

“The Watchers by the Well” – introduction by Nicholas Gray

“The Watchers by the Well” is a performance and composition as research project that culminated in a concert at SOAS on 1st November 2014 by the Balinese *gendér wayang* group “Segara Madu”, together with the actor and storyteller Tim Jones. The group had previously worked on a related project concerning the Balinese legend of “The Birth of Kala” (see: <http://music.sas.ac.uk/node/160>), and we wanted to explore a British folk-tale in a similar way, using a combination of Balinese music and new compositions by myself.

The concert formed part of the SEA ArtsFest 2014 (<http://www.seaartsfest.org/>) and included a pre-concert discussion taking the UK gamelan scene as its starting point. This involved a wide-ranging discussion with Dr Sophie Ransby of the Southbank Gamelan Programme and others, encompassing the growth of gamelan ensembles in Britain since the 1980s and links with the English experimental music tradition, as a prelude to discussing the project to be performed that evening.

The choice of story was based on my discovery of a book several decades ago in the Balfour Library of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford called *Forgotten folk-tales of the English counties* by Ruth Tongue. This had a strong effect on me at the time, opening up a hitherto unknown set of vivid stories, characters and beliefs. Years later I obtained a copy and discussed the idea of adapting a story with the group. The story we chose seemed to lend itself most readily to musical interpretation and to be a natural successor to our exploration of “The Birth of Kala”. We wanted to present the story in a way that was not too archaic or “folksy” but might draw on present-day or even futuristic elements. Our approach perhaps reflects a contemporary attitude to the eeriness of the English countryside, highlighted in an article by Robert Macfarlane (Macfarlane 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane>).

This story appears as “The Hare and the Harburer (version 2)” in this collection by the Somerset folklorist Ruth L. Tongue (Tongue 1970: 110–16) and is reproduced verbatim in Katherine Brigg’s *A dictionary of British folk-tales in the English language* (1970: 554–60), but with the title “The Watchers by the Well”.¹ It is said to have been collected from a Hampshire New Forest gipsy in the 1920s, but to originate in the Welsh Borders. It may be an amalgam of various sources. The atmosphere of the story is somewhat unsettling, as if we are on an unknown psychic path: this spiritual dimension resonates with aspects of the Balinese legend we had explored earlier. Other elements in the story are extremely problematic: in particular the husband’s violence towards his wife. Although we felt uncomfortable with this, we decided not to bowdlerise the tale and rather to tell it more or less as Tongue presents it. As it stands, this element casts a dark shadow over the plot, a shadow perhaps projected onto the figure of the water-spirit Nicky Nicky Nye.

Ruth Tongue (1898-1981) has been described as “a problematic figure” for folktale collection (Simpson and Roud 2000: 363). Mystical and eccentric, she was often dismissed by more academic collectors: “she was, after all, a storyteller by nature, and she could never stop herself from improving a good tale” (Rhodes 2009: 3). One might, however, argue this makes her more rather than less in tune with the character of her sources: certainly, her authorial voice seems to come over clearly in this tale.

¹ A harburer is someone who looks after the deer of a forest.

At the start of the project, I had several musical elements I wished to include. One initial idea was to combine the *gendér wayang* with a string quartet, and I had already written some music relating to the characters of the story for this combination. However this, along with a number of other ideas, such as using many more folksongs than we eventually did, was abandoned. It was as if the story rejected many of the ideas we threw at it, only accepting certain parts: some of the motifs from the string quartet version I reworked to fit the ensemble of two *gendér* plus violin and synthesiser, and a couple of quotations from English folk songs (see programme notes for details and citations). We then worked on all the elements together as a group, refining and integrating them with the narrative over the course of a year and a half.

The group also worked on the visual elements over a period of time, including the rotating “magic-lantern” using a bicycle wheel, which was developed by architect and gamelan player Paula Friar, with help from Rachel Hewitt. The “well” is a gamelan gong-stand wrapped in hessian. The stones used as props also function as lithophones at one point in the composition.

References:

- Katherine Briggs, Katherine (1970) *A dictionary of British folk-tales in the English language, incorporating the F. J. Norton collection: [in 4 vols]. Part A, Folk narratives*, vol 1: 554–60. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Macfarlane, Robert (2015) “The eeriness of the English countryside” *The Guardian*, 10th April 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeiness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane>
- M. B. Rhodes (2009) *Songs and stories of Ruth Tongue, self styled folklorist from Somerset*. Crowcombe, Somerset: Halsway Manor Society.
- Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud, eds. (2000) *A dictionary of English folklore*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ruth L. Tongue (1970) *Forgotten folk-tales of the English counties*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.