Gareth Farr’s ‘Kembang Suling’: Three musical snapshots of Asia

BY ROBERT J. DAMM

While programming a recital of music for flute and percussion, Dr. Lana Johns (flutist) and I began to prepare Gareth Farr’s “Kembang Suling.” We found that this duet for flute and marimba is an imaginative adaptation of Asian styles. It allows the performers to intimately explore many non-Western musical concepts and techniques, which will bring a refreshing diversity to any recital. In preparation for a lecture-recital, I contacted Farr with some questions about his music.

Composer and percussionist Gareth Farr was born in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1968. He studied composition, orchestration, and electronic music at Auckland University. Further study followed at Victoria University, where he became known for exciting compositions that often used the Indonesian gamelan. He played frequently as a percussionist with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra before moving to Rochester, New York, where he studied with Christopher Rouse at the Eastman School of Music and graduated with a Master of Music degree. Farr’s compositions are influenced by his study of non-Western music, including Ratontongan log drum ensembles, Balinese gamelan, and Indonesian musical systems.

Farr composed each of the three movements in “Kembang Suling” in a specific Asian musical style: Balinese gamelan, Japanese shakuhachi, and South Indian ragas. The piece was originally commissioned by New Zealand flutist Alexia Still with financial support from Creative New Zealand, Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa. Farr played marimba for the premiere.

Several recordings of “Kembang Suling” are available. Is the one Farr released on the Trust Records label the definitive performance? “Well, the composer’s interpretation isn’t necessarily the only one,” Farr says, “but I’m pretty happy with it. There is another recording of the piece I very much like: Kesatuan (Ingrid Gordon and Karen DeWig) on the Centaur label.”

Following is a description of the musical influences that inspired the piece and an explanation of the compositional elements that correspond to the conventions of traditional Asian styles.

I. BALINESE GAMELAN

The first movement was inspired by Balinese gamelan melodies. Gamelan is a generic name referring to various types of ensembles in Bali playing primarily a range of percussion instruments. These orchestras, featuring gongs and metallophones, may also include flutes, drums, stringed instruments, and voices. The kembang (or Kempang) is a wooden xylophone; the suling is a vertical bamboo flute. Gamelan music is traditionally very functional in that it is used to accompany royal ceremonies and processes, dancing, and puppet plays. Gamelan music generally uses one of two tunings: the pentatonic slendro scale or the heptatonic pelog scale.

This movement utilizes several pentatonic motives (e.g., F G-flat A-flat C D-flat in the middle of the movement and F A B-flat C E at the end). Other formal principles drawn from the gamelan tradition include the use of elaboration, counterpoint, and cycle. It also incorporates the concept of musical unity resulting from interdependent and equally important roles of the parts.

Farr’s program notes describe the movement: “The marimba and flute start out as one, their sounds indistinguishable. Bit by bit the flute asserts its independence, by straying further and further from the marimba melody. An argument ensues—but all is resolved at the climax.”

Farr was first introduced to Javanese gamelan when he transferred from Auckland University to Victoria University in Wellington, which is well known for its practical ethnomusicology program (especially gamelan). The experience changed his compositional style immediately, widening his horizons and serving as a catalyst for writing tonal music. He later studied Balinese gamelan in the United States, playing with Sekar Jaya in San Francisco and a few other Bay Area gamelans. “I became a bit of a Bali freak,” Farr said, “and have been to Bali several times.”

Farr remarked that he was playing a lot of Balinese gamelan when composing this piece. “Some things [in this movement] are very Balinese in style, but nothing strict,” he explained, adding, “Jaya Semara has always been a particular favorite of mine—fast, loud, what else do you need?”

In regard to particular scales (e.g., slendro or pelog), Farr said that the movement features “Balinese pelog at the beginning, then after it breaks out of that mood, forget trying to make it fit any scale.” One prominent formal principle in this movement drawn from the gamelan tradition is the use of imbal or “interlocked” (see Example 1). Farr clarified that the interlocking technique is called kotekan in Bali.

