

Ensembles Asia: Mapping experimental practices in music in Asia

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In Western countries and in Japan, experimental practices of music have developed into larger communities that share a common musical aesthetic and language, and are generally associated with genres such as noise music, free improvisation, or experimental music. However in South East Asia, and particularly in Indonesia, these categories are of little use for finding artists making unique music. Instead, distinctly individualistic styles and a form of musical experimentalism is found at the edge of more popular genres such as punk, metal, or as a result of incorporating traditional and indigenous musical influences. Ensembles Asia is project that aims to explore these forms of musical experimentations that slip through conventional categorisations of music. The project also tries to cultivate a new network of musicians through playing together in a large improvising ensemble.

1. INTRODUCTION

As I noticed from the corner of my eye, the light above Singaporean musician Lesley Low gradually brighten and a distinct twang came from his metal body guitar, I knew it was time for me to stop playing. I stepped off my small stage platform and observed my fellow performers scattered around the large theatre space with audience members sitting packed tightly in between (Figure 1). By now, I am used to playing in this unusual setting, where sometimes you feel like you are playing a duo with a radio in another room, and other times the overall sound becomes so dense that to simply stop playing seems to be the best choice you can make. After the concert, one audience member told me that the rapidly evolving soundscape with activities sounding from all directions was like sitting in a forest or jungle.

This was at the Asian Meeting Festival 2015 where 15 musicians from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Hong Kong and Japan played together, most for the first time with each other.¹ The project is the brainchild of Japanese musician and

¹The main programme of Asian Meeting Festival 2015 took place on 6–7 February at Asahi Art Square, Tokyo, and on 8 February at Villa Kamogawa Goethe Institute, Kyoto. Among the musicians invited from outside Japan included Yuen Cheewai (SG), Kok Siew Wai (MY), Yui-Saowakhon Muangkruan (TH), Nguyen Hong Giang (VN), Hue Trinh (VN), Leslie Low (SG), Idris (ID), To Die (ID) and Iman Jimbot (ID).

composer Otomo Yoshihide, and for this edition Yuen Chee Wai and myself curated the programme.² Leading up to this festival, I travelled to Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand to try to find musicians practising in experimental and free improvised music, and also in the hope of discovering localised subgenres or labelling of music as in European free improvisation or Japanoise. Instead I found various forms of experimental and individualistic styles of music, each with different relationships to tradition, existing musical genres and the surrounding environment. Some created a distinctly unique form of music while others would be hard to tell their origin if one only listened to the recordings.

In this article I will focus on my encounters and experience in Indonesia and highlight some of the key differences with experimental forms of music that developed in Japan. I will also discuss Otomo Yoshihide's work that lead to his Pan-Asian music project, Ensembles Asia/Asian Music Network and a spatially fragmented and evolving format for group improvisation that is inclusive towards musicians who do not share similar musical backgrounds.

Ultimately my argument is that new forms of experimental music and stylistic innovations now happen in between various genres of music. Some find their most radical voice in revisiting traditional forms of music and others follow a conventional format but the environment that the work is placed in defines their identity. As a practising musician and curator myself, I question how we can bring these diverse forms together and present them in a way that has impact on both the audience and the participating artists.

2. THE EXPLOSIVE CHEMISTRY OF SENYAWA

I was reunited with Wukir Suryadi at his idyllic home in Nitiprayan, a well-known artist district in Yogyakarta (also commonly called Jogja). It has been three

²First edition of the Asian Meeting festival took place on 23–25 September 2005 at PITINN, Tokyo, second edition on 23–25 October 2009, Asahi Art Square.



Figure 1. Asian Meeting Festival 2015. Photograph by Kuniya Oyamada. (colour online)



Figure 2. Wukir Suryadi's Bambu Wukir. (colour online)

years since I last saw him in Amsterdam.³ He seems more relaxed now and his English had improved significantly. Perhaps his extensive touring abroad with Rully Shabara as Senyawa has forced him to talk more English.

Originally from Malang, East Java, Wukir is widely known for his craftsmanship in building the unique instruments he uses for performing. He takes what he can find in his surrounding environment to make his instruments. This is often scrap bamboo, but he has also made instruments out of traditional ploughs and once from a broken machinegun (Dominguez 2012). After living in numerous cities throughout Java, Wukir eventually settled in Yogyakarta five years ago, where he cultivates his own bamboo in his backyard (Suryadi, 2014). He tells me that he takes inspiration from his surrounding environment and from Indonesian traditional culture. Bamboo seems to be the perfect embodiment of these two things – indigenous to the land with many varieties and a symbol of modern Indonesian resistance.

His namesake and the primary instrument that he performs on today is called the Bambu Wukir (Figure 2). It resembles the sasando, a traditional harp-like bamboo instrument from the Rote Island of the East Nusa Tenggara province of Indonesia. Both instruments have strings arranged in a circular formation, stretched at various heights from the bamboo body by wooden wedges. However, the Bambu Wukir's frame is cut diagonally at the top, looking like a bamboo spear, and is amplified with a contact microphone, in contrast to sasando's fan-like acoustic resonator made from large dried leaf. The sasando is typically plucked by the fingers of both hands while

placed on a stand or held between the legs, but Wukir holds his instrument like a guitar or riffle, and not only plucks with both hands but also bows and taps on the body. These sounds are enhanced through a distortion pedal, making it sound closer to an electric guitar or electric violin, yet the traditional pentatonic scale that the strings are tuned to give it a distinctly Indonesian characteristic.

