

Approaches to Learning Traditional Performing Arts in Central Java through a Direct Encounter

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Abstract

This paper examines learning approaches that are used by Javanese practitioners of traditional performing arts, including gamelan musicians, *dhalang* (puppet masters of wayang) and dancers. Based on fieldwork interviews and participant observation in and around Surakarta (Solo), Central Java, I described five learning approaches that have in common a direct encounter with live performing arts, which triggers an immediate learning process. These are learning by ear, simultaneous imitation, rehearsing and performing, exposure and absorption, and learning by association. Each learning approach is described based on the artists' own accounts of teaching and learning, and supported by pre-existing literature in cognition studies and ethnomusicology. I show that most practitioners have engaged in multiple learning approaches, and also that knowledge of one art form often enables or aids learning in other art forms. Javanese performing arts continue to be popular and sustainable. The learning approaches examined in this paper contribute to such success because they support sites for knowledge transmission through direct encounters with arts as they are performed.

Keywords: gamelan, Javanese dance, knowledge transmission, learning, wayang

Introduction

Traditional Javanese performing arts include gamelan music, wayang puppetry and dance.ⁱ In this paper I examine approaches for learning across these three art forms, and focus in particular on situations where there is a direct encounter between the learner and the performing arts, triggering an immediate learning process.ⁱⁱ Analysing these learning processes shows that people tend to make use of a range of approaches for learning, rather than relying on a single one. By examining such approaches, we can better understand how knowledge is transmitted in traditional

Javanese performing arts and therefore how new generations of performers are created.

Based on interviews with performers and supported by pre-existing literature, I have divided the ways in which practitioners learn performing arts through a direct encounter into five learning approaches. The first three, learning by ear, simultaneous imitation, and rehearsing and performing, all take place at the time when performing arts activities are being conducted. Exposure and absorption, the fourth approach, can be a subconscious and unintentional process. The fifth, learning by association, refers to learning one part by knowing another and highlights the links between different art forms where knowledge of one enables a practitioner to learn another. Based on extensive fieldwork observations and interviews with practitioners and arts teachers, each section of the paper will explain what the learning approach is and examine how it works in practice.

Previous research about learning processes in Javanese gamelan music has been conducted by ethnomusicologists. Perlman (2004) describes how the mind draws on different types of memory, reasoning and cognitive processes, and states that “this cognitive heterogeneity ... explains why music can be mysterious to its own expert practitioners” (p. 18). Perlman and Brinner (1995) both provide systems of categorization for the types of knowledge held by gamelan musicians. Perlman (2004) uses categories of implicit and explicit knowledge, where implicit knowledge is acquired slowly but can be quickly summoned to action and where explicit knowledge may be hard to immediately put into practice (p. 22). Brinner (1995) discusses procedural and declarative knowledge types. Declarative knowledge refers to factual information whereas procedural knowledge is about how to do something (p. 39). He goes on to describe a process where “by applying procedural knowledge to a stock of declarative knowledge of prototypical pieces, a musician gains declarative knowledge, increasing his or her knowledge of repertoire” (Brinner, 1995, p. 148).

In addition to ethnomusicological works, this paper examines dissertations by Indonesian students. These dissertations describe the life of a single senior performing artist in considerable detail, and frequently include information about how that artist learnt to play gamelan, dance or perform wayang. In many cases, the artist studied outside the context of a formal school-based education at a time before attending school was expected. Waridi (1997) wrote his Master’s dissertation on the highly respected musician Martopangrawit. He includes descriptions of Martopangrawit’s family background, education and how he learnt gamelan music, as well as details of his career. Harisna’s 2010 dissertation about gamelan musician and composer Suyadi Tejopangrawit is another example of a biographical work about a musician that is useful for researching knowledge transmission. He describes how Suyadi used approaches such as learning by ear and ascetic activities in order to learn to play gamelan.

Whereas the above works focus on gamelan music, in this paper I take a broader approach, including other art forms. This is because, in the context of knowledge transmission, the same practitioners are often active in more than one art form and their knowledge of one significantly informs their ability to engage in the others. Supangah (2011) writes, “in the world of traditional arts in Java, there are

no strict boundaries between the art of *pedhalangan*, *karawitan*, and/or dance” (p. 268). This paper will show that not only gamelan musicians but also dancers and dhalang (puppet masters of wayang) use a range of approaches to acquire knowledge of various types.

The five approaches discussed here can be found in many genres of performing arts across Southeast Asia and beyond. However, there have been few detailed studies of learning outside the context of formal education. In Southeast Asia, studies of knowledge transmission have tended to focus on the role of the teacher. Wong (2001) and Giordano (2011) have written about the *wai khru* ceremony, where students of Thai music pay respects to their teachers. Mrázek (2008) describes how both the teacher and the musical instrument are imbued with spiritual significance in Thai music, bound to each other, as part of the relationship between the teacher and student (pp. 80-81). Kitley (1995) suggests that in Bali, a similarly powerful, though perhaps less complex, teacher-student relationship can emerge when she describes how traditionally “the teacher and pupil have an idealised relationship where dedication, love and loyalty mean more than money” (p. 49).

