

Preface – Mini Gamelan Suite

A gamelan is an Indonesian orchestra of composed primarily of xylophone-like instruments. Nearly every community in Bali and Java owns a gamelan and it is at the center of their cultural life. Typically, we associate the term with bronze keyed instruments, but many smaller villages have iron or wood orchestras. There are angklung gamelans: tuned bamboo tubes suspended in a frame that the player shakes, or even small ensembles consisting of a few metallophones and jaw harps!

The music is a complex heterophony, with core instruments playing the melody while tuned gongs and wooden keyed xylophones embellish with ornamental filigree based on mathematic permutations on the melody. Drums provide important signals to the players in addition to keeping the beat, while pitched gongs mark the cycles of the piece. Some pieces have a vocal soloist or unison chorus, while others will have a flute, violin (“spike fiddle”) or zither. Pelog, slendro or angklung scales are used, although the tuning and distance between pitches varies from town to town.

This “mini suite” imitates the sound of a gamelan and is suitable for a world music program, workshop, warm-up, or just for fun! “Srepegan” can even be used in church as a processional, bell tree or introduction to any hymn or piece in F major. The movements can be played separately or they can segue from one to another, as explained in the performance notes.

The suite was written for Stephanie Wiltse for the “Embellish and Friends” concert with the Community Ministries program of Trinity United Methodist Church. She needed something suitable for audience participation that would be easy for non-ringers to play.

Most of the patterns are simple enough for novices to learn quickly. “Newbies” will have 1 or 2 bells, depending on the pattern. Give them the easy ones and save the 8th note and off beat patterns for your bell choir.

This versatile piece lends itself to a variety of instrumentation. Alternate bells or chimes may double or be substituted on any of the patterns. Orchestral (tubular) chimes can be used to accent bass notes here and there, or to double the bass line. A flute or recorder doubling the melody can be used in lieu of an Indonesian “suling”; add a gong (or suspended cymbal) every 8 or 16 beats, and throw in a hand drum for extra flare. You can even use boomwhackers! Xylophone, marimba, glock, or Orff instruments make good substitutes for gamelan instruments as well. Think “outside the box” and use what you have available. Be creative, the sky is the limit!

Susan T. Nelson