Wukir studied theatre, and for four years worked with the Rendra's Bengkel Teater. W. S. Rendra's is one of Indonesia's most recognised modern theatre makers and a poet who combined Western avant-gardism with traditional ritualistic performances (Winet 2010). During the final decade of Suharto's dictatorship in the 1990s, theatre arts became one of the most pointed political voices to oppose censorship and the elite class. Rendra was particularly known for his activism involving communal living with his company members and working directly with underprivileged communities and themes that resonated with them (Bodden 2010). Wukir tells me that Rendra taught him to look at traditional values as a way to critique current issues, and that his experience with his company is what shaped him spiritually today.

The other half of Senyawa, Rully points to direct influences from traditional Indonesian singing and particularly Raego, a ritual singing from Selawesi where he grew up (Leinhart 2015). However, his vocal versatility comes from incorporating other forms of traditional and contemporary vocal techniques such as Tuvan throat singing, death metal growls and Diamanda Galás-style high-pitched shrieking (Shabara 2015). His other band, Zoo, was one of the first groups in Indonesia to play an experimental style of rock music that was inspired by groups such as John Zorn's Naked City or Tatsuya Yoshida's Ruins. The band has evolved since, adding a distinct flavour of tribalism to their music. Another project that he leads is Raung Jagat, an experimental chorus project which uses self-invented conducting signs to represent and compose his own vocal techniques.

³In 2010, during my appointment as artistic director of STEIM (Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music in Amsterdam), we supported a project called *The Future Sound of Folk* by Singaporean electronic musician One Man Nation. Through this project I was introduced to two Indonesian musicians: Iman Jimbot and Wukir Suryadi. In late 2011, with the support from Performing Arts Fund NL (FPK), I organised an artistic residency at STEIM and a series of concerts in the Netherlands for Jimbot and Wukir. For both musicians this was their first time playing outside South East Asia.

Senyawa means ‘chemical compound’ in Indonesian. Senyawa was born from the combination of two different elements. There was a chemical reaction and something new was born. Wukir represents ‘nature’ with his instruments and I represent ‘human’ through my voice. (Shabara 2014)

Described in one interview as ‘one of the most intense bands in the world’, Senyawa combines various indigenous Indonesian art forms with a hard-edged noisy sound (Leinart 2015). Interestingly, out of all his projects, Rully considers Senyawa as his ‘metal’ band. Their sound is both distinctly experimental and Indonesian at the same time.

One important reference for their music is the ritualistic Javanese horse dance called *Jaranan* (van Groenendael 2008). In these rituals, a dance troupe starts off with a choreographed dance accompanied by minimalistic rhythms, and gradually enters into an entranced state of being possessed by animal spirits and gods. Once possessed, the dancers take on abnormal and super-human actions, depending on which spirit has taken over. These may include climbing trees, eating thorny fruit or glass, and even being run over on their back by a motorbike. After a climatic build up with the help of music, they are awoken by the *pawang*, the mediating shaman. When they are brought back to their normal selves, they show no signs of pain or injury from their actions during their trance (Hughes-Freeland 2008a, 2008b). Wukir plays on his *Bambu Wukir* rhythms and tempo shifts that resemble the musical accompaniment of *Jaranan*, while Rully takes on roles of both the *pawang* and the possessed dancers. Senyawa’s performances simulate *Jaranan*’s intense build up of energy followed by a gradual release. This dramaturgy combined with fast riffs played at ear-splitting levels and ecstatic screams is explosive.

Under Suharto’s New Order (1967–98), a modernised cultural identity for Indonesia was sought after, and contemporary forms of music and performance art that incorporate traditional influences were encouraged. However, this only applied to certain Javanese traditional culture, and the possessive rituals of *Jaranan* were viewed as primitive and not compatible with the rational and progressive societal image that the government pushed for (Tucker 2011). To work with such indigenous art forms that were excluded from the cultural discourse was directly addressing a power structure that centralised its influence and marginalised others, and was considered controversial and radical.

In contrast, today’s Indonesia seems to be polarised with, on the one hand, mainstream media capitalising on global idol marketing schemes such as *JKT48*,⁴

⁴*JKT48* is a spin-off of Yasushi Akimoto’s recent franchise of Japanese idol groups centred around *AKB48*. Ironically, *Bising* director Adyitia Utama worked as head of documentation for *JKT48* during the period 2011–14.

and, on the other hand, regions such as Aceh, which have gained more autonomy, condemning and even criminalising youth movements such as punk rock under Sharia Law.⁵ In such context, Senyawa has become both the successor of a distinctly Indonesian form of experimentalism that integrates native art forms and the vanguard of a local music scene through their highly individualistic and cutting-edge sound.

Senyawa has found more kinship with the international underground music scene. They have toured Japan with improvising guitarist Kazuhisa Uchihashi, and collaborated in concert with influential acts such as Keiji Haino, Otomo Yoshihide and Melt Banana. Equally intriguing is Senyawa’s latest album made in collaboration with Lebanese DJ and techno producer Rabih Beaini (aka Morphosis), triggering one’s imagination of a future cultural network between two non-Western cultural hotspots – Beirut and Yogyakarta.

