

# Sonic Hybridity, Cultural Continuity, and Musical Identity: *Gamelan Pesel* in Contemporary Bali

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**Abstract:** This article examines *gamelan pesel*, an innovative hybrid ensemble created by I Wayan Arik Wirawan that fuses the sonic and material characteristics of *semar pegulingan* and *selonding*. Through qualitative methods, including organological analysis, participant observation, interviews, and digital ethnography, this research explores how *gamelan pesel* embodies “sonic hybridity,” a process through which Balinese musicians negotiate between tradition and innovation. The findings reveal that *gamelan pesel*’s creative design integrates bronze and iron instruments to generate a new timbral spectrum, while its unique tuning system and intercontextual performances across ritual, social-cultural, and digital media articulate a dynamic redefinition of Balinese musical identity. Rather than signaling a rupture with tradition, the ensemble exemplifies progressive traditionalism, where renewal sustains continuity. This study contributes to ethnomusicological and cultural discourse by illustrating how new ensembles can nurture cultural continuity through experimentation and adaptation.

**Keywords:** *gamelan pesel*; sonic hybridity; progressive traditionalism; Balinese music; cultural continuity

## 1. Introduction

Amidst growing global appreciation for multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue, Balinese gamelan has emerged as a vital site of artistic exchange and experimentation. Once primarily studied for its historical, ritual, and theoretical dimensions, *gamelan* is now embraced as a dynamic and evolving musical form. Its rich sonic textures and intricate performance techniques continue to inspire composers, performers, and scholars—fueling a wave of innovation that reimagines tradition for contemporary contexts. A significant

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shift has occurred in how Balinese gamelan (also termed *karawitan*) is conceptualized and studied. Earlier scholarship emphasized the preservation of classical forms, while more studies highlight the creation of new ensembles and compositions shaped by globalization, digital media, and transnational collaboration (see Tenzer, 2018; Sudirga, 2020; E. A. Clendinning, 2020; Tilley, 2021; Surya et al., 2024). These developments have expanded the expressive possibilities of *gamelan* and redefined the cultural spaces in which it operates.

*Gamelan* ensemble innovation in Bali, however, is not a twenty-first-century phenomenon. The emergence of *gamelan gong kebyar* in the early twentieth century marked a major turning point in Balinese musical modernity, evolving from a five-tone pelog ensemble in North Bali (Sukerta, 2009). In 1987, I Wayan Beratha introduced *gamelan semara dhana*, a hybrid ensemble that fused the instruments and tuning systems of the five-tone *gong kebyar* and seven-tone *semar pegulingan saih pitu*, marking a bold step in instrumental and compositional innovation (see McGraw, 1999; Senen, 2002; Suharta et al., 2024). These precedents demonstrate how Balinese artists have continually responded to social and cultural change by developing new ensembles that strike a balance between innovation and tradition (see Sugiarta, 2015).

Building on this lineage, I Wayan Sinti introduced *gamelan manikasanti* in 1994, described as “an attempt to create an ensemble that is capable of playing pieces from a wide range of musical genres, both old and new” (Sinti and Sanger, 2006, p. 36). More recently, I Nyoman Windha’s JES Gamelan Fusion (JGF) and Dewa Alit’s *gamelan salukat* illustrate the ongoing momentum of experimental creation. Windha’s ensemble blends elements of *jegog* and *semar pegulingan* (Pramana et al., 2023; Pramana, 2025), while Alit’s *salukat* features a unique eleven-tone tuning system that departs radically from traditional models (see Divo, 2023; O. Smith, 2020, 2019; Tenzer, 2018).

These innovations affirm that gamelan is not a static inheritance but a living tradition. As Bakan (2019, p. 30) argues, tradition in Balinese music should be understood as “a process of creative transformation whose most remarkable feature is the continuity it nurtures and sustains.” Similarly, Emielu’s (2018, p. 227) notion of progressive traditionalism views traditional music as a dynamic cultural expression that retains relevance through conscious renewal. Both perspectives illuminate how innovation and continuity coexist, revealing tradition as an active site of experimentation.

Within this evolving landscape, *gamelan pesel* emerges, created in 2014 by composer I Wayan Arik Wirawan (34). Inspired by the aesthetics and tuning of *semar pegulingan* and *selonding*, *gamelan pesel* is neither a reproduction nor a pastiche—it is a purposefully hybrid ensemble. Combining bronze and iron instruments, two materials traditionally tied to distinct ensembles, it forges a

new sonic identity that is both grounded in historical reference and directed toward contemporary expression. Its tuning system, timbral textures, and *barungan* structure reveal an intricate interplay between organological design and compositional imagination.

However, the significance of *gamelan pesel* extends beyond its sound and structure. It operates across multiple performative and cultural contexts—ritual ceremonies, concert stages, and digital media platforms—making it a compelling example of how Balinese musicians negotiate between sacred function and modern presentation. This intercontextuality situates the ensemble within what Appadurai (1996) described as the “disjunctive flows” of global cultural production—where tradition is not fixed but constantly reconfigured across shifting scapes of meaning and practice. This dynamic resonates with broader patterns in Balinese cultural practices, in which traditional arts actively respond to global influences while safeguarding local values (see also Sudirga et al., 2024).

While such transformations illustrate the adaptive vitality of Balinese musical culture, no existing study has examined how the organological design, tuning system, and intercontextual performance practices of *gamelan pesel* intersect within an integrated framework. This absence constitutes a clear research gap that this article aims to address. Wirawan’s compositional work exemplifies what Bruno Nettl (2005; 2015) terms a process of working with inherited musical “building blocks,” creatively reassembled to meet new expressive needs. It also reflects what Adler (1998) calls composition as negotiation—a dynamic engagement with hybridity, memory, and invention. *Gamelan pesel* embodies this process by bringing together old and new materials, traditional and altered tunings, and performances that span both ritual and digital media platforms. At the heart of this negotiation lies what we call sonic hybridity: the deliberate blending of distinct timbres, tuning systems, and instrumental traditions to create a new yet culturally grounded sound identity.

