

# New Urban Soundscapes: Angklung Buskers in Yogyakarta

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## Abstract

Being characterized by a constant overlapping of different kinds of acoustic stimuli, contemporary metropolitan soundscapes are composite entities that are rather difficult to interpret. Within these contexts however, the production of live music undoubtedly has a crucial role in the construction of sonic public spaces and of the acoustic ideas and concepts that are associated with them. This paper presents some results of a research conducted in Yogyakarta (Java, Indonesia) regarding a particular kind of street music, i.e. the *angklung* bands: groups of buskers who make a living by performing every day in the most crowded spaces of the city. By applying the ethnographic method of participant observation, the activity of these musicians was documented, together with their life stories, repertoires and performative practices. In addition, the complexity of the phenomenon and its “osmotic” relationship with the Yoganese urban context was carefully considered. This specific case study is utilized in order to show how an apparently marginal musical practice has had a significant function in the construction of a metropolitan acoustic environment, to the extent of becoming one of its soundmarks. This paper is accompanied by several video examples, which illustrate how the musical practice analyzed is conducted and make it possible to evaluate its impact on the surrounding soundscape.

*Nuovi paesaggi sonori urbani: angklung buskers a Yogyakarta. Caratterizzati da una costante sovrapposizione di stimoli acustici di diversa natura, i paesaggi sonori delle realtà metropolitane contemporanee sono entità composite di difficile interpretazione. Entro questi contesti, tuttavia, la produzione di musica dal vivo ha senza dubbio un ruolo cruciale nella costruzione degli spazi sonori pubblici e dell'immaginario acustico ad essi associato. Nel presente articolo sono presentati alcuni risultati di una ricerca svolta a Yogyakarta (Giava, Indonesia) su un particolare fenomeno di musica di strada, le angklung bands: gruppi di musicisti di strada che si guadagnano da vivere esibendosi quotidianamente negli spazi più trafficati della città. Applicando il me-*

*todo etnografico dell'osservazione partecipante, è stata documentata l'attività di questi musicisti, indagandone storie di vita, prassi performative e repertori, considerando la complessità del fenomeno e il suo rapporto "osmotico" con l'ambiente urbano Yogyanese. Descrivendo questo specifico caso di studio, si cercherà di dimostrare come una pratica musicale apparentemente marginale possa avere una funzione importante nella costruzione di una realtà acustica metropolitana, sino a divenirne un'impronta sonora. Il saggio è corredato da esempi video che illustrano la pratica musicale in analisi e consentono di valutarne l'impatto sul paesaggio sonoro circostante.*

## Introduction

When one considers the substantial number of studies concerning the production of music in contemporary urban contexts, it is particularly striking to observe how little attention is paid to street music, which is globally widespread and has a specific role in defining the soundscapes of urban areas. Although it takes different forms in different places, busking has some common features, especially as regards its influence on the spatial and acoustic perception of public spaces. Street performances are a vital part of daily life in urban environments and of the way they are "narrated",<sup>1</sup> and they thus have a significant effect on collective cultural life.

In order to support these claims, I will refer to a phenomenon that I observed while conducting field research in Yogyakarta,<sup>2</sup> where I was studying the activity of the so-called *angklung* bands. Over the last decade or so, these groups of street musicians have become a stable presence in many urban spaces (especially in the city center and at the most busiest road intersections), where they manage to earn a living by performing well-known popular songs, using a specific instrumental ensemble. In this paper I will provide a general outline of the phenomenon: I will first describe its origins, focusing on its provenance and routes of dissemination, and in this context I will provide an organological description of the particular instruments used by these groups of buskers. I will then discuss the multifaceted nature of this practice, with reference to the connections between location (performative context), expertise (level of musical skills) and status (socio-economical condition of the musicians involved), all of which defines its present characteristic features. In this regard, I will also consider the question of feedback from audiences and the ambivalence of the governmental policies concerning the regulation of *angklung* bands, thereafter focusing on the way they are "re-shaping" the Yogyanese soundscape. In this analysis I intend to examine some crucial issues concerning urban musical ethnography, such as the function of music in negotiating the public spaces

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<sup>1</sup> Street music exists as the result of a social interaction (see Macchiarella 2015) and it is therefore extremely useful in helping us to understand how the different scenarios of community life are experienced and interpreted in contemporary urban contexts.

<sup>2</sup> This research took place between October 2015 and March 2016 and was financed by a scholarship provided by the *Sapienza University* of Rome (faculty of Literature and Philosophy) in agreement with the *Institut Seni Indonesia*, Yogyakarta.



FIGURE 1. *Angklung* bands migration from Banyumas to Yogyakarta.

chosen for performing and the transient relationship between street performers and their audiences, while also taking into account several complex musical and non-musical dynamics that influence the activities of these street musicians in Yogyakarta.

## Origins of the phenomenon

According to my interlocutors, it seems that the phenomenon of *angklung* bands has its origins in 2008, when some groups of *pengamen*<sup>3</sup> from *Kabupaten Banyumas* (a regency of south-eastern Central Java) – belonging mainly to the poorest segments of the local population – migrated to Yogyakarta,<sup>4</sup> in the hope of being able to make a living by working as street musicians. Yogyakarta is widely known as an important cultural center (see Richter 2012) and it is quite close to the Banyumas regency (the capital of which, Purwokerto, is situated at a distance of about 130 km). The cost of living in Yogyakarta is also reasonably cheap, and some groups of musicians therefore decided to transfer their activities there, which over the next decade would turn out to have been a wise move.

In traveling to the metropolitan area, they brought with them a particular instrumental ensemble known as *kentongan*<sup>5</sup> (or *tek-tek*), which is a typical product of their musical culture. In the Banyumas regency, these ensembles are associated with a homon-

<sup>3</sup> In *Bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian national language) the noun *pengamen* derives from the verb form *mengamen*, which means to stroll, wander or travel while playing music in order to earn money (it therefore corresponds closely to the English term “busker”, perhaps deriving from “to busk” or “cruise like a pirate”, in reference to shiftless and peripatetic people). According to Yampolsky (2010), strolling musicians have existed in Java since the 17th century, but the documentary evidence is too scarce to confirm this or to study the topic in detail.

