



David Lopato

East-West Fusions: A Delicate Balance

In the majority of “world music” fusions, Western improvised musics (jazz, rock, blues, funk, Latin, etc.) tend to be fused with musics from Africa, most notably the African subcontinent. These fusions tend to mix dynamic African rhythms with harmonies derived from European musics. The results tend to be texturally rich and rhythmically contrapuntal, and the forms tend to be short (sometimes as short as two bars), repetitive and groove-based. In a sense, these musics swim in the same large pool, since the origins of so many of the Western styles mentioned above can be traced back to sub-Saharan Africa, anyway.

But what about East-West fusions—for example, those involving Western improvised music with the music of India or Indonesia? These tend to grapple with very different musical issues, both in terms of their formal struc-

tures and the ways in which they incorporate improvisation. I’d like to take a quick look specifically at music involving the melding of Western improvisation with Indonesian gamelan music, a potentially rich, relatively untapped form of “world music” fusion, and I’ll view it through the lens of my own music of that nature, a recording of which is being released this September as *Gendhing For A Spirit Rising* (Global Coolant).

One of the main issues is melody. Is it diatonic, chromatic or modal? And what does “modal” mean? Jazz musicians tend to interpret the concept very loosely. In jazz, the basis for modal improvisation is most often a seven-note diatonic mode related to the major scale, for example the dorian mode, and it may be applied over different roots, such as in Miles Davis’ “So What” where the “changes” are D dorian and E \flat dorian. Even in that context, while Bill

Evans and Davis adhere rather strictly to the pitch constraints of the mode while soloing (in the original version, at least), John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley do not—and, as we all know, that worked out just fine. In classical Indian music, the composition and the improvisation, microtones aside, exist entirely within the pitch confines of a *raga*, which is somewhat analogous to the Western “scale” concept, but typically involves strict rules for how the improv is created. In Indonesian gamelan, the pitch choices boil down to one of two pentatonic tunings, *pelog* and *slendro*. You’re in one or the other, but never both at the same time. In fact, a gamelan (the Indonesian word for both the orchestra and the music itself) has separate sets of instruments for the two tunings. (An aside worth mentioning is the fact that tunings within those two systems may vary from village to village, which can be seriously disorienting

for a Westerner.) For our purposes, we'll map them onto (or squeeze them into, as it were) Western chromatic 12-tone tuning, which is precisely what I did in the second movement, entitled "This Life." Since it will be much easier to digest all this if you can hear what's going on, I've uploaded an MP3 file containing relevant excerpts of the piece to my website: <http://www.davidlopat.com/thislife-excerpts.html>.

My pelog scale in this case is B-C-E-F-G, and the slendro is B \flat -C-E \flat -F-G. The fixed melody of the head dances between both scales and involves only those seven pitches. Example 1 on page 90 shows how that dance plays out.

This is clearly a hybrid approach, one not found in gamelan. Nor do the two scales get "mashed up" in the rest of the head. The fragments of one scale are discreetly separated from those of the other, even though the melody flows from one to the other throughout. During the piano solo, the improvisation starts by alternating between one scale and the other, phrase by phrase, and eventually veers off into free chromatic improv, returning to the alternation of those two scales near the end of the solo.

The solo segues directly into the top of the head. At a cadence point early on (a sustained note on F below middle C, coinciding with a gong of the same pitch), the head transitions into a middle section and the rhythmic groove shifts to straight eighths. This section is distinctly different from the opening one. The opening section has a long, intricate, loping melody in swing time with constantly shifting meters and a free-form solo with irregular phrasing, albeit a 4/4 metric feel. The middle section is an entirely other ball of wax. It's inspired by music from the western part of Java (Sunda), more specifically a popular music form derived from classical Sundanese court music called *Jaipongan*. (Google the names Dedeh Winingsih and Idjah Hadidjah for examples of that music performed by two of the greatest singers you'll ever hear.)

This section, like most gamelan music, is "colotomic" in structure. In colotomic music, repetitive cycles are nested within other ones. The lengths of all cycles, as well as the lengths of phrases within those cycles, expressed in number of beats, are powers of two, i.e. eight, 16, 32, 64, 128 on up to 256 beats long, with the basic structural unit, a *gatra*, being four beats long. The ending of a cycle (or, to a Westerner, what would feel like the beginning of one) is marked by a gong. There are many sizes of gongs in gamelan, and the general concept is this: the bigger the cadence, the larger the gong (although the size doesn't always correspond to pitch). In this piece, the cycle is 64 beats long (16 bars of 4/4) and there are two types of gong employed, a large gong (*gong suwukan*) and a smaller one (*kempul*). The gong suwukan occurs every 64 beats and the kempul every eight beats, except

during the last two bars before the gong suwukan, where it is struck in each bar.