Senyawa is also a product of the cultural network that thrives in Yogyakarta. Wukir and Rully were brought together by local independent music icon *Wok the Rock*.⁶ Kristi Monfries, who organised many international projects between Indonesia and Australia, manages the duo’s international bookings and logistics.⁷ Many South East Asian artists would consider Yogyakarta the cultural capital of the region, with its open atmosphere, various alternative art spaces, and cheap living costs. *Biennale Jogja* and *Art Jog* (Astari 2013) have become flagship art fairs in the South East Asia and the prolific Venzha Christ and his organisation *HONF* (House of Organic Fiber) is widely considered to be a pioneer in South East Asian New Media Art (Hatley and Hough 2015). Timothy O’Donoghue, who organised regular concerts with *Wok*, now owns a popular local restaurant that doubles as an alternative music venue. On top of all this activity, there is a constant influx of youth coming to study at the universities, making the city a melting pot of different generations and ethnic groups from around the archipelago.

⁵The ‘Aceh punks’ who were detained and sent to military camps after organising a Tsunami relief concert were widely covered by Western news media (Armour 2014; Vaswani 2011).

⁶*Wok*, an active music promoter and organiser since the early 1990s, started the first net label in Indonesia called *Yes No Wave*. This has become a crucial platform for independent bands to release their work and also sell merchandise. *Wok* brought Wukir and Rully together at his concert series *Yes No Club*, organised with Tim O’Donoghue, and also gave them their band name. He continues to be an influence on the band, helping them create titles for songs, designing cover artwork and giving them general feedback on their music (*Wok The Rock* 2014).

⁷Kristi Monfries, who set up their first concert abroad in Australia, has been crucial in Senyawa’s international presence ever since. Her organisation *Volcanic Winds* is active in arranging artist exchange programmes between Australia and Indonesia. The *Instrument Builders* project was recently showcased at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (Monfries 2014).

3. OPEN-AIR NOISE WITH JOGJA NOISE BOMBING

Jakarta-based filmmakers Adythia Utama and Riar Rizaldi's music documentary *Bising* (Utama and Rizaldi 2014) chronicles, over the course of four years, the development of Indonesian noise music through interviews of an overwhelming number of artists and bands. The film draws a vibrant picture of Indonesia's youthful underground music scene. Yet, surprisingly, the film ends with several artists concluding that noise music is just a fad and that they should disband now because it is not cool anymore. After the film, Adythia told me that the scene moves quickly, and many groups in his film do not exist anymore or perform under new names. He then showed me an online video clip of the Jogja Noise Bombing (JNB). In the video a group of five to six members surrounding a table full of equipment and portable guitar amps are performing in broad daylight. The music, or non-music, can be easily recognised as noise music or harsh noise with characteristic feedback loops and distortion created with guitar-effect pedals. Yet, the setting for the performance is almost surreal, in a peaceful-looking park without any sign of an audience. An older man, who is possibly cleaning staff or manager of the park, looks on at first bewildered, then becomes increasingly angry at the ruckus being made, threatening to switch off their power at the breaker box (Mandra 2015).

JNB consists of eight core members who perform in different combinations and organise the logistics for their events. They have supporting members who help with equipment or occasionally join them to play (Aribowo 2015). One of the central figures is Indra Minus aka To Die. Indra arrived at noise music out of a desire to play louder than any other band and also feeling frustrated that Punk had become part of mainstream commercial music, losing its original DIY ethos (Minus 2015). His music combines death growls and shouting vocals with noisy drones made from feedback, cassette tapes and a handmade modular synthesiser built by local instrument builders Lintang Raditya and Andreas Siangian.

Although Yogyakarta has a vibrant art and music scene, Indra and his friends were frustrated that venues were not supportive of their music, and would simply not hire space to them because they were unknown. Their solution was to organise guerrilla-style noise concerts on the streets and in parks, taking electricity from wherever they could without permission. This was the beginning of JNB. Since their first event in 2009, the term 'noise bombing' has spread to other cities, where local noise musicians are also organising ad hoc concerts in public spaces (Aribowo 2015).

My understanding of noise music is closely tied to my own experience of going to live venues and clubs during the 1990s in Tokyo. Regardless of whether the



Figure 3. Jogja Noise Bombing Festival 2014 at an abandoned restaurant. (colour online)

genre being played was noise music or not, the music at these venues was always extremely loud. What was important for us was an experience of embodiment and a state of sensory saturation that was induced by sheer volume. These small venues with disproportionately large sound systems and heavily soundproofed walls were a world of their own, completely disconnected from the bright commercial lights and drunken salary men outside. It was this detachment from our environment and even our own bodies that made us gravitate towards noise music and noisy music in general. JNB's open-air concerts with portable sound systems are in stark contrast to this. To play such music outside is a provocation, as one man was disturbed enough to shut it down in the video, but Indra does not see their events as a political statement. For JNB, playing outside is a practical solution that solves their problem with unsupportive venues, and perfectly matches the city's open-minded and generally relaxed atmosphere. In the last couple of years, JNB have become the most active organisers of noise music in Indonesia, and the timing of my trip was to participate in their Jogja Noise Bombing Festival 2014.