This research offers the first comprehensive analytical account of this ensemble. Through organological study, musical analysis, and contextual interpretation, the authors examine and explore how *gamelan pesel* exemplifies a progressive traditionalism rooted in Balinese philosophy and animated by intercontextual practices.

## 2. Literature Review

The emergence of new gamelan forms composed by younger generations of Balinese artists reflects the long-standing dynamism of Balinese musical traditions, which continually evolve through experimentation, adaptation, and cultural negotiation. This literature review surveys two main bodies of scholarship

that inform the conceptualization of *gamelan pesel*: (1) theoretical frameworks on tradition and change, and (2) studies of ensemble innovation in Bali. Together, these works provide the foundation for understanding the ensemble's creation while exposing knowledge gaps that this study sought to address.

### 2.1 Theoretical Frameworks on Tradition and Progressive Traditionalism

A central framework comes from the book *World Music: Traditions and Transformations* by Michael Bakan (2019), where he defines tradition as a dynamic process of “continuity through change.” Bakan argues that musical cultures endure because they evolve, selectively drawing from the past while engaging new social and cultural conditions. Innovation, in this sense, is not a departure from tradition but one of its sustaining mechanisms.

Complementing this view is Austin Emielu's theory of progressive traditionalism, developed in his 2018 article “Tradition, Innovations, and Modernity in the Music of the Edo of Nigeria: Toward a Theory of Progressive Traditionalism,” published in *Ethnomusicology* (Vol. 62, No. 2). Emielu emphasizes that indigenous musical traditions can modernize without severing ties to their cultural roots. His model underscores that transformation is often intentional, designed to both express and preserve identity. Together, Bakan and Emielu frame *gamelan pesel* as a transformation from within rather than rupture—a new sound world grounded in Balinese cultural logic.

### 2.2. Studies of Ensemble Innovations in Bali

While theoretical perspectives clarify how traditions transform, research on specific ensembles illustrates how these dynamics unfold in practice. The only existing account of *gamelan pesel* is a brief essay, “Versatility as Innovation: Getting to Know” by Zachary Hejney (2018), which introduces the ensemble's formation and compositional goals but only touches upon its musical identity or cultural positioning.

Other studies of ensemble creation shed light on the broader landscape of Balinese innovation. Pande Made Sukerta's *Gong Kebyar Buleleng: Perubahan dan Keberlanjutan Tradisi Gong Kebyar* (*Gong Kebyar Buleleng: Change and Continuity of the Gong Kebyar Tradition*) (2009) traces the emergence of Gong Kebyar in the early 20th century, showing how a five-tone *pelog* ensemble from North Bali evolved into the most widespread Balinese ensemble in the world. Sukerta demonstrates how ensemble innovation has historically functioned as both a response to socio-cultural transformation and a catalyst for redefining tradition.

This pattern of deliberate experimentation continued in the late 20th century. I Wayan Sinti's creation of *gamelan manikasanti*, discussed in the article “Gamelan Manikasanti: One Ensemble, Many Musics” co-authored by Annette

Sanger and Sinti (2006), reflects an effort to design an ensemble capable of performing multiple Balinese genres within one configuration, showing that new ensembles arise as much from conceptual vision as from sonic ambition.

Recent scholarship has focused on ensembles by prominent composer-performers whose work embodies more radical forms of innovation. Dewa Ketut Alit's *gamelan salukat* has received significant attention. A master's degree thesis by Oscar Smith "Genetik: An Analytical Study of the Contemporary Gamelan Music of Dewa Ketut Alit" and a subsequent article "Waringin: Recording a Composition with Gamelan Salukat, a Crossroads of Music and Culture" (2020) analyze the ensemble's design, its eleven-tone tuning system, and capacity to generate new compositional possibilities that extend Balinese aesthetics into uncharted territory. Michael Tenzer (2018), in "Chasing the Phantom: Features of a Supracultural New Music," provides a detailed musical analysis of Alit's 2016 composition *Ngejuk Memedi* (Chasing the Phantom), illustrating how *gamelan salukat* reflects both deeply Balinese logics and global avant-garde sensibilities.

Parallel developments are seen in the group JES Gamelan Fusion, created by I Nyoman Windha. Two studies by I Putu Riangga Pramana (2023; 2023) provide detailed analyses of Windha's composition *Jaya Baya*, examining how the ensemble integrates elements of *jegog* and *semar pegulingan* to forge a distinctive hybrid aesthetic. These works underscore how Balinese composers are increasingly motivated to create ensembles that transcend the boundaries of conventional genres.

Offering a macro-level perspective, I Gede Arya Sugiarta (2015) in his book *Lekesan: Fenomena Seni Musik di Bali* (*Lekesan: Music Phenomena in Bali*) situates such innovations within socio-cultural change. Sugiarta argues that creating new ensembles is not merely artistic experimentation, but a critical strategy for cultural resilience—an ethical imperative that ensures Balinese tradition survives precisely because it adapts.

Collectively, these studies show that ensemble innovation in Bali emerges at the intersection of aesthetic experimentation and cultural continuity. Bakan and Emielu illustrate how tradition endures through transformation, while ensemble-specific research reveals strategies—conceptual vision, hybrid aesthetics, and novel tunings—through which Balinese musicians continually reinvent their soundscape.

Yet, despite this rich scholarship, *gamelan pesel* remains largely undocumented beyond Hejney's brief introduction. Its distinctive sonic identity and cultural positioning within contemporary Bali have not been examined. This study addresses that gap by analyzing *gamelan pesel* as both musical innovation and cultural statement—an embodiment of progressive traditionalism within Bali's ongoing dialogue of traditions and transformations.

### 3. Method and Theory

#### 3.1 Method

This article draws from a qualitative research study to examine the creation, sonic identity, and cultural significance of *gamelan pesel* as a musical innovation in contemporary Bali. Qualitative methods are well-suited for exploring meaning-making within cultural frameworks (Moleong, 2011; Sugiono, 2020), enabling in-depth engagement with local perspectives and practices.

