“Ngeli”: Flowing Together in a Gamelan Ensemble

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the collective flow experiences of participants while playing in a Gamelan ensemble. Participants were fifteen members of a Gamelan ensemble in Singapore who were prompted to articulate their phenomenological experiences through extensive semi-structured interviews. Their responses were then transcribed and analysed for emergent themes with initial codes guided by flow and collective flow theories. Three themes emerged from the data: community, chemistry, and collective peak. The Javanese term “ngeli” surfaced from the interviews as a parallel notion to the Western concept of flow. Implications for theory and practice were proffered in light of the findings.

Keywords: flow, collective flow, optimal experience, music psychology, cross-cultural
Flow refers to “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Also known as being in the zone, optimal performance, or peak experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Payne, Jackson, Noh, & Stine-Morrow, 2011; Privette, 1983), Csikszentmihalyi’s initial research that led to the formulation of the term “flow” involved hundreds of experts—including musicians (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For Csikszentmihalyi, people who play musical instruments tend to be happier, are more motivated, and more often in flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997); attentive listening to music can also induce flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Recent research on flow in music contexts has found associations between flow and (1) satisfaction with life (Habe, Biasutti, & Kajtna, 2019); (2) feelings of competence, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation (Valenzuela, Codina, & Vicente Pestana, 2018); and (3) grit, practice efficiency, and self-efficacy for self-regulation (Miksza & Tan, 2015). Antithetical relationships have also been found between flow and performance anxiety (Cohen & Bodner, 2019), amotivation (Valenzuela et al., 2018), and neuroticism (Heller, Bullerjahn, & von Georgi, 2015).

Musical activities happen not just individually but also in collective contexts, such as making music together in ensembles (Tan & Miksza, 2019). Even when theorising on flow as an individual phenomenological state, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) already observed how “singing in a choir and playing in an amateur string ensemble are two of the most exhilarating ways to experience the blending of one’s skills with those of others” (p. 112). Subsequently, flow experiences were found to be common in group activities such as team sports, music, and dance (Csikszentmihalyi & Rich, 1997; Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Mockros & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Walker (2010) argued that although flow in group and social contexts
bear similarities to individual flow (e.g., conditions such as challenge-skill balance should be met), it may well be “a qualitatively different phenomenon” (p. 3) as humans think, feel, and behave differently in groups. Through three empirical investigations, he also found that flow is better experienced with others than alone.

Salanova, Rodríguez-Sánchez, Schaufeli, and Cifre (2014) proposed the term “collective flow” (p. 3) to refer to “a collective state that occurs when a group is performing at the peak of its abilities” (Sawyer, 2003, p. 167). In a study examining the collective flow experiences of 250 participants at work, Salanova and colleagues (2014) found a reciprocal relationship between collective efficacy and collective flow, suggesting that group beliefs in their ability to do well are crucial to them performing at their peak. For Salanova and colleagues (2014), collective flow is made possible via social psychological processes, in particular, emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993)–where humans have the natural tendency to synchronise with one another emotionally and physically by mimicking expressions, body language, and emotions. Drawing on emotional contagion theory, Bakker (2005) hypothesised and found that flow may crossover from music teachers to their students, indicating that the flow experiences of teachers may positively influence the flow experiences of their students.

**Collective Flow in Music Contexts**

Flow experienced collectively in music contexts has been termed group flow (Sawyer, 2006), trade flow (Carter, 2014), combined flow (Hart & Di Blasi, 2015), and networked flow (Gaggioli, Chirico, Mazzoni, Milan, & Riva, 2016). Sawyer (2006) explained that while “Csikszentmihalyi intended flow to represent a state of consciousness within the individual performer,” group flow on the other hand “is a property of the entire group as a collective unit” (p. 158). When performing together in a state of group flow, ensemble musicians display
excellent teamwork, are in sync and have good chemistry with one another, anticipate the actions of their team members, and are inspired to perform at a level beyond what they could have done on their own. They engage in “parallel processing” (p. 159) where they listen and immediately respond to other musicians even as they are simultaneously playing without stopping. The group gels as one single unit as members work intuitively towards shared goals and develop a “group mind” (p. 159).