The instrumentation is also quite different and is modeled after Sundanese instrumentation. The trap set is replaced by a set of Sundanese *kendhang* (a two-headed hand drum similar in shape and construction to the Indian *mridangam*). In Jaipongan, a set typically consists of one large drum parallel to the floor and at least two small ones that stand upright. The pitch of the large drum is varied for melodic phrasing by pressing the heel of the foot against it while playing. The "rhythm section" now consists of a very different collection of instruments complementing the hand drums: glockenspiel, vibraphone, marimba, piano and the aforementioned gongs. In gamelan, metallophones of various sizes and the Javanese equivalent of a marimba called *gambang* are important instruments that create both melody and texture. Since the tuning is Western, the glock, vibes and marimba all seemed logical (and, I think, effective) representations. Because the gongs must conform to the Western tuning, they are sampled and played via keyboard. As is typical of gamelan, there are multiple tempos in this section, arrived at through gradual accelerandos, and the nature of the parts varies depending on the tempo.

Back to the issue at hand, namely improvisation and how it relates to the scale content and formal structure. In this "Sundanese" section, the scales are the same, but the mode of the scales is different. The pelog scale is expressed as F-G-B-C-E and the slendro F-G-B \flat -C-E \flat . The form to which all of the pitched instrument parts conform is an alternation of two bars of slendro, with two bars of pelog for the entire 16 bars of the gong cycle, cadencing on the pelog with a strike of the gong suwukan pitched at F below middle C.

In the particular modal configuration mentioned above, this *roughly* translates in Western parlance to two bars of F7sus alternating with two bars of F Lydian, but here's the critical point: *It's not the same*. The improv is a duet between soprano saxophone and violin, with the violin primarily in a responsorial role, which mirrors the role of the singer and the *rebab* (a two-stringed spiked fiddle) in Jaipongan. If either player were to, say, inject the pitch A or D into their improvisation on either of those scales, a normal inclination for any jazz musician who sees F Lydian or F7sus in a jazz chart, it would seriously compromise the harmonic and melodic fabric of the music.

The performers on the recording, Marty Ehrlich and Mark Feldman, did a wonderful job of navigating that terrain, something very natural for a classical Indian musician but quite unnatural for a jazz musician. Different disciplines are at work there. The score is notated in such a way as to provide the "pitch classes" upon

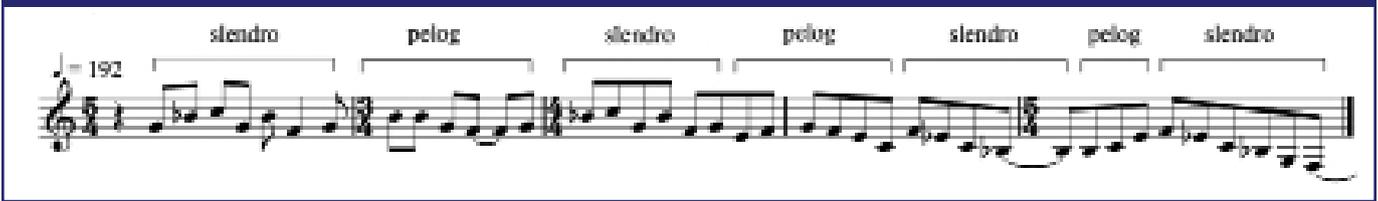
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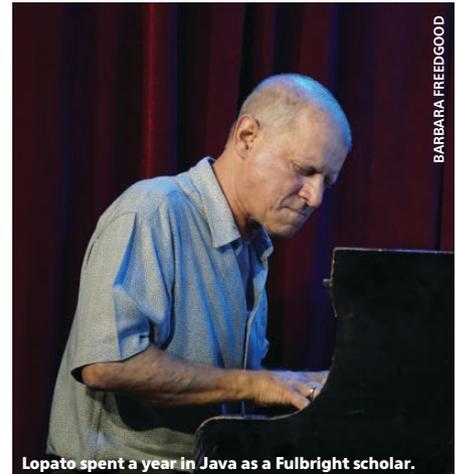
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Example 1



Example 2



Lopato spent a year in Java as a Fulbright scholar.

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which to be improvised (not indicative of range, just scale tones). They are written as stemless note heads—see Example 2 on page 90.

