

FILM REVIEW

An Offering to Please God: Bringing the Music of Bali to BYU

BY **MYRNA LAYTON**

Student film directors Valerie Charlton and Heidi Hansen were thrilled when their professor Robert Walz offered them the chance to learn about creating documentary film by acting as directors of a BYU news documentary entitled *An Offering to Please God: Bringing the Music of Bali to BYU*. Valerie, who has a huge CD collection and very eclectic taste in music, commented that while she definitely wanted the experience of making a documentary, the fact that it would be about music made the project even more appealing. Valerie and Heidi have created an important documentary which introduces the music of the gamelan within the context of religious life in Bali, where 93% of the people follow Hinduism and the name of the island itself denotes *offering*.

It all started when BYU's College of Fine Arts approached Robert Walz, assistant professor of communications at BYU, with the request to produce a documentary — the decision had been made that the university would be getting a gamelan, so why not begin at the beginning and make a documentary about the process? Walz was intrigued with the idea. During the summer of 2008, he and his colleague Dale Green, an Emmy-award winning photographer, traveled to Bali with Dr. Jeremy Grimshaw, ethnomusicologist in BYU's School of Music, to learn about and record gamelan music in its home setting and to observe and record the creation of the custom-made gamelan instruments for BYU. Unfortunately, Bali was on the do-not-travel list at the time, so no students were able to participate in the travel experience, but once the gamelan arrived at BYU, Walz involved Charlton and Hansen in the project.

The word *gamelan* refers to a set of musical instruments that are a distinct entity, created and tuned to be played together. In Balinese gamelans, instruments are paired, and the tuning of each twin is deliberately a little bit “off” so that when they are played together, an acoustic beat occurs, creating the shimmering sound that is unique to the Balinese gamelan. Not only are Balinese craftsmen concerned about musical sound, but every available space on the instruments is elaborately carved. The Balinese believe that empty spaces should be filled with beauty, so that there is no room for evil. The carvings depict scenes from the Hindu Ramayana, although for BYU's gamelan Mormon iconography — specifically the Nauvoo temple sunstone — has been incorporated into the carvings on the gamelan instruments.



KYLE CLAWSON

RIGHT: ERIC TORRIE
BELOW: TANIELLE BENCH ALVAREZ



Charlton and Hansen filmed BYU's Gamelan Bintang Wahyu in rehearsal and performance and interviewed members of the gamelan: students who are music majors, engineering majors, biochemistry majors, etc., who comment on why participating in Balinese gamelan is meaningful to them. They mention the opportunity to participate in the musical traditions of another culture as an initial reason, but they quickly learn to appreciate the importance of cooperation. Cooperation is a vital aspect of Balinese culture, from sharing water for crops to flying kites to producing gamelan music. In the latter, cooperation is imperative, as the *kotekan* or melodies and harmonies of the gamelan require cooperation to create. One person cannot do it alone.

Gamelan Bintang Wahyu's March 2009 performances at Holi, the Festival of Colors, at Utah's Sri Sri Radha Krishna Temple are featured in the documentary. Although Krishna's Hinduism is not precisely the same as the Hinduism of Bali, they are related. Caru Das of the Krishna Hindu Temple explains stories behind some of the carvings on the gamelan instruments, particularly one about a turtle whose life and death illustrate the maxim that pride goeth before a fall. Gamelan practitioners have only to look at the carvings on their instruments to be reminded of the importance of living virtuous lives.

Balinese composer and gamelan expert I Ketut Gede Asnawa is also featured in the film, explaining the importance of *rasa*, the ability to communicate emotion through music. Viewers can see that happen for the members of Gamelan Bintang Wahyu in their performances, and for Valerie Charlton and Heidi Hansen in their fabulous work of art about the gamelan, *An Offering to Please God*, which I highly recommend. ■



KYLE CLAWSON