Building on the work of Sawyer (2006), a small number of researchers have more recently examined flow experienced collectively in music contexts. Carter (2014) posited the notion of trade flow: where two or more players take turns in jazz improvisation in a manner similar to having a conversation. In a pilot study exploring combined flow in musical jam settings, Hart and Di Blasi (2015) interviewed six experienced jam musicians from the United Kingdom and found that combined flow was experienced sequentially via stages and also developed empathy between musicians. Gaggioli and colleagues (2016) applied the “Networked Flow” model to examine group collaboration among 75 musicians from Italy and found associations between intrinsic motivation (autotelic experience) and emotional connection (emotional contagion), supporting the notion that the emotional aspects of social presence facilitate group flow. Most recently, Hill, Hill, and Walsh (2018) examined group flow in a collaborative compositional context while Bishop (2018) argued for the need to clarify group flow through further research.

Statement of the Problem

As the literature survey above indicates, research on flow experienced collectively in music contexts is limited. This is crucial especially given that music making often happen in ensemble contexts (Tan & Miksza, 2019). Furthermore, as with the vast majority of
psychological research, studies on collective flow in music contexts has thus far sampled participants from “WEIRD” (i.e., Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic) societies (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010, p. 29). The ensembles and musical contexts examined have also been exclusively Western. As far as can be determined, no research has examined collective flow in non-Western group settings, such as the Gamelan ensemble. The Gamelan ensemble functions on a different set of cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic ideals from the Western groups surveyed above and may offer fresh perspectives on flow theory. In particular, the highly collaborative and non-competitive nature of Gamelan ensembles—which depend on interlocking social and musical relationships for success (Goldsworthy, 1997; Jocuns, 2009)—may contain important seeds of insights on collective flow. While there is no known study that has explicitly examined flow in Gamelan settings, researchers have found accounts that appear remarkably similar to flow, such as enjoyment, loss of self-consciousness, and long periods of concentration (Haddon, 2016; Leonard, Hafford-Letchfield, & Couchman, 2013; McIntosh, 2013). It would be valuable, therefore, to examine how findings from this longstanding tradition in Southeast Asia can illumine extant research on collective flow and inform a diverse approach to music education.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the collective flow experiences of participants while playing in a Gamelan ensemble. The research questions were: (1) What is the nature of the collective flow experience in a Gamelan ensemble? (2) How, if at all, did members of the Gamelan ensemble experience collective flow?

**Method**

**Participants**
Participants consisted of 15 members from a Javanese Gamelan ensemble in Singapore: Nila (pseudonym). Of the 15 participants, eight were males and seven were females, with 10 Malays, four Chinese, and one Caucasian. Nine participants were in their 20s, five were in their 30s, and one was over forty years of age. In terms of their musical experience, two did not have any background in music before joining the ensemble. Eight of the participants had prior experience in Gamelan music and seven had music teaching experiences. Prior to the study, ethics approval was obtained. All 15 participants provided informed consent.

**Data Collection: Instrument and Context**

Interviews offer multiple perspectives to research questions and problems (Yin, 1994). Given the phenomenological and subjective nature of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006) were conducted to allow participants to recollect and articulate their musical experiences. In particular, the interviews aimed at gathering experiential accounts of the participants’ subjective experiences while making music; the emphasis was on understanding flow from their perspectives (Willis, 2007). Accordingly, this was a qualitative phenomenological study, one which focused on the participants’ lived experiences (e.g., Van Manen, 1990).

Data collection took place over a period of two weeks. During this period, all 15 participants were rehearsing for a performance in which they collaborated with dancers and musicians from Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The interviews were one-time events that lasted no longer than an hour each, and were conducted at times and locations at the participants’ convenience. All interviews were conducted in English and audio recorded.

