

*"The task of art now is to somehow speak of this plurality of "reals" in a world moving into a polyphonic cultural space...Art is our guide to the new terrains we have opened within ourselves, in pursuit of techne and logos"*

*Dj Spooky that Subliminal Kid (1)(Miller 2004: 32)*

What I would like to suggest is that improvisatory music is living, breathing, non-verbal dialogue between musicians. This idea is especially relevant when the musicians involved are from different musical backgrounds and cultures. The musical improvisation that takes place between these individuals then becomes a tool for them to learn how to understand each other in a non-linguistic manner, and hopefully foster positive trans-cultural experiences. Ken Hischokop states in his essay, "The Classical and the Popular: Musical Form and Social Context", that "because music is so deeply entangled in the web of history, it cannot help but be part of a larger social dialogue" (303, in Lawrence and Wighart).

Fostering open musical dialogues between musicians from diverse cultural backgrounds and trained in different traditions (2) develops interesting, syncretic new musics, but even more importantly, my research shows these interactions develop "The way[s that] music as a sonic phenomenon and human agency participate in the construction of social and cultural meaning" (Monson 1996: 209) in today's global society.

Benjamin Brinner, in his book, *Knowing Music, Making Music: Javanese Gamelan and the Theory of Musical Competence and Musical Interaction*, explains how the idea of a 'community' in today's society has evolved to bridge across its former boundaries based in the ideas of specific location and/or proximity:

The term 'community'... denotes a group of people who share enough common musical goals and means to enable interaction in performance and audition without a strong sense of adapting to "foreignness." A musical community may be coterminous with the inhabitants of a particular locale, region, or larger sociocultural unit or it may be relatively widespread and therefore interleaved with members of other musical communities. People often refer to a 'jazz community', for instance, that spans many regions and is found side by side with, but separate from, other musically defined communities. Slobin has directed attention to the many groups that are not locally or regionally bounded, acknowledging that members of a community can be widely dispersed but not isolated from one another thanks to electronic media and worldwide transportation networks (29).

Robert Morgan, author of *Rethinking Musical Culture: Canonic Reformations in a Post-Tonal Age Today*, explains, as global citizens, we are currently living "in a world where there is no longer a single given "reality" but shifting, multiple realities" (1992: 58), where "the plurality of styles, techniques, and levels of expression appears both plausible and meaningful" (Ibid.). This has become the grist for many a critical theorist's ideas on the formation of present-day global culture. Morgan sees that, "Culture is no longer perceived as a consistent order but as something in motion that focuses only momentarily, and diversely, to provide temporary frameworks" (59). Morgan's book, describes how, even in 1992, increased access to radio has affected many a global citizen's modern day musical literacy:

Radio and recordings now provide easy, instantaneous access to a worldwide compass of "musics," including a full range of Western art music from the medieval period to the latest generation of contemporary composers, a generous sampling of non-Western art music, and folk music and popular music from throughout the world. This ready availability has markedly increased the types of music about which we have direct (if not firsthand) knowledge and has made us "literate" (if not "native speakers"), within a range of musical languages inconceivable even a short time ago. This growing knowledge of such a wealth of different music has contributed essentially to the pluralistic cast of contemporary musical life, and it has altered--and continues to alter--our conception of musical culture in many ways... contemporary musical culture is fast becoming not a single, relatively focused entity, but a melange of conflicting subcultures that interact with one another in complex ways while still preserving considerable autonomy. These subcultures...cannot be viewed simply as satellites of a central culture; taken collectively, they are coming to constitute that culture themselves (57).

Having studied various styles of gamelan myself over the course of two years living in Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia, I agree with Morgan's opinion how this type of experience can result in a non-native person's ability to become a "native speaker" of many different musical languages.

Ingrid Monson, author of *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, supports Morgan's statement, noting that "since music from around the world is widely available in the form of recordings, the personal sound horizons of any individual are unlikely to be restricted to the music of one tradition" (126). According to Timothy Taylor--author of the books *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets, Strange Sounds*:

*Music, Technology & Culture*, and the article, "Music and Musical Practices in Postmodernity"-- a result of this growing, widespread availability of sonic materials to the global audience is that "cultural production and cultural forms display the old and the new in ways that could only happen in the contemporary landscape in which everything is available in commodity form as never before" (2002: 111).

The sheer amount of musical information available to any global citizen within earshot of a radio is staggering, and exponentially growing in more urban areas with the availability of computers with access to the World Wide Web, and even more recently the advent of mobile phones that are able to download ringtones and entire music tracks. Figures 1.1-1.3 show the current demographics for internet users by world region as of March 2007 (Fig. 1.1), the internet penetration by world region (Fig. 1.2), and the evolution of non-English-speaking online population (Fig. 1.3). This clearly shows that the largest amount of internet users are located in Asiatic countries, with users in European nations closely following, and the amount of internet users in the North American region ranking with roughly 160 million users less than those in Asia. These figures indicate the percentage of the total populations in each of the world regions that use the internet. Comparison of Figures 1.1 and 1.2 shows that although the world's majority of users reside in Asia, the actual internet penetration--the total percentage of the Asian region's population currently using the internet--is only roughly eleven percent of the area's total population. The Asian demographic contrasts greatly with that of nearly 70% of the North American population using the internet. The overall growth of the non-English speaking online population over the course of the ten years between 1996-2005 has been charted at 800 million new users who are non-English speaking, with China, Japan, and Korea making up the lion's share of the population.

An article from the January 17th online magazine, *This Week in Consumer Electronics*, details the rapid growth of the amount of music that is being made available to worldwide audiences with the availability of downloadable music on the internet:

Worldwide sales of downloaded music, including cellphone ringtones, rose 82 percent to about \$2 billion in 2006 to account for around 10 percent of music industry sales, up from 5.5 percent, a global music industry trade group announced. Sales were about evenly split between downloads to a PC and over-the-air downloads of ringtones and full music tracks to a cellphone (Palenchar 2007).

This worldwide growth in the online music market is not expected to slow down any time in the future. According to the same article, by 2010,

Digital music sales will grow to account for at least a quarter of all music sales worldwide, said IFPI chairman John Kennedy. In the United States, the number of downloaded tracks grew in 2006 by 65 percent to 582 million, accounting for 73 percent of the 795 million individual tracks downloaded worldwide. The number of tracks downloaded worldwide grew 89 percent to 795 million (Ibid.).

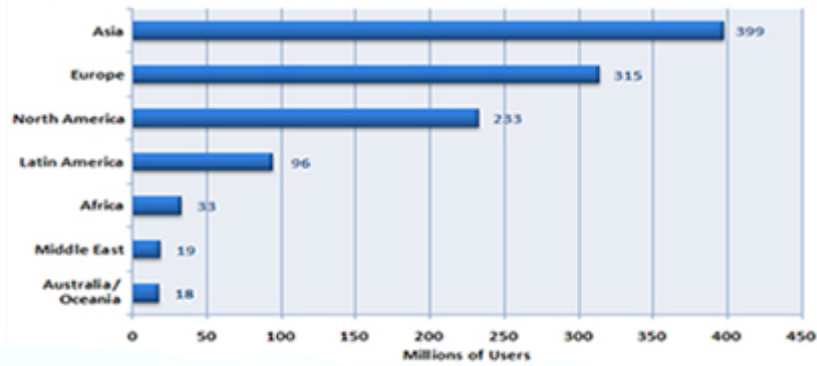
Thus, the burning question on the minds of many musical and cultural scholars working and evaluating the results of how these fast-paced changes are effecting the musical cultures of the world today is one that brings up issues of hegemony and subjectivity. Monson relates, "The question of how audiences and fellow musicians react to and evaluate these borrowings and influences returns us to the subject of boundaries, the articulation of cultural identity in music" (126). Simon Frith, in "The Discourse of World Music" observes,

On one hand ... world music could be seen as a site on which new sorts of (hybrid) identity are being performed. On the other hand, world music could be as a site on which new sorts of cultural theory could be developed, new futures glimpsed. The academic concern is no longer to apply some general theory of development (the cultural imperialism thesis, say) to music as an example, but rather to read the meaning of globalization through world music. Jocelyne Guilbault [in her study entitled *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies*, p310], thus claims that "world music seems far ahead of other fields of activity in its use of active social forces that are diverse and contradictory as agents of change and in its reliance on both local and international forces in the shaping of individual and social identities (210).

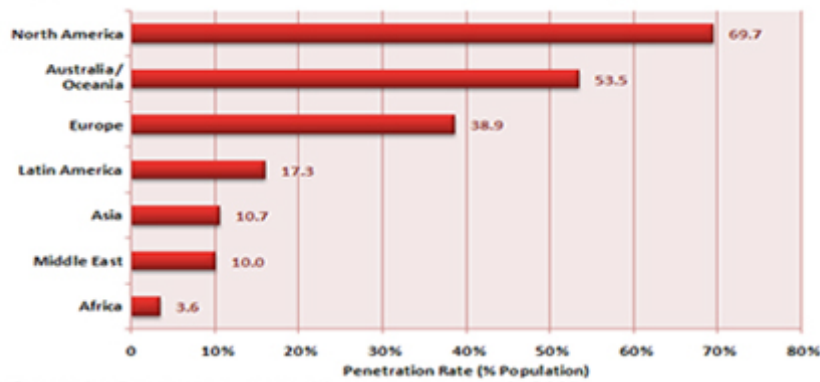
According to Robert Morgan, today's fast-paced transmission of musical culture on the global scale (and the subsequent expansion of global musical knowledge) via mass mediated broadcasts has not, in turn, formed a hegemonic musical culture, but rather:

[it] has enabled us to question the hegemony of a relatively small and limited body of music in setting absolute standards of acceptability... other traditions, often performance-oriented rather than text based, are coming into their own. No longer measured against an absolute standard of "high" art, they participate on essentially equal terms, as full partners within an encompassing cultural mix. Indeed, if anything, Western art music now tends to be measured against folk, popular, and non- Western traditions (and more often than not found woefully deficient). This reflects the growing democratization of an ever more heterogeneous society, which various minorities compete for equal status, demanding their own say in their own terms (60).

**Figure 1.1 Internet Users by World Region**

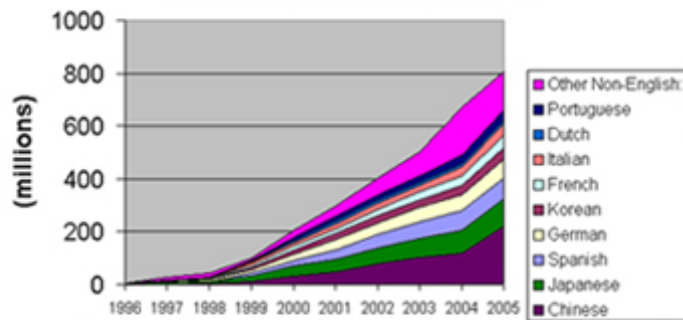


**Figure 1.2 Internet Penetration by World Region**



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**Evolution of non-English-speaking online population**  
<http://global-reach.biz/globalstats/evol.html>



**Figure 1.3**

If we return again to Figures 1.1 and 1.2 which respectively show internet users by world region versus internet penetration by world region, it is clear to see that Western nations are being almost equalled in usage of the internet by users in other parts of the world, and in Asia especially. The danger that exists in the current state of the internet and mass media as effective tools for Morgan's above mentioned cultural democratization, however, lies in the current imbalance between total net users versus total net producers in areas such as Asia and Africa. As Figure 1.4 shows, just under five percent of internet content is created in languages 'other' than English, nationalized European languages and Asian languages such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean.

