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L'Envoi

Cast off your melancholy, friend,
At the scenes of life's drama
Already acted; and at the lamp
Of ideals already burnt out !
The only course which brings peace and happiness
Is to follow unhesitatingly
The code individually tried and chosen
Which makes you true to your own self.

THE MUSIC OF GREATER INDIA¹

By DENNIS STOLL

IN his foreword to the first issue of *The Greater India Society's Journal* Rabindranath Tagore wrote: "To know my country in truth one has to travel to that age when she realized her soul, and thus transcended her physical boundaries; when she revealed her being in a radiant magnanimity which illumined the eastern horizon, making her recognized as their own by those in alien shores who were awakened into a great surprise of life."

It is true to say, I think, that India realized her soul in the music of Java and Bali, of Burma and Siam, of Laos and Cambodia. The high musical culture of these countries has survived nearly two millenniums since the Hindu and Buddhist spirit first spread beyond India's frontiers.

We look back upon, not so much a past Greater Indian Empire, as upon a forgotten Indian internationalism, that once linked the whole of Southern Asia. In the ninth century of the Christian era, a man coming from the Ganges valley across the Indian Ocean to Java could feel equally at home in both places. On Java island he would find a reflection of his own thoughts, his tongue employed in literature, a style of architecture based on that of the Hindu master-builders, an abundance of music and dancing which he could appreciate.

The Greater Indian Internationalism crumbled, and the old Indo-Javanese thought and language gave place first to Islamic and then to Western influences.

The Javanese today build almost exclusively with bamboo. They regard the ancient Hindu monuments in stone as relics of a supernatural era. Music and dancing alone have maintained their identity, and are still recognizably Indian in spirit. This is a triumph for the soul of India, and one which her people should not forget in deciding what part music shall play in the future life of their new-born nation.

Art is seldom static, and we may therefore reasonably assume that Javanese music has progressed since the days of Indian colonization. No certain comparison of old with new is possible, as detailed and accurate notation has, unfortunately, never been a strong feature of oriental musicianship. But the *gamelan* orchestras of Java, extraordinarily advanced in instrumental combinations of tone-colour, would seem to provide living evidence of artistic

¹ Lecture delivered at Netherlands House on September 10, 1943. Air-Commodore Vernon Brown presided.

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progress. We will examine the constitution of the *gamelan* presently, when we come to consider the music of Java's neighbouring island, Bali.

First, I propose we hear a gramophone record of a Javanese singer accompanied by a delicate chamber combination of only flute and zither. This will help to attune our ears to the unfamiliar medium. The song is a very simple one, called "Golden Rain." And the singer's voice flows through it with a technique no less perfect than the finest Indian *coloratura*, though hers is perhaps a less cultivated perfection. Her voice seems to float through a veil of rain woven into a mist of soft sounds of instruments.

Listening to that, one is reminded a little of the old delicate songs of We Liang Fu, the founder of the classic Chinese *Kun-ch'u* style. This influence is even more apparent in the next record, where the Javanese *prima donna's* head and chest register are employed with highly-developed technique. The pentatonic scale of it also recalls the music of China. But the grades of that Chinese scale are softened by the substitution of what we musicians call intervals of $5/4$ tones for whole tones. An unimaginative listener of the West might condemn both orchestra and singer for being "off the note." The late Dr. Crotch, who naïvely assumed that Javanese instruments "are all in the same kind of scale as that produced by the black keys of the pianoforte," would have been disconcerted to hear how little regard this Javanese *prima donna* and her *gamelan* orchestra have for our Western keyboard convention of Equal Temperament.

In addition to the pentatonic *slendro* scale, the Javanese employ a seven-graded tone system which divides the Western octave into seven even tones. The much cited examples of melodies given in Sir Stamford Raffles' *History of Java* (1817) and Crawford's *History of the Indian Archipelago* (1820) present only a part of the whole modal picture. The modern Javanese musician is not the victim of a pentatonic complex such as Raffles and Crawford diagnosed a century ago. He has inherited a diversity of other five-note *ragas* set down in the ancient Hindu treatise by Somanatha. These so-called incomplete *ragas* are practically obsolete in India today, but in Java they have survived the passage of a thousand years. To hear the modern *gamelan* play a five-note *raga* in the scale of *pelog* is to realize that the most ancient Indian traditions still possess vitality. It is as if the antique musicians carved in the stone of Borobodur suddenly sprang to warm life and made music for the Buddha.