The festival had changed its location the day before, and was now announced on Facebook to be at an abandoned chicken-skewer restaurant (Figure 3). Due to heavy afternoon traffic, I arrived at the location an hour late. Indra and his crew welcomed me with a smile telling me that they were still waiting for the sound system to arrive. Another hour later, a van pulled up and two guitar amps were unloaded – this was our sound system for the night. However, I was not going to be phased because I had already put in a considerable amount of time preparing for this concert, from renting a power stabiliser to deal with the common temporary electricity outage and hiring a Technics 1200 turntable from a local DJ at my own expense.

The line-up of the festival was impressive, with a total of 13 acts performing. American noise act id m thef-table was here on his last leg of an Australia/Singapore

tour and noise turntablist DJ Urine from France was coming in from Kuala Lumpur. Lucas Abela from Australia, better known as Justice Yeldham and for his extreme performances with glass plates, had already been staying in Yogyakarta for a couple of months working on a sound installation. Local acts such as Theo Nugraha from Borneo playing on a mysterious PVC pipe wired to pedals, and Lintang Raditya on his handmade 'Java Synth' modular system gave impressionable performances. I was playing a short solo set followed by a duo with Senyawa's Rully Shabara.

Without any time for a sound check, I struggled throughout my solo set to find the right sounds that rendered well on the humming guitar amps and that would not set off too much feedback in the small space. Rully did not need any preparation. He stepped in only holding an SM58 microphone, and on the first sound he made, his voice cut through the noise like a sharp knife. He immediately dominated the space. In the end it was one of the most exciting shows I have ever played.

What defines Jogja Noise Bombing as a group and secures their unique position in the local music scene is their fluidity. Their mobile festivals create spontaneous nodes around the city enabling a unique flow of people. At the same time, they become a hub for a larger network of international musicians touring the region. This flow is repeated in another layer of circulation through tapes and vinyl merchandise sold at shows and sound files distributed online by two independent labels run by their members.⁸ In looking at how noise music developed in Japan and North America, David Novak identifies circulation and feedback as a key culture-making process for transnational genres of music (Novak 2013). JNB is at the centre of a network of musicians in neighbouring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam who are reinforcing the genre of noise music and its influence.

However, to find a distinctly local characteristic in the sound and music of JNB is more challenging. Another core member Taufiq Aribowo, also known as Ari, admits that they have not reached the level of something they can call 'Indo-noise'. He tells me that they need to take it step by step in defining a unique sound, and this pursuit has led them to invest more time in building DIY and circuit-bent instruments (Aribowo 2015). At this point, if one would just listen to the recordings, most of JNB-related work could have come from any corner of the world.

4. BIN IDRIS' MELANCHOLIA

I was chatting with *Bising* co-director Riar Rizaldi and his friend Haikal Azizi while sitting on a stoop at the

⁸Indra runs Relamati Records, which releases on physical format of tapes, lathe cut records and CDs, and another member Arie runs a net label called Mind Blasting.



Figure 4. Bin Idris at Asian Meeting Festival 2015. Photograph by Kuniya Oyamada. (colour online)

prestigious Art Department of Bandung Institute of Technology or ITB. Riar, who is a recent graduate of the university, offered to show me around the city and introduce me to local artists. Haikal is pursuing his Master's in the Visual Arts programme while also teaching undergraduate students at the same university. They tell me how Bandung is another cultural centre in Indonesia, where many students come to study and end up staying afterwards. Compared to Yogyakarta's flat landscape and dusty roads, Bandung is mountainous and covered with beautiful trees. The art department has produced up-and-coming sound artists such as Duto Hardono and Bagus Pandega, who now teach and have studios in Bandung. Duto, who joined us later for dinner, tells me that Bandung is a better environment for artists than Jakarta, with cheaper living costs and more space. Haikal agrees but also says 'it's sometimes too ideal here' (Azizi 2014; Hardono 2014).

Haikal is the front man and guitarist of a popular band Sigmun and also has a solo project under the name Bin Idris (Figure 4). He tells me that his band plays rock music and his solo project plays the blues (Azizi 2015). Contrary to Haikal's simple description of his music, Sigmun crosses between metal and psychedelic rock incorporating long passages of high-energy improvisation into their sets. Bin Idris is often featured together with the growing folk music scene of Indonesia, but his use of pitch-shifting vocal effects and the loop machine creates an unusual dissonance. Although never trained formally in music, being from Jakarta and ethnically Betawi, Haikal grew up with many Arabic and Chinese cultural influences, and listened to Islamic music as much as American alternative rock and grunge. He tells me that he utilises effects especially in his solo performances because it gives him more space to explore new directions with the songs he writes. As Bin Idris, one can hear moments of the blues as Haikal imagines his music to be, but these are immediately forgotten as his playlist is

interrupted by impressive improvisations on the acoustic guitar or emotional build-ups of sound through the loop machine, and alien chants created with the help of a chorus effect. His recorded music largely falls into popular genres of music, yet his performances are filled with genre-defying moments and an undeniable individualistic style.

