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THE MUSIC OF JAVA

BY

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CONSERVATOR OF THE MUSEUM OF THE COLONIAL INSTITUTE



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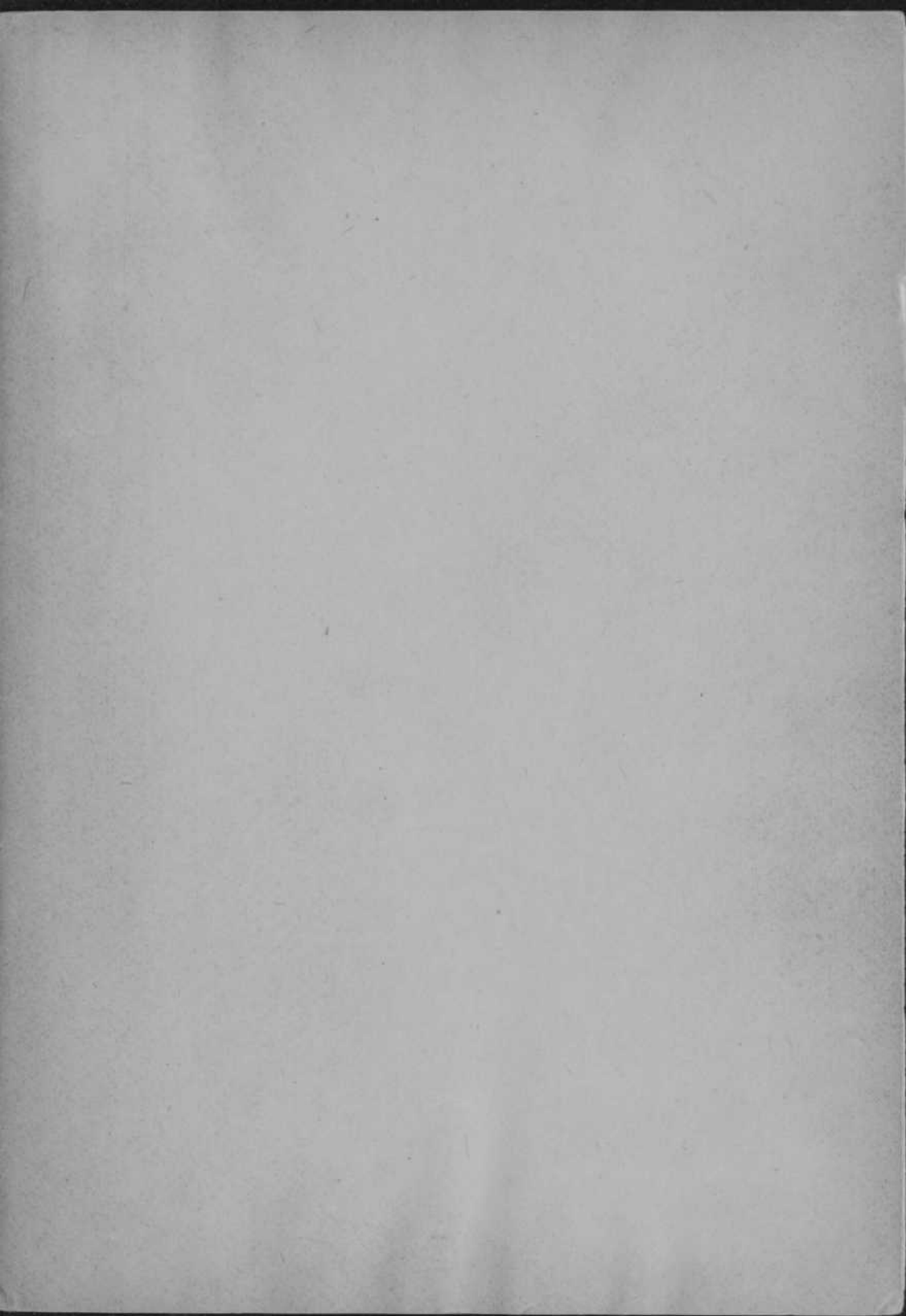
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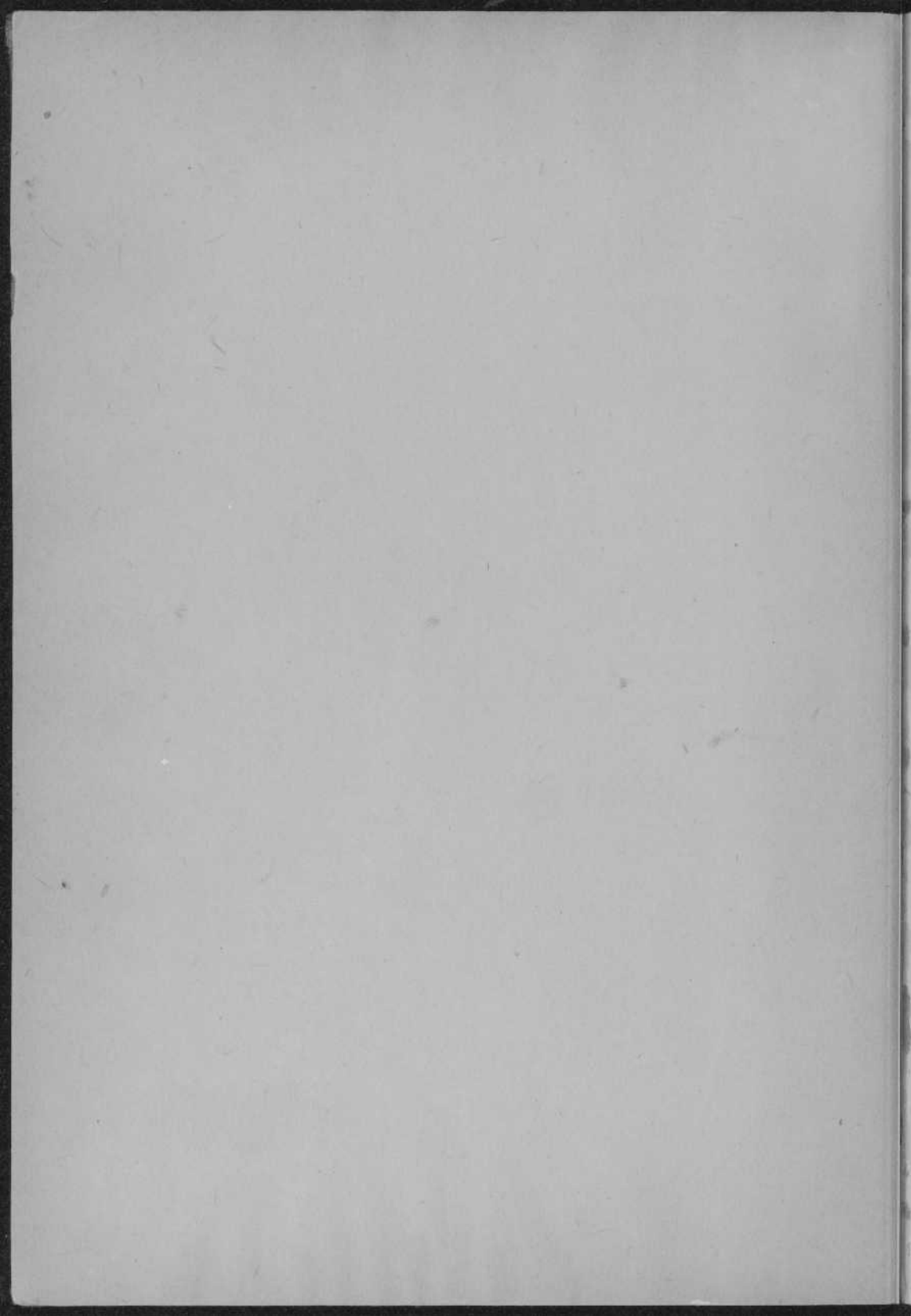
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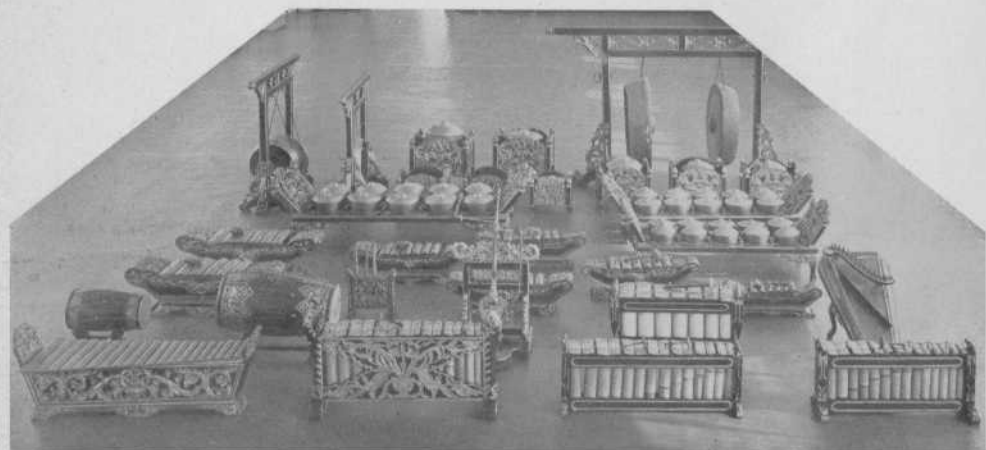


