

## MUSIC

# Swiss musicians' love affair with gamelan

A Swiss classical music ensemble's interpretation of gamelan breathes new life into the traditional Indonesian music form



JP/Arief Suhardiman

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Three classical musicians from Switzerland — cellist Domitille Coppey, pianist Jessie Vergères and violinist Timothée Coppey — were about to perform the concluding piece of their recital on the evening of July 18 at The Dharmawangsa in South Jakarta.

Instead of sitting down to play their piano, violin and cello, however, the three musicians left the three instruments behind, then stood up and walked toward the front of the stage. Then, while standing up, they started to tap their hands and legs in a synchronized rhythm before starting something unique: they bent down to pick three individual gamelan plates placed on the floor and three hammers.

The musicians — each holding a bronze gamelan plate in one hand and a hammer in the other — started to beat the plates with their hammers, resulting in a melodious composition. The audience started to nod their heads to the rhythm.

Who would have thought that just three gamelan plates, hit by three musicians in certain rhythms and tunes, could be just as melodic and harmonious as the whole gamelan set?

They played Domitille's three-minute composition called "Creation with Gamelan", which completely reimagines just what gamelan music can do.

The three musicians had come from Switzerland to perform the concert in Jakarta.

Domitille, born in 1989 has been playing music since she was little, taught by her mother Nicole Coppey, who established an educational and musical arts school called Un, Deux, Trois, Musiques... in Sion, Switzerland. Vergères and Timothée also studied music under Nicole at the same school. They have all been traveling the world — traversing Europe, the United States and Asia — to play their music before diverse audiences. They are trained mainly in European classical and contemporary music.

Gamelan is a traditional Indonesian percussive ensemble music form originating so far away from where the three musicians were born.

Coming from Indonesia, gamelan is played by people across Java, Bali and Lombok in West Nusa Tenggara. People from each region have subtle variations in the way they play gamelan. To literally define gamelan as a musical form, its name is rooted in the Javanese word *gamel*, which means "beating".

The essence that defines gamelan amid the variations in which Indonesians from different regions play it lies in its instruments. Gamelan ensembles comprise metallophones, as well as local percussion instruments *gambang* and *gendang*, as well as a big gong.

Domitille said she discovered gamelan in 2008, when she was around 18. Her mother took her traveling away from home — although not far enough to visit Indonesia — to the Cité de la Musique philharmonic concert hall in Paris, where they had a gamelan center.

According to Indonesian classical composer and pianist Ananda Sukarlan, gamelan already had a "Paris connection" for quite a long time.

"[French composer] Claude Debussy saw and heard a gamelan orchestra for the first time during the 1889 Exposition Universelle world fair in Paris," Ananda, also in the audience for the Swiss ensemble's concert, told *The Jakarta Post*.

According to a paper by Missouri Western State College assistant professor of piano Brent Hugh, gamelan music's trademark style — with its pentatonic scale as opposed to the diatonic scale used in classical European music — created quite a "sensation" among Europeans at that time.

The fascination that Europeans — particularly the French — have with gamelan lingers on, embodied by a gamelan course center in the iconic Paris philharmonic hall.

"My mother took me there to discover gamelan," Domitille recalled. "I joined a small group of stu-

Eclectic musician: Swiss cellist and gamelan player Domitille Coppey breathes new life into the traditional gamelan sound through her composition "Creation with Gamelan".

dents in that center to study gamelan for a week," she said.

Little did Domitille realize when she started, that her one-week experience with gamelan in Paris would lead her to a love affair that would last for so many years to come.

"My experience of learning gamelan in Paris was so great that I actually wanted to keep practicing gamelan at home [in Switzerland]. Since then, I have found gamelan to be a marvelous, beautiful musical tradition. I felt somehow that I fell in love with the tradition when I discovered it in Paris," she said.

"So my mother eventually bought me a gamelan set so I could continue practicing at home," she added.

Vergères is equally enthusiastic about playing gamelan.

"I enjoy the collective positive feeling we have when we play music together to create a common sound, be it classical music or gamelan," she said.

According to Domitille, she had to open her mind to a whole new way of thinking while learning to play gamelan.

"I have to change the way my brain thinks about music completely. It is a mistake to use your classical music expertise as a template to study gamelan. You should create a whole separate template in your brain for gamelan, which uses a pentatonic scale very different [from the diatonic scale used in European classical music] and basically learn from scratch again," she explained.

Domitille said that, eventually, as she practiced both music forms simultaneously, the two different musical templates started to run parallel and actually influence one another, imprinting in her an eclectic musical composition style.

"As time goes by, I feel I've become more adept at joining both aspects of my musical life, comprising European classical tradition and gamelan. You can feel how they join in the ["Creation with Gamelan"] piece we just played," Domitille plays, who practices both classical and gamelan music every day for six to eight hours, said.

Upon seeing and listening to the trio perform "Creation with Gamelan", Ananda said he was very impressed with the new life the three musicians had breathed into the gamelan music form.

"They interpret gamelan very differently from how the Javanese and Balinese do, because it doesn't come from their tradition. Thanks to their unique interpretation as a result of their [cultural and musical education] background, they are able to present gamelan music in a new way, which the Javanese and Balinese would never have come up with," Ananda said.

