

## **Tiny movements, big lessons – in Java**

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As an outsider learning Javanese classical music, I have researched not only music, but also dance:movement and theatre:life-drama. I assumed that the beautiful movements of Javanese dance, slow, meditative, and centrally-focused, would inform me of the structure of the music. Thus, I made hundreds of videos of the masters and their dancers. One day, I recorded a youth dance graduation; I did not expect to learn much from these young children. Unexpectedly, I realized that they (some were only five or six years old and could not yet walk self-assuredly) were learning how to become adults. This began my exploration in understanding how children learn and acquire movement grammar and vocabulary, and how they continue to integrate what they have learned until they become able-bodied dancers. My approach was to make videos of children's lessons at the studio of the late master Rama Sasminta Mardawa in the royal town of Yogyakarta Java.

While observing the students, I found that the students had concentration, center of gravity, and a relaxed attitude. I had certainly seen concentration before, but in watching these students, I learned that it was possible to have concentration in addition to a relaxed attitude. Laughter was an element they used to learn, and they were able to recognize their mistakes and correct themselves. Emptiness (*kosong*), in the metaphysical sense, was also significant in my observation. Teachers say that children are without preconceptions. They are like sponges: whatever the teacher gives them, they readily take. Children, whom I observed, express a desire to please their parents and to show what they have learned: that they can reach the perfection sought by their parents (and teachers), and therefore are able to fit into their culture.

I started to give up my preconceptions of learning Javanese music. Instead of taking apart the melodies and turning them into phrases and fragments, I began to pay more attention to the flow of the notes and the energy of the movements. By watching the young dancers (though the teacher gave detailed corrections), I could see that the children learned by watching one another. This group interaction is an underlying element of Javanese music. In addition, there was not only one "right way" to move; there were various ways to move. This also pertains to Javanese music. Before this project, as a non-Javanese Westerner, I learned by acquiring technique, by understanding "facts." In music, I learned with precision, note by note, sometimes by deconstructing in order to understand. This approach is rather normal in Western music. It provides not only an acquisition of the notes, the melodies, the material of the musical repertoire, and the techniques of execution, but it also provides the theoretical foundation for performing. After this project, in my daily application, I remain aware that I must be focused, able to concentrate, but with a relaxed demeanor (*santai*), not showing frustration. I recall the stillness present while the music moves; I respect silence while making sound.

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**Alex Dea** is an American-born Chinese independent ethnographer. Trained in Western music, Dea has a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology, specializing in Javanese Gamelan music. Dea studied avant-garde minimalism with “Bad Boys” La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and Robert Ashley. As ethnographer-performer, Dea documented the last masters of Javanese classical performing arts with over 1,000 hours of video, gave Jogjakarta Palace permission to record, and sings regularly in Surakarta Palace with title K.R.T Candradiningrat. Dea makes new work with Asia’s Didik Nini Thowok, the late Ben Suharto, Ramli Ibrahim, among others. Dea intertwines old classical and new avant-garde imagined histories and futures from harmonic overtones, and also writes about both traditional and modern dance.

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