

Let the Music *Play*

Once a vital part of the Plainfield campus, Goddard's gamelan today is rarely used. Can a renewed interest breathe life back into this unusual musical ensemble?



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The story of Goddard's gamelan is a story of two world-renowned musicians and a former student with a passion for Eastern music. It's a story of possibility, economic constraints and a somewhat neglected spirit – the gamelan's own, which resides, the players say, in its gongs.

"Have you gone to see it? You should really see it," says Jody Diamond, the former faculty member who was hired to teach classes about gamelan and how to play its instruments, and to oversee its design and shipment to Plainfield in 1995. Today the gamelan resides in the upstairs of the Music Building.

Named Sulukala by Goddard's first teacher of this unusual assembly of instruments, Dennis Murphy ('67-'81), Goddard's gamelan was the perfect vehicle to engage students in the sensibility of another culture while enhancing a spirit of community already important to the college. A community of players, experienced and even inexperienced, is necessary to bring a gamelan to its full voice.

A gamelan is a set of melodic percussion instruments, originating in the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali. Every gamelan is unique

right down to its tuning, which is chosen by its maker. The only limitation is that human beings have to be able to sing with it, so it can't go too high or too low. Most gamelan include a mix of plucked and bowed strings, marimba-like instruments, and instruments with box resonators a little like glockenspiels. Most have a set of large gongs as well. In Java and Bali, gamelan are often used to accompany shadow puppet theater, dance, weddings and public performances.

"The best gamelan are made out of bronze," Jody says, "but that's very expensive. So I ordered the most important instruments – those that play the most significant role in classical music – in bronze for this gamelan." For the instruments with duplicates, for people who are just learning to do beginning parts, she ordered iron and brass.

"It's illuminating to think of how a gamelan is different from



an orchestra,” she explains further. “If the orchestra players lay their instruments down and all the people left and you saw on the stage a bunch of violins and cellos and percussion instruments, just instruments, would you say that the orchestra is on the stage? You would not, right? You’d say the orchestra went out for ice cream and left their instruments on the stage.”

But when you go into the gamelan room, Jody continues, and you see all the beautiful instruments arranged in a certain relationship to each other, even without musicians in the room, you would say, “Oh, there’s the gamelan.”

“When we say gamelan, we mean a set of instruments built together and tuned together, therefore having its own character,” Jody says, “That’s why it’s given a name – and it needs people in order for its voice to be heard.”

Jody has been playing the gamelan since she was a first year student at California Institute of the Arts in 1970. Her freshman summer was spent abroad, in a group of 18 other students, in Indonesia, where she continued her study of the melodic percussion instruments that make up the multitimbral ensemble that she says represents one of the most beautiful, complex and highly developed classical orchestral traditions in the world. Jody is a recognized expert in contemporary music for Indonesian and international gamelan. She presently teaches at Dartmouth and Harvard, where she is a visiting associate professor in music and Asian Studies, and artist in residence, respectively.

Introducing Eastern Music Traditions to Goddard

Gamelan Sulukala is not Goddard’s first gamelan. The first was made of iron and built by Dennis Murphy, who Jody describes as “incredibly important, beyond Goddard, and known around the world for being the first American to build a gamelan on the Javanese model.” Dennis’s dissertation about building the gamelan, which he wrote when he was at Wesleyan University, is still read, according to Jody.

How did he do it?

“Lots of hacksawing and hammering of metal,” Dennis remembers. “Lots of village gamelans are made out of iron, and so by looking at those, I was able to figure out how to go about it.”

Dennis saw a Javanese gamelan when he studied South Indian music at Wesleyan.

“I could see how they went about tuning and so forth just by observing those instruments,” he says.

He used the iron gamelan he had built at Goddard, where he taught music and ran a group of Javanese orchestras. The set he built at Goddard is still used by his group, the Plainfield Village Gamelan.

“I got the basic stuff right away and I’ve been adding to it,” he says. “There’s no fixed size to a gamelan. Ours will cover about 12 people, [but] they can take up to 40 to cover everything.”

Playing the gamelan is a communal activity, according to Dennis, and an experience that “takes hold of students.”

“It’s an interesting thing that happens, if you’re playing the music yourself,” he says. “You almost go off into a different level of existence. For example, your time sense goes all to pieces and you may play for five minutes or five hours and say, wow...”