During the interviews, participants were asked regarding their musical experiences in Nila and their feelings during rehearsals and performances. These broad questions then led to
flow-specific questions, such as their ideas of an optimal performance, both individually and collectively, whether they have experienced being in the zone, and factors that facilitated or inhibited flow experiences while they were playing in a Gamelan ensemble. To provide contexts to their responses, questions such as their background in music and music education, when and why they decided to join Nila, and their roles and contributions in the ensemble were also asked. Throughout the interviews, follow-up questions were posed to probe deeper into participants’ responses; the interviews were also allowed to unfold naturally and conversationally.

Data Analysis

After the interviews, the data were transcribed, coded, and analysed for emergent themes using the three steps recommended by Saldaña (2012). First, initial codes were assigned to make sense of the data. While these initial codes were guided by flow and collective flow theories (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Salanova et al., 2014; Sawyer, 2006), additional codes were also allowed to emerge from the data. Second, analytical memos were written to clarify and make connections between the initial codes so as to combine the codes into larger categories. Finally, the categories themselves were joined together to form themes.

Themes

Three themes emerged from our analysis: community, chemistry, and collective peak. In the qualitative narrative below, we present participants’ thick and rich descriptions (Ryle, 1971) of their phenomenological experiences in Nila according to the three themes.

Community

One salient aspect of Nila that emerged from the interviews are the people that constituted the community of the group. The word “nice” was used to describe fellow members several times (e.g., “They are all very nice”; “they are actually all very friendly, very nice”);
Informant 2 recounted how during his first rehearsal, “everybody is so nice” and readily welcomed him to play with them. In like vein, Informant 3 noted how the people were “sociable . . . everyone in the group feels welcomed and they talk to the members especially if they are new,” and as a result, “you feel safe in the group.” While the Nila community is diverse (“different backgrounds,” “different races,” and “different cultures”; Informant 8), informants expressed feeling “comfortable” talking to one another (Informant 12), being able to “connect” with others (Informant 11), and having “a sense of camaraderie” (Informant 7). Several members also forged deep friendships with one another. Informant 4, for example, noted how “all are close friends of mine” while Informant 3 reported how “I’m friends with most of the people.”

Members of the Nila community help and support one another (Informant 9: “I don’t see anyone who’s not helpful”). Informant 2, who had joined for only slightly more than a month, expressed how “everybody’s been very helpful,” guiding him in particular, on the “little, non-written intricacies” of the music. A more senior member, Informant 15, explained that “when they [the new members] can’t get it, I move around and help” them. Members also “encourage each other in playing” (Informant 7) and work “as a team [to teach] each other how to get things right” (Informant 1). Some informants highlighted how the leader of the ensemble was helpful and supportive. Informant 5, for example, expressed how “although he challenges you . . . he’s not pressurising.” She further explained that “he will give you . . . patterns to play but he will teach me, ‘Oh, you can try something fun’ . . . it’s the way he says it.”

As the leader himself (Informant 14) explained, leadership in a Gamelan ensemble “is more subtle and you need to rely on other musicians more than maybe if you look at the conductor.” Consequently, the “task master” approach, in his experience, “didn’t quite work out
as well.” On working towards an “egalitarian” “gotong-royong” (i.e., the spirit of working together as a community) where “there’s no clear leader,” he noted that “you will end up with some sort of hierarchy no matter how much you try to disguise it or downplay it.” Still, “I try to downplay it quite a lot . . . I think it is nice to have that as an ideal.” His observation that the rehearsal culture at Nila “is hopefully still friendly and pretty relaxed and you know you can just try to have fun” was triangulated by several ensemble members (e.g., Informant 1: “he [i.e., the leader] doesn’t pressure you”; Informant 5: “he’s very approachable person . . . he tries not to make things too formal, or too serious”; Informant 12: “this is [a] casual group”; and Informant 11: “the people are very fun to be with . . . I really feel that there’s no pressure”). Although programming decisions lie primarily with the leader, he tended to choose music that “people like.”