<sup>4</sup> Over the last twenty years there has been large-scale migration into all major Indonesian cities: the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98, combined with the fall of President Suharto and numerous natural disasters which struck the archipelago led to a significantly impoverishment of rural populations, which forced many villagers – including musicians – to try to make a living in metropolitan areas (see Jaffe, Klaufus and Colombijn 2012).

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that elsewhere in Java, as well as in Madura, Bali and Lombok, the term *kentong* refers to a wooden slit drum (Kunst 1973).

ymous performative genre introduced in the 1990s, which is celebrated in numerous festivals (*festival kentong*) annually held in the major cities of the area (Purwokerto, Purbalingga and Cilacap). In the wake of a process of promotion and spectacularization concerning this genre, many young locals have now started playing in these ensembles, either for recreational purposes or as their livelihood.

This recently introduced artistic form is particularly interesting, as it involves the use of traditional instruments that have been transformed and adapted to practical needs, in order to perform contemporary Indonesian popular music.<sup>6</sup> However, most Javanese people consider such regional musical practices to be less sophisticated than the court tradition developed in the major cities of Central Java (Yogyakarta and Surakarta), which is dedicated to the preservation and innovation of *gamelan* music (Sutton 1986a, 1986b; Lysloff 1992). It is therefore interesting to see how, in moving to Yogyakarta, these buskers took part in an on-going process of urbanization of a regional practice, thereby affirming the value and importance of their own cultural capital, and creating a style of music with its own identity that could be used as a means for promoting their socio-cultural emancipation. Meanwhile, since their instrumental ensembles include the Indonesian *angklung* –<sup>7</sup> a sliding rattle made of bamboo (see image I in Fig. 2), which was officially recognized as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” by unesco in 2010 –<sup>8</sup> they started advertising themselves as *angklung* bands, thereby elaborating an effective marketing strategy and showing that they were fully aware of recent governmental policies in the context of cultural promotion.

## The instrumental ensemble: a brief description

In both organological<sup>9</sup> and functional terms, *angklung pengamen* ensembles consist of two separate sections, which can be defined as melodic and rhythmic respectively. The first of these is characterized by the use of autochthonous bamboo idiophones mostly tuned to a diatonic scale,<sup>10</sup> of which the main element is the *angklung* set.<sup>11</sup> This consists

<sup>6</sup> The term popular music should here be understood in its broadest possible sense, referring to musical genres that have a broad and strong appeal to the general public in Indonesia. This topic will be further examined in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> Formerly used by several West-Javanese rural communities in ritual contexts related to agriculture (Kunst 1973), during the 20th century the instrument was transformed and given a new function – mostly related to entertainment – in the context of a national project of patrimonialization of local cultural objects and practices (Perris 1971).

<sup>8</sup> Source: <<https://ich.unesco.org/en/rl/indonesian-angklung-00393>> (last access: 23/01/2018).

<sup>9</sup> As regards organological issues, I have referred to the updated version of the Hornbostel-Sachs system of musical instrument classification drawn up by the mimo Consortium (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Although the diatonic system is undoubtedly the most widespread among these buskers, some groups use chromatic sets of idiophones.

<sup>11</sup> This instrument is the result of the organological transformation of the traditional *angklung*, which

of a variable number of single *angklung* mounted on a wooden frame, to which they are connected by rubber bands (see image II in Fig. 2). This makeshift tightening system – a recent innovation introduced from the *Banyumas* regency – allows the player to obtain a repeated sound by hitting the idiophone element only once. It is therefore interesting to note the marked influence of the percussive dynamics on the agogic effects, since the force with which the instrument is struck determines the speed of repetition of the note, its volume and its duration. The idiophone is struck with two small plastic beaters that are usually held between the thumb and the index and middle fingers.

Another element of the melodic section is the *calung*, a set of percussion sticks belonging to the family of xylophones, which is a close relative of the better-known Javanese *gambang*. This idiophone, which is widespread in the *Banyumas* regency (see Lysloff 1992), consists of a series of tuned bamboo tubes fixed to a wooden frame, and it is usually struck with 3, 4 or 5 plastic sticks (see image III in Fig. 2), depending on the technical ability of the player. Some *angklung* bands also add a *calung* with lower notes in order to enhance the tonal range of their performances. The particular timbre of these bamboo idiophones gives these ensembles their unique acoustic qualities, and confers a special “flavor” to their music.

Unlike the melodic section, the rhythmic section mainly consists of hybrid percussion instruments of a Western kind. Its basic element is a set of single skin cylindrical drums known as *bedug*.<sup>12</sup> The body of these drums is usually a re-cycled plastic bin, to which a synthetic skin is fixed with duct tape (see image IV in Fig. 2). The size and number of these instruments, which are beaten with a pair of plastic sticks, may vary from one ensemble to another. A hybrid drum kit (which resembles a Western marching percussion set) is always also included, the elements of which – idiophones and membranophones of various types, mounted on an iron frame – generally depend on the specific musician’s requirements and financial resources (see image V in Fig. 2). Within these sets, the most common elements are the snare drum, high-hat, tambourine, cymbals, cow-bell, *keprak* (synthetic skins without a frame) and the *dangdut ketipung*.<sup>13</sup>

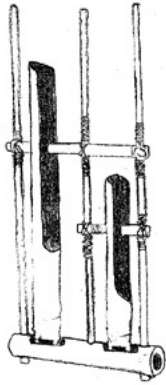
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began in the first half of the 20th century following the innovations introduced by the Sundanese musician Daeng Soetigna. According to Kunst (1973) the traditional *angklung* was mostly held in the hand, in such a way that a single person could normally play only two of such instruments at once (each of which could only produce one note, usually doubled on the octave above). These idiophones were therefore played in groups, so that together the players could build up simple motifs, acting as a background to the main melody, which was generally played on aerophones like the *tarompet*. Unlike the traditional *angklung*, the modern set allows a single musician to play a tune with several notes in succession, and it is thus, to all intents and purposes, a melodic instrument.

