What is gamelan?

Gamelan is an ancient form of tuned percussion orchestra from Indonesia. Most ensembles are made up of ornately-carved metallophones, gongs, and drums which are housed together, with sets unified by their decoration and unique tuning.

Gamelan fulfils a range of socio-cultural functions in Indonesia and is traditionally performed as part of marriage celebrations and other rites of passage. As such the music usually accompanies a communal meal with the aim of strengthening community ties and promoting collective health and wellbeing. In certain regions gamelan is also integral to indigenous religious rituals and practices.

Gamelan is a communal form of music-making. It is always learned in and performed as a group: the idea is for the ensemble to sound as a single, fluid entity. Gamelan is not a medium for personal expression and there are few opportunities for individualistic displays of technical virtuosity.
Applied gamelan

Gamelan is a versatile resource and has been used in a range of community/educational programmes in the UK context. To date gamelan projects have been set up in settings ranging from schools and hospitals to prisons and community centres. In order to explore such applications a symposium was organised by RIHSC, MMU, in June 2013. Delegates were asked about their experiences of using gamelan. The main reasons given for choosing gamelan over other musics/art forms centred around the accessibility of the instruments, potential for mixed-ability work and power to promote group cohesion.

Why use gamelan in community settings?

- Instruments sound nice/authentic without prior training
- Oral/aural transmission - no need to read music notation
- Gamelan: an inclusive & accessible form of group music-making
- Level playing field: new experience for most UK players
- Individual parts easily adaptable
- Promotes collaboration - competence distributed across group
- All parts are important – no matter how simple
Select literature review: benefits of gamelan with diverse participant groups

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<th>Applied gamelan research</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<td><strong>Illustrative findings</strong></td>
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<td>- Promoted creativity, emotional regulation and social participation</td>
<td>Children with ASD</td>
<td>Bakan et al., 2008</td>
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<td>- Ability to synchronise (in gamelan ensemble) correlated to overall attentional performance</td>
<td>Young people (focus on ADHD)</td>
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<td>- Encouraged self-reflection but not as intimidating as formal therapy; promoted group cohesion</td>
<td>Adult prisoners at risk of self-harm</td>
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<td>- Significant improvements in musical ability &amp; communication skills relating to interpersonal interaction</td>
<td>Adults with learning disabilities</td>
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<td>- Decreased levels of self reported anger &amp; increased feelings of calmness; improved social/listening skills</td>
<td>Adult prisoners</td>
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<td>- A great leveller. Used to facilitate exploration of group dynamics, collaborative team-work &amp; distributed leadership</td>
<td>Social workers, nurses &amp; service users</td>
<td>Leonard et al., 2013</td>
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The experience of playing gamelan

An understanding of how gamelan impacts on group cohesion is key to optimising its uses in applied settings. Players often describe a feeling of oneness with others or of losing themselves in the moment. McNeill (1995) theorises this phenomenon more generally in terms of self/other boundary loss and sense of heightened wellbeing resulting from synchronised joint action. While many group activities might elicit this experience, Pacherie (2012) differentiates between types of joint action:

- **egalitarian** joint action (participants monitor and predict their individual & combined actions)
- **hierarchical** joint action (tasks are centralised, specialised; participants are limited in their capacity to predict and control outcomes)

According to Pacherie, egalitarian joint action is more likely to result in experiences of boundary loss or ‘we-agency’ as the greater the degree of self/other prediction the harder it is to work out who is doing what. She cites the Western symphony orchestra as an example of hierarchical joint action.

Gamelan affords a more egalitarian form of joint action. Unlike Western orchestras, gamelan players:

- Follow each other: there is no conductor
- Do not over-specialise: learn all instruments
- Memorise repertoire: attention not on external score but on embedded/distributed cues
- Have some scope to creatively vary material
- Play interlocking, composite instrument parts

Conclusion

Gamelan has been found to promote feelings of togetherness and group cohesion which may be understood through the shifting boundaries of self/other observed in forms of joint action. Gamelan represents an egalitarian form of joint action and future research might explore this further in relation to music-making and wellbeing.