For an example of this we will go to Java's neighbouring island, Bali, where indigenous culture has been more sheltered from the influences of China, Islam and the West. Absence of good harbours for many years retarded foreign trade. Moreover, the Dutch earned a reputation for wisely never thrusting their ideas of culture down the throats of the Balinese. Consequently the spirit of Indo-Balinese civilization has been able to breathe in the religion, music and dance-drama of the island population. Brahmin and Buddhist priests lead the prevailing religious thought. Musical instruments which have not been known in Java for generations are still in daily use in Bali. The old Sanskrit epics are the favourite subjects of the popular Balinese theatre. Art on this island is no collection of dead stones and relics. Culture is not relegated to the museum, or its instruments to the glass case. Bali is the home of a living people, wise in their simple acceptance of religion and art as the finer part of existence. Before the Japanese occupation, some Western visitors went so far as to describe the island as the last surviving evidence of true civilization on earth.

The performance of a Balinese *gamelan gong* full orchestra is not easily forgotten. The brilliancy of the instrumentation, the dynamic shading of tone, the rhapsodical liberties taken with *tempi*, the symphonic structure of composition, command respect from all musicians whether of East or West. The perfection of the concerted playing is the more remarkable in that the performers are often not professionals, but farmers, artisans and business men.

Even ears inured to the sensuous colour and harmony of European music must be pricked up at the sound of those resonant mysterious-toned kettle-gongs *bonang*, the bronze bells *trompong* and bell-jar *regong*, the divers xylophones of metal and wood both with and without bamboo resonators, the brass-barred *gangsa* and *saron*, the thunder and rattle of the *kendang* finger-drum. There is little wonder that thousands of Balinese listen with rapt attention to the tone contrasts of their orchestras, the like of which are not to be heard anywhere, unless it be in exceptional concerts of modern music broadcast by the more extravagant radio stations of America.

Gamelan music is an integral part of the life of every Balinese. The full orchestra, which you have just heard, is divided into various smaller combinations to suit artistic and social requirements. For instance, here is a record of one—the *gamelan anklung*—that is used for marriage and funeral ceremonies. The music is quite spontaneously created, this time on only a four-note scale. You will notice a melody that echoes in the bass like an old Buddhist temple hymn that some celestial giant is humming. The rhythmic figure of the higher-pitched metal xylophones above is in striking contrast to the solemn slow sweet-toned gong-like measure of the bass.

The Balinese love to relate the ancient tales of the Hindu gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, that have been passed down from generation to generation. One of their favourite ways of doing this is the Shadow Show. The silhouettes of manipulative puppets are thrown upon a screen. And while the shadow shapes act their parts, the tale is told to the accompaniment of music. The particular *gamelan* used for this purpose consists of two pairs of metal-barred xylophones, tuned in octaves, the resonance plates of which hang loosely over bamboo resonators. The example we are going to hear illustrates a well-known South Indian legend. It is in the *slendro* scale, of the same tonal structure as the second Javanese song we played this afternoon.

Performances of Indian legends are given by Balinese dancers who are also actresses. Dressed in beautiful costumes, they tell a story with subtle gestures of head and hands and feet. Even the crook of a finger has significance.

The orchestra that usually plays for these dancers is known as the *gamelan djoged*. The instruments are wooden xylophones of half a dozen shapes and sizes. And sometimes a hide-headed drum punctuates the breathing spaces of the rattling wood. As you listen to this orchestra, you will perhaps be able to imagine the stiff jerky movements of the dancers, which are very much in harmony with the staccato rhythm and cross-rhythm of the xylophones.