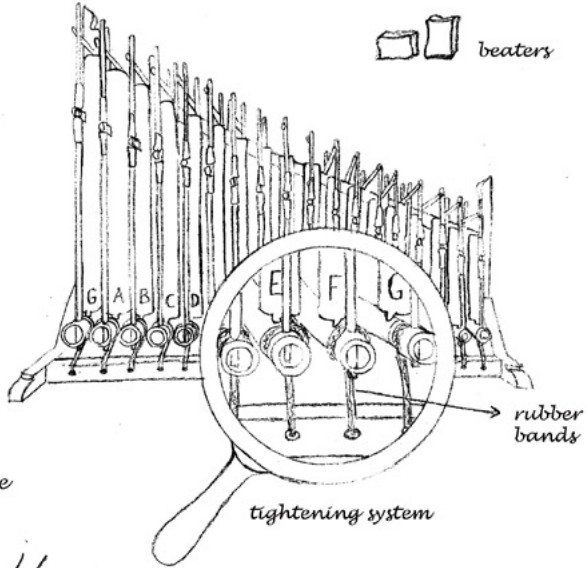
<sup>12</sup> As Kunst pointed out (1973), in Java the term *bedug* generally refers to a large double-skin barrel drum. In addition to being a part of *gamelan* orchestras, it is often used in mosques to announce times of prayer and various religious festivities. The use of this word also for a set of drums seems to be due to the vague morphological and timbral affinities between these different instruments.

<sup>13</sup> In Java and Sumatra the word *ketipung* is associated with various types of drums (Kartomi, 1990). According to my interlocutors, it can also refer to a pair of small single-skin cylindrical drums, which provide the typical rhythmic accompaniment of *dangdut* music. A rubber “stop” is usually applied to the skin of these drums, which absorbs the vibrations and allows the player to produce different sounds. While this

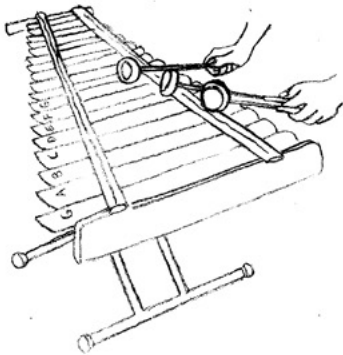
I. Traditional Angklung



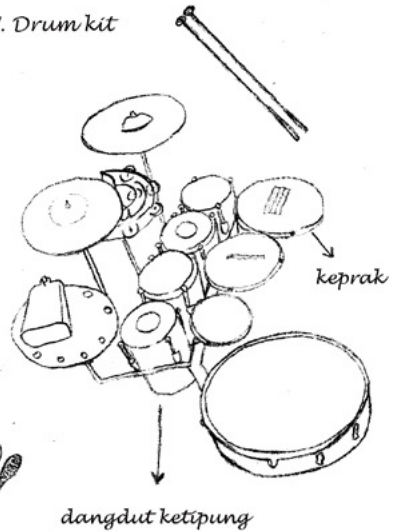
II. Angklung set from Banyumas regency



III. Calung xylophone



V. Drum kit



IV. Bedug set

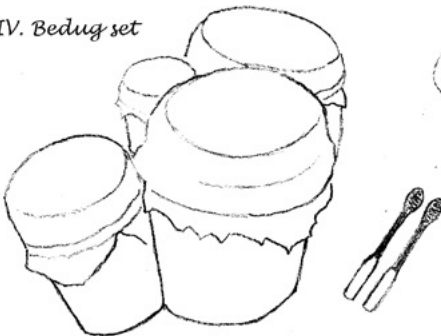


FIGURE 2. Elements of the angklung band (illustration drawn by the author).

Since in Yogyakarta there are few specialized manufacturers of these instruments – (especially as regards bamboo idiophones) – most local bands pool their financial resources in order to buy them on the Internet, where they can choose between a wide range of offers (mostly made by people in the *Banyumas* regency or West Java). Although prices are generally reasonable, a good quality complete instrumental ensemble might sell for as much as 30 million *rupiahs* (around 2000 euros) or even more. Considering that the cost of life in Indonesia is substantially lower than in developed countries, a local busker would be very unlikely to have the possibility of investing such a large sum of money to create an ensemble. This is, however, not a problem for those few *pengamen* whose instruments were made by local village musicians in *Banyumas*, as well as for those who are able to make them for themselves, since most of the basic materials that they require are cheap and easily available also in Yogyakarta. However, the majority of local buskers does not have manufacturing skills and thus generally settle for the most reasonable offer available, without paying too much attention to the craftsmanship and the sound quality of the instruments they acquire.

## Performing practices, institutional management and audience feedback

Unlike itinerant buskers – who constantly move from place to place – *angklung pengamen* tend to occupy a specific place over time. Regardless of the practical reasons underlying their choice of location (mainly related to the daily numbers of passers-by), in doing so they develop a performative space that bears the mark of their own presence, sound and cultural identity. Furthermore, the activity of these buskers involves an appropriation, maintenance and exploitation of a liminal – or transitional – spatio-temporal context, within which secondary phenomena that are not strictly musical can also have a performative function.<sup>14</sup>

*Angklung* bands are well known for being a genuine and iconic “acoustic ornament” of the *Jalan Malioboro* district.<sup>15</sup> Nowadays the area hosts three of these groups, which are widely considered to be an important source of public entertainment. In 2010 the local government authorities legalized their presence, providing them with id badges and allowing them to perform in the pedestrian areas of *Malioboro* every day from 8

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instrument – which seems to be a cross between the Indian *tabla* and the Western tom-tom drums – was originally a hand percussion membranophone, in *angklung pengamen* ensembles it is struck (as are the other elements of the drum kit) with a pair of plastic sticks.

