



**THE GAMELAN OF THE
WALKING WARRIORS**

**GAMELAN BELEGANJUR AND THE MUSIC
OF THE NGABEN FUNERARY RITUAL IN BALI**



Beleganjur Dharma Shanti orchestra during the recording session

Why another *beleganjur* album?

The *gamelan beleganjur* (meaning in Balinese: “*gamelan* of the walking warriors” or “*gamelan* of the walking army”) is a processional *gamelan* orchestra that was traditionally performed in religious and state ceremonies as well as being played in war. Today it has a central role in the rituals of Balinese Hinduism, as it is considered to be indispensable for celebrating mortuary rituals (collectively called *Pitra yadnya*), as well as crucially important for various other ceremonies. It can be heard everywhere in Bali, and it is very likely that visitors to the island, while strolling through a village, have come across a procession accompanied by a *gamelan beleganjur* orchestra. But this music is not only familiar to those who have been to Bali, because, like most Balinese music, many *beleganjur* recordings have been issued locally and internationally in recent decades. Why, then, another *beleganjur* album?

Before answering this question, we have to take a look at the recent history of this music. In the wake of the *beleganjur* contests of the mid 1980s, a new kind of *beleganjur* music developed and became standardized, including more complex structures, a constant search for musical innovation, and a greater emphasis on virtuosity, often involving unprecedented displays of technical prowess and exhibitionism during the performance. This new approach (called *kreasi beleganjur*) has created a well-defined conception of *beleganjur* that has become widespread locally as well as internationally, a conception that is reflected in most of the recordings issued until now.

Thanks to this album the listener can now appreciate two aspects of *beleganjur* music that have been largely overlooked in the existing recordings. The first of these is a more melodious and meditative quality that possesses many of the characteristic features of *beleganjur*, and yet is quite distinct from the spectacular and breathlessly frantic *kreasi beleganjur* that we are usually offered. The second aspect is the genuine “live” feeling that can be enjoyed by listening to this album, due to the fact that it consists entirely of direct recordings, some made in the context of an actual ceremony.



Priest (*pedanda*) blessing the sarcophagus (*patulangan*) and the tower (*wadah*) before the procession

An overview of the album

Tracks 1 to 4 consist of the music played by the *beleganjur* orchestra of the *Dharma Shanti* association (*tempek suka-duka*) of the Dinas Asahpanji neighbourhood (*banjar*) of the village of Wanagiri, which I recorded live in the association's rehearsal pavilion (*balai*) in March 2011. It features a kind of *beleganjur* that is far from the *kreasi beleganjur*, which is mainly practised in the area of Denpasar-Badung, and is also dissimilar from traditional *beleganjur* music closely connected to a ritual function. It is melodic as well as intense, and is less associated with certain features of the “Denpasar style” such as virtuosity and frenzied playing, while enhancing some of its more hypnotic and dramatic aspects.

Tracks 5 to 9 present a *beleganjur* orchestra within the actual context of a ritual ceremony. *Beleganjur* music prior to the triumph of the *kreasi beleganjur* was largely determined by the ceremonial context in which it was used, and less related to strictly musical or other extra-ritual considerations. What can be heard here mirrors the vitality and energy of this type of *gamelan* orchestra in a living context, as it features my direct recordings of a funerary ritual (*Ngaben*) lasting two days, held in the village of Peliatan in March 2011. In order to give the listener a first-hand sonic experience, I have included various ritual phases of the *Ngaben* ceremony, among which are recordings of another *gamelan* orchestra, the *gamelan angklung*, the task of which – like that of the *beleganjur* – is to provide music for temple ceremonies and for death rituals. In recent times the *gamelan angklung* has also undergone a process of renewal in some ways similar to that of the *beleganjur*, but the tracks included on this album feature music of a more traditional kind.



Transport of the sarcophagus (*patulangan*) by the funeral procession

The elements of the two gamelan orchestras

The *beleganjur* orchestra that is used in Bali nowadays is known as the *gamelan beleganjur hebonangan*. A name that derives from the presence of four bonang gong-kettles (today *reyong* kettles are normally used) tuned to a pelog-type scale. This provides it with a melodic property that distinguishes it from the previous conformations of the *beleganjur* orchestra. Although it may vary, a *beleganjur* ensemble usually consists of: two drums (*kendang*), eight pairs of cymbals (*ceng-ceng kopyak*), four small gong-kettles (*reyong*), two medium-sized gong-kettles (*ponggang*), four medium and large hand-held and hanging gongs (*kajar*, *kempli*, *bende*, and *kempur*), and two very large hanging gongs (*gong ageng*).