The manuscript and layout for the publication has been beautifully done by Promethean Editions. One correction that should be noted on the marimba part is that measure 27 should be the same as measure 13 (G-flat, F, E-flat, D).

The note stem with an x through it indicates a dead stroke (see Example 1). The use of dead stroke is found in traditional gamelan technique. According to Farr, “The left-hand dead strokes are the kajar (time keeper) equivalent of the kethuk in Javanese. The dead strokes serve a double function; they make it sound more like Balinese gamelan, but also they help keep the interlocking together (just like a kajar would).”

The movement has a wonderful span of dynamics, from pppp to fff. Farr said that he plays the opening of the movement on the nodes of the bars, as he conceives of the idea that “the music is fading in, as if it’s already been playing for ages.” He added that some perform-
ers may prefer a more definite start to the piece.

II. JAPANESE SHAKUHACHI

The Japanese shakuhachi is an end-blown, vertical bamboo flute with five holes. The oldest shakuhachi in the history of Japanese music was brought from China as early as the 7th or 8th century. The music of this early shakuhachi lasted only until the end of the 10th century, but was revived in the 17th century by a sect of traveling Zen Buddhists. Kinko Kurosawa (1710–1771), a monk, later collected and arranged important flute pieces and established a new school of shakuhachi music. He taught these pieces to younger priests, including his own son, who carried on his name and repertoire, as did his grandsons until the 19th century. These self-contained pieces are now known as the Thirty-Six Classics of Kinko (Koizumi).

In the 19th century the shakuhachi began to be used as a secular instrument and in koto ensembles. Used extensively in Japanese music during the 1920s and 1930s, the shakuhachi is played in contemporary homes and on concert stages. An important refinement in shakuhachi performance is the execution of a final grace note at the ending of each breath phrase (Malm, 151–160).

Farr acknowledged that his knowledge of the shakuhachi repertoire is not as extensive as his knowledge of gamelan. Japanese music is often inspired by nature and landscape. Program notes from the manuscript indicate that “the haunting sounds of the Japanese shakuhachi flute float out over the warm echoes of the rolling landscape.” Farr explained that this is “an evocation of the open landscapes, rolling hills, majesty of Fuji, and the emotive expression that I get from shakuhachi music.”

Much shakuhachi music is monophonic, but in this case, the subtle harmony of the marimba serves as an accompaniment to the flute (see Example 2).

“I like the idea a New Zealand percussionist came up with—to play the middle movement on alto flute and transpose the marimba part down a fourth,” Farr remarked. “That means some really yummy low chords for the marimbist.”

III. SOUTH INDIAN TALA AND RAGA

The nature of Indian music includes the concepts of raga, tala, and several modes of improvisation. Indian music is characterized by the raga system, a kind of musical scale on which a melody is based. The term “scale” is not quite accurate to define raga because raga encompasses a combination of musical phrases and contours that give a characteristic melodic identity. There are at least 250 ragas in common use in South Indian music (White, 22). One method of raga classification is by the time of day it is used. Another is to group ragas accord-

Example 1

Interlocking “kotekan” technique of the Balinese gamelan (note stem with an x through it indicates a dead stroke).

Example 2

The marimba provides harmony to the shakuhachi flute melody.
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ing to the particular mood they evoke. Ragas are said to cause not only emotions but certain physical effects. Thus, a very popular Indian raga called Malkos is to be played at midnight or mid-day and evokes peace and sublimity (White, 23–24).

Farr said that the raga used for this movement was “one I heard on a long road trip; no idea of its name. The tune stuck in my head, but by the time I got to a piano to figure out the pitches I could only remember the relative pitches. A B-flat C E-flat F A is the transposition I used in the piece. Of course, it just sounds like F major to us Westerners, and it’s almost impossible to hear the A as the tonic. So I eventually gave in to my temptation and put an alternative ending on F in the marimba.”