<sup>14</sup> Bywater (2007) uses the concept of “liminality” to define the particular features of modern-day urban streets, and explores the strategies used by buskers to appropriate and “possess” the stages on which they perform.

<sup>15</sup> *Jalan Malioboro* (“Malioboro Street”) is the center of Yogyakarta’s largest tourist district, to which it gives its name, and it is full of hotels, restaurants and shops. It lies on the north-south axis of the city running between the Merapi volcano and the *Kraton* (the Sultan’s palace) and it is a vital location for local buskers and street sellers.





**FIGURE 3.** *Calung Funk* performing with a female singer at Galeria Mall, Yogyakarta, 25/10/15 (Frame from [video example 2](#)).

until 10 pm (when the district is particularly crowded). This institutional benevolence is mainly due to the perseverance of these groups, which – by performing tirelessly – have mastered their instruments, built up extensive repertoires (consisting of up to 50 different pieces) and thus gained the support and approval of their audiences. Passers-by often stop and walk around these groups (see [video example 1](#)), filming their performances,<sup>16</sup> dancing or singing along to their favorite songs, thus giving life to what Turino (2008) defines as a “participatory performance”, in which the distinction between the audience and the performers tends to be blurred.<sup>17</sup>

*Jalan Malioboro* gives great visibility for *angklung pengamen*, who are able to earn about 100,000 rupiahs each (about 6 euros) by performing for only two or three hours a day.<sup>18</sup> Local people also now hire them to sponsor commercial products or perform during private ceremonies (especially circumcisions and weddings) and public events (small

<sup>16</sup> Many of these amateur short videos and interviews can be seen on the *YouTube* site by typing the key words “Angklung Yogyakarta”. It is interesting to note that some of these videos have reached around 3 million views, clearly indicating their vast appeal also to virtual audiences.

<sup>17</sup> The term “participation” refers to an active contribution of an audience to a musical performance, which Turino conceptualized as a crucial factor for enhancing social interactions within a circumscribed performative context. From a structural point of view, participatory performances are based on an ethic of democracy and inclusiveness, since they promote social interaction and collective growth. In terms of musical practice, this concept has implications that will be discussed further in this paper.

<sup>18</sup> In comparison with the average wages of the Yoganese community (for workers employed in sectors as tourism and entertainment), these buskers have very decent incomes: they earn as much as a local full-time waiter, despite their much more limited working hours.





FIGURE 4. *Satria Jogja* performing at a traffic light intersection, Yogyakarta, 21/11/15 (Photo: D. Zappatore).

concerts and fairs, which are usually held in the biggest urban malls),<sup>19</sup> thus enabling them to make a living through music alone.

Soon after arriving in Yogyakarta these groups became the object of media interest and they have started to promote themselves through social networks, in order to keep their fans informed about their activities and performances. Recently, some of them have even appeared in programs on Indonesian National Television, and this is a clear indication of how quickly Yogyanese society has incorporated *angklung pengamen* and their music into many different contexts that are not related to street entertainment alone. As a consequence of this it is becoming increasingly difficult to put the phenomenon into any specific category, since many of these musicians are seen as no longer merely buskers, but all-round public entertainers.

The situation is significantly different for the numerous groups who have not managed to obtain a place at *Jalan Malioboro*, and who therefore use the main traffic light intersections as their “performing stage”.<sup>20</sup> These bands usually consist of 4 or 5 members of various ages, who start working every day at around 9 am, after setting up with their portable instruments (see [video example 3](#)). While they play one or two members

<sup>19</sup> Whereas their street performances are mainly acoustic and instrumental, on more “formal” occasions these buskers – often accompanied by local singers – use electronic amplification systems to enhance the volume of their ensembles (See [video example 2](#)).

<sup>20</sup> According to many of my interlocutors, these ensembles have been quite common in this context since 2012, when many Yogyanese itinerant buskers – attracted by better potential earnings – decided to found their own *angklung* bands, following the successful model introduced by the groups at *Malioboro*.



**FIGURE 5.** *New Kharisma* performing at a traffic light intersection, Yogyakarta, 21/11/15 (Frame from [video example 3](#)).

of the group walk among the vehicles at the traffic lights to collect contributions, which are distributed equally among the musicians at the end of the working day (usually between 5 and 6 pm). Although they devote almost the whole day to this activity they do not usually earn very much, with each individual earning between 30,000 and 50,000 rupiahs (2 or 3 euros) per day, which is hardly enough to feed himself. Given these economic difficulties, they often need another part-time job to make a living.

These buskers are generally not as technically proficient as those that perform at *Jalan Malioboro*. Their repertoire is smaller and, due to the context, their playing is fragmented and episodic. Since their audiences are drivers who are momentarily waiting at a red traffic light, they generally stop playing when the light turns green; and rather than performing in a continuous and coherent way, they entertain their transient audiences with short “modular” pieces. The musical performances of these bands are therefore similar to exercises or rehearsals aimed at improving their skills while earning some small change. In fact, once they feel that they are sufficiently skilled, they often look for more profitable contexts in which to perform.

