

# Street-Style Siter Playing and Regional Urban Identity

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#### **Abstract**

This is a study of Central Javanese street-style *siteran* music (ensemble formed around a central zither) performed by *ngamen* (buskers). I transcribe and analyse an excerpt of an interpretation of a classic piece of Central Javanese art music to illustrate the musical differences between *gamelan siter* playing and street-style *siter* playing. I then discuss how musical specificities of, and repertoire choice by, *ngamen* are connected to issues of urbanisation and regionalisation in Central Java. This study demonstrates how *gamelan* musicians and *ngamen* operate within different interpretative frameworks based on performance context. I argue that this results in an inexhaustible variety of music making outside *gamelan* circles where *ngamen* are allowed to express their regionalised urban musical identity. This paper contributes to the scholarship on a genre of Central Javanese music marginalised by the *gamelan*, by using techniques of transcription and analysis to address pertinent sociocultural topics.

Key Words: Siteran, Ngamen, Transcription, Urbanisation, Regionalisation

#### Introduction

The siter is a Javanese zither that is most commonly associated with its role in the Central Javanese gamelan ensemble playing karawitan (Central Javanese art music). It is one of the specialist decorating instruments that plays at the highest level of density with a unique timbre that cuts through the homogeneity of the various metallophones. However, due to its peripheral role in the ensemble, it occupies a low status and is easily dispensable. A niche context for the siter is found on the streets of Java where ngamen (buskers) perform in siteran ensembles in which the siter barung (big siter) is the leading melodic instrument.

In his article discussing certain issues in gamelan scholarship, Tenzer (1997, p. 172) notes how the process of musical transcription has 'languished'

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in ethnomusicology. Amongst the plethora of literature focused on the Central Javanese gamelan, a significant portion of earlier writings that use transcription concerns the inner workings of the music itself. For example, Beck's (1990) PhD thesis is dedicated to the performance style of one musician on a specific instrument of the gamelan ensemble, containing tabulated results of different musical patterns and variations played from several transcribed renditions of pieces. Similarly, Sutton (1993) uses transcription not only to illustrate relationships of musical content between several instruments, but also to analyse the frequency with which certain melodic phrases occur. Taking such studies into account, Tenzer's comment could be understood to imply that gamelan scholarship has moved on from the use of quasi-scientific transcription and analysis methods, which strove to document and explain playing styles and the inner workings of the music.

Indeed, later works such as Sumarsam's (1995) first book place more importance on the cultural evolution of gamelan to provide a deeper sociological and anthropological contextualisation for the music. However, some scholars have managed to successfully incorporate transcription as a primary means (rather than for mere illustration purposes) by which to support an argument bridging the technicalities of music and pertinent theoretical issues. For example, Perlman (2004) makes extensive use of musical transcription and analysis to study how three Javanese musicians (Suhardi, Sumarsam and Supanggah) theorise the concept of 'inner melody' in gamelan music. Following on from this trend, I aim to integrate transcription and analysis techniques with pertinent sociocultural issues regarding regionalisation and urbanisation in Java.

Literature that concerns the *siter* in Central Java is scant, especially compared to research about the related kacapi zither, which holds a more prominent musical and social status in West Java. Indonesian language publications available on the siter follow the trend of using transcription to illustrate musical techniques, playing style and role of the instrument in the gamelan ensemble. For example, Marsono and Sri Hendarto's (1983) Yogyakarta arts academy primer for gamelan siter playing and Harmony's (2012) dissertation draw links between playing style and gamelan theory. English language publications are also sparse but follow a similar trend. Steptoe (1995) and Hughes (1997) offer rudimentary practical introductions to gamelan and ngamen siter playing respectively with some basic contextualisation of performance styles and instrument techniques. I intend to add to scholarship on the siter by using specificities of musicality not only to delve deeper into street-style siter playing, but also to explore the musical and cultural status ngamen hold in society.

I first transcribe an excerpt of ngamen siteran and use it as a foundation upon which to illustrate its distinct style compared to gamelan siter playing. This reveals the importance of context in performativity and the different frameworks of interpretation gamelan siter players and ngamen use. I then discuss how these musical aspects and repertoire choices are connected to issues of urbanisation and regionalisation. By doing so, I argue that street-style siter playing is an important outlet to represent part of the inexhaustible variety of music making outside gamelan circles, which affirms a sense of regionalised urban identity for ngamen. This research brings together the study of musical specificities and cultural identities by using transcription and analysis techniques within a genre of music marginalised by the gamelan in Central Javanese ethnomusicological scholarship. The author is a siter and siter barung player with experience performing in gamelan and siteran contexts.