A study that explores learning beyond lessons and classes is *Growing Into Music*, conducted by five academics from the United Kingdom and Azerbaijan. It focuses on the music of Mande *jeli* musicians of Mali and Guinea; Langa and Manganiyar folk musicians of Rajasthan; hereditary musicians in the Hindustani art music of North India; *ashiq* bards and *mugham* musicians of Azerbaijan; rumba musicians of Western Cuba; and the *musica llanera* ‘plains music’ tradition of Venezuela. The project website states: “Learning music is accomplished largely by osmosis and imitation, often without a great deal of conscious intent. Children may develop an unselfconscious musical confidence born of inherited or deeply-nurtured authority” (*Growing Into Music*). While the *Growing Into Music* project focused on children learning music, following their progress over several years, in this paper I have used interviews with adults and teenagers to find out how they learnt performing arts when they were young. Nettle (2005) states that “to all kinds of music scholars, one of the most important things about a musical culture is how it, as it were, transmits itself. Considering this, ethnomusicologists have contributed modestly on the general nature of ... different forms of transmission” (p. 292). Exploring approaches to knowledge transmission beyond that which is guided by a teacher, a book or a recording is an effective way to find out how practitioners have learnt their performing arts, and therefore how a performing arts culture is able to survive.

I became interested in the way Javanese performing arts are learnt in Java after studying gamelan music first in the United Kingdom and then in Central Java. I lived in Surakarta and studied gamelan music, on its own and in the context of wayang and dance from 2008 to 2017. This included two years studying at Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta (Indonesian Arts Institute Surakarta) from 2008 to 2010. I also took lessons with teachers, participated in community rehearsals and performances, and was an observer at many performing arts events during this period. My PhD research gave me the opportunity to ask questions about how Javanese practitioners had learnt their arts.

Learning by Ear

Javanese writers refer to the term *kupingan* as an approach for acquiring knowledge, taken from the Javanese word *kuping* or ‘ear’, and therefore translated here as ‘learning by ear’. Waridi (1997) gives an example of *kupingan* as “a person who is interested in learning gamelan always going to places where gamelan events are held”. He goes on to explain how this approach was considered effective before notation was commonly used, but that it requires a long period of time “because it is not a direct process of learning and teaching between a student and a teacher” (pp. 34-35). Harisna (2010) notes that in order for learning by ear to be successful, “it must be supported by perseverance and the willingness of individuals to repeat the results of their observations. The outcome is apparent when the person has memorised the material taught” (p. 42). We can see that for learning by ear the onus is on the student to learn, without a specific teacher. This is different to being taught aurally, where a teacher plays a passage that is repeated by the student. In *kupingan* (as in all of the approaches covered in this paper) there is no specific teacher doing the teaching. The concept of learning by ear is more easily applied to gamelan music than to dance or wayang, which obviously incorporate important visual elements.

Although I have translated *kupingan* as learning by ear, simply listening and playing, with less of a focus on learning, may be more accurate. The elderly musician Subiniⁱⁱⁱ captures the idea very well: “[Whatever instrument you play], as long as you’ve heard it you can play it” (Subini, personal communication, 20 January 2014). Gamelan maker and musician Joko Sabeyan explained that this is a process which begins at a very young age, “*Kupingan* is every time we hear a note, especially gamelan, oh this is *sléndro* [tuning], this is *pélog* [tuning]. From when we are little we can already feel this is *pélog*. I could already do this from a young age” (Joko Sabeyan, personal communication, 23 February 2014). Being able to differentiate between the pitches of the *sléndro* and *pélog* scales used in gamelan can be seen as the first step in developing a good ear, and tends to be a skill readily acquired by children surrounded by these musical tones.

Subini explained how she never made a big effort to learn gamelan music through listening. “I also don’t know, I’m surprised at myself, every time I play it I know it, by just listening I can play it” (Subini, personal communication, 20 January 2014). The dhalang and musician Hali Jarwo Sularso felt that the concept of playing together was related to learning by ear. He said, “*Kupingan* is when lots of friends play gamelan and they remember it all, without using notation. But if they are asked to write notation they can’t do it.” (Hali Jarwo Sularso, personal communication, 9 February 2014). Their enhanced listening ability is used to play together as an ensemble, but they are also reliant on the support of the ensemble, so their ability to play together does not necessarily translate into individual knowledge.

For musicians who didn’t grow up surrounded by gamelan music, it appears to be more difficult to learn by ear.^{iv} The gamelan teacher and musician Surono commented:

To be honest, for me, learning gamelan relies more on [my head], not my ear. Because my background...was that I began to know the arts world [as a teenager],

so my ears weren't very good at learning.... [Because] I didn't feel it from a young age, different to [my cousin] Sujarwo. Even when he was a newborn, Sujarwo was already in that environment.... For me, I rely more on notation. I am quite slow at learning by ear. (Surono, personal communication, 2 March 2014).

