

Suluk Tapel Adam in Frankfurt

Ensemble Modern, a renowned music group in Frankfurt, played the works of eight young Indonesian composers.

*Para malaikat angiring, wus
sewu tahun lamine*

*Hangabekti ing Pangeran,
wus djangkep sewu warsa*

*Idjajil wau tumurun, ingkang
sinedya ing manah....*

*(The angels keep company, for
a thousand years*

*Devoting themselves to the
Lord, for a millennium*

*The devils descend, as their he-
arts intend...)*

A S T A N D I N G ovation thundered through the Frankfurt LAB in Frankfurt, Germany, on October 6 as soon as conductor Franck Ollu from Ensemble Modern Frankfurt finished presenting the work of Gatot Dinar Sulisty, 35, titled *Mihrab*, prayer niche. This was the final part of a program, *Ruang Suara*, or Sound Space, featuring the pieces of eight young Indonesian composers. The recitation of *suluk*, or mystical poetry, about the birth of Prophet Adam combined with percussion booms, along with the shrills of brass trumpets, trombones as well as the scrapes of cellos and violins in Gatot's composition might not just be strange to the ears of a German audience, but could also be a new experience for the Indonesian members of the audience.

The evening was a musical adventure. Ensemble Modern

is known as a reputable group in Europe. Formed in 1980, this group is keen on playing the various works of avant-garde composers and frequently conducts tours from Africa to Latin America. The poster put up at Frankfurt LAB showed that they had just staged a collaboration performance with a group of *gagaku*, or old Japanese palace music. The clash of Eastern and Western instruments is nothing alien to them. That night, at Indonesia LAB, a festival to celebrate the selection of Indonesia as an honorary guest to Frankfurt Book Fair 2015, they tried to delve into the thoughts of our young composers, who in our own contemporary music world may not yet be popular enough.

The arrhythmic shouts and sounds uttered by Joko 'Porong' Winarko with Ensemble Modern responding became the major force of the piece offered by Gema Swaratyagita, 31: *Da-Dha-Dah Da-Dha-Dah*. It started with Ensemble Modern musicians entering the room by tapping their respective instruments. Some were carrying bamboo trays and rubbing small bamboo sticks inside them. Gema's work stems from the poem *Ursonate* (Original Sonata), by German artist Kurt Schwitter who died in 1948. Schwitter turned out collages of objects, alphabetic and typographic experiments, and poems of onomatopoeia based

on elements of phonetics and pronunciation. "I wish to put Schwitter's sound poetry into a composition," said Gema.

Gema, a graduate of Indonesian literature from Airlangga University, seems well-placed to handle the poetry of Kurt Schwitter because he once got composition private lessons from the late Slamet Abdul Syukur, an experimental composer who liked paying attention to 'small' sounds. "When I learned from *Mas Slamet*, I was just like a baby directly told to drink beer," recalled Gema. In his composition, there was the part in which Ensemble members uttered the *bagongan* voice, typical of the royal servants in *wayang* (shadow puppet) shows before the dialogue starts. There was also a scene of their squeezing paper bits to produce a crunching sound and throwing them in the direction of the audience.

M. Arham Aryadi Antara, 26, a music graduate from Pelita Harapan University, presented *Eruption*, a piece inspired by the eruption of Mount Sinabung in North Sumatra. There was no loud explosions but the atmosphere was leading to a number of bursting sounds. At first, Ensemble members were knocking two white small coral stones each. Then they created 'splashes' of sounds blended with recordings of the sounds of environs and soundscapes from the roads in Jakarta and

Ensemble Modern and the Indonesian composers.

Frankfurt. "I was exploring the manipulation of timbres, the colors of sounds," said Arham.