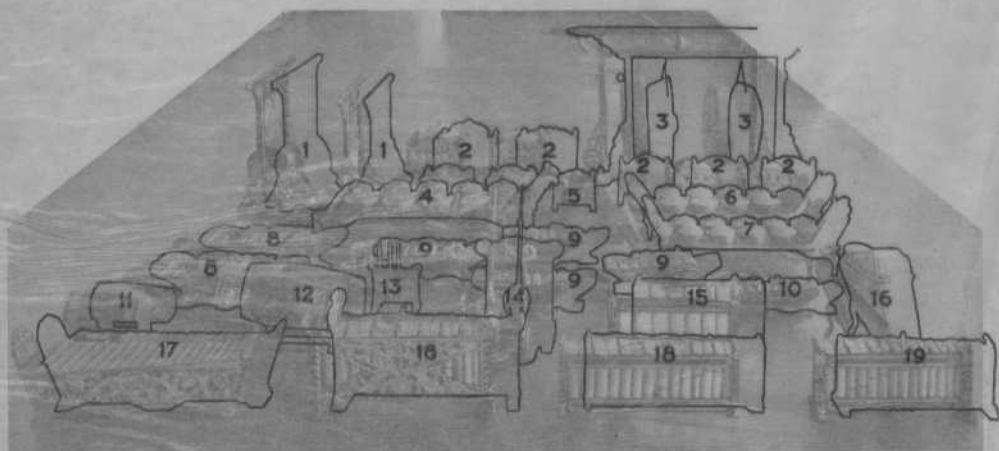


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Javanese orchestra (gamelan), belonging to the ethnographical collection of the Netherlands Colonial Institute, originally from Jogjakarta. The ensemble comprises the following instruments:

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. kempul | 10. saron panerus or peking |
| 2. kenong | 11. kenḡang tjiblon |
| 3. gong ageng | 12. kenḡang genḡing |
| 4. bonang panembung | 13. suling |
| 5. keḡuk | 14. rebab |
| 6. bonang barung | 15. genḡer panembung or slenḡem |
| 7. bonang panerus | 16. tjelempung |
| 8. demung | 17. gambang kaju |
| 9. saron barung | 18. genḡer barung |
| | 19. genḡer panerus |

THE MUSIC OF JAVA.¹⁾

by J. KUNST, Amsterdam.

(*Conservator of the Museum of the Colonial Institute*).

Anyone wishing to come to a clear comprehension of a kind of music that is entirely foreign to him is faced with a great many difficulties, however anxious he may be to appreciate its qualities, and however susceptible he may be to beauty in general. He must try to divest himself of all prejudice before approaching this world of strange sounds. If he has theories or preconceived ideas or axioms about aesthetics, he must try to forget them, as well as all the conventional conceptions with which he has grown up. To put down a specified rule for the state of mind and soul in which to enter into this new realm, or to prescribe what to forget and what to appreciate, would lead us into the domain of psychological analysis and of musico-technique. I do not propose to do this here for fear of our losing ourselves in this sphere of almost unlimited possibilities. I only wish to utter a warning against the familiar danger of following one's inclination to condemn in foreign music that which seems inferior to our own, whereas those elements which, as a rule, have been more or less neglected in our own music, with the consequence that our ears are not attuned to them, are generally not appreciated at their true value when they occur in this exotic music. For example, a common objection expressed by Europeans with regard to Javanese music is that it shows a certain primitiveness in the melody; a lack of development and growth in the form. They seem at the same time to be insensible to the delicacies of the rhythm and the wonderful shades and the variety in the drumming. On the other hand, the Javanese is sure to disapprove in European music of the, to his ears, wilful use of the tonalities, the lack of expression in our drum-play, the poverty of our percussion instruments; and, at first, he will be unable to take in the imposing tension of the melody, the touching climax—in a word, the essential psychic contents of our great orchestral compositions and of our chamber-music.