The musician Bambang Siswanto, however, was able to train himself to learn by ear:

Sometimes a person's hearing is absolute and this is good and can be effective, sometimes not. Like me, at the beginning it was not effective. My eyes were effective, through following the movements [of a musician's hands] with my eyes.... The notes were not important, but the way of moving. But in order to remember it, after I had been learning for a while, listening was more effective.... If the whole gamelan is sounding, I can still hear [the instrument] I want to hear. Once I could do that, listening became effective. (Bambang Siswanto, personal communication, 26 March 2014)

The singer and musician Sukaeni linked the idea of learning by ear to *perasaan* or feeling. She explained how she could play pieces that she didn't know the name of and hadn't necessarily played before, by following other instruments (Sukaeni, personal communication, 23 March 2014). As we shall see in the next section, this idea of simultaneous imitation is key to the ways in which Javanese musicians and dancers learn and play together. The musician Wakidi Dwidjomartono also described learning by ear as being related to feeling, and to the idea of *alami* ('natural') performing artists, a term he applies to himself, meaning those who learnt outside the formal education system.^v He defined *kupingan* as listening and then memorising (Wakidi Dwidjomartono, personal communication, 10 May 2014). However, for the other musicians and performing artists I spoke to, there was no explicit process of memorisation at work, rather a seemingly automatic transition from listening to reproducing with very limited conscious effort on the part of the musician or artist. In his book about music and cognition, Levitin (2006) describes how most people become expert listeners by age six because we have "incorporated the grammar of our musical culture into mental schemas that allow us to form musical expectations" (p. 216). Perhaps it is these mental schemas that allow performing artists, especially those who grew up surrounded by arts, to learn through listening alone.

Simultaneous Imitation

Simultaneous imitation is an approach used by gamelan musicians and dancers but not by dhalang, since there is usually only one dhalang performing at a time. Gamelan musicians use these approaches to play pieces they may not have played before or do not remember. With the instruments of the gamelan taking on different roles, musicians can join in with a piece by following other instruments, responding immediately to aural cues. Brinner (1999) describes how "a Javanese musician must listen interpretively" and respond appropriately to particular cues (p. 24). Elsewhere he defines this as a process of deductive imitation, which "involves idiomatic

translation or transformation of an essence abstracted from perceptual input” (Brinner, 1995, p. 138). In other words, the musicians follow instruments that may be played differently to their own, using the heterophonic structure of the music to play together. He describes how the gamelan ensemble forms an interactive safety net, allowing musicians to follow along without creating problems for the overall music of the ensemble (Brinner, 1995, pp. 179-180).

Bambang Siswanto explained to me how he could use such deductive simultaneous imitation for some instruments but not others: “If I don’t know the piece at all, I can still play *gendèr* for it (a tube-resonated metallophone that plays a central role in the ensemble), but I certainly cannot play *rebab* (a two-stringed bowed lute, a leading melodic instrument) or *bonang* (a set of horizontal pot gongs, another important melodic instrument). I can play *balungan* (one of several instruments playing the basic skeletal melody). I can follow the *bonang* or the *saron panerus* (a high-pitched metallophone that anticipates the skeletal melody)” (Bambang Siswanto, personal communication, 26 March 2014). In this way, the use of simultaneous imitation enables musicians to play a much larger repertoire than the pieces they have committed to memory. Levitin (2006) describes the concept of chunking, where musicians remember schemas for familiar sequences and use faking to fill in between by replacing a gap with something “stylistically plausible” (p. 215). In Javanese gamelan this is referred to as *ngawur*. It can occur when a gamelan player does not know the piece they are playing, and is playing an elaborating instrument.^{vi} They must try to get by through a combination of deductive simultaneous imitation and filling in their part by faking it at times when a cue from another instrument is not immediately apparent. For instruments that can easily rely on cues for all their notes, *ngawur* is unnecessary.

As well as a way to survive a performance, simultaneous imitation is an important approach for learning, which can be used at rehearsals and informal playing sessions as well as during performances. Suparno used this approach to learn gamelan:

I only imitate. So I don’t use notation, I just imitate. For example, playing *demung* sometimes I see who is next to me and just copy them. After a long time, [the material] has gone in here (indicates his head). (Suparno, personal communication, 21 January 2014)

Whereas the approach of learning by ear is focused on listening, in simultaneous imitation a performer concentrates on doing. They are engaged in listening, but must respond almost instantaneously to what they hear by moving, playing an instrument or vocalising. There is less time to consider what one has heard, as an immediate reaction is required. This is an important skill for professional gamelan musicians to acquire in order to access increased repertoire, but it is also a learning approach in itself, as information gained whilst playing music enters the memory without an explicit process of memorisation. This is similar to the approach taken during dance classes.

In palace-style dance, the dancers are expected to have fully memorised the dance routine for any performance. It is during the learning process that

simultaneous imitation is one of the most common approaches for teaching and learning. During a group dance class, the dancers are positioned so that less experienced students can see their more expert counterparts. This is so that they can simultaneously imitate them, and learn through moving as they dance. The dance teacher Umiyati Sri Warsini commented that if a new student approaches her, she suggests they just join in at first, dancing at the back of the class (Umiyati Sri Warsini, personal communication, 16 May 2014). The desirable type of imitation in this case is not deductive; it is unlikely that a dance student can deduce their own role from following a different role. For dance, an exact imitation is the end-goal, as a number of students usually learn the same role together.



Figure 1. Dancers rehearsing at the Mangkunegaran Palace, Surakarta. The dancers on the left are turning around to look at their peers and find out what the next movement should be. (Source: Rachel Hand, 26 June 2013)

While this type of imitation is restricted to group classes for palace-style dance, for village-style masked dance, learning through simultaneous imitation can take place during a performance for dances with more than one of the same character. Beja Nugraha explained that he learnt on stage rather than through rehearsals:

When I did masked dance for the first time, the learning process from my father was direct [in performance], not through rehearsals. Yes, in 1995 in Jakarta, at Taman Mini no less, that was the first time I did the masked dance, following Father. My role was at the back. (Beja Nugraha, personal communication, 23 February 2014)

Beginner dancers often start by performing simple roles where several people are dancing the same routine. Processes of simultaneous imitation and interpretation like this are key to the way people learn gamelan and dance. They can take place during classes, rehearsals and performances, and are a vital skill for performing artists, both as a way to survive professional life and as a learning approach.