Figure 1.4: Chart of Web Content by Language (Source: Vilaweb.com, as quoted by eMarketer)

Total Web pages: 313 Billion	
English	68.4%
Japanese	5.9%
German	5.8%
Chinese	3.9%
French	3.0%
Spanish	2.4%
Russian	1.9%
Italian	1.6%
Portuguese	1.4%
Korean	1.3%
Other	4.6%

This lack of content in local vernaculars and languages of smaller nations--such as those spoken in the African continent and in Southeast Asia for example--severely limits meaningful internet access (by meaningful, I mean access to images with related commentary) only to those individuals who can obtain instruction in those languages, and/or institutionalized education. Members of the Author's Working Group on Content in the article, "Content and ICTs: Challenges, Innovation and Prospects" argue

Questions of cultural hegemony in the digital content sector add to and shift established conflicts in print and broadcast media. Will new media facilitate globally diverse cultural representation, or will it reinforce Anglo- American dominance in the cultural realm? Will there be a level playing field for new content from developing countries, or will the main distribution channels remain difficult for new players to access? Policy makers will need to negotiate a careful balance between local versus global content, remaining open to the diversity of foreign content while encouraging their citizens to generate local content. The local language content generation infrastructure required depends on the availability of affordable software tools (with local language interfaces and support manuals) for viewing, creating, and manipulating content (Butt 2005).

This imbalance of voices creating content on the internet calls to mind the quote with which I began my paper, from Paul Miller's Dj manifesto, *Rhythm Science*--"The task of art now is to somehow speak of this plurality of "reals" in a world moving into a polyphonic cultural space ... Art is our guide to the new terrains we have opened within ourselves, in pursuit of techne and logos" (32). It is, indeed, the task at hand to mediate our creative energies together in an attempt to generate non-hegemonic cultural content.

### *Gamelan Plesetan: A Brief Overview*

My experience working with Sapto Raharjo, Rene Lysloff and other musicians as part of the Gamelan Plesetan Project has given me first hand knowledge of that new terrain Miller suggests. Gamelan Plesetan is a practice-based experiment in free and open creative exchange between musicians and artists whose experiences are based both in the traditional music and arts of their particular region and the ever-developing artistic areas of digital arts and new media. The concept of this performance event is rooted within la context of live, non-idiomatic improvisational multimedia electro- acoustic gamelan performance. These events can occur in areas ranging from concert halls to in the middle of a ring of redwood trees, and sometimes can be best described as modern day "Happenings" in the spirit of Allan Kaprow. According to UbuWeb,

The 'happening', as Kaprow developed it, is a non-verbal, theatrical production that abandons stage-audience structure as well as the usual plot or narrative line of traditional theatre. Although a compartmented organization may be used, the performers are considered as objects -- often kinaesthetically involved -- within an overall design of environment, timing, sound, colour and light. Found environments are often used and built upon, but the events are not casually arrived at, nor are they entirely accidental and spontaneous (UbuWeb 2006).

In an enactment of Gamelan Plesetan, musicians Indonesian and American, trained in both electronic instruments and traditional gamelan instruments openly collaborate to extend the boundaries of these existing musical genres to form a non-linear transcultural musical dialogue that ventures into uncharted musical territory. Each participant is communicating their acquired knowledge of the history of their particular musical community's/ musical tradition's way of communicating musically, be they from American inner cities, or the large cities of the island of Java. The core trio of players are all experienced on our own level in electronic and gamelan musics.

Sapto Raharjo's musical accomplishments range from gamelan composer and director of the Gayam 16 Gamelan Community, to electronic musician, rock musician (as a result of hearing rock music on European broadcasts to his father's ham radio in the sixties), to host of Yogyakarta's weekly new music radio show broadcast on *Gernimo FM*. Lysloff has played in and directed gamelan ensembles for over twenty years as well as playing electronic keyboards and synthesizers in music projects since his high school days. I myself am a gamelan player trained in Yogyakarta, Central Java with six years of gamelan playing, and I have been a professional DJ and electronic musician for fifteen years.

The music that results from the dialog that develops when musicians well-versed in the different musical styles/instrumentation of many cultures-- join together to 'jam' or freely-improvise takes the place of the spoken word, literally enabling people meeting from opposite ends of the world to communicate. Music is not the only language where people from different cultures can communicate directly without the use of spoken language as other non-verbally based artforms such as dance, and visual arts can prove. In music however, it is rhythm, phrasing, timbre, and melody that take the place of speech, and I argue that what emerges is a polyphonic musical dialog between the members of the improvisation--where each contributor to the polyphony is speaking from their own unique subject- position. This polyphony not only "speaks of a plurality of reals" as Miller puts it, but also creates the space where emergent forms of reality can exist in their true process of "becoming". For Gamelan Plesetan, the result is a syncretic, emergent form of music that is shaped in the cross-cultural chronotope of musical free expression and borne out of the self-realized collaborative process that mediates musical evolution.

Ingrid Monson's findings of how the musical and human aspects of improvisation have "a great deal to offer the rethinking of the basic concepts of anthropology, ethnomusicology and cultural studies" (131) have been proven by my personal experience working with other gamelan and electronic musicians both from Indonesia and the United States within the framework of free-improvisation that the Gamelan Plesetan project provides. From my fifteen years experience as a self-taught electronic musician, I can confidently attribute almost all of my musical knowledge from engaging in these very types of educational musical dialogues with musicians from traditions and skill levels different than my own. Projects like Gamelan Plesetan provide the opportunity for participants to experience temporalized space in the chronotope of musical experimentation. This chronotope is a place where these musical experiments are allowed to exist in a completely unedited manner for examination and further analysis by all. Learning how to use music as a communication tool is a way to open the network of cultural discourse beyond that of the typical subject/object dichotomy that can occur in more structured musical settings--such as that of the hierarchical structure of an orchestra with its composer, conductor, and players, or a rock group that plays prescribed 'songs'.

In this paper, I will examine my participation in the Gamelan Plesetan project as a case in study regarding the act of musical improvisation as a method for performing cultural dialogue as a member of the international gamelan music community. To understand the meaning and goals of the project, however, it is important for the reader to first understand the key terms I will be using to describe the project, its participants, as well as their musical and cultural backgrounds. Thus, as my point of departure, I will first create my framework and define idiomatic improvisation and non-idiomatic improvisation as discussed in Derek Bailey's book, *Improvisation Its Practice in Music*; in Anne LeBaron's article, "Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics", and Benjamin Brinner's *Knowing Music, Making Music: Javanese Gamelan and the Theory of Musical Competence and Musical*

### *Interaction.*

Secondly, I will illustrate the concept of idiomatic improvisation using as examples my own experience of playing different types of gamelan music and watching Indonesian shadow puppet performance. Thirdly, I will describe non-idiomatic improvisation according to Bailey and LeBaron, comparing these ideas with my own personal experience as a self-taught electronic musician and member of the music Groups Planet Six and the Liquid Concrete Air Band. Finally, I will situate the musical project Gamelan Plesetan within the idea of improvisational music by giving a detailed account of three different types of scenarios that have occurred during performance of the Gamelan Plesetan Project during the four years we have been in collaboration at the time of this writing.

## **Idiomatic Improvisation**

According to the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, the word improvisation has its roots in the Latin "improvisus," meaning, "unforeseen." Five entries appear on the initial search page for improvisation when first searching the dictionary's database online: the first being improvise--"to create and perform (music, drama, or verse) spontaneously or without preparation"; the second, "impromptu--readiness;" the third, "jazz--a type of music of black American origin characterized by improvisation, syncopation, and a regular rhythm"; the fourth, "Dixieland--a kind of jazz with a strong two-beat rhythm and collective improvisation"; and finally, "raga-- a characteristic pattern of notes used as a basis for improvisation in Indian music".

But what is improvisation, exactly? The five words returned by the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary's* search engine for the meaning of improvisation can all be considered various contexts that the idea of improvisation exists in, and to be sure, there are many other contexts that are not included in that short list. Bruce Ellis Benson presents an eleven point classification system for improvisation in his book, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music*. The list, he claims is by no means exhaustive.

Perhaps one may find further clarification of the concept of improvisation by juxtaposing the idea against the act of merely performing a written piece of music. Benson explains that, "A performance (of a piece of music) is essentially an interpretation of something that already exists, whereas improvisation presents us with something that only comes into being in the moment of its presentation" (25), and quotes G.C. Weitzler, a classical improviser who insisted in a 1756 interview that, "a musical person with good interpretive powers will never play in the same way but will always make modifications in accordance with the state of his feelings" ( 21, in Donnington, 1989: 157). Similarly, according to Derek Bailey, author of *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice In Music*, "In all its roles and appearances, improvisation can be considered the celebration of the moment" (142). I wholeheartedly agree with Bailey's statement, however, again, we must remember that the idea of improvisation can mean many different things to many people, as illustrated above.

As I see it, there are two major forms of improvisation: idiomatic and non-idiomatic. Bailey also acknowledges this fact in the introduction of his book, and begins his excellent study of improvisation by describing the two types of improvisation:

Idiomatic improvisation, much the most widely used, is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom-- such as jazz, flamenco, or baroque--and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom...Idiomatic improvisors, in describing what they do, use the name of the idiom. They 'play flamenco' or 'play jazz'; some refer to what they do as just 'playing'... Non-idiomatic improvisation has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called 'free' improvisation, and while it can be highly stylised, it is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity (Ibid., xi-xii).

My definition of idiomatic improvisation is improvisation that takes place within an overarching framework that is prescribed by the rules of the genre of music it occurs in. The musician that practices idiomatic improvisation is actually emulating the musical style he or she is working in, as opposed to the idea of non-idiomatic or free improvisation, where the musician is searching for a new means of expression of the musical self or the ways that the instrument can be played. In the following section, I will use a comparison of Balinese, Sundanese and Central Javanese gamelan music styles to illustrate the concept of idiomatic improvisation. I will then discuss the concept as it is used in a Javanese shadow puppet play to illustrate the concept of idiomatic improvisation in reference to a theatrical performance scenario.

The various genres of gamelan music I will discuss first are seemingly similar --as they all require the participants to learn a traditional musical repertoire as a point of departure, they all refer to specific contexts of playing gamelan, and all the performance genres contain elements of idiomatic improvisation within each of their basic frameworks. But on the other hand, these forms could also be considered very different from one another, especially when we take into account the way these musics are improvised within the gamelan idiom.

Idiomatic improvisation is rooted in the musician's adherence to the framework of the prescribed idiom, yet it offers her the freedom of personal interpretation as long as that interpretation remains within the confines of the musical genre. According to Bruce Ellis Benson, "Each instance of improvisation involves a kind of reworking of what currently exists"(30). Similarly, Paul Miller, aka Dj Spooky that Subliminal Kid believes that, "For the most part, creativity rests in how you recontextualize the previous expression of others" (33). The ability to recontextualize the work of others within the confines of an idiom, however, requires significant knowledge and skill in playing the music of that genre. One could use the saying "You have to know the rules in order to play the game" to describe the scenario of an idiomatic improvisation.

### *Idiomatic Improvisation and Its Role in Gamelan Musics*

First, some background on Indonesian gamelan music itself: Gamelan music is a classical form of music originating from the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali. Played on bronze metallophones, drums, and gongs, the music is very mathematical in nature, as most of its structure relies on cycles or repeated patterns of notes, with each specific instrument having its own particular sequence of patterns to play. The basic structure of all gamelan musics I have studied at Indonesia's National Academy of Arts (ISI) and at UC Santa Cruz can best be described as follows:

The nuclear melody [or *balungan*, which literally means 'skeleton'] is struck out in a series of clear, distinct and elemental tones, following one another in an even flowing and almost entirely unstressed rhythm. A set of gongs of different sizes (of which the *gong gede*, *kenong*, *kempul*, and *ketuk* are the most important, the first being the largest, the latter the smallest) "punctuate" the music, the largest gong marking the largest phrase, the second largest gong marking the next most gross subdivision, the smallest of its basic units (Geertz 1960: 278-9).

In the case of Javanese music this melody is played by an instrument called a saron. In the case of Balinese music, the core melody is played by the large leading instrument, the *terompong* and by a lower octaved *ugal*. The *balungan* to most gamelan songs, or *ghending*, is usually known to experienced musicians by ear, as opposed to them learning it through reading musical notation. Gamelan *ghending* is taught using notation at Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI), the Indonesian National Academy of Arts, as it is generally used in an institutionalized academic setting to quickly convey basic musical structures to large groups of students at the same time, however, traditionally gamelan musicians do not use notation when playing or learning a song, rather they learn from following along with the more experienced players on the simpler *saron* instrument. Derek Bailey notes that there are three distinct stages of learning idiomatic improvisation within the framework of jazz music, but for the purposes of our paper, this definition stands also relatively true for gamelan music. The stages are:

- a) choosing a master, or a musician to imitate;
- b) absorbing his or her skills through imitation of the master's playing style, and finally;
- c) the development of the player's own unique style and attitude based on the foundation of imitation (53).