Drivers often see these ensembles as a source of public nuisance or disturbance, and they feel that this way of making money does not meet the current “standards of respectability” promoted by the local government, which is trying to reduce the amount of beggars – including “amateur” buskers – within the Yogyanese urban area.<sup>21</sup> Moreover,

<sup>21</sup> The result of these government policies was a regional decree that entered into force in 2014 – *Pera-*



FIGURE 6. A banner in front of the Social Welfare Office in Yogyakarta, advising people about fines and penalties applied for begging and mendicancy: *Jenis Pelanggaran* = type of infraction; *Pidana* = period of imprisonment; *Denda* = financial penalty (Photo: D. Zappatore).

these *angklung pengamen* ensembles are not officially authorized to perform according to the current legislation concerning urban traffic.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, they continue to perform undisturbed, and their numbers are constantly rising: a census conducted by the local police force in 2016 verified that there were almost 20 active groups in the metropolis, with more than 100 individual *pengamen* exclusively engaged in this activity. Considering this large number of people, the local institutions have decided to turn a blind eye to this phenomenon, since preventing *angklung* bands from performing would increase unemployment and poverty levels, with negative repercussions on the entire Yoganese community. Recently, however, efforts have been made to control and regulate the activity of groups performing at traffic lights, especially by moving them to more suitable places (as pedestrian areas or shopping centers). This shows that the phenomenon is gradually being accepted and becoming a significant feature of Yoganese urban life.

*turan Daerah diy (Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta)* No. 01, designated *tentang Penanganan Gelandangan dan Pengemis* (“about the handling of homeless and beggars”), the main points of which can be summarized as follows: no one is permitted to beg individually or in groups for any reason; no one is permitted to support, help, incite, force or coordinate other people in such activities. Penalties include imprisonment and fines of up to 50 million *rupiah* (almost 3.500 euros, see Fig. 6).

<sup>22</sup> According to the 15th article of *Peraturan Daerah diy No. 5 (2004)*, designated *tentang Penyelenggaraan Lalu Lintas Jalan* (“on operations concerning traffic lights”), no one is allowed to occupy urban spaces in the vicinity of intersections with traffic lights or pedestrian crossings.

## Learning methods and repertoires

Before discussing the repertoires of *angklung pengamen* I wish to briefly deal with their musical education, since this is essential for understanding their musical approach and their attitudes towards performing. It is necessary to emphasize that virtually none of these musicians have studied music in ways that we might consider as conventional but that they are self-trained and therefore relatively little influenced or conditioned by specific musical systems or rules. Very few of them – mainly originally from the *Banyumas* regency – have had the possibility to observe older musicians performing in their autochthonous or “natural” local settings, and thus to learn through direct imitation, while most *angklung pengamen* use the Internet for learning and as a source of inspiration. They watch videos on *YouTube* and download the lyrics of songs with chords from the Net, and they practice together on a daily basis. In this way they develop a group “feeling” based on spontaneous musical interaction since, in order for their performances to be a success, the members of these groups need to have a certain empathy and a shared approach.

The repertoire of *angklung* bands is usually diverse and open to a wide range of different musical forms, which can satisfy the tastes of a continually changing audience.<sup>23</sup> All of these ensembles have repertoires based mainly on contemporary Indonesian popular music, which can be considered as an organic system characterized by dynamics of mutual influence and inherently open to processes of hybridization (see Wallach & Clinton 2013, Sutton 2013). According to Wallach (2008) this system is coherent enough for it to be analyzed as a meta-cultural field<sup>24</sup> of social and ideological oppositions. In fact he claims that Indonesian popular music democratically embraces diversity and cosmopolitanism, acting as an essential cultural referent for a wide range of social categories and testifying to the ambivalence and the ideological oppositions that characterize contemporary Indonesian society.

Various musical genres coexist within this huge reservoir, the hybrid nature of which is often due to the combination of foreign musical idioms with autochthonous traditions, according to a process known among local scholars as *pribumisasi* (“indigenization”, see Kartomi 1995). Some of these heterogeneous expressive forms are very widespread and much appreciated by local audiences: this is, for instance, the case of *lagu daerah* (“regional folksongs”), *dangdut* (especially *pop* and *koplo*), as well as *kro-*

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<sup>23</sup> This kind of extreme adaptability to the most heterogeneous genres and repertoires can be connected to Carpitella’s comments (1961) on the Italian *cantastorie* tradition: in defining their performative attitudes the author talks about the *indifference* with which they approach the generative systems of musical folklore.

<sup>24</sup> Urban (2001) characterizes modern mass-media societies as entities operating within a “meta-culture of modernity”, in which cultural expressions are disseminated as mass products and simultaneously replicated through the creation of similar – yet innovative – forms that are based on the combination of pre-existing elements. Meta-culture promotes the dissemination of cultural manifestations, establishing contextual frameworks within which their meaning should be interpreted.



*ncong*, *campur sari* and *jaipong*.<sup>25</sup> *Angklung* bands have a casual and eclectic approach to all these musical genres, since they try to move beyond local conventions and pre-determined forms, thereby expressing the great cultural diversity of Indonesia and thus spontaneously embracing the national slogan *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (“Unity in Diversity”).<sup>26</sup> Some of these ensembles (especially those that perform at *Jalan Malioboro*) also adapt Western hits (see [video example 4](#)), well-known international evergreens – mainly American and Latin-American, but sometimes European – or pieces of the most varied kinds, in an attempt to free themselves from the limitations of local repertoires. In doing so, they show that they are musically versatile and also competent to entertain international tourists and foreign visitors.

Rather than composing new pieces, therefore, *angklung pengamen* choose popular and successful songs and arrange “simplified” versions that they can play with their instrumental ensembles. These street bands continuously transform preexisting materials, proposing a musical product that is simultaneously familiar and rejuvenated. They give well-known songs a new identity, a new sound and a distinctive style, creating – and sharing – a novel, but easily recognizable expressive language. Even though they operate outside the global market of the music industry, they are therefore engaged in a process of “creative interpretation”. Furthermore, since their way of performing is informal and unmediated, they undoubtedly have an important meta-cultural function since, whether consciously or not, they succeed in broadening the appeal of Indonesian popular music and diversifying its audience, while promoting their cultural capital on a daily basis.

