

# Mepalu Sari [Essence of a Collision]

New Music

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## Mepalu Sari [Essence of a Collision]

Placed together, the Balinese word “mepalu” and Sanskrit word “sari” translate as “essence of a collision.” It’s an apt title for this new music project, a digital album developed over the course of a year with high school students attending schools in Klungkung and Sukawati, Bali and Vancouver, Canada. At the heart of the project is the gamelan, an Indonesian musical ensemble that features a variety of percussive metallophones (xylophones and gongs), drums and flutes. For *Mepalu Sari*, this traditional ensemble has been used in unconventional ways, both through new approaches to composing for it and the sampling of it in electronic music tracks. Across the album’s 100 minutes, traditional instrumentation collides with sampled beats; established and emerging artists help to broaden both how we listen and to whom we listen. The confluence of gamelan and electronic music also holds an important place in Western Front’s history through the pioneering influence of one of its founders, the electroacoustic composer Martin Bartlett. In 1990, Bartlett commissioned the creation of a Javanese gamelan ensemble which was housed at Western Front until 2019. *Mepalu Sari* honors the

legacy of gamelan at Western Front, while connecting to the vibrant contemporary music scene in Bali and with electronic musicians in Vancouver and beyond.

The initial inspiration for the project came from the composer I Putu Gede Sukaryana (Balot). In 2016, I was shown a video produced by the Balinese label Insitu Recordings (which Balot co-founded) of his composition *Anomali - X*. Gamelan reyongs (metal gongs) are typically played suspended on ornately decorated frames, as part of an orchestral ensemble with other gamelan instruments. In *Anomali - X*, Balot took reyongs out of their traditional context, and placed them on the floor in the shape of an X. As he says in the description of the piece on YouTube: “In this unique shape the contrasting tones of the two tunings were then blended into new and interesting textures.” The sense of exploration in the music and its performance was palpable, and I was excited when Balot arrived in Vancouver in the fall of 2018, to begin teaching gamelan and to embark on a master’s degree at the University of British Columbia (UBC). He’s been an active fixture in Vancouver’s music circles, performing in different communities and attending concerts throughout the city.

In the summer of 2019, Vancouver-based musician Justin Devries was researching archival footage of

gamelan performances at Western Front, and told me about a remix project that Balot was working on with Jonathan Adams, Insitu's other founder and a PhD candidate at UBC. The project provided samples from Insitu Recordings' catalogue to electronic musicians around the world, that would then be remixed into new pieces. It got me thinking that a similar remix project would be an exciting opportunity for Western Front's youth programs. I approached Balot and Jonathan about the possibility of a collaboration, to both support young composers in Bali experimenting with gamelan, and to create a cross cultural musical exchange with youth in Vancouver.

Interest in gamelan music by Western composers has a long history, beginning with Claude Debussy and Erik Satie, who, after being inspired by a Javanese gamelan at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889, began using gamelan rhythms, scales, textures and melodies in their works. Imagine the wonder they must have felt, in a time before ubiquitous access to recorded music, at hearing ways of organizing sound that were so fundamentally different from anything else in Paris at that time.

But now, in 2020, we're in a different place. What would it mean for a musician to sample *Anomali - X* without permission? Balot, Jonathan and I decided to create an exchange

where, in addition to offering the experience to record and remix gamelan music, high school students on both sides of the Pacific would begin thinking about that question. When approaching the Balinese students, we made it clear that their music would be altered and remixed by their Vancouver counterparts, but that credit would be given to both the composers and performers of the samples. Likewise, the Vancouver students knew that the students in Bali had willingly given permission for their music to be remixed and altered.

In October, 2019, eight students at Burnaby North Secondary School began workshops under instruction from Balot and Jonathan and the guidance of their teacher Kevin Ault. They were educated in gamelan history and geography through an afternoon-long lecture by Jonathan, and also participated in a workshop in which they were able to play gamelan, instructed by Balot. At the same time, three groups of students in Bali had the opportunity to go to a studio for the first time, recording and performing their original compositions for gamelan.

The music that the Balinese students created is both moving and technically inspiring. Performed on gamelan instruments, and without lyrics, the music expresses concerns that are both universal and particular to their day-to-day

lives in Bali. Dewa Gede Agung Kayonanda Parikesit Pemayun, says of his piece *Bunuh Diri (Suicide)*, “Suicide is an unusual behavior, carried out consciously.” For his other piece, *EKG*, he “took the idea from a heartbeat detector, which was being used on someone in a coma.” Several pieces are influenced by rain, including Made Pande Gangga Sentana’s *Bandang (Flash Flood)*, which “is inspired by water that overflowed and became a flood because humans threw away their trash carelessly.” Other works explore technical concepts, akin to Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which consists of 24 Preludes and Fugues exploring the keyboard in all 12 keys. Amongst other pieces, I Kadek Bagas Suryadinata’s *Faktorisasi Prima (Factorization of Prime Numbers)*, explores polyrhythms and canons using prime numbers 2, 3, 5, 7, 11 and 13.