Each area within Bali and Java have their own special style of gamelan music that accompanies its traditional dance and theater, conveying the individual characteristics of the cultural group it represents. For example, Balinese gamelan music is very energetic, and precise, with frequent changes in tempo and volume, whereas the gamelan style from the areas of Surakarta in Central Java is more *halus*, or reserved, controlled, and quiet. In my experience, when comparing the many different styles of gamelan that have developed in Java, the music seems to grow less *halus* the further away one gets from the two court gamelan centers of Yogyakarta and Surakarta in Central Java. Surakarta's music is considered to be the more reserved and controlled of the two court styles, and the musics of Banyuwangi, East Java, and Sunda, West Java are very unlike that of their Central Javanese cousins, often times taking on the more energetic characteristics, and faster tempos that approach those tempos and energies of Balinese gamelan music. The faster types of gamelan found in Bali and Sunda

both have tightly interlocking parts. Balinese *gong kebyar* style--the fastest style of all gamelan in my experience--leaves little room for musical freedom for the individual players, as the interlock is precise and scripted by the composer. However, the type of interlock played in Sundanese music allows the player a few options according to the player's desire and/or competence. I have direct experience of this from playing with the UCSC West Javanese gamelan ensemble directed by Undang Sumarna. Most times the notation Sumarna gave to the ensemble indicated only a basic structure, or *balungan* of the song to be played. Each individual note indicated in the score, however, has its own set of corresponding patterns to be played, ranging from a simple, basic pattern to one that is more intricate and faster paced. This is the case for each of the melodic instruments in the Sundanese gamelan ensemble. The musician assigned the job of playing the first *saron*'s part is the leader in this respect to her partner playing the second *saron*. The first *saron* player's decision of what interlock to play determines that of the second *saron* player's part, as the second *saron* either mirrors the same pattern played by *saron* one as indicated in the score on the offbeat, or switches to an interlocking part that corresponds to that of the *saron* one player. This is also evidenced in the playing of the large, melodic *bonang*, and its higher pitched mate, the *bonang rincik*. The *bonang* player has the prerogative of playing any of a number of patterns that correspond to the note that is called for in the *balungan*. It is the role of the *bonang rincik* player to follow the main *bonang*'s lead by playing the same pattern but, a more simplified version of it. If the main *bonang* player plays the simplified version of the pattern, the *rincik* player must answer with the more intricate one. The basic musical structure of Central Javanese gamelan is somewhere in between the two extremes of the highly structured Balinese style and the possible interplay of patterns seen in the UCSC Sundanese ensemble. When a gamelan musician becomes familiar with and competent at playing the patterns associated with the various different instruments in the ensemble, they at this point are so well versed in the basic theory of the form that they each can play almost any instrument within a given framework, except for in the case of the soft instruments like the *suling*, *rebab* and *gender*. These instruments require the most technical skill and experience as their parts play embellishments of the *balungan*. According to Benjamin Brinner, director of the UC Berkeley Gamelan Ensemble and author of *Knowing Music, Making Music: Javanese Gamelan and the Theory of Musical Competence and Musical Interaction*,

The *balungan* constitutes a type of shorthand. It does not directly represent the part to be played on the *gender* [*suling* or *rebab*], but it evokes certain possibilities. To interpret the piece in an acceptable manner--there is no single correct rendition--[the player draws] on many types of knowledge, including other pieces with analogous passages, a stock of patterns and their common usage (14).

Here is where the individual player has the freedom to make personal choices regarding the type of ornamentation to be executed that is most appropriate to the musical situation at hand. There is even an Indonesian term for this phenomenon--*garap*. According to Rene T.A. Lysloff, ethnomusicologist, University of California at Riverside gamelan ensemble director, and member of Gamelan Plesetan, "*Garap* means working out your part, the pattern that is idiomatic to your particular instrument ... on different instruments there is different room for improvisation ... and these also have their own variations" (Lysloff 2007). Lysloff's explanation of the term *garap* precisely illustrates my conception of idiomatic improvisation--the musician has the ability to express personal choices regarding the music they are playing, and not feel constrained while working within the confines of the genre. Here, the performer acts as a representative of the musical tradition, using quotation of past players and performances of a piece of music as a basis of reference for the player to make personal choices about how the musical interlude will be played. Brinner explains, "The greater flexibility of the individual parts within a Javanese gamelan composition enables musicians to take advantage of the interrelatedness of these parts and the cyclical repetition inherent to most compositions to work things out in performance" (121). This predetermined looseness found in the overall structure of a gamelan group can therefore be compared to the working scenario of musicians practicing in the genre of idiomatic improvisation.

It is also worthy to note that even the very structure of a gamelan group is usually an improvisation of sorts. Clifford Geertz, in his book, *The Religion of Java* notes, "Any group of performers can form an orchestra on the spot, even if they have never met one another before" (278). Explaining further,

As the gamelan demands rather little of the delicate adjustment between separate virtuosi required by the Western orchestra, with its greater freedom for individual interpretation and consequently greater need for a coordinating conductor, there is little need for a stability of personnel (280).

I feel, however, that this is not a result of lack of an element of Western-style virtuosity in playing the music, as

Geertz seems to indicate. This situation points to an openness on the part of the musical tradition toward the idea of letting the music have its own identity in the framework of the situation and in the group collaborative process involved in creating a gamelan performance, an idea that contrasts sharply with that of a Western orchestra ensemble's strict adherence to a rigid framework set out by the piece's original author in the musical score which is then interpreted by a singular, central conductor. Brinner elaborates on this idea in his book:

The conductor of a symphony orchestra, who holds a position of unchallenged musical authority, generally establishes the course of performance prior to rehearsals, choosing which repetitions to take and which segments to skip, if any, then communicating these verbally to the musicians in rehearsal. Since the path of each piece has already been mapped out with great precision in score by the composer, the conductor as leader is more concerned with interpreting the score and ensuring coordination, blending, and balancing of the huge orchestral forces at his or her command.

Leadership in a Javanese gamelan contrasts dramatically with the duties and prerogatives of symphonic conducting. Rather than residing unequivocally in the hands of one central conductor, it is shared among several musicians, each with his own domain of control and influence. Compared with the symphonic repertoire there are far more decisions to be made regarding the overall course of the performance, because pieces are much less fixed in details and overall sequence and because programs are often assembled in the course of performance, [and t]hese decisions, many of which are spontaneous, are communicated musically rather than verbally (171).

### *Idiomatic Improvisation Gone Awry in a Wayang Kulit*

For the next section I turn to a brief discussion of idiomatic improvisation expressed in the performance of a *wayang kulit*, and the consequences of that occur in the case of misunderstanding idiomatic cues in the context of an improvisation. *Wayang kulit Purwa*, a form of Indonesian shadow puppetry is a ritualistic play that typically lasts anywhere from 4 to 9 hours, and occurs in three acts: the introduction, the *panakawan*, or clown scene, and the great battle scene, respectively. *Wayang kulit* is in part an idiomatic performance and musical improvisation, and part a tradition-based method of teaching culture and community values. The *dhalang*, or puppeteer--often regarded a spiritually powerful person--retells ancient stories of the creation and the order of the universe according to the area's traditional belief systems, while incorporating lessons for the community based on his interpretations of these stories into a modern, real life context. Certain wayang characters, such as royalty and dieties relate with each other and the audience in a highly traditional, structured manner according to the Majapahit belief system/social structure in *Kawi*, a high form of language reserved for the gods and holy people (not understood at all by the audience); while the *dhalang* uses other more earthly characters, such as *panakawan*, to recontextualize these messages into modern vernacular and concepts.

The first act sets up the premise of the drama and introduces the main characters, settings and ends with an indecisive battle. The second act, introduces the clowns as translators of the main story; the characters adding their own social commentary to the audience, thus breaking down the "fourth wall" of the shadow stage. This scene also ends with a battle where one of the main characters dies, setting the stage up for the third act, which consists mainly of the very climactic battle scene. The first and the third acts are narrated in the language of *Kawi*, used extensively in Javanese *sastra*, or literary forms. The point is that only the gods, holy people and kings can directly communicate with each other directly, but the audience usually knows the general outline of the plot, as all the stories are based from the Ramayana, or the Mahabarata stories, both originating in ancient India and brought over to the region during the reign of the Majapahit empire from the first or second century, A.D. to the sixteenth century A. D. (Holt 1967: 4).

The second act of the play is based on the use of the panakawan characters led by the portly and extremely wise Semar. According to Clare Holt in *Art in Indonesia: Communities and Change*,

Semar is not only loved, but revered and regarded by some of the most sacred figure of the whole *kotak*, or *wayang* set. He appears on the screen precisely at midnight, preceeded by the *gara-gara* ... 'ominous manifestation (chaos),' when danger is greatest, the distress of his master the deepest, and when help is essential ... some writers on the *wayang* conjecture that Semar and his sons are ... 'the people' not otherwise represented in the palace heirarchies. They are the voice of the simple village folk, with all their strength, misery, and wisdom. Without them a princely master is unthinkable without their support, advice, and succor, he may be lost ... Whether deity or deified symbol of the people, Semar role of servant-mentor with that of a mediator between his masters and the gods (145).

*Wayang kulit* shows are used to teach moral lessons and impart community values through the use of the above mentioned traditional character types. Remarkably, the entire show is dictated by the *dhalang's* narration and musical cues. Everything down to story he narrates is improvised within a certain framework of traditional stories from the era dating before the Majapahit kingdom's rule of the area. A gamelan orchestra provides musical accompaniment for the *wayang kulit* show and over the years, has expanded from a small set, consisting mainly of the softer instruments (*gender, suling, and rebab*) and limited to one tuning, to a full *salendro/pelog* ensemble.

All music played during the event is based on the orchestra listening to *dhalang's* vocal and musical cues, and depends on him speaking in the vernacular of the tradition's idiom. The entire orchestra must be very centered in the present moment, prepared to correctly interpret the *dhalang's* cues at any given moment. This traditional Indonesian multimedia event is an excellent example of how improvisation can work within the confines of an idiom.

My primary experience comes from watching *Wayang Kulit Purwa* on a regular monthly basis at the Yogyakarta Kraton while I was a student at ISI. To a new viewer of *wayang*, the show looks very organized and even scripted, with everyone knowing their part beforehand. However, as my experience grew in watching *wayang* with my dear friend, companion and *wayang* enthusiast, Agus Mokam, I learned that the musicians are driven by verbal and percussive cues given by the *dhalang* as he improvises on the evening's theme based on the traditional epic and current local events. After this, I began to understand why, at some points in the seven hour performance, the music would begin, and then stop, with the members of the gamelan laughing slightly--and restart again. Agus explained the reason for this abrupt halt to the proceedings was that the *sinden*, or female singer, had misunderstood the *dhalang's* cue, and started to sing a different song than what was inferred. This caused the gamelan to start playing the wrong tune, throwing the whole show off for a moment. The *dhalang* in turn, called for everyone to stop, and he proceeded to give a more clear cue which everyone understood, and the show continued on its proper trajectory. Again, I turn to Brinner's work to explain how this intricate system of cueing works:

A *dhalang* cues through percussive patterns (*dhoddhogan*), vocal techniques (*wangslalan, konbangan, buka celuk*, and other musical uses of the voice), and puppet position or motion. *Dhoddhogan* are rhythmic patterns tapped with a hand- or foot-held mallet (*cempala*) on the puppet box, or on bronze plates (*keprak*) hanging on the side of the box. They are used to stop and start the pieces, to cue changes of speed and volume and transitions to new pieces. Through standardized in principle, these patterns vary according to personal stylistic preferences ... [and] most of the cues tapped on the box or bronze plates are directed toward the drummer while vocal cues, whether spoken or sung, are directed at the melodic leaders [the *rebab, gender* and *bonang* players] (273-274, 276).

