

5-31-2018

# Bali's "Forgotten Stepchild": The Cultural and Sonic Vitality of the Balinese Rebab

Mikaela Marget  
*Lawrence University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lux.lawrence.edu/luhp>



Part of the [Ethnomusicology Commons](#), and the [Musicology Commons](#)

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

---

## Recommended Citation

Marget, Mikaela, "Bali's "Forgotten Stepchild": The Cultural and Sonic Vitality of the Balinese Rebab" (2018). *Lawrence University Honors Projects*. 128.

<https://lux.lawrence.edu/luhp/128>

## Bali's "Forgotten Stepchild":

### *The Cultural and Sonic Vitality of the Balinese Rebab*

Mikaela Marget

#### Abstract

The *rebab* is one of the only traditional stringed instruments found on the island of Bali, Indonesia. Though it is ever-present in musical ensembles in Bali, the *rebab* has been consistently overlooked in scholarship of Balinese music by Western ethnomusicologists. Through participant observation, personal interviews, and library research, I explore the idea that the *rebab* deserves a place in the scholarship of Balinese music. In addition, I argue that the Balinese *rebab* not only persists in Balinese music culture as a vital object, but that it is also an active participant in shaping Balinese music culture. In this paper, I address differences between Balinese and Javanese *rebab* playing and construction, I look into the sonic importance of the *rebab*, I explore why it has been labeled a "dying instrument" and I discuss the symbolic and social nature of the *rebab* as a factor of Balinese individual musicianship, religion, and culture. With this research, I have found that the instrument is vital in many ways to traditional and modern music making in Bali despite lack of academic study.

#### Introduction

I spent months before my trip to Bali imagining what my first impression would be. My Google image searches were saturated with beautiful white beaches, temples, rolling hills, palm trees... classic tourist bait. After 21 hours of travel, I was expecting to look out my plane window in a state of coffee-fuelled wakefulness, to see this paradise below. Instead, I was met by Mount Agung, Bali's largest active volcano, spewing ash into the sky (where, incidentally, my plane was).

Having my expectations countered like this was an experience that became familiar to me during my time in Bali, where I had gone to study the only Balinese stringed instrument: the *rebab*. The Balinese *rebab* is an upright stringed instrument (also referred to as a spike fiddle) that is played in some *gamelan* ensembles in Bali<sup>1</sup>. The instrument consists of two strings, a moveable bridge, a wood/coconut shell body with a membranous head, and is typically lavishly decorated (Sukerta 2000: 12-19). My pre-travel research was brimming with confusion about the value of *rebab* in Balinese musical culture which I hoped I could clear up with a trip to Bali, yet

---

<sup>1</sup> The term *gamelan* refers to a type of musical ensemble found in Indonesia and around Southeast Asia. There are many types of *gamelan*, I mostly focus on *gamelan gong kebyar* which is a 5-tone ensemble made of bronze metallophones, gongs, drums, *suling* (flute), and *rebab*.

I found that on arrival I was met with more questions and ambiguity than answers and clarity. I attribute this in part to the scarcity of research on the instrument by Western ethnomusicologists. In my library research, I found myself constantly frustrated with discussion of the *rebab*, namely that scholars in “comprehensive” books about Balinese music continually write it off. One prominent ethnomusicologist even described it as “the forgotten stepchild of Balinese music” in a discussion on the gamelan listserv<sup>2</sup> (Tenzer, post to listserv, November 18, 1996). Before traveling to Bali, I assumed that the *rebab* would not have a significant musical life in Bali but I found that I was misled by these western sources. Inclusion of *rebab* in competitions and certain ensembles is often necessary, pointing to the ongoing importance of the instrument. The value of the *rebab* is subtle and entangled with Balinese history due to associations with sixteenth-century Hindu courts. In addition, though not many musicians are as enamored with the *rebab* as I am, I met multiple individuals in Bali to whom the *rebab* is a vital part of their musical lives. In a short amount of time in Bali, I found that the *rebab* holds a significant place in musical culture; scholarship of Balinese music should reflect this.

I argue that though the *rebab* has been routinely ignored and misjudged in scholarship of Balinese music, it should not be overlooked, as it is an active participant in shaping Balinese musical culture. First, I outline the theoretical framework that influenced this study and my methods of research. Second, the *rebab* has been labeled a dying instrument due to the association it carries with historic court genres; I explore why it has been described this way and whether or not this assessment is accurate. Third, I outline topics relating to crafting a *rebab* and I address differences between Balinese and Javanese *rebab* playing in order to highlight uniquely Balinese characteristics of the *rebab*. Fourth, I explore timbre and sound of the instrument and I discuss how the *rebab* is valuable despite the challenges of audibility in modern ensembles.

---

<sup>2</sup> The *gamelan* listserv is an online community of *gamelan* enthusiasts, scholars, and musicians.

Finally, I outline social significance of the instrument and I discuss the symbolic and religious nature of the instrument and how the history of the *rebab* relates to how it is perceived in contemporary Bali.

The sonic and social value of the *rebab* are extremely interconnected, and I have done my best to mirror this in my discussion by alternating sections relating to social and sonic aspects of the *rebab*. I have attempted to delineate between the social and the sonic for clarity, but the sonic nature of musical instruments is deeply interconnected with how they function socially. I think it is unfair to make absolute distinctions, which is why I often reference the sonic and social within multiple sections. This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the *rebab*, nor is it meant to exaggerate the role of the Balinese *rebab* in Balinese music culture; rather, I am making a case for the value of academic *rebab* study regardless of the perceived popularity of the instrument.

