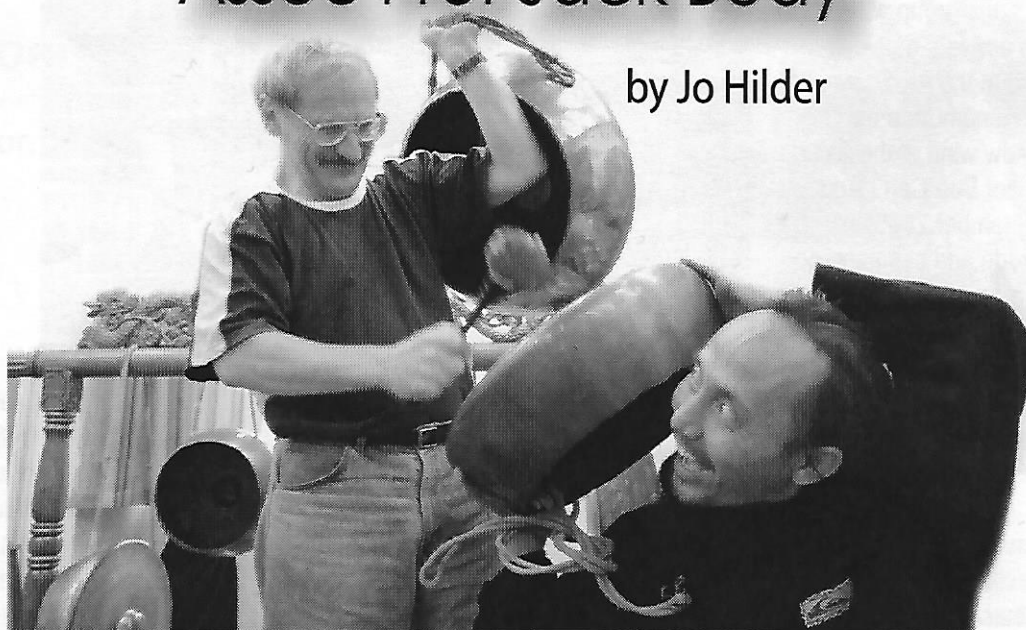


Profile: From New Zealand Assoc Prof Jack Body

by Jo Hilder

Photo: Gerry Keating, Image Services, Victoria University of Wellington



Jack Body and Wayan Yudane

Jack Body, a prominent composer and Associate Professor of Composition at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), is a key figure in the world of gamelan in New Zealand. While he has a broad interest in the music of different cultures, especially Asian cultures, Indonesia has been an enduring passion.

He has been the driving force behind many of the gamelan-related events over the years and is currently the manager of Gamelan Padhang Moncar (GPM) at VUW. In this role he has a two-pronged approach, supporting the study of traditional music but putting equal emphasis on the creation of new music for gamelan as well.

In a recent interview, he described how he first became interested in Indonesian music and some of the activities he's been involved in.

If you look up Jack's biography on the internet, you find that he made an overland trip through Asia in 1971. Ah-ha, you might think (as I did) – he probably heard gamelan on his travels and was captivated. Not so. In fact he first heard gamelan music after this trip, from LPs of Javanese gamelan loaned to him by Allan Thomas, the ethnomusicologist who was later

responsible for bringing the first set of gamelan instruments to New Zealand in 1974. And Jack admits, under his breath, that he actually found the music 'a bit boring'.

On his first encounter with Indonesia 'a couple of days in Jakarta', he was not even conscious of gamelan, but he thought Indonesia was 'a very nice place to be – the people seemed extra friendly, seemed interesting, so I thought I'd go there and I went back for about four months. In fact I overstayed my visa and misplaced my passport, tried to renew it myself and nearly got locked away for it!'

On this second visit, he stayed mainly in Bali and of course heard gamelan there, becoming aware that 'it was a brilliant kind of musical tradition.' His first work with the music of Indonesia was an electro-acoustic work he created using field recordings made by Allan Thomas in Indonesia – the resulting composition Musik Dari Jalan earned first prize at the 1976 Bourges Competition. 'That made me think, well this is actually a potential world to be explored further'.

His attraction to Indonesia was such that he found a way to go back as a guest lecturer at Akademi Musik Indonesia in Yogyakarta, staying for two

years (1976-77) to teach western music. While he didn't really become involved in playing gamelan, he recalled how he became interested in traditional musics. He obtained what was then a top of the range Yakamichi cassette recorder, and having teamed up with his long time partner Yono Sukarno who transcribed and translated lyrics, he set about recording street musicians in Yogya. These recordings were released as *Music for Sale*.

