

# The Bali Bug

By Kyle Gann

## Gamelan Son of Lion

Among the cultures that have left their mark on our music, Indonesia possesses a special luminosity, and has ever since Colin McPhee. We've stolen rhythmic structures from Africa, melodies from the Indian reservations, instruments from Japan, and scales from Eastern Europe, but whoever catches the Balinese gamelan virus converts to the whole schmeer. If the Dutch hadn't cracked down on homosexuality and the Japanese hadn't eyed Bali as a strategic military point, McPhee might have abandoned Western habits altogether, composing included, for his 1930s island paradise. (I take this from Carol Oja's fine McPhee biography.) Forced back to New York realities, he penned his Balinese patterns for Euro-orchestras. Almost every infected composer since, however—including Lou Harrison, Larry Polansky, Jarrad Powell, and Barbara Benary, whose recent opera at La Mama occasions this review—has bought, borrowed, or built their own clanging metallophones, soaring *suling* flutes, and ringing nipple gongs.

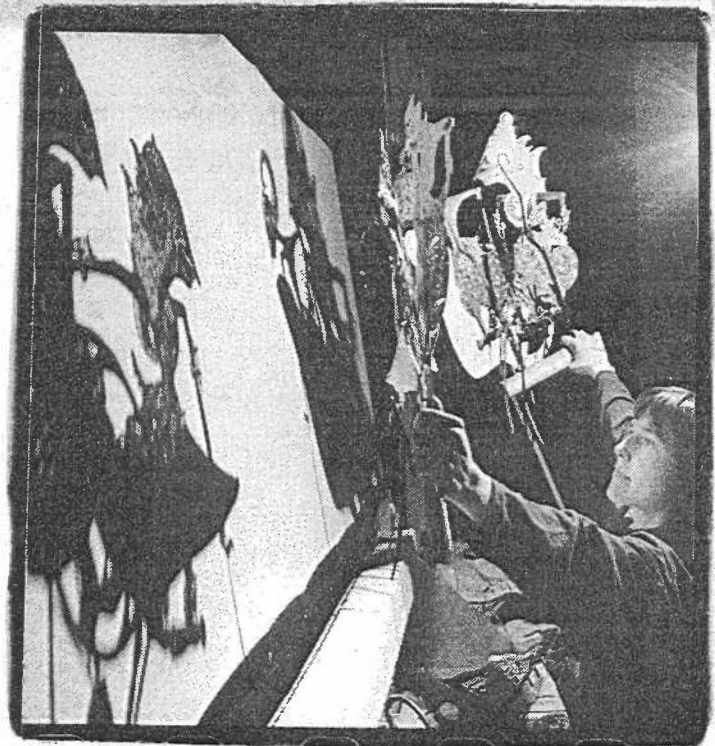
These days it isn't considered terribly p.c. for white people to "appropriate" a music "originated" by people of color. So fuck p.c.—Gamelan Son of Lion has been around more years, 17 to be exact, than the current liberal

fascions (sic), and Benary helped build its instruments herself from hot-rolled steel, food cans, and (as the program noted with scholarly specificity) 1956 Oldsmobile hub-caps. It's a moot point whether she's mastered gamelan style well enough to play it authentically; the more accurate impression is that her own minimalist compositional idiom fuses so aptly with Javanese rhythmic cycles that the gamelan was a natural extension for her. (The same was true of McPhee.) Besides, her gamelan drummer and theater consultant was Jody Diamond, whose work in bringing the Indonesian avant-garde to America has earned her eternal repose in multicultural heaven.

Benary didn't really aim at an Indonesian-style work in her puppet opera *Karna*, which Son of Lion performed February 3 through 13. The piece accompanied traditional shadow puppets, and the music articulated its form Javanese-style, with recurring complex rhythmic structures and different-sized gongs marking off the various cycles. However, the piece lasted only two hours rather than all night (as Javanese theater does), and since Benary used an English text, she sensibly set it not to wailing Javanese inflections but to admirably understandable Virgil Thomson-ish melodies. If anything, the fusion of English text with Hindu names and phraseology called to mind Gustav Holst's *Choral Hymns From the Rig Veda*.

The story was taken from the Indian *Mahabharata* epic. Karna, the low-caste son of a charioteer, is ashamed of his low parentage and wants to transcend it by defeating Prince Arjuna in a tournament. It turns out that Karna was abandoned at birth and his biological father is actually the sun god Surya, though he gets killed anyway (with Krishna's help) because his foster father's chariot gets stuck in the mud. I tried to read in some kind of timely *Iron John* weak-father-figure interpretation, but the *Mahabharata* is pretty opaque to Western sensibilities, and Benary, by her own admission, was more interested in fidelity to her source than in creating a bridge. (Nor did it help that I studied Sanskrit in college. I can always make a big impression on Hare Krishna types who try to sell me the *Bhagavad Gita* at airports by reciting "Andho 'pi satyam pashyati," which means "Even a blindman sees the truth.") Although it's the only sentence I remember from my Sanskrit text, you'd be amazed at how useful it's been. But I digress.)

Benary, one of the original minimalists, has a warm and affective, never-mechanical style. She's long been overdue such a full evening of her music. Unfortunately, in the hallowed Downtown tradition of ambitious low-budget productions, this was marred by an uneven performance, especially weak in the ad hoc vocal ensemble. Jody Kruskal and Danielle Woerner distinguished themselves as Karna and his mother, respectively, but the voices as a whole were distinctly underrehearsed, and not well-tuned to the gamelan's non-Western *pelog* and *slen-dro* scales (I heard opening night,



MICHAEL ACKERMAN

**Karna: Benary's Minimalist Puppet Opera**

and the rest of the run might have improved in these respects). The Son of Lion players themselves were better prepared, and Daniel Goode leaped athletically to bang all those gongs on the right beats.

Nevertheless, even through this double veil of narrative obscurity and vocal looseness, Benary's music rose to a series of deeply affecting moments. If I had trouble concentrating the first half hour or so, by Acts IV and V I was caught up in the spirit of the work. Karna sang to his parents in smoothly natural 7/8 meter, Act IV had a charming overture of mallet melodies, and the final battle scene was enlivened by rousing rhythms in a 10/8 pattern (divid-

ed 2 2 2 2 2 3 2 3 2). The humor, provided by two little clown puppets, was cute and weirdly naive, punning on the unpronounceability of Hindu names. Karna's dream, in which Surya tells him how to obtain a magic weapon, was effectively portrayed by a black-white reversal in the puppetry, and by having another singer echo Surya's words in a miked whisper. Varied and well-focused in its structure and techniques, *Karna* is a convincing cross-cultural hybrid that deserves a better-funded performance. It also deserves to be on compact disc, which would render the work's minor cultural barriers easy to overcome. ■

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