The preceding remarks bear partly on an essential difference, which we may define in the following way: Indonesian music is static; modern European music dynamic. Western music is full of action and tension; the great orchestral compositions express a crisis, a conflict; they strive and attain. On the other hand, we may characterize Javanese music perhaps best by calling it "time transferred into music". It is in the best sense of the word "without aim"; it does not EVOLVE, it IS. This will explain why, at the end of an European concert, we are conscious of being fatigued, whilst a whole night spent in listening to the gamelan leaves us practically without any feeling of being tired.

It goes without saying that this contrast only bears on the general

¹⁾ Lecture delivered at the Netherlands Legation in London for the members of the India Society on October 22, 1934. Sir Francis Younghusband presided.

character of both arts. Western music also knows compositions without growth and development; it can also be meditative, can give the impression of being "time transformed into music". The Indonesian music, on the other hand, sometimes has its dramatic moments, and can undoubtedly express strong passions. But these features, when they occur, in no wise mark the general character of the two kinds of music.

You are undoubtedly aware of the fact that music in the Indonesian archipelago is still entirely a popular art; a music made by and for the people of all classes in the Indonesian world. As for the origin of the greater part of the compositions, it is as with us in our folk-songs and our mediaeval art: the author is only seldom known by name, and even then he is only the voice of the people. Prince and labourer alike listen with equal rapture to the same *gendings*, although their individual appreciation may be different. To appreciate this fully, one must have attended a wayang performance in one of the *cratons* (palaces), and have seen how completely the nobles as well as the common people are absorbed in the music and the play: the nobles with their guests on the marble dais of the *pendopo*, a brilliant nucleus of the audience, and round it the people, a dense mass of delicate, brown and silent figures.

When we consider the composing elements in our own music, and then ask ourselves to what extent they are also present in Javanese music, we arrive in the first place at the conclusion that, although the European ear can distinguish a tonal centre in many of the vocal compositions (*tembang*) and of the instrumental pieces (*gending*), there is no question here of such a pronounced and fixed tonality as we find in our own music. Instead of this we find semi-modal, semi-tonal systems of a highly intricate kind. We enter here in the sphere of the *patet* and of the *laras bem* and *barang* of the Principalities, the scales *selisir*, *sunaren*, etc., of Bali, the modes *mèlog*, *njorog*, *madenda*, *degung*, etc. of the Sundanese: in my eyes the most fascinating province of the whole Indonesian world of music.

The scales in use may be arranged in two systems, called in Javanese *pélog* and *sléndro*.

The absolute lack of historical and musicological dates left until lately full scope for all sorts of suppositions as to the origin of the musical scales.

According to Professor LAND, the *pélog*-scales must be comparatively new; he supposed them to be of Perso-Arab origin; at least, he has advanced this as a more or less tenable hypothesis. RADEN MAS SURJĀPUTRĀ seems to have accepted, for *pélog* at any rate, a more or less close connection with the scales of Hindostan, but at other times again he seems to have thought that, after all, they might be of pure Javanese origin.

According to popular belief, *sléndro* is the gift of a Hindu god and *pélog* a transformation of *sléndro* by the hands of irreverent and bold man.

Since the last few years we know, with fairly great certainty, thanks especially to Professor VON HORNOSTEL, that the Javanese scales — and a great many others — have come from China, and have their origin perhaps in a still more distant land, with a still older culture — namely, in Central Asia, in Turkestan.