'We did other recording projects as well and travelled and realised there was an incredible variety of village music. We'd go to each place and ask what interesting things they had and they always had unique music... So I was really interested in exploring musical genres'. Other recordings released include one of *Jemblung*, a vocalised form of gamelan and storytelling, and an anthology of music of Madura. Over the years, Jack has continued to compose electro-acoustic pieces using material he recorded in 1976/77 and in 1993 released a CD of these called *Suara: Environmental Music for Java*. In between each of the electronic compositions, he included interludes which are short field recordings of things

like pigeon whistles, *ciblon* water play and *Gua Tabuhan* (stone music recorded from the stalactites at Pacitan).

Jack has strong views about the use of recordings of traditional music: 'When you're dealing with this music, you have to let the original material be heard in its unadulterated form, at least for a moment, otherwise it's a kind of exploitation, you're jusing something without respect for what it actually is. It's a bit like writing music for gamelan and looking at all these exotic instruments and thinking "oh there's some interesting sound sources – bah bah bah boom", without any understanding or honouring of the tradition that the instruments represents. So I think that's even true of even just field recordings of the environment. They're beautiful things in themselves, deserving of concentrated attention. So at least somewhere in the composition let it be heard for itself.'

Another surprise: Jack has never composed for gamelan as such, at least not anything he's been happy with. But he has successfully combined Indonesian and Western music in two recent compositions, each time involving Budi Putra, our gamelan teacher, as a performer. *Campur Sari* (which appears on his CD *Pulse*) is for string quartet and Javanese *gender*, *kendang* and voice. According to the NZ Listener, in this work 'East and West are tastefully reconciled without compromising either. How artfully he avoids the head-on clash between the two different scale-tuning systems of Eastern gamelan and Western string quartet.'¹ But what about his other composition work?

More recently, he composed *Palaran: Songs of Love and War* in which he wrote music for the Amsterdam Atlas Ensemble (of Western, Middle Eastern and Chinese musicians) to accompany Budi singing *macapat*. The successful way that Jack can combine Indonesian and other music forms clearly results from his deep understanding of and respect for the music.

When asked if he felt that gamelan or Indonesian music in general had influenced his other composition work, he noted that 'some people say so'. But he went on describe aspects that he would like to use in composition.

'There are certain principles that astonish me in gamelan such as the freedom of the *pesindhen* and the rhythmic freedom of the *suling*, against the regular pulse of the rest of the ensemble, and it seems to me that's a principle that one could use. Even in *kroncong*, the singer in *kroncong* is never on the beat – it's that kind of fluidity that is a principle one could use and I hope to some time.

And also the principle of *irama* – you have this contradiction between the music, the basic pulse, the melody slowing down, while the internal ornamentation is speeding up – it's what happens when you change gear in a car, isn't it? – but it's a beautiful concept, a kind of paradox. And that's something I'd like to use in a piece, not yet, but some time ...

When I was working on *Palaran*, there were some beautiful paradoxes there too. Most of the sections were *slendro* but there was so much *miring* (the bending of pitches in the vocal line), that it sounded like *pelog*, like a sleight of hand, an illusion of

thinking it's one thing but it's actually moving towards another. And it's just beautiful. Also *wolak walik*, when changing from *slendro* to *pelog* in mid-verse as Budi did when he did created the *penataan* for us in the BEAT festival - just in mid-verse, suddenly, we moved from one world to the other, a cosmic shift. Things like that are just so exciting.'

It is these kinds of experiences and insights that Jack is keen to share with his composition students, and he values the presence of the gamelan within the School of Music for this as well as for its intrinsic qualities.

'I'm no great shakes as a gamelan performer, but I think it's important for musicians to experience another kind of music making, other kinds of ensemble. Because all my training has been in Western music, looking for new horizons, is very instructive and I try to suggest that to my students. They might go on to other kinds of music but it's good for them to be aware that Western music is not necessarily the ultimate at all...It's a very useful resource for students to experience and to explore creatively.'