5. JIMBOT'S TRADITIONAL EXPERIMENTALISM

Bandung is also where my old friend Iman Jimbot is based. We wait for him on the ITB campus, where eventually he turns up, looking sharp wearing a brown leather biker jacket. His vibrant character has not changed, and like Wukir, his English has improved significantly since I last saw him three years ago. He tells me that he is collaborating with more artists from abroad these days.

Jimbot, whose real name is Iman Rochman, comes from a family of Sunda musicians, where he started to play music at the age of four and later studied traditional music at the Padjadjaran National University in Bandung (Rochman 2015). The Sundanese are the second largest ethnic group in Indonesia with their own language and cultural identity, which was largely undermined during Suharto's Java-centric New Order regime (Jones 2013). Traditional forms of music, with the exception of Central Javanese traditional music, were generally considered as accompaniment for theatre or dance, and were rarely presented on their own (Notosudirdjo 2001). However, starting in the 1990s, various hybrids between traditional and Western genres of music have become widely supported and continue to be popular after Suharto's fall (Raden 2006; Miller 2014). In recent years, Jimbot has become the driving force of a modernised version of Sundanese traditional music through countless and diverse collaborations. He is a regular member of Indonesian pop band Saraswati, and was featured on Spanish World Music composer Ana Alcaide's Tales of Pangea project. In another band Trah, Sundanese traditional music is infused with metal and hip hop. His list of collaborations extends to jazz, R&B, blues, and punk. All these collaborations culminated in a recent solo concert, which featured Jimbot playing with 23 other bands. He called it the 'Jimbot Festival'.⁹

Amongst his collaborations is the unique Karinding Attack. Named after a traditional Sundanese mouth harp made from bamboo, Karinding Attack consists of musicians coming from metal and hard rock backgrounds all playing on handmade bamboo instruments. Jimbot is the only member with training in

⁹The event named 'Torotoot Jimbot Ti Sunda Ka Jomantar' took place on 31 March 2015 at Dago Tea House, Bandung. https://youtu.be/aUA_MXeozSo



Figure 5. Jimbot playing at Asian Meeting Festival 2015. Photograph by Kuniya Koyamada. (colour online)

traditional music. The instruments vary from Karinding to a percussion instrument similar to the Anglung, another iconic traditional Sundanese instrument. The music takes form from metal and hip hop with rapping and metal vocals, but the instrumentation is exclusively acoustic bamboo sounds. One of the tags on their Last.fm pages reads folk metal.

Jimbot's versatility as a musician also comes from the many instruments he can play. His primary instruments are the Kecapi, a zither-like Sundanese instrument, the Kendang, a double-sided drum common throughout South East Asia, and the Suling, a bamboo flute also common throughout the region. When available, he plays the Bonang, a collection of gongs shaped like pots that are used in Javanese gamelan music. He can also sing, which is another prominent feature of Sundanese traditional music (Harnish and Rasmussen 2011).

Jimbot's unhinged desire to expand his musical activities makes him one of the few traditionally trained musicians who are willing to collaborate with experimental genres of music, such as noise music or free improvisation. His exposure to this music comes from being a member of the Bandung-based artist community centre The Common Room. The Common Room has been playing a pivotal role in bringing together artists and the local community through workshops, exhibitions, and small-scale concerts. Essentially anyone can rent the multifunctional space and as a result it has become the primary location for unconventional music concerts. Here Jimbot regularly plays with touring experimental musicians (Figure 5).

6. THE DISTRACTIONS OF JAKARTA

One of the cultural hubs of Jakarta is Café Mondo – a popular hangout spot for local creative types serving Japanese curry and omelette rice by day and hosting experimental and underground music events at night.

Japanese co-owner Shunsuke Izumimoto, who speaks Bahasa-Indonesia better than English, came to Indonesia ten years ago as a graphic designer and became fascinated with local popular music from the 1960s and 1970s. Now with an extensive collection of rare vintage vinyl, even locals consider him an authority on this genre. Izumimoto tells me that although Indonesia still has a thriving underground music scene, the situation in Jakarta is difficult for artists and very few venues can sustain business due to the high rent or conflicts with the local municipality or police (Izumimoto 2014).

My first concert in Jakarta joined by Jimbot was at Ruangrupa, an internationally renowned independent art space. Originally starting as a loose artist collective 15 years ago, Ruangrupa has established itself as a cutting-edge organisation working with new media artists, hosting annual art festivals and supporting local independent music. Their space includes a gallery, radio station, office, media archive and gift shop.

Before the concert, I was invited to give a seminar to members of the organisation about my own activities and the Ensembles Asia project. This was also an opportunity for me to ask about their work and how they operate. One of the founding members, Andan Mirwan, explains to me that most of their projects are supported by international organisations and they feel that support from local institutions is thin because they are too alternative and not commercially driven enough. To my question as to whether Jakarta is a good place to be an artist, he says that distractions and turmoil in daily urban life is something they feed off, and points to the recent election of the first president to not come from the military or political elite and the first non-Muslim Jakarta governor in 50 years, as an inspiration. ‘Other cities are just too comfortable’ Andan told me with a grin on his face (Mirwan 2014).