The original idea was that the Vancouver students would take these recordings and create samples from them, which they would then mix in 8-channel surround sound for a live performance to be hosted at Western Front in June 2020. From November 2019 until early March 2020, the students participated in workshops with composer Brian Topp in preparation. Instructed in Ableton Live, they created new compositions with the samples. It was a simple idea which became complicated by

the enforcement of social distancing measures in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic. By mid-April it was clear the concert would have to be cancelled.

These unforeseen circumstances enabled us to rethink the project anew and we decided to approach other artists to also submit remixes. All of the artists are either based in Vancouver or have a connection with this city. For example, Ash Luk of the duo Minimal Violence, while now based in Berlin, used to work at a cafe just down the street from Western Front. Sarah Davachi worked for a time at Western Front, helping my predecessor, DB Boyko, with the music program. One of the last events that occurred at Western Front before the lockdown was a workshop led by composer Mauricio Pauly, a professor at SFU, with his students and the Montreal-based duo scapegoat. Some of the artists on this album participated in those workshops, and are current students in the SFU music program.

The remixed tracks on the album are preceded by the gamelan pieces that the samples were derived from. In some cases, as with Maria Alvarez’s *Light to Grey*, you can clearly hear the use of the sample. In others, like Rohini Soedwha’s *Tephra*, you would never know the samples were derived from a gamelan unless someone let you in on the secret. One of my favorite tracks, by Burnaby

North student Ashley Musa, sounds almost like she randomly picked and placed samples behind an 808 drum machine. About two thirds of the way through, it all comes together, with a meticulously constructed beat. It was so unexpected, and grooved so deeply, that the first time I heard it I laughed. Listening to the album from start to finish the gamelan pieces and the remixes blend together in an impressionistic and ethereal way.

One of the beauties of vinyl records is that their technological limitations force the listener to accept the ordering of the music in the way that the artist intended: it's a real pain to skip over, say, "Octopus's Garden," when listening to The Beatles' *White Album* (1968). This is one of the great joys of listening to vinyl or tape: the technological medium makes you listen to the whole side. As an educator, one of my favorite things to do for high school students is to play the last song on side A and the first song on side B of a vinyl copy of *Abbey Road*. Almost all the students have heard "Here Comes the Sun," the first track on side B, but very few have heard it as it was intended to be heard - after the noise induced Moog-fest and abrupt cut off of "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" on the preceding side of the album. Seeing their faces light up during the first few seconds of "Here Comes the Sun" after flipping the record over is always a great teaching moment.

Today's technology allows for an incredible amount of flexibility on the part of the listener. I remember trekking through the snow on a daily basis to listen to the three vinyl records by saxophonist and composer Wayne Shorter at my university library; now you can access his entire discography with the click of a button. But the negative side of this infinite access, is that music can also be bypassed at the click of a button. It's so easy to now skip over "Octopus's Garden," but it's also just as easy to avoid other voices whose expression we might not initially gel with. In listening to music, how often do we click the "next" button before a track has completed? How do we silence an artist's voice when we do this, establishing hierarchies in what we listen to?

As a curator, I have the responsibility to break down some of these hierarchies, to help curious audiences to challenge themselves with sounds they may not have been expecting. Or to rethink and reexamine what experimentation even means in the second decade of the 21st century. The music Western Front presents can be incredibly difficult to listen to, but if listened to with open ears, it can also be life changing, as hearing a gamelan was for Debussy and Satie. Western Front's archives contain recordings by Laurie Anderson, Pauline Oliveros, Anthony Braxton and many, many

others. This album, *Mepalu Sari*, is now a living part of that history. There's some incredible music on it. Phenomenal music. While some of the artists are more well known than others, every track has moments of magic.

Western Front decided to put this album on Bandcamp, a company that has wonderful articles and fair artist remuneration policies. While the tracks can be streamed for free, any monies given for them will go towards Western Front's artistic program. The individual artists also have the option to release the music on their own pages, so if you want to support them directly, feel free to do so. Also, be sure to explore the many releases on the Insitu Recordings website, our collaborators in this project, as well as each artists' individual Bandcamp pages and sites.

Thanks for listening.

—Aram Bajakian

## Participating Artists

Aysha Dulong, Ashley Musa, Ben Berardini, Bianca Greco, Denis Petrov, Dewa Gede Agung Kayonanda Parikesit Pemayun, Ethan Lum, Ida Bagus Pradnyananta Arimbawa, I Gede Mei Sutrisna Yasa, I Kadek Anggara Dwianta, I Kadek Bagus Suryadinata, I Kadek Diva Nanditya, I Kadek Hendra Dwiantara, I Kadek Wahyu Baskara Dewangga, I Komang Galang Widnyana, I Made Panji Pradnya Adi Kusuma, I Putu Diva Adi Pradana, I Putu Restu Andika, Kalyan Rath, Made Pande Gangga Sentana, Maria Alvarez, Mela Melania & Jack J, Minimal Violence (Ash Luk and Lida P), Pande Komang Gede Triadi Ditya, Rohini Soedhwa, Sarah Davachi, Scott Gailey and Tegan Wahlgren.



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supported by the Province of British Columbia



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Produced by Western Front in partnership with Burnaby North Secondary School and Insitu Recordings. Supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the BC Arts Council, the Province of British Columbia, the City of Vancouver, Artstarts in Schools, and the TELUS Friendly Future Foundation. Copresented with New Forms Festival.