Another way that Jack has introduced his students to these new horizons is through hosting a series of Artists in

Jack Body and Joko Sutrisno



Residence from various regions of Indonesia (plus one from the Philippines). The first, in 1999, was Rafloza, a Minangkabau musician, who was followed by Agus Supriawan (Sunda, 2000), Bennicio Sokkong (Luzon, Philippines, 2001), Dody Ekagustdiman (Sunda 2002) and I Wayan Gde Yudane (Bali 2003).

The artists have stayed from six weeks to four months and Jack has set his students transcription projects with them. The visiting musician 'would play some music, we would record it, we would transcribe it and then we'd make a piece out of it, and I'd invite them always to integrate the guest into the piece. We'd also do other projects with composers – writing for them or working with them and having concerts.'

'So it's really just an opportunity for people to interact, but it's a lot of work to make sure the person is fully occupied, tis happy here and has a comfortable place to stay, and for some guests with only a little English language, it's labour intensive to look after them.'

'One of the most successful was Agus Supriawan, who is Sundanese. He had enough English language which made it easier. He was very adaptable to work with anything on any occasion. and very instructive also. We would have improvisation sessions, working with a group and we'd say "that's fantastic – let's do that tonight in the performance" but at the performance, the beginning of the improvisation and he would do something else completely! You'd say "this afternoon, it was so good, why did ...?" He say "you can't repeat something, you have to do it different." ...

'In one of these improvisation sessions, we had some taiko drums and he took a beater and dragged it gently along the floor and it resonated so musically... His sensitivity to everything around him - all te potential sound sources and how they might fit together - and his immediate interaction with anybody he was playing with was dazzling. It's that kind of freshness that you get.'

When not organising musicians to visit here, Jack has often been organising our group to tour to other regions of New Zealand and twice to Indonesia. The highly successful BEAT! International Festival of Gamelan in March 1999 was also his brainchild, attracting guests from Indonesia, USA, Australia, Singapore and Holland.

In fact, Jack is always organising some event or other. 'I guess I've always been a facilitator – enjoy organising people and things and events. And in a sense it is creative but it's a low level creativity as against composition that's so hard. So I enjoy being creative at that level, facilitating, bringing together.'

'I like taking performers and ensembles and selecting material and then putting it together in a new and interesting way. It is assembling found musics in a way - found sounds.'

An example of such a project was *Darkness to Light: An Easter celebration* (2001) which combined Gamelan Padhang Moncar (GPM) with a church choir, throat singers, cello, *rabab pasisia*, jews harp, bagpipes, organ and various wine-glasses and vocalists.

Jack's promotion of the gamelan as an ensemble to compose for, doesn't just stop at working with composition students. He notes that 'If you don't have your own gamelan, you make your own gamelan, and if you do have a gamelan you can still make it your own by making music for it. If you're a composer or – what's a composer? – anybody might like to make something for these marvellous instruments.'

And that's just what Jack got people to do for *Darkness to Light*. A variety of people, including members of the gamelan who might never have composed before, arranged sections of the mass for gamelan or other instrumentations.

'I like the idea of a project every year – a big project of some kind.' And Jack has usually succeeded in this goal. He has brought us such guest musicians as the *kroncong* legend Waljinah in 2003 and

Didik Nini Thowok in 2004 (both these events covered in *Swara Bendhe*, No 5, Dec 2004). The project for 2006 is for GPM to play at the Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival, combining forces again with both these artists.

Jack's current project is *Vita Brevis*, scheduled for November 20 - a project that features three guest vocalists from Indonesia and a Maori singer and combines Javanese and Balinese gamelan and church choir. The title refers to the purpose of the performance which is to remember and contemplate the deaths of so many people in the recent disasters in Indonesia and elsewhere, both natural and otherwise.

Jack explains the motivation for the project. 'I realised that it must be discouraging for Budi because his special thing is vocal, and yet we have so few singers in our group, so I thought we should do a vocal project and that's why I invited three singers from Indonesia... It's about voice. And it seemed appropriate that, because of the connection with Indonesia, we should remember the tsunami, but now we've got the earthquake in Pakistan/India! – I'm racking my brains to see how we could also mark that ...'

'Without wanting to exploit the tragedy of others, I think it's good to reflect on what it means when some people's lives are terminated before they should be and what that means to us, the living.'

'It won't be all doom and gloom - a Chinese composer is contributing a piece and the poem he has chosen is about a poet considering his own death and what that means. The last line is: "I will only have one regret, and that is that I didn't drink enough wine."'

With all he has achieved in his lifetime so far, it wouldn't be surprising if this line were to sum it up for Jack too.