Perhaps his colleague and music curator Indra Ameng is more conflicted. Indra has been a central figure in the Jakarta independent music scene since the late 1990s, managing key bands that embodied a youthful optimism in a post-Suharto era, and curating popular monthly events in the city (Ameng 2013). However, his new project RRREC Festival in the Valley is an outdoor event that takes place on an idyllic camping ground three hours away from Jakarta (Figure 6). In its second year at this location, the line-up features an array of local and international bands, including more experimental acts such as Senyawa’s Rully and Jogja Noise Bombing. He tells me that there is no musical centre in Jakarta, and after experiencing Jakarta’s sprawling size and heavy traffic jams, it is easy to imagine why this is. Indra’s solution was to take the whole music scene of Jakarta outside the city into a more relaxed and intimate setting to experience the music.



Figure 6. RRREC Festival in the Valley 2015. Photograph by Takeshi Tamura. (colour online)

The concert with Jimbot was well organised with sufficient equipment and dedicated sound engineers. Jimbot came with his standard three-instrument setup of Kecapi, Kendang and Suling. With just a short sound check, we felt comfortable and did not feel the need to do much more before the concert. During the concert, Jimbot moved freely between his instruments, carefully matching my electronic sounds played from various vinyl records and an analogue synth. He surprised me with various unconventional playing techniques such as sliding his nails on the strings of the kecapi or playing on the non-skin areas of the kendang.¹⁰ The concert was well received by the audience and I left Jakarta early the following morning, finishing my short visit to Indonesia.

7. OTOMO’S ASIAN NETWORKS AND ENSEMBLES

Ensembles Asia is a culmination of three streams of Otomo Yoshihide’s work – Asian Meeting Festival (2005, 2009b), *Otomo Yoshihide Ensembles* (2009a) and Far East Network/FEN (2014).

The Asian Meeting Festival was born out of a frustration of witnessing East Asian governments and mainstream media fuelling xenophobia within their own people. The Internet was becoming a crucial tool for independent artists to connect with each other and was helping establish new cultural exchanges between Tokyo and cities such as Seoul and Beijing. But at the same time it was enabling hateful ideas to spread and further distort the image of neighbouring countries and their citizens. Otomo felt it was important to create physical platforms for the Japanese artists and artists from other Asian countries to exchange ideas and start new collaborations. With no funding or institutional

¹⁰A recording of this concert is available at <https://soundcloud.com/jasussss/iman-jimbot-dj-sniff-live-at-the-play-back-ruang-rupa-2014>.

support, Otomo organised the festival on two occasions (Otomo 2005, 2009b).

Taking its name from the American military radio station, which had left a strong imprint on post-war Japanese youth culture, Far East Network (FEN) is a band formed by Otomo with Yan Jun from Beijing, Yuen Chee Wai from Singapore, and Ryu Hankil from Seoul. Despite Yan Jun, Cheewai and Hankil being more than 15 years younger than Otomo, they all shared a similar experimental approach towards music-making. What was equally important was the fact that each member was also an active organiser of experimental music in their home country (Otomo 2009b). Like the Asian Meeting Festival, FEN embodied optimism towards creating a new network of independent musicians in Asia that was not mediated through Western ideas of experimentalism nor hindered by political conflict.

Otomo Yoshihide Ensembles was a commission by YCAM, an innovative art centre in southern Japan. The project involved four large-scale sound installations – *quartets*, *orchestra*, *without records* and *filaments*, each built in collaboration with a team of visual artists, engineers and computer programmers. These works reflected Otomo's increasing interest in composing non-hierarchical sound spaces. Otomo was inspired by the Onkyo-kei performers at Off Site, who played at the same volume level as the air ventilator or a bicycle passing by outside. At these concerts, the act of listening and playing became equal for the musicians, which inevitably flattened the performance space, inviting the audience to take on a more active role. Otomo began to experiment with unconventional staging ideas and performance durations for group improvisation.

However for an improvising ensemble it is a little different. Even if you would take out one of the player's sound, the music still works. But, for example, combining three separate solos would not sound the same as a trio improvising together. (Otomo 2009a)

YCAM's artist director Kazunao Abe described these subtle negotiations amongst improvising musician and streams of sounds that hardly seem to intersect as 'co-existing without synchronizing' (Otomo 2009a). For the *Ensembles* installations, Otomo replaced the musicians with sounding objects and video silhouette. These objects and images interacted with each other like an improvising ensemble controlled by a sophisticated computer system. It was through this project that Otomo conceptualised a way of working with individuals coming from various backgrounds without dictating their roles but rather trying to highlight each of their strengths.

What's important is that the result is not achieved by one person's concept. The concept can be faulty and full of gaps. What is more crucial is that everyone involved,

professionals and amateurs, contribute all their skills and work as hard as they can to complete the piece together. (Otomo 2009a)

Ensembles or *Orchestras* in plural form become a working title for Otomo's later work that involves large groups of participating artists.

8. ENSEMBLES ASIA/ASIAN MUSIC NETWORK

Soon after Tokyo had won the bid to host the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Japanese government launched a new initiative to enhance cultural exchange with ASEAN countries. Asian Center was founded as a dedicated organisation within the Japan Foundation to support projects under this scheme. Otomo was invited as artistic director for the music category where he launched *Ensembles Asia*. *Ensembles Asia* is divided into three projects: *Ensembles Asia Orchestra*, *Asian Sound Research* and *Asian Music Network*. I was called upon by Otomo to become the project co-director of *Asian Music Network* together with Yuen Chee Wai.

