Music students perform, learn from percussion master in traditional Indonesian gamelan ensemble

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For years, the percussion program at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette has stood as a reminder of the importance of diversity with its performance choices ranging across the globe, highlighting a variety of cultures.

This past weekend, the focus was on the traditional Indonesian ensemble gamelan, which was led by gamelan master and University of California at Berkeley professor, Midyianto.

“It’s almost like a whole orchestra of instruments,” Mark DeWitt, music professor and Dr. Tommy Comeaux endowed chair in traditional music, said. “It’s like a different way of thinking about music, and it’s from Southeast Asia. I think that because it’s almost as big as an orchestra, that when people from Europe started getting an interest in music from other parts of the world, they kind of gravitated toward that because it was kind of related to something that they were accustomed to. So there’s a long history of people studying gamelan music.”

In order to fully appreciate and understand the gamelan ensemble, UL Lafayette’s percussion students worked under Midyianto’s expertise for two days, when he showed the students the ropes of playing while lecturing them on gamelan history and culture.

“This was one-semester material, and it’s very complicated,” Midyianto said. “And it only took them two days to learn it. So I’m really happy to work with them. This is real special for me.”

Silence filled the room as the UL Lafayette percussion ensemble filed into Room 138 of Angelle Hall. Midyianto, dressed in traditional gamelan attire, filed out behind the students. Shoeless, each student sat criss-crossed on the floor behind their instruments. Once Midyianto took his seat on the floor next to his instrument, the kendhang, the group bowed their heads forward in unison.

Midyianto began the song by dribbling his fingers across the leatherhead of the two-headed, barrel-shaped kendhang, which controlled the tempo and transitioning of the pieces. As his palm began to beat the kendhang, the students joined in with their individual instruments.

The group played a total of three songs, the first and last of which were traditional gamelan songs, Midyianto said. The second piece was an original created by three of the percussion students, which Midyianto said he thought was “better than the first song.”

“I had never done a workshop where all of the students in the group were music majors,” Midyianto said. “So it spoiled me. They were very easy to work with.”

As each song would come to an end, the students would soften their rappings on the instruments until the lingering sound had almost completely subsided. Then, they would raise their wooden tool they used on the instrument in unison, before hitting their instrument for one last note.

The instruments comprising the UL Lafayette gamelan ensemble first came to the university a few years prior to DeWitt’s arrival in 2010. DeWitt said music department faculty wrote a grant in order to purchase the traditional gamelan instruments, but once approved, there seemed to be a minor setback.

“We now had the instruments but we didn’t have a teacher on staff who knew the tradition,” DeWitt said. “Which is why we decided to bring someone in from the outside.”

Midyianto wasn’t too far outside for DeWitt’s reach, however. When working toward his doctorate at UC Berkeley, DeWitt recalled having a psychology class with Midyianto, who was teaching gamelan at the time.

“Unfortunately, I never took his gamelan class while I was there,” DeWitt said. “Which I deeply regret now because maybe I’d be able to use the instruments a little more often.”

The university’s collection of gamelan instruments includes the kendhang, the kempep gong, kenong, ketuk, slemeh, kempyang, gender, gambang, bonang and saron.

The majority of the university’s gamelan set is painted Cajun red and embellished in gilded designs tracing the center and outskirts of the instruments.

“Each one is named after the sound it makes,” Midyianto said, as he grabbed one of the wooden utensils used for playing gamelan and firmly tapped on the bronze kenong, humming out the sound it made.

According to DeWitt, the gamelan instruments are only played about once a year. Despite their dust-collecting days over the past year, the instruments seemed to radiate with pride as the students’ hands danced across the instruments’ bronze bodies. The sound of the melodies seemed to weigh on the room’s atmosphere, as if the crossing of cultures were embracing hands in unity.

“It was a pretty eye-opening experience,” percussion student Mark Derouen, who was partially responsible for the gong in the performance, said. “Considering all that we learn here in the school of music, for the most part, has been all western music, it was very interesting to see a different type of eastern music notation.”

This type of experience and learning environment is something DeWitt said he believes is most gratifying.

“The thing about traditional music that I find the most is that it’s face-to-face,” DeWitt said. “You know, when you learn face-to-face, it’s often not written down, and yeah, you can learn from recordings and work with that but when you’re learning in person and playing in person, it’s different.”

“To me, the most rewarding type is when you’re in the same room, and you’re not even plugged in necessarily, you don’t need amplifier or a sound system,” he continued. “You can hear each other. So its not social media, and it’s not trying to sound as loud as possible. It’s people communicating. Its artistic communication in small groups.”

This nonverbal communication in music DeWitt referred to seemed to be evident among the students immersed in the gamelan percussion ensemble. No words were being exchanged, but the unified rhythm moving through the ensemble seemed to speak in a way that words could not.

“I think, in the history of music, gamelan was a type of music that was initially very exotic and unfamiliar,” DeWitt said. “And in some ways it still is to other people, but nonetheless, it’s just undeniable proof that other cultures have music that is equally artistic and complex and deep, in every way, as whatever music we might know and be familiar with.”