## 'Ketawang Puspåwarnå': Transcription and Analysis

I study a recording of 'Ketawang Puspåwarna' (Central Java Musicians, 1976), a classic piece of karawitan repertoire heavily associated with the 'refined' court styles of Mangkunegaran (Surakarta) and Pakualaman (Yogyakarta). The popularity of this piece is demonstrated by the countless means through which it is interpreted and performed. Vetter's (1981) study into the performance practice of Central Javanese music illustrates how this piece varies in interpretation not only between these two courts, but also from this street-style version. However, this recording is unique as the piece is rarely played by ngamen, who prefer vocal-centric genres such as langgam, jineman and popular songs (Hughes, 1997, p. 14). Furthermore, the place this piece occupies in the Central Javanese karawitan musical canon has resulted in it being used to illustrate exemplar gamelan siter realisations in some of the aforementioned literature (Harmony, 2012, pp. 47-53; Marsono and Sri Hendarto, 1983, pp. 61-2).

Hence, this is a good opportunity to focus on the specificities of streetstyle siter playing to compare with gamelan siter playing. I illustrate how the differences between these styles reveal not only different frameworks of performative interpretation between ngamen and gamelan musicians, but also the importance of performance context.

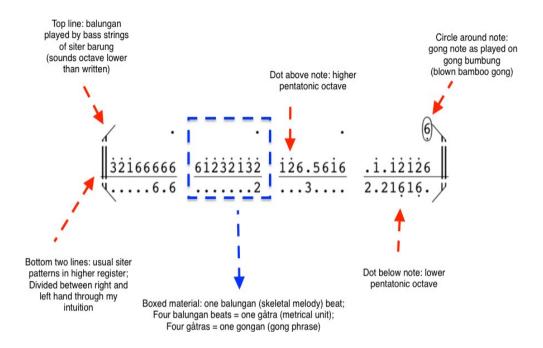


Figure 1 - Guide to understanding the transcription

I have transcribed the first cycle of the piece excluding the first round of the ompak (like the ngelik, a structural section of the piece), which is only played twice at the very beginning. References to individual beats of the balungan will be made using the following shorthand: gongan.gåtrå.beat (i.e 1.4.4 = first gongan, fourth gåtrå, fourth beat). This siteran recording only includes one zither, the siter barung, unlike other recordings that may also include the smaller siter panerus (used in gamelan ensembles), which is pitched a pentatonic octave higher.



Figure 2 – Siter panerus used in gamelan ensembles http://collections.nmmusd.org/Gamelan/9880/9880gamelansiterwithbox portraitLG.jpg

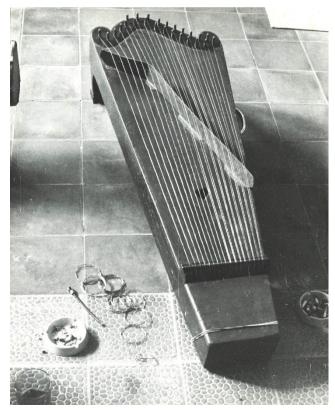


Figure 3 - Siter barung used in this recording: photographed by Roger Vetter, used with permission

# Ketawang Puspåwarnå (Slendro Manyurå) Ompak (second time) 2 126..616 2.3.12112 2.612. 165..353 565..353 ...12... Ompak (second time)

Figure 4 – 'Ketawang Puspåwarnå' transcription: gongan one

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Figure 5 - 'Ketawang Puspåwarnå' transcription: gongan two

$$\begin{bmatrix} \frac{1}{22.561.3} & \frac{5.56.353}{2..12...} & \frac{5612.1.6}{...6.5.} & \frac{1..121.2}{2.21612.} \end{bmatrix}$$

Figure 6 – 'Ketawang Puspåwarnå' transcription: gongan three

Figure 7 - 'Ketawang Puspåwarnå' transcription: gongan four

In contrast to gamelan siter playing, the ganti slenthem technique, where the balungan is played on the bass strings of the siter barung along with the usual patterns in the higher register (Hughes, 1997, pp. 14-5), is used. There are certain instances where the ganti slenthem version of the balungan is rather sparse, for example:

Figure 8 - Gåtrås 3.1 and 3.2 - 'Ayu Kuning'

Another version of the balungan from an online bank of karawitan notation is more suggestive of this special phrase 6132 6321 called 'Ayu Kuning':

Ompak [ •	2		3		2		$\widehat{1}$		3		$\overset{\smile}{2}$		1		<pre> ⑤ ]</pre>
Ngelik •		6		ż	3	ż	î	3	Ż	6	$\overset{\smile}{5}$	2	3	5	3
•	•	3	2	5	3	2	$\widehat{1}$		3		$\overset{\smile}{2}$		1	•	6
															<pre></pre>

Figure 9 – One version of the balungan for 'Ketawang Puspåwarnå' (Boston Village Gamelan); boxed material refers to the 'Ayu Kuning' phrase

Although the ganti slenthem is quite sparse, a hypothetical balungan line can be extrapolated from the *seleh* (final) notes in the *siter barung*'s patterns to the individual balungan beats: 3362 3361. The initial emphasis on 3, use of 6 as a pivot note and the seleh of each gåtrå still reflect the essence of 'Ayu

Kuning'. Therefore, the potential difficulty of the ganti slenthem technique requires ngamen to make appropriate musical changes to the balungan that gamelan siter players would not need to consider.

The seleh 2's in this recording consistently end on a 2. In a Yogyakarta arts academy primer for gamelan siter playing, most seleh 2's in this tuning and mode (slendro manyurå) end on a kempyung ('fifth' interval) 2:

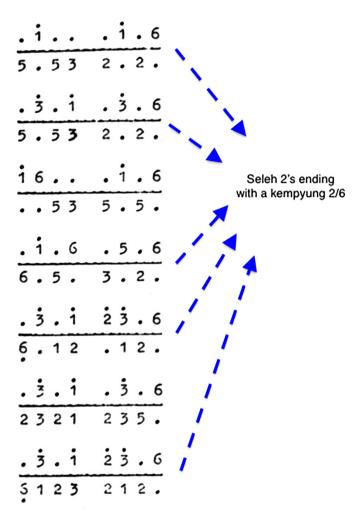


Figure 10 - Extract from Marsono and Sri Hendarto (1983, pp. 37-8); marked patterns illustrate kempyung endings for seleh 2's in slendro manyurå (tuning and mode of 'Ketawang Puspåwarnå

in this recording); unmarked patterns end on a 6; n.b. no endings on  $\dot{z}$ 

Textbook playing would also require the *siter barung*, as the instrumental melodic leader in this context, to signal the transition to the *ngelik* in 1.4.3 and 1.4.4 using a 'Duduk' pattern:

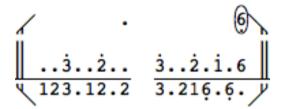


Figure 11 - Example of a 'Duduk' pattern typically played by the gendèr barung (instrumental melodic lead in some gamelan contexts) to signal the transition to the ngelik section

Instead of a 'Duduk', the transition is signalled through the repeated 6's in 1.4.1 and is understood by all the musicians. Whilst different from conventions in *gamelan siter* playing, the stylisation of patterns indicates a shared musical knowledge within an alternate *ngamen*-specific framework.

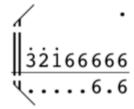


Figure 12 - Passage 1.4.1: repeated 6's to signal ngelik section

Basic *imbal* (interlocking) patterns in *gamelan siter* playing clearly alternate notes played by each hand. However, several of the *imbal* figures from the street-style recording are heavily embellished.