The research involved a total of seven semi-structured interviews conducted between February and August 2025. The primary interlocutor was the ensemble's composer, I Wayan Arik Wirawan, with four interviews focusing on his compositional approach, aesthetic intentions, and the ensemble's conceptual development. Additional interviews were conducted with two gamelan makers/tuners and one karawitan scholar, namely I Wayan Gede Juniarta and I Made Kartawan, to situate *gamelan pesel* within broader organological and theoretical contexts in Balinese music. Participants were purposively selected for their direct involvement in the creation, performance, or interpretation of *gamelan pesel*, ensuring that all perspectives made substantive contributions to the study's central questions.

In addition to interviews, participant observation was conducted during rehearsals and performances of *gamelan pesel*, allowing for direct engagement with the creative process, ensemble interaction, and audience responses. A multi-sited digital ethnography further examined how *gamelan pesel* circulates through online platforms. As of July 28, 2025, digital data were collected from YouTube (52 posts), TikTok (56 posts), Instagram (528 posts), and various streaming services, including Spotify, Apple Music, SoundCloud, and Bandcamp.

Across these platforms, posts were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on materials explicitly tagged, described, or visually identified as *gamelan pesel*. Selection prioritized original uploads by ensemble members, affiliated institutions, and recording labels, as well as high-engagement audience posts that demonstrated public interaction with the ensemble's work. This ensured the dataset reflected both official dissemination and grassroots circulation of *gamelan pesel* within digital media.

Data compiled from interviews, participant observation, and both scholarly publications and digital media materials. A three-stage analysis process, following the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1992), entailed reduction (selecting and organizing the materials), display (presenting the data), and drawing conclusions (identifying themes and interpreting the findings).



### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

The conceptualization of *gamelan pesel* as a new musical ensemble in Bali can be effectively analyzed through the combined theoretical frameworks of Emielu's progressive traditionalism and Bakan's tradition as a process of creative transformation. Emielu (2018), in his study of Edo music in Nigeria, argues that tradition is not a fixed or static entity but one that evolves through selective and intentional innovation. He introduces the idea of progressive traditionalism to describe how communities actively reinterpret and renew their musical heritage in response to changing artistic, social, and cultural conditions. Innovation, in this view, is not an act of rupture but a form of continuity—a way of preserving tradition by making it relevant for contemporary contexts.

This perspective is strongly supported by Bakan's (1999, p. 30) formulation of tradition and transformation. Rather than viewing change as external or disruptive, Bakan emphasizes that transformation is embedded within the tradition itself. In Balinese musical culture, the act of recomposing, rearranging, or experimenting with existing forms is not only accepted but often expected as a sign of vitality and mastery.

Together, Emielu and Bakan offer a theoretical foundation that affirms the legitimacy of innovation as an intrinsic part of tradition. The *gamelan pesel*, though newly created, draws upon deep historical sources such as *gamelan semara pegulingan* and *selonding*, and departs from both in its tuning systems, instrumentation, and conceptual framework. These departures are not evidence of loss or dilution but illustrate how Balinese composers engage with their musical heritage through experimentation and reconfiguration. In this sense, *gamelan pesel* exemplifies a mode of creative continuity—a cultural process in which tradition is preserved, revitalized, and extended through transformation. By situating *gamelan pesel* within these frameworks, it also opens space to examine how audiences—both onsite and online—perceive the ensemble's authenticity, innovation, and cultural legitimacy.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section analyzes the emergence, organological identity, and intercontextual dynamics of *gamelan pesel* to illuminate how innovation and continuity intersect in contemporary Balinese music. It begins by tracing the ensemble's conceptual and creative origins (4.1), followed by an examination of its organological features and their impact on compositional practice (4.2). Finally, it considers how *gamelan pesel* operates as an intercontextual conduit, moving across ritual, social, and digital domains to articulate new forms of cultural expression (4.3). Together, these discussions highlight how new ensemble practices contribute to the evolving soundscape and cultural imagination of Bali.

#### 4.1 The Unintended Beauty: From Accidental to the Inevitable

The *gamelan pesel*, created by composer I Wayan Arik Wirawan (Figure 1), stands among Bali's most innovative contemporary ensembles. Raised in Banjar Kehen, Kesiman—a village renowned for its *gamelan* traditions—Wirawan developed early expertise in the *gong kebyar* tradition, shaping his conviction that innovation and tradition are not opposing forces but mutually reinforcing dimensions of Balinese creativity. In 2009, he entered the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Denpasar, where exposure to diverse ensemble forms encouraged him to approach composition conceptually. His academic training refined a vision for works grounded in Balinese aesthetics yet open to experimentation. By 2017, his compositions—often featured at the Bali Arts Festival—were recognized for being both accessible and distinctively original, underscoring his commitment to advancing gamelan innovation while remaining culturally rooted. Yet, despite these achievements, Wirawan regards *gamelan pesel* as his most defining creation.



Figure 1. I Wayan Arik Wirawan, creator of *gamelan pesel* (Source: I Wayan Arik Wirawan, 2025)

He often describes its emergence as “*sesuatu yang tidak disengaja, tapi juga disengaja*”—something unintentional, yet also intentional. This paradox captures the slow, exploratory process through which *gamelan pesel* evolved. In an interview (18 July 2025), Wirawan traced its genesis to 2012, when he constructed two iron-keyed instruments—a *gangs*a and a *jublag*—tuned to a Western diatonic scale with C as the tonic. Such experimentation reflects broader questions often asked in Bali today: does adopting foreign tonal



frameworks risk diluting tradition, or can it expand the expressive range of Balinese music? For Wirawan, the answer lies in reinterpreting rather than abandoning tradition—embedding new tonalities and timbres within Balinese structures and sensibilities.

