

Foreign *Sindhen* in Practice: New Teaching Strategies and the Impact of Practice-Led Research on Javanese Female Singing

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Abstract

Practice-led research has a long history in ethnomusicology and is currently reconsidered in many academic contexts all over the world. There has not been much literature written on the effects that a long-term active immersion in the music culture investigated can have on the “researched”, the “researcher” and the “research” itself. I experienced some of these effects as a native Italian who spent seven years learning, performing and researching in Java, Indonesia. I conducted my research led by the practice, inspired by the bi-musicality approach. Learning, performing and researching are approaches interrelated with each other and determine some interesting developments of investigation, not only within the research context, but in the research methodology itself. In this paper, I discuss the pros and cons of the practice-led research experience within the Javanese singing framework, considering the following specific aspects—new teaching strategies adopted by Javanese teachers to transmit knowledge to a foreign researcher; challenges encountered by a foreign singer on a shadow puppet theatre stage; the way in which local artists and audience take part in the research process and how the fieldwork might affect the researcher’s mentality and shape her/his approach. This article reflects on new outcomes produced by the encounter of practice and research, opening a debate about the possible collaborations and methodological exchanges between teachers, artists and researchers. It suggests that performing and understanding music should be heard and be included in the debate based on personal experience as performer and researcher.

Keywords: female singing, Javanese music, practice-led research, *sindhen*, teaching methodologies

Background

In recent years, “practice-led research” (Penny, 2014; Smith & Dean, 2009) and “practice-based research” (Candy, 2006) methodologies seem to have acquired more and more relevance amongst scholars of ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology. Learning to perform, meaning to participate actively in the music culture investigated, seems to have become part of many academic programmes from the United States (Giuriati & Hood, 1995; Solís, 2004) to Australia (Penny, 2014, p. 85). According to Baily (2001), “Learning to perform has quite a long history in ethnomusicology” (p. 86). It is a crucial part of the research methodology. Not only musical education but also live performance should be considered a primary resource, on the same level of other academic outcomes (writings, multimedia etc.) (Baily, 2008).

It is safe to say that this approach has been adopted by earlier ethnomusicologists such as Blacking (1967, 1973, 1977), Hood (1960) and Jones (1934) many others until the newest generations. The aim of this approach is that of better penetrating into the processes of music-making as well as related cultural factors in the practices investigated. As Sumarsam notices:

The commonly required “field study” for students in ethnomusicology, with an emphasis on “participant observation”, has created ethnomusicologists capable of performing and teaching the musics they study; some of them have even become accomplished musicians (Sumarsam, as cited in Solís, 2004, p. 88).

However, this methodology has revealed pros and cons over the decades, and some scholars such as Babiracki (1997) expressed concerns about the way in which merging into practice might affect the analytical thinking of the researcher. Can the three aspects of learning, performing, and researching be equally distributed in what is called “practice-led research”? How has this methodology developed since Hood’s bi-musicality and what impact does it have on the “research field” and on the protagonists of the musical traditions investigated? How do learning and performing contribute to the research? What are the pros, contras, the consequences and effects on the research, on the ‘researched’ and on the “researcher”?

In this article, I would like to discuss and reflect on some aspects of this approach, the consequences and the impact that it had not only on the “research” and on the “researched”, meaning people and contexts involved in the inquiry, but also on the mindset of an individual who is both a performer and researcher. Quoting Penny (2014):

The findings of these projects transcend personal development as they draw the intimate, internal world of the performer out into the public domain, generating knowledge, inciting new ways of thinking and provoking further discussion and exploration (p. 91).

The person who “learns”, “performs” and “researches” (and then “analyses” and “revises” the outcomes of the research) is someone who brings his identity, history, background and mentality to the “field”, determining a mutual adaptation with the hosting context and becoming an active contributor to the processes of transformation and development of the discipline itself. In the current era, when concepts such as “transcultural

musicology” (Giuriati & Giannattasio, 2017) start to be debated in a multicultural and global society, ethnomusicologists need to reflect on the effects of their research methodologies, especially if they involve the “practice”.

What this paper proposes is not a definite solution or a firm statement on how research should be conducted, considering the existence of diverse methodologies, all equally valid, that contribute to make the field of ethnomusicology active and in a continuous dialogue. Rather, the article would like to offer a contribution to the “practice-led-research” debate by presenting my personal experience of seven years living, learning, performing and researching Javanese singing, showing the possible implications and consequences of a long-term applied “bi-musical” approach. Performing and understanding music should be included in the research methodology not only as a mean to better understand a music culture but as a tool for shaping the mind-set.

Methodology

Practice-led research has been a significant determinant in my academic career. Why have I decided to adopt this methodology? I have undertaken my PhD programme in Italy, studying with Professor Giovanni Giuriati, one of the former students and academic heirs of Ki Mantle Hood, the father of bi-musicality. I have been reared within this conceptual framework and, consequently, I have decided to base my research on practical musical experience. I follow the principles of the so called bi-musicality “challenge”, but also keep in mind two of the questions addressed by Ki Mantle Hood (1960), “How far can we go?” and “How much time do we have?” (p. 58).

I accepted the challenge and I moved to Java, for the first time, in September 2013. Since then, I’ve spent seven years studying, living, researching, practicing and experiencing *sindhen* or *sindhenan*, the Central Javanese female singing style. I have moved beyond merely “participant observation” (Rice, 2014; Solís, 2004) and emic perspective (Bartz & Cooley, 1997). Rather, my fieldwork has turned into a full immersion in Javanese life, not only within the musical community but under every aspect. Yogyakarta has become my second home, my informants has become my friends, academic peers and colleagues. Therefore, I often faced a certain difficulty to separate the imaginary boundaries between “research” and “real life” (Kisliuk, 1997). Discussing with my colleagues, I understood this is common when one really merges into another culture. Many of them have made definitive choices as changing nationality, getting married with locals and starting over with a new life or becoming experienced performers and teachers of what was initially their “research topic”, in their original “research field”. Counting on technological resources and the rapidity of transport in the current era, it is easier to merge life and fieldwork (more than it was indeed at the dawn of bi-musicality). Therefore, a “strong identification with the chosen culture” (Abu-Lughod as cited in Solís, 2004, p. 11) is a more and more widespread phenomenon which inevitably cuts the barriers between the “foreigner” and the “local”, as well as, in many cases, between the “scholar” and the “artist”. What consequences does it have on the research?

Some scholars such as Babiracki (1997) acknowledge that total immersion in the culture investigated might distort a researcher’s point of view when analysing data. Risks not only include assuming the perspective of the practitioner (lacking a critical point of view) but also losing the focus of the research, privileging the practice over the analysis. It might be true on the one hand but, on the other, it also offers the chance to witness some new

phenomena and to be part of some interesting processes and changes within the practice, having a look at 360 degrees, rather than one single perspective.

Bi-musicality shaped my research in many ways, starting from the way of approaching Javanese music. It also affected the relations with the other musicians in many ways. Before leaving to Java, I used to take part in Javanese gamelan rehearsals in the KBRI (Indonesian Embassy in Rome, Italy). It is a workshop often included in the Asian Music course of our Music department, thanks to the diplomatic relationship between La Sapienza University and the embassy. The workshop (often ending with a concert) is proposed by Professor Giovanni Giuriati to his students in line with the bi-musical approach inspired by Mantle Hood. It is great chance in the Italian academic framework also considering that, unlike the United States and United Kingdom, only few gamelan sets are available in the whole national territory (and only very few of them are in good condition). Playing gamelan at KBRI has been indeed the “bridge” (as intended by Hardja Susilo as cited in Solís, 2004, p. 60) for many of my colleagues who eventually decided to move to the “fieldwork”. This choice is in general, among other reasons, motivated by the need to deeply understand music elaboration and the way Javanese “think” music. In fact, with the KBRI gamelan group we often performed *lancaran* (the 8-beats per gong cycle form) without singing parts, using cypher notation scores, with a limited chance to improve our elaboration skills or to play more challenging instruments.

Once in Java, I started taking female traditional singing (*sindhen*) classes with several teachers, exploring diverse learning strategies. Interestingly, I found some methodologies were not very different from the ones used at the embassy (including the use of notation). Even more interestingly, I understood as some methods were expressly conceived for foreigners and researchers who had started merging significantly into Javanese arts over the last decades. On the other hand, I found myself divided between the “critical”, academic approach and the feeling inspired by practicing Javanese music which led me to achieve a more emotional rather than rational sentiment. Especially within the Javanese music framework, being a musician often implies achieving the *rasa* (Benamou, 2010), a “musical feeling” that often clashes with the restraints of scientific analysis. Another interesting aspect, connected with my training as a *sindhen*, has been the embodiment of the Javanese female ideal and the way of enacting that ideal on the shadow puppet theatre stage. This double nature of “foreign researcher” and “traditional female singer” has been the key to better understanding internal processes of transformation within the traditional performing arts. But, indeed, it has also caused some problematics both in my relationship with the other artists and in the urge to produce results in the limited time of the PhD programme.

