

An Ancient Indonesian Music Tradition Gets an Electronic Update

by Claire Voon October 9, 2015



*Aaron Taylor Kuffner, 'The Gamelatron Urban Sanctuary' (2015) at the Chimney NYC
(all photos and video by the author for Hyperallergic)*

For centuries, Indonesians have taken mallets to various forms of the gamelan, a traditional set of instruments assembled from an array of gongs and metallophones, often played to accompany dances. Throughout this month, an updated version of the ensemble is playing digitally composed scores, chiming away in a space in Brooklyn, 10,000 miles from the tradition's country of origin.

The Gamelatron is the world's first completely robotic gamelan orchestra — a kinetic, site-specific structure created by Aaron Taylor Kuffner, who has rigged 27 Javanese gongs and mallets on five separate steel towers, programming them to play music that he digitally arranged. Tucked into the Chimney NYC, a one-room arts venue that opened in June, the structures border a simple rug and a number of beanbags to create *The Gamelatron Urban Sanctuary*, an unexpected oasis of sound.

On select nights, visitors are invited to enter the former warehouse and sit or lie at the center of the Gamelatron as the mallets strike the bronze instruments, filling the 20-by-20-foot space and its 26-foot-tall ceilings with patterns of peals that range from delicate dings to heavy, hollow tolls. The composition bounces off the brick walls, and even as it mixes with the noise of cars hurtling down the nearby road, the experience is immersive; one feels far removed from the city, enveloped by the soundscape and transported to a space of serenity.



Detail of Aaron Taylor Kuffner's 'The Gamelatron Urban Sanctuary' (2015) at the Chimney NYC (click to enlarge)

“I think that there’s something about these tones and these pitches that affect our body, that we feel,” Kuffner said. “And we kind of forget that sound is in itself a physical force — it’s not just ephemeral. I think people’s bodies can perceive these sounds not just as an audio experience but as something more physical, and I think that’s why [gongs] have had an association with spirituality and the divine.”

Kuffner, currently based in Brooklyn, lived in Indonesia for a number of years and learned to play the gamelan himself. He’s since constructed multiple electronic iterations of the traditional instrument; the “Gamelatron Cemerlang” (Indonesian slang for “bling”) is his 29th such sculpture, with the only other active ones currently ringing at the Venice

Biennale. Each is composed of rigorously handcrafted gongs Kuffner commissions from artisans in Indonesia, mostly made from scavenged copper smelted in backyard forges that the makers repeatedly heat and pound into shape. One can see the imprints of their tools on the surface of each gong, permanent marks of the efforts that went into the object’s creation.

The less-than-a-month-old sculpture at the Chimney NYC features gongs as heavy as 100 pounds and as light as just five. The sight and sounds of the cloth-wound mallet heads tapping them and rebounding without the aid of human hands form a scene of simple harmony, but it's one that rests on intricate programming. Each time he installs a Gamelatron, Kuffner writes new material to fit the setting, using software to create digital audio sequences that a custom-made device transposes into electric pulses. These pulses then trigger levers that activate the mallets to create meditative musical arrangements; shifts in voltage result in a mallet striking a harder or softer blow. Similar to a jukebox, the Gamelatrons are equipped with a number of songs one can select by pushing buttons embedded in the sculpture, or even with a network-connected device such as a smartphone. In this specific installation, Kuffner has 10 written tracks that range from five minutes to 30, spanning close to two hours' worth of material in total.

"Nine of those are pretty lively compositions, and one of them is kind of a long, sparse play, where I'm really thinking of the silence between the notes a lot, more than I am thinking of the melody within the composition," Kuffner said. The results are all haunting and hypnotic, with the chimes seeming random even though they're highly thought out.

Although Kuffner has modernized the gamelan, his compositions are still grounded in traditional Javanese music; he uses notes from the regional *pelog* scale to craft his scores. While most gamelan songs incorporate just five out of the seven notes, as another contemporary update, Kuffner uses a selection of six. He has also polished, for the first time, the 27 gongs so that they gleam and stand as flashy, golden disks.

"I'm trying to create this other context for the gamelan to be relevant even in modern Jakarta," Kuffner said. "So by making these instruments, which are kind of folksy, into these bright objects, it's taking something that is seen as kind of backwards and turning it into something that's really valuable and shiny and new and flashy." An old ensemble that's seldom played in Indonesia today outside of formal ceremonies, the gamelan, according to Kuffner, has little cultural context, especially to young generations. Planted in New York City and equipped with 21st-century technology, the Gamelatron reinvigorates this fading tradition, recontextualizing the ancient orchestra to create a new haven for contemplation or simple repose.



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A panel of buttons allows one to select specific songs



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The Gamelatron Urban Sanctuary continues at the Chimney NYC (202 Morgan Ave, Bushwick, Brooklyn) every Friday through Sunday from 6 to 9pm through October 25. Appointments may also be made by emailing Clara Darrason at contact@TheChimneyNYC.com.*