There cannot be any doubt about the fact that *sléndro* came to Java and Bali a good many centuries after *pélog*. *Pélog* was perhaps already imported by Malay-Polynesian peoples, who came to Java many centuries before our Christian era. *Sléndro* seems to have entered Java simultaneously with a later culture in the eighth century A.D., when the dynasty of the *Çailéndras* ruled the central parts of the island, and to have derived its name from that same royal family: *gamelan sléndro* = *gamelan Çailéndra*. At first it seems to have remained restricted to the centre of the island, where it supplanted for the greater part the old *pélog*. Later on,

probably in consequence of political changes, sléndro made its entry into the west and the east of Java, and subsequently into Bali. According to recent discoveries, we may take it for granted that very soon after Java began to play a part in history the two tonal systems existed side by side. Sléndro was intended for the accompaniment of the wayang purwā — viz., the shadow plays when they represent Hindu myths; while pélog was intimately connected with the characteristically Indonesian pre-Hindu art, or, better still, non-Hindu art, with certain ceremonies, several forms of the dance, and with the wayang gedog, representing the Pandji cyclus, which is purely Java-Polynesian.

In its complete form instrumental pélog has seven tones to the octave — that is to say, it seems to have seven tones to the octave, but in reality that heptatonic scale is only a conglomerate, only the least common multiple of a group of pentatonic scales with unequal intervals, in which from time to time there appears a sixth, or even a seventh, tone as a weak or accessory tone. Sléndro is always pentatonic and has generally almost equal intervals.

From top to bottom these intervals are called in Central Java:

In pélog	The intervals expressed in European semi-tones (approximately)		In sléndro	The intervals expressed in European semi-tones (approximately)
(penunggul or bem alit)	or		(barang alit)	
barang	2.7	2.64	nem	2.4
nem	1.5	1.56	limā or gangsal	2.4
limā or gangsal	1.2	1.02		2.4
pélog	1.5	1.56	dāḍā or tengah	2.4
dāḍā or tengah	2.4	2.64	gulu or djonggā	2.4
gulu or djonggā	1.5	1.56	barang	
penunggul or bem	1.2	1.02		

So neither of these systems agree entirely with our own system of intervals, but I know by experience that the European ear accommodates itself quickly and hears these intervals as perfectly pure and beautiful. But then, these scales, like our own, are built up on absolutely natural principles.

As regards the Javanese melody, in my opinion it has not reached the same degree of development as the European — at any rate, as far as the orchestral compositions are concerned. The fundamental melody is rather simple, more or less archaic. Only when produced vocally or on the rebab (the native violin) or the suling (bamboo flute) it becomes richer and more graceful. However, notwithstanding its relative simplicity, it sometimes sounds very impressive and full of sentiment, and the vocal melodies are often splendid. One of those songs belonging to the Jogjanese wayang-purwā music, I will now let you hear. (Here followed the reproduction of the lagon **patet manjurā wetah**).

And now for the harmony. One notices that the different voices are not, as with us, subject to certain fixed rules. One might almost call it voluntary or accidental. Ordinarily this is not a properly regulated **polyphony**; it is a freer form, more primitive perhaps, viz. heterophony, as Professor SRUMPF has baptized it. However, in some of the gendings, we find the beginnings of canonic imitation: perhaps a polyphony *in statu*

nascendi, and also the human voices and the rebab come sometimes to a melodic independence which creates a real kind of polyphony.

There remains the rhythm. If, perhaps with some justice, we may say that European music has attained a higher degree of perfection from the point of view of melody and harmony, as regards rhythm it is, in my eyes, we who have remained behind. In Indonesian music in many cases the rhythm is much more elaborated and varied; sometimes I have heard polyrhythmic, better heterorhythmic, constructions of extraordinary beauty.

Now let us pass on to a more concrete subject: the composition and the use of the Javanese orchestras. The plural is used here intentionally: Java is familiar with several kinds of orchestras and also with a number of instruments, that can be used simultaneously as well as for solo-parts. The gamelan proper is the most perfect orchestral form and the most complete; other simpler ensembles are at the same time more primitive.

The complete gamelan of the Principalities seems, when seen and heard for the first time, to be only a confusion of sounds and instruments. Apparently the musicians are placed and play at their own sweet will. But little by little one perceives that there is "method in their madness", and that each instrument has its own task to fulfil in the orchestral plan.