In the following paragraphs I am going to discuss more specifically the findings of my experience in learning and performing Javanese traditional female singing, adding empirical evidence and considerations.

Studying *Sindhen*: New Teaching Strategies for Foreign Practitioners

Sindhen is a Javanese female singer who sings in gamelan ensembles and the gamelan-accompanied performing arts, and similar to shadow puppet theatre, has a specific repertoire and a specific voice quality. Moreover, *sindhen* is supposed to embody an ideal of femininity, of “refinement” (*alus*) and manners in line with courtly aesthetic principles. In fact, this practice is supposed to have been developed in the central Javanese courts around the 18th–

19th century (Sutton, 1984) during a period of reformation and epuration of courtly ethics and customs (Di Bernardi, 1995). Despite several transformations that affected repertoires and performance practice, especially in the last decades, the key features of the *sindhen*, in the Javanese imaginary, are still the ones related to the court canon.

In my research, I have mostly focused on three key aspects that still distinguish the *sindhen* from other types of Javanese singers. Those that I define as “primary requirements” of a *sindhen* are:

- The ability to sing and elaborate melodic patterns (*cengkok*) in gamelan classical pieces;
- The vocal quality, similar to the one classified as “twang” (McDonald, 2005) meaning using pharyngeal constriction to obtain a sharp and metallic sound, resonating on medium-high frequencies;
- A certain way to behave to embody the Javanese hyper-feminine ideal (connected with several norms regarding language, costume and manners, as the way they sit on stage and interact with musicians and audience).

When I started practicing vocal singing in Yogyakarta, I had to deal with the aforementioned requirements, necessary to properly embody the *sindhen* character on stage (and, sometimes, in real life).

After the first two years, mainly spent among Central Javanese artistic communities, I moved to other areas of West and East Java, and I started to join other performing contexts, still applying the same methodology of learning and performing to eventually produce some research outcomes based on my personal experience, complemented by ethnography (audio-visual production), interviews and music transcriptions and analysis.

Thus, these three aspects have always been strictly interdependent in my research and the real challenge has been to make them equally distributed during my fieldwork and my daily life as *sindhen*. The hardest task was to prevent the love for the practice (which I think is common for every scholar who uses this approach) to not overwhelm the necessity to elaborate concrete data, in order to be able to call it “research” or :practice-based research: and not just “practice” (I will define this aspect in more detail below, presenting concrete examples from my personal experience). Another difficult task was to conciliate my double identity of *sindhen* and researcher, especially during the learning process. As I could notice, the challenges of the performer/researcher duality are often encountered also by graduate students from local academies of Yogyakarta and Surakarta.

During the past years, I have studied *sindhenan* with several teachers and I have noticed the existence of two different teaching methodologies, also confirmed by the many interviews (or I should more properly call them “talks” or “communications”) to other *sindhen*, friends and colleagues.

The first methodology can be defined with the Indonesian term *alami*, meaning natural. It means learning by imitation and “by ear” (or “by heart”, Benamou, 2010), often directly on stage. Learning through performance has been common for many *sindhen* in the past and is still common. Usually, it requires the mentorship of a teacher or a senior singer. It is also possible to learn from other colleagues or a member of the family, in the case of *keturunan seni* (artistic descendance). In the past, it might happen also via radio or cassettes. Nowadays, it may involve the use of other media, such as YouTube videos or WhatsApp

voice notes. Especially since April-May 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic which reached the Javanese island in March, more and more artists are relying on the Internet to spread their knowledge, via online classes and dedicated YouTube channels.

The second methodology is called *akademi*, literally “academical”, because of its connection with local academies (like ISI, the Indonesian Institute of the Arts).¹ This methodology implies written supplemental learning material such as cyphered notation and booklets with lyrics. Despite this fact, oral transmission still covers an important percentage, especially in the memorisation of melodic patterns in vocal pieces.

Most of my teachers including Pak Parto (Petrus Suparto) in Yogyakarta, Ibu Kesi (Sukezi Rahayu) in Suarkarta, Ibu Narsi (Narsihati) in Banyumas, and Pak Broto (Subroto) in Surabaya—prevalently used an oral approach to teach me how to elaborate *sindhengan* for gamelan pieces. They used to play the skeleton melody of a piece on a *gender* (a metallophone) and sing the vocal part, which consists in a semi-improvisation of melodic patterns on the main cadences. I had to listen, record and try to imitate their execution.

The majority of the methods still seem to largely rely on oral transmission, since local academies have been established, written methodologies have started to be used to a large extent. Furthermore, the constant presence of researchers going to central Java to study gamelan music determined the necessity, felt by some teachers, to adapt the teaching methodology to analytical purposes and to add a critical approach to their teachings. This is the case of one of my teachers: Pak Abdal.

Pak Abdal and the Mathematic Method

Mohammad Abdal (for his students simply Pak Abdal) has studied gamelan at ASKI (now ISI) the musical academy of Surakarta, and has at a young age started teaching gamelan to both local and foreigners in several cities, from Surabaya to Yogyakarta. He currently teaches in Yogyakarta in a central-Javanese (mainly Solonese) style. Beside karawitan (gamelan music practice and theory), he has taught Mathematics in junior-high schools for quite a long period. As he shared with me, his pragmatic mentality brought him to find interesting strategies to teach *sindhengan* to foreigners and researchers. His strategy is intended to be used with practitioners who aim to analyse vocal patterns and their application on the instrumental pieces. In Pak Abdal’s opinion, since many teachers only teach how to sing the melodic patterns “by heart” (Benamou, 2010) without any analytical insight, researchers tend to apply “western” theories and concepts to analyse Javanese pieces, instead of relying on the *ilmu karawitan* (‘the science of karawitan’ which has its rules and prescriptions as other music traditions). For Pak Abdal, and the other teachers (like Pak Didik, gender and rebab teacher in Bantul district) who adopted his methodology, “*karawitan* science” might be used as an analytic tool as well:

I know that foreigners have a different learning methodology, I have taught people from Belgium, Germany, America, The Netherlands and my method worked with them because it is scientific, analytic. After me, other Javanese teachers started to apply my method also for teaching local students, when they couldn’t learn simply by oral transmission. (Pak Abdal, 2015, personal communication, November 7, 2017).

The increasing number of foreign students and researchers, according to Pak Abdal, has created the necessity to adopt a new approach. His method, according to him, can also be used to teach local students, especially those who were already used to learning “*akademi*” (in Indonesia or abroad) and do not have a family background in traditional music. This way, the world of the orality and that of the academia can be joined together to understand *sindhen* singing from various perspectives, not only having to choose between the performer or researcher’s angle, but with the possibility of a versatile application.

Classifying *Cengkok* with Alphanumeric Formulas

Female singing for gamelan pieces consists of a semi-improvisation of vocal patterns (*cengkok*) on a skeleton melody (*balungan*) (Walton, 1987). For example, in a piece in the form of *ladrang* (32 beats for every *gong* cycle, divided in 8 groups of 4 notes each called *gatra*), the *sindhen cengkok* (vocal patterns) should be distributed as follows, according to my Yogyaneese teachers, Pak Parto and Pak Abdal (the brackets indicate that the elaboration of the vocal pattern under that specific *gatra* is optional) (Table 1):

Table 1

Distribution of the vocal patterns on a ladrang musical structure

| | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| I <i>gatra</i> (<i>sindhen cengkok</i>) | II <i>gatra</i> <i>sindhen cengkok</i> | III <i>gatra</i> (<i>sindhen cengkok</i>) | IV <i>gatra</i> <i>sindhen cengkok</i> |
| V <i>gatra</i> (<i>sindhen cengkok</i>) | VI <i>gatra</i> <i>sindhen cengkok</i> | VII <i>gatra</i> (<i>sindhen cengkok</i>) | VIII <i>gatra</i> <i>sindhen cengkok</i> |

Cengkok are melodic patterns consisting of a combination of notes and lyrics, elaborated on strong *selèh* (cadences) of a gamelan piece. When improvising on a fix melody, *sindhen* should be able to create their own vocal ornamentations based on memorised *cengkok*. The way to memorise *cengkok* is disparate. Some teachers make the student memorise all the possible basic patterns for all the pitches of the Javanese scales (*slendro* and *pelog*) before applying them to a musical piece. Other teachers make the student listen and imitate their elaboration, until mastering the melodic contour “by ear” or “by heart” and, consequently, automatically internalising *cengkok* patterns. On average, most of these methodologies may be classified as oral, meaning that teachers do not explain the nature or the elaboration process of the melodic patterns themselves, but only their application on a piece. The aim is to let the student develop the ability to sing as many pieces as she can in a short time.