Learning through Rehearsing and Performing

A rehearsal of Javanese performing arts is referred to as a *latihan*, but whereas in English the word rehearsal often means preparation for a specific performance, there are many routine, weekly or twice-weekly *latihan* held in and around Surakarta where professional and amateur musicians or dancers come together to play music or dance for enjoyment. As Sutton (1993) notes, a *latihan* “is valued in its own right” (p. 18).^{vii}

Young or less experienced performers sometimes attend rehearsals as a way to learn from more knowledgeable players. In many cases a rehearsal is led by a professional musician, who may act as a kind of teacher, selecting repertoire for the group and helping less experienced participants, but rarely instructing individuals in exactly what they should play. Sutton (1993) points out that “little is said by a group leader unless the resultant sound is too disorganised or misconceived” (p. 19). An example of this is the senior musician Suropto Hadi Martono, who runs a number of rehearsals held in people’s homes and at community spaces, which cater to participants from a range of backgrounds, amateur and professional, old and young. Musicians learn from each other at these sessions, picking up variants of melodic phrases, drumming patterns, and ideas for arrangement of repertoire. They can engage in simultaneous imitation as discussed in the previous section, and may also be allowed to choose some of the repertoire of the rehearsal. Outside the formalised classroom and away from their teachers, musicians can try out particular styles or melodies in a musically supportive atmosphere.

Whereas gamelan music and dance are learnt at rehearsals, a dhalang does not usually learn through routine group rehearsals. Rehearsals for wayang, if held at all, are in preparation for a performance and tend to be aimed at rehearsing the musicians, rather than the dhalang himself. Only sections of the wayang show are practised, with the focus on those parts with particularly unusual or challenging musical accompaniment. It is unusual for a professional dhalang to rehearse his part at all in the context of a rehearsal.^{viii}

The line between rehearsal and performance is not particularly clear-cut in terms of the way the music is played. Sutton (1993) notes that “the distinction between performance and rehearsal in Java is much less sharply drawn than in the West” (p. 17). At both rehearsals and performances, musical pieces or suites are played through in their entirety without stopping. Learning therefore also takes place at a performance in a similar way to at a rehearsal. Soetarno (1997) describes the wayang performances put on by famous dhalang Anom Soeroto every thirty-five

days for his Javanese birthday, as “fostering a sense of family among dhalang, also for gaining experience, exchange of thoughts, exchange of creativity, and this in turn enriches the experience of the soul” (p. 18). For children, the time immediately before a performance was traditionally an opportunity for them to try out the gamelan instruments and play with the wayang puppets. Although I have witnessed this at village performances, it is no longer the norm. Supanggah (2011) notes that “many performances today are more formal or ‘closed’ in nature, with an increasing gap between the artists and the audience” (p. 254). Nonetheless, while children nowadays rarely get the chance to try the instruments before a show, performances still provide an opportunity for children to learn by watching and listening, and sometimes by becoming the performer themselves.

Many of my informants described their first experiences performing as on stage with no rehearsal. In some cases, such as Suparno’s account below of his first wayang performance which took place in the 1950s, this was actually the first time they had taken part in a particular performing art at all.

[My first time] holding wayang puppets was at Gondo’s place, at a *ruwatan* ritual performance. The person having the ritual done was my sister, Gondo, who had knocked over a rice cooking pot. The person doing the *ruwatan* ritual was Mbah Masaran ... During the day I was asked by my father to perform wayang after the ritual. Me, even though I was only a young child and my speaking wasn’t good. I said I couldn’t do it. “How come you can’t do it? It’s only the follow-on after the ritual. At home you play with wayang puppets. You should put that into practice at the performance at your own sister’s place.”... Now, a child doesn’t have knowledge of dramatic skill (*sanggit*). But I was brave enough to come forward. In the first scene the characters hadn’t even greeted each other, but were angry straight away about the whereabouts of the wedding party. My father laughed from behind the wayang screen. “What is this kid doing?!” Of course, after I had finished as we were going home, [he said,] “What were you thinking? People with guests they haven’t even greeted but are immediately angry?!” I couldn’t do it yet, but would be able to in future. So, starting from being laughed at, I was then trained so things ran more smoothly, at that time using the *mucuki* model. (Suparno, personal communication, 21 January 2014)



Figure 2. A child dhalang, Kuntawijaya, performs *mucuki* in Sekalekan village, Klaten. Note the small platform he is sitting on so he is the right height for the screen. (Source: Rachel Hand, 20 February 2016)

Despite being laughed at, Suparno's first performance didn't put him off wayang. His father expected him to jump from playing with puppets at home to performing a complex story on stage. It is likely that he was aware that his young son would be unable to perform properly, but children are forgiven for performing badly, and being on stage, being laughed at, could help move Suparno's learning along.

