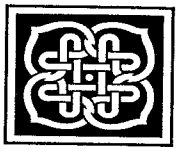
A House in Bali

Colin McPhee



PERIPLUS

resolved itself to a simple tug-of-war between the forces of right and left. A character belonged once and for all to one side or the other, and stood or fell accordingly. The cards, it seemed, had long ago been stacked against the demons, for things *must* come out right in the end, as surely as dissonance dissolves in concord. Since the outcome was known in advance, the play lacked tension, and scenes could be cut or extended at will without affecting in any way the plot. Puppets or men, the play could be brought at any moment to a satisfactory conclusion, could be folded up like a telescope should an unexpected shower of rain make this necessary.

THE DESIGN IN THE MUSIC

SEVERAL NIGHTS IN THE WEEK the *légong* club of which Nyoman Kalér was the head met to practise in the Temple of Origins across the road. There were some thirty musicians in the club, and thirty more members to help carry the heavy instruments. Some of the boys and men worked in the fields, others did nothing at all. They gathered together in the early evening, after they had bathed in the stream that ran by the house. Sometimes they rehearsed with the little dancers, but more often it was for the sake of the music alone, and for hours the air would ring with swift, chiming sounds that rose and fell above the agitated throb of drums.

At first, as I listened from the house, the music was simply a delicious confusion, a strangely sensuous and quite unfathomable art, mysteriously aerial, aeolian, filled with joy and radiance. Each night as the music started up I experienced the same sensation of freedom and indescribable freshness. There was none of the perfume and sultriness of so much music in the East, for there is nothing purer than the bright, clean sound of metal, cool and ringing and dissolving in the air. Nor was it personal and romantic, in the manner of our own effusive music, but rather, sound broken up into beautiful patterns.

It was, however, more than this, as I was to find out. Already I began to have a feeling of form and elaborate architecture. Gradually, the music revealed itself as being composed, as it were, of different strata of sound. Over a slow and chantlike bass that hummed with curious penetration the melody moved

in the middle register, fluid, free, appearing and vanishing in the incessant, shimmering arabesques that rang high in the treble as though beaten out on a thousand little anvils. Gongs of different sizes punctuated this stream of sound, divided and subdivided it into sections and inner sections, giving it metre and meaning. Through all this came the rapid and ever-changing beat of the drums, throbbing softly, or suddenly ringing out with sharp accents. They beat in perpetual cross-rhythm, negating the regular flow of the music, disturbing the balance, adding a tension and excitement which came to rest only with the cadence that marked the end of a section in the music.

Tiny cymbals pointed up the rhythm of the drums, emphasized it with their delicate clash, while the smallest of bells trembled as they were shaken, adding a final glitter, contributing shrill overtones that were practically inaudible.

Not long after I became acquainted with Nyoman Kalér, he had said I was welcome to come and listen as the men practised, and the friendly members of the club soon grew used to seeing me enter the courtyard after dark to sit beside them while they played. Their instruments were arranged in careful order, like an orchestra. The deep-voiced *jégogans*, with their heavy, trembling keys, were ranged at either side, while in the centre stood the soft-toned *g'ndérs* that played the melody. At the back were placed the little *gangsas*, on which the brilliant ornamental parts were performed. The drums, the leading instruments, were placed in front. At a short distance away the tones merged and blended so that the *gamelan* sounded like one great instrument.

I sat watching the concentration of the players. Boys of fourteen, men of twenty or sixty—all gave themselves up to the serious business of rehearsal. The music was rapid, the rhythms intricate. Yet without effort, with eyes closed, or staring out into the night, as though each player were in an isolated world of his own, the men performed their isolated parts with mysterious unity, fell upon the syncopated accents with hair's-breadth precision. I wondered at their natural ease, the almost casual way in which they played. This, I thought, is the way music was meant to be, blithe, transparent, rejoicing the soul with its eager rhythm and lovely sound. As I listened to the musicians, watched them, I could think only of a flock of birds wheeling in the sky, turning with one accord, now this way, now that, and finally descending to the trees.

What is the object of this club? I asked one night.

A little pleasure, a little profit, said Nyoman.

For the feasts and celebrations of Kedaton, their own village, they gave their services, as they were expected to do. In the temple they accompanied the ceremonial dances before the altars, played far into the night as they lulled priest and priestess to sleep with trance-music.

