Musical Journeys in the Malay World

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Margaret Kartomi's book is the first introduction on the musical traditions of Sumatra and covers musical arts as well as performing arts that contain music. The musical traditions of other parts of Indonesia including those of Java, Bali, and Madura have been well documented and form the subject of many books and articles. With the publication of this book, an overview of the music of Sumatra has finally seen the light. Sumatra is the sixth largest island in the world and it is impossible to cover the island’s entire musical traditions in a single volume because there are simply too many. The book limits itself therefore to the traditions of Aceh, North Sumatra, Riau, West Sumatra, South Sumatra, and Bangka-Belitung. It may be said that the island has thus geographically been covered quite nicely. The book consists of four parts: I. West Sumatra and Riau; II. South Sumatra and Bangka; III. North Sumatra; and IV. Aceh. The chapters form essays in their own rights and the readers may thus opt to read each of them separately, although reading it straight through provides a valuable overview of the traditions it covers.

Music in this book includes vocal, instrumental, and body percussion, as well as dance and other bodily movements and other theatrical performances in a range of settings including modern, traditional, and ceremonial, as well as novel media-covered artistic tours and missions for and during government
and commercial gatherings. The book is also a highly personal account of the many performers and traditions Kartomi encountered on the island during her many stays in Sumatra from 1971 to 2011. It is a mixture of social science and ethnomusicology and is illustrated, and well written. Musical scores and drawings of instruments and photographs of performances and performance settings enliven the book. Because of its open and personal style it offers an accessible place to start for any student engaged in the musical traditions of Southeast Asia.

Over the last couple of decades many musical traditions have disappeared in Sumatra due to religious, governmental, and commercial pressures (p. xxvi). Through her book, Kartomi has ensured that many traditions have been described and thus have been opened up to the world, easily fulfilling its ambition to ‘help future observers and scholars who might join me in researching this virtual musical terra incognita’ (p. xxvi). The book does not deal with popular music as it needs and deserves detailed coverage in its own right. In view of the oral/aural component indispensable in music and theatrical performances it is a pity that no CD has been added to the book.

The book links up nicely with the other two volumes briefly discussed here as the ‘major themes that recur throughout the chapters ([which] include) identity, rituals and ceremonies, religion, the impact of foreign contact on the performing arts, the musical instruments and pitch variability, the dances and music-dance relationships, social class, gender issues, and arts education’ (p. 6).

The second volume edited by Barty Barendregt contains contributions by Bart Barendregt himself, Philip Yampolsky, Jan van der Putten, Adil Johan, Andrew Weintraub, Emma Baulch, Lars Gjelstad, Bettina David, Jeremy Wallah, Kees van Dijk, Wim van Zanten and Tan Sooi Beng. The previous book discusses many traditions that have already disappeared or are in the process of being lost or are evolving almost beyond recognition. Some ideas of these changes may be gleaned from the present book which, of course, cannot adequately address all the ‘sonic modernities’ in the entire Malay world. Nevertheless, its authors give us a sense of what these modernities entail. Its subjects include Dutch East Indies radio (Yampolski), Malay ronggeng (Van der Putten), policing Malaysian and Singaporean popular music culture (Adil Johan), Melayu popular music in Indonesia (Weintraub and Baulch), popular music and youth cultures in Solo, Central Java (Gjelstad), dangdut (David and Wallach), singing and politicians (Van Dijk), music in Sunda, West Java, and modernising songs of the forest (Tan Sooi Beng). The book is a compilation of papers from a workshop and a presentation to launch the research program ‘Articulation of Modernity’ which aims to analyse the ‘interplay between the production of popular music, shifting ideas of the modern,