However, Pak Abdal’s method is conceived as a useful analytic tool rather than a singing practice. It consists of learning a number of *cengkok* in their basic form, without embellishments, classifying them with letters and numbers like mathematical formulas, to apply when needed on a written melody. This way, each melodic pattern is easily identifiable and allows the student to fill his/her own score with the formulas learned and recognise the formulas when transcribing and analysing a musical piece.

Before our lessons, Pak Abdal always prepared the musical score of the pieces in cyphered notation, already divided in the main musical sections (for example *ompok*– low register section–and *ngelik*–high register section) with *gatra*'s subdivision. Firstly, he asked me to identify the main *selèh* on which the vocal pattern should end, according to Javanese *karawitan* rules. Further, I had to write down the basic formulas identifying those vocal patterns, instead of the vocal pattern's extended notation (Figure 1):

LADRANG WILUJENG, BALUNGAN A-B-D

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>2123 (P)</p> <p>Is T₂</p> <p>(Yo ra-nga-ne)</p> | <p>2126̂ (U)</p> <p>C ½ N₁</p> <p>(Ka-wi se-kar)</p> | <p>33.. (P)</p> <p>ngantung</p> | <p>6532 (U)</p> <p>C L₁</p> <p>(se-kar pe-pun-dhen sri kre-sna)</p> |
| <p>5653 (P)</p> <p>Is T₁</p> <p>(Ra-ma ra-ma)</p> | <p>2126̂ (U)</p> <p>B ½ N₁</p> <p>(Lir pus-pi-ta)</p> | <p>2123 (P)</p> <p>Is T₁</p> <p>(Ra-ma Ra-ma)</p> | <p>2126̂ (U)</p> <p>B N₁</p> <p>(wa-rna-ne ku-su-meng pu-ra)</p> |

Figure 1. A first draft of the melodic formulas' classification on *Ladrang Wilujeng*

How to classify vocal patterns with mathematic formulas? Pak Abdal made me start from the lyrics. *Sindhenan* lyrics, used in the classical gamelan pieces, consist in ancient riddles called *wangsalan*, made of 24 syllables each, divisible in a 12-syllable question (*cangkriman*) and a 12-syllable answer (*batangan*). The question and the answer can be further divided in groups of 4 and 8 syllables each. Beside *wangsalan*, *sindhen* can use short phrases, called *isen-isen* (literally 'filling') of 4 syllables, such as: *yo mas yo mas*, *rama rama*, etc. Pak Abdal showed me how to classify the *wangsalan* and *isen-isen*. For example, using the riddle: *Kawi sekar, sekar pepundhen Sri Kresna. Lir puspita, warnane kusumeng pura*,² one can operate the following segmentation (Table 2):

Table 2

Syllabic segmentation of a wangsalan riddle

| WANGSALAN | 4 syllables | 8 syllables | Total of the syllables |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Cangkriman</i> (question) | <i>Ka-wi se-kar,</i> | <i>se-kar pe-pun-dhen Sri</i> | (12 syllables) |
| | | <i>Kres-na</i> | |
| <i>Batangan</i> (answer) | <i>Lir pus-pi-ta,</i> | <i>war-na-ne ku-su-meng pu-</i> | (12 syllables) |
| | | <i>ra</i> | |
| | | | Total 24 syllables |

According to Pak Abdal, this syllabic segmentation could be easily simplified in alphanumeric formulas, as following (Table 3):

Table 3

Attribution of the alphanumeric formulas to the syllabic segmentation of a wangsalan

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Cangkriman</i> (question) | 4 syllables <i>cengkok</i> (first segment of the sentence) C ½ | 8 syllables <i>cengkok</i> (second segment of the sentence) C |
| <i>Batangan</i> (answer) | 4 syllables <i>cengkok</i> (first segment of the sentence) B ½ | 8 syllables <i>cengkok</i> (second segment of the sentence) B |
| <i>Isen-isen</i> (optional filling) | <i>cengkok</i> of a variable number of syllables used as a filling Is | |

Thence, a 4 syllable segment of a *wangsalan* could be identified by the formula **C ½** or **B ½**, depending on its function (answer or question). Similarly, the 8 syllable segment will be identified by **B** or **C**. If one wants to use the full 12 syllable line (which is also possible, in according with *karawitan* principles) the formula will be **B_r** or **C_r**, the “r” standing for *racik* or *ngracik*. Finally, **Is** identifies *isen-isen*. If we write these *wangsalan* and *isen-isen* formulas under the skeleton melody of a *ladrang*, we obtain the following score (Table 4):

Table 4

Application of the wangsalan and isen-isen formulas on a ladrang musical structure

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| I <i>gatra</i> Is | II <i>gatra</i> C ½ | III <i>gatra</i> Is | IV <i>gatra</i> C |
| V <i>gatra</i> Is | VI <i>gatra</i> B ½ | VII <i>gatra</i> Is | VIII <i>gatra</i> B |

This way, the student can quickly recognise the lyrics distribution on the instrumental melody, which correspond to the hierarchical importance of the cadential notes (usually a 4 or 8 syllables *wangsalan* is sung on stronger cadences, while *isen-isen* are sung on the weaker cadences).

If we write the complete *wangsalan* under each *gatra*, we have the complete outline of the lyrics partition in a *sindhén* vocal elaboration or semi-improvisation (Table 5):

Table 5

Wangsalan and isen-isen formulas and lyrics on a ladrang musical structure

| | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| I <i>gatra</i> Is (<i>yo mas yo mas</i>) | II <i>gatra</i> C ½ (<i>Ka-wi se-kar</i>) | III <i>gatra</i> Is (<i>Ra-ma Ra-ma</i>) | IV <i>gatra</i> C (<i>se-kar pe-pun-dhen Sri Kre-sna</i>) |
| V <i>gatra</i> Is (<i>yo mas yo mas</i>) | VI <i>gatra</i> B ½ (<i>Lir pus-pi-ta</i>) | VII <i>gatra</i> Is (<i>Ra-ma Ra-ma</i>) | VIII <i>gatra</i> B (<i>wa-rna-ne ku-su-meng pu-ra</i>) |

After being able to segment and classify the lyrics used in *sindhengan*, Pak Abdal showed me how to complete the formulas with the individuation and classification of the musical patterns. To do that, we looked at a specific piece: *Ladrang Wilujeng*.

Studying and Analysing *Ladrang Wilujeng* with Pak Abdal's method

Ladrang Wilujeng in the *pathet* (modes of the Javanese music scale's system) of *slendro manyura* (the highest-pitched mode of *slendro* scale) is often the first piece chosen by teachers to approach the gamelan repertoire. As Sutton observes:

Ladrang Wilujeng is often chosen as a beginner's piece by teachers, not because it is simpler than any other, but because it contains a variety of commonly used one-and-two-*gatra* passages. Aside from its associations with security and safety, its musical construction makes it a useful *gendhing* to study (Sutton, 1987, p. 71).

How did I study *Ladrang Wilujeng* with Pak Abdal's method? Starting from the *balungan*, that he already divided in sections on a cyphered score, I was required to apply the *wangsalan*, *isen-isen* and cadential pattern formulas based on the *gatra* subdivision and the cadences, as shown in the previous paragraph. In order to elaborate melodic patterns, it is important, in Pak Abdal's opinion, to take into account the preselected segment or lyrics and pay attention to the single *sèleh* and the melodic contour (Table 6):

Table 6

Application of the wangsalan and isen-isen formulas on the skeleton melody of Ladrang Wilujeng

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2123 Is (<i>yo mas yo mas</i>) | 212 [∧] 6̇ C ½ (<i>Ka-wi se-kar</i>) | 33.. | 653 [∧] 2 C (<i>se-kar pe-pun-dhen Sri Kre-sna</i>) |
| 5653 Is (<i>yo mas yo mas</i>) | 212 [∧] 6̇ B ½ (<i>Lir pus-pi-ta</i>) | 2123 Is (<i>Ra-ma Ra-ma</i>) | 212 [∧] 6̇ B (<i>wa-rna-ne ku-su-meng pu-ra</i>) |

On the third *gatra* there is no *isen-isen* because it is a specific combination called *ngantung*, usually instrumental. However, a vocal “sliding” to another note towards the following *gatra* called *plesedan* can be added. It is a common technique, often used by senior *sindhèn* (see Figure 3).

