

# Indonesian Musik Kontemporer and the Question of “Western Influence”

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## *Abstract*

Western influence is commonly regarded as a major factor in the existence of contemporary art music in Asia. Yet in the case of *musik kontemporer* by traditionally-based Indonesian composers, several observers have commented on their lack of familiarity with Western new music. Conversely, acknowledging a long colonial history and forces of modernization, scholars such as Becker, Sutton, and Sumarsam have drawn attention to conceptual and technological forms of Western influence on Indonesian music. These discrepancies follow in part from disciplinary understandings of influence. The humanities focus on individual artists, texts, and matters of style, while the social sciences give greater attention to social and cultural forces and phenomena. I argue, with reference to *musik kontemporer*, that it is crucial to be specific about the kind and extent of influence, the path that influence travels, and most importantly the degree of what I term “ethnological valence.” For example, sound amplification is arguably less Westernizing and more ethnologically neutral than the symphony orchestra, though both are Western inventions. More complex in this respect and most pertinent to *musik kontemporer* are the concepts and attitudes associated with experimentalism. Having traveled to traditionally-based and Western-oriented scenes by distinct and parallel paths, experimentalism is variously abstracted or associated with Western models and practices. Specificity and conceptual clarity are thus crucial to the evaluation of the role of Western influences on modern arts in postcolonial contexts, in order to avoid reinforcing the notion of the all-powerful West without resorting to simplistic disavowal.

I would like to start with an example—a somewhat extreme but nonetheless representative example of Indonesian contemporary art music, or *musik kontemporer*. This is a series of clips from the 22 minute piece *Daily* by the Balinese composer I Wayan Sadra. *Daily* was presented in Jakarta in 2004, the final piece on a concert featuring Sadra’s work at the Art Summit Indonesia, currently Indonesia’s most prestigious international festival of contemporary performing arts.

[video example]

What do we make of a piece like this? Why do we make what we make of it? In this paper I scrutinize a pervasive assumption in the Western response to non-Western modern art by picking apart the notion of “Western influence.” A good example of this response is the reaction to Sadra’s account of the first piece in which he broke an egg, in 1981, presented by Jody Diamond at an SEM chapter meeting. A graduate student in ethnomusicology asserted “This sounds just like a performance piece from New York! Isn’t this just Western influence?” Reflecting on her response to this charge, Diamond notes:

At first, I wanted to say that there is no Western influence. But of course European-American culture has influence in the world today, not just in art but in everything. And it would be difficult to argue its absence in Indonesia: the Dutch ruled there for 200 years, and ties with the U.S. are now very strong. (Diamond 1990: 14-15)

Diamond is certainly right to point to Indonesia’s long colonial history and to the more recent cultural flows owing to what we now call globalization. Judith Becker was similarly right to counter the assumption, common when she was writing in 1972, that there is no Western influence in Javanese gamelan music. Arguing that “*influence* cannot be limited in interpretations to mean only simplistic adoption,” Becker points to “the impact of technology and Western concepts” (Becker 3). Along this line, Becker (1980), Sutton (1996), and Sumarsam (1995) have drawn attention to particular borrowings and impositions, some concrete like notation and electronic sound technologies, and others abstract, like the increase in individual creativity or the concept of high culture.

Focusing on the specific alleviates the rather insidious problem most apparent in unqualified invocations of “Western influence.” The problem stems from the formulation’s far-reaching explanatory power. This derives in part from the term influence, especially the sense active in the notion of being under the influence of an intoxicating substance or a charismatic individual. Combined with the term Western, there is an appeal if not to Western superiority, at least to some sense of the West’s dominance. One cannot deny the influence the West has had in the world. But to avoid reinforcing the notion of the all-powerful West demands even greater specificity. One needs to ask not only “what kind of influence?”, but also how much, when, and for how long. What role does influence play? What other factors shape its impact? What paths does influence follow, what is the context in which it is received, and how is it thus filtered and interpreted? I will address these questions in my examination of what led Sadra to break eggs and drag gongs in the name of music. But along the way, I want to address certain aspects of the question of Western influence on musik kontemporer more directly, through a consideration of disciplinary conceptions of influence, and a theoretical angle on what’s going on when we call something “Western.”

As quoted earlier, Diamond and Becker touch upon the distinction between a narrowly artistic conception of influence, and one that is inclusive of all manner of social

and cultural phenomena. This distinction corresponds to a very general difference in how influence is primarily understood by the humanities versus the social sciences, and thus musicology versus ethnomusicology. Because musik kontemporer as a topic falls in the overlapping margins of these two areas of music scholarship, it is necessary to examine their assumptions and prejudices. I will focus here on those of musicology.

