

Balinese gamelan *gong kebyar* A player's handbook



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History

Gong kebyar emerged during a musical revolution in the early 20th century. This was a time of great social change in Bali - the local rulers were losing their power and wealth to the invading Dutch, and village-based music clubs replaced the royal courts as centres of musical activity. Old court gamelan ensembles were melted down and reforged into gong kebyar sets. The refined court music was also reforged into a dynamic and exciting new musical style, and the virtuosic *gong kebyar* music quickly became popular all over Bali.

Why is it called *gong kebyar*?

The word *kebyar* refers to the irregularly timed unison passages that are sometimes played at the beginning of a composition. You can hear an example in the dance piece called [Margapati](#). *Kebyar* passages are unique to *gong kebyar* music, and always start with an explosive, onomatopoeically named *byar* chord (hence the name *keBYAR*).

Tuning

The pitch collection of the *gong kebyar* ensemble is a 5-note mode called *pelog selisir*, a subset of the 7-note Indonesian scale called *pelog*. The fourth and seventh *pelog* notes are left out in *pelog selisir*, which is why gong kebyar music is notated with the numbers 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6.

Ombak, meaning ‘waves’, is an important feature of *gong kebyar* tuning. All of the keyed instruments, with the exception of the *ugal*, are tuned in pairs with one being slightly lower (*pengumbang*) and one slightly higher (*pengisep*). The *ombak* waves can be heard when the paired instruments are played together, with these slightly different pitches competing with each other to produce a pulsating sound.

Balinese gamelan orchestras are not tuned to a standard frequency (or ‘concert pitch’ in the Western sense). The instruments in a gamelan ensemble are carefully tuned to be played together, and the pitches of each instrument are usually unique to that particular ensemble. Most individual instruments cannot be separated and played with another orchestra, unlike Western instruments.

Musical style

Gong kebyar has a wide range of musical characteristics, often going through many contrasting musical states all in a single song. The music is very dynamic, often shifting suddenly from a quiet volume to very loud, or rapidly accelerating in tempo. It can reach extreme speeds and volume levels, but it can also be slow, soft and lyrical.

Gong kebyar has a complex texture when all the instruments are playing at once, with many different parts moving at different rhythmic densities - some quickly, some slowly. The lowest pitched instruments tend to play the most sparsely, and the highest pitched instruments tend to play the most quickly. This gives the effect of stratified musical layers moving at separate speeds, which some Western theorists call stratified polyphony.

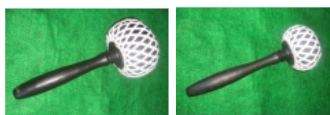
Interlocking rhythms are a very common feature in Balinese music. Sometimes the music is too fast for one person to play on their own, so the notes are shared between two people. There are many complicated ways of doing this, but the most simple is with alternation or ‘hocketing’:

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Player 1 | x x x x x x x x x
Player 2 |  x x x x x x x x
Combined | xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
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HANGING GONGS

Most *gong kebyar* orchestras have one or two large gongs: one of lower pitch called ***gong wadon*** (female gong) and one of higher pitch called ***gong lanang*** (male gong). In addition there is a medium sized gong called ***kempur***, and a small gong called ***klentong***. Gong patterns typically outline the metre of *gong kebyar* music, with the large gongs marking important moments in the metre, such as the end of a phrase.



Technique

← large gong mallet (left) and kempur mallet (right)

Hanging gongs are played with the padded mallets shown above, except for the *klentong*, which is typically struck with the mallet's wooden handle to get its characteristic high 'tong' sound.



KEYED INSTRUMENTS

x2

x2

x1

x4

x4

Instruments with a small pitch range (5 keys)

Bridging the gap between gongs and the keyed instruments is the ***jegog***, also called *jegogan*. The large *jegog* are the bass voices of the keyed instruments, and they play very sparsely, reinforcing the metre and providing a basic backbone for the melody.

The ***jublak***, also known as *calung*, plays the unadorned core melody (in Bali this is called *pokok*) of *gong kebyar* music. It uses a tenor voice, pitched an octave higher than the *jegog*.



