

## Biography of Colin McPhee (Part I)

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### Introduction

The following paper is a brief biography of the Canadian composer and pianist, Colin McPhee, focusing mainly on his work as an ethnomusicologist. As a Balinese musician and composer, I am primarily interested in his works as they relate to Balinese culture. I will also introduce some of his western music compositions that were inspired by the *gamelan*<sup>1</sup> music of Bali. I hope that by doing this project, I will gain a better understanding and insight into what Colin McPhee has done for my music as well as for the field of ethnomusicology in general.

When I was studying at ISI, the Institute of Arts in Bali, my teacher introduced me to a name of composer, Colin McPhee, who spent his time studying Balinese culture in *Sayan*, a small village outside of *Ubud*<sup>2</sup> in central Bali. I wanted to study more about him and what he did to promote my culture among scholars in the world. As a Balinese person and on behalf of the Balinese community, I want to give my respect to Colin McPhee for all his works on behalf of Balinese culture, especially his masterpiece “Music in Bali”. In addition, I want to know more about his life as well as his research in other kinds of music or cultures in the world, and possibly to define the influence of Balinese music on his compositions.

### Colin McPhee’s Life, Career, and Journey in Exploring Balinese Culture

Colin McPhee was a composer, pianist, and pioneer researcher on the gamelan music of Bali. He was born in Montreal on March 15, 1900 and raised in Toronto. His family and teachers recognized his talent in music when he was a child. Therefore, his family sent him to study at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland in 1918. Later, in 1924, he continued to study piano with Isidore Philip and studied composition with Paul Le Flem in Paris. While he studied in Baltimore and Paris, he became a well-known musician in western music and returned to New York to establish himself as an important member of the musical avant-garde. He worked as a composer under the direction of his teacher, Arthur Friedheim who was a pupil of Franz Liszt. During that time, he was also busy performing, touring with the singer Eva Gauthier, playing for contemporary music concerts as well as giving solo recitals. Arthur Friedheim (1859-1932), an eminent pianist, wrote in his autobiography:

And the day has dealt kindly with me too, for I have received from far-off Java a letter from a former Toronto pupil, Colin McPhee, perhaps the most gifted pupil I ever had. His innate musical sense, his sturdy application and a striking personality marked him out for a brilliant career on the concert platform. I felt a personal sense of loss when, after I left Canada, he gave up the piano altogether and applied himself entirely to composition. Now he is in Java and other distant lands seeking new inspiration in the relatively unfamiliar native music. Yet I must not criticize him because he has neglected my favorite instrument. Did I not do the same thing when I was his age? (Friedheim 1961: 256)

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<sup>1</sup> Gamelan is an Indonesian name for an orchestra of gongs and other percussion instruments.

<sup>2</sup> Ubud is a small village in the middle side of Bali that has rich cultural activity. Many scholars decided to stay in this village.

Around the late 1920s, while Colin McPhee exploring his talents as a member of the New York Polyhymnia symphony, he became interested in the study and performance of music from different cultures outside of European music. When he discovered newly released recordings of the exotic music of Bali, it ignited an instant desire to perceive what kinds of instruments made such beautiful and intricately textured sounds. The vibrant timbres and complex rhythms of Balinese gamelan completely changed his life. In his book *House in Bali*, he wrote:

I was a young composer, recently back in New York after student days in Paris, and the past two years had been filled with composing and the business of getting performances. It was quite by accident that I had heard the few gramophone records that were to change my life completely, bringing me out here in search of something quite indefinable - music or experience, I could not at this moment say. (McPhee 1946:9)

As a composer, McPhee saw the instruments of the Balinese gamelan as a new resource for creating music, a “crystal, vibrant sound” (Oja 1984: 3) he had looked for since he was a child, but was ultimately unable to find in the world of western music. To understand this music became an obsession for him. McPhee described clearly the complex sound of gamelan in his letter to Dr. William Mayer after his Bali years (Oja 1984 : 3). In that letter McPhee explained that when he was 12 years old, he composed a piece for a children’s percussion band which he had various ideas for sound effects, but the effects were not satisfying his expectations. However, ten years later, he tried again incorporating glass wind chimes into a piano concerto, but it was not able to produce the exact sound he wanted. Surprisingly, at the moment he heard Balinese and Javanese music, the sounds that those instruments produced instantly achieved for him that elusive sonority he had looked for. Like others who sought to explore the island, such as the critic and novelist Carl Van Vechten, the Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias, the painter George Biddle, and Jane Bello (who later become his wife), he sailed to Bali for the first time in 1930.