The *mucuki* system, as a way for a child dhalang to practice in a real performance situation continues to exist to this day, with a young child, most frequently from a dhalang family, taking to the stage and becoming the dhalang for around thirty minutes before the main performance begins. With the gamelan musicians already in place to accompany them and the audience beginning to arrive, a child dhalang can get some exposure and feel what it is like to be the dhalang, before he or she is able to perform a whole story. *Mucuki* performances tend to feature just one or two scenes, with a focus on battles rather than speech, as child dhalang tend to have better puppet manipulation skills than they have knowledge of textual content. Many of the dhalang I spoke to had performed *mucuki* when they were young, often before their father's show. The dhalang Wulan Sri Panjang Mas describes how she is teaching her son wayang by encouraging him to perform *mucuki* before her performances:

When he was in class six of primary school I said to him, “Son, you are going to be a dhalang. Here’s the text, you read it.” I taught him and he could do it, so I gathered together his classmates from school. I trained them to play gamelan, to accompany him. Then when it was his first performance at home ... everyone knew that my child was a dhalang ... Then, after a while, if I had a performance in Klaten or wherever, my son could already perform wayang, I told him to perform *mucuki* before my performance. (Wulan Sri Panjang Mas, personal communication, 7 March 2014)

As well as wayang, gamelan is also often learnt through performing. The singer Sutarmi learnt to sing by performing for her father’s wayang performances as a child in the 1970s. She explained that she started out only singing simple repertoire and then learnt other pieces by listening to them. She also learnt to play some gamelan instruments in this way (Sutarmi, personal communication, 23 February 2014). Hali Jarwo Sularso described how he learnt to play gamelan through performing as a child in the 1950s, starting by playing gong at all-night wayang performances:

The gong came first ... When I was little I would sleep and then be woken up at 3 a.m. to play gong. Oh yes, I was so happy! After that came *bonang*, after gong, *bonang* ... Once I had memorised *bonang*, then came *kendhang* (a set of two-headed drums that control the tempo). (Hali Jarwo Sularso, personal communication, 9 February 2014)

Later, as an adult, he continued to learn while performing, but from his friends and peers:

If we gathered ..., then I could check. Oh, if that is the case, my *rebab*-playing the other day was wrong. It was often like that with my friends.... If there were a gamelan performance I would definitely play *kenong* (large pot gongs that mark structural points in the music), but [listen to] that *rebab* playing. Yes, until the *kenong* was wrong because I wasn’t [concentrating]. (Hali Jarwo Sularso, personal communication, 9 February 2014)

Hali Jarwo Sularso is a dhalang as well as a gamelan musician. He has learnt wayang from watching other dhalang and takes elements that he likes as inspiration for his own performances:

When a dhalang performs there is humour, there is *sulukan* (sung verse), puppet manipulation, *keprak* (percussive signals and effects), and what do I like? If the *keprak* is good I use it. Wow, the jokes are good, I will use them. But I don’t write them down, I put them in here (indicates his head) and they are in. Wow, the story is good ... Yes, I use it. So in the past I learnt to perform wayang by watching wayang performances until the end. I never went home early, never, I stayed until the end so that the story could finish. (Hali Jarwo Sularso, personal communication, 9 February 2014)

He finds it easier to absorb and retain information through watching wayang performances if he is playing the gamelan rather than just spectating, so if the dhalang is a friend of his and there is space, he will join the musicians for some of the performance.

Traditionally, two wayang performances were held for an event, one during the day, which was considered less important, and the other at night, from around 9 p.m. until the morning. This night performance was considered the more significant one and would feature the main dhalang. He might ask a younger brother or a son to perform for the daytime performance as an opportunity to practise on stage. In addition to the daytime performances providing a forum for less experienced dhalang to perform, they were also the place for beginner gamelan musicians to explore the gamelan. Joko Sabeyan describes how there was even a relaxed attitude towards who played the gamelan at some night performances:

At performances in the past it wasn't like it is now, now it is quite strict. For example, if someone is the dhalang, the gamelan musicians are from [the leader] Wito, for example, one club. If another person from outside the club wants to swap, perhaps they are shy or not allowed to, it's like that. In the past whoever wanted to could play, while learning ... In the past children could play the gamelan. Before, when father was performing, it was children who played the gamelan, his grandchildren usually, and this wasn't considered an issue back then. Even the host of the event didn't consider it a problem. Nowadays it is made into a problem. "Why are children learning at this performance!?" Some people are like that. (Joko Sabeyan, personal communication, 23 February 2014)

He told me that nowadays there are far fewer opportunities for beginners to join performances like this. Nonetheless, within these constraints, learning while performing is still an important way in which young artists acquire knowledge and skills.

Clearly, performing is crucial to the learning process, and importantly, performing comes at an early stage in learning, when an artist may have mastered very little. As soon as he or she knows barely enough to perform, perhaps knowing how to play only one or two instruments and not even a whole gamelan piece, or perform a single wayang scene or a few dance steps, a young artist is pushed into their first performance, often by older relatives. While gamelan and dance students certainly learn through rehearsing as well, it is these initial, often unplanned, performances that they remember. For young dhalang, there is often no rehearsal before their first performance, which may be preceded by learning through exposure and absorption alone.