All the composers were selected by Ensemble Modern in Jakarta in October 2014, which was facilitated by Goethe Institute. About 20 composers applied and eight were accepted. Besides Gatot, Gema, Arham, there were Ris Banbos, Joko 'Porong' Winarko, Taufik A. Adam, Dewa Ketut Alit and Stevie Jonathan Susanto. After passing the selection, they were invited to Frankfurt in January 2015. Taken to the den of Ensemble Modern, they were free to ask Ensemble members to use specific instruments for their compositions. Ensemble helped them formulate their ideas. They provided assistance in writing musical scores. This project was more as an undertaking of mutual growth.

Their works had mostly been completed only at the end of September. Ensemble Modern studied them fast. Stevie Jonathan Susanto, 23, set up a screen with a video portraying his own eyes. On stage, he combined the sounds of *rebab* (a traditional violin), cellos, violins, violas, and the piano, also played by pressing its strings. On certain pressures, the eyes on the screen were shifting, squinting and looking sideways. "It actually came



from two overlapping videos so that the eyeballs appeared to become four," said Stevie. The work of Taufik Adam, 40, *Balayia*, merging the sounds of flute-like *bansi* and traditional clarinet *serunai* and Ensemble, was among the most solid in structure. The tone of West Sumatra crystallized into Western instruments and secured new cohesion. The same was the brought by Ris Banbos, 42, *Singgah Lah Singgalang*.

As for Gatot's *Mihrab*, he researched the way shamans on Mount Kawi recited mantras in thanksgiving ceremonies. Then he was interested in converting *Serat Tapel Adam*, a poem, into a composition. "This poetry tells of God breathing a soul into the body of the Prophet Adam," he indicated. He made a composition for 16 Western instruments from brass to percussion and they were blended with *Tapel Adam* with varied renditions: from the manner of quick reading to singing. "I sought contrasts. There were unexpected and unpredicted symmetries," he noted. This was apparent when the suluk clashed with interlocking brass.

Mihrab is Gatot's second work using mantras. The previous year, he used the mantras of Jayabaya, the king of Kediri, for a composition performed by the Dutch Chamber Music Company in Holland. "I created a song out of the text of the prophecy Jangka Jayabaya. The present work is more experimental." Through his collaboration with Ensemble Modern, Gatot claimed to have wilder ideas for his future compositions. "The collision between ancient Javanese suluk and Western contemporary music offers rich opportunities. The classical epic poem *Serat Wedhatama*, for instance, can be made an aria with orchestral accompaniment."

Dewa Ketut Alit appeared with *Open My Door*. Alit has had the experience of teaching *gamelan* (traditional Java-

nese orchestra) for 10 years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA. He has produced many contemporary gamelan pieces. His composition, *Techno Gong*, was played by Gamelan Electrica from the US with Evan Ziporyn as conductor. He has also created gamelan with tune-system like an electronic instrument. "My *Genetic* piece was played by the Gamelan Salukat group from the US with the electronic gamelan," he said. And with Ensemble Modern he created another experiment. "I put all my gamelan works with the concept of layers of sounds for the first time into Western instruments."

Joko Porong's *Krotoguns* was also interesting. He brought the dynamic tambourines of *Kuntulan*, a folkdance from Banyuwangi, into the expression of Ensemble. In his view, tambourines reflect the ambience of rising and falling sea waves. He asked Ensemble musicians to wear *giring-giring*, or anklet bells, and stamp their feet while playing instruments. "Sadly, they stamped with less vigor, unlike Banyuwangi people," he commented.

The evening revealed how the famous Ensemble Modern were humble and open-minded. During rehearsals, they were prepared to do each and everything required of them. When Arham asked Ensemble members repeatedly to practice gargling in the throat with a loud sound, they readily did it. Likewise, when Joko Porong asked bass clarinet player Nina Janseen Deinzer to dip the instrument's lower part into a bucket filled with water to produce a specific sound effect, Nina made no objection. "I was even going to pour some vodka," she said jokingly. "They didn't regard us as beginners. They enthusiastically explored our minds because the ideas of Indonesian composers are in fact still a mystery to them," added Gatot.

● SENO JOKO SUYONO (FRANKFURT)

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