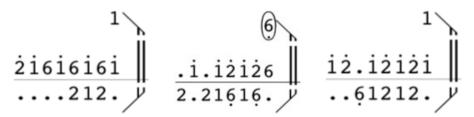


Figure 13 - Passages 1.2.4, 1.4.4 and 2.2.4: exploration of neighbours to the seleh notes in the left-hand and repetition of short patterns leading to the seleh note in the right hand fill up most beat subdivisions

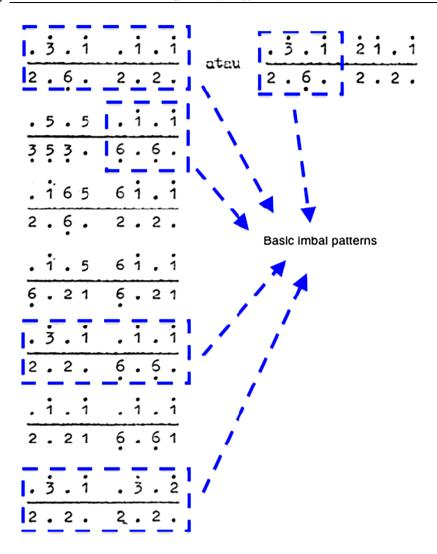


Figure 14 – Basic gamelan imbal from ibid., pp. 7-9; clear alternation between hands in boxed material with subtle variations in unboxed material

Repeated gantungan (hanging patterns to delay the seleh) phrases are ngracik (single melodic line) phrases as opposed to imbal commonly used in gamelan siter playing.

**Figure 15 - This gantungan** phrase can be found in passages 1.1.1, 2.1.1 and 4.1.1 and is an example of ngracik

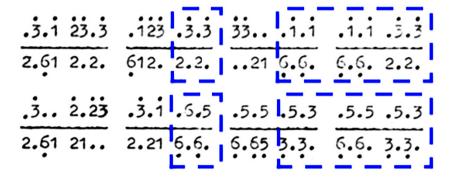


Figure 16 – Typical gantungan phrases from (ibid., pp. 25-6); boxed material indicates basic imbal patterns and unboxed material illustrates subtle variations

Hughes (2004, pp. 267-8) notes the importance of a model in the process of musicians' improvisation. The *siter barung* player consistently produces a series of patterns to different *seleh* that are similar to each other and unlike those of a gamelan *siter* player's. This suggests that these musicians engage with notably distinct frameworks of interpretation when performing.

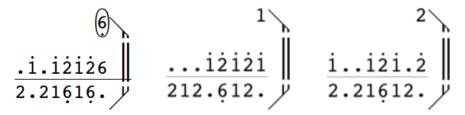


Figure 17 – Similar variants on patterns to different seleh: 1.4.4 (6), 3.2.4 (1) and 3.3.4 (2)

.3.3	5616	65	. 23.	. 3	. 356
2.61	<del></del>	3 2	1 1	2.21	2

Figure 18 – Exemplar seleh patterns for 6, 1 and 2 from Marsono and Sri Hendarto (1983, pp. 18-9); illustrative of the differing ways to approach the seleh

The leadership roles of the siter barung in this comparatively small ensemble may restrict the player's freedom, flexibility and individuality in pattern realisation at certain moments compared to the gamelan siter player. Nevertheless, dissociation from court rules affords the opportunity for idiosyncratic stylisations.

This analysis has identified several musical differences between streetstyle and gamelan siter playing with regards to instrument technique, formulation of cadential patterns, interpretation of special phrases and general playing style. In addition to stylistic differences, this also highlights the implications of performance context on the scope of performative interpretation.

#### Regional Urban Ngamen Identity

The members of this ngamen group come from the localities of Klaten and Prambanan, situated outside the court cities of Surakarta and Yogyakarta (Central Java Musicians, 1976, Liner Notes). Researching street music in Yogyakarta, Richter (2012, pp. 77-9) looks at how social, economic and cultural aspects of identity reflect the differing music tastes of street guides and becak (cycle rickshaw) drivers: the former more globalised, the latter more regionalised. Ngamen siteran groups most commonly play campursari (term encapsulating several Javanese regional music styles), music associated with the middle and lower stratum of Central Javanese society (Supanggah, 2003,

p. 4). However, they may use the same detailed framework of patterns to interpret karawitan classics like 'Ketawang Puspåwarnå'. It is notable that this ngamen group makes a transition to irama rangkep (where densities of balungan are halved and decoration doubled, resulting in a livelier feel) later on in the track. This is a very unusual way to interpret 'Ketawang Puspåwarnå' and is a technique more commonly found when performing langgam. Thus, in contrast to the dichotomy between globalisation and regionalisation that Richter poses, this act of a musical group associated with regional genres performing a piece of karawitan represents an urbanisation of traditional court music.

