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Carol J. Oja

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COLIN McPHEE: a composer turned explorer

Carol J. Oja

> I am really glad I came back, for there has been loads of new material to absorb; . . . I feel sure that this work is going to have great value for western musicians, if they survive.[1]

PROPHETIC WORDS written by the Canadian-American composer Colin McPhee to his friend Aaron Copland, after McPhee had returned to Bali in 1937 from a hiatus in his eight-year stay there. The Balinese gamelan, with its shimmering sounds and supple swing, became the center of Colin McPhee's life long before the study of musical exotica came into fashion for Western composers. McPhee's work in the East was pioneering, not just in the considerable substance of his Bali-inspired research, writings, and compositions, but in the ecumenical attitude that it helped to inspire about Asian musics and the rich potential they hold for the West. McPhee, together with Henry Cowell, Henry Eichheim, Harry Partch, and a few other Americans of his generation, took decisive steps across Western boundaries and into the whole world of music.

Until a few years ago McPhee's career had been little celebrated outside of a group of faithful colleagues and friends. But with recent performances of his orchestral masterpiece *Tabuh-Tabuhan* by the Stuttgart Orchestra and by the American Composers Orchestra (both conducted by Dennis Russell Davies) and of the Concerto for Piano and Wind Octet (with Davies conducting and Keith Jarrett at the piano); a new recording of his *Balinese Ceremonial Music* (by Douglas Young and Peter Hill on Cameo Classics); and future performances of other works planned in both Europe and America, it seems that something of a McPhee renaissance is underway—a modest one, certainly, but significant for a composer whose productivity suffered sorely from neglect.

McPhee's life was punctuated by many inner struggles and unexpected twists. Perhaps most striking was the juxtaposition of his background—refined, cultivated, and thoroughly Western—with the seductive lure and sensual pleasures of the East.

Born in Montreal in 1900 and raised in Toronto, his talent was recognized early by family and teachers. Like many gifted Canadian musicians of the day, he was sent

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away for training, first in 1918 to the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland and later, in 1924, to Paris where he studied piano with Isidore Philipp and composition with Paul Le Flem. Amidst the Baltimore and Paris years, he returned home to work with the renowned Liszt pupil and proselytizer Arthur Friedheim. By 1926, when McPhee arrived in New York, he was an accomplished professional and immediately became active in the new-music scene. His works were performed by Edgard Varèse's International Composers Guild, the Copland-Sessions Concerts, and Howard Hanson's American composers' series at the Eastman School of Music, and his *Kinesis*, *Invention*, and Concerto for Piano and Wind Octet were published in Henry Cowell's *New Music* (1930 and '31). He was also busy as a performer, touring with the singer Eva Gauthier in early 1928, playing for contemporary music concerts, and giving solo recitals.

It was most likely in New York during this period that McPhee first became curious about Balinese music. The social and artistic circle in which he traveled was captivated by the exotic, whether by far-off South Pacific islands or nearby Harlem nightclubs. Among McPhee's friends were the critic and novelist Carl Van Vechten, the host of wildly successful parties that drew together blacks and whites from the forefront of New York's literati, and the Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias—then at work as an illustrator for *Vanity Fair*—who was himself to sail for Bali in 1930. There were also the painter George Biddle, who had lived in Tahiti from 1920 to 1922, and Jane Belo, Biddle's ex-wife, whom McPhee was to marry in 1930. Belo had an avid interest in anthropology and had spent time in Egypt and the Caribbean. Besides the influence of these friendships, McPhee first heard newly-released recordings of Balinese music in the late 1920's and was a member of the New York Polyhymnia, a society founded in 1930 to encourage the study and performance of musics from little-known cultures.