Thence, once we have the lyrics formula, we should add the melodic formulas. Similar to the procedure for creating *wangsalan* and *isen-isen* formulas, the cadential pattern formulas are created with the initial letters of the pitches in *slendro* scale, as spelled in Javanese. The strategy of identifying musical patterns with letters corresponding to the *selèh* note, has been used already by the *gendér* teacher Panji Sutopinilihh in the conservatory of Surakarta (Sumarsam, as cited in Solís, 2004, p. 79). Another interesting method of teaching music patterns in gamelan music (specifically on the *gendér*) has been adopted by R. L. Martopangrawit. This method associated a name to melodic patterns to help the students recognise and classify them (Sumarsam, as cited in Solís, 2004, p. 79). Considering that Pak Abdal is a former graduate at the music conservatory of Surakarta, as he confessed to me, and he has been in touch with some great teachers of the past (currently, he is almost seventy years old) he might have taken inspiration from Pak Pandji and Pak Marto’s methodologies and applied it to singing (Table 7):

Table 7

Attribution of the alphanumeric formulas to the pitches of slendro scale

| Notes in cyphered system | Name of the note in Javanese | Formulas |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| 1 | <i>Siji</i> | S |
| 2 | <i>Loro</i> | L |
| 3 | <i>Telu</i> | T |
| 5 | <i>Limo</i> | M (“mo”, since the L is already used for the 2) |
| 6 | <i>Nem</i> | N |

Each *sèleh* (cadential note) determines a melodic pattern (*cengkok*). If we apply these cadential formulas on *Ladrang Wilujeng*’s *balungan*, we obtain the following score (Table 8):

Table 8

Application of the cadential pattern formulas on Ladrang Wilujeng

| | | | |
|----------------|------------------|------|------------------|
| 2123 | 212 ⁶ | 33.. | 653 ² |
| T ₁ | N ₁ | | L ₁ |

| | | | |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| 5653 | 212[∧]6 | 2123 | 212[∧]6 |
| T | N | T₁ | N₁ |

The first *gatra* ends with the note 3 (Telu = **T**). Consequentially, the student should choose a *cengkok* ending on the pitch 3. Since we start from basic patterns, we use the **T₁** (the number in subscript indicating the complexity level of the pattern) which in cyphered notation is equivalent to:

$$T_1 = 2 \quad \underline{2 \ 12} \quad 3 \ 3$$

The second *gatra* ends on the low 6. Similarly, the student writes **N** as Nem, choosing the basic pattern **N₁**, equivalent to:

$$N_1 = 2 \quad 3 \quad \underline{31} \quad \underline{216}$$

The same happens with the vocal pattern on the fourth *gatra*, ending on 2 (Loro = **L**). The basic form of this *cengkok*, showed by Pak Abdal, is:

$$L_1 = 6 \quad \dot{1} \quad 6 \quad \dot{2} \quad 6 \quad 3 \quad \underline{21} \quad 2$$

This last *cengkok* appear longer than the other two, because it is associated with the 8-syllable *wangsalan* (see Table 5). In order to decide whether the *cengkok* should be long or short, the student shall consider the previously applied lyrics formula, so that an *isen-isen* and a 4-syllable *wangsalan* correspond to a short *cengkok*, while an 8 or 12 syllable *wangsalan* corresponds to a long *cengkok*. Of course, the choice of which segment of lyrics and melodic pattern to use on a cadence, which here appears mechanical and calculated, constitutes a “natural” elaboration for a senior *sindhen* who sings “by ear” or “by heart”, not using any written support.

Eventually, applying both lyrics and melodic formulas, as shown in the previous paragraphs, on the skeleton melody of the piece, we obtain the final score with the complete *cengkok* formulas (Table 9):

Table 9

Application of the complete cengkok formulas on Ladrang Wilujeng

| | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| 2123 | 212[∧]6 | 33.. | 653[∧]2 |
| Is T₁ | C ½ N₁ | | CL₁ |

| | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 5653 | 212⁶ | 2123 | 212⁶ |
| Is T₂ | B ½ N₁ | Is T₁ | B N₁ |

If we resolve the *cengkok* corresponding to each formula we have (Table 10):

Table 10

Cengkok corresponding to the formulas of Ladrang Wilujeng

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|------|-------------|------------|------------|-----|------|-----------|------------|
| Is T₁ | 2 | <u>2 12</u> | 3 | 3 | | | | |
| | yo | mas | yo | mas | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |
| C-B ½ N₁ | 2 | 3 | <u>31</u> | <u>216</u> | | | | |
| | Ka- | wi | se- | kar | | | | |
| | Lir | pus- | pi- | ta | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |
| C L₁ | 6 | i | 6 | 2 | 6 | 3 | <u>21</u> | 2 |
| | Se- | kar | pe- | pun- | den | Sri | Kre- | sna |
| | | | | | | | | |
| Is T₂ | 5 | 6 | <u>6i6</u> | <u>53</u> | | | | |
| | Ra- | ma | Ra- | ma | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |
| B N₁ | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | <u>31</u> | <u>216</u> |
| | War- | na | ne | ku- | su- | meng | pu- | ra |

Thereupon, the *Ladrang Wilujeng* full score with Pak Abdal’s basic *cengkok*, identified by the above-mentioned formulas. (Figure 2):

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>2 1 2 3 2 1 2 $\widehat{6}$ 3 3 . . 6 5 3 $\widehat{2}$</p> <p>2 <u>212</u> 3 3 2 3 <u>31</u> <u>216</u></p> <p>Yo mas yo mas Ka-wi se- kar</p> | <p>6 $\dot{1}$ 6 <u>$\dot{2}\dot{1}\dot{2}$</u> 6 3 <u>2.12</u> 2</p> <p>se-kar pe-pun- dhen Sri Kre- sna</p> |
| | |
| <p>5 6 5 3 2 1 2 $\widehat{6}$ 2 1 2 3 2 1 2 $\textcircled{6}$</p> <p>5 6 <u>616</u> <u>53</u> 2 3 <u>31</u> <u>216</u></p> <p>Ra- ma ra- ma Lir pus-pi- ta</p> | <p>5 6 <u>616</u> <u>53</u> 3 3 2 2 1 3 <u>31</u> <u>216</u></p> <p>Ra- ma ra- ma war-na-ne ku-su- meng pu- ra</p> |

Figure 2. The *ompak* section of *Ladrang Wilujeng* with Pak Abdal's melodic patterns corresponding to the formulas.

The full score is the last result of a long session of classification, segmentation and analysis of the musical piece, which helps the student to understand the structure and the composition (or elaboration) process, before starting to sing it. This way, the student doesn't only learn how to elaborate vocal patterns on a fixed melody, but she learns how to deconstruct a piece to reveal the theory behind the vocal practice. It is fundamental to learn new pieces and be able to analyse pieces sung by other singers or teachers, especially considering the fact that every *sindhen* can make her own version of a piece, varying the *cengkok*, as long as she respects the *karawitan* principles.

Thence, according to the purpose (studying, performing, analysing) the student can use the *cengkok* in their extended form in cyphered notation or with their formulas. Once the student has mastered a piece, she can use more elaborate *cengkok* taken from other singers or heard in recordings, or make her own ornamentations. She can also choose to not use the score anymore for performative purposes. Instead, if the purpose is the analysis, writing the formulas in the place of the extended *cengkok* might be a useful tool to detect similar *cengkok* and ornamentations sung by another *sindhen*. I show an example in the next paragraph.

Knowing the basic melodic patterns of a specific piece can be a helpful guideline when transcribing and analysing the same piece sung by another singer. For instance, I tried to transcribe the same piece, *Ladrang Wilujeng* in *slendro manyura*, executed by the Yogyane *sindhen* Titik Sumiarsih (May 2014)(Figure 3).³

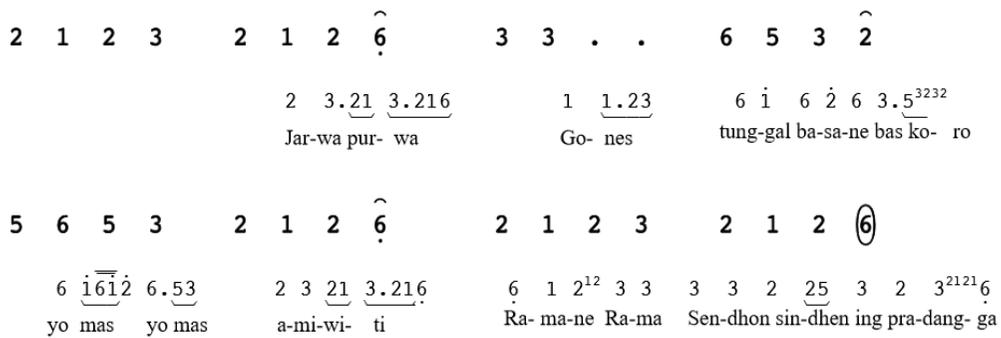


Figure 3. Transcription of the *ompak* section of *Ladrang Wilujeng* with *cengkok* elaborated by the *sindhen* Titik Sumiarsh, [min. 0:13-1:10]

As shown in the transcription, I wrote down the extended version of each *cengkok* in cypher notation. Once I transcribed all the *cengkok* under the skeleton melody, I could classify them with Pak Abdal’s mathematic formulas. This way, I could find out how a senior *sindhen* embellishes and elaborates a pattern (Table 11):

Table 11

Formulas of the *cengkok* used in *Ladrang Wilujeng* by the *sindhen* Titik Sumiarsih

II gatra C ½ N₁ - The *cengkok* is variated from the basic form, using *wiletan* (embellishment) and *gregel* (a large vibrato) on the last syllable (“-wa”).