However, this choice of repertoire also sheds light on the relationship between ngamen musicians and karawitan. Researching street vendors in Yogyakarta, Gibbings (2016, pp. 79-80) discusses the concept of 'citizenship

as ethics' and the changes these individuals have to make in order to legitimise their belonging in the city. For example, some street vendors renovated their stalls to fit in with the government's greenery agenda, so that they would not be viewed as 'polluting' the streets (ibid., pp. 84-7). A glance of the other tracks on 'Street Music of Central Java' (Central Java Musicians, 1976) reveals that the entire album comprises of karawitan repertoire. Extrapolating on Gibbings' findings regarding street vendors, these renditions of pieces of karawitan by ngamen could represent an attempt of self-legitimisation. Suppangah (2003, p. 14) illustrates how the existence of karawitan is in danger amongst Central Javanese community musicians as it is considered 'out of date, old fashioned or belonging to the old generation'. Therefore, this album works to affirm the place of ngamen music making in the Central Javanese community by showcasing the relevance of traditionally highly valued court music. Thus, these street-style renditions of karawitan can be regarded as an emblem of Central Javanese 'musical citizenship'.

Nevertheless, whilst repertoire choice connects the music of ngamen to that played by gamelan ensembles, regional variety is a core trait of this urbanisation. In their article discussing the political agency of street vendors in Indonesia, Gibbings et al. (2017, p. 247) study how a particular organisation used the concept of an 'imagined community' to provide the 'disjointed group' of street vendors across the archipelago with a collective voice in society. Such actions not only empower groups of marginalised individuals, but also risk homogenising them. In the context of ngamen siteran, it is highly plausible that musicians from different regional localities have their own distinct methods of performative realisation, possibly even varying between individuals from the same regional locality due to lack of standardised practice. Therefore, whilst renditions such as this of 'Ketawang Puspåwarna' illustrate the urbanisation of karawitan repertoire, the regionalisation that results in distinctive specificities of performativity should not be generalised as a homogenous 'street-style'. Instead, the term should be used to refer to the countless number of interpretations of Central Javanese music that exist outside of court music styles.

#### Conclusion

This study of a classic karawitan piece interpreted by a street-siteran group has demonstrated how transcription techniques can be used not only to analyse aspects of musical style, but also to understand the sociocultural implications of the performance context of the music. In terms of playing technique, interpretation of musical conventions and differences in patterns demonstrate how street-style siter playing differs from that of gamelan siter playing. An understanding of conventions in gamelan music is adapted to suit a ngamen-specific framework that is grounded in performance context.

This allows for a creation of a distinctive, sophisticated *siteran* style that is not bound by the strict rules of court playing, thus reflecting the flexibility of performance practice in Java. The interpretation of pieces from the karawitan repertoire by ngamen illustrates an urbanisation of highly revered Central Javanese court music amongst the larger local community. By incorporating this sort of repertoire within a performance context that favours lighter campursari pieces, a symbolic cultural connection is made between different social classes through music. This sort of urbanisation sheds light on the collective group of ngamen who may each contribute to this trend through varied regionalised or individualised musical interpretations. Therefore, through the same means by which Morat (2013, pp. 337-8) discusses the 'colloquial' renditions of popular songs by street barrel organists in Berlin, street-siteran groups construct and affirm a regional urban identity through distinct ngamen specific languages of siter playing compared to gamelan siter players.

This study has made connections between musical transcription, methods of analysis and sociocultural issues regarding ngamen who perform siteran, a significantly understudied genre of Central Javanese music. Further research into street music can extrapolate on Morat's (ibid., p. 335) observation on the commercialisation and democratisation of the popular music industry in an Indonesian context, by studying ngamen interpretations of genres such as kroncong, dangdut and langgam.

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### Discography

Transcription is Track 1 (0:27-2:38) from:

Central Java Musicians. (1976). Ketawang Puspawarna, Slendro Pathet Manyura [Recorded by Mark Nelson and Roger Vetter]. On Street Music of Central Java [Remastered CD]. New York City: Lyrichord Stereo LLST7310.

# Webography

Boston Village Gamelan. (n.d.) Ketawang Puspawarna, laras sléndro pathet manyura. On Gendhing Jawi – Javanese Gamelan Notation. Retrieved March 29, 2020, from http://www.gamelanbvg.com/gendhing/pdf/sm/Puspawarna.pdf.