

Feature

Ubud festival welcomes world musicians

Franki Raden, Contributor, Ubud | Fri, 02/18/2011 10:08 AM



Italian strings: Anello Capuano, acclaimed as the most prominent world music multi-instrumentalist, is set to play at BIFest this Saturday. Courtesy of Bali Inter-Music Festival (BIFest) Indonesia has a rare opportunity to hold an international music festival luring highly acclaimed world musicians to Ubud.

Called the Bali Inter-Music Festival (BIFest), the event will take place at Arma Museum, Ubud, on Feb. 19, from 6 to 11 p.m.

For the first BIFest in the new decade of the 21st century, the musicians will come from Canada (Reg Schwager, known as the best Canadian jazz guitarist), Africa (Supa Kalulu, marimba dance band led by Jan Maraire, wife of the late master Maraire), Italy (Anello Capuano, acclaimed as the most prominent world music multi-instrumentalist), Japan (Chika Asamoto, a superb female soprano sax player), Jakarta (Dwiki Dharmawan, Indonesian music ambassador) and, of course, Bali itself (Bona Alit, the young master of Balinese music).

Entering the new millennium, the world has shown the emergence of new musical impulses from across the globe. Due to European colonialism, for the past several hundred of years, Western

music has dominated the global arena and market. By the same token, it has also been narrowmindedly considered as superior compared to non-western music. But the fact is that many people have forgotten that behind Western music culture lays a strong influence of Asian and African music.

European symphony orchestra, for example, could not be established without the contribution of Asian instruments such as the dulcimer, kamanche and janissary drum that have developed respectively into piano, string instruments and timpani. These three instrument families have basically defined the history of European classical music.

It was Claude Debussy who first bluntly stated that European percussion instruments looked barbarian compared to Indonesia's gamelan music. He also mentioned the Palestrina style of counterpoint sounded like kid's play compared to the gamelan counterpoint.

Having said that, Debussy developed a whole new musical idiom later known as the foundation of 20th century modern music based on the concept that he partly borrowed from the aesthetics of gamelan such as a whole-tone scale, pentatonic scale, heterophonic texture, colotomic and multi-layers structure of composition.

Gamelan was first introduced to European audiences during the colonial time in the archipelago. In 1817, Thomas Stamford Raffles brought a set of gamelan instruments to England after the Dutch defeated him in Java. Later on, Joseph Ellis used the same instruments to develop his theory of the tuning system in the world. Ellis' studies are considered as the historical foundation of the new field in music called ethnomusicology.

The birth of ethnomusicology was highly crucial for the emergence of new creative musical impulses from the non-western worlds in this third millennium. The new discipline provided an academic knowledge about non-western musical practices. Equipped with this knowledge, Western ethnomusicologists could explain to their societies that non-western musical practices have to be viewed within cultural contexts other than European. Therefore, in order to appreciate non-western musical practices one needs to understand non-western cultures as well. Otherwise, they would simply miss the core issues and lose the opportunity to enjoy great musical cultures that have developed strongly for thousands of years.

Gamelan music, for instance, from a Western diatonic and tonal musical perspective could give the impression of being out of tune and containing merely static melodic repetition. Yet ethnomusicological studies demonstrate that gamelan actually possesses an intricate diverse system of micro tuning, embedded deeply in Javanese mystical practice and cosmology, and employs a highly complicated stratified counterpoint that Debussy acknowledged as more sophisticated than the music of Palestrina, an Italian renaissance composer known as the champion of European polyphonic music.

In the 1960s was born an intriguing new musical aesthetics in the Western hemisphere called "repetitive music" or "minimalism" that drew on the concept of melodic repetition of Balinese gamelan music and African interlocking rhythm. Among the pioneer composers of this new

musical movement are Terry Riley and Steve Reich who studied Balinese gamelan music with I Wayan Sinti and Ghanaian drumming in the West Coast area.

Within the span of 30 years, repetitive music has finally managed to spread around the world and dominate the contemporary musical scene across the globe. Its influences run deeply across musical genres such as modern classical, experimental, rock, jazz, world beat and pop music.

Supported by this new musical awareness and paradigm, non-western musical products were finally able to enter the global market with a strong foundation. In the past several years, non-western music managed to gain its own sections within record stores around the world. The market terms for these “new” products are many. They are called world music, world beat, ethno pop, Afro pop, world fusion or, in Germany, welt beat and welt musik. Sometimes, they were put under the names of the record labels such as Putu Mayo.

Of course, long before this market was established people were already familiar with the “older” non-western musical products such as Latin music, reggae and jazz.

By the same token, many non-western musicians also emerged as new superstars. Names such as Bob Marley, Kitaro, Kodo (group), Tan Dun, Fela Kuti, Youssou N’Dour, Dumisani Maraire, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Ravi Shankar, Sheila Chandra, Ofra Haza, Ladysmith Black Mambazo (group), Tito Puente, and Angelique Kidjo today can stand on the international music scene equal to any Western superstar.



African sounds: Supa Kalulu, a marimba dance band led by Jan Maraire, wife of the late master Maraire, performs at a festival overseas last year. Courtesy of Bali Inter-Music Festival (BIFest) Their music sits on the Billboard chart along with songs from mainstream Western pop.

The market share of non-western music today passed the market share of classical music and jazz. In the 1980s the non-western music products were already considered as the fastest growing sections of the global music industry. A decade later, its market share reached more than US\$ 2 billion, 3 percent of the entire money circulating in the international music market. By the end of the 1990s, non-western music albums managed to make it to the Top Ten World Music chart of

the Billboard. Due to this phenomenal number as well as the immense popularity of non-western music across the globe, today many Western singers and musicians from Paul Simon, Sting and Kanya West through to Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock and all the way to the Kronos Quartet, owed their successful new albums to their non-western musician collaborators. A year ago, the Kronos Quartet (one of the most celebrated string quartets in the world) came to Bali only to work on their new compositions with Rahayu Supanggah in Ubud.

Hence it is the non-Western music's turn. Indonesian and other non-Western musicians must claim their positions on the international music scene.

The Bali Inter-Music Festival is designed to take this challenge. As one of the most dynamic non-western cultural places in the world, Bali is the most logical site where non-western music should be celebrated. Yet for the past several decades, Bali has become a new global village with populations coming from various parts of the world. Even a small region in Bali such as Ubud has become one of the most dynamic international cultural sites in the world. Music in this region is still part of people's everyday life. Yet this is the place where Colin McPhee studied Balinese music and influenced several most important 20th century composers such as John Cage, Steve Reich and Louis Andriesen through his Balinese style of musical compositions.

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