Figure 3. Now a rare occurrence, children join in playing the gamelan at a wayang performance in Manjungan village, Klaten. Here, Sukaeni is showing her niece, Nining Dewi Larasati, how to play *saron*, and her nephew, Nanang Kris Utama, is playing *saron* at the front. (Rachel Hand, 9 August 2013)

Exposure and Absorption

While the learning approaches described in the preceding sections involved intention on the part of the learner, some performing arts knowledge is gained through exposure and absorption, a process of osmosis that takes place without any effort on the part of a learner or a teacher. This unintentional learning occurs in many places, including performances and rehearsals, and is likely to be a particularly strong factor in the learning of those artists growing up with performing arts at home. Since a person's learning capacity is greatest during childhood, being surrounded by performing arts activities at home can make a significant contribution to a person's knowledge and skill at a subconscious level, without requiring any intention or effort. Levitin (2006) compares acquisition of a music culture to language acquisition and explains that "our ability to make sense of music depends on experience" (p. 106). Children growing up with music have a head-start in terms of the amount of music they experience compared to those growing up in non-musical households.

A dissertation about dance teacher S. Maridi describes a process of natural absorption of knowledge:

For S. Maridi, learning to dance occurred naturally; as a child there is an automatic desire to play. He often played imitating the movements of his father when he was dancing from behind him ... S. Maridi's behaviour caught the attention of his father. His father then started to teach him the techniques of good dancing. (Kusumawati, 2002, pp. 25-26)

From this we can see that as a child, S. Maridi was never forced into learning dance, but when he showed interest of his own accord, this was noticed and encouraged by his father who was himself a dancer. Such exposure and absorption during childhood is key for many artists whose initial interest in performing arts begins as a result of this. Hali Jarwo Sularso defined wayang as his hobby when he was a child and told me how he loved to watch performances whenever possible (Hali Jarwo Sularso, personal communication, 9 February 2014). Sujarwo Joko Prehatin described how, when his cousin Surono had set up a small wayang screen at home to practise wayang, "I indirectly joined in with learning even though no one was teaching me. I just held the wayang puppets and played in the style of a person performing wayang" (Sujarwo Joko Prehatin, personal communication, 31 January 2014).

For some children of performing artists, the assumption was that they would be able to do performing arts anyway, without any direct instruction. The dhalang Beja Nugraha described his father Tukas Gondo Sukasno as being very harsh on him, expecting him to learn without any direct tuition. He was required to make full use of any exposure to wayang by watching performances with maximum attention:

If he performed, I really learnt. When Father performed wayang, when my older brother performed, when my uncle performed, then I learnt ...[through] watching. I didn't even want to play gamelan ... My father, if he educated me, he was very strict.... If I was confused, I was scolded. 'If you are watching wayang, what are you looking at?' Like that, I was told off. (Beja Nugraha, personal communication, 23 February 2014)

In this way, unintentional absorption of performing arts is transformed into intentional learning, though the forum of a performance remains the same. Watching performances and intentionally learning is common among performing artists. Bambang Siswanto described how he was able to learn a great deal from watching specifically at a time when his ear was not yet fully trained to learn by listening alone:

How do Wakidjo's hands move when he plays *gendèr* or *rebab* or *kendhang*? It's his hands that move, because I couldn't catch the idea of sound from the *kendhang*. I just knew, I was told, it's good, that's all. So how does he make that sound? When I was close to him I could ask him. If not, I could only watch.... Then later there was a different *kendhang* player, it was different, even the sound was different. And then I asked, which one was better? I didn't actually know which one was better. Only at that time, since it wasn't a problem for the other *kendhang* player, it must have meant that it was good, that was all. My thinking was like that. That

drumming was good. There were people back then who were sensitive. If it wasn't nice sometimes they would move, look over or whatever ..., basically they moved as an effect of him playing something. That meant I could get it, oh whoever made that less nice, it could be felt, even though I didn't know the detail of it. (Bambang Siswanto, personal communication, 26 March 2014)

We can see from this that through watching, Bambang began to learn about what makes a performance considered good by the musicians, knowledge which he could then use when playing gamelan himself. Exposure to live performances or rehearsals is essential to building up this kind of knowledge; media such as notation and recordings simply cannot convey such details, and even learning from a teacher in a classroom or individual lesson does not provide this kind of interactional information which is crucial to becoming a good gamelan musician.

Wulan Sri Panjang Mas grew up in a village in Wonogiri and, as a child, was only exposed to her father's wayang performances. She explained that when she started to watch wayang by other dhalang, in particular in Surakarta, she would often ask questions about what she was seeing:

Before I didn't know any Surakarta dhalang, I was just with my father. Then, afterwards, I got to know senior Surakarta dhalang. If I watched a wayang, coincidentally there would be one who would sit next to me. If there was a scene that I didn't know I would often ask. And the dhalang who sat next to me would explain. (Wulan Sri Panjang Mas, personal communication, 7 March 2014)

For Wulan, unintentional exposure to performing arts as a child led to her intentionally learning from exposure to different dhalang as an adult, and therefore greatly widening her knowledge. The musician Wakidi Dwidjomartono too, having been exposed to gamelan in his local community from a young age, began to take advantage of this, learning for himself when he saw others play gamelan.

For example, back then there was Dalimin's *bonang* playing, Cipto Suwarso's *bonang* playing, which I paid attention to, watched. For example, if I wanted to learn *bonang*, I would watch that *bonang* player. Wow, he is so good, and then wow, his *bonang* playing is like this. (Wakidi Dwidjomartono, personal communication, 10 May 2014)

He describes his learning approach as some kind of inexplicable transformation:

I asked myself, how am I suddenly able to play a bit, play *gendèr*, play *rebab*? I didn't take lessons with anyone, didn't study ... I was just left as I was. But suddenly, alone, yes that. Perhaps there was already a talent or a gift from there ... a heavenly gift. (Wakidi Dwidjomartono, personal communication, 10 May 2014)

This was the same response I received when I asked my *rebab* teacher, Darsono Hadiraharjo, how he was able to remember the whole of the lengthy piece *Gendhing Krawitan* off by heart. He told me he had just got up one day and been able to play it, which he also referred to as a heavenly gift (*anugerah*).