Indeed, people, for the leader, lie at the heart of the Gamelan ensemble. He explained that the playing of Gamelan has a “social function and even in Indonesia, you have all these casual activity groups that play Gamelan.” According to the leader, in order to maintain pleasant rehearsal atmospheres, food is “very important.” Interestingly, the importance of food was similarly mentioned by several other members. Informant 3 noted how ensemble members “talk to the members especially if they are new and they always like to talk about food, like snacks . . . because our group always take a break . . . we will have snacks in the middle.” Informant 6 said “they just bring food . . . Very chill, very relaxed,” further adding that every rehearsal, there is food like “pizzas,” “curry puffs,” and “egg tarts.” For Informant 10, food precedes music making, commenting, “It’s a lot of laughing, talking, eating, snacking first, [and] then the music comes.” She further explained that food “really helps you know . . . drinking coffee or eating . . . Yeah we are all very comfortable with each other, and then music comes later.” Informant 15
was even more explicit about the relationship between eating together and playing in a Gamelan ensemble:

Food is very important because . . . it’s a social thing, to be informal you have to have . . . sharing food is a very . . . universal way of showing that you are inviting someone to enjoy or to partake in something similar with you. So, in this way, you can . . . show this message very clearly like you are welcomed here beyond just the music . . . and I think that’s the thing that Gamelan is so great . . . it’s this democratic space. You can have a complete ensemble with musicians of varying levels. Right? Everyone is welcomed. It’s not like a Western orchestra where everyone has to be top notch for the music to go. You can have like, really beginners playing the balungan and it’s fine. The music can still go through all the iramas [i.e., tempos] . . . that’s the great thing about the Gamelan. It’s very democratic.

As a result of playing together in a Gamelan community, members learned how to work “together as a group” (Informant 7) and also to “communicate with others” (Informant 1). After working with fine Indonesian Gamelan musicians, Informant 4 reported that he became “more patient” with others, “more open to other people,” and reminded himself to be “more forgiving of people’s shortcomings.” Indeed, according to the participants, good relationships are crucial to making music in the Gamelan ensemble. As Informant 5 noted, “if you play Gamelan without knowing the people, it’s very difficult,” further explaining that “once you know the people around you, then you know what kind of personality . . . there’s a sense of comfort and even though we are playing different instruments . . . knowing that ‘Oh, your friend is playing that instrument’” feels more “interconnected while playing.” In like vein, Informant 15 noted how good relationships are important as “there has to be some form of friendship; otherwise, music
making cannot happen because you need . . . to be comfortable with the people you are making music with.” In Gamelan playing, any “negative vibe, negative energy . . . will definitely show” through one’s playing (Informant 1). As a team, “positive energy” (Informant 1), “positive vibes” (Informant 5), and “good vibes” (Informant 10) are crucial. And this brings us to our next theme.

**Chemistry**

Relationships . . . I mean I have been playing with them for quite some time . . . I think it’s important . . . especially for Gamelan, it’s very important for us to gel as a group . . . like at the end of the day, [if] the chemistry is there . . . you can work easily with everyone . . . the satisfaction to get through from one piece to another every single rehearsal and to see the whole product at the end of the day . . . that’s what . . . to me special . . . that keeps me coming for more practices and to commit to more shows . . .