But individual showmanship is not central to either the musicians or audience. “Indonesians have a sense of not bringing themselves forward in any way,” Dennis explains. “I remember we were having a rehearsal with a Javanese master, and a guy playing one of the instruments was getting kind of wild with his hammer, doing all kinds of silly gestures between notes, and the gamelan master bawled him

A PASSION FOR THE MUSIC
Above left, Dennis Murphy in the '70s, playing the gamelan he built while he was teaching at Goddard. Right, Jody Diamond, an international gamelan expert, taught Goddard students to play the ensemble in the '90s and arranged the design of Gamelan Sulukala, which came to the college in 1995. Opposite page, Goddard students from the '70s practice on the gamelan of Dennis' creation.



out and said, ‘Who wants to watch you making a fool of yourself? You should be contributing to the group.’”

It was this element – the social aspect of gamelan – that made it a perfect idea for Goddard, according to Jennifer Isaacs, the music director of WGDR radio and a former student of Jody’s from the early ’90s. Jennifer’s ad hoc group still intermittently plays Sulukala.

“The gamelan creates a world of its own,” she says, “a world into which a group of people may enter, discover, learn, create and perform together.”

As Jennifer understands it, a student of Dennis Murphy’s, who played on Dennis’s iron gamelan in the ’60s, went on to become a benefactor for Sulukala, arranging for it to be bought.

“That’s when they hired Jody,” Jennifer says, “because the benefactor donated money specifically to purchase a gamelan and a gamelan instructor.”

Jennifer remembers that Jody brought one of her own gamelans initially for students to learn on while Goddard’s was being built.

“It took about a year and a half to build and then they shipped it from Java,” Jennifer says. “The first semester we used it was the winter semester of ’95.”

The date is clear to Jennifer, because she was among the crew of students and faculty members who went to Boston to help load the gamelan into a Ryder truck and bring it back to the campus.

“When we place ourselves in the artistic environment of the gamelan room, we are at the center of an adventure that is just beginning.” –JODY DIAMOND

Today, Jennifer plays with a small group of gamelan musicians, about four people, and they play a kind of “fusion of everything we can think of,” including rock and roll. Sometimes she invites a flutist she knows to join the group.

“I am not a master,” she says, although she has been playing for about 10 years. Anybody can sit down and play a song in an hour and a half, she explains, but it takes years of playing before one can claim mastery. There is a basic difference between the way Western popular music is structured and the way music is written for gamelan.

“Instead of shifting from ‘verse, verse, chorus,’ as a Western melody might, the gamelan melody expands,” she says, “and higher-pitched, more accentuating instruments come forward, playing more notes per measure, more prominently.”

“I think the explanation for that effect is there are different levels of complexity among the instruments,” Dennis explains, “and some instruments’ responsibility is to carry the main melody and others provide punctuation – that’s the gongs – that come in now and then like periods and commas in a paragraph, and then there’s a group of instruments that do the elaboration. They play the same tune, but they play it in a different way.”



Offerings for Sulukala’s future

Even with attention from Jennifer’s band and occasional performances during residencies, Sulukala is underused today. Two budget crises led to downsizing in the music department and the loss, in different periods, of Dennis Murphy and Jody Diamond. The college has students on campus only during the residencies rather than year-round, as in the past. The gamelan stays upstairs in the Music Building, and Jennifer visits it just once a month, give or take.

“It takes a village,” Jody says laughing. And for Goddard’s gamelan, that village is presently missing.

“Poor gamelan,” she says. “It’s a shame to have any instrument not be played. It’s a particular shame to have an entire orchestra of instruments not be played.”

Jody’s hope for Gamelan Sulukala is that it be put in someone’s administrative charge so that it might be “invited out” for use on other campuses or in other venues, or that seminars might be held on campus occasionally where it might be featured and used.

Jennifer also feels Goddard’s gamelan would like more attention. She believes it has an unfulfilled spirit. In Indonesia, Jody explains, offerings of rice and flowers are made to the gongs, where the gamelan’s spirit is said to reside.

“Maybe we don’t have enough of that in our lives,” she says. “Who offers rice and flowers to their piano?”

But the making of music, she says, is an amazing activity.

“When we place ourselves in the artistic environment of the gamelan room, we are at the center of an adventure that is just beginning,” she wrote in an essay before Sulukala was made.

Goddard’s gamelan patiently waits for its adventure to begin again. ☪

EDITOR’S NOTE: Since this article was written, Bennington College has requested that Gamelan Sulukala travel to southern Vermont for a three-week period for a concert with renowned musician Pak Harjito. The event takes place on April 4. And so Sulukala’s life begins anew . . .