Brinner then goes on to provide an excellent description of these three different types of cues, their meanings, and use in a *wayang* performance. His reason for doing this clearly meant to illustrate the intricacy and context sensitivity of the *dhalang's* cuing system--"the precise meaning of a cue is defined with reference to the context in which it is given such as the overall structure of the play or the structure of a particular piece. Contextual information should filter out conflicting meanings to leave a single unambiguous message" (Ibid.). However, as my personal experience confirms, "it is to be expected that cues will be missed or misinterpreted in such a complex and unrehearsed production" (Brinner 278).

In hindsight, it is difficult for me even to this day to determine the origin of the misunderstanding between the *sinden* and the *dhalang* that Agus and I witnessed that evening at the Kraton. Perhaps the singer was simply following along a misinterpreted cue from the *gender* player--unfortunately, I'll never be sure, as at that point in time I was relatively insensitive to the many nuanced cues that are involved during a shadow puppet play. However, I can be sure that my witnessing the missed cue was not totally out of the ordinary. In *Knowing Music, Making Music*, Brinner quotes an introductory book on *wayang* by Van Ness and Prawirohardjo that explains:

a *dhalang* should never speak directly to the musicians, but this does occasionally happen when indirect means of communication fail: "If in the middle of a *ghending* ...t he *dhalang's* signal is not heard by the musicians, then the *dhalang* often will utter the words, '*wau ta*,' [meaning roughly 'what I just said!'] as a request to the musicians to play softly (*sirep*), stop, and so forth (278).

This indicates to me that Agus and I probably were lucky enough to witness an instance of the above situation during that evening's *wayang* performance. Something had been misinterpreted in the intricate context of the

*dhalang's* cues, forcing everything to stop and start over again. In effect, the flow forward of the idiomatic improvisation had been misinterpreted by one of the key players in the game. This is an excellent example of the confines of idiomatic improvisation. The *dhalang*, being the conductor of the improvisation, the keeper of the idiom, so to speak, was not understood by his player and the performance momentarily took an unwanted turn in the incorrect direction. Obviously, this type of improvisation although possessing many unknowns in terms of musical detail prior to the actual performance, was solidly subservient to its idiom-- and rests solely in the overarching direction and wishes of the *dhalang*. Which is one hundred percent the way it should be in an idiomatic improvisatory situation. Had this been a non-idiomatic improvisation, however, the result would definitely not have garnered the same jolting arrest in the performance. What I argue in my following discussion of non-idiomatic improvisation is that the main difference between the two would be the ability of the players to break out of the rules--and play with the open-endedness of the situation.

## Non-Idiomatic Improvisation

The main difference between idiomatic improvisation and non-idiomatic improvisation lies in the performer's end aim of the music-- musicians working within the confines of an idiom use the history and rules of that particular music as a bounded area from which limited choices can be made during a performance setting. A gamelan musician never will play a different style of music while in an idiomatic musical setting. Gamelan players stay within the boundaries prescribed by gamelan tradition. While in some regional styles the players have the option of making limited choices regarding patterns that can be played by their particular instrument, more generally, it is only the highly experienced players of the soft instruments who have the freedom to decide exactly which ornamentation seems appropriate to the *gending* and the performance situation at hand. It would be unheard of for a gamelan musician to reference jazz music during an idiomatic gamelan improvisation. A remarkable feature of traditions that use musical emulation as a tool for mastery of the music is that, in the end, this very act of emulation results in the rich history of the musical genre actually constantly being in dialogue with its present day practitioners. Gamelan musicians pay homage to certain styles, teachers and regional traditions, and in an idiomatic context, gamelan players do not individually break out of their prescribed tradition. On the opposite side of the spectrum however--in a non-idiomatic improvisation setting--it would be completely permissible and even encouraged for two seemingly disparate musical genres such as gamelan and jazz to enter into a musical dialog with one another, according to the preference and skill of the musicians engaged in the improvisation.

In the above section on idiomatic improvisation, I used the metaphor "you need to know the rules in order to play the game" to describe the idea in the most basic of terms. On the other hand, in the case of describing non-idiomatic improvisation in a nutshell, the phrase, "Break the rules," might be an apt colloquialism to use to describe what happens during a non-idiomatic improvisation. In other words, for me, during the act of non-idiomatic improvisation, a musician can reference any musical genre they desire. Anne LeBaron, in her article, "Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics", uses the term non-idiomatic to discriminate between improvisatory forms tethered to highly identifiable or indigenous styles such as traditional jazz, Indian *ragas*, the Korean *sanjo* (many others could be mentioned) which are idiomatic and those that aren't connected to any identifiable indigenous form, style, or tradition" (Notes, 65).

In his book on improvisation, Derek Bailey points out that:

All improvisation takes place in relation to the known whether the known is traditional or newly acquired.

The only real difference lies in the opportunities in free improvisation to renew or change the known and so provoke an open-endedness which by definition is not possible in idiomatic improvisation (142).

Here, Bailey seems to be equating free improvisation with non-idiomatic improvisation--I also see the parallel that exists in the two ideas. Peter Stubley, author of the website, *European Free Improvisation*, explains:

Definitively describing this music in a single precise term or expression is extremely difficult. After 30 years, there is still no descriptor that is universally accepted and understood. For example, many people still seem to automatically assume that free improvisation is free jazz, or at least "it must be" a branch of jazz, because jazz is the one form of music where improvisation is a recognised and acknowledged major part of the creative process. I think Derek Bailey started using the term 'non-idiomatic improvisation' in an attempt to recognise that free improvisation could exist on its own terms, without having to be associated with other forms, which, in any case, are intended primarily so that music can be readily pigeon-holed for selling and media purposes (Stubley 2006).

Alternatively, rather than taking the "break the rules" attitude, it could be argued that there is another school of idiom-free improvisatory thought that speaks to the idea that in a truly free improvisation, there is only one rule--to listen to what is going on in the improvisation and to trust your reactions. The key factor in non-idiomatic improvisation--as in any type of improvisation--is to "say something" to the other improvisors musically. Jazz musician Ralph Peterson explains the basic rule of establishing a dialogue during free improvisation:

A lot of times when you get into a musical conversation one person in the group will state an idea or the beginning of an idea and another person will complete the idea, or their interpretation of the same idea, how they hear it. So the conversation happens in fragments and comes from different parts, different voices (Monson 1989: 7).

The direction of the improvisation really depends on the musicians involved, and the key to a successful improvisation is each member of the group listening to what is going on between the rest of the players. Yasudah (4), an Indonesian composer and improviser living and working in Surakarta, Central Java, explained in an email interview that the degree of success of an improvisation for him really depends on how well the musicians are communicating with one another.

[It] depends on the musicians I improvise with. I enjoy very much when everyone can listen to everybody else and give each other space. When all musicians compete in making themselves heard, I get very frustrated ... A good improvisation should be a dialogue between the players ... The musicians trying to create a musical piece together all stepping back in order to serve the composition that emerges. That is the ideal scenario (Yasudah, 2007).

This idea of listening to the dialogue that develops during the act of improvisation also speaks to the attitude that Renee Coloumbe, Director of the Improvisation Ensemble at University of California Riverside expressed in an interview:

We are all free improvisors. In free improvisation, the challenge is, when faced with an absolute musical choice--when you can do absolutely anything--the trick is to find the place in your own unconsciousness where the improvisation is always fresh and not try to capture a moment where it has been, or where it will be. Every bit of your musical history has built that foundation--it is woven into everything you are doing-- and at the same time, there is no possibility of doing anything but what is exactly needed in that situation. [It exists in] a place in the unconscious, nothing is looking back or ahead, it is all about being in the moment (Coloumbe, 2007).

Coloumbe works with her students at UCR teaching them how to experiment with live video feeds, enabling them to interact and experience the improvisation on multiple levels.

Ann LeBaron explains that "musicians with jazz, rock, or new music backgrounds have been drawn to free improvisation not only as a mechanism for discovery, but as an exercise to assist in the shedding of learned musical behavior" (46). LeBaron states that the appeal non-idiomatic improvisation has for so many musicians lies in the fact free improvisation, "has always been a journey into the unknown, a tool for unearthing profound discoveries, and a method for generating complex structures-- which can contain referential as well as non-referential sounds and phrases" (41). For example, during non-idiomatic improvisation, a musician trained in traditional Japanese *samisen* can feel free enough to play their instrument in a new way. This exploration can happen in whatever ways the musician personally sees fit--by choosing to explore the music making possibilities of playing only one string, or experimentation with using note patterns that are non-native to the instrument, or even choosing to use the resonator base of the instrument as a small drum--the choice is endless and entirely up to the musician. Another example could be seen in how an experienced *tabla* player working within the non-idiomatic context can also exercise the freedom to break from their usual *tal* patterns to experiment with playing the instrument using a different rhythmic structure, and/or choose to work in a completely different percussive style altogether.

Non-idiomatic improvisors are constantly faced with this 'absolute musical choice' especially when freely improvising for the first time together as a group. This is true mostly in part because prior to the first encounter, there exists no previous experience or reference of improvisatory history within the framework of that group--they don't know what works and what doesn't as a result of their previous experience. However, there are certain constraints thrust upon the improvisation at times when the improv is placed in a public setting. According to Rene Lysloff,

Improvised music is more process based [than other types of music], [so] the audience may not be able to relate, and become bored in the time it takes for a group to congeal...it is a very good experience for musicians, however... an *experiential* [my emphasis] thing....it shows how well people are communicating [musically] with each other [Lysloff 2007].

I will now relate my personal experiences to explain why I agree with Renee Coloumbe's idea of how the

non-idiomatic improviser exercises her own agency while in a real-time, free improvisation situation. The idea Coloumbe expresses above-- "when faced with an absolute choice--when you can do anything ... [and] every bit of your musical history has built that foundation" --takes into account two very important aspects involved in non-idiomatic improvisation. Firstly, the idea that the musician is posed with an 'absolute choice'--or freedom-- in how to act in the improvisatory situation. Secondly, the idea that the very idea of 'choice' is solidly based in the musician's own personal musical history. Musicians, when faced with Coloumbe's 'absolute choice' freely choose to take that freedom in one of two directions. One choice is for the musician to stay within the boundaries of their own personal style, developed upon their personal foundation of musical history. Another avenue that can be explored is also alluded to by Coloumbe in her statement --"the trick is to find the place ... where the improvisation is always fresh and not try to capture a moment where it has been". This 'place' as I understand it is best reached by musicians using methods cited by LeBaron in reference to improvisatory music with certain elements of surrealistic collage:

[The] ... musicians who most vividly incorporate surrealistic elements of automatism and collage in their work also demonstrate two essential requirements fo surrealism: 1) the desire to investigate new territory at the expense of adhering to a personal style; 2) the avoidance of complacency and the comfort of the familiar, turning instead to expansion at the risk of occasional failure. Each artist amplifies a conception of beauty while transforming a perception of reality (38).

Musicians employing this type of tactic in an improvisatory setting, in my opinion, are the most free--as they release their connection to their own musical ego and musical comfort zones. This is not to say that making these choices is very cut and dry for the musician--i.e., if one decides to stay within the comfort zone of musical experience of 'what usually works' it does not restrict the player to remain in that zone for the entirety of the improvisation. Again, I reiterate that a non-idiomatic musical improvisation has many choices involved for the participating musicians, in contrast to an idiomatic improviser working within a prescribed set of rules.

In the next section, I will relate my personal experiences to explain why I agree with Renee Coloumbe's idea of real-time, free improvisation/non-idiomatic improvisation. This is not to discount the copious amounts of writing done on the subject of free improvisation, nor to say that I think done by Bailey, and LeBaron, and others are not important, but the types of non-idiomatic musical improvisation scenarios that I have personally experienced are not normally written about, at least I have been unable to find many accounts of people writing about these types of situations. I feel it necessary for me to furnish the reader with some idea of where, in the broad spectrum non-idiomatic improvisation, its meaning exists for me.