### Theoretical Approach

In *The Classification of Musical Instruments: Changing Trends in Research from the Late Nineteenth Century, with Special Reference to the 1990s*, Margaret Kartomi outlines a brief history of organology from the classification of musical instruments through the comparative lens of the Hornbostel-Sachs system up through Susan DeVale's work and Kartomi's own book in the 1990s (Kartomi 2001: 283-314). She describes the re-emergence of interest in organology in the 1990s as scholars became increasingly interested in the study of musical instruments within social contexts. While these scholars were expanding earlier organology to include how instruments functioned in social settings, they are mostly focusing their studies around instruments as products of human culture.

Ethnomusicologist Eliot Bates argues that there is value in imagining musical instruments “as actors who facilitate, prevent, or mediate social interaction among other characters” (Bates 2012: 364). He imagines instruments not as products of human culture but as objects with power and agency within a complex web of social interaction. Bates specifically explores the social life of the Turkish *saz* in his work, but asserts that his methodology is applicable to the study of any musical instrument. At the end of his article, he poses thirteen questions for others to use as framework for more explorations on musical instrument agency. A few of Bates’ questions I found relevant to my research on the Balinese *rebab*:

- Why do some musical instruments (but not others) possess the performing musician and/or the audience, and how do such possessions happen?
- Does the performer perform the instrument or the other way around?
- Why are some musical instruments caught in an allegorical web overflowing with symbolism and symbolic associations, while others comparatively[?] seem to lack symbolic references?
- How do makers adapt/respond to changes in the available raw materials, construction tools, and instrumental forms/designs available to them and subsequently alter the way in which instruments are made? How far is too far, or in other words, how much can construction techniques, materials, or formal aspects change without resulting in a *new* instrument? (Bates 2012: 387-388).

In addition to helping me frame my study of the *rebab*, Bates’ questions inspired a few of my own that shaped my research:

- How are instruments able to transcend time, connecting audiences with past cultural identities through specific sounds? Why are some “traditional” instruments valuable in contemporary compositions?
- How do performers and instruments build relationships over time, and how does that affect the music that is produced?
- How do economic factors influence how instruments are perceived socially?
- How do unpopular instruments fit into social contexts, are they valuable and how do they navigate social spheres?

Bates’ ethnographic approach to the study of a musical instrument takes the trend of framing organology through an ethnographic lens further than his predecessors and

contemporaries by shifting focus to instrumental agency. In other words, rather than treating instruments as objects that are representative of human social interaction, Bates studies musical instruments as subjects with the power to not only function within social context but also have the ability to shape social contexts. He is not the only scholar who is doing this and references two others: Regula Qureshi and Kevin Dawe, early twenty-first century scholars who also study musical instruments as active subjects of research instead of objects (Bates 2012: 367-368; Qureshi 2000: 805-838; Dawe 2001: 219-232).

The idea that instruments can be active participants in social music making is intriguing to me because the tools we use to make and create music shape culture, therefore they should be studied in such a way that accounts for mobility and agency. In this paper, I explore the social life of the *rebab* using a combination of Kartomi and Bates' approaches (with a heavier focus on Bates' theory of instrumental agency). Depending on the context, instruments can function as either objects or as subjects, or even simultaneously both objects and subjects. The *rebab* has the capacity to transcend time, shape contemporary performances, and facilitate relationships but it can also function as a commodity and as a symbol. I examine how the *rebab* has the power to shape and move within Balinese musical culture as well as embody elements of Balinese musical cultural identity as an artifact.

### Methods

My main methods of research include observations and interviews with *rebab* players in Bali, some books written on Balinese music, and discussions on a gamelan listserv. Most of the relevant posts on the listserv were from the mid 1990s-early 2000s by American scholars of gamelan music or American or Canadian musicians. Many of the posters speculated on the

importance of *rebab* in *gamelan*, or shared personal experiences with the instrument; I regard these posts as ethnographic research with a focus on the perceived importance (or lack thereof) of *rebab* in gamelan ensembles to Westerners.

My field research was conducted during just under a two-week span from December 09-22<sup>nd</sup> funded by Lawrence University. I did not include interviews or lessons from non-*rebab* players, which causes this paper to carry the weight of *rebab* enthusiast bias. In the future, it would be helpful to interview a more diverse set of musicians and audiences in Bali and abroad to guide research.

One-on-one lessons with my *rebab* teachers were my main sources of information for this project, Ida Bagus Made Widnyana (Gusde), and I Wayan Sanglah (Pak Sanglah). Gusde is a contemporary composer and musician with the Çudamani group in Ubud; Pak Sanglah is a *rebab* player with Tirta Sari in Lodtunduh. Lessons typically consisted of playing songs for an hour or more, with a snack break in the middle. It was during breaks that I asked questions pertaining to my research, with consent to use our conversations in my paper. I did not record but I took thorough notes after the lessons were over. I had to rely on my memory of the topics we discussed, but I chose to conduct research in this manner because it felt more appropriate to have conversations than recorded interviews. In addition to my informal lessons, I conducted interviews. I had one with the maker of my *rebab*, I Kadek Sudyasa, and one with a *rebab* player from a tourist show in Ubud who was called Cok Rak. In both interviews I took notes but did not formally record (again making sure I had verbal consent to use our conversation in my research).

