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Music from Bali Comes to Illinois Wesleyan

Oct. 28, 2014

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— The sounds of pings and chimes carried across the Eckley Quadrangle of Illinois Wesleyan University, attracting children and adults alike. One observer thought the sounds seemed to fall somewhere between a steel drum and a xylophone.

In reality, the sounds came from neither. The School of Music's faculty and students were demonstrating the variety of instruments in their Gamelan Ensemble.

Predominantly percussive instruments, gamelans are traditional music ensembles of Java and Bali in Indonesia. Although centuries old, Gamelan music is still woven into the fabric of Balinese and Javanese daily lives. It often accompanies dance, shadow puppet theatre, and rituals and ceremonies. Gamelans predate the Hindu-Buddhist influence that dominates other art forms in Bali and Java, which makes them a purely native art, according to Assistant Professor of Music Adriana Ponce.

Western composers were widely introduced to Gamelan music at the Paris Exposition of 1889. Composers ranging from Parisian avant-garde pianist Erik Satie to electroacoustic pioneer John Cage incorporated elements into their work. More recently, Gamelan can be found in the music of the 2001 Disney movie *Atlantis*, the score of the movie *The Golden Compass* and in the music of the television series *Battlestar Galactica*.

According to Ponce, the beauty of Gamelan, apart from its ornamentation, is also in its accessibility. It is possible to play a range of music, from very simple songs to complex compositions. Players don't need to read music, as the music is traditionally taught through imitation. Because of that, it is an ideal experience for students in all majors, she said.

Ponce and her School of Music colleagues wanted to expose students to musical traditions other than those that were Western-based. She wanted to invite a Gamelan expert to campus, but there was a problem: the expert had no Gamelan instruments for demonstration or instruction. Ponce received funding from a U.S. Department of Education Grant to Develop Asian Studies and an IWU Curriculum Development grant to commission instruments for IWU.

She also consulted I Ketut Gede Asnawa, a Gamelan composer, performer and ethnomusicologist who is also a visiting professor at the University of Illinois. Asnawa helped arrange for commissioning the



Music Professor Adriana Ponce (right) leads a song for Bessie (Ratskoff) Crum '04 on the School of Music's Gamelan Ensemble.



Music Education major Chelci Wilson '16 tries out a Gamelan instrument.

Gamelan in Bali. In general, no two Gamelan ensembles are the same, according to Ponce. IWU's ensemble is distinguished by the kind of instruments, their materials and the type of music that can be played on it. Gamelans also vary depending on their use and function in society; some are processional, others accompany dances, other rituals, and religious ceremonies.

Asnawa was present when the instruments were completed, blessed, and performed for the first time in Bali. Fruits and flowers were offered to the new instruments in a traditional ritual in Bali before they were sent to IWU. He also conducted the inaugural concert on campus.

Illinois Wesleyan's Gamelan are used in the course MUS 346 Exploring Musics From Around the World, taught by Ponce, and in MUS 175 Gamelan Ensemble, a course open to all students and taught by Asnawa. "We want students to take the Gamelan class, but they are probably intimidated by the fact that they don't know these instruments," said Ponce. "But they need not be. Everyone will be a beginner in the class and will be learning from the basics."

By Mallika Kavadi '15