Research aspects of “The Watchers by the Well”: an English folk-tale collected by Ruth Tongue, with new music for Balinese gendér wayang and other instruments by Nicholas Gray

This project was presented in a concert at SOAS on 1st November 2014. For more details about the music and story, see the introduction and programme notes.

Research questions:
1) How is Balinese gendér wayang particularly suited to creating dramatic atmospheres and what kinds of atmospheres can be created? Exploring the relationship between atmosphere and timbre: does the diffuseness of the concept of timbre contribute to this link? How to match visual and musical atmospherics and link with the story.
2) How to use improvisation and flexibility in building a composition project and, in particular, to use group rehearsals as a means to refine and develop the composition in a parallel with some Balinese compositional practices.
3) How to incorporate improvisation and flexibility in the final performance, given that gendér wayang is a largely interlocking genre.
4) What is the suitability of gendér wayang for an English story? This raises a number of issues: sound versus representation, portraying liminality (the borders within the story), post-colonial issues and ethics (representation and power). Are instruments sound-makers, culturally embedded symbols, or both?
5) Exploring aspects of performativity, ritual and psychic journey within the cross-cultural context of the story and the music.
6) Exploring the reliability of the narrator Ruth L. Tongue: an ethnographer or teller of tales? What does this tell us about ethnographic writing?

Research environment:
The project builds on the work undertaken for “The Birth of Kala” project (see http://music.sas.ac.uk/node/160). Some of the compositional methods relate to those explored in Gray 2011. The composition shows stylistic influences from Balinese shadow play, English folk song and experimental music.

Research methodology:
To build a composition that would take its final form through group rehearsal, creating a performance more tightly woven and integrated with narrative than the previous Kala project, though still incorporating Balinese pieces in the final programme as a frame.

References:
For bibliography of material relating to the story, see accompanying programme notes.