

Rhythm Sticks 2006 – SambaSunda

Reviewed by: Josh Meggitt

SambaSunda

Queen Elizabeth Hall,
London

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There was no printed programme, so there was no information on titles or names of performers, but what could be more enjoyable on the hottest night of the year than a concert of Indonesian gamelan, music that positively shimmers out of the tropics? Gamelan orchestras fascinated composers John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen and were crucial to their development, and Benjamin Britten performed transcribed gamelan patterns on the piano and feature in his ballet score "The Prince of the Pagodas".

SambaSunda, a 14-piece group from Bandung, western Java, is somewhat of a gamelan fusion orchestra: combining traditional instruments (metalophones, tuned bronze bowls, bass gongs, wooden drums, bamboo percussion and assorted flutes and stringed instruments) with less orthodox sounds (dulcimers, guitar, jaw harp, violin). The result is powerful, evocative music more representative of the Indonesia of today.

Taking to the stage in an assortment of colourful robes, SambaSunda looked magnificent, and its members wasted no time in making an enticing racket. Opening with a slow, spacious improvisation on various drums, the whole troupe was soon hammering away, seeming both randomly chaotic and totally controlled. Here, and in the opening few pieces, the focus was on the drums at the front of the platform, and the percussive emphasis pointed to African and South American influences, hence the 'Samba'.

Also ironically present was the ghost of 1950s' exotica, that bastard hybrid of world-music influences served up to Hawaiian holidaymakers by the likes of Martin Denny and Arthur Lyman; similarly SambaSunda whooped and hollered like monkeys, hyenas and wild birds through much of its set.

The arrival of vocalist Rita Tina (? – I couldn't catch the name and, as I say, a programme note was not offered) shifted the mood down into seductive territory, prompting a reconfiguration of instrumental duties. In came the dulcimer, guitar and violin and more was made of the tuned gongs. She was superbly outfitted in bright orange and was also an enchanting dancer making much use of slight hand movements, but it was for her magnificent voice that she was here. Poor engineering caused some unpleasant high moments but these were rectified, and throughout she moved effortlessly from slow glide to raucous metallic clamour.

Tina returned after a number of strong instrumental numbers, featuring excellent interplay from the three performers on flutes and stringed instruments. A brief improvisation was played on the western violin to emphasise the key used in Sudanese music, conveying a sense of beauty and loss alien to western tuning. The violin, wooden flutes, jaw harp and traditional Javanese strings (played on a bow resembling a hacksaw and jelly-rubber) took the lead, weaving mournful lines of smoke around rhythms and melodies pinged out on the various keys and gongs. A romantic pop number was perhaps not their finest moment, recalling 'Bollywood' schmaltz of the sweetest kind, and I cringed at the singer's efforts at audience participation.

Gamelan remains one of my favourite styles of music, and here it was performed with such infectious vibrancy one could not but have been seduced.

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