Library research on the *rebab* was frustrating; I found very little scholarly work including the instrument. The lack of peer-reviewed discussion prompted this research project and

provided a framework for this paper. I felt that the *rebab* was being ignored and/or mis-researched, which guided my methodology. I chose to center on active *rebab* players and makers to dispel the myth of *rebab* being an unnecessary or antiquated instrument.

### “Dying” Instrument

Various scholars have been writing that the Balinese *rebab* is a “dying instrument” for almost a hundred years, yet here it still exists as a vibrant part of Balinese music and culture. In the 448 pages he wrote about Balinese music, Colin McPhee mentioned the *rebab* only five times. He ultimately dismissed it as a dying instrument, writing, “The former practice of including it in the large Balinese gamelan has almost died out. Today it is found chiefly in the gambuh orchestra...” (McPhee 1966: 34). McPhee’s work is influential as it is one of the first works on Balinese music published, based on his work in Bali from the 1930s. It is my speculation that his choice to forgo discussion of the *rebab* may have contributed to a lack of study by contemporary scholars of Balinese music.

Colin McPhee was not the only writer to imply that the *rebab* was on the brink of extinction. In the early 2000s, Pande Made Sukerta wrote that the instrument was in danger of dying out as well. He reasoned that there were few ensembles that needed it, there weren’t many performances, there were limited instruments, and that Balinese people assumed that the *rebab* was difficult and only for the elderly (Sukerta 2000: 8-9). I was intrigued by Sukerta’s assessment of the instrument and how it was viewed. Why was the instrument associated with old people and why did people believe it was hard to play? I got an answer from a conversation that I had with Pak Sanglah. When I asked Pak Sanglah why he has more students now than in the past he replied by saying that there has been a shift of thought in relation to the *rebab*. In the

past, it was expensive and difficult to obtain a *rebab*, as opposed to other gamelan instruments that were in the community already. Due to the accessibility problem, Pak Sanglah told me, parents perpetuated myths about the *rebab* to dissuade their children from wanting to play (Sanglah, personal communication, December 18, 2017). Now, it seems these deceptions are less prevalent. I even had a cab driver tell me “*rebab* isn’t that hard, you just need to know all the songs” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 13, 2017). Pak Sanglah teaches many students now, aged 12 and up and from many countries including the United States, Japan, and Bali (Sanglah, personal communication, December 18, 2017).

The instrument’s association with gamelan *gambuh* may have contributed to a decline in popularity in Bali and potentially influenced scholars to ignore the instrument. *Gambuh* is a historical court genre, which though respected, is not particularly intriguing to people in Bali as a form of entertainment; it is seen as an antiquated and difficult art form used for ceremonies and rituals (Susilo 1997: 11). The instrument’s association with *gambuh* does not exclude the *rebab* from being used in contemporary compositions and in new contexts, though. Often composers balance traditional and new styles to create new compositions. Gusde mentioned to me in a lesson that he wrote a song for ten *rebab* played by *legong* dancers who eventually got up from the instruments to dance (Widnyana, personal communication, December 16, 2017). In this case, Gusde was drawing upon the *rebab*’s historical association to create a modern impact in his composition. Michael Tenzer also writes about a contemporary composer who uses *rebab* in his *kreasi* (new music) compositions: Nyoman Windha. Windha uses the flexibility of the non-fixed-pitch *rebab* (as well as the *suling* and the voice) to reintegrate the sixth and seventh tones of *pélog*<sup>3</sup> into his *kebyar* music (Tenzer 2000: 307). Here as well the composer does a careful

---

<sup>3</sup> *Pélog* is a 7-tone gamelan scale, gamelan gong *kebyar* are tuned to a subset of 5-tones derived from *pélog*. (Tenzer 2000: 6).

balancing act between traditional and new, “He does not eschew *kebyar*’s formal conventions; he just extends and distorts what they can bear...” (Tenzer 2000: 307). Though integration of *rebab* is not necessarily widespread in new compositions, there are composers using the *rebab* in creative ways, continuing the life of the instrument.

In addition to the misconception that the *rebab* is not an active participant in contemporary Balinese music making, there is a misconception that *rebab* crafting is not present in Bali due to past limits of accessibility on constructional materials. Sukerta, in his book published in the year 2000, asserts that there are no more *rebab* makers in Bali, despite musicians wanting to learn how to play (Sukerta 2000: 13). Pak Sanglah alluded to this in a lesson, telling me that because there was a lack of *rebab* makers in the past, imported Javanese *rebab* became common<sup>4</sup> (Sanglah, personal communication, December 11, 2017). This is no longer the case, I can confirm that there are *rebab* makers in Bali today; Pak Sanglah and Kadek are two examples in just the Ubud area. In Denpasar there are also *rebab* makers (Pon, post to listserv, April 18, 2005). The presence of *rebab* makers and players across Bali points to the ongoing vitality of this instrument to Balinese musical culture.

Accessibility of materials to make and sell *rebab* has had a major impact on how the instrument was perceived. Here is a clear connection with the third question I outlined from Bates’ article concerning the construction of instruments (Bates 2012: 387). As access to *rebab* materials became scarce, the instrument itself was exiled but it has persisted Balinese music culture. The *rebab* functions in this situation as both an agent and an object. In one sense, it is a commodity whose demand went down in response to expensive materials, but the *rebab* is also an active agent in Balinese music culture as it has refused to die out completely. Not only is the

---

<sup>4</sup> The timeline of *rebab* makers being present in Bali is still unclear to me, but it seems to me that in the last ten years or so materials have become more accessible and led to more people to learn how to make and sell *rebab*.

*rebab* involved with individual musicians/parents/students in this setting, it also is involved in a larger economics-driven social web.

### Construction

Construction of the *rebab* is not uniform across the island or even between various *rebab* makers in a single area. Each maker has individual taste and crafting techniques<sup>5</sup>. Many of the makers I spoke to emphasized their enthusiasm to continually experiment with construction in order to create a better instrument. Pak Sanglah knows when a *rebab* is good when he can hear and feel that it is resonant and clear. He told me that his crafting methods have not changed since he first learned how to craft a *rebab*, but he is always getting better through experimentation (Sanglah, personal communication, December 21, 2017).

When I was in his workshop for a lesson, I noticed that Pak Sanglah had *rebab* of all shapes hanging on the walls (see Fig 1). Though their basic shape is similar, each was unique from the next. Some were round and small; others looked more triangular and had long necks.

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, Pak Sanglah makes *rebab* with both coconut-shell resonators and with wood resonators but has no preference between the two (Sanglah, personal communication, December 20, 2017). Contrarily, Pande Made Sukerta swears by coconut-shell resonators as he believes coconut-shell *rebab* have a clearer sound (Sukerta 2000: 13).



**Figure 1** Pak Sanglah standing in front of his *rebab* wall. Most of these were hand made by Pak Sanglah. Second from the right is a Javanese-style *rebab*, the rest are Balinese-style. (Picture taken by Mikaela Marget, December 21, 2017. Lodtunduh, Bali, Indonesia).

Though Pak Sanglah has many *rebab* and would sometimes switch instruments during a lesson, he usually preferred to play on the *rebab* that he has had for over twenty years. This indicates to me that a large element of creating a good instrument relates to how it feels to a player and familiarity with an instrument is most likely is key to comfortable playing. I am interested in how musicians become attached to instruments and if there is a sense of partnership in music making between player and instrument. *Rebab* may have the capacity to forge relationships with their players over time. In addition, Pak Sanglah told me that he usually sells the *rebab* he makes for his friends or for friends of friends (Sanglah, personal communication, December 21, 2017). This comment points to the social power of the *rebab* in personal relationships. Here, the *rebab* acts again as both a commoditized object and as an agent in social interaction—connecting musicians and friends by passing hands.

### Javanese and Balinese *Rebab*

Pande Made Sukerta outlines differences in construction between Javanese and Balinese *rebab* in *Learning the Balinese Rebab*. Sukerta argues that peg length, size, shape of the body, and length of the fingerboard are drastically different between Javanese and Balinese *rebab*. He has even taken great pains to modify Javanese *rebab* to be more “Balinese” because there were few *rebab* makers in Bali, resulting in the importation of *rebab* from Java (Sukerta 2000: 13). To what extent can the modification of instruments lead to differing perceptions of identity? It is clear in his writing that Sukerta was frustrated that none of the Javanese instruments could be sufficiently modified to be Balinese in his eyes, yet this is what was available at the time so these were the instruments being played in Balinese ensembles. The *rebab*, at least to Sukerta, is an object whose unique appearance is symbolic of Balinese aesthetics; he writes, “Its shape reflects its background in Balinese culture” (Sukerta 2000:13). He directly addresses differences between Javanese and Balinese *rebab* in an attempt to show the uniqueness of the instrument. In this account, Sukerta makes clear that the *rebab* is an object that embodies cultural identity.

The *rebab* makers and players I spoke with emphasized that playing style, as opposed to construction, is what makes Balinese *rebab* playing distinct (Widnyana, personal communication, December 14, 2017; Sanglah, personal communication, December 18, 2017). Sukerta’s idea seems contradictory to Gusde and Pak Sanglah’s, but in fact they are cohesive. While Javanese and Balinese *rebab* have little sonic difference of construction, visually and kinesthetically they are quite distinct. Sukerta is technically correct about the constructional differences between the two styles but people in Bali play have played Javanese-style *rebab* that have been retrofitted to look more Balinese and it doesn’t appear to be controversial (McGraw,

post to listserv, April 19, 2005). While a Balinese look and feel of an instrument is important, even more so is a Balinese playing style.

Loose and fluid ornaments, improvisation of rhythms around a main melody, and bowing with clear and steady motion are valuable in Balinese *rebab* playing. According to Pak Sanglah and Gusde, much of this is in direct opposition to Javanese playing where bowings are dictated by the notes of each song and ornaments are minimal (Sanglah, personal communication, December 18, 2017; Widnyana, personal communication, December 14, 2017). It is important to note that while there are basic differences between Javanese and Balinese playing styles, *rebab* playing is individualized. Every musician will have different taste and technical ability, leading to varying sounds from player to player.

#### “Good Sound”

A “good” sound was not explicitly discussed in my lessons with Pak Sanglah or Pak Gusde, though their facial expressions were often telling. For instance, in one of my lessons, Pak Sanglah imitated a bad/beginning *rebab* player with furious, uncoordinated bowings and a sour look on his face. Sometimes, in my lessons with Gusde, if there were out-of-tune notes or a wolf tone, he would shake his head at the sound. I paid close attention to my teacher’s reactions to the sound of their *rebab* because I was grappling with what it meant to have a “good” sound on an instrument in a tradition that was new to me.

On the listserv, musician David Schalidt wrote about how his perception of the timbre of the instrument, describing the *rebab* sound as raspy, indistinct, and dissonant (Schalidt, post to listserv, April 19, 2005). This is sometimes true to the sound of the *rebab*, but Schalidt was most likely describing the sound of amateur player. When I heard my teachers play solo *rebab*, I did

not find the instrument to sound raspy or dissonant. Pak Sanglah's playing had an especially clear and beautiful tone and though the timbre was shallower than that of a western instrument like a violin, I don't perceive it to be raspy. In fact, this indistinct/not clear tone is something musicians actively work against. If the instrument is not producing a clear tone, musicians sometimes grab a betel leaf (traditionally) or any nearby leaf and place it between the bridge and the strings to soften the sound and make it more clear (Sanglah, personal communication, December 17, 2017).

It seems that the conditions for an ideal sound for a single *rebab* is bilateral: it is produced both by a player's skill and the construction of the instrument. The thickness of the *batok* (body of the instrument) contributes to clarity of sound (Drummond, post to the listserv, January 24, 2008). Even the hair used for the bow effects to the sound; it is typical to find bows made with plastic for the "hair" instead of the traditional horsehair. Horsehair is better for a robust sound, but it is very scarce and expensive in Bali so many makers opt for the cheaper and more durable plastic (Sudiyasa, personal communication, December 11, 2017). An accurate bridge placement is ideal. When I met Kadek, he told me that the best place for a good sound is to measure three fingers-width from the top of the *batok* (see Fig 2) (Sudiyasa, personal communication, December 11, 2017). About a week later in my lesson with Pak Sanglah, I was told that I should set the instrument up by placing the bridge two fingers-width away from the top of the *batok* (see Fig 3) (Sanglah, personal communication, December 17, 2017).



From left to right:

**Figure 2** Kadek's recommendation for bridge placement,

**Figure 3** Pak Sanglah's recommendation for bridge placement

(Pictures taken by Mikaela Marget, April 30, 2018. Appleton, Wisconsin, United States of America).

The placement of the bridge is important in producing a clear tone but the exact place varies depending on the instrument and the instrumentalist. *Rebab* construction is not standard, so the relationship between *rebab* player and their *rebab* is important, the *rebab* player must know the specific instrument to create the most ideal sound. For my instrument, Kadek's recommendation produces a clearer tone.

Each tactic that *rebab* players utilize to create a more ideal sound for individual playing is important but the *rebab* is often played in ensembles, which creates a unique set of difficulties regarding sound. In a *gamelan gong kebyar*, the *rebab* has an ambiguous role due to the relative quiet nature of the instrument and the loud sound of *gong kebyar*. Hearing a few small, wooden stringed instruments in a sea of bronze metallophones is a challenge, but there is both social and sonic value in including *rebab*.

### Audibility

Audibility is certainly an issue that *rebab* players and makers are grappling with. I spoke with Pak Sanglah about this and he mentioned that the type of space that the ensemble is in makes a huge difference in whether or not the *rebab* will be heard. The more open space there is, the easier loud ensemble sounds dissipate and the *rebab* can come through (Sanglah, personal communication, December 18, 2017). Construction of some instruments also reflects the desire to be heard. When I was speaking to Cok Rak, he told me that the instrument he is playing on is one that he is modifying to be more audible in the context of shows (Cok Rak, personal communication, December 13, 2017). There is also evidence of the *rebab* being electronically amplified during shows to be heard more clearly, though none of the people I spoke to in Bali do this. This was surprising to me, as I have seen many recordings where the rest of an ensemble is drowned out by a single *rebab*.

Discussion by Americans and Canadians on the listserv about the necessity of the *rebab* in a *gong kebyar* ensemble highlights confusion about the instrument's audibility. Ethnomusicologist Andy McGraw wrote that in his experience, the *rebab* was impossible to hear at all in a full *gong kebyar* ensemble (McGraw, post to listserv, April 19, 2005). Gamelan musicians David Schalidt and Ken Worthy argued that the texture of the ensemble was improved with the addition of the *rebab* (Schalidt, post to listserv, April 19, 2005; Worthy, post to listserv, April 17, 2005). Finally, there was musician Andrew Timar, who wrote "I heard the *rebab* quite clearly in quiet sections and I imagine I heard it even in tutti passages" (Timar, post to listserv, April 17, 2005). These three speculations shaped my initial research and I was hoping to arrive in Bali and confirm one of these as "right." I found that this was a naive first-time fieldworker

expectation. Instead of finding out which listserv post was “right” I encountered each of their perspectives in turn. In my experience, I found there were moments that the *rebab* was inaudible, quiet moments that the sound of the *rebab* popped through, and sections that the timbre of the ensemble was greatly enriched because of the *rebab*<sup>6</sup>.

As I was watching a tourist show in Ubud (Fig 4), I had a unique opportunity to compare the sound of a group that had a *rebab* and one lacking a *rebab* in the same show. For me, a biased *rebab* -focused listener, the presence definitely made a positive difference. In the beginning of the show, I heard it weaving in and out of the *kotekan* lines, sometimes getting lost and popping through again. Often, the gamelan would stop altogether and the narrator, *suling* (flute) and *rebab* would accompany the dancer around the stage. It was a delightful contrast both in timbre and volume. Then, suddenly, the *rebab* player’s bow hair fell off his bow! He calmly packed up his instrument and began to play another instrument, the *reyong* (I found out later that his bow had broken and that this was unintentional). The sonic difference was apparent immediately. Suddenly, there was no more *rebab* and the trifacta of soft instruments that brought contrasting sound to the bronze instruments was altered. Though I may not have noticed if there was not a *rebab* in this performance in the first place, I certainly noticed when it was taken away.

---

<sup>6</sup> Michael Tenzer briefly mentions the *rebab*’s role in *gamelan gong kebyar*, stating that the *suling* and *rebab* are both “clearly of timbral and aesthetic importance...” (Tenzer 2000: 206-207), but he does not elaborate.

In my experience, in addition to the timbral contrast between bronze instruments and strings, the textural sound of the *rebab* was an integral part of the performance. Often, when the rest of the ensemble ended, the *suling* and *rebab* would hold over a few seconds adding an unexpected twist to the end of the phrase. Though the concept of *rebab* volume in a *gong kebyar* ensemble was debated thoroughly on the listserv, I think in each rehearsal, performance, and gamelan group, the audibility of the *rebab* will vary.



**Figure 4** Tourist dance show in Ubud, *gamelan* group Sekehe Gong Panca Artha. Featured: *rebab* player Cok Rak (Photo taken by Mikaela Marget, December 13, 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia).

There are specific techniques that *rebab* players use to cut through the texture of an ensemble to be heard. Playing the melody in their own rhythm, embellishing the melody, fast trills to imitate/fit in with the “wave” tuning of the other instruments are all methods utilized by *rebab* players to be heard. Musicians also tune *rebab* in paired tuning to make them more audible (Widnyana, personal communication, December 13, 2017). While audibility is a distinct challenge when playing *rebab* with an ensemble, it does not exclude the instrument as a vital part

of modern genres of gamelan playing. Gamelan playing has a focus on the layering of textures to provide a full and complete sound (Gold 2005: 54, 58). In the ways I have outlined above, the *rebab* adds a texture to the communal music-making that other instruments are unable to do, which, I argue, makes the *rebab* a valuable member of the gamelan ensemble.

### Social Importance

In an ensemble, the *rebab* adds to a sense of completeness and is visually pleasing as well as sonically interesting to performers and audience members. On the listserv, some speculated that the main function of the quiet *rebab* in loud ensembles such as *gong kebyar* was to add to the sense of *rame/gotong royong* (“sense of communal work” that is central to Balinese music making) (Timar, post to listserv, April 17, 2005; Schalidt, post to listserv, April 19, 2005; McGraw, post to listserv, April 19, 2005). Lisa Gold describes the importance of communal work in *Music in Bali*. During ceremonies, *ramé* is important: “The boisterous, full atmosphere, known as *ramé*, is essential to a successful ceremony and requires the active participation of the entire community” (Gold 2005:7). The listserv posters are writing the same about the *rebab*; that it is important to include in ensembles because it adds to the atmosphere, even if every note played by the *rebab* is not distinctly heard. *Rebab* players have told me that the whole group feels as though the ensemble is more complete with a *rebab*. Cok Rak informed me that a *rebab* is absolutely necessary to have a full ensemble, and Pak Sanglah said that his group is always happy when he is there because it makes the ensemble more complete (Cok Rak, personal communication, December 13, 2017; Sanglah, personal communication, December 18, 2017). The *rebab*’s ability to add to the gamelan sound by enhancing the texture makes it sound more full, which connects to the feel of a complete social ensemble.

The *rebab* holds social value in certain ensembles and in competitive settings. While it is more common for *rebab* to be seen in historical genres/ensembles of like *semar pegulingan* and *gambuh*, it is vital for *gong kebyar* competitions in specific pieces. Due to the association with historical Hindu courts, the *rebab* is included in pieces that are thought to have roots in the courts for *gamelan gong kebyar* competitions (Widnyana, personal communication, December 13, 2017). Lisa Gold mentions this intermingling of newer styles with traditional in *Music in Bali* “Innovation and creativity are balanced with preservation of tradition. This contributes to an important sound ideal...Not only is it important for sonic and other spaces to be filled, but references to the past must be made” (Gold 2005: 16-17). The inclusion of the *rebab* in competitive settings is an intersection of social and sonic value. The *rebab* has the ability to transcend time and contribute traditional sounds to a *gong kebyar* ensemble unlike any other instrument in the *gamelan*.

Interestingly, while many musicians in Bali play with only the *gamelan* group from their *banjar* (local community), *rebab* players are scarce enough that they often play with multiple groups. If a *gamelan* group does not have a *rebab* player of their own, sometimes they will go to surrounding communities to recruit someone to play with them for competitions (Widnyana, personal communication, December 13, 2017). Groups will typically look within close communities or for someone in their region. For example, my teacher Pak Sanglah has played for Tirta Sari (who he considers his main group, and is on his business card) but also plays, teaches, and has toured with Çudamani. Both groups are around the Ubud area. The tie of a musician to a region is important, as Lisa Gold mentions, “When a music ensemble is good, the community feels regional pride because the very identity of a place is strongly connected to its *gamelan*...” (Gold 2005:55). I believe this is why groups look regionally for *rebab* players rather than across

the island, though it may also simply be easier to schedule rehearsals with someone who lives nearby. Further exploration into how a non-fixed-pitch instrument functions in a pitched ensemble is due. Is the rebab fundamental to the social group of a *gamelan*? There is a unique social fluidity to the way that the *rebab* (and *rebab* player) functions in gamelan ensembles due to its ability to move between groups. It is not tuned specifically to the ensemble that it is playing with; instead a *rebab* is built by an individual and not tuned until it is in the ensemble it will play with. I would like to know if *rebab* are included in initial ceremonial blessings of an ensemble, or if they are really thought of as part of the group even though they are not constructed with the rest of the ensemble. How does this affect how other gamelan musicians interact with *rebab* players, if it does at all?

The social value of the *rebab* is as contested as the sonic value of the instrument. Each musician appreciates the instrument for different reasons; some enjoy playing simply for musical reasons, some use it as a tool to preserve Balinese culture, others like to play because it has spiritual value to them. I spoke with my teachers and asked what they value about playing the *rebab*, and each had different answers. Gusde, as a composer and contemporary musician, was interested in the flexibility of a non-fixed-pitched instrument and enjoyed experimenting with scales and songs from different musical cultures. In many of my lessons, Gusde encouraged me to learn the pentatonic scale and major western scale. Sometimes, he would play Christmas tunes during break for fun and to see if I recognized them. Pak Sanglah finds spiritual enjoyment in playing the *rebab* and he enjoys making instruments to sell to his friends to spread love and joy. Pak Sanglah is very spiritual; often during lessons, he would stop in the middle of a sentence to tell me that the house ants were God, that the trees were God, and that the rain was God. His relationship with the *rebab* is in line with his spiritual view of the world. In our first lesson, he

told me that playing *rebab* is just like meditation to him because the hand shape of the bow reminds him of a *mudra* (a hand shape taken when meditating) (Sanglah, personal communication, December 17, 2017).

### History, Symbolism, and Religion

The *rebab* is and has historically involved in a complex overlapping web of religious and cultural synthesis. The name “*rebab*” is found in multiple countries including Turkey and Morocco, leading some (like Colin McPhee) to believe that the *rebab* originated in ancient Persia (McPhee 1966: 34). It may be true that the *rebab* originated in Persia, but it is difficult to speculate on the history of the *rebab*, as there are no written records of the instrument’s lineage. The term *rebab* seems to be used to describe a bowed lute across continents, so it is possible that the instrument existed in Bali or Java before the sixteenth century and the name was appropriated. Regardless if the name or the instrument itself was appropriated, the *rebab* is indicative of the social interactions of multiple religions and musical practices over the course of multiple centuries. I did not find reference to these complex layers of social interaction in contemporary Bali, however. Most people think of the *rebab* as part of the Javanese-Hindu Empire and not further back in time than that. This may be in part due to the role that the *rebab* plays in evocation of Balinese court culture in performances and ceremonies. There may also be an example of the interest in preserving a Balinese identity/shared history through the *rebab*. Sukerta states that his goal in writing *Learning the Balinese Rebab* is to preserve and develop Balinese culture (Sukerta 2000: 10). To Sukerta, the *rebab* is a crucial actor in the fight to preserve a traditional Balinese identity.

Modern iconography of the *rebab* in contemporary Bali is as unclear as its history. One of the Hindu deities with a special relationship with the *rebab* is the goddess of knowledge and the arts, Saraswati, who holds a *rebab* to signify the importance of music. In Indian Hinduism, Saraswati holds a *sitar* or *veena*, but the fact that in Bali she often is depicted holding a *rebab* may be indicative of a synthesis of other religious symbols/beliefs to Balinese Hinduism. Though most of the reliefs of Saraswati I saw held *rebab* (see Fig 5), while I was in Bali I found statues of her with a guitar or with various other stringed instruments. Sometimes, artistic license must have taken hold because sculptors and painters depicted her holding a stringed instrument that was structurally confusing (see Fig 6). I saw one relief of Saraswati holding an instrument that had three pegs, one string, and a body with no resonator. While some in Bali associate the *rebab* with Saraswati, it does not necessarily seem to be so important to others, especially in the tourist area of Ubud where I was. One art vendor I spoke to handed me a painting he had done of Saraswati (see Fig 7). While describing her symbols to me he told me that she held a guitar (though it was obviously a *rebab* and his English was superb, I think he said this for simplicity's sake). I mentioned that I knew it was a *rebab* and he was pleasantly surprised and emphasized that the *rebab* is a traditional symbol (anonymous, personal communication, December 20, 2017).

In addition to being a historical and religious symbol of Balinese culture and identity, the *rebab* participates in religious practices. *Gamelan gambuh* is typically played in the second courtyard of a temple and welcomes and entertains spirits in temple ceremonies (Eiseman 1990: 283).



From left to right:

**Figure 5** Depiction of the Goddess Saraswati holding a traditional *rebab* (Rl. Raya Ubud, Ubud).

**Figure 6** Depiction of the Goddess Saraswati holding a traditional *rebab* (Ubud).

**Figure 7** Depiction of the Goddess Saraswati holding a guitar-like instrument (Greenfield hotel, Ubud Bali).

(Photos taken by Mikaela Marget, December 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia).