III gatra plesedan - Titik uses a *plesedan*.

IV gatra C L₁ - Even in this case, the *cengkok* presents an embellishment on the penultimate syllable (“-ko”), reaching the pitch 5 followed by *wiletan* and *gregel*.

V gatra Is T₂ – Here, Titik uses another version of the *cengkok* on the *sèleh* 3.

VI gatra B ½ N₁ - On this *gatra*, we find the same *cengkok* of the second *gatra*, similarly ornamented.

VII gatra Is T₃ - Titik uses another version of the *cengkok* on the note 3, starting from the low 6 instead of the high 6.

VIII gatra B N₁ - In this case, the same basic *cengkok* with a descending melodic contour on the pitch 6 is ornamented on the syllable “-dhen”, adding a *wiletan* and a *gregel* on the penultimate syllable “-dang”.

Pak Abdal thought this kind of analysis might be a good compromise between my western musical theory and the local *karawitan* practice. Deconstructing the vocal melody using formulas constitutes a logical way to analyse a piece, still respecting the *karawitan* science while using the appropriate vocabulary (for example: “A *gregel* is a *gregel*, not a

vibrato as you mean in *seriosa* (opera)” (Pak Abdal, personal communication, November 7, 2017).

Summing up, Pak Abdal’s teaching methodology aims to help the music analysis of the piece beyond the vocal elaboration itself. That is why Pak Abdal, contrary to other teachers, gave me basic formulas and not ornamented vocal patterns to learn. The point is to understand what I have to sing in order to be able to analyse more pieces and not simply imitate a teacher’s style. I should be able to recognise melodic patterns reconstructing them to their basic forms. It is interesting how, with his method, Pak Abdal created a solid bridge between the local teachers and the researchers, urged by the necessity to fulfil “academic” *sindhèn* and researchers’ needs.



Figure 4. The author and Pak Abdal during a vocal class (January 2015).

Like Pak Abdal, many teachers are shifting from oral methodologies to written methodologies, but still lying in the middle, halfway between orality and writing, meeting several requirements and enlarging their student capacities. This is necessary in the current century where, often, performers are also researchers and vice versa.

Learning how to sing the traditional vocal pieces through different methodologies necessary implies, in Java, the parallel practice in performance. What does it mean performing as a “Javanese traditional female singer”? Clearly, a foreign singer is not going to become “Javanese” (not by birth, at least) and this is not the aim, but there are some ways in which, over time, foreign researchers and musicians have found their space within traditional performances.

Comparing Methodologies: Learning by Heart as the “Old Time” *Sindhèn*

After my first year in Java and achieving some acquaintance with the *sindhenan* technique, I felt that I was still missing something. In fact, despite the fact that I collected a wide repertoire of both *lagu* (song), *gendhing* (classical gamelan compositions) and other vocal genres as *langgam* and *jineman*, I still needed the use of notation (or the formulas taught by Pak Abdal reminding me of the right *cengkok* to use) to sing the most difficult pieces. What I was missing, in a word, was *rasa*. *Rasa* is a term which literally means “feeling” but it encloses a variety of other meanings which Benamou (2010) describes as “aural sensation”, “impression” or “aesthetic effect” (Benamou, 2010, p. 47). Musically speaking, *rasa* is:

Being able to express the right feeling musically [...] not only knowing how to produce the right effect through details of *garap* or “interpretation”, but also on sensing what is appropriate to a particular situation. This might mean, for instance, knowing when to sing plainly or to let loose with ornaments, depending on whether a piece was solemn (*regu*) or jovial (*bérag*), or on what the genre or context were called for (Benamou, 2011, p. 49).

Rasa is the key of expert Javanese musicians to be able to improvise the simultaneous variations on a skeleton melody (*balungan*), in accordance with the others, mixing creativity and shared music knowledge. For the female singers, *rasa* is essential to create their own *cengkok* style within a *garapan*. In order to do that, they have to intimately “feel” the elaboration of the melody (thence, the musical mode or *pathet*) basing on the parts of the other instruments, and the changes of tempo (*irama*). Writing beautiful *cengkok* on a cyphered score, copied by a teacher or transcribed from famous recordings, might work for a singular performance but not for being a good *sindhen* in the long run.

In 2014, I conducted some interview-rounds in the districts of the DIY (Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta) in order to know the background and learning processes of as many *sindhen* as I managed to meet. After weeks of questions, talks, discussions with many singers, their families and their teachers, I classified and organised the outcomes: *sindhen alami* (natural *sindhen*) and *sindhen akademi* (academic *sindhen*). The first were the ones prevalently reared within families of artists or village music communities. They learned naturally how to sing, by ear or by heart without the aid of any scores or *titi laras* (solfège). The second were coming from a higher education background, most of them from ISI Yogyakarta or ISI Surakarta, and shared a similar music training (for example the widespread use of notation and the inability to improvise on a given *balungan*). An interesting factor was the age. Apparently, the *alami* singers were, mostly, the oldest, while amongst the *akademi* were many youngsters. This led me to an additional subdivision: *jaman dulu* (old time) versus *jaman now* (current century) (Meloni, 2021). Some of my teachers confirmed the assumption: to become a good *sindhen* I should be able to sing with *rasa*, *alami*, as an old-time vocalist.

Facing aural transmission is a sort of trauma for someone who has been educated in Western art music since a young age (I never joined Italian conservatories but I studied the conservatory programme for piano at local music schools for nearly ten years). During my long permanence in Java, after joining many gamelan sessions and shadow puppet theatres, I had started to get accustomed to the more common use of “listening” instead of the written page and of improvisation rather than “prescription”. However, I felt uneasy being totally deprived of even a few spared papers with roughly written *cengkok* under a melody. Among other teachers, the two I spent more time with, mastering the *alami* methodology, are Ibu Kesi (Sukesri Rahayu) in Surakarta and Ma’ Narsih (Narsihati, a singer-dancer of Banyumas).

Ibu Kesi is a college teacher in *pedalangan* (puppetry) department at ISI Surakarta and one of the most popular *sindhen* in central Javanese shadow puppet theatres. It is interesting how Ibu Kesi uses both a “written” and “aural” methodology, depending on the singular case. She is also a researcher and author of the first monograph about *sindhenan* in the style of Surabaya (East Java, see Rahayu, 2017). While in the curricular classes, Kesi often relies on notation and theory, when holding a private lesson, she privileges learning by imitation and “feeling”. The training with Ibu Kesi was pleasant and relaxed (*santai aja* as Javanese would say). At the beginning I felt scared and confused without my notebook and Kesi allowed me to keep the *balungan* with the main *selèh* notes in front of my eyes. However, after two encounters, I felt ready to completely forget the written page and memorise the *cengkok*, trying to imitate her voice and follow the patterns that she played on gender. The methodology was similar to that of Pak Abdal and other teachers (like Pak Suparto at ISI Yogyakarta etc.). It consisted of memorising a certain number of *cengkok* to use on different pieces. But this time, I had to sense when to start singing, when to fall on the ending note and which *cengkok* version to choose (she gave me few variants for every ending note, adding ornamentations). All of this without reading the part. We started with a simple piece, the *srepegan* in the style of Surakarta, an average *gendhing lampah* (“walking pieces” see Brinner, 2008, p. 127) common in shadow puppet performances. I faced an additional difficulty due by the fact that I already learned how to sing *Playon* (the yogyanese equivalent of the *srepegan*) and I memorised the *cengkok* in Yogyakarta style (which actually were those of Pak Suparto). According to Kesi, I should be able to distinguish the different types of *cengkok* styles and use them appropriately, according to the piece and context, still with a margin of personal creativity. The *cengkok* might follow a style of an academy, a teacher, a famous singer or of a region (Sutton, 1991). Since I was studying with her, I should master her own style (*cengkok ala Kesi*) before being able to elaborate mine and taking inspiration from other styles. Among these personalised *cengkok*, I vividly remember the *cengkok seksi* (the “sensual effect” given by an ascending glissando between notes 2 and 5 in slendro tuning). This was a huge difference with, for example, the Pak Abdal method. He gave me “plain *cengkok*” not individual style *cengkok*. That is the main difference between studying for analysis purpose and studying for performative purpose. Pak Abdal’s *cengkok* were a tool for the analysis. Ibu Kesi’s *cengkok* were a real demonstration of the subtle details of personal style.