The ensemble first appeared at the 2011 Bali Arts Festival in a *Musik Pengembangan* (Music Development) performance, paired with a *geguntangan* ensemble. The unexpected timbral richness of this experiment convinced Wirawan to pursue the idea further. Over the next two years, he refined the instrumentation: *gong-kempurs* modeled after *selonding* anchored the bass, while a borrowed *semara dana reyong* was eventually replaced by a custom bronze version tuned specifically for the ensemble. These developments gave the *gamelan pesel* a coherent sonic identity that balanced innovation with continuity.

By 2014, Wirawan formally named the ensemble “*pesel*”—a name that operates on several levels. As an acronym, it references *semar pegulingan* and *selonding*, two historically significant gamelan types whose fusion anchors the ensemble’s concept. The *gamelan semar pegulingan*, once associated with Bali’s royal courts, is known for its refined bronze instruments and seven-tone *pelog* tuning (see Rai S., 1996; Bandem, 2013), while *selonding*, rooted in Bali Aga communities, features iron keys and is reserved for sacred rituals (see Tusan, 2002; Widiana, 2019; Suharta et al., 2020). This combination places *gamelan pesel* both within and beyond tradition: an innovation that draws authority from historical depth while articulating a new aesthetic vision. Beyond the acronym, *pesel* means “to bind,” and *mesel* means “to link,” ideas that frame the ensemble as an act of connection—between timbres, between people, and between artistic impulses that might otherwise seem opposed.

This principle of binding informs not only the sound of *gamelan pesel* but also its social structure and creative process. The ensemble maintains a fixed membership of 22 musicians who have remained together since its founding, cultivating a rare degree of musical attunement where players respond to the collective pulse as much as to individual parts. Instrument builders, tuners, and performers collaborated closely in the ensemble’s creation, embodying the Balinese ethos of *gotong royong* (mutual assistance). For Wirawan, this collaboration is essential: innovation is not an isolated act but emerges through embedded social practices that reflect the communal foundations of Balinese music.

*Gamelan pesel*’s sound reflects this ethos of connection. Wirawan’s compositions are deliberately melodic and emotionally resonant, designed to make a strong impression even on first hearing, yet they contain layers of rhythmic and structural complexity that reward repeated listening. This balance has enabled *gamelan pesel* to move fluidly across various contexts—ritual

settings, social-cultural events, and digital media platforms—demonstrating that new ensembles can serve as both cultural artifacts and vehicles for artistic exploration.

Recordings have played a key role in amplifying the reach of *gamelan pesel*. With support from Canadian collaborator Johnathan Adams and Balinese composer-producer Putu Gede Sukaryana, Wirawan released *Nada Hidup* (Living Sounds) (2017) through Insitu Recording, featuring seven original compositions: *Ayuning* (Radiant Beauty), *Kerulut* (A Song of Romance), *Jangkep* (Unity), *Lantur* (The Flow of Life), *Muda Langen* (Youthful Joy), *Uyang-uyang* (Restless Soul), and *Cakup Lima* (Hands in Prayer). The album quickly sold out its initial 100 copies, signaling the ensemble’s growing resonance with audiences beyond its immediate community. A second album, *Pesta Nada* (Celebration of Sounds) (2023), introduced another set of works—*Segara* (Sounds of the Ocean), *Prana* (Living Energy), *Mecanda* (Playful Spirit), *Pesta* (Festival of Life), *Makenyir* (Smiling Faces), *Elogan* (Dances of the Wind), and *Guna-Geni* (The Living Flame)—further consolidating *gamelan pesel*’s reputation as a leading voice in contemporary Balinese gamelan.

Reflecting on its evolution, Wirawan recalls, “*Awalne nak iseng gen*” (it all began as a playful experiment).” What started as a simple curiosity about new tunings and timbres has become, for him, an inseparable extension of his artistic identity. This is the unintended beauty of *gamelan pesel*: its sound world seems accidental in origin, but in retrospect, it appears destined to exist, as though Balinese tradition itself had been waiting for such a transformation. In binding bronze and iron, old and new, personal vision and collective ethos, *gamelan pesel* demonstrates how innovation in Bali often moves from the unexpected to the essential—a reminder that tradition’s vitality lies not in resisting change, but in embracing it as part of its natural evolution.

#### 4.2 Sonic Resonance: Organological Identity

As previously noted, *gamelan pesel* is a hybrid that draws inspiration from two distinct Balinese traditions—*semar pegulingan* and *selonding*. This section explores how the ensemble’s organological features—its materials, construction, and instrumental configuration—interact with compositional practice to produce a distinctive sound world. Rather than viewing instruments as static tools, this approach recognizes them as dynamic agents that shape and are shaped by the music they enable. The sonic resonance of *gamelan pesel* refers not only to its physical vibrational qualities but also to the creative energy that emerges when material properties inform compositional choices. In this case, these resonances are inseparable from Wirawan’s artistic vision, whose compositions are designed in direct response to the ensemble’s unique acoustic

profile. Thus, organology and composition are not separate domains, but interwoven elements in the construction of the ensemble's aesthetic identity.

Organology, the study of musical instruments, is a foundational area of inquiry in musicology. As Hood (1982, p. 124) asserts:

“organology [in music]—the science of musical instruments—should include not only the history and description of instruments but also equally important but neglected aspects... such as particular techniques of performance, musical function, decoration, and a variety of socio-cultural considerations.”

This broader perspective highlights that musical instruments are not merely tools for sound production, but are deeply embedded within complex cultural, aesthetic, and functional systems. Despite the centrality of instruments in Balinese music, scholarly literature on the organology of Balinese gamelan remains relatively limited. Notable contributions include Rembang's (1984) foundational work on gamelan-making practices; Kartawan's (2014) study of *gender wayang*; Chung's (2015) examination of *suling* (Balinese bamboo flutes); research on *genggong* by Sadguna and Sutirtha (2017); Sadguna's studies on *kendang* (Sadguna, 2010, 2018, 2022); and work on the *rebab* by Rai S. et al. (2011). These studies offer important insights but also highlight the need for further research, particularly into hybrid ensembles such as *gamelan pesel*.

