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Javanese music, Swiss style

Krisna Diantha , Contributor , Lucerne, Switzerland | Sun, 11/29/2009 5:18 PM | Lifestyle

It was an unusual sight for the French-flavored province of Sion in western Switzerland - more than a dozen European teenagers playing the Javanese gamelan.



Members of Gamelan 1-2-3, a gamelan orchestra made up of Swiss teenagers, perform at the Fete de la Musique in Sion, Switzerland.

The performance took place in a concert hall as part of the Fete de la Musique (music festival); the teens played all parts of the gamelan set, including kendang (drums), bonang (small gongs), suling (flutes) and slenthem, saron and peking (various types of brass xylophones).

Some of them performed as the sinden or singer, with others serving as dalang or narrators.

"But this is not a wayang kulit [shadow puppet] show," says Nicole Coppey, head of the gamelan orchestra.

The professor of music prefers to describe her group's musical performances as a kind of combination of gamelan, wayang kulit and Sion-styled creativity. No wonder there was such promotion of Indonesian traditional music at the concert.

"For much of the performance, the story is derived from the Indian epic Ramayana," Coppey adds.

Coppey has made an unusual innovation with the Javanese musical art in introducing it, as the greater part of the audience was composed of members of the Sion community rather than Javanese or other Indonesians. The few Malay faces seen at the building were mostly employees of the Indonesian Embassy in Bern.

"We like it," said the embassy's Hubertus Witjaksono. "At the end of the performance, you get some surprising blends [of sounds]." He was referring to the piece known as "Kupu Kuwi" (That Butterfly), which combines gamelan music and vocals from the youngsters, and which he describes as an amazing piece.

"It's a very beautiful rendition. We're proud of what Nicole has arranged," he added, expressing an admiration apparently shared by the rest of the audience.

Coppey's involvement in Indonesian music began 20 years ago, she explained, when "an Indonesian musical workshop was held in Geneva".

The Javanese gamelan show became fixed in her mind. Later, when at the Cite de la Musique, a musical school in Paris, she was challenged to create gamelan-based compositions.

"I understood, the spark could become a burning fire," she says.

So, with great fervour, she attended Javanese gamelan workshops in Paris. [...]

Coppey set up her Javanese gamelan orchestra in Sion. With her musical school, 1-2-3, she had no difficulty finding players for the traditional instruments.

"The problem was how to manage the time between this and school activities," she says.

"Also, there was a problem transporting the instruments, which wasn't easy in Switzerland."

She also found the trick for getting the best out of her troupe.

"The more spontaneous, the better it goes," she says. "If the approach is too intellectual, difficulties arise."

Now her orchestra, Gamelan 1-2-3, has no less than 20 members - all Swiss teenagers - about 15 of whom are actively involved.

Coppey and Gamelan 1-2-3 are now capable of presenting such classic pieces as "Gantungan Nem", "Kendhang Bubah", "Kotek", "Srepegan Ludiro", "Gangsaran", "Wilujeng", "Kupu Kuwi" and "Udan Mas". [...]



The Indonesian Embassy fully supports Nicole Coppey's activities. "There's already an angklung orchestra, and now we have Gamelan 1-2-3," says Ambassador Lucia.

"We're proud that Indonesian culture is increasingly loved and widespread in Switzerland."