With Ma’Narsih the situation was radically different. As a village woman, almost unalphabetised, who has become a maestro *lenggér* (the social dance typical of Banyumas area, see Lysloff, 2001) thanks to the *indang* (the gift), I had the chance to experience an *alami*, aural teaching. I spent few months, in 2018, in the Pegalongan village, aimed to master the so called *banyumasan* style (the *sindhen* style typical of Banyumas, Central-West Java). It was my fifth year in Java and I already started to introduce myself as the *sindhen manca* (foreign *sindhen*) from Yogyakarta, rather than the ‘foreign researcher’ from Italy. I also changed my name to Ria Saraswati (a shortening of my first name plus a homage to the goddess of music and art guiding me in my path). I thought this would be useful for both me and my interlocutors to cut the geographic and cultural distance. I was wrong. The first words of Ma’ Narsih welcoming me had been, “Sorry if we are not ‘refined’ as in Yogyakarta”. She was treating me as an important guest coming from a Central Javanese academy and felt initially uncomfortable because of her “*alami*” education. Despite the initial uncertainties, I managed to interweave a wonderful relation with Ma’ Narsih during the time of my staying

in Pegalongan. She was glad that a “foreign, Central-Javanese adopted *sindhen*-researcher” felt comfortable in village living. I used to wake up early and help the village community in their daily tasks, cutting few hours in the morning for learning *sindhen* with Narsih in the public *sanggar* (artistic workspace) and then practicing in the afternoon with the other musicians of the village. Ma’Narsih didn’t follow a specific method, as she warned me before starting to teach. She didn’t even feel like “teaching”, she’d rather sit beside me during *calung* (bamboo gamelan) sessions and show me how to sing by imitation. When we sat alone in the *sanggar*, without the *calung* players, she used to sing the pieces coming up in her mind (*Ricik Ricik*, *Sekar Gadung*, *Ilo Gondang* etc.) and give me guidelines on how to improvise the *parikan* (“riddles”), seasoned with nostalgic digressions on her glorious past as singer-dancer. I had no other chance but to try to imitate her as best I could while waiting for the evening rehearsals to better fix the tempo and the tuning. It worked. Not only was I able to sing some of the most popular Banyumas repertoire in a short time, but I did it without notation and, for the very first time, enjoyed the spontaneity of the semi-improvisation and the music interaction in a relaxed, Javanese way. Nevertheless, the aural method revealed to be highly successful to become a proper Javanese singer. On the other hand, academically, it was a bit misleading. All I could do was record hours and hours of lessons with Ma’Narsih, plus the evening gigs, and try to write down what I could, cross-checking with some of the musicians, few of whom came from the SMKI (the local music high school).

Among all the methodologies, all useful to diverse purposes of both performance and research, the singing sessions with Ma’Narsih are those which better trained me as a *sindhen jaman dulu* an old-time singer. With Pak Abdal I could achieve a Javanese critical mindset, a respectable alternative to my Western-musician critical mindset when transcribing and analysing music. With Ibu Kesi I could touch the difference between singing with *rasa* and singing with *ratio* (meaning using “rational thinking”, from the Latin terminology, the opposite of being guided by “sentiment”), other than observing a true case of performer and researcher from a local perspective. With Ma’Narsih I experienced what it means to merge in a totally different reality and totally embody the old ideal of the female singer. According to Ma’ Narsih it was necessary for an aspiring *sindhen* to master the aural learning and she negatively judged modern *sindhen*, too attached to written notation and more attracted by new gamelan music. It is surprising how, in light of many years in central Java and only a few months in Banyumas, the *banyumasan* repertoire is still the one I could sing at any time in any occasion with closed eyes. On the other hand, *Banyumas* repertoire is still the one which is giving me a harder time in the course of revision. While analysing central Javanese repertoire has become easier, thanks to the large amounts of both local and foreign manuals, and a well-established practice at the academies in Indonesia as well as abroad, for areas like *Banyumas* (as well as some areas of East Java) the analysis is still mostly guided by “the ear” and the personal experience, and cannot be always cross-checked and verified theoretically. I often found myself without any written notation or guideline to disclose some obscure passages.⁴



Figure 5. Calung sessions in Pegalongan village with Ma’Narsih (December 2017).

What I would like to highlight with these accounts is the variety of teaching methodologies and how they have evolved over time also because of the presence of foreign “bi-musical” researchers and the determinant role of institutional interrelations. Furthermore, another aspect to highlight is how all these methodologies can shape the researcher/performer’s mindset and guide him/her in both the revision and analysis and the performance practice. What mostly enriched me as a researcher is the different way of thinking when analysing a piece, not relying on “conservatory-like” prescriptions but thinking: “What would I have done if I were singing this piece myself”?

In the final analysis, “learning by heart” or “*alami*” led me to achieve useful performing skills, other than gaining new understandings of the music-making itself. The aspect of performance is not secondary, but rather central in practice-led-research because it allows the researcher to fully embody the musician’s identity and self-representation on stage (hence, in the society). Learning and performing are two aspects necessarily interrelated, especially in Java, and often one does not exclude the other. In a highly “participatory” (Turino, 2008) and “collaborative” (Sedana, 2005) music such as gamelan, mastering the very essence of the elaboration processes, its determinant. Using Rice’s words, “to learn how the music is structured and how it is brought to life in performance” (Rice, 2014, p. 36).

Indeed, performance is also a powerful tool to understand subtle and internal causes of transformation processes. For this reason, becoming a foreign *sindhen* allowed me to take an active part in these processes to be able to rethink and revise them under a different light. On the other hand, becoming an active singer changed my perception of Javanese music and

Javanese stages as well, putting me in-between the researcher and the performer. In the following paragraph I will elucidate this aspect.

Performing *Sindhèn*: Foreign Singers and the Impact on the Wayang Stage

The phenomenon of foreign *sindhèn*, is not totally new.⁵ Such scholars as Susan Walton and Nancy Cooper have already plunged into the *sindhèn* practice, studying with some of the most legendary *sindhèn* such as Ibu Supadmi and Nyi Tjondrolukito.

However, in the last decades, foreign *sindhèn* are becoming more and more in demand, especially for shadow puppet theatre. A great impulse has been given by the opening of some scholarship programmes as *Darmasiswa*, among the most renown. Since 1974, students from every part of the world can come to Java to learn traditional music and arts in local academies, sponsored by the Indonesian government. Foreign women are often encouraged to study dance or singing and once they have reached a sufficient proficiency (it is enough to master one or two pieces for starting) they are invited to join the performances, side by side with local artists. For researchers, this constitutes a valuable opportunity to apply the practice-led methodology. Therefore, we find a mutual exchange: local artists can count on “spectacular” foreign *sindhèn* to promote their shows and researchers can freely experience as many performances as they want in return.

In the current century, tagged as *jaman now*, *sindhèn* play a determinant role in popular performing arts like *wayang*, especially in the comic interludes (Meloni, in course of publication). “*Jaman now*” has become a slogan used to refer to the latest innovations, often boundaryless, happening with impressive speed. There is even a proper *hashtag* on Instagram, often used by artists when posting some videos breaking “traditional” paradigms. *Sindhèn* play a pivotal role in humour and vocal challenges, enacting witty dialogues with puppeteers, showing off vocal abilities, and often dancing to the newest hits. The humour is based on the interaction between *sindhèn* and a male comedian or the puppeteer himself. In these sketches, the female singers have to maintain a submissive yet coquettish attitude that confirms the male power and re-establish the ideal of Javanese femininity (Cooper, 2000). How can a non-Javanese woman contribute to this type of entertainment?

“Foreignness” as a humouristic element in *wayang* comic interludes is a well-documented practice since the Narthosabdho era (Mrázek, 2005). Exoticism seems to be one of the features Javanese appreciate the most. For this reason, starting from the ‘70s, when the *hiburan culture* (the culture of entertainment, Lockard, 1998) started to highly influence the *wayang* world, *sindhèn* coming from outside Java became determinant to the show, “And if they are not actually foreign or even markedly foreign, their exotic qualities will be exaggerated in performance” (Mrázek, 2005, p. 411). Engaging with a foreigner offers a great deal of linguistic jokes and acting out misunderstandings, the most fertile ground for *dalang* (puppeteer) ’s humour. Ki Narthosandho seemed to be the precursor of this practice:

In a number of Ki Nartho Sabdho recorded performances, the *dhalang* has a longish comic conversation with a singer (*pesindhèn*) from Banyumas, and then asks her to sing a song or two from Banyumas. The singer, as well as the *dhalang*, speaks in the Banyumas dialect of Javanese, which is easily understandable to speakers of other Javanese dialects, but is different enough to sound funny to them (Mrázek, 2005, p. 406).