The making of *gamelan pesel* involved a collaborative effort among nine skilled gamelan artisans, each contributing specialized craftsmanship to develop a cohesive and innovative ensemble. These artisans were selected for their expertise in various aspects of gamelan construction. The contributors included: I Made Jana (Tatasan, Denpasar) – forged *pemade* and *kantilan* keys; I Ketut Warsa (Penatih, Denpasar) – produced *jegogan* keys; Pande Lanus (Tihingan, Klungkung) – made the *reyong*; Putu Sumana (Kaba-Kaba, Tabanan) – forged the *gong*; Ibu Mangku (Klungkung) – crafted small instrument keys; I Wayan Santra (Negari, Singapadu) – carved the *plawah*; I Nyoman Kopi (Penatih, Denpasar) – *plawah* carver; I Wayan Nadiarta (Kehen, Kesiman) – *plawah* carver; Kak Meni (Tembahu, Penatih) – constructed the *plawah* framework.

These collaborative innovations laid the conceptual and sonic groundwork for *gamelan pesel*. Drawing from the aesthetics of *selonding* and *semar pegulingan*, the ensemble combines iron *gangsra* keys—referencing *selonding*—with bronze *pencon* gongs, reflecting the timbral identity of *semar pegulingan*. The use of larger gongs in place of the traditional *gong bebancihan* further enhances the ensemble's resonant depth. These material decisions were not merely functional but guided by Wirawan's aesthetic vision, which sought to evoke specific sonic textures in his compositions.

The complete instrumentation of *gamelan pesel* (Figure 2) includes: a pair of *gangsa ageng*, a pair of *gangsa kantilan*, a pair of *jublag*, a pair of *jegogan*, one *tungguh reyong* (which may also function as a *trompong*), *gong wadon*, *kempul*, *kemong*, *gentorag*, *klenang*, *kajar*, *cengceng gecek*, a pair of *krumpungan* drums, and *bebarongan* drums. The instrumentation of the *gamelan pesel* is illustrated in the following image.



Figure 2. *Gamelan pesel* ensemble (Source: I Wayan Arik Wirawan, 2014)

According to *gamelan* maker and tuner I Wayan Gede Juniarta of Blahbatuh, the use of mixed materials in *gamelan* is not unprecedented. In the past, economically constrained communities—particularly those seeking to build *gong kebyar* ensembles—sometimes combined iron and bronze instruments out of necessity, gradually replacing iron components with bronze as resources allowed (interview, 9 July 2025). Similarly, *gamelan* tuner and *karawitan* scholar I Made Kartawan cites the example of *gamelan gambang*, which typically includes four bamboo *gambang* instruments alongside a single bronze *saron*, illustrating another instance of pragmatic material combination (interview, 3 August 2025). However, both Juniarta and Kartawan emphasize that *gamelan pesel* represents the first known instance of an ensemble intentionally and conceptually constructed from both iron and bronze. Unlike previous cases driven by economic constraints, Wirawan’s decision was an artistic one—aimed at achieving a specific sonic character and philosophical vision—a purposefully hybrid ensemble whose material design is rooted not in compromise, but in creative experimentation.

While both *selonding* and *semar pegulingan* employ a seven-tone *pelog* tuning system (*saih pitu*), Wirawan introduced modifications aligned with his creative objectives. Initially, the ensemble was tuned to a diatonic scale with C equaling *do*, aligning the pitch *ndang* to facilitate collaboration with Western instruments in equal temperament. However, over time, the tuning shifted naturally—an occurrence known as *engkes* in Balinese practice—due to the material properties of the keys and frequency of use. Although bronze detunes more rapidly, iron also gradually changes pitch. This shift was only noticed during a collaboration with a Western band, by which point the pitch had fallen between B and C. Wirawan chose to retain this new tuning, which now defines the identity of the *gamelan pesel*.

Although Wirawan initially described his ensemble as diatonically tuned, upon closer scrutiny, it reveals a more nuanced reality. Diatonic scales, defined by five whole steps and two half steps within an octave, rely on evenly spaced pitches in equal temperament (see J. P. Clendinning & Marvin, 2016). In contrast, *gamelan pesel* employs the traditional Balinese tuning system, which utilizes paired instruments known as *pengumbang* (lower frequency) and *pengisep* (higher frequency). According to Rai (2001, p. 149), this *pengumbang-pengisep* pairing is central to Balinese gamelan aesthetics, producing *ombak* (literally meaning “wave”)—pulsating acoustic beats that reflect a broader philosophical dualism called *rwa bhineda*. This dualism in gamelan is often interpreted as the interaction of male and female energies. Despite its initial diatonic framework, the presence of intentional pitch discrepancies through the *pengumbang-pengisep* system places *gamelan pesel* firmly outside the realm of equal temperament, challenging any straightforward classification as diatonic.

Both Kartawan and Juniarta describe the tuning of *gamelan pesel* as *bengkek* or *bentek*. Rather than indicating a flaw, this quality reflects a distinct auditory experience. Kartawan poetically likens it to “*cara bungane pusuh*,” a flower yet to bloom. This is most apparent in *gamelan pesel*’s *ombak*, which is noticeably shorter and less sustained, juxtaposed to fully bronze ensembles. While bronze instruments tend to produce brighter, fuller, and longer-lasting *ombak*, the deliberate combination of iron and bronze in *gamelan pesel* results in a compact, nuanced timbral quality. This quality directly informs the expressive contours of Wirawan’s compositions, which embrace and respond to the ensemble’s short, shimmering sonic decay.

Does this imply that *gamelan pesel* sounds are “out of tune”? On the contrary, we argue that this is an intentional outcome of Wirawan’s experimentation, not an error. His deliberate use of mixed materials and exploration of alternative tuning systems produces a timbral character that is distinctly identifiable and unlike any existing ensemble. This uniqueness becomes a defining feature of



*gamelan pesel*, marking it as a significant contribution to contemporary gamelan innovation in Bali.