When distant reverberations of Western jazz reached Bali some years ago, the musicians of the island, having a keen sense of humour, responded with what they called a *djanger* "sitting dance." Here is a record of the original *djanger* created by them in 1925. An eerie *ostinato* melody on the *rebab* violin (borrowed, of course, from Arabian settlers or traders) creeps like an endless snake over a monotonous drum-throbbing. A gigantic chorus of men and women hurl staccato rhythms across the instrumental *ostinato*. The music works up to a frenzied climax that leaves jazz-mongers, or even American football cheer-leaders with a lot to learn. Musicians will be glad of the assurance that there is little danger of the *djanger* superseding indigenous art. The Balinese regard this sitting-dance music as a good standing joke against the Western tourists who were quick to notice in it the primitive characteristics of jazz.

The finest dancing in Greater India was once to be seen in French Indo-Chinese Cambodia. There stories from the Hindu "Ramayana" were told in terms of subtle mime and ballet, the gliding rhythm and rippling muscles of unjointed limbs. The moon-white faces of the dancers, their lips stained red with Chinese paper, moved like animated masks

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above undulating shoulders, arms and hands describing gestures liquid and angular. Flexible-kneed and toes upturned, they pirouetted or stood beautifully poised on one foot, these dancers, accompanied by the soft clash of their ankle-bells and the sounds of singing and orchestral music.

The Laotian and Cambodian orchestras are world famous for their artistry. The French composer Claude Debussy was profoundly influenced in his style by the music he heard at the Cambodian Exhibition in Paris. His contemporary, Maurice Ravel, produced much that is tonally suggestive of the music of Laos.

Here is a short record of Laotian *khenes*, flute and cymbals.

Siam and Cambodia originally formed part of the ancient Empire of Fu-nan. The Chinese chronicles relate how the Indian Prince Kaundinya sailed East to the lands now known as Thailand and Indo-China. There he married the native Queen Willow-Leaf. Together they began the great Indianized kingdom of Fu-nan. About the third century A.D. another Kaundinya, an Indian Brahmin, felt himself to be divinely inspired to reign over Fu-nan. "The whole kingdom was stirred with joy," the chronicle says; "the people came to him and made him king. He changed their laws according to the methods of India." These streams of political influence undoubtedly made their impression on Cambodian and Siamese music.

Even though modern Siamese opera-drama alternates singing and speaking parts after the fashion of the Chinese, the favourite subjects are still Indian. The "Ramayana" story of the monkey god Hanuman is the basis of a very fine scene, which I propose we make our last example. The orchestra consists of three hand-drums, two *patala* xylophones, two sets of *khong lek* gongs, two metallophones, a bamboo flute and an ivory *peecharwar* flute, and a great gong for punctuation. The most distinguished feature of the performance is the artistic handling of *accelerando* passages, the tasteful employment of *tremolo* and *glissando* effects. The Siamese *prima donna* betrays her reliance on Chinese as well as Indian resources. The music is built on a mixture of two tonalities. Characterized by classical softness, playful sweetness and simplicity, it breathes something of the spirit of sixteenth-century China, notwithstanding that its soul is essentially Indian.

The geographical link between Burma and India is manifest in the music of the two countries. The Indian Buddhist monks who set sail for the Irrawaddy delta in the third century A.D. brought with them the bow-harp, now obsolete in India, but represented in the ancient Bhaja and Sanchi sculptures. The instrument is still in use in Burma under the name of *tsaun*. The *serinda*, a sort of violin, and Indian drums are as commonly heard in Burma today as the Burmese gongs and *patala* xylophone in India. Indeed, the influence of the one nation's music upon the other is as paradoxical and subtle as the mutual influence of Muslim and Hindu culture in India itself.

This brief talk has done no more than touch the fringe of a vast subject. A thorough exploration of Greater Indian music would take years to accomplish and volumes of records to illustrate. All I have been able to do is to try to recapture a few moments of that age when, as Tagore said, India realized her soul. The more I hear of the Indian musicians that we are fortunate enough to have with us here in London—Mrs. S. Khanna singing "Mira Bai," Dr. Bhupen Mukerjee playing the *sarode*, to mention only two of many—the more I know that the day is not far off when India will realize her soul again.