Still nowadays, some of the most famous and requested *sindhen* are those who manage to embody outstanding entertainment characteristics, often involving an element of ‘foreignness’. A remarkable example is that of a dear friend of mine, Lisa (Elisha Orcarus Allasso), guest star *sindhen* of the celebrated Yogyanese *dalang* Ki Seno Nugroho (who recently passed away). Elisha, born and raised in Yogyakarta, graduated from ISI in *pedalangan* and is a Javanese native speaker. She conquered her audience by pretending to be a native of Sulawesi island. During comic interludes, she stands up and interacts with the puppeteer imitating Sulawesi speakers’ accent, generating numerous linguistic mistakes and double meanings. Some people firmly believe that she comes from outside Java and talk about “the funny *sindhen* from Sulawesi”.

However, in the multicultural globalised world of “*jaman now*”, coming from outside Java seems to be not enough. Due to the high inflow of foreign *sindhen* and changes in the performance practice (new popular repertoires, the request of social dancing, the involvement of new media) the presence of a “*sindhen* from abroad” (*sindhen mancanegara*) has become a real trend. In 2018, I had several talks with some of the most famous foreign *sindhen* (Hiromi Kano, Agnes Serfozo, Megan O’Donoghue Williams) and I gathered diverse points of view. By what emerged from the talks I assumed that, in the current century, becoming a *sindhen* is a choice. Each woman artist chooses which model of femininity she wants to embody. She can follow old norms of *tempo dulu* (‘old times’) like Hiromi (pers. comm. May 15, 2018); she can become a contemporary extrovert superstar, like Megan (personal communication, May 13, 2018); she can lie in the middle adapting multifaceted *sindhen* characters for diverse Javanese territories, like Agnes (personal communication, May 27, 2018). That said, the questions are: How should you behave if you are also a researcher? Which ideal of femininity should you embody? And, moreover, which role do local artists expect you to play in their performances?

To discuss this latest issue, I can bring as an example my personal experience on stage. The case study that I am going to discuss is based on some brief extracts of a comic interlude (*gara gara*) in a shadow puppet theatre performance that I joined in East Java on September 3, 2016, with the famous *dalang*, Ki Warseno Slenk.⁶ The dialogue between me and the *dalang* during the comic interlude is as follows:

[min. 0.05]

Ki Slenk: “Halo, *mbak* Lia?”

Me (in English): “Yes”

Ki Slenk (in English): “You tired?”

Me (in English): No.

Ki Slenk (in English): “No? No tired? *Wah*, You fresh?”

Me (in English): “Yes, fresh”.

Ki Slenk (in English): “No lazy?”

Me (in English): “No”.

[min. 0.23]

Ki Slenk (in Javanese): “If I speak Javanese can you understand?”

Me (in Indonesian): “Just a little”

Ki Slenk (in Javanese): “But you can dress up as a Javanese, who helped you?”

Me (in Indonesian): “I did it by myself”

Ki Slenk (in Indonesian): “How long have you studied?”

Me (in Indonesian): “I have been doing it for two years, and now I can do it by myself”.

Ki Slenk (in Indonesian): “But you are beautiful tonight”

Me (in Indonesian): “Thank you”.

Ki Slenk (in Indonesian): “Really. You are beautiful, smart, a doctor. I have a request: are you here on the 6th of September? When are you going back to Italy?”

Me (in Indonesian): “Tomorrow!”

Ki Slenk (in Indonesian): “Don’t come back! I still have many jobs...”

[min. 1:20]

Ki Slenk (in Indonesian): “I have still one request. Please tell everybody that Indonesia is not a country of terrorists. But Indonesia is a place of kind people and a worldwide known culture. And you can see by yourself the people of east Java. How they are extraordinary... aren’t they?”

Me (in Indonesian): “Yes”.

Ki Slenk (in Indonesian): “Yes, that is. You have to share this message. Indonesia has not to be considered extreme. No! A country of war... no! Indonesia doesn’t like war. Indonesia likes friendship and humanism”.

It is evident from this dialogue how Ki Slenk stressed the fact that I was not only the *sindhen cantik* (“beautiful *sindhen*”, an epithet often used to describe female singers of all sorts), but I had an educational background. This was determinant in order to add credibility to the message that he wanted to convey. A message directed to Indonesian and foreign audiences (the performance was transmitted via live streaming). He used resonant terms like “worldwide culture” and “humanism”, in line with the slant that he wanted to give to the discourse. The switch between three languages (English, Javanese and Indonesian) is other evidence of his will to make his speech “world-embracing”.

Another video, this one showing a performance by Ki Seno Nugroho, the most famous Yogyanese *dalang*, uploaded on YouTube by one of Ki Seno’s fans, constitutes an interesting case study. This video, showing the *limbukan* comic interlude, in which I was taking part, is entitled: “*Calon doctor luar negeri membuat Ki Seno semakin bangga seni budaya Jawa!*” (A PhD candidate from abroad made Ki Seno very proud of the Javanese culture!). Again, my academic title was preferred to the usual “*sindhen cantik*” and it was connected to the idea of ‘proudness of Javanese culture’. The video description reports: “Illary, a PhD student from Italy, is carrying out a research about Javanese culture, specifically on *karawitan* and *wayang kulit*, so that she joins the comic interlude hosted by *dalang* Ki Seno Nugroho”. The description ends with: “We feel proud that our Javanese culture is admired and researched abroad”. This was exemplary to me, about the determinant role that us researchers play when we gain access to the practice. For the artists, our interest and dedication to their performances is a way to legitimise their “culture” and “tradition”, with the hope that it can reach a worldwide appreciation through academic channels, stressing their “cultural” relevance and not only “folkloric fascination”, as it might represent for tourists. It is possible to analyse this phenomenon under several aspects.

On the one hand, I adapted to a way of joking as the female singer, submissive and coquettish. On the other, the puppeteer used the fact that I was a foreigner to make humour about the language, to remark cultural diversity and to spread social messages and ideologies. The fact that I was a “doctor” (actually, still a PhD candidate at the time) reinforced, in Ki

Slenk's opinion, the power of my assertions. I could become a powerful means to convey puppeteer's ideologies and messages, my words legitimised by my academic background. This, on the one hand, put me in a difficult position, since I felt the responsibility of what I should or should not say. Should I be honest and open in discussion based on my studies and knowledge or should I just agree with the *dalang* claims? In that specific performance, I decided to not expose myself too much, afraid that starting an open debate on politics and religion would not be polite on a *wayang* stage. Usually, these matters are filtered by the puppets on the screen and only explicated through their dialogues. Thence, I acted passively, as the average *sindhen* do, not bringing further argumentations to the topic, but just supporting the *dalang*, smiling and acting *manis* (sweet). I thought that, in this specific case, what the *dalang* wanted from me was just a reinforcement of his propaganda, validated by my academic position.

However, in other performances, with other puppeteers and in different contexts, I decided to play the *sindhen* doctor role and to talk, for example, about vocal qualities or to teach Italian folksongs. It always depended on what the artist expected from me and how far could challenge the audience. What didn't change was my attitude, still *sopan santun* (polite and graceful), a firm requirement for a *sindhen*, whatever her role played on stage.

Therefore, in my experience, the adaptation came from both sides. On the one hand, I embodied a mannered, feminine singer yet maintained my foreign researcher feature, which was also the key through which the puppeteers could make jokes and promote their ideas. On the other hand, the puppeteer allowed me to investigate from inside stage mechanisms, helping my research not only offering me a direct insight into the practice but becoming an active part of it. To quote Baily (2001), "At the end of the day, the researcher becomes the researched" (p. 96).

Discussion

Besides learning and performing, I conducted classic ethnographic research, involving interviews (or "talks"), data processing and field recordings. The practice-led research has been useful to me to deeply understand how the vocal semi-improvisation on gamelan works and to make accurate transcriptions and analysis using Javanese musical vocabulary and theories or proper *ilmu karawitan*. It helped me investigate knowledge transmission, having a wider comprehension of learning processes and observing new critical and theoretical approaches adopted by some Javanese teachers, who started to use written/analytical methods aimed at addressing the needs of researchers/practitioners (local and foreigner).