While researching the subject, I came to discover that many writers acknowledge the emergence of the genre from two distinct schools of thought, so to speak. Many cite the musics of African American bebop and free jazz--the work of Dizzie Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis; and the Euro-American and European avant garde--the intuitive work of Karlheinz Stockhausen, the indeterminacy of Cage and Tudor, and the work of Pauline Oliverios as major contributors and pioneers in the field. I do not argue this. But how can I explain the fact that I have been a musical improviser when, in fact, I did not grow up listening to free jazz music, nor the indeterminate music of John Cage, nor the "intuitive" music of Stockhausen that so many contemporary researchers on improvisation write about? Rather, I listened to punk, new wave, heavy metal, and early hip hop and rap musics--anything in my sphere of existence that was different and more interesting than what was being played on the radio during the time starting from the early 1980s until today. My introduction to the more academically recognized musics mentioned above, only happened after I had already started my journey as a (primarily) self taught musician--I learned about many of the Euro-based musicians only very recently, during my studies at the music conservatory in Java, and here while at UCSC.

My own personal experience as a musician is based in the fact that I learn as I collaborate with other musicians from various musical backgrounds. Anne LeBaron notes that :

free improvisation has always been a journey into the unknown, a tool for unearthing profound discoveries, and a method for generating complex structures-- which can contain referential as well as non-referential sounds and phrases ... [and that] ... musicians with jazz, rock, or new music backgrounds have been drawn to free improvisation not only as a mechanism for discovery, but as an exercise to assist in the shedding of learned musical behavior (41,46).

According to Bailey,

much of the impetus toward free improvisation came from the questioning of musical language" (83), and as a result, nowadays, "the characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic--musical identity of the person or persons playing it (84).

Although I agree with LeBaron and Bailey wholeheartedly on these points, I would also like to introduce the idea that it was in this type of open environment where I gained most of my music making abilities. I did not come to improvisation directly as a practitioner of another genre of music. My main experience of music making was one of working within an open framework with musicians of varying skill levels, all of us unpressured to act within the framework of our previously learned musical behaviors, and experiences.

### *Non-Idiomatic Improvisation as "Learning to Play"*

I would like to continue the thread Bailey spins regarding improvisation as a sort of questioning of musical language by looking into the idea of improvisation as a form of self expression. According to Bailey, 'Historically, it [freely improvised music] pre-dates any other music--mankind's first musical performance couldn't have been anything other than a free improvisation,' (83). Japanese experimental pianist and improviser Yuko Fujiyama relates in an online interview found on [asianimprov.com](http://asianimprov.com) that although she is a classically and jazz trained pianist, she did not seem to truly understand what her acquired skills really meant to her on a personal level. Here is her own account of her introduction to the world of free improvisation:

I have a classical music background and also studied jazz, but I couldn't find my place in both music[s]. I thought I didn't have any talent for playing piano. I sold my piano and came to New York City in 1980. One morning, I was waiting for the superintendent at the entrance of his building in East Village with other people to show us an apartment for rent. Suddenly I heard the strong piano music coming out from the ground floor room through the opened door. It knocked me down(sic). I forgot about the apartment and was drawn into that music. Then the resident came out and invited me to come inside. He was Jerome Cooper, a drummer who was a member of Cecil Taylor's Unit and the music I heard was a tape recording of this group. He played me more tapes of various musicians, such as Steve Lacy, Sherry Hirsh, Art Ensemble of Chicago, etc. Until that day I didn't know anything about this creative improvised music. Later, I listened to all these musicians performing live. Their music taught me "It's OK that I'm not a classical or jazz pianist. If I want to express myself, I just need to look for it inside of myself. That had a strong persuasive power on me, so I began to try out find my own expression on my piano (Fujiyama, 2000).

I continue my explanation of idiomatic improvisation with an account of how I actually started playing music as part of the electro-acoustic music group, Planet Six. Before joining the group, I had no musical training other than that in elementary school music ensemble and high school chorus. As a grade school student, I received flute lessons for three years, and there I was taught flute technique and basic fingering, the skill of reading musical notation, and a basic repertoire, both at school and later in private lessons. Due to a hand injury, I stopped my lessons and did not return to the flute until some fourteen years later, while riding in a van for nine days on my first cross-country road trip. What I found on that first attempt to reacquaint myself with the instrument was that although my ability to read musical notation and the names for the notes according to my finger positioning had left my memory, however, my fingers quickly and easily remembered their correct places on the instrument, and within about an hour of intense focus, I realised that I still actually remembered all the different combinations of fingering positions. I was very excited by this, and continued to practice on a daily basis, eventually reaching the point in my playing to feel comfortable enough to play non-rehearsed flute parts on many of Planet Six's electronic music recordings, as well as perform in using the instrument in live performance situations.

Around that same time, after the group I had been travelling with had secured our San Francisco live/work loft, I also started teaching myself how to play analog synthesiser, as I had access to a Sequential Circuits Pro-One. This instrument was rather an interesting challenge to learn, as I had no formal piano or keyboard training. The Pro-One's 27 knobs and 24 switches, and two modulation/pitch bend wheels although fully labelled, were at first sight and for some time after, a complete mystery to me. The only thing I could do to remedy the situation was to turn the machine on, plug it into an amplifier and speakers and experiment with the different combinations of knob twists, switch positions, and key depressions. Eventually, after about three months, I came to understand the meanings of the somewhat cryptic labelings on the machine's control panel. Through what I like to think of as a mad-scientist-in-her-laboratory's style of improvisation--twisting and flipping the knobs and switches in random patterns and listening to the results over the course of an extended learning period--I eventually came to understand what to expect when I turned one of the two oscillators on the machine's frequency knobs up, while its

resonance knob was turned down and the rest of the switches and knobs associated with that sound's wave shape were individually adjusted. I later began to play this instrument along with the flute during many a Planet Six show. Effectively, I was playing the Pro- One by ear, as I still never managed to learn how to play the keyboard part of the machine like a keyboard player. I would simply play harmonies with whatever sound wave I could conjure up on the machine during a live performance. Nothing was ever scripted during a Planet Six show. We had no set songs, per se, we just played live. I argue that my musical exploration on the Pro-One is a valid form of non-idiomatic improvisation, as I was not a keyboard player nor an analog synthesiser player when I began, and I did not use any reference materials during my learning period. I had no teacher to learn from, and I later found out from a friend familiar with electronics that there was some sort of electrical short in the synth, allowing it to work only after it had been turned on and warmed up for a while! My experience was quite the opposite of the one Fujiyama expressed to describe her journey toward finding her musical 'self' through the unlearning of her classical training. However, I believe that both approaches to learning how to play music are inherently connected with the ideas of freedom exercised in a non-idiomatic improvisation.

### *Early Electronic Dance Music as Non-Idiomatic Improvisation*

In the early 1990s, instrumental electronic dance music was only beginning to gain the momentum as a "popular" music it enjoys today. My musician friends and I were all learning together how to express ourselves musically using electronic instruments. I speak specifically from the perspective of an electronic musician who was lucky enough to begin her electronically-based musical life at a time before the genre had any type of idiom, commercial formula for success, or 'rules'. In effect, the musicians working at this time were shaping the music as a genre. In the early nineties, there were not the hundred or so different permutations of electronica, or electronically generated dance music, as the genre possesses today. At that time, the main subdivisions of electronic music were: hip hop and rap, which primarily used an electronic soundtrack at the base of a vocal rap; electronic new wave, influenced primarily by the bands Kraftwerk and Caberet Voltaire; house music and techno originating from Chicago and Detroit; some early reggae dancehall music by artists such as Mixman, and King Jammy; and of course, disco which had gained its popularity as a genre in the seventies. These musics each had their distinct audiences, without much crossover between the genres. What we were doing back then was sampling aspects of all of these different types of music, and any other type of music we wanted to experiment with. We then created something different through the use of these samples (sourced from various media such as: second hand records of any genre, our voices, live instruments, and other sounds we found interesting), playing them combined with electronic instruments we found in pawn shops, mixed with the above mentioned records played on a turntable, and acoustic instruments such as the flute, guitars and the human voice--recording everything live onto DAT (digital audio tape). At times, I remember revelling in the fact that there were so few other people doing what we were doing, and that it seemed that anything was possible. It was because of that particular music's lack of popularity and the concurrent emergence of the techniques we used to create music at the time that we felt so free. In my eyes, what we were doing at that point in time was using non-idiomatic improvisation to create early electronica.

The act of non-idiomatic improvisation for me, as a Dj and an electronic musician, however, has always been a nexus of interrelations between musical genres. Playing other musicians' music is oftentimes the core role of a Dj, and where the power of sampling lies. According to Paul Miller, aka Dj Spooky that Subliminal Kid, "Djing lets you take the best of what's out there and give your own take on it" (17). The role of a Dj can be considered that of an aural collage artist, and actually can be considered to date back to the era of the surrealists and musique concrete.

While these techniques existed in isolated examples of music before and after surrealism's peak, they blossomed into full-blown developments only with the advent of postmodernism. Technological tools used to record and process music, along with a more open and pluralistic musical landscape, provided an environment for such surrealist techniques to flourish when placed at the disposal of composers [and Djs] ... Surrealist-related elements of displacement, of radical meshings, of intentions recorded instantaneously--reflected the revolutionary effect that recording technology brought to music (LeBaron 2002: 33).

The advent of affordable music sampling technologies, paired with the amazing collections of second hand records available to musicians living in larger urban areas definitely fostered the growth and development of this type of music as never before. At that time, there was no prescribed idiom for the music created by the use of these tools. This absolutely was the largest factor for the inherent freedom we felt in making electronic music. In my personal experience at that time, there was barely an audience, let alone an audience with expectations.

As electronic dance music grew more popular as a genre, the audience size increased, and expectations did start to develop. My musical partner in the project, Aaron Winett became increasingly concerned with formulating music that was 'Dj friendly'--meaning easily mixed together with other electronic musics being produced at the time. What this inevitably meant was that our music started sounding like other musics being made during the same time. As time went on, the events we would organize--originally, to showcase our own unique style of music--slowly began to develop a format, based on what was observed by other members of the event organizing collective as 'peak dance floor hours'--a projected high point of dancing going on on the main dance floor area. Because of this, music that was specifically composed to keep a dance floor moving was usually given the peak hours of the party. This type of music was more formulaic, and 'Dj friendly' as most of it was centered around a 4/4 rhythm structure.

As a result, Aaron and I began to grow apart musically, as it was my continued interest to keep experimenting with the musical possibilities offered outside of the realm of the more popularly accepted electronic musics. In the beginning, electronic dance music as a genre was quite varied. Interesting combinations of sounds and rhythms were combined in the spirit probably similar to the spirit Bailey describes earlier in this paper when the first music was made by humans. However, as time marched on, just like all other musics have taken on their own idiomatic characteristics, electronic dance music, driven by the genesis of its audience, and the expectations associated with the genre also became more formulaic and structured. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the audience was also not used to dancing to the more free form types of electronic musics produced in those days. Current electronic dance music has once again taken a turn toward the more experimental-- once again, musicians are experimenting with time signatures not centered around the basic 4/4 dance floor crowd-pleasing structure as evidenced with the many permutations that have since developed during the genre's more formative years, such as the electronic music genres of ambient jungle, drum and bass, and dub step, to name a few.

### *The Liquid Concrete Air Band : Pushing the Envelope into Noise*

In closing this section on non-idiomatic improvisation, I will contrast the differing views of a number of my musical co-collaborators on the subject of improvisation against the backdrop of the scenario created in an instance of the Liquid Concrete Air Band. I do this to illustrate the varying attitudes that exist with regard to the practice of free- improvisation today. The above two sections specifically dealt with improvisation as a learning process, and as a process in the development of a musical genre. Now, I turn to describing non-idiomatic improvisation as experienced in a large, anarchic improvisation group called the Liquid Concrete Air Band.

This final example of non-idiomatic improvisation comes from both my own personal experience with the Liquid Concrete Air Band in 1993, and an account of a participant in the 2007 iteration. The LCAB is a very loosely organized non-idiomatic improvisation musical group that is open to anyone that hears about the show and shows up to play. According to the announcement for the 2007 LCAB found on the Semi Permanent Autonomous Zone (SPAZ) collective's website:

The Liquid Concrete Air Band is an interactive audio visual noise orchestra. Anyone in attendance at one of its rare and improvisational performances is a member of the group. Participants are encouraged to set up interactive installations for group experimentation. The first LCAB event was in 1993 and included many of the S.P.A.Z. founders. There have been seven shows since then, including events on Leap Year Day in 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2007, with the 9th performance scheduled for Leap Year Day, February 29th, 2008.