A new *gamelan* ensemble cannot exist or be recognized solely through its distinctive sonic identity derived from its organological materials. While timbre and tuning are crucial, it is through composition that these sonic elements are animated into musical form. In Bali, *gamelan* serves as a primary medium through which composers articulate expressive ideas. This is particularly evident in the case of *gamelan pesel*, whose entire repertoire has been composed by Wirawan. His compositional voice, inseparable from the instrument's material and tuning innovations, plays a defining role in shaping the ensemble's identity.

As previously discussed, *gamelan pesel* adopts a seven-tone *pelog* tuning system known as *saih pitu*. Within this framework, Balinese ensembles such as *semar pegulingan* and *selonding* traditionally emphasize five core pitches, with the remaining two functioning as auxiliary tones (*pemero*) (see Rai S, 1996). In *semar pegulingan*, this modal system is referred to as *patet* or *patetan*, and in *selonding*, it is termed *saih*—different terminologies that reflect the same structural principle.

However, Wirawan intentionally diverges from this conventional modal system. When asked about his compositional approach, he acknowledged the seven-tone nature of his ensemble. Still, he emphasized that he does not adhere to the five-primary and two-auxiliary tone hierarchy. This departure marks a critical point of innovation. In his composition “*Tabuh Petegak Bebarongan Uyang Uyang* (Restless Soul),” featured on the 2017 album *Nada Hidup* (Living Sounds), the melody shifts fluidly between moods and tonal centers. The piece exhibits melodic and rhythmic progressions that defy fixed modal patterns, underscoring Wirawan's break from traditional modal logic.

This process of deviation and reconfiguration reflects what Sudirana (2024) describes as the act of “finding the unusual.” For composers like Wirawan, creating new works often involves a deliberate search for distinctive elements that distinguish their creations. Sudirana (2013a, pp. 165–166) further explains:

Creative composers are always seeking new ideas through listening or direct in-depth learning of their own classical music or musics from other cultures. Of course, these composers are also creative musicians who are ‘fans’ of the music they study. In the act of composing, composers will consciously or unconsciously—depending upon their skills and talent—apply new musical elements or concepts that they have learned or come to favor.

Wirawan's intuitive compositional method, which eschews fixed modal hierarchies in favor of melodic freedom and experimentation, exemplifies this process. When composing and teaching, he vocalizes melodies directly from

inspiration rather than referring to established frameworks. As analysts, we may seek, as Tenzer (2006, p. 7) puts it, to “discover an archetypal sound-structure model on which a music or repertoire is based,” yet Wirawan resists precisely such structural expectations. In the case of *gamelan pesel*, the archetype is not merely subverted—it is fundamentally reimagined.

This sonic resonance is not only in the physical sense, but in a conceptual one: the instruments do not simply carry musical ideas—they provoke and reshape them. Wirawan’s departure from *patet* logic is not an act of negation, but one of creative redefinition. It exemplifies a broader movement in Balinese music toward experimentation, where sonic materiality inspires new musical ideas.

In this context, *gamelan pesel* becomes a site where sonic experimentation intersects with evolving cultural identity. Kenneth Burke, as cited in Liliweri (2003, p. 72), argues that cultural identity is closely tied to language—understood as a non-material element of culture—where language functions as a tool to represent, articulate, and compare the various aspects of identity. While Burke speaks of verbal language, a similar logic applies to musical language as well. In Bali, music functions as more than an art form—it is a medium through which identity and cultural belonging are continually expressed and negotiated. Giddens, as cited in Barker (2005, p. 171), emphasizes that identity is not static but is continuously formed and reformed; it is always in a process, constituting a dynamic and evolving construct rather than a fixed state. This notion resonates with Wirawan’s refusal to remain bound by inherited musical systems. As Rutherford (cited in Piliang, 2010, p. 280) reminds us, identity is a linkage between past and present socio-cultural values—a relational thread that connects tradition with contemporary meaning-making. *Gamelan pesel*, with its hybrid tuning, altered material construction, and modal departure, exemplifies this ongoing negotiation between continuity and change in Balinese musical culture.

Thus, its sonic resonance reverberates beyond the acoustic realm. It is the sound of identity in motion—materially grounded, yet constantly evolving; shaped by tradition, yet unapologetically experimental.

#### ***4.3 Gamelan Pesel as an Intercontextual Conduit: Ritual, Non-Ritual, and Digital Realms***

The dynamic presence of *gamelan pesel* across ritual, non-ritual, and digital platforms exemplifies its role as an intercontextual conduit—a concept inspired by Appadurai’s (1996) theorization of disjunctive cultural flows. Rather than viewing tradition and innovation as fixed oppositions, Appadurai proposes that cultural forms circulate across multiple, overlapping “scapes”—ethnoscapes,

technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes—through processes of negotiation and hybridization. We use the term intercontextual conduit to describe the ensemble’s capacity to move fluidly across ritual, social-cultural, and digital domains, carrying its cultural resonance into diverse contexts. *Gamelan pesel* embodies this fluidity, traversing sacred temple compounds, social-cultural festivals, and digital platforms, demonstrating how Balinese musical practices are continually reshaped through adaptive recontextualization.

In ritual settings, *gamelan pesel* has been consistently invited to accompany temple ceremonies and sacred events—spaces typically reserved for ensembles with deep-rooted ceremonial functions. Its distinctive timbre and compositional character blend seamlessly with the sonic atmosphere of temple rituals, affirming its suitability for sacred use. Far from being perceived as an outsider, the ensemble has been met with reverence. Wirawan remarked, “It is an honor to be invited to a ritual event,” signaling both the seriousness of the occasion and the legitimacy of *gamelan pesel* within sacred contexts. Many of the ensemble’s most significant performances have occurred within the *utama mandala*—the innermost and holiest part of the temple compound—where music is offered to both deities and human participants. “*Terhormat asane pentas grup raga’e*,” Wirawan explained, expressing the high status accorded to his ensemble when placed in such ritual settings.