As Informant 1 noted above, it is especially crucial for Gamelan players to display excellent teamwork and to “gel” as a group. Importantly, when “the chemistry is there,” it is easy to work with one another and achieve satisfying musical results together–musical results that are “special,” drive him to want more, and motivate him to return to Nila. This “chemistry” did not develop overnight, but through playing together with other members of Nila “for quite some time.” When asked regarding his ideal of an optimal performance, he responded:

. . . that’s where you feel everyone gels together really well . . . everybody knows their roles, everybody knows their parts and you know where your transition [is] going to be . . . that seamless feeling . . . from . . . one irama [tempo] to another irama . . . everything just goes well . . .
When asked how this optimal performance could be achieved, he replied, “Time . . . time spent together as [an] ensemble . . . and playing together. That’s where you start to gel slowly.”

Clearly, for Informant 1, time is needed for chemistry to develop and for an optimal performance to happen. Similarly, Informant 4 spoke about the “intangible bond” that developed over time and how this bond led them to “click” with one another:

these are old friends . . . we still have this . . . intangible bond . . . so when you play music . . . I think most musicians will understand this. This is something that you can’t describe. It’s just that you have this [*click fingers*]; you can [just] click with the person. So when you play music, it’s very natural, it’s very easy . . . the newer members . . . [are] also trying to embrace or understand this concept.

So powerful is this “click” that members can easily feel it when “something is off.” Members feel “comfortable” when they play together, and “you don’t feel as if it’s stressful you know.”

However, for Informant 2 who had joined the group for only more than a month, the “chemistry” and “click” recounted by Informants 1 and 4 respectively were noticeably absent. On why he has never experienced being “in the zone” with Nila, Informant 2 explained:

I’ve only been playing with them for so short [a] time. This will be my first performance with them. And I think it’s harder for me when I haven’t played for so long . . . so I’m still having to think a lot about what I’m playing. And, you know, playing with, say a string quartet that I’ve played with many times, it’s much easier for me. It comes. I’ve been playing for 30 years, 20 years . . . and it will happen here if I keep playing with them.

It is worth highlighting that while Informant 2 has never been in the zone during the limited weeks he spent with Nila, he was confident that it “will happen here” with time. Informant 5,
who has also never been “in the zone” with Nila, was similarly positive and hoped that she would be able to get into the zone

maybe today . . . because I feel a bit more confident today . . . this is my second wayang [show / performance] . . . my first wayang performance . . . was pressurising . . . It was my first time playing . . . with dances, with drama.

When asked what inhibited her from being “in the zone” while playing with Nila earlier on, Informant 5 responded “my personal struggle . . . with nervousness.” She also offered more insights when asked about how others playing in the group can affect her being in the zone:

Being in the zone, it’s when you lock eyes with any one of the members. Then, [you] can tell that, “Oh, you are in the zone” . . . it’s like . . . is it telepathy? . . . I know he’s in the zone . . . then he knows I’m in the zone. So we can feel, we are in that zone right? It’s actually fun . . . when you lock eyes with . . . your friend or your partner when you’re playing. And you know . . . all of us are having fun.

The awareness of each other while performing was echoed by Informant 13, who stated that “optimal performance is when everyone is aware of each other.” Informant 4 explained the musical awareness that happens while playing the Gamelan:

maybe as a musician, the zone is . . . you can actually hear each person’s part and you know how to react or respond to the person’s part, because . . . not only Gamelan, whatever music you play, it’s always, when you play as an ensemble, it’s always reacting to other musicians . . . that’s what happens when I’m in the zone.

Recounting an actual “in the zone” experience with another Gamelan group, Informant 3 similarly noted how “I felt like I could listen to everything at the same time, so I didn’t have to worry about what I’m playing.” This “everything at the same time” that Informant 3 alluded to is
a crucial aspect of the Gamelan experience, as myriad parts come together to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. And this brings us to our final theme.

**Collective Peak**

When asked to describe an actual “in the zone” experience with Nila, Informant 10 responded:

especially when . . . the ensemble is full like they have everything, the soft instruments, _gambang, gendèr, siter_, flute and that whole mixture of sound . . . I actually really can get goose bumps and things like that. That feeling . . .