Speaking very generally, musicologists tend to be concerned primarily with questions of musical style. Most often they focus on individual composers and the influences that shape their work, most notably the influences of other individual composers. Influence in this specifically artistic sense has been theorized most cogently by Harold Bloom, who in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997) sorts out the different ways in which poets create themselves in relationship to their precursors. Influence in this sense relates to the notion of canon, not just as a scholarly construct but as a product of a broader discourse involving artists, critics, and audiences. So although musicology’s continued focus on the canon of Western art music can be criticized as being myopically Eurocentric, it does reflect a certain reality, in that this focus is shared by many artists and devotees. The same can be said of the Eurocentric focus in studies of contemporary art music in non-western contexts, the majority of which examine East Asian examples. Contemporary art music in East Asia has for the most part developed from the base of a well-established localized practice of European classical music which dominates certain spheres of musical life. Hence, Toru Takemitsu, who for musicology is perhaps the most paradigmatic Asian composer, noted how in his youth “the West was a single enormous mirror” (Takemitsu 92).

It is certainly possible to find examples of Indonesian composers who fit the paradigm represented by Takemitsu. For example, Tony Prabowo, whose piece “Autumnal Steps: Homage to Takemitsu” very clearly indicates the extent to which he has defined himself in relationship to his precursors. In general, however, the situation in Indonesia is very different from that in Japan or other parts of Asia. Western music has had a presence since Portuguese and then Dutch traders arrived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And there is currently a great abundance of Western and Western-style music, mostly in the form of pop. But the Western musical tradition which is thought to count, and which is the usual conduit for musical modernism—that is, European classical music—has a minor presence in Indonesia. It is limited to a few urban centers, and even there its existence is somewhat tenuous. The impact of this situation on the handful of Western-oriented Indonesian composers is considerable.<sup>1</sup>

Western art music’s presence is even more limited, almost negligible, in the milieu occupied by Sadra and his traditionally-based colleagues at ASKI (now STSI), the performing arts academy in Solo, or Surakarta, Central Java. To those familiar with this milieu, it comes as no surprise that these composers had little or no knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Stephanie Griffin’s biography of Tony Prabowo (2003).

Western new music when they carried out their first experiments in the late 1970s, as Sutton and Vincent McDermott have noted, and as I have confirmed through my own research.<sup>2</sup> Yet as McDermott comments, there is a “remarkable similarity” to “Western experimental music” (McDermott 25), and thus, as Sutton notes, one might assume “that composers had really been won over by the musical doctrine of the Western avant-garde” (Sutton 1993: 58). That this isn’t the case is reflected by the differences that one finds beyond the apparent similarities. There is much that is central to Western-oriented art music, wherever it is practiced, that these Indonesian composers have not adopted. Notation is used sparingly, and only in the development process, never in performance. Scores exist only when demanded by academic requirements, and even then they are produced after the fact, when the piece is already finished. Pieces are developed not prior to but in and through rehearsal, typically with extensive input from performers. Composers quite freely recycle elements and sections from their own and their colleagues’ pieces, often with no sense of infringement of intellectual property or of compromised originality. The notions of the musical work and the composer as an individual creator do exist, but not with the inviolable status they tend to have in the European classical tradition and most of the international new music world.<sup>3</sup>

Sadra and his colleagues have interacted with composers from America and Europe, as well as with their Western-oriented peers from Indonesia and other parts of Asia. But this interaction has not been extensive, and mostly came after they had formulated their basic approach to composition. Whatever influence there has been has not been formative, but has either reinforced or shaped their practice in more subtle ways. But in addition to the question of timing, the reception of foreign influence in Solo has been tempered by the distinct attitude towards influence that prevails. From my interactions with Sadra and other ASKI composers, I have gained little sense of them being anxious about influence. Their curiosity towards musics other than their own is well developed, but it manifests in an openness to whatever music they happen to encounter, rather than a privileging of a specific Western-oriented canon. Neither do they dwell on precursors closer to home. There are, to be sure, Indonesian parallels to the system of recognizing influential precursors that is such a major part of the practice and discourse of artistic traditions in the West. In traditional Javanese music the focus is on individual styles of players. In Bali, awareness of individual composers was an integral part of the twentieth century development of gong kebyar. The question bears further investigation, but it

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<sup>2</sup> My research proper was conducted over two three-month trips in 2004 and 2005. I have been acquainted with composers from ASKI since 1991, when I participated in the collaborative creation of a piece with A.L. Suwardi during his one-month residency in Vancouver. I spent over a year in Solo from 1993 to 1995, studying traditional Javanese gamelan performance and collaborating with several composers, including I Wayan Sadra.

<sup>3</sup> The compositional approach of composers from ASKI, which I have observed first hand, is described in some detail by Roth (Roth 1987).

would seem for musik kontemporer as practiced at ASKI Surakarta that the break from these established frames of reference is as radical as the break in aesthetics and compositional practice.

So how then, if not from emulation or adoption of existing models of contemporary art music, did composers from Solo take to breaking eggs and dragging gongs, among other less radical forms of experimentation? Key aspects of experimentalism such as the prioritizing of innovation and the very idea of art as a specialized realm of aesthetic experience can be traced back to the West. But does this mean that they are Western? Is experimentalism Western? What does it mean to say that something is Western, or that it is not? With regards to other types of change, the social sciences have resisted and countered the tendency to conflate modernization with Westernization. As a way of theorizing this distinction, and approaching these questions, I would like to propose the concept of ethnological valence.

I use the term ethnological not in its standard academic sense, but as one uses psychological in speaking of “psychological well-being.” By ethnological valence I mean the logic of the way that ethnicity is perceived in or attributed to things. For example, the idea that chocolate is Swiss, or that the violin is Indian (to Indians), or that the rebab is Javanese. As these examples suggest, ethnicity is not determined simply by the fact of origin. Cocoa beans do not grow in Switzerland or, for that matter, anywhere in Europe. Ethnicity is not an inherent quality. It is relative, and it can shift over time by processes of indigenization. The sense of something having ethnicity also varies by degree, and hence the idea of valence. Sound amplification is arguably more ethnologically neutral than the symphony orchestra, though both are Western inventions introduced fairly recently to other parts of the world. Symphony orchestras have a dominant position in certain musical spheres in East Asia, which they do not in Indonesia—a fact which, as I have argued, is a significant factor in the different characters of contemporary art music in the two areas. Sound amplification, on the other hand, is now ubiquitous in many traditional Indonesian performing arts. But as Sutton has argued, amplification and other electronic sound technology does not in itself “Westernize,” but “may instead reinforce indigenous values” (Sutton 249).

Ethnological valence is also affected by how things are introduced from one context to another, and thus with the various parameters of influence I identified earlier. With this in mind, I turn now to an account of the influences that led Sadra and his colleagues at ASKI to embrace experimentalism. The earliest and most general is the notion of “high culture” applied by Dutch scholar officials to the artistic traditions of the Javanese courts in the late nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> By Indonesian independence in 1945 the idea was well

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<sup>4</sup> See Sumarsam (1995: chapter 2) and Lindsay {Lindsay, 1985 #837@chapter 1}

established, and conservatories were founded to maintain traditional performing arts. The first half of the twentieth century saw the development of self-consciously modern and Western-oriented traditions in literature, visual arts, and theater, and to a more limited extent in music. With these came the modern notion of art, which was adopted and applied to traditional performing arts by S.D. Humardani, the charismatic head of ASKI through the critical period of the 1970s. Humardani took a strong and extremely active role in pushing students to free themselves from the shackles of tradition. This did not, however, mean an outright rejection of tradition; the imperative to create new forms that embodied a modern Indonesian spirit went alongside efforts to preserve the heritage of Javanese and other regional traditions. Humardani was not, significantly, a musician. He had some experience with traditional Javanese dance, but his professional training was in anatomy. His encouragement of experimentation did not involve specific musical ideas, much less reference to existing musical models, but was a more abstract and general incitement to use anything necessary to make music, and to search continuously for new possibilities.<sup>5</sup>

A second key figure is the dancer and choreographer Sardono W. Kusuma. With a solid foundation in traditional Javanese dance, Sardono became the youngest member of the Jakarta Arts Council when it was founded in 1968, and a prominent participant in the artistic experimentation that surrounded Jakarta’s newly constructed art center. In 1973 and 1974, before musical experimentation really got under way in Solo, three young artists who would become leading figures in musik kontemporer at ASKI were involved in one of Sardono’s major productions. Sadra, A.L. Suwardi, and Pande Made Sukerta were thus exposed to the practice of an artist whose foundation was in Javanese traditional dance, but whose outlook and approach was decidedly modern. (For example, in his 1979 *Meta Ecology*, Sardono had his dancers move in a pool of mud.) All three musicians credit this experience with first opening their minds to a broader range of creative possibilities. But again, it is significant that Sardono is not a musician, and that he is Indonesian.

Humardani and Sardono thus acted as conduits and assimilators of ideas obtained either directly from the West or from Western-oriented Indonesian perspectives. Both of them spent relatively short periods in England and the United States, and both very briefly studied Western modern dance. More importantly, they were key figures in efforts to forge a distinctly Indonesian vision of the contemporary arts, one that transcended the ongoing polemic concerning Indonesian culture. This vision was open to ideas that happened to be Western in origin, but also proudly embraced a foundation in regional Indonesian traditions. Humardani was a key participant in the seminars and conferences throughout the 1970s that took inspiration from Jakarta-based experimentalists such as

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<sup>5</sup> Humardani’s importance has been frequently noted. The most extensive discussions of his contributions are by Rustopo (1990; 1991).

Sardono in formulating policies and programs of broader scope. For musik kontemporer, the most significant of these was the Young Composers Week (Pekan Komponis Muda), a gathering of musicians with various backgrounds from different parts of Indonesia that ran annually from 1979 to 1988.<sup>6</sup> It was at the second event, in 1981, that Sadra broke his first egg.

To conclude, the problem with the question of Western influence is that it is loaded. It is especially loaded with respect to the development of contemporary arts in postcolonial contexts, and all the more so with contemporary music because of the most familiar points of reference and the tenacity of Eurocentrism in certain musicological perspectives. The question cannot be answered simply “yes” or “no,” and though more accurate, it is scarcely more helpful to say “maybe somewhat.” It cannot, in the end, be answered definitively, but can only be approached with greater specificity and conceptual clarity.

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<sup>6</sup> Documentation of the first six years of the *Pekan Komponis Muda* has been compiled by Hardjana (1986).

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