### Conclusion

Eliot Bates writes: “Much of the power, mystique, and allure of musical instruments, I argue, is inextricable from the myriad situations where instruments are entangled in webs of complex relationships—between humans and objects, between humans and humans, and between objects and other objects” (Bates 2012: 364). I chose examples of the Balinese *rebab* that are indicative of the *rebab*'s role in social interactions on individual, communal, and spiritual levels. I argue that the *rebab* throughout history has had an active, if subtle, effect on musical culture in Bali.

What I have discussed in this paper is only introductory research into the importance of the Balinese *rebab*. Further topics to be explored relating to the Balinese *rebab* may include the possible cultural impact of foreign *rebab* students, how the *rebab* may act to preserve culture, the

relationship between pedagogy and *rebab*, the role of the *rebab* in a commercial setting, and how a “traditional” instrument such as the *rebab* relates to the tourism industry. The social value of ancient instruments like the *rebab* in tourist performances and the intersection of commercialism and ritual could also be examined further. In addition, what appeal to foreign audiences does the *rebab* hold and how does that impact self-conceptions of cultural or religious identity for Balinese musicians? How does the *rebab* act as a conduit of international cultural exchange in contemporary Bali as it did in Majapahit-era Bali?

My intent in this paper was not to overinflate the role of the *rebab* in contemporary Bali, nor was it merely to berate scholars for overlooking it. Instead, I attempted to illuminate how instruments outside the mainstream still have social impact and are useful in the study of musical cultures. My hope is that there will be more studies done on the Balinese *rebab*, but also that this paper may inspire study of other “forgotten” instruments in various music cultures.

## Bibliography

Books:

- Eiseman, Fred. 1990. *Bali Sekala & Niskala: essays on Religion, Ritual, and Art*. Vermont: Tuttle Publishing.
- Gold, Lisa. 2005. *Music in Bali*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kartomi, Margaret. 1990. *On Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments*. United States of America: University of Chicago Press.
- McPhee, Colin. 1966. *Music in Bali*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Sukerta, Pande Made. 2000. *Learning the Balinese Rebab*. Bali: Bali Mangsi Foundation.
- Tenzer, Michael. 2000. *Gamelan Gong Kebyar: The Art of Twentieth-Century Balinese Music*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Articles:

- Bates, Eliot. 2012. "The Social Life of Musical Instruments." *Ethnomusicology* 56(3): 363-395.
- Dawe, Kevin. 2001. "People, Objects, Meaning: Recent Work on the Study and Collection of Musical Instruments." *The Galpin Society Journal* 54.
- Kartomi, Margaret. 2001. "The Classification of Musical Instruments: Changing Trends in Research from the Late Nineteenth Century, with Special Reference to the 1990s." *Ethnomusicology* 45(2): 283-314.
- Quereshi, Regula. 2000. "How Does Music Mean? Embodied Memories and the Politics of Affect in the Indian "sarangi." *American Ethnologist* 27(4): 805-838.
- Susilo, Emiko. 1997. "Gambuh: A Dance-Drama of the Balinese Courts: Continuity and Change in the spiritual and Political Power of Balinese Performing Arts." *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies* 1(2): 1-26. University of Hawai'i  
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ba85/74ee73db4b13b8641666b06587e625f00ec2.pdf>.  
 Date accessed: 4/21/2018.

Listserv:

- Drummond, Barry. Thu, Jan 24, 2008. Message sent to  
 GAMELAN@LISTSERV.DARTMOUTH.edu

Mcgraw, Andrew. Tue, 19 Apr 2005. Message sent to  
GAMELAN@LISTSERV.DARTMOUTH.edu

Pon, Yan. Mon, Apr 18, 2005. Message sent to GAMELAN@LISTSERV.DARTMOUTH.edu

Schalit, David. Tue, 19 Apr 2005. Message sent to  
GAMELAN@LISTSERV.DARTMOUTH.edu

Tenzer, Michael. Mon, 18 Nov 1996. Message sent to  
GAMELAN@LISTSERV.DARTMOUTH.edu

Timar, Andrew. Sun, Apr 17, 2005. Message sent to  
GAMELAN@LISTSERV.DARTMOUTH.edu

Worthy, Ken. Sun, 17 Apr 2005. Message sent to GAMELAN@LISTSERV.DARTMOUTH.edu

#### Interviews:

Anonymous cab driver. Personal communication. December 13, 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia.

Anonymous painter. Personal communication. December 20, 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia.

Cok Rak. Personal communication. December 13, 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia.

Sanglah, I Wayan. Personal communication. December 11, 2017. December 17, 2017. December 18, 2017. December 21, 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia.

Sudiyasa, Kadek. Personal communication. December 11, 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia.

Widnyana, Ida Bagus Made. Personal communication. December 13, 2017. December 14, 2017. December 16, 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia.

#### Photos:

Figure 1

(Mikaela Marget, December 21, 2017. Lodtunduh, Bali, Indonesia).

Figure 2

(Mikaela Marget, April 30, 2018. Appleton, Wisconsin, United States of America).

Figure 3

(Mikaela Marget, April 30, 2018. Appleton, Wisconsin, United States of America).

Figure 4 (Mikaela Marget, December 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia).

Figure 5  
(Mikaela Marget, December 13, 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia).

Figure 6  
(Mikaela Marget, December 13, 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia).

Figure 7  
(Mikaela Marget, December 13, 2017. Ubud, Bali, Indonesia).