The most critical factor in his decision to go to Bali in 1931 lay not in some abstract desire to explore the exotic but in the sound of the music itself, which for McPhee held an 'overpowering' mystery. In a letter written after his Bali years, McPhee vividly described his life-long quest for an elusive sound ideal:

> When I was 12 I wrote a piece for children's percussion band with a few strings etc. I had various ideas for effects but at the end, on the last two chords, two plates had to be dropped and smashed. The effect was not so good, but I was thinking of frail china splintered on marble. Ten years later, when I wrote a full-blown piano concerto . . . I had, in the scherzo, a place where one percussion man had to shake a number of those little Chinese glass wind-chimes that one hung on the verandah in the summer. This was never performed, to my disappointment. The conductor thought it nonsense. . . . But once again I had in mind some idea of crystal sound, something aerial and purely sensuous. It is strange that another 10 years should find me in Java and Bali where music sounded exactly like that.[2]

Once McPhee discovered the gamelan it permeated most of his compositions, from *Tabuh-Tabuhan*, written in Mexico City in 1936, mid-way though his Bali stay, to several post-1950 works: Symphony No. 2 (1957), the *Nocturne* for chamber orchestra (1958), and the Concerto for Winds (1960). In these pieces McPhee's traditional Western schooling—especially a Parisian finishing in the neoclassical days of the 1920's—neatly merges with his Balinese experience. *Tabuh-Tabuhan*, for example, is constructed within the Western symphonic tradition: it has three movements, a concerto-like role for two pianos, and carefully positioned climaxes.

1 Letter from McPhee to Aaron Copland; from Sayan, Bali, 16 February [1937]. Collection of Aaron Copland.

2 Letter from McPhee to Dr. William Mayer; from Woodstock, New York [1942]. Collection of Mrs. Beata Sauerlander.



Colin McPhee in Toronto in the early 1920's (Ethnomusicology Archive, University of California in Los Angeles).

Yet its timbre, rhythm, and texture are all gamelan-infused. Balinese instruments are used to form what McPhee called a 'nuclear gamelan', and the counterpoint of the gamelan—vertically dense yet sonically delicate—gives the work an intricate, even ethereal, texture.

McPhee's experience with the gamelan also inspired him as a writer. His extensive research in Bali, involving detailed transcriptions and analyses of works performed by gamelans across the island, ultimately became life-consuming and culminated in the publication of *Music in Bali* (New Haven, 1966), a posthumous work that remains the principal treatise on the island's music. Over the years, he published dozens of articles about Balinese music and dance—even about the island's food—and wrote two other books: *A House in Bali* (New York, 1946), a poetic account of the joy of exploring another culture's music, and *A Club of Small Men* (New York, 1948), a delightful children's story about a gamelan for boys that McPhee formed in the village of Sayan.

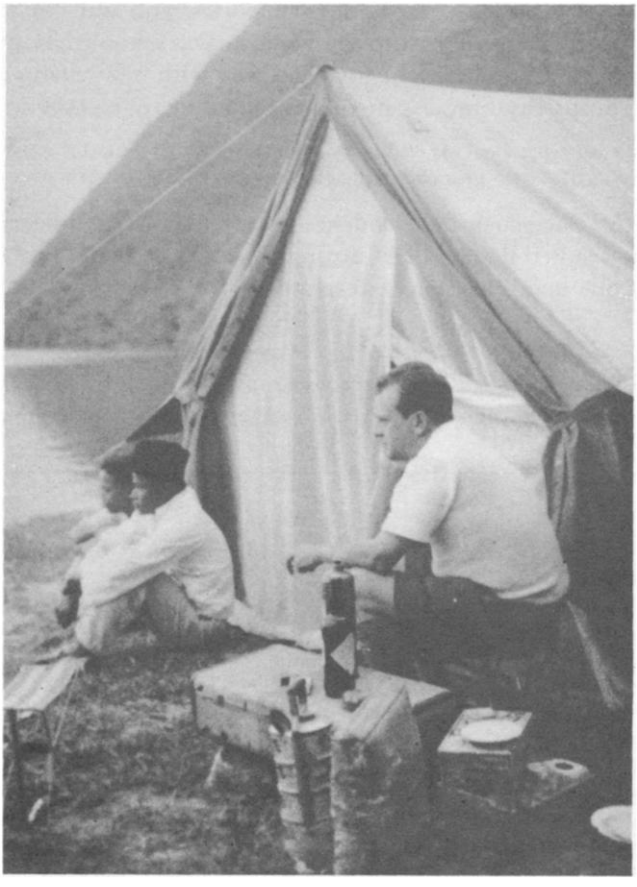
Throughout McPhee's career there was an ever-present tug between writing and composing, as he constantly sought a creative stride, a satisfying means of expression. For long periods he abandoned composition entirely, and in depressed, self-destructive fits demolished reams of his music and letters; hence his extant works are mostly published ones. After returning from Bali, he was frequently overcome by despair at receiving so little attention for his work.

