



Jack Body: Enchanted by Indonesian music

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Living in one of the most isolated Western countries in the world requires adjustments and rituals.

For Pakeha, New Zealanders of European ancestry, one essential has long been the big trip abroad known colloquially as OE, overseas experience.

This journey, mainly to explore the Northern Hemisphere and seek out family roots, is an important part of the culture of New Zealand, a country still searching for its identity.

The young musicologist Jack Body was no exception.

He had already graduated with a masters degree from Auckland University and had won a prestigious arts fellowship. In the late 1960s he headed for Europe where he studied in Cologne and at the Institute of Sonology at Utrecht.

Then he took the long way home wandering through Europe and Southeast Asia with his mind and microphone open. The last stop was Indonesia.

"I was an innocent abroad and I knew next to nothing about the country," he said. "I'd already been to India and was intrigued by the music I'd heard in the streets and villages.

"But Indonesia was quite different. By comparison I found India to be harsh. In Indonesia I started recording the sounds I heard the way other people take photographs of their travels.

"I followed my ears. I recorded birds, animals, street sounds, music. I was fascinated by the fantastic richness of the culture. I liked the way people took things easily. They couldn't be bothered to get hot and bothered.

"What attracted me most? The sensuality."

Back in New Zealand Body transcribed some of the music he'd collected, a laborious task but one he thought necessary to understand what he'd heard. He also knew he needed more of the seductive archipelago.

In 1976, he was given a guest lectureship at the Akademi Musik Indonesia in Yogyakarta where he taught for two years. On his return home he joined the faculty at Victoria University's School of Music in Wellington where he is now an associate professor.

His compositions have been performed in the United States and Holland. He is a widely exhibited photographer and also runs a music publishing company, Waiteata Music Press. His specialty has been cross-cultural compositions and experimental electro-acoustics.

In all his pursuits he has set out to bring the music of Asia, Indonesia in particular, to the attention of Kiwis. He has done so with such success he has won a swag of awards, including a New Zealand Order of Merit in the 2001 Honors List.

The following year his recording Pulse won the New Zealand Music Award for the Best New Classical CD.

And all this time he's been promoting Indonesian culture, along the way collecting a Javanese gamelan for his university. Ibu Tien Soeharto, the late wife of the late Indonesian president Soeharto donated the set of instruments.

This year he has been back to Indonesia twice, recording music palace guards play at Yogyakarta's kraton.

He said the music was an intriguing and centuries-old European-derived mix of fifes, drums and other instruments performed by men in quaint uniforms whose origins could well serve as the topic for a doctoral thesis.

Kiwis have opportunities to learn more about Indonesia not just through Body's own efforts. He has organized numerous residencies in Wellington for Indonesian artists and praised the Indonesian government for offering a range of cultural scholarships for structured three-month arts programs.

These are expected to be enhanced later this year when an agreement between Indonesia and New Zealand is signed allowing young people from each country to get work visas in the other.

Now 64, Body shows no sign of going stale, repetitive or monotonous. If he followed Shakespeare's formula he would be "the lean and slippered pantaloon" but he moves, physically and intellectually, as nimbly as his students.

He has the quirky mannerisms of a long-time creative artist living in a parallel universe where music rules. While he has to be involved in teaching and university administration, his mind seems to be somewhere else, pulling sounds and ideas together for some future fusion.

His latest production -- "exhilarating, the most ambitious I've ever done," he said - - staged with help from the Indonesian Embassy in New Zealand and the Asia-New Zealand Foundation, is *The Seven Ages of Man*, a "cross-cultural, multimedia music theater" piece based on Shakespeare's famous lines in "All's Well That Ends Well".

Body's idea was to mix bits of the Bard in English with music from the Javanese and Balinese gamelan repertoires, add in an electric violin and four vocalists singing in Javanese and Balinese, and have the lot interpreted in dance and puppetry.

Translation of the Shakespeare posed difficulties. The verse about a soldier, "full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard", caused problems.

"In Shakespeare's time most of the military were mercenaries, but in Indonesia being a soldier is an elite occupation," Body said. "We had to make some adjustments in the language.

"Many people in the English-speaking world have been taught the seven ages of man and I found Indonesians related well to the sentiments."

The composers included the Javanese gamelan director Budi Putra (originally from Surakarta in Central Java and now a New Zealand resident) and the Balinese gamelan director I Wayan Gde Yudane. Most of the gamelan players were university students and faculty, including Body.

In the wrong hands this could have become a real dog's breakfast, but in fact it worked brilliantly on every level -- emotional, imaginative and creative.

There were several reasons; the inclusion of the masked multitalented Balinese puppet master I Nyoman Sukerta as a musician, singer, dancer and actor, was a master stroke.

So was the lighting system which included a fog machine, recreating in the Wellington studio the misty, musty, dusty, mysterious, spooky, smoky and almost

tangible atmosphere found in the villages and kampungs of Indonesia come nightfall.

The only thing absent was the scent of clove cigarettes, for New Zealand takes its anti-smoking laws seriously.

"The reception has been great," the exuberant ethnomusicologist said. "I love this synthesis... I've long wanted to use dance and now I've got the theater bug. We're hoping to take the production on tour around New Zealand, maybe even to Indonesia. That would be terrific."