This ritual recognition has extended far beyond Wirawan’s home village. *Gamelan pesel* has been invited to perform in temple ceremonies across Bali, including in Lungsikan and Bentuyung, as well as in other regions such as Lombok and Semarang. Wirawan proudly observed, “*Yen nangkil ke pura joh, sesai ningehang gamelan pesel’e meputer*” (“When I go to distant temples, I often hear recordings of *gamelan pesel* being played”), revealing both his personal pride and the ensemble’s growing sonic embeddedness in ritual life beyond its physical presence.

Outside of temple ceremonies, *gamelan pesel* frequently participates in *manusa yadnya*—rites of passage in Balinese Hinduism that commemorate key stages of human life. These include wedding ceremonies, *metatah* (tooth-filing rituals), and *telu bulanin* (the three-month ceremony for infants). In these events, the ensemble typically performs original compositions from its repertoire, while also demonstrating musical flexibility by adapting to specific ceremonial needs. When accompanying *topeng* dance performances, for instance, the group reinterprets canonical *topeng* pieces using the *gamelan pesel*, exemplifying its capacity to respond to diverse ceremonial needs with flexibility and creativity.

Beyond ritual and domestic ceremonies, *gamelan pesel* has established a strong presence in Bali’s urban cultural sphere. Its participation in major events such as the Bali Arts Festival (Pesta Kesenian Bali) and the Denpasar

Festival highlights its role in shaping a contemporary sonic identity for the city. In Denpasar, the *gamelan pesel* has come to symbolize a modern Balinese sound—urban, experimental, yet deeply rooted in tradition. This recognition has reached an exceptional level of civic endorsement: the mayor of Denpasar, I Gusti Ngurah Jaya Negara, has performed with the ensemble on multiple occasions. Wirawan views this as both a valuable opportunity and a profound expression of institutional appreciation. Noteworthy performances include the ensemble's appearance during the opening of Dharma Negara Alaya in 2019, a municipal arts and cultural hub, and at the Rakernas X Jaringan Kota Pusaka Indonesia (JKPI) in 2023 (Figure 3), a national gathering focused on urban heritage.



Figure 3. *Gamelan pesel* performing at the Rakernas X Jaringan Kota Pusaka Indonesia (JKPI) in 2023 (Source: I Wayan Arik Wirawan, 2023).

In addition to high-profile festivals and social-cultural performances, *gamelan pesel* has engaged in a wide array of interdisciplinary collaborations. The ensemble has composed and performed music for contemporary dance, theater, and experimental art projects, including collaborations with modern bands and popular musicians. These projects highlight *gamelan pesel's* role not only as a musical ensemble but as a flexible cultural platform capable of traversing genre boundaries. Although many of these creative outputs remain undocumented in formal archives, they significantly contribute to the ensemble's growing artistic legacy and demonstrate how *gamelan pesel* continues to evolve as a site of musical innovation and cross-cultural dialogue.



As an intercontextual conduit, *gamelan pesel*'s adaptability enables it to transition fluidly across ritual, non-ritual, and digital domains—extending its presence from localized ceremonial contexts to broader regional and even global audiences. This mobility is not incidental, but rather emerges from a deliberate artistic vision and community-oriented experimentation. Drawing on Appadurai's (1996) concept of disjunctive cultural flows, the ensemble exemplifies a form of strategic hybridity: rather than merely absorbing external influences, it selectively reconfigures Balinese tradition through negotiation, collaboration, and media-savvy engagement. *Gamelan pesel* thus operates within multiple cultural "scapes," simultaneously rooted in ritual sanctity and responsive to contemporary aesthetic and technological shifts.

Digital platforms, in particular, play an increasingly vital role in shaping the ensemble's transcultural visibility and economic sustainability. *Gamelan pesel* actively disseminates its work through various streaming platforms, including YouTube, Spotify, SoundCloud, TikTok, and Instagram, with support from Insitu Recordings (2016). While TikTok is regarded as a vital mediator for Indonesian local performing arts (Zandra & Hidayatullah, 2024), it serves as a powerful catalyst, greatly amplifying the visibility of performances in this digital era. With users frequently engaging and recontextualizing short audio clips as soundtracks for creative digital expression, *gamelan pesel* also circulates virally on it.

Innovation, particularly in the digital realm, functions not only as a mode of artistic creation but also as a key marketing tool (N. T. Smith et al., 2024). In this case, *gamelan pesel*'s soundscape is embedded within user-generated ecosystems, thereby enabling broader and faster cultural diffusion beyond its original geographic and ceremonial contexts. For example, the piece *Ayunning* (Radiant Beauty) receives the most views on *gamelan pesel*'s YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CfcAtpwR90>) and TikTok platform ([https://www.tiktok.com/@gamelanpesel/video/7440679486334455048?\\_r=1&t=ZS-8yPDjlg4tYQ](https://www.tiktok.com/@gamelanpesel/video/7440679486334455048?_r=1&t=ZS-8yPDjlg4tYQ)). Nonetheless, as of 28 July 2025, it reveals a significant difference in audience engagement and reach between these two platforms. The complete 13-minute official recorded version of the piece *Ayunning* on YouTube garnered 494,554 views from 9,480 subscribers, accompanied by 2,803 likes and 71 comments since its upload on 18 April 2020.

In contrast, a one-minute live-performed video from the same piece on TikTok, uploaded on 24 November 2024, garnered significantly higher visibility, reaching 2.2 million views. Accompanied by hashtags such as #gamelan and #fypシ, the post generated substantial engagement—65,000 likes, 609 comments, 5,051 saves, and 1,434 shares. Compared to the full-length YouTube video, the exposure of *gamelan pesel*'s content on TikTok is markedly greater. TikTok's 'For You (FY) page' operates through an algorithmic, personalized feed characterized



by ephemerality (Caliandro et al., 2024, p. 282), prompting creators to employ hashtags not only for self-identification but also to actively enhance their visibility.