The performance history of *Tabuh-Tabuhan*—a crucial example of the effect of this neglect on McPhee's career—is central to understanding the course of his life. Written in Mexico City during the summer of 1936 and performed immediately by

Carlos Chávez and the Orquesta Sinfónica de México, *Tabuh-Tabuhan* was an instant success. It was the first major work composed by McPhee since H_2O and *Mechanical Principles*, scores for two Ralph Steiner films performed at a Copland-Sessions concert in 1931. Prior to that McPhee had gained other successes, especially with his Second Piano Concerto, which had a triumphant première in Toronto in 1924, and his Concerto for Piano and Wind Octet, first performed in Rochester, New York in 1928 and heard several times in New York and Boston during the late 1920's. After the première of *Tabuh-Tabuhan*, Chávez was so excited about the piece that he wrote Leopold Stokowski, Arthur Rodzinski, and other major conductors of the day recommending a performance, but none was forthcoming. Not until 1947, eight years after McPhee had returned to New York from his final stint in Bali, was the work first heard in the United States; it was performed on CBS radio as part of the 'School of the Air' series.

The neglect of *Tabuh-Tabuhan* eroded McPhee's self-confidence to such a degree that he stopped writing music during the 1940's. With the 1947 radio performance, however, which gave him an unusual opportunity to *hear* his music, McPhee's flagging spirit began to regenerate, and after *Tabuh-Tabuhan* was finally conducted by

McPhee in Sumatra in the 1930's (Ethnomusicology Archive, University of California at Los Angeles).



Leopold Stokowski in a New York concert performance in 1953, he turned once again to composing. A series of orchestral works followed, beginning with *Transitions* in 1954. Significantly, all were written on commission, giving McPhee a necessary boost to his finances and morale. In 1960 he began teaching ethnomusicology and composition at the University of California in Los Angeles and remained there until his death in January 1964.

In many ways the timing of McPhee's career kept him perpetually out of step with the musical world around him. When he traveled to Bali, it was to explore exciting new sound possibilities; but the effect of his stay was to remove him for nearly a decade from visibility in America as a composer. Then in 1939 when he returned to New York it was as a recently divorced man without funds; war was nearing, and new music as a whole—not only that with Balinese inspiration—was eclipsed by world events. With few performances and a tendency to be easily defeated, McPhee's fortunes went into decline.

The style of his music, too, did not fit into the forefront of musical avant-gardism during the 1940's and 1950's, for in many ways McPhee was a romantic at heart. Grand gestures, best achieved through works for symphony orchestra, and luscious sounds were central to his craft. He considered music to be 'before anything else an art of glamorous sonority',[3] and as early as 1931 was disgruntled with the compositional trends of his time: 'The Schoenbergian school delights in inverting, reversing, and augmenting its themes. Stravinsky now denies himself the luxury of sensuous sound or rhythmic excitement'.[4] For McPhee, study of the Balinese gamelan did not lead to the construction of abstruse compositional theories, and did not inspire him to challenge or reject the Western tradition in which he was schooled. Rather it gave him a means of charging the orchestra he loved so well with new vitality, with unusual timbres and vigorous rhythms. As he observed succinctly in 1960:

> I have no statement I can make about my musical point of view beyond the fact that the composer should work independently, unaffected by prevailing trends, and have the courage to be spontaneous at all times.[5]

For Colin McPhee such independence meant public indifference and creative isolation. But it resulted in a series of distinguished musical and literary works that vividly convey one man's passionate response to the music and culture of Bali.

3 McPhee, 'Scores and Records', *Modern Music* XIX (May-June 1942), p. 271.

4 McPhee, *Muscial Leader* [Chicago, Illinois], 12 March 1931.

5 Letter from McPhee to Oliver Daniel; from New York, 25 May 1960. Collection of Oliver Daniel.

COLIN McPHEE — CHRONOLOGY

1900	born at Montreal, Canada, 15 March.
1921	graduates from Peabody Conservatory.
1924	plays *Second Piano Concerto* with New Symphony Orchestra in Toronto (later to become the Toronto Symphony Orchestra).
1924–6	studies composition with Paul Le Flem in Paris.
1927–31	lives in New York, taking active part in the modern music movement. Meets and studies with Varèse.
1928	*Concerto for Piano and Wind Octet* premièred by Rochester Little Symphony (cond. Howard Hanson).
1928–30	*Kinesis and Invention* (for piano solo) published by Henry Cowell's New Music Edition. Sometime during this period McPhee hears records of Indonesian gamelan.