I participated in the first two of the LCAB's seven performances--in 1993, and again in 1996. Terbo Ted, the organizer and conductor of the event had invited all of his friends to participate and encouraged everyone to bring whatever instruments they wanted to play. Below, I will describe the 1993 event that was held at the Peacock Lounge, a bar in San Francisco's Lower Haight Street neighborhood.

The improvisation began at six in the evening, and was set to end at midnight, when the Peacock Lounge closed its doors for the evening. Most participants of that year's event brought musical instruments, but I distinctly remember a couple of people playing around with a slide projector, walking around and pointing its projections at different areas of the room. Musicians were instructed to arrive early in order to set up their improvisation space. In all, I remember about fifteen different groups of people set up on the lounge's small cocktail tables positioned along the walls and on the dance floor of the main room. I was set up with my Pro-One at a small table quite near the front door of the bar, with Aaron from Planet Six, and a Dj friend of ours named Topher. Topher had brought a turntable with him, and was mixing in samples from records, and Aaron was playing his Roland 303 bass tone generator. All the instruments we brought were fed into a mixer and sent out to an amp that was driving our own small, 500 watt sound system. Our friend Marcus Hawkins was playing violin and flute, wandering around between the different groups of people adding his sounds to their mix. According to Anne LeBaron,

Free improvisation in large groups can be an exhilarating experience for both performing and listening participants. However, these larger groups often benefit from an imposed structure or direction. Initiating a group improvisation with a verbal or visual image, thereby triggering the collective illumination of the image (46).

Most of the people in the bar that evening were members of LCAB. Every once in a while, a few passers-by would wander in, take a look around at the various set ups scattered around the room, and then leave. Terbo Ted was also walking around and acting as the group's conductor--by giving out small, fortune cookie sized typewritten instructions to every group of musicians. I don't remember exactly what our group's little slip of paper instructed us to do, but do remember it asking us to emit our sound in a certain way that evoked whatever it was written on that little paper. I also remember Ted walking around at a certain point telling us all to play really softly.

At points, there was a feeling of true cacophony in the space and the improvisation seemed to be totally chaotic, even with Ted going around with his instructions. There also was this guy there--I'm not sure if he was there to play music or if he was just some random fellow who wandered in off the street-- who was so into everything that was going on around him that he started trying to climb up the wall in front of us. He was literally hanging off the decorative moldings on the wall. That was actually quite strange.

Although the experience was quite invigorating, I did not really feel that any real group improvisation was happening. Everyone was pretty much focused on what their small group was doing, but there didn't seem to be much aural cross pollination going on, except for the people walking around with the slide projector, and Markus Hawkins wandering around with his acoustic instruments. Overall, it turned out that the event was centered around the group building a wall of sound together-- and in order to really experience it fully and completely, one had to leave their personal music-making station and walk around to other stations. This embodied and mobile way of experiencing the event turned the space from a seemingly pointless escalation of competing sounds into an interactive sound sculpture. The composite sound mixtures in each area of the room was completely unique from one space to the next, and could only be effectively experienced by the participants circumambulating the entire space.

Djynnx Ogo, musician and improviser with whom I am currently working together with on an album of improvised electronic music, was a participant in the more recent 2007 Liquid Concrete Air Band. Djynnx told me of his experience at this year's event, held at Oakland's Otherworld warehouse:

I showed up, set up a drum kit and some extra floor toms, grabbed some earplugs from the table ([where there were] copious amounts of earplugs, tape, flashlights,[and] extension cords). Then started playing. There were several percussionists at that point and not so many noise-makers, so the drummers around the room could hear each other somewhat. For about 20 minutes there was some semblance of rhythmic cohesion. then, as more and more people showed up, and volume levels rose, the structure turned in on itself, creating small pockets of actual "playing with each other" scattered about the large room. No one could really hear anything that wasn't at maximum volume within 10 or 15 feet...so there were actually several different jams going on. At a certain point (within the first 2 hours) the act of "playing together" at all became wholly futile, and it became more about catharsis through exhaustion. There was a large central gong/bell in the center of the room. Also some incredibly loud sirens that occasionally pierced through the noise wall. Visually there were many projections and video screens playing a variety of outlandish and offensive material. By the third or fourth hour, the room became (and stayed) filled with smoke from fog machines. There were colored lights throughout the room, and huge fans that created whirlwind-type effects in the fog. The overall effect was like being in some kind of acid-test hell dimension, where the party never ends (Djynnx Ogo, 2007).

Djynnx described quite a chaotic scenario and also told me that at this year's event there was no attempt by Terbo Ted to guide the improvisation. This was probably the freest type of improvisation imaginable--chaotic as it

was described-- with the players going at things so incredibly hard that the idea of the emergence of a single group effort is nearly impossible, and probably not even an issue within the group. I imagine that it was a complete free for all, and the video clips available on the internet's *YouTube* are pretty intense (3). It was quite interesting that Nx said that even in the atmosphere of complete freedom to do whatever one wanted in the situation, people tended to form smaller improvisatory groups, rather than attempting to coordinate a larger all-inclusive improvisation. The musicians of the LCAB felt comfortable enough in the space of improvisation to express absolute musical freedom, however, they resorted to sticking in smaller, more manageable groups, and as a result, they gave up their concern for the overall musical results in the larger sense.

This type of improvisation also speaks to Rene Coloumbe's concept of improvisation that offers the musician absolute freedom, and also addresses some points brought up earlier in this paper in interviews held with both Yasudah and Rene Lysloff. Yasudah probably would have felt frustration in the LCAB scenario, as he expressed earlier that,

When all musicians compete in making themselves heard, I get very frustrated. A good improvisation should be a dialogue between the players...The musicians trying to create a musical piece together all stepping back in order to serve the composition that emerges (Yasudah 2007).

Ogo's observation, that, "At a certain point (within the first 2 hours) the act of "playing together" at all became wholly futile, and it became more about catharsis through exhaustion," (Ogo 2007), indicates to me that the type of improvisation involved in a LCAB gathering is not one centered around an inherent need for and overall musical structure, nor for a dialogue to develop, but rather one based more in a noise music aesthetic. According to Wikipedia,

Noise music is music that uses sounds regarded as unpleasant or painful under normal circumstances. "Noise" music is regarded by some as a contradiction in terms, because "noise" is generally defined as unwanted and undesigned or unintentional sound and music as the opposite ... However, "noise" in a more general sense refers to any extremely loud or discordant sound, and that these sounds are often the basis of noise music (2007).

The whole point of making noise music is to create sonic textures--often referred to as walls of sonic material. This inherently questions the idea of whether these textures fit into the category of being 'music' at all. For our purposes, however, I will refer to noise as a type of music, and although this type of music contrasts sharply with the other more organized musical structures previously discussed, its inclusion in this paper is meant to expand the reader's idea of the range of sonic materials that can be considered as non-idiomatically improvised 'music'.

Rene Lysloff, Director of the UC Riverside Gamelan Ensemble and member of the Gamelan Plesetan project attributes his background in improvising as based in the blues idiom of his college days, learning in terms of constraints set out by the blues idiom: those of variations on harmony, rhythm, and scale. Lysloff's background in improvisation, then, explains his inert need to experience some sort of musical direction in which to direct his improvisatory efforts. Lysloff has admitted in an interview that he sees improvisation without direction as somewhat nihilistic. As a result of his need for musical structure, even in freely improvising music, I feel that Lysloff probably would not have enjoyed the experience of playing with the LCAB, seeing it as tending too far toward the nihilistic side of the spectrum.

## **Gamelan Plestan in the Context of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation**

In the following section, I turn to examine three iterations of the Gamelan Plesetan project--analysing where they fit into the broad spectrum of idiomatic and non-idiomatic improvisational performance. I begin my analysis with a general description of the music created during performance, and then give an account of group's performances at the *2005 Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival*, at *Blink: the UCSC Digital Art and New Media Festival*, and finally at my MFA Thesis performance at the *UCSC Spring Electronic Music Concert*. I see these events as turning points for the project in its evolution from a strictly aural improvisation to one that includes aspects of visual enhancement aided by the introduction of a gamelan/computer visual interface.

A Gamelan Plesetan performance combines aspects of live gamelan playing, electronic music, and multimedia visualization. One of the most interesting aspects--in both an ethnomusicological sense and in an "new" musical sense--of the music created by Gamelan Plesetan is the fact that many different styles of music are

incorporated together to form a completely new, syncretic style of music. An example of a scenario that Gamelan Plesetan usually works in can be described as the following: Rene Lysloff sets a basic cyclical pattern--usually consisting of a sampled and looped gong with a very long cycle between repetitions, generated by his laptop. Next, he adds layers of sampled gamelan harmonics, synthesizers, and vocal samples, also looped, explaining in an interview that the "Cyclical use of the gong and the punctuating instruments creates an organic direction..and gives the musicians a structured progression and a direction to the music" (Lysloff, 2007). Although himself an accomplished electronic musician in his own right, Sapto Raharjo plays Central Javanese gamelan instruments such as *khendang* (Javanese drums), gongs, *kempul*, *gender* keys, and *saron*. Sapto's choice of using gamelan instruments during a Gamelan Plesetan performance is based on "what sounds are different from the rest [that are being made]...I can play all of the [electronic] instruments the [just the] same [as no.e and Rene], so I want to add complementary sounds, harmonisation, gender, voice, live acoustic instruments...and the most important thing, the *khendang*" (Sapto, 2007). Sapto usually places two to three gongs and *kempul* around him on the floor of the performance area, playing them with his hands. Another technique he uses is to "play the *gender* non-traditionally, not classically... killing conventional rules," (Sapto, 2007) by taking the *gender* keys off of their resonating chambers, placing them on the floor, but playing them with the usual *gender* mallets. During our interview, Sapto told me that it is hard for him to give a name to what he does during a performance. When he plays, he explained, "there is no thinking, no reacting, no following...it seems like I come into a specific life...a very different life...[it's] not like what I do every day," (Sapto 2007).

The musical elements I contribute to Gamelan Plesetan's sonic mixture run the gamut from short, sampled sound files I have clipped from live recordings I have made of entire gamelan orchestras playing musical compositions; to samples of individual gamelan instruments from varying regions in Indonesia and beyond (i.e., Indian *tabla*, Tibetan whistling, and Japanese *bima*, to name a few). I also have included sound scape recordings of the evening call and response of frogs in Indonesian rice fields and the daily call to prayer at various Indonesian mosques. I loop all of these sonic materials to form a new, interesting poly-rhythmic patterns. I also play patterns I have pre-programmed on my drum machine, often switching between these and playing the individual drum machine sounds as a live instrument in its own right, jamming along with Sapto's live drumming on the *khendang*. The resulting music is that of a real-time sound collage comprised of layers of live, non-idiomatic electro-acoustic gamelan improvisation and sound scape recording with an underlying computer-generated structure that is framed by a very long gong cycle. At points, the gong cycle is so long that it is not a particularly noticeable aspect of the structure for a non-gamelan player. All of these sonic materials-- Sapto's microphone-amplified gamelan improvisation in particular--is finally processed through digital effects running on Lysloff's computer laptop, further deepening and extending the polyphony.

According to Lysloff, the music of Gamelan Plesetan always tries to find an equilibrium between traditional sounds and those produced electronically. Rene likes to refer to the type of improvisation that goes on during and enactment of Gamelan Plesetan as one that is

structured, but more open. Usually, when I play I have a lot of presets working [on the computer], and I am approaching our gigs from a compositional point of view ... It is cyclical ... but we are not constrained by harmony--we use drones, dissonance, and consonant sounds ... we don't follow traditional harmony. It is more like sound collage, sound scape, the combination of tones and chords. no.e samples events-- other gamelan performances [ones she has recorded live and others are prerecorded], speech ... recycled and recontextualized materials that add an ambience and texture to what we do. In this sense, it is much more like free improvisation--we use palettes of sounds, a thick fabric of sonic materials (Lysloff 2007).