### Pieces in “*angklung*-style”: an example

I wish to use the term “*angklung*-style” to express the salient characteristics of the music played by *angklung* bands, in which fast tempos and the frequent use of rhythmic interlocking have a central role. I will focus on a single piece which I regard as exemplary

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<sup>25</sup> In recent years, these genres have become the subject of great interest to many international scholars. Since it is not possible to describe each of them separately here, please refer to the existing literature for further information. To give just a few examples, J. Becker (1975), P. Yampolsky (2010) and L. Mustaers (2014) have all studied *kroncong*; A. Weintraub (2008, 2010, 2013) and J. Wallach (2008, 2013) have written several articles and monographs about *dangdut* music; R. Supanggih (2003), and R. Anderson Sutton (2013) have studied contemporary *campur sari*; while P. Manuel and R. Baier (1986) have devoted an interesting essay to urban *jaipong*.

<sup>26</sup> It should however be noted that, as stated by Yampolsky (1995), Indonesian government statements and policies on national culture are ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, the government claims that the many ethnic groups of modern Indonesia are some of the “peaks of culture” of the national heritage, while on the other hand, according to many critics, the government’s cultural engineering policies and programs to “preserve” and “foster” the “traditional” (i.e. ethnic or “regional”) arts frequently indicate a low regard for these arts as traditionally practiced and a certain suspicion and mistrust regarding the ethnic pride and identity that they symbolize and affirm.

of this style: a *dangdut koplo* version of the Sundanese song *Bubuy Bulan*<sup>27</sup>, performed by one of the most successful groups active on *Jalan Malioboro*, who call themselves “Calung Funk”.<sup>28</sup> Before showing how these musicians go about creating their musical product, I feel it is necessary to specify that the following analysis is made in terms of various notions and concepts typical of Western music (such as “harmony”, “accompaniment”, “variation”, etc.), the meaning and use of which was absolutely alien to my interlocutors, since they generally have very a practical approach to music making and they rarely consider any theoretical or abstract issues regarding their performances. Nevertheless, given the tuning system of these ensembles and the repertoires that they perform, it is quite feasible and easy to describe their musical products in western terms, which should facilitate the reader’s understanding of this music.

As stated above, the *angklung set* (which in this case is tuned to a chromatic scale, as are the other instruments of the melodic section) has a prominent role, since it is used to play the main melody, allowing the audience to easily recognize the re-arranged song. As can be seen in the nine bars of the example below, the musician sometimes reinforces the single notes of the melody by doubling them an octave above, in order to strengthen the melodic line and to emphasize the accentuation of the offbeat:



FIGURE 7. *Bubuy Bulan*, Calung Funk cover version. Melodic line played by the *angklung*, bars 1-9.

The other idiophones are responsible for enhancing the sonic texture with ornamentation, and are usually free to accompany the main melody with continual variations. The first *calung* contributes with a constant rhythmic-harmonic accompaniment, playing two note chords that are often doubled in unison on the upper octave on the offbeat. These chords have variable intervals, since the musician tends to use the whole register of the instrument. The second *calung* plays single notes as a melodic bass accompaniment, underlining the harmonic progression through arpeggios. The musician accentuates the

<sup>27</sup> *Bubuy Bulan* is a love song written by the guitarist and songwriter Benny Korda, who was active in West Java in the 1950s. Unfortunately, little is known about the original version of this piece, which probably included traditional instruments such as the *kacapi* (Sundanese zither), the *suling* (bamboo ring flute) and the *kendang* (two-headed barrel drum). Over the years numerous Indonesian musicians have performed and recorded their own versions of this piece, which has long been considered as one of the most popular Sundanese folk songs.

<sup>28</sup> A full transcription of an excerpt of the cover version of “Bubuy Bulan” performed by *Calung Funk* – which I recorded in October 2015 – is provided in Mus. ex. 1 ([audio example 1](#)).



1st, 4th and 7th of the eight half notes (or minims) in each bar, thus enhancing the interlocking rhythms:



FIGURE 8. *Bubuy Bulan*, Calung Funk cover version. Accompaniment played by calung, bars 1-8.

As regards the rhythmic section, the *bedug* players maintain a basic pattern, without variations. The beat is easily detectable, since the main accent is on the first beat of each bar. The player of the drum kit enriches the basic texture with the frequent use of a specific figuration on the *ketipung*, which resembles the rhythmic patterns of *dangdut koplo* music.<sup>29</sup> The ride cymbal is used to mark the beginning or the end of each phrase, while during the refrain the high-hat plays on the offbeat, and in the stanza the cymbal doubles the *angklung set*, sometimes adding simple variations.



FIGURE 9. *Bubuy Bulan*, Calung Funk cover version. Rhythmic section, bars 1-2.

After hearing the band playing this song several times, I noticed that they did not perform in a standardized or normative way. Although each instrument has a well defined and yet complex function within an agreed-upon overall structure, their individual margins of variation are usually wide, and the musicians are free to “improvise” their parts on

<sup>29</sup> As regards these rhythmic figurations, see Weintraub (2013: 168).

the basis of fixed patterns, fully memorized and assimilated thanks to daily practice. Although each *angklung* band has its own specific levels of technical skills, these basic principles seem to apply to them all. This approach to making music reminds some of Turino's statements (2008) about the musical features of "participatory performances": firstly, *angklung* bands perform short, open and repeated forms, characterized by a limited number of dramatic contrasts and by a rhythmical/metrical uniformity; secondly, they create dense textures in which the use of an intensive – yet subtle – variation has a prominent function, to the detriment of individual virtuosity. These musical features promote "inclusiveness", stimulating the audience to participate as an active part of the performance. Moreover, since their instrumental ensembles are very similar to each other, they share a specific sound or timbre, which constitutes their most distinctive feature. The sound of bamboo idiophones is easily recognizable (even from a distance), and it makes them a distinctive acoustic presence in the urban environment.

