

**Review: *Balinese Music*, by Michael Tenzer. Berkeley and Singapore: Periplus Editions 1991. 143 pp. photographs, drawings, musical notation, discography, glossary, bibliography, index.**

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Despite the extraordinary appeal Balinese music has demonstrated internationally and its continued vitality in Bali, it is surprising how little scholarship has been devoted to any of the many genres that flourish on this small island. Colin McPhee's wonderfully detailed *Music in Bali* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) is based on his experiences in Bali sixty years ago. Very little substantial work, and certainly nothing approaching a comprehensive overview, has appeared since. Michael Tenzer's *Balinese Music*, though short and aimed at a wider audience than professional scholars, is a welcome and long-needed addition. The book is informative, lavishly illustrated, and, despite a penchant for exuberance, engagingly written. Tenzer's depth of experience and his approach as a participant in the musical tradition as composer as well as performer make this book a natural next step beyond the work of McPhee, who also applied his composerly sensitivities to Balinese music. And yet, from my own perspective as an ethnomusicologist, *Balinese Music* is tantalizing in stopping short of the more comprehensive book the scholarly world still needs, and I am sure Tenzer could have written, on Bali's musical traditions. Having said this, which is more in praise of Tenzer's knowledge and abilities than criticism of the book under review, I will not pursue further what the book might have been but discuss what it is, based on its many merits and its few problems.

The Preface sets an enthusiastic and personal tone that carries through the subsequent nine chapters. "My years of experience with this music have turned me into an enthusiastic disseminator, in reverence of this artistic tradition and the people and culture that possess it," Tenzer tells us (p. 7). And indeed the overarching impetus of the book is not to argue this or that hypothesis, to take other scholars to task, or to rewrite history, but to inspire in the reader something like the passion that Tenzer clearly has for the island and its music. The book's final chapter, "Getting Involved," is not a summary or conclusion, but an invitation to readers to participate as listeners and, preferably, as performers. Indeed, information on hearing, seeing, and learning Balinese music is sprinkled throughout the book. Tenzer wants us to become enthralled by this music—all of it. Most of the strengths and problems of the book relate directly to this one pervasive motivation.

Tenzer considers many varieties of Balinese music in their contemporary and historical contexts, providing the reader with an excellent overview, interspersed with a few detailed looks at particular pieces and styles, and at individual musicians. Chapter One ("Introduction to Balinese Music") stresses both the abundance of music in contemporary Bali and its appeal to foreigners, with several pages devoted to Tenzer's predecessor McPhee. Chapter Two ("A Brief History of the Music") surveys the history of Balinese music in a well-crafted seven pages of text that judiciously introduce important social and political factors that have affected the music most profoundly. I plan to incorporate this chapter into the required reading for my own undergraduate course on music in Southeast Asia and would recommend it to anyone seeking a brief but informed introduction to the subject.

Chapter Three ("The Construction and Tuning of Instruments") contrasts with the broad overview in the first two chapters, beginning with a close-up description of a particular gamelan foundry. This is followed by a concise explanation of Balinese tuning systems and introduction to Balinese instruments, with emphasis on those of the ubiquitous *gamelan gong*

*kebyar*. Tenzer is to be praised for presenting material clearly and simply, with a minimum of distortion. In Chapter Four ("Basic Principles of Gamelan Music") Tenzer manages to maintain his engaging style of prose even as he offers technical descriptions of musical structure: gong punctuation, core melody, melodic elaboration, and drumming. This chapter is complemented by Chapter Six ("Ensembles and Repertoire"), an excellent survey under four headings: bronze gamelan ensembles (*gong kebyar*, *semar pegulingan/pelegongan*, *gender wayang*, *angklung*, and *gong gde*); bamboo gamelan ensembles (*tingklik* and *joged bumbung*, *jegog*, *gandrung*) sacred and rare ensembles (*gamelan selonding*, *gamelan gambang*, *gamelan luang/gong bheri*); and other ensembles (*gamelan bebonangan/beleganjur*, *cak/kecak*, and others). Although the organization here by ensemble or ensemble type parallels McPhee's approach to chapter-level organization in his major work (1966), Tenzer foregoes extended detailed technical description in favor of emphasis on context and anecdote. One only wonders why *gamelan gambuh* was omitted here. Inserted in between these two important survey chapters (Four and Six) is a marvelously detailed study of "The Music for the *Baris* Dance" (Chapter Five), in which Tenzer masterfully takes us through all the instrumental parts for a simple piece and demonstrates how the music and dance work together.

In Chapters Seven ("Music in Balinese Society") and Eight ("Three Generations of Balinese Musicians") Tenzer takes a close-up approach, again with some success. He begins Chapter Seven by describing a village gamelan rehearsal which he uses as a springboard into discussion of Balinese musical organizations (*sekaha*), the transmission process, the involvement of children in music making, and recent developments (including the advent of performing arts contests and the participation of women as musicians and puppeteers). Chapter Eight is devoted to three individuals: the elderly musician I Wayan Tembres; the extraordinarily influential administrator, dancer, and musician, Dr. Made Bandem; and the young performer-composer-teacher I Wayan Rai. Focus on individual musicians is all too rare in works on musical traditions in Indonesia; thus these vignettes are welcome. Yet one must question why two of the three musicians chosen (Bandem and Rai) are prominent figures at Bali's performing arts college (STSI) and are scholars holding advanced degrees from the United States. The coverage could certainly have been better balanced here. (While no musician is "typical," the percentage of musicians in Bali with academic careers and foreign training is undoubtedly well below 67 percent.)