The improvisation that occurs during a Gamelan Plesetan performance, according to Sapto Raharjo, is one that deals with the co-collaborators existing in a constant state of flux. In an interview, Sapto explains that this is the members of the group

searching for structure... Gamelan Plesetan has lots of unknowns ... [often] killing conventional rules ... it is a constant process ... if we make ten performances, the result is ten new compositions, the feeling is the same however ... we must make a dialog, but there is more--a bargaining between the musicians. Without bargaining... there is no smoothness ... we listen to each other and react, smoothing the sound structure. We are dependent on one another ... there are many possibilities--*multi-kemungkinan* ... there are many conditions--*sangat tergantung* ... and the individual perceptions of each player are different ... so, [we are] autonomous but united (Sapto 2007).

Sapto says that he tries to let go of all idiom when playing his usual chosen instruments of *khendang*, *gender* keys, and various gongs and *kempul* during an enactment of Gamelan Plesetan. He explains, "There is a lot of

improvisation in gamelan around the *balungan* [basic song structure] ... [in Gamelan Plesetan] I free myself from idiom ... but in order to free oneself, you must know how to play music!" (Sapto, 2007). During our interview, Sapto told me that it is hard for him to give a name to what he does during a performance. When he plays, "there is no thinking, no reacting, no following ... it seems like I come into a specific life ... a very different life ... [it's] not like what I do every day," (Sapto 2007). While the trio perform in concert, the elements of live electro-acoustic gamelan improvisation and computer programming are combined in Gamelan Plesetan's musical explorations to form a musical new media. The computers, sequencer, and sampler arrange and store many samples and information regarding structure of the music, while the group's inherently non-linear live non-idiomatic composition technique constantly affects the final outcome of the performance, resulting in a collage-like soundscape environment that fades between cultures; between the past and present; introducing the listening audience to traditions somewhat familiar, yet new; local yet foreign; and all together comfortable yet uncomfortable. When asked to describe the type of music created by Gamelan Plesetan in an interview, Sapto replied that "the music doesn't have a definition yet, and [I feel that] this is a symptom of a lot of contemporary music today"(Sapto, 2007). For me, however, the music could best be described, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, as a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of global musical culture (Barthes 1977: 146).

### *Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival 2005: There is Nothing to See*

Gamelan Plesetan had its second performance in 2005 at the 10th annual Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival. That year, Lysloff and I were not joined by Sapto Raharjo on acoustic gamelan instruments. This resulted in an absence of the use of actual, physical gamelan instruments as part of our performance. This absence in and of itself was very outside the usual idiom of what is expected in a typical gamelan performance. The inherent idea of a 'gamelan music performance' usually denotes the use of some physical gamelan instruments, however, Rene and I decided to experiment with the idea of mixing the different idioms of an electronic music performance and a gamelan music performance by using only samples of gamelan sounds. Without the inclusion of actual live gamelan instrumentation, I argue that we were breaking the idiom of a contemporary gamelan music performance--and stretching the audience's perception of a contemporary gamelan composition--by working mainly from the electronic music side of the improvisational performance spectrum.

The event that spurred this radical departure from incorporating the usual spectacle associated with a gamelan performance at the YGF was the fact that Rene had just returned to Yogyakarta from the United States where he had recently seen a show of the English electronic music group, Autechre(27). Rene wanted to shape our performance based on what he experienced at the Autechre show. Rene explained,

What I liked about the concert was the focus on music. Everyone there was a serious Autechre fan and they were at the concert to listen to music. All we [the audience] could see on stage were the various LED and status lights of the equipment, sometimes the dark shapes of the musicians as they hunched over their computer displays (I suppose if I had been closer I would have seen more than obscure figures). In any case, the visual absence of the artists put the emphasis on their aural presence. It was very intense ... listening to Autechre there was an intense and enjoyable experience. I just sat on the floor, my eyes on a dark stage, but my mind wandering as amazing electronic music washed over me (Lysloff, 2007).

It was very strange explaining to the stage crew that Gamelan Plesetan didn't want to appear on the stage during our performance. Everyone kept asking us if we were serious. Nevertheless, our electronic music gear was set up off in the wings of the stage, and the stage lighting was set to black. Nothing was visible--only what could be imagined while listening to the music that emanated from the huge sound system. Lysloff later explained, "I was aiming for a reflexive experience--getting the audience to think about the theme of my composition (a rather heavy handed attempt to protest the war in Iraq), focusing on sounds rather than watching some people on a stage," (Lysloff, 2007). The visual spectacle and reminders of the traditional context that the presence of gamelan instruments and a live orchestra of gamelan players represent all comprise the usual idiom of a contemporary gamelan performance.

For this Gamelan Plesetan performance, it was Rene's wish for the listener to journey inward-- to react with the juxtapositions that Gamelan Plesetan's musical collage conjured up within their own personal set of perceptions of the music being played. In this performance, I mixed samples of many different regional styles of gamelan

music together, and layered them with familiar, everyday sounds associated as a part of living in the busy city of Yogyakarta--the call to prayer of a mosque; the sound of frogs in the rice fields. The collage was further enhanced with Rene's added layers of electronic gamelan gong cycle structure along with his "heavy handed attempt to protest the war in Iraq"--referring to his use of anti-war speeches into the fabric of the music.

It was difficult to imagine each individual audience member's personal reaction on the private, subconscious level... what associations would be brought to mind in the case of each unique individual? Of course, Rene and I would have no idea what exactly this could have meant for an average Indonesian gamelan enthusiast-- never having had the personal experience as living as an Indonesian in the gamelan cultures we were (and still are) studying. Perhaps the unique mixtures of musical genres, sound scapes, and even the individual, electronically generated sounds themselves found in Gamelan Plesetan's music created a link between previously unrelated associations for an individual, thereby causing a reaction--be it a positive one, or a feeling of unsettled discomfort-- due to the newness of the musical associations introduced. Unarguably, the experimental gamelan collage usually produced by the Gamelan Plesetan is a chaotic form where different styles of traditional gamelan music and electronic ambience are mixed into states of multiple intensities through the use of non-linear compositional techniques. But we may never know what the audience reaction really was.

The point that Lysloff was attempting to prove to our audience, on the darkened stage at the 2005 YGF, however, not only forced the issue that there is nothing to watch during a standard electronic music performance, but the act also was an attempt to open the audience's understanding of the range of possibilities for what contemporary gamelan music can become with the use of electronic instruments. The mere lack of something-- anything at all--to look at during the performance actually removed the musical performance from its usual aspects of visual spectacle and its relationship to a gamelan music 'performance' at all. Given Gamelan Plesetan's stark visual contrast with the rest of the gamelan performances before and after it during the course of that evening's events, Lysloff admits, "I don't think it [our idea of performing offstage] was all that successful [at YGF that year], although I still believe the idea is worth exploring in the future" (Lysloff, 2007).

This iteration of the project was an experiment in introducing a non-idiomatic gamelan improvisation to the audience. We were playing gamelan music, as the samples we generated primarily had their basis in gamelan music, and we were working within Rene's long gong cycles--similar to a idiomatic gamelan composition. The concert itself was also played within the context of a contemporary gamelan performance. However, I argue that this is a non-idiomatic improvisational performance of gamelan, as we were not using the physical gamelan instruments during the performance, nor employing the usual spectacle associated with a typical 'gamelan music performance'. Rather, we exercised a performance technique commonly practiced within the idiomatic boundaries of an electronic music performance. Like Rene, I too felt the audience's experience during our performance was less than optimal. Although Rene and I have often had the experience of watching the sparse visual aesthetic of an electronic music concert in the West, I knew there was a huge chance that the Indonesian audience would not immediately react in the way Rene intended, and in fact, perhaps not pay attention to our music at all, without the usual visual cues associated with performance. Rather, there was the distinct possibility that they begin to chat with other members of the audience, or to even check and send text messages to those outside the venue! As a result of our shared dissatisfaction, I decided to take an active role in the development of our visual performance.

### *The UCSC BLINK/DANM Festival 2006: Playing in a Ring of Redwoods*

After the somewhat unsuccessful performance experiment at the 2005 YGF, I began to think about ways to engage the audience visually during a Gamelan Plesetan performance. It was my desire to keep our audience visually engaged as well as impart a social message, echoing Lysloff's desire to convey important social messages through the medium of our performance. The following September, I began my graduate studies in Digital Art and New Media at UCSC. By my second quarter in DANM, I began working with Peter Elsea who taught me how to manipulate video using MAX/MSP/Jitter. By Spring quarter, I was ready to experiment and develop the visual aspect of a Gamelan Plesetan performance for *BLINK*: UCSC's first Digital Art and New Media

Festival. I developed a concept for an improvisational process performance piece at Porter college, in a ring of redwoods very near the Porter quad. Luckily, Sapto was living in California at the time, acting as visiting director of the UC Riverside Gamelan Ensemble, so both he and Rene could come up to Santa Cruz and collaborate. For this event, I wanted to take our performance out of its usual stage setting, and place it in a more relaxing environment --outdoors in the forest. I saw this as an interesting setting for an electronic musical improvisation, especially since I have previous experience playing music at free, outdoor electronic music festivals held in similar locations.

I set up the musical instruments on and around the base of a very large, truncated redwood that was the perfect size to use as a table for the electronic equipment and set up the gamelan instruments and microphone on the ground at the tree's base. We used the natural enclosure of the ring of trees as our installation space, placing four speakers at key points in the circle, to create a feeling of 'surround sound'. I also wrapped the base of a large group of trees directly opposite from our playing area in eleven yards of five foot wide white cloth. The purpose of this was to reference the cloth-wrapped holy trees frequently found in Bali, as well as to provide a large video projection area. I wanted to bring even more attention to the fact that we were playing surrounded by trees by projecting on them. I mixed video of the live event with processed video of people in the audience drawing on a white sheet of paper at an interactive drawing/video station set up inside the installation. This aspect of the performance was open to anyone in the audience who wanted to join in with the experience. I also rigged up a microphone to trigger additional video effects as Sapto played khendang and his dismounted *gender* keys. The sound of the music drew a good amount of people, who were not expecting to hear an electronic music performance in the usually empty ring of redwood trees at Porter College, and we played music for about two hours--until it got too dark and cold to stay there anymore.

Unfortunately, the visuals did not come off as planned, as the projector I was using was not bright enough in the late afternoon sun that filtered in between the redwood tree branches. Luckily, we could still watch the video from the large computer monitor that was set up in the performance area. I also feel that the audience interactive drawing station could have been more effective, as it was not totally clear to all members of the audience that the station was open for all to use. The drawing station was located next to me on a small table. This probably could have been remedied with the station being located in its own, separate area away from the musicians, as most people probably felt uncomfortable approaching us directly as we were playing music. I too, felt that the drawing table's proximity to the musicians was a bit distracting for me, as I frequently stopped playing music in order to encourage whomever ventured close enough to the table to experiment.

Technical difficulties aside, I feel that the event was quite successful--I learned volumes about the value of using a high lumen video projector in the situation, and gained valuable experience in facilitating audience participation during performance. I also really enjoyed the element of surprise involved for most of the audience--some people wandered in and out periodically the entire time we were playing, and at one point, there were a group of children running around between the trees. The voices of the children were picked up by the microphone and added to our mix, adding a pleasantly unplanned element to our audio recording of the music that was played that afternoon.

This iteration of the project involved many unknowns prior to the actual day of the event. The fact that this was the first time I ever experimented with an interactive visual element in a real-time musical performance was equivalent to me playing a new instrument for the first time in front of an audience. As I had never combined the act of playing live music with controlling the visual aspect of a performance simultaneously, I only had my imagination to visualize what the event could actually be like, as at the time of writing, the UCSC DANM program had no facilities for rehearsing this type of event beforehand.

The other members of Gamelan Plestan--Sapto especially, since he had never previously seen a redwood tree-- really enjoyed the unique experience of playing music in the outdoor environment. Rene also had never performed electronic music in an outdoor setting. Sapto's reaction to our improvised performance installation in the Porter redwoods was that of an entirely new experience for him:

It was not like what I do every day. Play[ing] between the tall trees at UCSC was a [very] different life [than my usual playing environment]--a new experience...*rangsangan*...a stimulating experience ... one that makes me question myself, 'What should I do now [here between these trees]?' Then I answer my own question by making a sound (Sapto 2007).

