

# **Indonesian experimentalisms, the question of Western influence, and the cartography of aesthetic authority**

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## **Abstract**

The eclectic profile of Indonesian creative musical activity designated by the term *musik kontemporer* drives and confounds attempts at definition. But among a chaotic mixing of conventions are exemplary practices which invite the labels experimental and avant-garde. Though suggesting links to a "now-global Cageian experimental movement," closer inspection raises a host of qualifications. The happening art of certain Javanese villagers has a seed that can be traced circuitously to Cage, but it grew in soil in which art never was so separate from life. The Western-oriented composers taught by the senior figure Slamet Abdul Sjukur after his fourteen years in Paris share with him a practical experimentalism, as the underdeveloped state of European classical music in Indonesia precludes a rigorous high modernism. Traditionally-based composers at the arts academy in Solo, spurred to innovate by director Gendhon Humardani and the notions of autonomous art he abstracted from Western philosophy, developed a practice of sound exploration which is otherwise independent of Western experimentalism, having more to do with the social relationships in traditional Indonesian musics and an Indonesian sensitivity to sound. Simplistic appeals to Western influence are clearly inadequate as an explanation for the emergence of *musik kontemporer* in Indonesia. In this paper, I instead take a cartographic approach, locating composers, scenes, and practices on a map concerned less with particular stylistic distinctions and more with the sources and distribution of authority for aesthetic positions and practices. Within Indonesia, the prestige of the now international but still predominantly Euro-American avant-garde is limited by the paucity of transnational connections for Western-oriented composers, while the nativist cosmopolitanism of traditionally-based composers resonates with official cultural policy and is reinforced by foreign acclaim.

## **CV**

Christopher J. Miller is a Lecturer at Cornell University, and a PhD candidate in ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University, completing a dissertation on Indonesian *musik kontemporer*. He first became involved with this topic and traditional Javanese music as an undergraduate at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. As well as a scholar, he is active as a performer of traditional Javanese gamelan. He has also composed numerous pieces for gamelan and collaborated with Indonesian composers. His article "Orchids (and Other Difficult Flowers) Revisited: A Reflection on Composing for Gamelan in North America" was published in *The World of Music* in 2005.