You may notice that all of the accompanying parts are written out. (The kendhang and gong suwukan are omitted here for spatial considerations, but it should be noted that the kendhang part is entirely improvised.) While the glock, vibes, piano and kempul do play strictly notated ostinato-based parts, the marimba part, although also notated in the score, would ideally be improvised. In Javanese music, gambang is one of the main improvising instruments. Players learn how to improvise around a given melody much in the way that jazz musicians learn how to blow over changes. A Western musician who familiarizes himself or herself with Sundanese gambang improvisation would, then, improvise the entire part, with the exception of the transition back into the head. This is not as daunting as it may seem, provided the Western musician is an improviser to begin with. The kendhang part must, however, be played by someone who has studied that tradition more extensively, which raises obvious logistical issues for anyone venturing into this complicated world of East-West fusions. Often it is not feasible to hire the very people who are best qualified to perform the music. For recordings in this digital age, amazing things can be done remotely. For live performance, it's another matter entirely, and one to be taken seriously when writing such music.

After the section undergoes a tempo shift to a faster, hotter pace, a second acceleration seg-

ues back into the head, with the trap set sneaking in during the last four bars to help transition the music back into swing time. The full head is played to conclude the movement.

What we have here is an example of Western music that is heterophonic (the harmonic aspect in the opening section supplied not by the piano, but rather the bass, much in the way it might in an Ornette Coleman tune, for example), in swing time, co-mingling with Eastern music that is, for all its rich texture, essentially monophonic, in straight-eighth time. Those aesthetically and structurally disparate musics are brought together by a combination of compositional devices. The main one is the rigorous use of particular scales derived from one culture and tweaked to fit into another's tuning system. The way those scales co-mingle is foreign to the culture of origin but less so to the other culture. Then there is the introduction of Western diatonic harmony into music that is essentially modal, i.e. the harmonic nature of the piano part in the middle section. There is a discreet sharing of musical values within the piece. All of this is done with care, though, so as to respect the aesthetic of a musical system very different from our own. For me, this is an important aspect of any pan-cultural undertaking, musical or otherwise.

That notion of difference calls to mind a basic tenet of Eastern philosophy, namely the rejection of goal-oriented movement in favor of a more contained, circular flow that anyone who has studied Eastern martial arts knows quite well. In musical terms, this could be viewed through the differing approaches to harmony.

In most composed Western tonal music, there is the concept of the tonic, or "home base," that is established at the onset, then ventured away from and returned to, as though a mission were taken on, struggled through, accomplished and then triumphantly drawn to a conclusion. Gamelan is much less goal-oriented. The explorations are perhaps more internal, more subtle. Both the circular form and the limited monophonic pitch constructs allow for much less "roaming" or "achieving." In the large movement of *Gendhing For A Spirit Rising*, I actually infuse the cyclical form with a much larger dose of Western harmonic motion and it does have the effect of creating, in addition to heightened emotion, a journey away from and back to a home base, even though the final cadence probably sounds completely unresolved to a Western ear. This was one of the attractions of writing that movement. I felt as though I was expanding upon a tradition without violating the core aesthetics of it.

Just as one philosophy is not necessarily better than the other, neither is one musical approach. From my vantage point, the possibilities of such fusions are truly exciting. Much beautiful music is yet to be made through them.

DB

Pianist, composer and educator David Lopato has performed his own compositions throughout the world. His double album *Gendhing For a Spirit Rising* (to be released Sept. 8 on Global Coolant Records) is an East/West encounter that finds musical influences flowing back and forth between cultures. Lopato, whose studies included a year in Java as a Fulbright scholar, is featured on piano, marimba, vibraphone, glockenspiel, Sundanese kendhang, gongs and electronics. He has been a core faculty member of the Jazz and Contemporary Music Department of The New School in New York since 1991. Visit him online at davidlopato.com.

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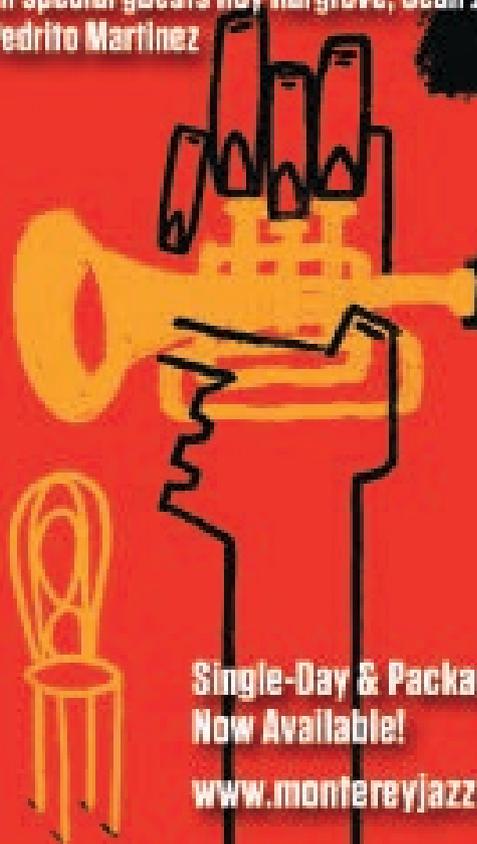
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