In the first place attention has to be drawn to the fact that the great gamelan of the princes and regents have a double set of instruments — viz., they are composed of a **sléndro**-part and of a **pélog**-part. The only instruments these parts have in common are the big gongs and the drums; occasionally also some **kenongs** and some **kempuls**.

Needless to say, the **sléndro**- and the **pélog**-parts are never played simultaneously. It is also quite exceptional to pass from the one tonal system into the other in one gending. I only know one single case: in the gending **Bedājā ketawang**, where there is a change from **pélog** into **sléndro**, and then back again into **pélog**.

The **pélog**-part of the gamelan is again divided into two parts with regard to the multi-octave gendèrs. The sequence of tones for those gendèrs, according to the **pélog-bem**-system, must be **bem, gulu, dādā, limā, nem**, in every octave; but in the **pélog-barang**-system the sequence is **limā, nem, barang, gulu, dādā**. As the keys are suspended above sounding-tubes by means of cords, it is difficult to change them, when, in the course of the evening, **pélog-bem** is abandoned in favour of **pélog-barang**, and therefore there are in **pélog** those two groups of multi-octave gendèrs. Each of those couples of gendèr-**pélog** forms, with a gendèr **sléndro**, an open square, in the middle of which the musician is seated.

This difficulty does not arise with the other melodic instruments. When their compass is no more than one octave, they produce all the seven tones of the complete **pélog**-scale, or they have loose keys or gongs, which can easily be changed.

The gamelan **pélog** and the gamelan **sléndro** comprise more or less the same instruments. But when they are not combined in a double orchestra, the instruments of a **pélog** orchestra are generally larger than those of a **sléndro** orchestra. Moreover, there are some kinds of small gongs, either suspended or in a horizontal position, which belong exclusively to one or the other of these two ensembles respectively. For instance, the **kempyang** only occurs in the gamelan **pélog**; the **engkuk** and the **kemong** belong exclusively to the gamelan **sléndro**.

Then there are some differences in the composition of the Solonese orchestras on the one hand and the Jogjanese orchestras on the other. Jogja, for instance, has a kind of **bonang** more, the "bass" **bonang**, called

bonang panembung. The other differences are chiefly found in the construction and the structure of some instruments — viz., the **rebab**, the **suling**, the **bonang**, and the **gambang kaju**.

Now we come to some details of the functions of the different instruments in the orchestral ensemble.

We may distinguish:

- (a) the instruments producing the essential melody;
- (b) those that play the melody in its full development;
- (c) the punctuating instruments (colotomic instr.);
- (d) the paraphrasing instruments; and
- (e) the agogic instruments.

The group of **sarons**, **demung**, and **saron barung** — all of which are metallophones with loose keys lying flat — play chiefly the essential melody, a kind of *cantus firmus*. This latter, called **balunganing gending**, played in two or three octaves, has a compass of about two octaves. And as the sarons have each a compass of one octave only, the essential melody is necessarily kept within the limits of this one octave.

By the highest saron, the **saron panerus**, **peking** or **selukat**, it is syncopated or rhythmically doubled. In the strong compositions a slightly more elaborated melody is executed on some **bonangs**, which, sometimes, also have a paraphrasing function; in the softer pieces the melody, in a much more enriched form is played on the **suling** and the **rebab** or executed by the voice (**sinden**), supported and alternated from time to time by a choir singing in unison (**gérongan**).

The essential melody is strengthened at equal distances — for instance, each time after four **ketek** (rhythmic unit, the original meaning of the word is heartbeat), by beats on the **slentem** or **gendèr panembung** and — but this is only in Jogja, as we have mentioned — on the **bonang panembung**. Sometimes the **bonang barung** is found to herald those strengthened tones in quite a remarkable manner.

Every melody is subdivided into periods or phrases by colotomic beats, rather like a poem by commas, semicolons, and full stops; only much more regularly.

The longest periods end with a beat on the biggest gong, the **gong ageng** or **gong gedé**. These beats may be compared to the full stops.

Each of these phrases (**gongan**) is subdivided into a number of shorter phrases, which end in a beat of the **kenong**; these beats take the place, more or less, of the semicolons. At the end of the last phrase of a gongan we hear therefore not only the gong, but also the kenong.

Each period by a kenong-beat (**kenongan**) is again subdivided by beats of the **ketuk**.