I argue that these kinds of seemingly instant acquisitions of knowledge are in fact the result of years of exposure and absorption, usually beginning from birth or in early childhood. This kind of exposure from a very young age sets the stage for being able to do performing arts. However, exposure alone is clearly inadequate for becoming a performing artist. Practitioners must make use of this exposure in some way if they wish to excel in performing arts. Those people who only acquired knowledge unintentionally through exposure and absorption without supporting this with other forms of learning were able to do arts to some extent but would not become professional performing artists.

Learning by Association

One of the key traits that unite almost all professional Javanese performing artists is that they tend to be multi-skilled. It is well known that most gamelan musicians are proficient on many instruments of the gamelan and can often sing vocal parts. Many singers can also play gamelan to some extent. However, it is less commonly acknowledged that many artists can do more than one art form. For example, many dhalang can play gamelan, and indeed it is often considered necessary to be a good dhalang. Some dhalang can also dance and they make use of this knowledge when making puppets dance on the screen. Professional dancers understand the cues given to them from the *keprak* and often know some of the drumming patterns that accompany the dances, being able to vocalise them if they don't have drumming technique. Gamelan musicians who play for dance or wayang (and I would argue that this is what most professional musicians do nowadays since gamelan-only events are comparatively rare) must understand a great deal of what is happening on stage or on screen and many gamelan musicians can also dance or perform wayang a bit, although they may have never performed professionally. With all these overlaps in knowledge between the different art forms, learning one art form can help a performer to acquire knowledge in another art form, through learning by association, and according to my research, this is frequently what happens.

Many of my interviewees were capable of performing more than one art form, or at least had some specialised knowledge in multiple art forms. Hali Jarwo Sularso is not only a dhalang but is also an expert musician. He explained:

It's like this, for the dhalang's art one must be able to play gamelan. If a dhalang can play gamelan that is really good and they will be respected by the gamelan musicians ... This is different to a dhalang who can't play gamelan. If he wants to signal to end a piece, he can't. I don't like that. I learnt to perform wayang and also to play gamelan. (Hali Jarwo Sularso, personal communication, 9 February 2014)

Similarly, in order to play gamelan for wayang accompaniment, it is advisable to know some wayang-specific repertoire: "The *rebab* has to be able to play *sulukan*, right? Because it guides the *sulukan*. The *rebab* player must know. Same for the *gendèr* player—*ada-ada* (a style of sung verse used to create an atmosphere), *sulukan*, they must be memorised" (Hali Jarwo Sularso, personal communication, 9 February 2014).

Suroño described how knowing dance can help with wayang: “For us, because we already know about dance, for performing wayang, [I know the] movements, the original movements, and afterwards I can transfer that to wayang movements, so it is much better” (Suroño, personal communication, 2 March 2014). And vice-versa, how wayang can help with dance: “For example, in masked dance it isn’t just about dancing but there is also dialogue. That also helps. Because I can already perform wayang, I am able to use it in masked dance” (Suroño, personal communication, 2 March 2014).

Bambang Siswanto frequently plays gamelan to accompany wayang. He took evening classes in wayang so that he would be better at this.

I thought I should know how it felt to perform wayang so that if I am playing gamelan I can make the connection, like that, make the link. If the dhalang wants this, that, oh these notes like this means it will finish ..., this code means he wants a *gendhing*, this code is for a *pathetan* and so on. (Bambang Siswanto, personal communication, 26 March 2014)

As a child, Wakidi Dwidjomartono learnt *kendhang* from a dance teacher, although he wasn’t learning dance himself.

There were dance rehearsals, there were never gamelan rehearsals ..., it was all dance. The children were around 10 years old, 15 years old. We—I joined the gamelan—we accompanied on the gamelan, and I learnt a little *kendhang*, and I was told, “That’s wrong, it should be like this,” and I was given examples by the teacher, like that. (Wakidi Dwidjomartono, personal communication, 10 May 2014)

It is usual for dancing teachers to be very familiar with drumming patterns. When teaching dance during rehearsals at the Mangkunegaran Palace, Umiyati Sri Warsini sometimes corrects the *kendhang* player by vocalising the drumming for particular dance steps. Sujarwo Joko Prehatin learnt to dance the Klana character in masked dance by first playing *kendhang* for his uncle and his cousin to dance over the years. Due to the drumming being closely linked to the dance movements, by playing *kendhang*, Sujarwo learnt the dance for himself.

Much of the vocabulary of the different art forms is the same; many drumming patterns are named after dance movements, while *gendèr* patterns take their names from vocal texts. For someone who has already learnt one art form, it will be much easier for them to learn another, due to the musical and extra-musical links between them. These links between art forms are utilised by performing artists to aid their learning by making associations between different parts of their knowledge when they are performing.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined some of the ways in which the Javanese learn traditional performing arts. I have not focused on specific repertoire for each learning approach, beyond making distinctions between the different performing arts where appropriate. This is because I have found that for these types of knowledge transmission, practitioners are rarely able to be specific about the repertoire learnt through a given approach. Knowledge is not learnt in such convenient chunks – one piece of music through imitation and another by ear – but instead is acquired in a more mixed-up way. In addition, there is more than repertoire being learnt through these approaches, with other aspects of artistry such as *rasa* or feeling, style (both institutional and personal) and technique being considered important. These different elements and repertoires, acquired through multiple learning approaches, come together to create each performing artist.

