
BAMBOO BRIDGES:
VOCALITY AND HUMAN TEMPORALITY IN BALINESE FLUTE PLAYING

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Abstract

Balinese bamboo flutes, collectively known as *suling*, have maintained their central role in Balinese orchestral and chamber music despite rapid expansionism in, and the privatisation of, Indonesia's post-Suharto media. As an archaic instrument that has, organologically, changed little since Bali's pre-modern era, *suling* have retained relevance and quite remarkably, bridged generations. Yet despite this continuity of presence, the specific vocality of each inheriting generation has approached such elements as timbre, melodic idiom and embellishment with varying, and often-contradictory results.

This paper surveys *suling* playing across forty years of gamelan recordings, mapping changing approaches in vocal and *suling* style. I examine the significance of such elements as vibrato, embellishments, gang and choral singing including the relatively recent compositions that feature seven-tone, multi-*suling* harmonies. From large hanging gongs to the smallest bronze metallophone, Balinese gamelan moves in musical time with piston-like precision. I observe that *suling* has a malleable musical affect upon the aural perception of rigid, quadratically organized subdivisions in the predominantly percussive orchestral sonority of gamelan music. Using Tenzer's (2006) periodicity typologies, I survey the stylistic output of *suling* across temporal and genre boundaries to explore how both improvised and formulaic melodic realizations reflect generational tendencies and tastes in music.