Because of the unique combination of these factors, along with the fact that the piece was framed as one

part of a larger gallery exhibition, there was less pressure for the group to conform to the regular demands of an onstage performance. We felt the freedom to approach our participation in the festival event as more of a process based piece as opposed to a 'performance' per se. The audience was also not pressured to attentively sit in one place to watch the 'show', but rather, they were free to wander about the performance area. They were free to engage with the interactive visuals, and/or to sit in the large space of trees where most of the speakers were located--just listening and enjoying the environment. Most people chose to watch us playing for a while, and then leave to check out the other parts of the exhibition, but others also felt free enough to stay and dance in the area by the cloth wrapped trees, and some stayed to experiment with the interactive visual aspect of the piece.

In retrospect, I see this process-based piece as an exercise in non-idiomatic improvisation, that could fall along the lines of what I felt Planet Six was doing during the formative years of electronic dance music, before Aaron and I went our separate musical ways--especially in terms of the overall concept of the piece, as there were completely no pre-rehearsed music-making or video elements of the actual two-hour improvisation. Of course, the very nature of working with electronic elements such as computer-controlled visuals and sample-based music depends on pre-programmed aspects-- i.e., the video patches, pre-sampled sounds, pre-programmed synthesiser files, and pre-recorded electronic drum patterns. However, the actual end use and end result of these pre-programmed elements as a means of individual creative expression were not pre-determined at all during the entire two hour duration of the performance, therefore still qualifying the event as an act of non-idiomatic improvisation.

### *UCSC 2007 Spring Electronic Music Concert*

In this last section, I will examine the ninth iteration of Gamelan Plesetan as part of the *2007 Spring Electronic Music Concert* and as part of my Digital Art and New Media MFA Thesis work. The electronic music show was a dream concert, as far as concerts are concerned. The Recital Hall was a beautiful venue, and the group enjoyed the luxury of having the immense talent of Peter Elsea as our sound engineer on the day of the performance.

For this show, the visuals began to take on a life of their own, as earlier that year I started to experiment with gamelan controlled visual projections using an interface called the Gamelan Lumina, developed at UCSC by Peter Elsea and Darryl Ferrucci. I incorporated use of the Lumina with a video motion capture program I developed for another improvisation at the July 2006 Yogyakarta Gamelan Festival. In the UCSC show, two opaque digital video images are layered and the body's movements act as a video mixer between the two sources--uncovering the layer of video behind the foremost one. The addition of the Lumina (programmed in MAX/MSP/Jitter), enabled traditional gamelan instruments--the gong and saron--to switch and distort the projected images when the instruments were played. The two layers of visual materials I used are: a) digital photographs of Californian natural landscapes taken by Indonesian surrealist painter, Anas Muzamil, mixed with those of Indonesian landscapes taken by myself, and b) digital photographs of computer e-waste I have taken myself in the Central Javanese village of Soboman (32), and other materials I have sourced online from Greenpeace.org and the web document *Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia* prepared by the The Basel Action Network (BAN) and the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition (SVTC) (33). I juxtaposed the natural textures with images of electronic waste generated by our society's growing dependence on technology and its commodification on a large projection screen located just above the players.

Using these images, I created an uncomfortable metaphor that addressed the dangers of this increasing environmental problem-- in an attempt to make self reflexive statement about the group's and humankind's responsibility toward greater consciousness regarding the development and disposal of our tools and technologies.

Our access to the Graduate Electronic Music Studio's video projector and an excellent sound system for the two days before our show was a definite boon, thus allowing Supto to experiment with using the Gamelan Lumina and the motion capture camera as performance tools, as he had never previously used the interface. We spent the two evenings before the performance in the studio getting familiar with the new interface, and also

working out a loose structure for the 20 minute time we were allotted in the event's program. In retrospect, I feel that the introduction of the gamelan/video interface was a real turning point for the group's improvisatory performance. In effect, my work at UCSC with Peter Elsea helped me to introduce a new improvisatory instrument for Sapto and myself to play during our performances--adding a new interactive multimedia based dimension to what we do as Gamelan Plesetan. Over the course of the group's four years of working together, our musical improvisations have evolved from what I first perceived as very open and free--where I felt that anything could happen--to one that became more based in the type of familiarity that is reached between musicians after a long period of playing together. This familiarity tends to give the music the group made together a certain sound--as the members use the same types of instruments, and can easily and quickly achieve a musical flow together. According to Bailey,

the longer you play in the same situation or group ... the less appropriate it becomes to describe the music as 'free' anything. It becomes, usually, very personalised, very closely identified with the player or group of players (115).

The introduction of the improvised multimedia aspect, in effect, breathed a new dimension into what can be done in a Gamelan Plesetan performance. Our performance evolved into one of multi-tasking in a way-- with one task centered in creating interesting music with its basis in something the group has developed over time, and the added task of creating a new visual dimension with the gamelan instruments paired with the computer. Sapto-- who usually plays the gamelan instruments during performance--and I--who 'played' the computer program running the visuals--were only just beginning our exploration of our new tools that I developed during my time here at UCSC for my MFA concert at the Recital Hall. By using the new interface while in a concert setting, Sapto and I can develop different ways to manipulate the visuals while at the same time also maintain our live musical dialogue. An added bonus of this is that since the visuals are now so closely related to the music made by the gamelan instruments, this may definitely affect the way Sapto plays music using the interface--further expanding our potential exploration in the music we make together.

## Conclusions

My personal experience of improvisation and music in general have taken me on quite a life's journey. I consider myself fortunate in the order of my experiencing the varying degrees of freedom involved in the spectrum of improvisation: the often frustrating freedom I found in teaching myself how to play electronic instruments without the involvement of a musical instructor--this freedom allowed me to approach learning about and playing music as a searching, experimental process--a sharp contrast with the experience of Yuko Fujiyama, the classically trained pianist who had to 'unlearn' her extensive training in order to feel comfortable playing her chosen instrument.

I later expanded my individual process of experimentation and musical searching to join others in the creation of music during a time of the genesis and development of a new genre of danceable electronic music. During the same time period, I was also extremely lucky to find myself experiencing the type of freedom found playing in the Liquid Concrete Air Band--where I was introduced to the idea of free improvisation in a large group scenario as an exercise in musical catharsis--blowing away any requirements for music to need to have one, constant, imposed structure in order to be classified/recognized as 'music' to me. Through my collaboration with others in the Liquid Concrete Air Band, my musical horizons were broadened to the point where I could question the inherent concepts behind the terms 'music' versus 'noise' and see the act of a seemingly nihilistic, non-idiomatic musical performance as an embodied, interactive sculptural experience of sound.

My musical journey next circled all the way to the opposite end of the improvisatory spectrum to find me working within the tightly knit idiom of Balinese gamelan-- with its definite need for musical structure in that there is practically no room for improvisation due to the intensity of interlocked musical patterns. That journey later reached somewhat of a middle ground within the spectrum as I developed a more classically grounded reference for improvising within an idiom. This helped me to understand the intricacies involved in the richly improvised but highly organized forms of music and performance used in Central Javanese *wayang kulit*; and also later helped me in my discovery of the freer range of personal musical choices that can be made within the idiom of

Sundanese gamelan.

I truly agree with the opinion of Professor Rene Coloumbe, whose concept of improvisation is about being centered in the present moment, while offering the musician the opportunity to be free enough to be confident in having the ability to make the right musical decisions, in any situation. My experience of the many shades of improvisation have helped me in my life to be better able to work in many different types of musical situations and with many different talented people. Improvisation is about communicating ideas with other people, taking a chance to step outside of the imposed structure of everyday music, and society in general. It is inherently about freedom-- be it exploring the possibilities for freedom found in aspects of the more controlled, idiomatic side of music, to the completely unleashed expression of the musical self in the heat of the moment in a situation presented by the Liquid Concrete Air Band. Free improvisation, in the end, is all about making personal choices, and about how comfortable one feels about sharing those choices with the rest of the world.

It is my belief that the dialogue of freely-improvised music, much like language, can bridge cultural gaps and enhance social balance, both locally and globally between artists and musicians from different communities within and outside of the gamelan diaspora. Music is itself a type of language that has been used through the ages to communicate ideas central to various cultures, be it through the use of the human voice to tell stories through song; or the use of rhythms that are particular to a certain region to signify certain aspects of ritual or to evoke a certain mood in the listeners; or the use of varying combinations of the two with added elements of melody and harmony. The technological tools used to record and process music, along with a more open and pluralistic musical landscape facilitated by today's mass-mediated vehicles of radio and internet have done much to foster the growth of increasingly overlapping levels of musical literacy worldwide. We are fortunate to live in a reality where "a musical community may be coterminous with the inhabitants of a particular locale, region, or larger sociocultural unit or it may be relatively widespread and therefore interleaved with members of other musical communities" (Brinner 29). This increasing sense of a shared musical literacy has contributed much to the development of diasporic music communities today--the international gamelan community included.

My personal experiences as a musician working within and across a small number of these diasporic communities has shown me how non-idiomatic improvisation can create an avenue for the communication of ideas and concepts both musically and socially, based in the shared subjectivity that occurs when musicians freely improvise without the tethers of idiom. It is a place where I have personally experienced how, "artist[s] amplif[y] a conception of beauty while transforming a perception of reality... not only as a mechanism for discovery, but as an exercise to assist in the shedding of learned musical behavior" ( LeBaron 38,41,46). It is a place composer Sapto Raharjo describes where, "there is no thinking, no reacting, no following ... it seems like I come into a specific life ... a very different life ... we must make a dialog, but there is more--a bargaining between the musicians ... we are autonomous but united..." (Sapto, 2007). It is also a place where the resulting 'unity' Sapto speaks of through the discovery of one's own autonomy during improvisation not only opens new inroads toward emergent forms of music borne out of the self-realized collaborative process that mediates musical evolution--it also serves to create something more than the sum of its parts and become part of a larger social dialogue. In this context, non-idiomatic improvisation--to paraphrase Fred Frith's observations about world music--can most definitely be "seen as a site on which new sorts of (hybrid) identity are being performed" and "a site on which new sorts of cultural theory could be developed, and new futures glimpsed" (210), while addressing the plurality of realities present in today's polyphonic cultural space.

#### Notes

- 1) Dj Spooky, also known as Paul Miler, is a Dj, electronic musician, and also the author of numerous articles and the Dj manifesto, *Rhythm Science*. His work focuses on Djing and electronic music's role in contemporary society.
- 2) I include more contemporary musics such as rock, electronic, and New Music forms as also belonging to their own specific "tradition" just the same as musics usually thought of as being "traditional" here, such as gamelan, the blues, and classical Western musics.
- 3) Video footage of Liquid Concrete Air Band's improvisation on April 1, 2007 at The Otherworld, Oakland can be found at: < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwWHtoQVufS>>; <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMkk\\_p8z8IE&mode=related&search=](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMkk_p8z8IE&mode=related&search=)>; <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oFlwU4wGIM&mode=related&search=>>.
- 4) Yasudah, is an Indonesian composer living and working in Surakarta, Central Java. Yasudah oftentimes uses

self-made instruments explained to me the major influences on his work: "The direction of the wind and the constellation of the stars. Plus my cultural background. Plus the European and American contemporary music I studied at Jakarta Institute of Arts. Gamelan and *wayang* are my musical and philosophical background in the sense of that I regularly listened and watched them since my early childhood. I am not a Karawitan musician though. At the age of 17 I started playing in a Rock-Pop Band guitar and vocals. During and after my studies experimenting with and exploring everything that can produce sound. In those years as a young composer I felt stressed by the ambition to create the music of the 21st century. After my spiritual initiation that stress dissolved and I felt free to experiment with whatever music I liked. Until now I have opened to all types of music and I discern between 5 contexts (pancakonteks): 1) just fun/ ceremonial; 2) *beato* context; 3) *mixo* context; 4) *exploro* context; 5) *cosmo* context. I feel free to move in and out of these five contexts" (Yasudah, Email Interview, May 15, 2007).

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