Furthermore my merging into the performance practice of shadow puppet theatres created continuity between my researcher and performer roles so that: "The research becomes an extension of the performance" (Penny, 2014). It allowed me to conciliate two different identities (*sindhen* and *dokter*) and to deeply modify my way to conceive music and performing arts. Also, my vocal technique has been dramatically affected by the *sindhenan* training. In 2018, during a class with my Italian vocal teacher, he looked a bit upset because I put too much "twang" (McDonald, 2005) in the voice and I tended to sustain the final note of every musical phrase with prolonged vibrato in a Javanese way. He asked me to sing "less Indonesian". This request, other than making me unashamedly proud for mastering *sindhenan* until that point, gave me interesting causes for reflections on the diversity of the Western and Javanese vocal practices. The fact that I inserted all sorts of Javanese music (from gamelan to

dangdut) in my music playlist, might be another factor that has contributed in modifying my music aesthetical perception.

Enacting the role of foreign *sindhen* has been determinant to understand the current developments of Javanese music and performing arts, to discover who is the female singer in the current century and what meets the contemporary audience demand. In order to achieve a full comprehension of the Javanese contemporary art context, it has been very important to become an active performer and not just an “observant” or a “guest”, to experience what does it mean to be an embodiment of “Javanese femininity” (despite not being Javanese) and the ways *sindhen* interact with the male artists and audience. I could witness in first person how gender ideology is determinant in the Javanese arts. Since my first year at ISI Yogyakarta, I had been encouraged to learn singing instead of *rebab* or *pedalangan*, which were considered more appropriate for males in a traditional environment. Also, the jokes with the *dalangs* on stage were often sexually-oriented and put me in a critical position, between the emancipated Western woman mindset and the Javanese traditional feminine-ideal, coquettish and submissive. This compromise made me continuously re-negotiating my identity and I could notice the huge gap between the diverse conceptions of “femininity”.

Another determinant consequence of the “bi-musical” or “performance-led” approach has been that of rethinking myself as a “musical being” and not as a separate entity from “fieldwork”. This is necessary for a discipline studying, “Why and how human beings are musical” (Rice, 2014, p. 1).

Most of all, learning and performing have been necessarily intertwined with the research in order to cut barriers and to exchanging/sharing knowledge, methodologies and perspectives. Nevertheless, it is fundamental to define the object of study, in which way the practice contributes to the investigation and decide to what extent one can go. But even in doing this, the collaboration of teachers and artists is determinant, it is a solid point of reference that can also change the research targets and totally overturn her/his theoretical assumptions and mindset.

Being a *sindhen* and not only a researcher helped me to interweave solid relationships with artists and teachers and to have great accessibility to performative frameworks. I always introduced myself as a “*sindhen*”, rather than a “researcher”, and that made my interlocutors feel at “home”, without the embarrassment that one can feel in front of a foreign scholar. For the artists I collaborated with, my title was a means to increase the prestige of their performance and to look for a link with the outside world to promote their culture through reputable channels. For my teachers, it was a tool to improve and widen their teaching methodology. Giannattasio (2017) states:

But it is also true that the human community has never been as close as now to the possibility of exchanging and sharing values, knowledge and symbolic practices, including the musical one (p. 20).

It is also true that I was conscious that I could not always properly balance learning, practice and research, especially for a matter of time. My PhD programme had a very strict duration of 3 years, with a maximum of 6 months extension for major reasons. In this short amount of time, joining the world of shadow puppet theatre has not been easy. Evening performances have an average of eight hours duration and once you are in the *sindhen* clothes you cannot hold a camera (it’s not polite), you can only record and take notes. I had to alternate

the *sindhen* and the researcher's outfits and, I admit, I often preferred the *sindhen* one. On this point, I have to agree with Baily's statement: "The person who uses learning to perform as a research technique is unlikely to stop once fieldwork is over. On the contrary, you tend to take on the music as your own" (Baily, 2001, p. 96).

I want to make the last remark about the foreign *sindhen* issue. One might argue that it is a practice that can determine changes in the traditional performing context but this is a very debatable issue. I believe that more than determining the changes in action we just become part of them, contributing to cutting barriers in a more and more globalised and "transcultural" (Giannattasio & Giuriati, 2017) world.

Conclusion

In the contemporary, cosmopolitan era, I assume that the main challenge for an ethnomusicologist is no longer to adapt to other musical traditions. Many researchers do not even need to go to Java for playing gamelan, they can do it in their universities and embassies. The real challenge is to define our object of study to the degree the practice helps the actual research and vice versa. Moreover, it is determinant to find mutual exchanges with those who have always been defined as informants or researched, but that we would rather start to call colleagues or collaborators.

Eventually, I can state that in my experience, practice-led research is not only helpful to access the investigated environment, but it is a way to put a bridge, not only between modes of analysis (Rice, 2014, p. 34), but also between diverse identities and mentalities of the "researcher" persona. This contributes to create an encounter of cultures and shared methodologies, to widen the perspectives and start taking into consideration analysis methodologies suggested by teachers and performers. This is determinant, in order to decolonise the research perspective and to create a solid base for what Italian scholars define as "transcultural musicology" (Giannattasio & Giuriati, 2017). A discipline which does not divide the scholars from the artists or the east from the west, which does not create borders and dichotomies but, rather, creates new ways to study and divulge knowledge in the world of music and performing arts, from multiple points of view.

Ultimately, practice-led research is a useful tool for shaping the mindset of the researcher. By actively merging in the fieldwork and in the investigated practices, an individual coming from a different musical education background can overcome those initial prejudices indicated by Hood (1960). When revising and analysing data, I could switch from the insight view of the musician to the outside view of the researcher, counting on both practical musical skills and critical speculative thinking. This multi-sighted approach contributed indeed to the quality of the research without limiting the result to a pure speculation or, on the contrary, on a technical conservatory-like manual. All the planning, acting, reflecting and revising over the situations I encountered in learning as a *sindhen* changed my approach so that the bridge was not only put between a researcher and a collaborator/informant but between personal ways to intend the music and the musical research itself in a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary way. If we start from the assumption that music is made by individuals, therefore, I believe that individual experiences in making, performing and understanding music should be heard and be included in the debate, to guide future ethnomusicologists in the study of music, first of all as "musical beings" themselves.

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Endnotes

1 In January 2020, the Pakualaman Palace in Yogyakarta opened the Pawiyatan Sindhen Muryawidyaswara, a specific school in which teachers from the main Javanese and Solonese academies train future *sindhen*.

2 The question of the riddle is translatable as: “The ancient Javanese word for “flower”, the flower belonging to Sri Kresna”. The answer is: “The word is *puspita*, the colorful flower in the palace”. The key of the riddle lies in the linguistic game between the first short sentence of the question (*Kawi sekar*) and the first short sentence of the answer (*Lir Puspita*). A clue of the answer is given in the second part of the question (*Pe-pu-ndhen*, in which the syllable *-pu* is the same starting the word *pu-spita*) and in the second part of the answer (*pu-ra*). A great corpus of the ancient Javanese riddles is constructed on these linguistic puzzles. What is important is not the meaning but the metrical structure which makes the *sindhen* able to elaborate the cadential patterns (*cengkok*).

3 Gong'n'Roll. (2020, June 29). *Sindhen Titik Sumiarish Ladrang Wilujeng* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQYCu9RTG48> .

4 Especially with the lyrics in *ngapak* (another dialect different from that of central Java) which every musician doodled on my notebook, after desperate requests, in slightly different versions, all equally accepted in the practice. Indeed, the case of standardisation and cultural hegemony of some areas is a related and interesting topic, which emerged from several researches (see Sutton 1991, Sumarsam, as cited in Solís, 2004), but it will be not further discussed in this paper.

5 Javanese have different ways to address foreign *sindhen*: *sindhen bule* (literally “white” or “albino” *sindhen*, a less refined terminology often used to address tourists or foreigners in general); *sindhen asing* (“foreign” *sindhen*); *sindhen manca* (*sindhen* “from afar”) or *sindhen luar negeri* (*sindhen* “from abroad”). Sometimes, I also heard the more ironical expression *sindhen import* (“imported” *sindhen*) or the specification of the native country, for example: *sindhen Amerika*, or *sindhen Itali*.

6 Gong'n'Roll. (2020, June 29). *Sindhen Docor Goro Goro* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RNF4QJx2c>

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Biography

Ilaria Meloni completed her PhD programme on September the 19th, 2019, at La Sapienza University of Rome, with summa cum laude. She has been living, researching and performing traditional female singing in Java (Indonesia) since 2013 in different contexts (*karawitan*, *wayang kulit*, *kroncong*), collaborating with the Institute of the Arts of Yogyakarta. She has been active in *gamelan* rehearsals and concerts organised by the Indonesian Embassy in Rome and the Indonesian Embassy to the Holy See (Vatican). Currently, she is conducting an internship in *karawitan* to the Sultan Palace of Yogyakarta and carrying out a team research on *sindhen* voice quality with a specialised phoniatician.