Indian music also operates through the concept of the rhythmic cycle called tala. In the classical music of South India, tala is often kept by a double-headed hand drum called the mridangam. This movement of Farr’s work consists of a repetitive three-bar motif played on the marimba: 5/4, 5/8, 5/16 (see Example 3).

The flute plays a different cross rhythm every time, returning to the marimba’s pattern at the end of every cycle. Farr commented that he has heard similar cycles of progressive diminution of a rhythm in Indian music.

Farr’s knowledge of Indian music was gained primarily through his study of South Indian Bharata Natyam dance, so most of his influences in that respect are Carnatic. This movement certainly sounds like the Carnatic music of South India. The flute part was composed to model an improvised interpretation of a given theme through many brilliant and ornamented variations. Although a drone accompaniment is typical of Indian tradition, Farr does not utilize one in this piece. He related that he initially thought the A drone would be assumed by the listener, but found the draw toward F much stronger. Farr suggested that it would be interesting to perform the third movement with an A drone.

OTHER WORKS
“Kembang Suling” is only one of Gareth Farr’s several contributions to the percussion repertoire. Especially interesting are those works that feature...
the influence of non-Western music such as taiko drumming, Rarotongan log
drum ensembles, gamelan, shakuhachi,
and Indian musical systems. A list of se-
lected works by Farr that feature percus-
sion follows (see Table 1). “Volume Pig”
[for percussion quartet] is perhaps the
craziest piece I’ve ever written,” said
Farr. “The initial inspiration was taiko
drumming, and then I went off on some
serious tangents from there. ‘Kendhang
Kalih’ is a duet with each player’s setup
of tom-toms and timpani laid out in mir-
ror image of each other. It is also the
most minimalistic and hypnotic piece
I’ve written.”
“Kambang Suling” is unique in the
repertoire because of its Asian character-
istics. Johns and I have found that audi-
ences respond with delight to this
multicultural work. For both the flute
and the marimbist, it is technically chal-
lenging, stylistically captivating, and
musically rewarding to rehearse and per-
form.

TABLE 1
SELECTED WORKS BY GARETH FARR

Orchestra
“Tabuh Pacific” (large orchestra and
gamelan)

Vocal
“Nga Tai Hurihuri” (soprano, karanga, 4
percussion)
“Pagan Prayer” (soprano, percussion
quartet, 2 trombones, 2 bass trombones)

Gamelan
“Acid” (Javanese gamelan, 4 percussion)
“Chengcheng” (Balinese gamelan, 2 harps,
4 percussion)
“Kebyar Moncar” (Javanese gamelan)

“Reongan” (Javanese gamelan)
“Reong Lenggong” (gamelan angklung)
“Segi Tiga” (gamelan angklung)
“Siteran” (Javanese gamelan and harp)
“Taikoan” (Javanese gamelan and taiko
ensemble)

Chamber and Percussion Ensemble
“Kembang Suling” (flute, marimba)
“Kendhang Kalih” (percussion duet)
“Little Sea Songs” (percussion quartet)
“Volume Pig” (percussion quartet)

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tions Limited.
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Fred Hoey’s start in the music industry came at an early age upon winning the 1936 National Rudimental Drummer Competition. His illustrious career in the field of music as an author, clinician, and authority in the world of percussion afforded him many opportunities. In the mid 70s, Fred Hoey launched the CB 700 line of drums and percussion. This unique line was designed by Hoey to service the educational percussion market in a comprehensive way. As Vice President of Sales for C. Bruno in the early 1980s, Hoey created the Gibraltar brand name of drum hardware and initiated its first designs. The mid 80s brought Hoey to oversee the Remo, Inc. San Antonio Distribution Center where he participated in product design, development, and sales direction. Throughout his career, Fred Hoey remained active as a prominent Southwestern performing percussionist. He also wrote several drum methods still in distribution by Mel Bay Publications. He was a charter member of the Percussive Arts Society and an educator whose influence on percussionists continues with the PAS Fred Hoey Memorial Scholarship.

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Deadline: All materials must be received in the PAS offices no later than March 15, 2006.

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