

**A Gamelan Composition Portfolio with Commentary: Collaborative
and Solo Processes of Composition with Reference to Javanese
Karawitan and Cultural Practice.**

Six Volumes – Volume Number 3

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Project 2

Ice Pictures – collaborative trio with Jon Hughes and John Jacobs

CD 1 – recordings of the main pieces –

- 1) *Gundrlay*
- 2) *Rebab Wind and Grind*
- 3) *Rough Sand Circles*

CD 2 – recordings of other pieces mentioned –

- 1) *Bobbly Bonangs*
- 2) *Bonang Triangle*
- 3) *Ice Pictures 1*
- 4) Musical example of original improvisation that produced the rebab ‘grind’ motif, which led to *Rebab Wind and Grind*.

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1) The Initial Ideas and Inspirations

For several months prior to starting the project, we spent time in informal discussion about what we wanted to achieve. We knew at least three key factors – firstly, that we would use gamelan instruments, secondly that we would combine them with electronics in some way, and thirdly that all the material would be based on improvisation. We also discussed the possibility of using visual material.

Particularly for me, there were influences at the start of the process from Western avant-garde and experimental music. This inspiration is found here more than any other project in this portfolio. Two of these influences from Western music were John Cage and Cornelius Cardew. I was interested in the connections between Cage's artwork and his music, particularly since attending an exhibition of his work in Huddersfield.¹ I was particularly inspired by Cardew's graphic score *Treatise*. I was interested in graphic scores in general; however, I usually prefer the visual element of the score itself, rather than the musical result, as is also the case with *Treatise*. Again, with Cage, I found his chance processes easier to comprehend through his visual art than through his music. These Western influences were more prominent for me at the very beginning of the process, especially when working on the visual ideas. They remained in the background of the collaboration, more as abstract ideas rather than the more concrete influences they started as. My influences from Cage and Cardew (along with other Western experimental music), became much more concerned with their ethos of experimentation, rather than the actual music they created, which I became less inspired by. The idea of using extra-musical influences such as chance procedures became more appealing to me, and I sought to use this to explore my own musical ideas. These ideas were also influential on Hughes and Jacobs.

However, when we started working on the music, these influences quickly developed towards karawitan, along with creativity and ideas that were more personal to me, such as my own art, and being more directly influenced by Jacobs and Hughes, as I was working with them, rather than the influences from Cage and Cardew which became more distant. The karawitan influences took the form of structures which featured seleh-type notes (for example, *Bobbly Bonangs*, *Gundrlay*), as well as colotomic-type structures, as heard in *Rebab Wind and Grind*. It seemed more of a natural progression to take influences from karawitan, rather than Western experimental music.

¹ Held in the Huddersfield Art Gallery from November 2010 until January 2011.

There are strong connections with the duo with Charles Matthews. For example, the gender motif that started the process which became *Gundrlay* came from a pattern that emerged from the first session of improvisation with Matthews. This trio also connects back to the duo with Matthews, as I used some of the rebab 'style' of playing I was developing with the trio (particularly in pieces such as *Gundrlay*, *Rebab Wind and Grind* and *Rough Sand Circles*), in the later material I worked on with Matthews, particularly the rebab piece we played in the Gathering of the Gamelans concert, and other material from around that time. (I discuss this development of instrumental playing in the commentary in volume 1, in section 2.3, p.34 - the process of developing new playing techniques from traditional playing techniques.)

2) Roles in collaborative processes and the effect on the participants

For this project, I was more of a performer collaborating with composers, rather than one of three collaborative composers. There may have been a difference in what I felt my role was, and what it actually was, or what it appeared to be to other people. My contribution was more in the form of actual musical content (i.e. the notes I was playing on the rebab, the way I was reacting musically to other parts of the piece, especially in the process in the recording studio), rather than structural ideas – except the visual images. Jacobs discusses his role in the collaboration:

I know that I will fairly quickly start looking for ways of building a larger structure, so there were a lot of conversations where I was slightly holding my tongue not to push things too hard in a certain direction too quickly because I also know that successful larger structures do come out of working intuitively... I felt a part of my role [in *Ice Pictures*] was making sure I didn't scupper my chances of exploring that way of composing. And I suppose hopefully that was also creating some space for you Charlotte, to not have

reinforced that sense of – I’m the non-composer in the room! Because it would be very easy for that to happen. (Personal Communication, 26th June 2014)

Hughes goes on to suggest:

It’s an interesting issue for me, and also another problem is my process tends to be a little bit solitary... I have a better handle on that now, partly through doing that [the Ice Pictures collaboration], partly through getting more comfortable with letting people into my process, because at that time I was probably a bit more worried about that and I have been more anxious about that up until recently.