Our mission was to research independent and experimental musicians in South East Asia, facilitate exchange among artists in the wider region of Asia, and to organise various events in Japan to showcase these artists and new projects born out of the exchange. The first event was going to be the latest edition of Otomo's Asian Meeting Festival curated by Chee Wai and myself.

After my research and concerts in Indonesia, and with Chee Wai's extended knowledge of the South East Asian music scene, it was not difficult for us to compose a list of unique musicians from each region. As musicians ourselves, we believe that playing music together is the best way to exchange ideas and understand each other's backgrounds. However, at the same time we did not want to present casual jam sessions. It was important for us to create something that was more than just bringing together these musicians, and that it was built around strict professionalism worthy enough to present to a large audience.

Leading up to the festival, we had several occasions to test how we could showcase a group of distinct musicians. In August 2014, Otomo and ten artists from various Asian countries, including Chee Wai and myself, were invited to YCAM for a two-day event. One of the programmes included a group improvisation session with all members.¹¹ The staging was

¹¹Otomo Yoshihide FEN Orchestra/Asian Explosion: Networks took place on 3 August 2014 at YCAM, Yamaguchi Japan. Participating artists were: Otomo Yoshihide (JP), Yuen Cheewan (SG), Vhenza Christ (ID), Vu Nhat Tan (VN), Bani Haykal (SG), Yan Jun (CN), Ryu Hankil (KR), Sachiko M (JP), Tadashi Yonago (JP) and dj sniff (HK).

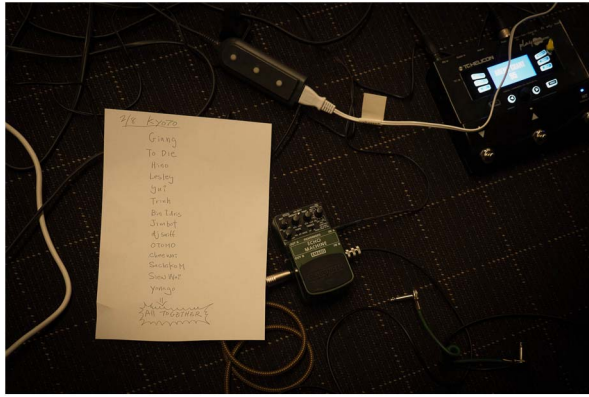


Figure 7. The playing order sheet for the musicians at Asian Meeting Festival. Photograph by Ayane Morishita. (colour online)

already decided: to have small stage platforms for each performer and scatter these around the space.¹² What was not decided was who was playing with whom, and the running order of the concert. After some discussion with Otomo and the musicians, we arrived at a format where a list was composed and every performer appeared sequentially to play in short duos and trios (Figure 7). When the fourth musician joined, the first musician would pull out. Although we set a general guideline to join after three or four minutes, exact timings was left to each musician to decide. After all members had played, there would be a short break and then we would play again all together. The rule for this part was that the performance had to last for about 40 minutes and that everyone had to play together at some moment. When and how long this moment should be was not predetermined.

In January 2015, with some musicians overlapping from the YCAM event, we worked again on showcasing a large group of musicians at the Playfreely Festival in Singapore.¹³ For this occasion we had two days assigned for rehearsals. Otomo led a workshop session where we played in small combinations with each other, and also all together under his conducting. Interestingly, after some trial and error, the format that we used at YCAM seemed to produce the most musically interesting results. With varying degrees of experience in free improvisation or working with alternative conducting systems, the most reliable common thread between the musicians was their understanding of time. A loose rule of timing and duration provided a good balance of structure and freedom for each musician to explore their sound and various interactions with others during the actual performance. By the time we had our third opportunity to work with another group of

¹²This was one of Otomo's signature non-standard staging methods, which he had used in various concerts including previous concerts at YCAM and also for the last edition of Asian Meeting Festival.

¹³Playfreely Festival is an annual Improvised Music festival organised by independent rock band The Observatory.

musicians in Thailand the following week, it was clear that this would be the best way to work.

One time, for some odd reason I was assigned to wash the dishes, and was looking onwards from the kitchen counter everyone having a good time eating and drinking, and then thought: 'What if I can make an orchestra like this?' Small groups form several circles, each talking to each other among themselves, but sometimes the members interchanging, and oddly as a whole there would be some kind of polyphony made. (Otomo 2009a)

9. ASIAN MEETING FESTIVAL 2015

After two climatic and noisy peaks during our last set with all musicians together, I can sense that most of us were feeling that the concert was coming to an end. Yet, Bin Idris, whose station is at the centre of the theatre space, continues to play a lengthy passage on his guitar accompanied with his pitch-shifted voice and Japanese artist Tadashi Yonago is swinging a light bulb suspended from the ceiling creating visually a dramatic moment. Eventually, Bin Idris fades out his sound and Yonago unscrews the light bulb. The space falls into complete silence and darkness. Then Japanese percussionist Tatsu-hisa Yamamoto suddenly bursts into a completely misplaced drum roll and stops abruptly causing both performers and audience members to laugh. The lights go up and the concert is at a definite end. We all rise to bow.