The *gamelan angklung* is a particularly ancient Balinese *gamelan ensemble*, small in size and tuned to a four-tone slendro scale. Its sound is deemed to be appropriate for rituals connected with death due to its sad character, but also because of its capability to console people at a moment of bereavement. Like the *beleganjur* it is however also adopted in various other kinds of rituals. Although its name refers to the *angklung* (a set of bamboo tubes mounted on a frame), this instrument is no longer included in the orchestra. Nowadays the ensemble usually consists of: from eight to twelve metallophones covering three octaves (*jegogan*, *gangsã*, *kantilan*), a gong chime (*reyong*), three medium and large hanging gongs (*kempur*, *kempli*, *kelenang*), two drums (*kendang*), a set of cymbals (*rincik*), and occasionally flutes (*suling*). The latter do not, however, feature in these recordings.



Gamelan angklung orchestra at seaside

Formal structure

Beleganjur pieces usually start with an introduction played by the drum (*awit-awit*), followed by the basic melody of the piece played by the *reyong* kettles. The melody is constructed as a cycle (the colotomic structure), made up of eight beats (*gilak*), the end of which is marked by a gong stroke. The pieces are characterized by a dense rhythmical stratification produced by the interlocking effects of the various different instruments. Full ensemble sections normally alternate with others in which the drums or cymbals are absent.

Gamelan angklung pieces generally open with a solo phrase (*pengawit*) played on the *gangsa* metallophone, as a prelude to the entrance of the whole ensemble. *Angklung* music varies considerably in its structure, but it can have a regular colotomic structure, and it can consist of a single musical phrase (*gongan*), the end of which is marked, like the end of the colotomic cycle, by a stroke on the gong. The dense rhythmical stratification provided by the interlocking of the instruments, which is so typical of *gamelan* music, is also a very prominent feature of *gamelan angklung*.

References:

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- McPhee, C.: *Music in Bali*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1966.
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Photographs:

Front cover : Trunyan cemetery, Bali

Back cover : Sarcophagus (*patulangan*) after the cremation

Inlay : Arrival of the procession at cremation palace

1. Pemungkah (5:40)

This is the piece with which the *Dharma Shanti beleganjur* ensemble of the banjar Dinas Asahpanji always commences its performances.

2. Semut Megarang (6:40)

This piece refers to the way ants collaborate in order to accomplish a task. The metaphor of the ants represents the strength of the community when it is united.

3. Gilak Melasti (6:15)

This piece is connected to the *Melasti* purification ceremony, which is held shortly before the celebration of the Balinese New Year (*Nyepi*).

4. Dedari Ngindang (6:25)

This piece alludes to a female spirit flying in the sky.

5. Procession to the house of the deceased (2:09)

This is a recording of a *gamelan beleganjur* orchestra marching to the house of the deceased where those attending the funeral were gathering, on the eve of the cremation.

6. At the house of the deceased (8:00)

Once all the guests had assembled they were entertained with theatre (*topeng*) and music played by the *gamelan angklung*. This track features three consecutive pieces that I have selected from the constant flow of music provided by the *gamelan angklung* on this occasion.

7. Procession to the cremation ground (7:08)

On the day of the cremation, an elaborate tower (*wadah*) housing the mortal remains of the deceased was taken in procession to the cremation ground, accompanied by a *gamelan beleganjur orchestra*. The role of this music is to synchronize and coordinate the procession, as well as to help the spirit of the deceased to undertake its perilous journey.

Each time the cortège comes to a crossroad, the bearers of the cremation tower rotate it three times counter-clockwise, in order to ward off evil spirits and to prevent the spirit of the deceased from returning to harm its relatives.

8. Lamentation (2:21)

At the cremation ground the remains of the deceased were removed from the tower and placed in a sarcophagus in the form of a bull (*patulangan*). Immediately before this was burned, a group of women approached with gifts and offerings to the dead and chanted a plaintive lament.

9. At The Seaside (5:24)

Once the remains of the departed had been cremated, his family as well as those attending the ceremony went down to the seashore, in order to throw the ashes into the sea. A *gamelan angklung* orchestra accompanied this phase of the ritual. This track features a piece I have selected that was played on this occasion.

This album was recorded live in March 2011 on the island of Bali, Indonesia.

Side A was recorded in the village of Wanagiri, in the district (*kecamatan*) of Sukasada, of the regency (*kabupaten*) of Buleleng.

Side B was recorded in the village of Peliang, in the district (*kecamatan*) of Ubud, of the regency (*kabupaten*) of Gianyar.

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I also wish to sincerely thank the family in the village of Peliatan who allowed me to witness and record the Ngaben funerary ritual, and the musicians who played during the ceremony. In conclusion I would like to express my reverence and respect for the spirits of the dead for whom this music is played.

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Abandoned Wadah Tower after the ceremony