

Gamelan



One of the most ancient types of music still in existence, the sounds of a gamelan ensemble are haunting and hypnotic. These ensembles are rooted in Indonesia, particularly Bali and Java, and have played a great role in shaping many different styles of Western music today.

Gamelan, which is the word used to refer to this ensemble of instruments, is primarily made up of a family of melodic percussion known as metallophones, which consist of metal keys progressively arranged. They bear a resemblance to the xylophone and the marimba, although they are tuned to a pentatonic scale. These keyboards are struck with special hammers, hence the name gamelan, which comes from the Javanese word "gamel", meaning "to strike". Other instruments used in a gamelan include gongs of various sizes, drums, bamboo flutes, rattles, and occasionally singers.

Gamelan arrangements are complex and cannot be performed by an individual performer; a group effort is important in this type of ensemble. Arrangements typically employ a cyclical, repetitive structure, with interlocking parts in the metallophones and phrases marked by the gongs. As with any genre of music, arrangements, sound, and instrumentation vary based on regional differences. The two most well-known types of gamelan can be found in Java and Bali.

Gamelans perform in a variety of settings. A street procession in Indonesia may feature a marching gamelan, while a more formal performance by a large orchestra is known as a gamelan gong. A smaller version of gamelan gong which performs at several different ceremonies is known as gamelan angklung.

Wayang, another type of gamelan, accompanies wayang kulit, which is a traditional shadow puppet performance. The integration of gamelan music here is so important that the puppeteer, referred to as the "dalang", is required to have a thorough understanding of the arrangement.



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