But when their *légong* dancers appeared in other villages, said Nyoman, the club expected to be paid. The money went into the treasury to be saved until the time of *galungan*, the week of feasts and holidays. Then was the time for joyous liquidation. The club bought pigs for a banquet and divided the remainder of the funds for holiday spending. But often it would be found that there was only a very small sum to share, for in the past six months the funds would have melted away on new costumes for the dancers, new gold leaf for the instruments, or a new set of headcloths for the members of the club.

For a club must sparkle, said Nyoman, when it appeared. Especially in another village. Otherwise they would be too *ashamed*. . . .

The iridescent music of Nyoman's *gamelan* had its roots in a distant past, could be traced to the courts of ancient Java, and from there to a still more ancient India and China. Here to-day it had blossomed miraculously into something new. Successive generations of musicians had recreated it, transformed it, quickening the rhythm and modifying the instruments so that they rang with greater brilliance. An elaborate technique of interplay among the different instruments had slowly evolved, a weaving of voices around and over the melody, enveloping it in a web of rich though delicate ornamentation. And yet no separate part was in itself too difficult; all united to form a shimmering, pulsating whole, held together by the discipline of long rehearsal. As for the composers themselves, who could say? Long since dead, they were, presumably, simple craftsmen. Their names were unknown.

But how was it possible, I asked, for men to remember through the years this music of the past? If there were no notes. . . . In my country, I said, we write down our music. I showed him a printed page. He looked at it with curiosity.

There are also written notes in Bali, he said. But few people can read them, few have ever seen them. A book is rare.

If you could find one for me. . . .

He thought his friend Lotring, a musician who lived in Kuta, owned one. He would go one day and see.

He came a week later saying, Here is the book.

It was a bundle of dried palm leaves, trimmed and neatly tied together. It was old and brittle, and crumbled as I opened it. Inside, three or four lines of Balinese script stretched across each strip of leaf.

That is the *pokok*, the stalk, the trunk of the music, he said.

It was nothing more than the meagre tones of the chant in the bass, the barest of outlines. Nothing to indicate rhythm, nothing to indicate melody or the elaborate interweaving of sounds. A scratch here and there marked the accent of a gong and that was all.

It was only a reminder, said Nyoman. The rest, he explained, existed in the mind of the teacher.

Balinese music is based on five tones. In the sacred writings of the priests these tones have cosmological significance, for they are linked with the gods of the five directions, north, east, south, west and centre, where in the middle of a lotus sits Batara Siva, Creator, Destroyer, Lord God of All. His mystic colour is white; his sacred syllable *hing*; and the tone for this syllable is *ding*.

The gods of the other directions have also their colours—red, yellow, blue, black; their syllables and tones—*dong*, *déng*, *doong*, *dang*. . . .

But he didn't think, said Nyoman when I asked him, that the boys and men of the clubs thought of this as they played.

Music is for pleasure, he said. It pleases both gods and men. In the writings of the priests there were long directions about the dances and *gamelans* "necessary" at a temple feast. It was to be regretted that to-day these directions were only half carried out. The gods felt slighted, complained more and more frequently, through the mouth of the priest or medium in trance. . . .

Thus music, I learned, had its "stem," its primary tones (which it was possible to preserve in writing) from which the melody expanded and developed as a plant grows out of a seed. The glittering ornamental parts which gave the music its shimmer, its sensuous charm, its movement—these were the

"flower parts," the "blossoms," the *kantilan.* (Like a dancer, Nyoman explained in parenthesis, whose body is the trunk, whose arms and head are melody, and whose hands form the flowers, which are the "gilding" of the dance.)

It was in these flower parts, he said, that a teacher showed his inventiveness, a *gamelan* its ability. The style was always changing, although the stem-tones remained the same. When he was a child, at court, the music had been slower, simpler, softer. But to-day it had become very difficult. . . .

One evening Nyoman brought to the house a *g'ndér* from the *gamelan* and began playing the soft love-music from the *légong* dance. A row of thin metal keys hung suspended over a row of upright bamboo tubes, and trembled at the least touch. As he sat there on the floor, the keys came to his shoulders. He held a little mallet in each hand; his fingers were relaxed, and the mallets seemed to fall upon the keys rather than strike them. The tones were limpid, with a mysterious, prolonged echo from the tubes, and as he played he seemed to lose himself in the dreaminess of the sounds he was producing.

A *g'ndér* is delicately adjusted and easily goes off pitch. If the bamboo resonators are out of tune, the tone is dead, but when the instrument is perfectly in tune it has a haunting sound, prolonged and softly ringing. It is the presence of many of these instruments that gives a *gamelan* its floating, disembodied sound.