(Personal Communication, 26th June 2014)

3) The Visual Art

As mentioned before, the first drawing made specifically for this collaboration was partly influenced by Cardew and Cage, along with my own drawing style which I was also developing at the time. One of the ideas for the many parallel lines came from some of the pages of *Treatise*, which are a kind of extension of a five line stave. I drew much of the drawing on a train journey and decided that every time the train went over a bump and jogged the pencil, I would change the direction of the line to follow it. This was influenced by chance procedures developed by Cage. This drawing is shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1) Line drawing by Charlotte Pugh



Trees were another of my visual inspirations. We used my photos of trees and my drawing/graphic score based on a tree. I also considered connections between karawitan and trees, for example, the trunk being a balungan or colotomic structure, and the branches being all the elaborations. Other images were of cracks in ice, and circles drawn in sand. These images are shown in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2) Photographs by Charlotte Pugh



Before starting to work on any music, we had a preliminary session in the gamelan room to discuss what we wanted to do. I brought several images and drawings along. We talked about what we each saw in them, and how we might use them to create music, or interpret them through music. We came up with a list of phrases and words inspired by the images:

- Little eggs
- Foreground and background
- Echoes and shadows
- Patches of light
- Contrasting tree shapes
- Lines of perspective
- Lines to infinity – infinite lines in infinite space – truncated lines
- Outside the bounds of the picture – unseen part of the discrete structure
- Gradually adding to a phrase indefinitely
- Hazy quality – noise in the images (How do we generate this in sound? Use old equipment and recording techniques?)
- Relationships of texture
- Recording of recording of recording – until it distorts (a process I partially used in the music box section of *Look at the Moon!*)

4) The rehearsal, creative and collaborative process

Session 1 – 1st February, 2011

Hughes set up microphones and recorded the whole session, which lasted roughly two hours. Nothing was prepared in advance, apart from drawing on memories from our initial discussion. I started by playing around with a riff on slendro gender barung that I had remembered from the Charles duo – not exactly the same riff, but a similar idea. Jacobs started working out an interlocking pattern on pelog barang gender panerus. There was a suggestion that Hughes might loop this phrase and create a 'texture' from it. Hughes then improvised a free-form slenthem melody over the top.

Hughes also suggested improvised rebab over the top of both the slenthem and gender layers. This was achieved by recording what we had played, looping it to make a continuous layer, listening to it on headphones and playing along to it. I had not improvised on rebab before, and found this difficult to begin with. This became the piece *Gundrlay*.

Jacobs then suggested an idea based on the contour lines of the drawings, for three bonang phrases, which would follow the lines. He played slendro bonang barung and asked me to improvise suling to follow and echo the contours. This was done in the same way as the rebab part for *Gundrlay* – listening to a recording of Jacobs’s bonang improvisation on headphones and playing along. This became the piece *Bobbly Bonangs*. (Track 1 on cd 2)

Next, Hughes improvised a melody on gongs and kempuls, based on a structure from the ‘tree’ image/graphic score. This was the only piece that was included on the album unmodified.

Session 2 – 9th February, 2011

Hughes set up recording equipment as before, and the session lasted roughly 2 hours, as before. Again, nothing was prepared in advance. Jacobs and I went over the interlocking patterns from the previous week and decided to practise in a separate rehearsal to develop and extend the patterns, and link them together in some way. Hughes read out the list of words and phrases we had initially come up with – ‘little eggs’ jogged our memory of those ideas we had discussed.

We chose the phrase ‘gradually adding to a phrase indefinitely’ to use as a starting point. Jacobs suggested that we would all use the same instruments (bonangs), and choose a note to start on and a different note to finish on. This was based on the idea of two seleh notes, and the distance between them, and thinking of it like a sekaran. We would play each pattern three times, then move on to extend the phrase (using the same ‘seleh’ notes). Hughes then suggested leaving more space, which would help us both to listen and react to each other more. We found that Hughes and I were both more aware of what Jacobs was doing than what the other

was doing. This was probably due to positioning, as we all had our backs to each other and Jacobs was in the middle. For this piece (which became *Bonang Triangle* – track 2 on cd 2), Hughes played slendro bonang barung, Jacobs played pelog bonang barung, and I played pelog bonang panerus. Afterwards, I suggested that we each draw an image of what the process felt like to us – how we visualised it. We then had a discussion about how we were finding the process, any issues arising, and more general musical experiences we were involved in at the time.

Hughes then suggested choosing a photo and improvising together – interpreting it in our own individual way, with no rules or boundaries. One of the photos was of cracked ice. (This led to the name for the album – ‘Ice Pictures’.) For these improvisations, I played gongs, because this was something I would not normally improvise on. Jacobs played pelog *gambang gangsa*, and Hughes played pelog bonang barung. These improvisations became *Ice Pictures 1, 2, and 3*. (*Ice Pictures 1* is track 3 on cd 2.) This combination of sounds was also an inspiration for *Look at the Moon! It’s Turning Blue... Part 2*. Working on this particular improvisation developed our collaborative and listening skills, particularly as in the previous session Hughes had been concentrating more on recording than on playing. In this session, all three of us were playing together much more, and this seemed to create a space where we could work more closely together.