Following the instructive final chapter "Getting Involved," suggesting ways in which the foreigner can hear and learn Balinese music, Tenzer offers a brief discography of Western disc recordings and Balinese cassette recordings of Balinese music, a useful glossary, a short bibliography, and an index. Interspersed throughout are absolutely splendid color photographs, a few old black and white photographs, and numerous hand-drawn illustrations. The book serves a wide readership, lay and scholarly, and does so with a virtuosity befitting the music described. Yet the reader should be warned of a few problems.

Permeating this work is Tenzer's unabashed exuberance over practically all forms of Balinese music. While I do not question the sincerity of Tenzer's feelings, they have led him to write in what is often an inflated or sensationalizing prose. He seems scarcely able to mention any aspect of Balinese music without belaboring its exquisite beauty, heaping on the adjectives and adverbs where the nouns and verbs do the job. Within the second sentence of Chapter One, we are told of Balinese music's "brilliant cascades of metallic sounds, lonely whispering melodies, grandiose and clangorous marches, virtuosic rhythms, and breathtaking crescendos" (p. 11). Yes, but as this kind of description begins to accumulate over the course of more than 100 pages it takes on a numbing effect, quite the opposite of what the author intends. While I would be the last to discourage lively, enthusiastic writing

in scholarly work, Tenzer's enthusiasm is so pervasive as to risk sounding like tourist guide-book promotionalism, as the superlatives keep pouring out page after page. What is in all likelihood intended as reverence and deep appreciation nudges dangerously close to hype.

Indeed, this book is produced by a publisher, some of whose books are clearly geared toward the tourist market. One of the challenges in reviewing it for this scholarly journal is that it does not fall clearly into either the "guidebook" or the "scholarly study" category, but seems to dance spiritedly between the two, trying to satisfy the constraints of both genres. Without attempting any thorough comparison with other Periplus works, I feel compelled, however, to note that the provocative work of Adrian Vickers (*Bali A Paradise Created*, 1989, first published by Penguin of Australia) contrasts markedly with the present book in its critical analysis of just the kind of view of Balinese culture that permeates Tenzer's work. Where Vickers questions our assumptions, probing deeply and raising unsettling views of the West's distorted and distorting interaction with the Balinese, Tenzer avers nothing problematic either in what he describes or how he and other Westerners come to "know" Bali and its music. Not that Tenzer's approach is "wrong"; but it ignores the perplexing methodological problems of cross-cultural apprehension, concepts of culture—in short the host of issues now bubbling at the surface of cultural anthropology (in such works as *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* edited by George Marcus and Michael Fischer [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986]; *Writing Culture*, edited by James Clifford and George Marcus [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986], among others). Though we are told of Indonesian governmental cultural policy, foreign and domestic tourism, revivalism, and radical musical experimentation, the broader political, economic, and ethical dimensions of these facts of modern musical life in Bali go largely unexplored.

Tenzer, like McPhee before him, has been profoundly affected by his own experience of Balinese music—at first an aural experience, via recordings, followed by in-depth observation in Bali and, subsequently, by applying his own creative energies to compose music based on Balinese structural principles. His book is full of engaging description, with vivid metaphors. But Balinese experience of Balinese music often becomes blurred with Tenzer's own aesthetic experience of this music. We often are unable to tell whether a description is based on Balinese articulation, on Tenzer's own aesthetic response, or some combination. The reader is expected not to be concerned with what might be important differences in perceiving the same aural phenomena. Other Westerners who have heard *gambuh* music, for example, would probably agree with me that his description of the flute (*suling*) and accompanying fiddle (*rebab*) playing in this genre as spinning "airy, haunting melodies in a kind of fuzzy coordination that have a distinctive, ghostly sound" (p. 20) captures marvelously *our* feel of this music. But it is Tenzer's choice of metaphor, his turn of phrase, a Westerner's aesthetic response, and not necessarily that of the Balinese, whose music this is.

A few other problems demand brief mention. First is the problem of normalized description. For instance, is the description of *jegog* ensemble performance (p. 92) simply a report on one event observed, or a generalized account? Is it based on what Balinese have told Tenzer, on what he has witnessed himself, or a combination? It is not clear, but needs to be. Second, Tenzer betrays a degree of naiveté about Javanese music when he characterizes it as "wide open to the contributions of individual performers' lovingly crafted improvisations" (p. 19), in contrast to Balinese music which is almost entirely non-improvised. Javanese music, while not as thoroughly fixed as some varieties of Balinese music, is nevertheless highly constrained, with rather little latitude for individual improvisation. In Javanese performance, it is more appropriate to talk of a limited range of choices between alternative variations than of "wide open" improvisation.

Despite these few problems and the sometimes sensationalist tone discussed above, this book does provide a range of useful information. The currency and clarity of Tenzer's descriptions throughout make this not only appealing to the lay reader, but of considerable value to ethnomusicologists, and suitable reading for courses covering the music of Bali as well. Given the breadth of the subject and the page limitation, probably imposed by the publisher, Tenzer has managed to impart much that is new, without over-simplifying the basics. I look forward to future studies by this skillful and knowledgeable writer.