In the smaller forms of composition, called **ladrang** and **ketawang**, the **ketuk** is alternately played with the **kempul**.

The orchestral compositions are arranged in different categories, according to the differences in the colotomic structure mentioned above.

If the gamelans were composed only of the instruments I have mentioned, the musical effect produced would undoubtedly be too rigid, not to say unwieldy, however much it might be flavoured with agogic and dynamic spices. Fortunately this melodic framework is filled in with beautiful paraphrases and ornamented with delicate musical arabesques. These ornaments, which become especially elaborated in the soft lyrical passages, are executed by the so called **panerusan**, the paraphrasing instruments. The principal instruments of this kind are: the **gendèr barung** and the **gendèr panerus**, the **gambang kaju** and, occasionally, the **tjelempung**, a kind of cither.

While the essential melody and the punctuation of a *gending* are unvariable quantities, the players of the *panerusan* are free to play their paraphrases according to their inspiration. But, as in all manifestations of Oriental art, this liberty has been strongly bridled by tradition. Nevertheless the *panerusan* forms one of the most fascinating parts of the orchestral whole.

From the European as well as from the Indonesian side opposition has arisen against fixing those *panerus* parts by putting them down in the scores for the sake of assisting the Javanese musicians. It is to be feared, however, that it might result in killing the natural aptitude for the spontaneous creation of ornaments and pretty paraphrases. The same thing has happened to our Western pianists, who on the whole, have stopped cultivating their talent for improvising, since the figured bass has been replaced by piano-parts written out in details. Still, if the Javanese music, which is at present passing through a period of stagnation, is to go on developing, and if the Javanese artist of the future wishes to use it as a medium for the free expression of his genius, it will be necessary to note down the *panerusan*-parts as well as the rest.

Finally, for the agogic function, there is the **kendang**, which, together with the *rebab*, is the most important instrument of the gamelan. It is played by the leader of the orchestra, the **lurah gending** — at least, when he does not prefer to play the *rebab* — who, by means of the most delicate shades in the movement, hardly perceptible to the uninitiated ear, marks and varies the time of the composition and heralds the transition to its following parts.

The **kendang gending** is most frequently used. However, for the accompaniment of dances and for certain kinds of compositions (*ladrang* and *ketawang*) the **kendang tjiblon** is substituted, which is smaller. Then we know the **kendangan kalih** or **kendangan loro**, the double *kendangan*, where the orchestra-leader plays besides the *kendang gending*, also a very small drum — viz., the **penuntung** or **ketipung**.

There are several ways of playing the drum; each of these has a special name. For each of the two tonal systems there are about twenty-five. Most of them are essentially reducible to five principal ways of playing, which in the staff-notation of the *Jogja kraton* are represented by special signs.

Here I may conclude the description of the gamelan of the Principalities. I shall omit that of the smaller ensembles. I only wish to point out that many of these have a special function to fulfil, e.g., the gamelans **Munggang**, **Kodok ngorek** and **Sekati**.

Every gamelan-composition whether *gending* or *ladrang* or *ketawang*, opens with an introduction, **bebukā** or **bukaning gending**, which enables the performers to enter into the spirit of the piece and to get into touch with each other and arrive at a mutual understanding. We may distinguish the **bebukā swārā** or **bāwā**, the vocal introduction — and the **B. bonang**, **B. gendèr**, **B. kendang**, according to the instrument that plays the principal part in the prelude. The instrumental *bebukā* never lasts more than a few "bars", and is always concluded by a beat of the gong. The vocal introduction can be much longer, as it is a complete song. After that the *gending* proper begins *attacca*.

In the composition consisting of two parts — that is to say in all the **gending ageng** and **tengahan**, and in some of the **gending alit** — the first part is generally repeated two, three, or more times. When we wish to pass on to the second part, the **mungguh**, the orchestra-leader announces this transition on the *kendang* or on the *rebab* before the penultimate beat of the *kenong*. The time is accelerated lightly, and after a beat on the gong *ageng* the *mungguh* commences.

Before the end of the piece — and this also happens in case of the one-part-compositions — the time is accelerated, starting from the penultimate beat of the kenong (**sesekan**, i.e. stringendo) whereas the last few bars are played more slowly (**suwuk**, ritardando). The last beat on the gong seems to die away into the depths of eternity.