Session 3 – 16th February, 2011

Again, microphones were set up, and nothing was prepared in advance. We discussed how to proceed after this session. Jacobs suggested that our next session should be in the studio. We would have a lot of material and we could listen through to it all and decide how to develop it, what to use and what to discard. Hughes then suggested creating some ten second ‘textures’, using the lines drawing as a guide or inspiration, using it like a graphic score. It was the first time we had used this drawing.

We changed the time to fifteen seconds, to allow for more exploration. We practised for a while to see if we could feel how long fifteen

seconds was, so as to avoid looking at the clock. I felt our playing was initially a little disjointed, but gradually became more and more cohesive. We discussed what we were doing between each playing, such as the different ways we could read the score. For example – landscape format reading left to right, portrait format reading top to bottom, also reading on the 'x' axis (Jacob's suggestion) – seeing the image as three dimensional, journeying into the image, seeing it the same all the way through (like a stick of rock), and as a static musical texture. Also we imagined what would happen once we had entered the three dimensional image.

For these improvisations, we used a variety of instruments – bonang, gong, kempuls, balungan, gender, gambang gangsa, and rebab. These improvisations lasted for the whole two hour session, and resulted in the pieces *Rough Sand Circles* (the title taken from one of the images), and *Rebab Wind and Grind*.

5) Studio sessions

In the studio sessions, we re-recorded some pieces (for example, the *Ice Pictures* improvisation), and added to other pieces – by adding more compositional elements (which were a continuation of the discussions we had when we listened back to the improvisations and came up with compositional ideas to develop those improvisations further), and more improvisation. This was when I did most of the improvisation for *Gundrlay*, *Rough Sand Circles* and *Rebab Wind and Grind*, and also this is when those pieces became more structured compositions.

6) Selected pieces

The common thread to all these pieces is the rebab lines which I developed through this collaboration. See also section 2.3 of the overall commentary, which discusses the concept of the development of playing techniques. These pieces are finished pieces, which have been developed from hours of improvisation, recording and discussion.

6.1) *Gundrlay*

There are many different aspects of this piece, however I will focus on my contributions, namely the rebab part. This piece features more of my collaborative elements, such as the gender riff, which I took from the improvisation I did with Charles. I worked on this with Jacobs to create interlocking patterns that repeat and create an underlying texture. The name *Gundrlay* come from the amalgamation of the words 'gender' and 'underlay'. Much of the structure of the piece, such as the idea of the three sections linked by electronically enhanced gongs, was the idea of Jacobs. However, the rebab lines were worked out with joint suggestions from Jacobs, Hughes and myself, in reaction to my own improvised ideas.

The piece consists of three sections, and the rebab parts are slightly different in each one. Throughout the piece, there are three rebab lines, which overlay and echo each other. In the first section, there are many glissandi, trills and smooth bowing. The phrases are longer than in the other sections, and have smoother contours. In the second section, there is a different kind of bowing, which has a 'shaky' effect; this is achieved by very fast backward and forward motions of the bow. Again, there are many glissandi, even more than in the previous section. Section three has different bowing again, this time the bow is scraped harder across the strings and creates a harsher sound, with less vibrato. Glissandi is still a main feature, and in this section, the playing is mostly in the higher register of the instrument, which gives a harsher sound when bowed in this way.

6.2) *Rebab Wind and Grind*

In this piece, I again focus on the rebab part. The piece is in two contrasting sections. The rebab playing in the first section is similar to *Gundrlay*, but just one layer this time. The melody is slower, and again glissando is a main feature. The bowing is slightly harsher, as in the third section of *Gundrlay*. The second section (2.20 onwards) uses a loop of the rebab 'grind' motif that emerged from the fifteen-second improvisations in the third session, when we were using the lines drawing as an inspiration. (Track 4 on cd 2 is

a recording of that improvisation.) The superimposed rebab line floats above, again with slower moving melodies and many glissandi. It works its way into the high register, and keeps returning there. Again, there were several rebab layers here, as in *Gundrlay*. This is a kind of companion piece to *Gundrlay* – here the rebab is more ethereal and mysterious, but there are many technical similarities to the rebab part in *Gundrlay*. Underpinning this section is a gong and kempul structure that is connected to the colotomic structures found in karawitan – i.e. the repeated/cyclic pattern of gongs which has the same principle in all pieces, from the dense structure of gangsaan, to the long, drawn out structure of gendhings such as gendhing kethuk 4 awis.

6.3) *Rough Sand Circles*

This piece came from an improvisation based on the photograph of sand circles. It is in three sections, an A B A form. The rebab line in the first and third section was developed from a motif in pelog heard on the gambang gangsa, played by Jacobs. I extended this motif into a melody. This also became one of the pieces used in *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* – the ‘Romance’ for rebab and gender. (See section 2.6 in Project 4.)

In the second section, the rebab playing is more sparing and has more of a textural role than the other sections. It plays much shorter fragments, and there is a contrast of the harsher ‘scraping’ sounds produced by harder bowing (as in section three of *Gundrlay*) and the sweeter, more romantic melody heard in section one and three. This rebab melody is perhaps closer to those found in karawitan, and has more defined pelog pitches than those heard in *Gundrlay* and *Rebab Wind and Grind*.