The *g'ndér* was followed by a drum, on which Nyoman began to explain the different drum strokes. He held it across his knees, drumming lightly with his fingers—you only used the sticks for the great ceremonial music or the heroic dances. He used the finger tips, the palm of the hand, the ball of the thumb, striking the drum sometimes near the middle of the parchment to give a deep, hollow sound, or near the rim, when it rang out tensely. The two hands fluttered in endless patterns —the soft, rapid throb for the love scenes, light tripping rhythms for more playful moments, tense, heavy drumming filled with sharp, excited accents for the battles, the abductions, the appearance of a god or demon.

Another day he brought a little *gangsa*, to show me how the flower parts were composed. Soon the house was filled with gongs, drums, cymbals and flutes, looking like a museum in disorder. But I wished for a piano, for I was beginning to feel out of practice. I was also eager to try out some of the melodies

from the *légong gamelan* that I had begun to write down, to see how they would sound.

It was by chance that I heard of one that belonged to a resident on the island who was willing to let me have the use of it for a few months. It created a sensation in the village when it arrived, for nothing like it had ever been seen. It was a shrill upright; its tones echoed disagreeably against the walls and the cement floor, but it was surprisingly in tune. The afternoon of its arrival the house was filled with visitors who came to listen to the strange new music that was suddenly heard in the village. They pressed the keys, examined the pedals.

What a great voice! they exclaimed. What a number of "leaves" (the keys). What are the foot-brakes for?

I showed them the mechanism. I played a melody from the *légong* which I had written down, filling in the gongs with the left hand. Lost in admiration they left to spread the news in the village.

The *g'ndér* looked very fragile beside the piano. It was beautifully carved; little animals peered out from a forest of leaves, and its keys jangled softly as we moved it. The piano was a monument of cold efficiency. As a ruler is marked, it divided the octave into twelve precise degrees. The tuning of the *g'ndér* was more irregular. Only some of the tones agreed with the piano, while others were strange and unaccountable as certain tones in the voice of a Negro blues singer. Heard separately, each instrument sounded convincing. When I listened to one after the other I was deeply disturbed. The piano sounded harsh and out of tune after the softer intonation of the *g'ndér*.

Since the piano had twelve tones to the *g'ndér's* five, the music I played held no meaning for Nyoman. Tourists have brought back romantic tales of the Balinese taste for Bach, but this was quite impossible. Nyoman's reaction to Western music was typical. It was a complicated noise without order, tempestuous and baffling in its emotional climaxes, dragging on and on and leading nowhere.

Your music is like someone crying, he said. Up and down, up and down, for no reason at all.

A simple tune on the white keys might catch his interest, but the harmony of the left hand ruined it for him. His ears could not filter the sound made by so many notes so closely spaced.

His reaction to rhythm was just as negative. Balinese music

is tense and syncopated like jazz, and when I played a waltz, or an adagio from some sonata, Nyoman would exclaim—

Where is the beat? There is no beat! Like a bird with a broken wing!

Only my jazz records would he listen to at all. He found the singing curious, the trumpet of Louis Armstrong fantastic, but he felt the rhythm at once.

THE GODS DESCEND

IN TWO DAYS IT WOULD be full moon, when the feast of the Temple of the Ancestors would take place.

For a month the women of Nyoman Kalér's household had been busy, like the women of every other household in the village, in preparing the offerings, the endless cakes, fritters, sweets, and ceremonial objects made of palm leaf. In Nyoman's house confusion reigned, especially the last few days, for new costumes were being made for the three little *légong* dancers, and snips and scraps of bright-coloured cloth lay scattered about among the piles of cakes and fruits. Men cut and sewed; over a table three boys leaned, their faces flecked with gold leaf as they painted enormous flowers and birds in gold on the costumes of the dancers.

The morning mist was still in the air on the day of the feast as one by one the men came out of their doorways and walked towards the temple, to begin the festive cooking. It was not long before the courts were in a turmoil. Soon there was the sound of chopping as groups of men prepared the spice, the sound of soft scraping as they grated huge mounds of coconut. Above the laughter and conversation pigs shrieked as they were carried into the kitchens. Ducks gabbled, while about the court chickens fluttered, blood still dripping from their necks. From simmering caldrons the acrid steam of bitter *blimbing* leaves mingled with the bright aroma of frying pork. Cooks stirred, prodded, turned the spits, carefully lifted from pans wide coils of sausage, to set them out to cool above the reach of dogs that now flocked in the courts. In the air there hung the sharp, fresh scent of ginger, lime and tamarind.

All at once, above this cheerful bustle there floated the sound