

GAMELAN

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Gamelan?

A Gamelan is a traditional Indonesian percussion ensemble consisting primarily of tuned giant gongs, metallophones and xylophones. The gongs made of bronze, are mounted on wooden frames which are beautifully carved and painted. Gamelan ensembles traditionally perform outdoors at village temples ceremonies, weddings and funerals, or to accompany performances of dance, drama and puppet theatre. The gamelan is led by a drummer and sometimes also includes a violin (Rebab) flute, (suling) and singing.

Where is it from?

The gamelan originated in Java and Bali and has featured in their traditional way of life for hundreds of years. There are two main types of gamelan, the Javanese and the Balinese.

Who can play it?

Anyone who has a reasonable sense of rhythm, and is prepared to listen! You don't need to be able to read music, as pieces are learned from memory. The tunes can, however, but can be represented by numbers to help those new to gamelan music.

Is it easy to play?

All children starting from Foundation Stage upwards will be able to contribute to the unique sound and will have a memorable experience at what ever level they have contributed. Gamelan playing can be quite a moving experience – almost trance-like as the music is repeated over several times. Cyclic patterns are used in music throughout the world and feature in several units of the QCA scheme of work for Music. (A cyclic pattern is a melody or rhythmic pattern that is repeated over and over again) As you progress, more complex pieces can be played, and advanced playing can be very challenging.

How do the players play the gamelan?

Because of the positioning of the instruments the players cannot see each other very easily, so as they play they must listen very carefully to make sure they are in time with everyone else – following the rhythmic leader, the drummer.

When playing the gamelan, the player uses a damping technique to stop (close) the sound. The player stops the sound by holding the bar of the note just played while playing the next note. One hand is always following the melody, damping the sound behind it.

In gamelan music the smaller higher pitched instruments tend to play faster-moving parts than the lower sounding instruments. ‘Balungan’ is the skeleton melody forming the frame of the piece. Other parts derive from it; the higher sounding instruments playing the decoration.

Why do you take your shoes off and sit on the floor?

As the Gamelan comes from southeast Asia, it is common practice to sit on the floor. The instruments are designed that way. Players take their shoes off as a mark of respect, much as one would when entering a temple. You do not step over the instruments when on the floor.

Why are gamelans seen as sacred instruments?

Javanese mythology often tells of the Gods creating Gamelans, and many are deemed sacred, and only used for special occasions. Even today there is a certain mystery over the creation of the instruments, and the bronze smiths guard their secrets, handed down from generations.

It is believed that the special alloy of 3 parts tin, to 10 parts copper will produce a living sound, endowed with a soul. Thus a Gamelan may be regarded as a living spirit, and respected as such. The Gamelan is inaugurated in a ‘Naming Ceremony’ and given a name (a poetic name e.g. Perfumed Rain.) It is believed that it takes about 20 years to acquire its final tones, and must be played regularly, or the spirit of the metal will die.

What notes does the gamelan use?

The tuning is not the same as western European tuning. Each gamelan is hand made and each has its own tuning, which is either a 5 note scale (slendro) or a 7 note scale (pelog).

For pictures of a Gamelan go to <http://www.google.co.uk>

Choose ‘Images’ and search for ‘Gamelan’