*Gamelan pesel* utilizes general and thematic hashtags such as #gamelan, #fypシ, #gamelanbali, #gongkebyar, #pesel, #gamelanpesel, to expand audience reach. The #fyp hashtag—short for “for your page”—serves as a universal visibility strategy, while #gongkebyar, despite the ensemble not belonging to this genre, connects the content to a network of over 3,200 posts associated with Balinese arts, including dance performances, practice sessions, and instrument sales. Through this associative tagging, *gamelan pesel*’s music circulates across diverse digital communities and reaches global audiences. The multilingual nature of user engagement—featuring Indonesian, Balinese, Chinese, Burmese, Thai, English, French, and emoji-based comments—illustrates the ensemble’s transnational resonance. Moreover, the *Ayuning* audio clip from the TikTok post can be saved as a standalone soundtrack, allowing users to remix and reinterpret it in their own videos.

The stark contrast in these metrics, particularly the higher engagement and viewership of the condensed content on TikTok, highlights the platform’s effectiveness in disseminating content and attracting a wider audience through its algorithmic features and format, even with a smaller follower base (8,627) compared to YouTube (Table 1).

Table 1. *Ayuning*’s Statistics as of 28 July 2025

YouTube (Video Length: 13:14 minutes)	Subscribers	9,480
	Viewers	494,554
	Likes	2,803
	Comments	71
	Upload date	18 April 2020
Tiktok (Length of the video: 1.05 minutes) #gamelan #fypシ #gamelanbali#gongkebyar	Account followers	8,627
	Viewers	2,200,000
	Likes	65,000
	Comments	609
	Saves	5051
	Share	1434
	Forward	84 posts
#gamelan #fypシ #gamelanbali #gongkebyar #pesel #gamelanpesel	Upload date	24, November 2024
	post	174.3k
	post	2.7 billion
	post	8,410
	post	3,220
	post	3,376
	post	143

Source: Data collection by the authors from YouTube and TikTok accounts of *gamelan pesel*

What sets *gamelan pesel* apart is that its digital success is not an accidental byproduct of exposure but the outcome of intentional engagement with platform logics and media infrastructures. The ensemble maintains a strong online presence across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube while cultivating an offline identity grounded in ritual legitimacy. These platforms not only increase visibility but also provide income streams that help support artistic production, instrument maintenance, and ensemble continuity. Digital access, in this sense, becomes an enabler of both creative independence and cultural preservation.

Importantly, *gamelan pesel*'s digital expansion does not signal a departure from traditional values or ceremonial roots. As Kraidy (2006) argues, cultural hybridity is forged through dialogical processes in which local traditions and global technologies intersect and mutually reshape one another. Rather than becoming an artifact of digital commodification, *gamelan pesel* uses new media to extend its ritual significance into contemporary public life. This is particularly evident in the group's capacity to retain sacred resonance while also forging new roles in urban festivals, civic collaborations, and online communities.

At the heart of *gamelan pesel*'s project lies its unique instrumentation and conceptual foundation. Comprising a hybrid set of iron and bronze metallophones and drawing inspiration from *selonding* and *semar pegulingan* ensembles, the group creates a distinctive timbral identity that resonates across diverse performance environments. But more than an organological innovation, the name *pesel*—meaning “to bind” or “to make one”—reflects a broader cultural ethos: a commitment to bridging the sacred and the secular, the local and the global, the inherited and the experimental.

In this light, *gamelan pesel* represents more than a musical group; it serves as a model for how Balinese gamelan can be adapted, circulated, and sustained in the twenty-first century. Through ritual performance, civic engagement, and digital production, the ensemble unifies disparate cultural domains into a coherent artistic practice that is both rooted and mobile, reverent and innovative. Its trajectory exemplifies the creative agency of young Balinese musicians who navigate and transform ritual, non-ritual, and digital realms, forging a musical identity that resonates as strongly in the temple courtyard as in the algorithmic feed. In doing so, *gamelan pesel* not only redefines what gamelan can sound like, but also what it can mean in a globally networked world.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how *gamelan pesel* embodies the evolving relationship between innovation and continuity in contemporary Balinese music. Through organological, analytical, and contextual approaches, the research highlights how the ensemble's hybrid construction—combining bronze and iron

instruments—creates a distinctive sonic palette that bridges ritual and artistic domains. Its tuning system and compositional strategies reveal an intentional negotiation between inherited tonal logics and experimental frameworks, while its performance ecology—spanning temple ceremonies, social-cultural events, and digital platforms—illustrates how Balinese musicians continually redefine tradition through intercontextual practice. Collectively, these findings affirm that innovation in Bali is not a rupture from tradition but a mode of sustaining cultural vitality through creative adaptation.

Theoretically, this study advances the concept of sonic hybridity as a framework for understanding how musical traditions evolve through material, aesthetic, and technological mediation. *Gamelan pesel* exemplifies what Bakan (1999) terms “traditions and transformations” and what Emielu (2018) describes as “progressive traditionalism,” both of which frame innovation as arising from within tradition rather than outside it. By situating *gamelan pesel* within these paradigms, this research contributes to broader debates on hybridity and cultural renewal, positioning the ensemble as an intercontextual conduit that sustains meaning across diverse cultural and media environments. This adaptive capacity also reflects a wider pattern in Balinese performing arts, where traditional practices actively negotiate global influences while maintaining their symbolic depth and cultural significance (Arshiniwati & Peradantha, 2025).

Practically, the findings underscore the importance of supporting composer-led experimentation and community-based instrument making as mechanisms of cultural resilience. Collaborative initiatives among traditional artists, art institutions, and digital platforms could enhance both creative independence and heritage sustainability, ensuring that innovation remains anchored in local epistemologies. Ultimately, *gamelan pesel* exemplifies how Balinese musicians continue to reinterpret the past to shape the present—binding sound, material, and meaning into a living process of renewal that defines the soundscape of twenty-first-century Bali.

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## Authors' Profile

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