### Back to *suara bambu*: village sounds versus metropolitan noise

Noises and sounds – whatever their nature and their function may be – inevitably have a crucial function in defining contemporary urban environments. According to R.M. Schafer (1993), these "organisms" are marked by a "lo-fi soundscape", resulting from a superabundant sonic presence – a sort of shapeless, featureless and indeterminate sound continuum (or "bandwidth noise") – which gradually weakens the urban population's response to isolated acoustic stimuli. This concept of Schafer's seems to be very appropriate to Indonesian metropolises since, as Colombijn pointed out (2007), they are among the noisiest cities in South-East Asia.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, in his article on the Javanese electronic soundscape, R. Anderson Sutton (1996) describes how the diffusion of modern electronic amplification systems has contributed to the development of an aesthetics of "overlapping sound", in accordance with the local notion of *rame* ("crowded", "noisy", "funny"). According to Sutton, the omnipresence of mechanically reproduced sounds is in accordance with the indigenous acoustic aesthetic values, and it also express feelings of cultural and psychological disorientation due to the influence of new technologies and the disruptive encounter with modernity.

As regards Yogyakarta specifically, its soundscape is full of all sorts of artificial sounds, first and foremost the constant background noise of traffic. Within this bland and monotonous acoustic urban environment, being able to make music that can capture the

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<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Colombijn remarks that local people generally consider a high level of sound that is a continuous and steady presence (such as a busy road) as being less annoying than an isolated and unexpected loud noise (Colombijn, 2007). Besides, the concept of "noise" is highly subjective and culture-specific, and it can therefore be seen as a variable cultural factor.

attention of passers-by in public spaces and entertain them is fundamental for the local buskers, hundreds of whom try to make a daily living thanks to their performances, which have an important role in differentiating the acoustic background. In this regard, the phenomenon of *angklung* bands is extremely interesting, since the presence of these lively and festive ensembles in the city center is undeniably re-shaping and enhancing the metropolitan soundscape. And so, apart from being devoted to entertainment, these buskers are also effecting a process of acoustic re-education: their performances reflect a concrete aspect of live music-making (i.e. its “artisanal” dimension, with its own specific acoustic qualities) and bring it closer to being a collective experience, in opposition to the artificial “acoustic bombardment” that urban listeners are subjected to every day. Moreover, through their activity, *suara bambu* (“the sound of bamboo”), which had been closely associated with rural communities, where it still has a strong cultural significance, is now being integrated into the urban environment and becoming a new *soundmark*<sup>31</sup> of the multi-faceted Yogyanese soundscape.

## Conclusions

The phenomenon of *angklung* bands constitutes a fascinating case study involving many aspects that are highly relevant to ethnomusicological and ethnographic research. Firstly, its origins are linked to an internal migration of street musicians – together with a specific musical practice, which they consider as an expression of their cultural identity – from a circumscribed rural area (the *Banyumas* regency) to a vibrant urban context (Yogyakarta). This practice, which has recently become a contemporary performative genre of popular entertainment, involves the use of autochthonous instruments that are both traditional and innovative, since they are the result of an ongoing process of organological transformation that started nearly a century ago.

Since 2008 the phenomenon has spread rapidly throughout Yogyakarta, arousing the interest of urban audiences and encouraging many young local buskers to join the existing ensembles or to set up new ones. This has generated competition between street musicians for the busiest urban sites (which can be seen as performative stages), forcing local institutions to regulate their activity. On the basis of a technical differentiation between “professional” and “amateur” groups, the local government authorities have assigned the most coveted spots to the former, and have left the less favorable spaces to the latter. Only a few of these ensembles have truly succeeded in emancipating themselves from their difficult socio-economical conditions, but now these musicians

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<sup>31</sup> In Schafer’s terminology, the term refers to «a community sound, which is unique or possesses qualities that make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community.» The author states that «once a *soundmark* has been identified, it deserves to be protected, because *soundmarks* make the acoustic life of the community unique». (Schafer 1993:10).

– whose opportunities to perform have substantially increased – are becoming the object of ever-greater media interest, as can be seen from the numbers of videos and short documentaries about them that have been shared on the Internet.

Apart from the question of their fame and technical skills, however, all of these groups are engaged in what I have defined as a process of “creative interpretation”: they draw their repertoires mainly from contemporary genres of Indonesian popular music, selecting the most successful songs and re-presenting them in their own personal style, which is poised in the region between “traditional” and “modern” forms of expression. They have, therefore, an important meta-cultural function, since they spread Indonesian popular music while promoting their own cultural capital. Furthermore, the “natural” sound of these ensembles is undeniably giving the monotonous Yogyanese soundscape an added value, re-shaping a passive acoustic environment and very probably bringing some tangible emotional and psychological benefits to urban listeners.

Since *angklung* bands are open entities – whose musical productions are constantly and rapidly being renewed – it is very difficult to predict the direction that they will take in coming years, and the data that I have presented may well become outdated very soon. However, a constant monitoring of the phenomenon will undoubtedly make an interesting contribution to studies focused on the analysis of practices of musical performance in urban contexts, as well as on processes of cultural mediation and the dissemination of popular music and folk music at a local and a global level, stimulating interdisciplinary approaches which could take a wide range of complex socio-economical and cultural factors into account.

## Multimedia contents

NB: the attached audio-visual documents were recorded with non-professional equipment on Yogyakarta's crowded sidewalks and near some of the most congested road intersections of the city. Consequently, the high noise levels and the chaotic nature of these performative contexts had a negative effect on the quality of these recordings. I have nevertheless decided to attach some samples, which I feel are helpful for gaining a better understanding of the musical practices investigated.

Video examples:

### 1. [Angklung bands at Jalan Malioboro, Yogyakarta](#)

*Excerpts:* Calung Funk performing “Edan Turun” by Athang Arturo (*dangdut reggae*), 24/01/16;

New Banesha performing “Sahabatku” by Loket Band (*dangdut koplo*), 17/10/2015.