1930–1	*Sea Shanty Suite* published by Kalmus. *Symphony No. 1* written, but score subsequently lost along with several other early works. Writes film scores *H₂O* and *Mechanical Principles*.
1931–2	visits Java and Bali intending to continue on to Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Becomes fascinated by Balinese music and stays in village of Kedaton (near Den Pasar, South Bali) for six months.
1931	returns to Paris. Bored by western music. Decides to devote his life to making a complete record of Balinese music. Soon returns to Indonesia.
1932–3	stays with the painter Walter Spies in Ubud, Bali. Has native style house built in mountain village of Sayan, where he lives, on and off, for the next seven years.
c. 1934	begins transcriptions of Balinese gamelan (principally for 2 pianos).
1935	meets Lotring, the Balinese composer, and helps him to reorganize the gamelan club at the coastal village of Kuta (where McPhee builds a hut, dividing his time between Kuta and Sayan). Leaves for America at end of December.
1936	spends part of year in Mexico where he writes *Tabuh-Labuhan* (for 2 pianos and orchestra) capitalizing on Balinese influences: performed in Mexico under Chavez.
1936–7	writes several articles on Indonesian music, and works as jazz critic.
1937	returns to Bali and lives in Sayan, where he founds a *Gamelan of Semara* (the Love God) thus helping to reawaken interest among the Balinese in the 'old styles' of their own music in danger of extinction.
1938	completes *Balinese Ceremonial Music* for two pianos in June. Gives performance of several of his transcriptions at the 'Bali Conference' (held aboard a ship off South Bali). Founds a childrens' music association. Finally leaves Bali on Christmas Day 1938.
1939–40	meets Benjamin Britten in New York. McPhee arranges Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* for 2 pianos.
1941	Britten and McPhee record *Balinese Ceremonial Music* on Disc (Schirmer's Library of Recorded Music). Music also published by Schirmer (1940). Begins writing his book 'Music in Bali', based on extensive research material collected in Bali during the 1930's.
1944	composes *Four Iroquois Dances*. Works as Music Consultant to the Office of War Information.
1946	publishes 'A House in Bali', an autobiography of his life in Bali in the 1930's.
1947	*Balinese Transcriptions* (for 3 pianos, percussion, celeste, cellos, and basses) first performed at the Ballet Society, New York.
1948	publishes 'A Club of Small Men' (a description of his Balinese childrens' gamelan).
1950's	United Nations commissions three scores for documentary films during this decade.
1954	*Transitions for Orchestra*, first performed by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (cond. Irwin Hoffman) 1955.
1956	Britten visits Bali (January). *The Prince of the Pagodas* written later that year.
1957	film score *Blue Vanguard* (commissioned by UN). *Symphony No. 2* composed; premièred by Louisville Orchestra (cond. Robert Whitney) 1958.
1958	*Nocturne for Small Orchestra* premièred by Stokowski in New York.
1960	*Concerto for Wind Orchestra* premièred by Robert Boudreau's American Wind Symphony. McPhee joins staff at UCLA as 'lecturer in harmony, composition, orchestration, Indonesian music, and Balinese compositional technique'.
1962	*Magnificat* and *Out of the Depths* composed (SATB and organ).
1963	serious illness diagnosed in autumn. Resigns from UCLA to complete work on his book *Music in Bali*.
1964	dies in Los Angeles on 7 January.
1966	*Music in Bali — a study in form and instrumental organisation in Balinese Orchestral Music* published in New Haven and London by Yale University Press (reprinted by Da Capo Press, New York, 1976; ISBN 0-306-580448-1).
1979	*A House in Bali* reprinted (by OUP. ISBN 0-19-580448-1).

(The material of this chronology has been kindly supplied by Douglas Young, who will contribute an article on McPhee's music to a future issue of TEMPO.)