Apart from these groups of compositions, there are some melodies, partly vocal, partly orchestral, used with the wayang, of which I will mention the group of the **ādā-ādā**, specimens of introductory melodies, which symbolize certain sentiments of the wayang figures; and the pure instrumental pieces, called **srepegan**, **ajak-ajakan**, **sampak**, etc., mostly fighting music, with a special colotomy, which contains a great many beats of the **keṭuk** and of the **kempul**.

The following Columbia record give an idea of an **ādā-ādā**. Being a Solonese one, it is partly recited, partly sung.

Javanese music also distinguishes several movements (**wirāmā**), as, for instance, **lombā** (andante), **rangkep** (adagio), and **toyāmili** (allegro, lit. running water).

These are, in very broad outlines, the principal details concerning the gamelan of the Principalities and its compositions.

The Javanese loves his music passionately. Although to the untrained Western ear it sometimes sounds just a little monotonous, it means everything to him. Nor it is to be wondered at that we should now and then come across admirable verses on music in Javanese poetry. The encyclopedic poem **Tjenti**, for instance, which dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century, has in a masterly way interpreted the music of the principal instruments. I cannot deny myself the joy of letting you hear — in a translation of course — what **Tjenti** says, for instance, about the music of the rebab, which is, as said above, the native violin, played like a cello.

"**Djajengrāgā** with an elegant gesture took the rebab in his hands. It was well shaped. Its neck was **pontang**¹⁾, the bow decorated with carvings and gilded; the resonance-chamber was provided with an embroidered covering (**djamangan**).

The **nem**-string was touched; when struck, its tone proved to be entirely in unison with the **nem** of **gendèr** and **gambang**. The **nem** of the **suling** was likewise completely in tune. **Djajengrāgā** drew himself up; his attitude was modest, in accordance with his nature. He took a few strokes up and down, in order to try the instrument. The bridge was cut out of **djati**-wood; the tension of the skin was firm; in short, all details were equally excellent. Then he struck **paṭet sāngā**. His fingers quivered, while now and then touching the strings, like the tail of a scorpion ready with its sting. The strings were pressed down correctly, the fingertips pressed down the flexible string, finding a melody with swift tone figures. The up and down movements of the hand made the strings bend. There were repeated slight swervings from the right pitch, with a view to enhancing the effect. The middle-finger was conspicuous in its movements; the forefinger resembled the fresh shoot of a fern, little finger and ring-finger looked very much like spiders' legs. Deftly the fingers were put in turn on the strings. The bow was artlessly used in its full length. Whenever the tempo accelerated, his stroke adapted itself without the slightest hesitation, in accordance with **gendèr**, **gambang** and **suling**. The fascination was perfect. The tone garlands twined themselves about the heart. The music of the strings was in tune with the notes of the principal melody: clear, regular, correct. In studying **Djajengrāgā**'s music carefully, one

¹⁾ i.e. partly made of bone, partly of ivory.

has to admit that it was clever. He sometimes just moved his thighs. That was his custom, and it did not trouble anyone. This time was not like other times: the music of that day surpassed everything else. The other players were wrapt in ecstasy (literally, had lost their hearts); not one *niyâgâ* made a single remark; they all sat speechless, watching *Djajêngrâgâ*. They gazed at him in mute admiration. The **sendon** had come to an end; **sarâjoedâ** followed *attacca*, and was wound up with a drum-beat **bem**, and the soulpleasing sound of the gong. After the **patetan** *Djajêngrâgâ* critically examined the rebab. The host, *Kidang Wirâtjâpâ*, laughed heartily and said: "Good heavens, how wonderful! That would make a sick man well again!" "

So much for the *Tjenġini*.

After this bird's eye view of Javanese music, I shall give you some more gamelan-records of a different character. (Here followed four records of *pélog*- and *sléndro*-compositions).

With that I will end my lecture. Lastly, I wish to thank the Council of the India Society for having invited me to deliver it. I hope that I may have succeeded in arousing your interest in this particular form of Oriental music, which for so long — and so unjustly — has been neglected by us Westerners.¹⁾

¹⁾ People who should like to know more about this subject, I may refer to my book "*De Toonkunst van Java*", in 2 vol., with many photographs and musical examples edited by *Martinus Nijhoff*, The Hague, 1934.