Technique

← *jegog* mallet (left) and *jublak* mallet (right)

The *jegog* mallet is similar to a gong beater. The *jublak* mallet is wooden with a rubber tip. Both of these instruments are generally played in a legato fashion, where one note stops as soon as the next note starts. This requires a two-handed technique - one hand to hit the keys and the other to dampen them. The playing hand controls when a note starts by hitting a key with a mallet. The non-playing hand controls when that note stops, by grasping the key so it stops sounding.

Instruments with a large pitch range (10 keys)

The ***ugal*** is the leader of the *gangs*a section, often translating musical cues from the lead drummer to the rest of the ensemble. This instrument sometimes plays in unison with the *gangs*a. At other times it improvises an ornamented melodic line (in Bali this is called *payasan*), derived from the *jublak* core melody. Like the *jublak*, it plays in a tenor voice, although with a larger pitch range.

The **gangs**a section is made up of the alto-voiced *pemade* and the smaller, soprano-voiced *kantilan*. *Gangs*a sometimes play a melody line, but more often play melodic elaboration. The elaboration is sometimes played with fast interlocking rhythms (in Bali this is called *kotekan* or *ubit-ubitan*).



Technique

The *gangs*a beater is made of hard wood, which produces a piercing treble tone. These instruments are sometimes played in a legato fashion like the *jubl*ag and *jegog*, and at other times play staccato interlocking patterns. The technique is mostly the same as for the 5-key barred instruments, although the *gangs*a is more challenging because it plays at higher speeds.



HORIZONTAL GONGS (GONG KETTLES)

The *reong* at times play melodic elaboration or melody like the *gangs*a, and at other times play accented rhythmic patterns. This instrument is a horizontal gong rack, generally played by 4 musicians side by side.



Technique

Reong players use two cord-wrapped mallets, one in each hand. The kettles are played melodically by striking on their bosses (tip of the kettle), and they must also be carefully dampened with soundless mallet strokes. Percussive sounds are also possible on the *reong*: the kettles can be struck on the shoulder to produce a sound called *kecek*, and a brassy chord can also be sounded in rhythmic patterns by all players in unison.



UNPITCHED PERCUSSION

The *ketuk*, also known as *kempli* or *kajar*, is a single gong kettle that is used like an unpitched percussion instrument. The *ketuk* and *ceng-ceng* (cymbals) are the time keepers for the *gong kebyar* ensemble. The *ketuk* plays a pulse, like a metronome. The *ceng-ceng* plays more quickly, often filling in four notes per beat (like semiquavers).

Technique

The *ketuk* plays with a dampened, non resonant timbre. The non-playing hand rests on the shoulder of the gong kettle, dampening its vibration. The playing hand wields a cord-wrapped mallet similar to the *reong* beater pictured above, striking the boss (tip) of the kettle.

The *ceng-ceng* consists of a wooden base with a number of cymbals fixed to it, facing upwards. The player wields two handheld cymbals, which are clashed against the cymbals on the base.

The *kendang* (drums) are the rhythmic leaders or ‘conductors’ of the *gong kebyar* orchestra, playing rhythmic elaborations that often reinforce both the metre and the pulse. Sometimes two *kendang* play rhythmically interlocking patterns, sometimes they combine to play rhythmic accents, and sometimes the lead drummer will play on their own. Together with the *ketuk*, the *kendang* are responsible for setting the ensemble’s tempo. If the gamelan is playing a dance accompaniment, the lead *kendang* player must watch the dancer, translating the visual cues into audible signals for the other musicians to follow. So the *kendang* players are a vital link between dancers and musicians, making sure that the musical accompaniment is responsive to the dance choreography.

Technique

The *kendang* is usually played with a combination of the palms and fingers, and sometimes with a mallet in the right hand. There are many possible *kendang* strokes. Here are some of the more common techniques: *pak*, a loud slap with the fingers; *de*, a resonant bass stroke with the palm; *cung*, a partially dampened harmonic stroke; *dag*, a bass stroke using the mallet.

OTHER INSTRUMENTS (not used in this class)

All the instruments listed below play ornamented melodic lines, somewhat like the *ugal*. They are not always included in *gong kebyar* ensembles.

Suling, a bamboo flute:



Rebab, a two-stringed instrument sometimes called a ‘spike fiddle’, shown here on its stand:



Trompong, a larger, lower pitched version of the *reong*:



