" There is something slightly familiar in this situation, something I seem to have heard elsewhere.

Since 1931 I have seen so much disappear from Bali that had a value inestimable and precious. Few remain today who can correctly teach even two or three pieces in the old style. Since music in Bali was practically never written down, but handed on from one generation to another, this abrupt break with the past by the young Balinese of today will mean the complete extinction in a short time of all that made Balinese music once a unique art. From this severance they have everything to lose, nothing to gain. The Balinese are not strong as individuals, or creative enough to produce new forms of significance. Indeed, the strength of all

Balinese art lay in tradition, in unity, in the absence of any protruding individuality. Their art—and we are the people to name it so, not they—is racial expression, impersonal, anonymous. And so, when belief in tradition disappears, when the opportunity arises for individual expression, the result is the destruction, *the loss of all qualities that provided strength and significance.*

Artistic collapse is not limited to music. It can be seen as well in drama, dancing, painting and sculpture. A vast cultural wealth is now at the mercy of the whims of irresponsible youngsters, who out of it all make amusing or spectacular potpourris that are, in the true sense of the word, decadent. Older traditions still exist, but only in the most remote parts of the island, practised solely by the older generation. What will survive even ten years from now is hard to say.

Unlike the rest of the East, the Balinese continue to produce new and characteristic music and so still have a priceless heritage to lose. For this we have to thank their intense musicality, and their peculiar social system, not yet dead, in which ceremonies and music play a prominent part. Other countries have been less fortunate. The music of Java is heard only in its great courts. In Siam, Indo-China, China and Japan, Western influences are rapidly and completely destroying the national drama, dance and music. And since the West appears to have little to offer to the East but gas, guns and planes, it is reasonable to expect that art and tradition will soon exist, even in Bali, only as words.