

Edinburgh International Festival Review: Yogyakarta Palace Gamelan Orchestra Kridha Mardhawa (*****)

There's a problem, of course, in awarding a star rating to a group that itself defines a particular style of music. That's the case with the musicians and dancers from the royal court in Yogyakarta, central Java, who brought gamelan music and dance to the Edinburgh International Festival over three evenings this year.

Star ratings seem rather irrelevant. Being at the pinnacle of their culture, these performers get to set the agenda – and so they did, spectacularly, in these breathtaking performances, assured yet subtle and alive. On entering The Hub's performance space, you are amazed to see the huge gamelan percussion orchestra laid out before you, with hanging gongs, beautifully carved keyed instruments and arrays of upturned kettles gleaming under the lights.

There's a contrast between the style of gamelan performance in Yogyakarta and that of Surakarta, central Java's other royal court city, more familiar to anyone in the West who has encountered the form. That of Yogyakarta is stronger and less elaborate, and although the players gave some admirably clangorous performances of pieces in tribute to the city's Sultan, there was also a more refined, subtle delivery of *Gambirsawit*, a classic of the Javanese repertoire.

One oddity was *Gendhing Westminster*, written in the 1920s by Yogyakarta composer Raden Wedana Larassumbaga, which suddenly breaks the sumptuous gamelan texture to imitate the chimes of Big Ben – although the festival's theme is Eastern influence

on the West, this was a revealing example of the East looking to the West for inspiration. And to demonstrate the music's inextricable links with dance, there was a vibrant performance of the famous mask dance *Topeng Kelana* by Widaru Krefianto Darmawan.

With Javanese gamelan having become such a formidable force in Western music making and education, it's essential and rewarding to be reminded of the assured, refined origins of the music played at its highest level.