The association that Informant 10 made between having a complete ensemble and peak experience was similarly noted by Informant 12: “The more people playing . . . the more we feel it . . . I mean if it’s just five of us playing . . . then I won’t feel it because like only _bonang_, ‘peng, pong, peng, pong [simulating the sounds of the _bonang_]’” She further added that as “Gamelan is an ensemble, you cannot play alone.” In like vein, Informant 7 noted, “that’s the idea of Gamelan–playing together, making beautiful music . . . That’s the ‘zone’ for me.”

In short, insights from our informants suggest that peak experience in a Gamelan ensemble is experienced collectively, in particular, when the full aesthetic demands of a piece is met. When this happens, Informant 10 can really get “goose bumps.” Informant 4 similarly recounted feeling such a “high”:

. . . that was one of the performances that I would say felt like we were in the zone . . . until now I still can feel the “high” . . . even the musicians from Indonesia . . . I was chatting with the guy who came up with the music last night . . . he said like, he felt good to perform that night.
Beyond feeling “high,” Informant 12 recounted how her father who went to watch her performance exclaimed, “Oh my god, it sounds like trance.” As she explained, there are two aspects to playing in a Gamelan ensemble: the performing arts and the spiritual; some members of the audience might have even felt that the ensemble members were “actually in another zone spiritually. But I would say . . . it’s more . . . like we are so engrossed [in] the music until we are . . . in that music.” This sense of being carried away by the music resonated with the leader’s description of the “in the zone” feeling when playing the Gamelan:

. . . in Javanese music, there is a term for it. It’s called ngeli, “to float” . . . it’s that feeling of floating where you are carried along by the music, so it’s like everything is happening and you move automatically with the music . . . So like you [are] familiar with the piece or you are familiar enough with what other people are doing so you can just go with it and you can listen and you can hear everything and you can hear yourself inside it . . . sometimes when you are performing when things are in a safe spot, I can just sort of like this part should be fine then just play what you want. Play as, play in a relaxed way, you don’t really have to think about it. Just float. Very nice feeling, that’s in the zone . . .

Interestingly, when asked to describe her zone when playing music, Informant 10 immediately mentioned the leader and commented that he is “always in the zone.” She also described her zone in a manner similar to the leader’s account: “. . . you just feel, you feel . . . very light . . . like the whole music is coming, you are just going with the music.” Informant 12 literally “started to swing” when she was in the zone—the flow experience was accompanied by a somatic response, recalling the leader’s comment on ngeli that “you move automatically with the music.”
At the state of collective peak, our informants have shown us how Gamelan musicians “feel high” with goose bumps and “feel light” as if they were carried along by the music. Describing the “in the zone” feeling while making music, Informant 15 described it as “a good massage” and that he would not have stayed on in Nila if he did not have such a feeling. Beyond feeling “high,” feeling “light,” and feeling “good,” the music itself needs to “feel right,” as encapsulated by the word “rasa”:

my idea of optimal performance would be . . . kind of understanding the mood of the music, like in Gamelan we always talk about the rasa which is the feeling of the music . . . There isn’t any indication in the music that ‘oh this is supposed to be slow or not.’ So it has to be like everyone has to, kind of know the background of the music, everyone has to . . . aim to get this feeling without . . . doing anything overtly. So it has to be like everyone knows it and you try to achieve this . . . ultimate goal, of the right feeling of the music (Informant 3).

However, developing rasa is a “slow process” and “takes time” (Informant 3). As Informant 4 puts it,

If you can achieve it, it’s quite amazing. If you can’t achieve it . . . you just know that you don’t feel good performing. Then that means as musicians we have not achieved . . . the perfect aesthetic . . . even if you are not playing [the] Gamelan, as any musician, you always want to . . . perform well; you want to aesthetically . . . achieve some . . . level of quality . . . as Gamelan musicians, this is the kind of level that you want to aim for, when you . . . feel this unstaged bond when [performing] together.