If one were to listen to the recordings of the music that was played this night, I would imagine it to be categorised within the genre of experimental music or free improvisation. However, for both the participating musicians and audience members, the experience was less defined by the genre or style of music that resulted, but rather by the sound spatialisation created by the fragmented stage setting and the subtle interactions between the musicians within this environment. These are aspects that are lost in documentation and flattened in the process of music categorisation, yet this is where I believe the strongest potential for a new form of music lies in this project.

Several months later I find myself in the studio with guitar amps testing to see which of my records sounds best. At this year's RRREC Festival in Valley, six musicians from the last Asian Meeting Festival, including To Die, Bin Idris and Jimbot, were reunited to play once again together in an ensemble. Other participants at Asian Meeting Festivals have kept close contact with each other, organising events for each other in their home cities such as Hanoi and Kuala Lumpur (Figure 8). It gives me joy to think that the experience of playing together has had some influence on each of our music.

In Asia, with perhaps the exception of Beijing or Tokyo, I doubt that there will be a large movement or central location for experimental genres of music. Instead, there will be unique individuals and micro-



Figure 8. Asian Meeting Festival 2015. Photograph by Kuniya Koyamada. (colour online)

scenes connecting and cross-influencing each other through recordings and DIY tours. These activities will fall through Western- or English-based media and their documentation will be buried deep under Facebook announcements and WeChat messages.¹⁴ At the moment, I cannot think of anything more exciting than being part of these small networks.

10. CONCLUSION

Senyawa, Jogja Noise Bombing, Bin Idris and Iman Jimbot are just the tip of the iceberg of Indonesia's thriving alternative and underground music scene. What struck me as a unique characteristic among the experimental musicians that I interacted with was a common influence taken from metal and punk rock. Wok the Rock and To Die both pointed to the significance of the DIY culture that was associated to the Punk movement in the 1990s. The creation of independent labels and zines were acts of freedom of speech and solidarity against a dictatorial government.

Another aspect that I found unique was how traditional art forms and their integration with contemporary genres played an essential role in defining Senyawa and Jimbot's experimentalism. Christopher J. Miller examines the eclectic characteristics of Indonesian *musik kontemporer* or contemporary art music where most composers have pursued a form of nativism, incorporating indigenous musical traditions into their compositions (Miller 2014). To see this nativism cross over to non-institutionally trained independent musicians such as Senyawa, and also be combined with more non-commercial forms of music such as noise music, death metal and free improvisation is unusual in the West and in Japan. For Jimbot and Senyawa, their conscious reference and grounding in a particular

¹⁴In Mainland China, most announcements for experimental and independent music events are done solely through the subscription function of WeChat. Especially after recent censorship and denial of permissions for Japanese musicians to play, organisers are concerned that putting information on the internet is too risky (Yan 2015).

cultural heritage becomes a basis of their idiosyncratic style and what gives them an edge within their music scene. Yet their approach differs drastically in that Senyawa is creating a new genre of music through reinterpretation while Jimbot essentially plays the same form of his traditional music but in combinations with many different genres.

In contrast, for example in Japan, experimental musicians generally disassociate themselves from traditional forms of expression and ideas of aesthetics. Even with the *Onkyo-kei* improvisers of the early 2000s in Tokyo, whose minimalistic and sporadic playing styles seemed to embody an obvious sympathy for the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, such analysis connecting the two was met with a strong denial and hostility by the artists themselves (Novak 2010). For the group of musicians, including Otomo Yoshihide, who played at the tiny gallery Off Site where this particular music scene developed, their music derived from a fundamental inquiry into sound, space and the act of playing. This was a musical practice born out of a unique environment and moment in history. To connect their music with Zen and other traditional values was simply seen as exotification and even an insult to their practice.¹⁵

For Jogja Noise Bombing and Bin Idris, technology is seen as a way to break free from conventional genres. However, their uniqueness is not only defined by the unconventional gear or sounds that they make but also within the tensions that arise from their relationship with particular genres they work within. Jogja Noise Bombing is recognised as a unique noise act not for their musical characteristics but for their unconventional way of presenting noise music and the role they play within an emerging musical network. Bin Idris's primary stage is at folk and independent rock music events instead of free improvisation or experimental music events which would be abundant in cities such as Tokyo or Berlin. As a result, his most experimental moments are not in the main structure of the music but in the transitions between songs or during a climactic ending of a set.

Each of these artists is distinctly experimental in their own way, but do not operate in exclusively experimental genres of music or communities of artists as in Europe or Japan. They also rarely cross paths even in their native country because of the different genres they associate themselves with. How would they respond and interact if they were to play together? What would an ensemble of such musicians from the wider region sound like and what kind of music would they produce?

¹⁵However, there has been a recent revival of traditional Japanese folk music *Ondo* and its dance *Bon-Odori*. Contemporary art festivals have actively included such traditional formats as a way to create a more inclusive programme, and artists such as Otomo Yoshihide and Sachiko M have been commissioned to compose modern renditions.

These are the questions that Ensemble Asia/Asian Music Network will be asking in the coming years and, ultimately, I hope to create an active network of musicians throughout Asia who are not connected to each other through specific genres of music but rather through an experimental practice that varies and reflects each of their unique backgrounds.

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