

Biography of Colin McPhee (Part II)

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After McPhee's year of composing *Tabuh-Tabuhan* in Mexico, he continued to write several articles about Indonesia as well as working as a jazz critic. Around 1937, he returned to Bali to continue his research on Balinese music and culture. He was eager to begin further study of the older music of the island, especially the music that is related to a ritual context. Together with I Made Lebah,¹ he had a plan to form a group in *sayan* for the sole of purpose of reviving the gamelan *Semara Pegulingan* (McPhee 1979 : 187). This music was very rare in the island, because of the influence of *kebyar* style, a style that was becoming the most popular, causing villages to upgrade their old ensembles into *kebyar* instruments. It was McPhee's desire to help encourage the Balinese to maintain the old styles of their own music that were in danger of extinction. The result of this idea was the formation of a children's music association in *Sayan* village. He gathered all of talented children from *sayan*, and provides a teacher from outside of the village to teach them as a group, as well as facilitating them with a set of instruments to learn one particular old style of music that was rare in the island.²

By the time he went back to New York at the end of 1938, (because of the prediction of World War II), his "pocket" was already full with research data on music and culture of Bali. He met Benjamin Britten in New York in 1940, and after exposing him to Balinese music, McPhee's transcription for two pianos of Balinese *gamelan* music have been published through Schirmer's Library of Recorded Music. Under the title of *Balinese ceremonial music*, this album includes the music of shadow play, *arja* flute melodies, and the ceremonial music, which open the temple festival. He also arranged Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* for two pianos. The particular aspect of Britten's music under consideration is because of the effect of his exposure to the music and theater of Bali and Japan, the former thanks to McPhee.³

In 1947, "A House in Bali" was published, an autobiography of McPhee's life during his time in Bali. This book told the story of how McPhee became interested in Balinese music for the first time by listening to a recordings, how he decided to sail to Bali, how he became fascinated with the culture, music, and the fresh and friendly environment of the village, and primarily what he was doing during five years in Bali. This book is mainly concern about giving the idea or the picture of the Balinese as well as their customs. In the explanation on that idea, he described how dancers, singers, and musicians were trained to be a performer, how they organized performances, how they should obligate to perform at the village temple and how the music related to the culture and religion.

A year after "A House in Bali" was published, "A Club of Small Men", McPhee's other book, was published as well. In this book, McPhee described a group of Balinese children from the mountain village of *sayan*, five to eight years old, who wanted to make music as well as adults. They looked on when their fathers played *gamelan* and wished that later on they could also play like that (McPhee 1948: 11). By looking at this situation and how the children has a strong desire to have their own group, McPhee helped them to obtain

¹ I Made Lebah was a great musician and performer from the village of *peliatan*, a small village next to Ubud, who also become McPhee's driver and stayed together with him in *sayan*. See Colin McPhee, *House in Bali*. New York: John Day, 1979.

² See Colin McPhee "A Club Of Small Men", *An Asia Book*, The John Day Company, New York, 1948.

³ See Michael Tenzer in his Reviewed Works of *Britten and the Far East: Asian Influences in the Music of Benjamin Britten* by Mervyn Cooke, *Asian Music*, Vol. 32, No. 1, Tribal Music of India. (Autumn, 2000 - Winter, 2001), pp. 190-192.

an orchestra as well as find a master teacher, who knew a many repertoire, from other side of the island. They were to become very well known because they were often asked to play in the temple festival. McPhee also provides great photographs and drawings that illustrate the story.⁴

During the 1950s and until 1962, McPhee was busy composing many different pieces for western ensembles, such as *Transition for Orchestra*, first performed by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra under the conductor of Irwin Hoffman in 1955, and three scores for documentary films commissioned by the United Nations. His *Nocturne for Small Orchestra*, premiered by Leopold Stokowski at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 1958 was a small and delicate work of great diversity, which showed that McPhee did indeed find his style of his own. This work was followed by the *Concerto for Wind Orchestra*, which was performed for the first time by The American Wind Symphony under the general direction of Robert Austin Boudreau. In this piece, McPhee used pentatonic scales that he learned about through Balinese music. It was a difficult task to adapt the characteristic sound of *gamelan* for western wind instruments, but *Concerto for Wind Orchestra* was widely held as a successful piece.

In 1960, Colin McPhee became a professor at the University of California Los Angeles, specializing in composition, orchestration, Indonesian music, and Balinese compositional technique. He shared his great experience with Balinese music as well as his great knowledge in western music with his students at UCLA, until he resigned from in 1963 to complete work on his book on Balinese music.

McPhee's life ended in both triumph and tragedy in 1964, only a few weeks after finishing his magnum opus "Music in Bali" (Tenzer 1998 : 17). This book was an exhaustive attempt to explore all aspects of Balinese music. It was published two years after his death with the help of Dr. Mantle Hood, a professor of the University of California Los Angeles. He had begun writing it in 1930, and had worked on it consistently since then. This is an important and useful book that provides a lot of great musical and pictorial illustrations of Balinese musicians and dancers, giving an obvious picture of the customs of Bali. The way that McPhee gives a description about many different types of ensemble that are appear in Bali is really clear and supplemented by transcriptions and photographs documentation. He also gives useful selective list of musical transcriptions of the music of Bali, made before 1930s until the time of its publication, available at the University of California Los Angeles. Generally, this book gives a better idea and insight about the scene of Balinese society, the music, dance, and religion as well as the custom of Bali.

William P. Malm review McPhee's book in *The Journal of Ethnomusicology* (Malm 1967 : 719-720). In his review, he said that this is a major result of McPhee's effort. He worked with great diligence and talent at forming some permanent record of the traditions in order to preserve many different older forms of Balinese music, which he thought, soon would be extinct. Malm continued to say that this book also provides wide information with an impressive synthesis of the music of Bali, musical performance practice, and the place of music in Balinese life some thirty years ago. On the other hand, Richard A. Waterman said in his review for this book, that the remainder of the central portion of the book is musicology and perhaps too technical in spots for non-musicologist. It was hard for anyone to understand the explanation of the music by only looking at the musical scores provided in the book. However, Waterman was amazed at what McPhee had been done with his field technique in the days before recording equipment was available. This book also provide an old and new music of Bali, which are presented, described, and analyzed with all respect to Jaap Kunst's

⁴ See also "Distant Tones", excerpts from the Bali field notes of Colin McPhee, Edited and with an introduction by Carol J. Oja, with five linocut prints by William Rueter, 1990.

1925 pioneer study (Waterman 1967 : 766).

As Mantle Hood says in his foreword to the book, “the achievement of such magnum opus did not come about casually” (McPhee 1966 : v). This work represents a great and strong desire of a young composer who wanted to find the source of the sound that he was dreamed of. The exotic sound of Balinese music becomes aesthetic sounds that attracted him and completely change his life. This book has an interesting subject matter, the physical of the book is large because it provides a lot of detail information about the subject that was arranged in a tasteful, impressive, and beautiful way.

Colin McPhee was a talented pianist and composer who had a deep musicological interest in exploring another musical language. Only a few composers in the western world would have afforded themselves the chance to do exactly the same thing that McPhee did. His life was completely changed by the influence of Balinese music. He published books about music and culture of Bali as well as the aspect of human life in Balinese society. In fact, McPhee’s works engaging in and focusing on Balinese culture are a great contribution to the Balinese and a good way of introducing Balinese culture to the world. For the present and future generations of Balinese musicians, McPhee’s works of Balinese music will be standing as an important piece of heritage.

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