Ananda himself is known for composing classical piano pieces based on variations of Indonesian folk songs in a composition series called *Rapsodia Nusantara* (The Rhapsody of The Archipelago). He has also frequently incorporated the gamelan's distinctive pentatonic scale into his classical piano compositions.

"What they have done is similar to what I do. Because of my background, I can approach [classical piano music] differently and offer a fresh interpretation of it, because it doesn't come from my tradition," he said.

Domitille said that in order to successfully come up with an eclectic interpretation of a particular music form, first you had to truly internalize the music into your being, in order to really comprehend it in a genuine way and allow it to interact seamlessly with the different musical tradition that you had originally been immersed in.

"It has to be a part of you, it takes patience and time to really internalize a way of living expressed in a different musical form that is not from your tradition. There's a difference be-

Gamelan, reimagined: Swiss pianist Jessie Vergères (left), violinist Timothée Coppey (center) and cellist Domitille Coppey interpret the gamelan tradition with a fresh approach through Domitille's composition "Creation with Gamelan". The composition requires players to beat gamelan plates with hammers, alternated with percussive sounds from their own clapping hands, instead of playing the whole gamelan set.

Courtesy of 123musiques



Courtesy of 123musiques



Courtesy of 123musiques

Passing the music on: Swiss cellist, gamelan player and composer Domitille Coppey (right, sitting down) teaches children in Switzerland to play the gamelan in a traditional Indonesian orchestra.

tween showcasing a culture and being a culture," she said.

"Once you have internalized and comprehended the different musical tradition, though, you can start creating a truly genuine eclectic musical expression," she added.

According to Domitille, if people tried too hard to mix different musical cultures without spending enough time to truly internalize the different way of being that they entailed, the result would not convey genuine emotions that would touch the audience.

"It will become obvious [to the audience] when you try too hard to mix things," she said.

United by music: A multiethnic children's ensemble performs in Switzerland.

In order to allow more Swiss musicians who love gamelan to truly internalize the music form and immerse themselves in it, the Un, Deux, Trois, Musiques... music school opened a gamelan learning center, in collaboration with the Indonesian Embassy in Bern, on Nov. 10, 2017.

"Who would have thought that in a place as remote as Sion located in the Swiss Alps, there is a center to learn gamelan?" Swiss ambassador to Indonesia Yvonne Baumann said in her opening remarks.

Ananda said he was happy about the opening of the center, adding that music could be a unifying force to combat xenophobia and radicalism, which had become prevalent globally.



JP/Arief Suhardiman

A musical ride: The Swiss classical music trio of violinist Timothée Coppey (left), pianist Jessie Vergères (center) and cellist Domitille Coppey (right) take the audience on a musical journey to explore all facets of the human experience through their repertoire presented at a recent Jakarta gig.

## Classical music tour de force

A classical music trio from Switzerland — comprising cellist Domitille Coppey, pianist Jessie Vergères and violinist Timothée Coppey thrilled the audience during a recital on July 18 at The Dharmawangsa in South Jakarta with a strongly built set list.

The trio started the program with a song cycle titled "Trio in A Major" from Russian composer Vissarion Shebalin, who lived between 1902 and 1963.

The different tempos of the song cycle — moderate, allegro assai and largo — evoked in listeners a life-affirming sentiment. The three players showcased their full strength here, presenting a song cycle that, in a synesthetic perception, created an image of a train going up and down a hill in one beautiful journey through its changing tempos.

The composition itself is brilliant, full of joy and optimistic despite the composer's tragic life. "During the Soviet regime, he fell victim to the 1943 Soviet Union purge and had fallen into obscurity since then," Domitille explained.

Then the hell became melancholic with a piece called "Prayer" by Ernest Bloch, a Swiss Jewish composer who lived during the baroque period of 1880 to 1959. The composition's predominant motif is played in the lower registers of the cello, which makes the piece even more haunting and chilling.

Domitille played the somber melody — which sometimes transitions into a prayer-like solemn evoking devotion.

In this piece, the late composer seems to

evolve a sense of both dread and faith — two elements that are salient and interlocked in the Jewish collective memory, as persecution has been a major part of Jewish history.

Having lived through the Holocaust, which occurred in the 1930s and 1940s, overlapping with World War II, Bloch truly understood the horrors of the systematic genocide of Jews across Europe by Nazi Germany and how faith had become their sole key to survival during a time of great brutality, evoking his comprehension in one powerful musical piece.

Whereas through "Prayer", Bloch seemed to want to go into the light of life but had not quite reached his destination yet, the piece that followed his composition, "Le Grand Tango" by Argentinean composer Astor Piazzolla, who lived from 1921 to 1992, once again reminded us of the light that would eventually appear at the end of a long dark tunnel.

True to the spirit of tango itself, the piece truly celebrates human life and the vitality that animates it — no matter what trials one has to go through in one's life — with upbeat music. The audience nodding their heads and moving their hands and feet rhythmically along to the music was a reminder at the end of a long day that life, after all is said and done, is worth living.

Like all successful classical performers in the world, that evening the Swiss trio succeeded in taking its audience to emotional highs and lows — celebrating all facets of the human experience — in one powerful recital. (JP/Sebastian Partogi)



Courtesy of 123musiques

Learning by doing: Swiss pianist and gamelan player Jessie Vergères instructs a young boy to play the traditional Indonesian instrument.