The approaches examined here have in common their use of a direct encounter between the learner and the performing arts, with learning taking place at the time when the art is being performed. This temporal nature of learning is significant for several reasons. Firstly, in order to learn in this way, artists must be fully open to receiving knowledge as the performance is taking place, and often while they are actually performing themselves. Brinner (1999) describes a type of performing that involves “heightened listening that is both broad, scanning all the lines of sound for useful information, and focused, searching for particular types of information that will be most helpful” (p. 32). For dancers, as well as listening to the gamelan, they must be fully aware of their co-dancers’ positions and movements, without actually turning to look at them. As well as being a way to perform, I would argue that this type of heightened awareness, whether aural, visual or kinetic, is also a way to learn performing arts, and is utilised in the learning approaches described in this paper.

The second point of importance related to these approaches is that they can only work for artists who have the opportunity to be exposed to and engage in performing arts on a very regular basis. Attending a weekly rehearsal or class, as is often the case for those learning gamelan overseas, cannot offer the same learning experience as being almost constantly exposed to performing arts, which in Java rarely means just gamelan music without wayang or dance. While it cannot make up for a childhood immersed in gamelan music, foreign students who study in Java can benefit from increased exposure to Javanese performing arts and perhaps acquire some of the skills for using the learning approaches discussed in this paper. While living in Solo for several years I made use of some of these learning approaches, in particular learning through rehearsing and performing, and learning through simultaneous imitation. I also ensured I was frequently exposed to gamelan music by attending performances and other arts events as often as possible.

Traditional performing arts continue to be sustainable in Java, populating several specialist schools and colleges, and drawing audiences in the thousands to large performances. Smaller events continue to make use of gamelan, wayang and dance for entertainment and ritual purposes. When artists perform, they learn through doing while also providing opportunities for other artists to learn through

watching. The approaches for learning examined in this paper, which rely on frequent encounters with arts as they are performed, therefore both support and are supported by the continued popularity of traditional performing arts.

In this paper I have shown that when we look beyond formal education, lessons and teaching materials, learning can take place in many different contexts. Furthermore, Javanese practitioners understand and can explain how they have learnt using these approaches. They are aware that much of their knowledge and skill has been gained in contexts outside formal education, and through direct contact with arts as they are performed rather than through books and other media. I would expect many of these learning approaches to be present in other performing arts cultures. Further study of how such learning takes place outside the classroom would be very welcomed.

Endnotes

¹ This paper is based on research conducted during my PhD studies, which were funded by the National University of Singapore. Research was conducted in the city of Surakarta (Solo), Central Java, and in surrounding villages. Prior to beginning my PhD, I spent four years living in Surakarta, studying gamelan both at an institution and in the community, as well as participating in many performing arts events. Part of this paper was presented at the BFE/RMA Research Students' Conference 2016 under the title "Knowledge Transmission in Javanese Gamelan Music: A Survey of Methods for Learning".

² This paper does not, therefore, cover learning approaches which use a mediator such as learning from notation, from recordings, from ascetic practice or from teachers in lessons and classes. I describe these approaches elsewhere (Hand, 2016, pp. 201-244, 283-323).

³ I have included a very brief description of each interviewee's position in performing arts (musician, dancer, etc). Including a lengthier biography for everyone interviewed is beyond the scope of this paper, but more information about these artists can be found elsewhere (Hand, 2016, pp. 430-448).

⁴ It is difficult to analyse whether growing up surrounded by gamelan music actually makes it easier to learn by ear due to the many other factors that affect a person's ability to learn. However, cognition research supports this theory. Levitin (2006) describes how "basic structural elements are incorporated into the very wiring of our brains when we listen to music early in our lives" (p. 107). Growing up surrounded by gamelan music hardwires it into a person's brain from the beginning of their life, thus creating a predisposition to learning it in the future.

⁵ This concept of a 'natural' artist suggests, somewhat unhelpfully in my opinion, that learning outside school is somehow more of a natural process, and that arts schooling is perhaps 'unnatural' in some way. Nonetheless, it offers a way for non-schooled artists to define themselves without negatively emphasising their lack of schooling.

⁶ An elaborating instrument is one that elaborates on the basic melody. Each elaborating instrument has its own idiomatic style for interpreting and elaborating its part.

⁷ A PhD dissertation by Jonathan Roberts (2015) provides a detailed account of amateur gamelan groups in Surakarta and examines "the social organisation of ensembles and the social implications of participation" (p. 41).

⁸ While wayang is taught at schools and institutions in Java, these classes use a teacher as a mediator between the performing art and the learner, and are not therefore discussed in this paper.

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Biography

Rachel Hand was awarded a PhD in Southeast Asian Studies from the National University of Singapore in 2017. Her dissertation examines knowledge transmission, heredity and education in Javanese gamelan music, wayang and traditional dance from the 1920s to the 2010s. She has presented papers on her research at several international conferences. Rachel also has a BA and MMus in Ethnomusicology from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.