In the 1920s, the Dutch musicologist Jaap Kunst (1891–1960) and the Sundanese music teacher and scholar Machjar Kusumadinata (1902–1979) started their cooperation in developing music theory for West Java. In this essay, I will discuss elements of their theories and show how the present generation of music scholars in Bandung is dealing with the shortcomings of these theories.

As regards musical practice and practical knowledge, I will describe and reflect on my encounters since 1980 with the well-known Sundanese musician Uking Sukri (1925–1994), who taught Cianjuran music in the Netherlands for about half a year in 1988–1989. Uking Sukri has also performed on international stages, including the Netherlands. Finally, I will focus on the experiment by Uking Sukri’s ensemble in combination with the jazz pianist Bubi Chen in 1989. The mere fact that this combination of instruments existed offers empirical evidence that the theory of tonal systems designed by Kusumadinata and Kunst does not hold for Cianjuran music. This experiment in West Java inspired my Dutch Cianjuran group, Dangiang Parahiangan, to start a similar experiment with the pianist Rob Agerbeek in 2009.

Jaap Kunst

Jaap Kunst is internationally recognized as one of the founders of the study of ‘comparative musicology’, for which he later introduced the term ‘ethno-musicology’ (Kunst 1950). His university training was in law, but he was an accomplished violinist. In 1919, he went to the Dutch East Indies

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1 Also called Tembang Sunda or Tembang Sunda Cianjur. It is solo singing and the accompaniment is provided by two zithers (kacapi indung and kacapi rincik) and a bamboo flute (suling), and sometimes also by a bowed violin (rebab). The instrumental form of Cianjur, in which the bamboo flute takes the melodic part, is called kacapi-suling.
for a concert tour with a pianist and a vocalist. Kunst was greatly inspired by the gamelan music of Yogyakarta and he decided to stay in the colony. He did administrative work for his living, gave violin lessons, but above all researched Indonesian music (largely in his spare time) until his repatriation in 1934.

From January 1930 until December 1931, Kunst held the position of ‘government musicologist’. He competed for this post with the musicologist and researcher Johann Sebastian Brandts Buijs (1879–1939), who had also come to live in the Dutch Indies in 1919. Van Roon (1995) describes the fierce competition for this post between the two scholars who, until this point, had been on friendly terms. The discussions about the ideal candidate for this job also took place in the Netherlands. Important scholars, like the historian Johan Huizinga and the composer Willem Pijper, gave their opinions. Both Huizinga and Pijper emphasized the relation between art and science. Huizinga wrote ‘Here is a field where art and science may be most intimately linked together, with art being capable of being preserved only by science’. Pijper wrote that a candidate for this post should ‘combine the temperament of a creative artist, hence “musical intuition,” with the intellect of a scholar’. He considered Kunst’s recordings of music to be very important, especially for museums and phonogram collections, however, ‘only a born artist […] with many years’ European experience, […] is likely to succeed in bringing Indonesian music to life for Western artists – and at the same time for the people of Europe. It is not just a codification of practices that is at issue: Indonesian musical research is much further-ranging than that’ (Huizinga and Pijper, quoted in translation by Van Roon 1995: 70, 73; see also Van Zanten 2002: 938–943 and the chapter by Djajadiningrat and Brinkgreve in this volume).

Due to budget cuts, the post of government musicologist was not continued and between 1932 and 1934 Kunst once again undertook administrative work in the Department of Education and Religion, which led him to move from Bandung to Jakarta (Batavia). Kunst left Indonesia in

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4 These debates about the relation between art and science reflect ideas similar to those expressed in the nineteenth-century discussions concerning the Sundanese language (Van den Berge 1993, 1998; Moriyama 2005). For the Dutch in the second half of the nineteenth century, knowledge in prose was a better representation of reality than poetry, whereas for the Sundanese singer and his public poetry meant transmission of relevant knowledge (Van den Berge 1993: 205–209).