*Description:* The excerpts focus on the context surrounding *angklung* bands performances at *Jalan Malioboro*. These groups – whose activities are assisted by local traffic wardens – easily manage to attract large audiences, which spontaneously interact with them by singing and dancing, and frequently give them money. Itinerant street sellers often try to make the most of this particular situation by trying to sell their wares.

### 2. [From the sidewalks to the stage](#)

*Excerpt:* Calung Funk performing with a female singer at Galeria Mall, Jalan Jenderal Sudirman, Yogyakarta, 25/10/15.

*Description:* The band has been hired to perform in the context of a trade fair for promoting local products (handmade batik clothes, traditional food, etc.) held in one of the biggest and busiest shopping malls in Yogyakarta, which is an ideal setting for reaching a broad and varied audience. The musicians use an electronic amplification system to enhance the volume of their performance, which is accompanied by a local amateur singer, who tries to attract the attention of passers-by with her sensual dance moves. Her methods are clearly effective, since a middle-aged man draws close to her and gives her some money (this is a widespread form of cultural behaviour known as *sawer*, see Wallach 2008).

### 3. [Angklung bands at traffic lights intersections, Yogyakarta](#)

*Excerpts:* New Kharisma performing at Jalan Parangritis, Yogyakarta, 21/11/15;

Angklung Jogja performing at the traffic light intersection between Jalan Bantul and Jalan Mayjend Sutoyo, Yogyakarta, 24/02/16;

Pegasus angklung performing at a traffic light intersection in the vicinity of Parkir Wisata Ngabean, Yogyakarta, 07/01/16.

*Description:* The excerpts focus on the activity of “amateur” *angklung* bands at traffic light intersections. Despite violating the current Yoganese legislations concerning begging and urban traffic safety, all of these groups continue to operate undisturbed, testifying to the new openness of the local government towards the phenomenon. During the performances, one or two members of each group collect tips from the drivers who are waiting at a red traffic light.

#### 4. [A Western song in “Angklung-style”](#)

*Excerpt:* Rajawali performing “Someone like you” by Adele at the traffic light intersection between Jalan Perintis Kemerdekaan and Jalan Gambiran, Yogyakarta, 28/02/16;

*Description:* Example of a Western song re-arranged for *angklung* band. Western repertoires can easily be adapted to *angklung* band instrumental ensembles, a fact that allows these buskers to free themselves from local musical idioms.

#### Audio example

1. Excerpt of a recording (first verse and refrain) of “[Bubuy Bulan](#)” by Benny Korda (*lagu Daerah*), performed by Calung Funk at *Jalan Malioboro*, Yogyakarta, 14/10/15; running time: 00.32 (see the full transcription in Musical example 1).



# Musical example 1. Bubuy Bulan.

Bubuy Bulan (Calung Funk cover version)

Author: Benny Corda

Genre: *Lagu daerah* ("regional song"), pop Sunda

$\text{♩} = 120$  **A** (refrain)

Angklung set\*

Calung (medium-high register)

Calung (low register)

Bedug besar (big drum)

Bedug medium (medium drum)

Bedug kecil (small drum)

Ride

Cymbal

High-hat

Dangdut ketipung

Angk.

Cal. M.H.

Cal. L.

B.B.

B.M.

B.K.

R.

Cym.

H.h.

Dang. K.

\* N.B. Due to elastic tightening system of the anklung set, each single note played on the instrument repeats or vibrates (producing a tremolo-like effect).

# ZAPPATORE

6

Angk.

Cal. M-H.

Cal. L.

B.B.

B.M.

B.K.

R.

Cym.

H.h.

Dang. K.

Detailed description: This block contains the musical notation for measures 6, 7, and 8. The score is for a band and includes parts for Angk. (Trumpet), Cal. M-H. (Cavalry Horns), Cal. L. (Cavalry Horns), B.B. (Bass Drum), B.M. (Bass Drum), B.K. (Bass Drum), R. (Snare Drum), Cym. (Cymbal), H.h. (Hi-Hat), and Dang. K. (Kick Drum). The music is in 2/4 time and features a mix of melodic lines and rhythmic patterns.

9

Transition **B** (Verse)

Angk.

Cal. M-H.

Cal. L.

B.B.

B.M.

B.K.

R.

Cym.

H.h.

Dang. K.

Detailed description: This block contains the musical notation for measures 9, 10, and 11. It begins with a 'Transition' section and then enters the 'Verse' section, marked with a box around the letter 'B'. The instrumentation and notation are consistent with the previous block, showing a continuation of the band's performance.

NEW URBAN SOUNDSCAPES

12

Angk.  
Cal. M-H.  
Cal. L.  
B.B.  
B.M.  
B.K.  
R.  
Cym.  
H.h.  
Dang. K.

Detailed description: This block contains the musical score for measures 12, 13, and 14. The score is written for a multi-instrument ensemble. The instruments listed on the left are Angk., Cal. M-H., Cal. L., B.B., B.M., B.K., R., Cym., H.h., and Dang. K. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The Angk. part features a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes. The Cal. M-H. part consists of a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The Cal. L. part has a similar eighth-note accompaniment. The B.B., B.M., and B.K. parts are grouped together and play a consistent rhythmic pattern. The R. part is mostly silent. The Cym. part plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The H.h. part is mostly silent. The Dang. K. part plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

15

Angk.  
Cal. M-H.  
Cal. L.  
B.B.  
B.M.  
B.K.  
R.  
Cym.  
H.h.  
Dang. K.

Detailed description: This block contains the musical score for measures 15, 16, and 17. The instruments and notation are the same as in the previous block. The Angk. part continues with a melodic line. The Cal. M-H. part continues with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The Cal. L. part continues with a similar eighth-note accompaniment. The B.B., B.M., and B.K. parts continue with their consistent rhythmic pattern. The R. part remains mostly silent. The Cym. part continues with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The H.h. part remains mostly silent. The Dang. K. part continues with a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

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