Indeed, this “bond” is crucial for a successful Gamelan performance. Informant 1 noted how during one memorable evening with Nila, “everyone was tight . . . that feeling was good
when we played together . . . everything gelled so well that . . . after the end of the show, you just
felt so good.” As Informant 8 puts it, “That’s [the] whole essence of Gamelan . . . You can’t play
alone, you play as a team and you need to produce a single sound out of the whole ensemble.”
From being a diverse community with “nice” people who help and support one another, to
developing chemistry among members, the musicians of Nila make music together in the state of
collective peak and experience a sense of aesthetic oneness and rightness—rasa.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the collective flow experiences of participants
while playing in a Gamelan ensemble. Three themes emerged from our analysis: community,
chemistry, and collective peak. Community refers to the people that constitute Nila. Although
they hail from diverse backgrounds, they are closely knitted, support one another, and bond
through food. Chemistry refers to how members of the ensemble “click” with one another such
that they are able to readily respond to one another musically while performing. Although this
may be facilitated by social bonding through food, it requires time to develop. Collective peak
refers to the state of being in the zone together as an ensemble. In this state, members feel high,
feel light, and feel good as they make music together to feel right—rasa.

Our data suggest, first of all, that community and social conditions are antecedents of the
collective flow experience in Nila. In other words, the sense of community created the necessary
pre-conditions for collective flow experiences to occur later on when members perform together.
As Informant 10 noted, “it’s a lot of laughing, talking, eating, snacking first, then the music
comes”—the communal and social aspects of being in Nila preceded the music making, and by
extension, the collective flow experiences derived from communal music making. In line with
Dunbar (2017) who found that eating together leads to social bonding, food emerged
prominently from the data as an important social activity. As Fischler (2011) noted, “If eating a food makes one become more like that food, then those sharing the same food become more like each other” (p. 533). Eating was clearly a means by which members of Nila bonded and “became more like each other.” The comment from Informant 10 that “it’s a lot of laughing, talking, eating, snacking” resonate with studies conducted using the Experience Sampling Method which found that “even in our highly technological urban society, people still feel most happy and relaxed at mealtimes” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 113). In addition to food, the role of the leader, as noted in the qualitative narrative, also emerged from the data as being crucial to fostering a sense of community. Consistent with Freer (2009) who found that conductors’ awareness of the needs of their singers are crucial for the facilitation of flow experiences, the leader of Nila was attuned and sensitive to the needs of his group members. In the spirit of gotong-royong (i.e., working together as a community), the leader downplayed hierarchy, selected music that his musicians enjoyed, and fostered a friendly, relaxed, and non-pressurising environment.

The sense of community evident in the data contributed to the chemistry that participants spoke richly about. Their thick and rich descriptions (Ryle, 1971) of how they engaged in teamwork, gelled, were in sync with one another, and had the intuitive sense of what was coming up next resonated strongly with Sawyer’s (2006) theorisation of group flow. Importantly, the musical awareness they spoke about recalls Sawyer’s (2006) notion of “parallel processing” (p. 159): where ensemble members listen and immediately respond to other musicians even as they are simultaneously playing (e.g., Informant 4: “you can actually hear each person’s part and you know how to react or respond to the person’s part”). As noted in the interviews, members experienced a sense of aesthetic oneness as the ensemble “gelled” and was “tight” (Informant 1);
this is consistent with literature that found that during peak experiences, music ensemble members “become part of something larger than themselves” (Hart & Di Blasi, 2015, p. 284; see also, Sutton, 2004). It also reinforced Sawyer’s (2006) point that in group flow, members develop a “group mind” and the group comes together as one single unit (p. 159). In the context of Gamelan, this “group mind” lies in achieving the sense of “right feeling” (Informant 3) and “perfect aesthetic” (Informant 4)—rasa.