After staying in a special hotel for foreign guests for a time, Colin McPhee ventured out away from the other visitors and stayed in village of *Kedaton*, south of *Denpasar* (capital city of Bali). Balinese musical activity there was unbelievable to him, and people seemed to be very creatively free in their cultural life. In that era, there was a shifting of tradition or artistic centers<sup>3</sup> from the palaces to the village *banjar*<sup>3</sup> (Tenzer 1998 : 16). It was changing the way that Balinese people develop their traditions from the community’s perspective, though they still paid respect to the courts. Colin McPhee become fascinated with the unique culture of Bali as he started to explore the music had dreamed about. Because the Balinese are mostly a friendly people, he quickly found master Balinese musicians to study and transcribe the music, met friends in a Balinese friendship style<sup>4</sup> and gathered information from everyone he met. One of them was I Nyoman Kaler, a Balinese musician deeply knowledgeable about the more ancient traditions. Kaler said that 20 years earlier, each palace would have had two orchestras. Outside of the palace would stand one gamelan with great gongs, which was used for ceremonies and to welcome the guest and inside the palace, and there was a little gongs

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<sup>3</sup> Banjar is a traditional community center in Balinese society.

<sup>4</sup> In Bali, when people already know somebody or foreign who come to Bali for as visitor, Balinese people will directly treat them like their family. However, not all Balinese are friendly, but most of them, in this case, are friendly peoples.

and keyed instruments of delicate tone to play more romantic music. This Gamelan was called *gamelan Semara Pegulingan*, the *gamelan* of Semara, God of Love, (Young 1984 :15).

The music of Bali totally changed McPhee's life. In 1931, he returned to Paris to continue his study of western music, but found himself bored with it and decided to go back to Bali for a longer stay. He stayed in *Sayan*, a mountain village where German artist Walter Spies had settled and built a traditional house. This house became a second home for McPhee as he would live there, on and off, for the next seven years. He made many transcriptions of Balinese music<sup>5</sup>, which helped him to understand the complexity of its construction. He worked to transcribe many of these recordings, and had in his house a piano that he always used to help in his transcriptions. In 1935, he met one of his more important teachers, Wayan Lotring, a brilliant Balinese composer who helped McPhee reorganize a gamelan club in the coastal village of Kuta (McPhee 1946 : 164-165). With Lotring, who made a series of recordings for Odeon in 1928 (McPhee 1966 : 152), he tried to study in depth one type of ensemble in Bali called *gamelan pelegongan*<sup>6</sup>, particularly in Kuta. McPhee also learned many other things about Lotring's life as a composer as well as studied his music for *gamelan pelegongan* that was quite unlike anything that McPhee had heard in the island.

At the end of December 1935, Colin McPhee went back to America (Oja 1984 : 7). He brought with him idea of new music that was influenced by the music of Bali, which he had by then studied and engaged in for four years. He was spending some of his time in Mexico, where he came up with an idea to compose a piece for orchestra using ideas of Balinese music in combination with western music and other styles as well. The result of this was a composition called *Tabuh-Tabuhan (Toccata for Orchestra and Two Pianos)*, composed in 1936 and first performed by Carlos Chave and the National Orchestra of Mexico City.<sup>7</sup> This piece was largely inspired by the various methods of Balinese gamelan technique. The title was derived from the Balinese word *tabuh*, which means the mallet used for striking the Balinese instruments, but also refers to different drum rhythms, metric forms and gong punctuations.<sup>8</sup>

In this piece, McPhee mimicked the instrumentation of a Balinese ensemble by using two pianos, celesta, xylophone, marimba, and glockenspiel, to form the core of the orchestra. He called this the "nuclear gamelan". He also considered that this piece was a purely personal work, in that he used Balinese composed motifs, melodies, and rhythms fused with his own western sensibilities to create a new kind of symphony. Douglas Young in his article "Colin McPhee's Music: (II) 'Tabuh-Tabuhan'", said that even

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<sup>5</sup> It was very hard for him to record music at that time, because there was no recording equipment and electricity in Bali yet.

<sup>6</sup> *Gamelan Pelegongan* is one set of ensemble in Bali that is similar like *gamelan Semara Peglingan*. It usually played to accompany a dance piece called Legong dance. The word pelegongan derived fro the root word "legong". See "Michael Tenzer, *Balinese Music*, Berkeley and Singapore: Periplus Edition, 1991, and Colin McPhee, *Music in Bali*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966.

<sup>7</sup> See Colin McPhee, *Tabuh-Tabuhan: toccata for orchestra and 2 pianos*, distributed by Hal Leonard, Associated Music, New York, c1960.

<sup>8</sup> Colin McPhee explained this in his prefatory 'Note' to the full score of *Tabuh-Tabuhan* (eventually published by AMP Icn. 1960).

though it is composed for a large orchestra, it is not a symphony. Though *Tabuh-Tabuhan* has a definite close relationship with Copland's symphonic dance works, he said that "the superb rhythmic sweep of the first movement culminates in a wonderful series of overlapping entries of an upward-surgng motif, brilliantly orchestrated at different speeds and in a great variety of metrical displacements". The significance of *Tabuh-Tabuhan* is that it was an early example of a composer treating non-Western music seriously in combination with the art music of Europe (Young 1986 : 19).

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