One final point of resonance between data in this study and extant literature lies in how the leader’s account of “ngeli” (“that feeling of floating where you are carried along by the music . . . you move automatically with the music . . . you don’t really have to think about it”) was strikingly similar to Csikszentmihalyi and Lebuda’s (2017) description of flow: “It took 2-3 years before I gave it the name ‘flow’ because ‘flow’ was very often mentioned by people (‘Oh, I am being carried by the river, I don’t have to think, I just do it, spontaneously, automatically’)” (p. 814). Interestingly, the “feeling of floating” noted by the leader was similarly reported in Hart and Di Blasi’s (2015) study on combined flow among group jam musicians. Indeed, the Javanese term “ngeli” may well parallel the Western concept of flow, adding an additional cross-cultural dimension to previous scholarship in the music domain that has identified wuwei (“effortless action”) as the Chinese cognate of flow (Tan, 2016). Future research may seek through empirical work and conceptual analyses to surface other Asian related concepts of flow, in particular, noting points of divergence that may nuance and expand extant flow theories.

Findings from this study offer several important implications for theory and practice. Our three themes may be conceptualised as a three-layered pyramid with “community” at the base, “chemistry” a step above, and “collective peak” as the pinnacle. In “community,” the members are distinct individuals coming from walks of life; united by their common interest, they form a
community. In “chemistry,” the “I” join hands to become the “we” as members “click” with one another during music making. In “collective peak,” even the “we” disappears as musicians experience the larger sense of aesthetic oneness and the larger “I.” While we did not embark on this study with an eye towards the formulation of a theory, our three-layered pyramid which emerged from the data offers a useful theoretical model to conceptualise collective flow in music contexts. The practical implications of this theoretical model must be emphasised. Given that group flow “is a property of the entire group as a collective unit” (Sawyer, 2006, p. 158), this model suggests that collective flow in music contexts should be undergirded, first of all, on the notion of the musical ensemble as a community. This community makes chemistry possible, which in turn facilitates the collective peak experience. Since “group flow is hard to predict in advance” (Sawyer, 2006, p. 158), and chemistry cannot be forced, the sole factor that one may control is to promote communal bonding among ensemble musicians. To this end, music educators, conductors, and leaders involved in group-based musical activities (e.g., classical orchestras, jazz bands, and Chinese orchestras) may strengthen ties between their members in myriad ways—including eating together.

Before concluding, a number of limitations must be acknowledged. Although our informants have offered rich insights, they cannot be taken to speak for all Gamelan ensembles. Furthermore, despite the geographical proximity between Singapore and Indonesia, the practice of Gamelan in Singapore is ultimately a transplanted one. Future studies may examine Gamelan musicians from Indonesia, other parts of the world, and other non-Western musical ensembles. Additionally, our argument that community and social conditions are antecedents of collective flow is one that requires further testing and verification. Future research employing quantitative approaches (e.g., collective flow questionnaires; Salanova et al., 2014), sustained in-depth
qualitative investigations (e.g., ethnographic approaches), as well as examining Gamelan members’ participation from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Valenzuela & Codina, 2014) may offer additional insights and advance collective flow theory in music contexts.

Conclusion

To the best of our knowledge, this was the first study that has examined collective flow in a Gamelan ensemble. It has made contributions to flow research and the larger field of music psychology by providing thick and rich qualitative insights into the nature of collective flow in a Gamelan ensemble. In particular, it has contributed to the thin literature on collective flow in music contexts and was novel in examining a Southeast Asian musical ensemble that has received limited attention in research on flow and music psychology. The emergent theoretical model that comprises community, chemistry, and collective peak contributes to the field as it may be used as a theoretical framework for future research on collective flow in music contexts; at the same time, it offers practical implications. The term “ngeli,” which emerged from the data as a Javanese parallel to the Western concept of flow, reminds researchers and practitioners alike that flow, as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) noted, is indeed a phenomenological state that cuts across culture and time. Future research on how musicians flow together in diverse ensembles can certainly contribute to an ever greater awareness of this optimal engagement in music.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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