

SECTION V

MUSIC

THAI CLASSICAL MUSIC COMES TO AMERICA: CULTIVATING A RARE SPECIES IN A MUSICAL GREENHOUSE

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Introduction

Thai classical music in the United States has had an "unofficial" existence for some years, since amateur musicians from within some of the larger overseas Thai communities have had small, informal ensembles. Dr. David Morton formed the first officially recognized Thai classical ensemble at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in the 1960s, but sometime during the 1970s this ensemble ceased to function. Kent State University's ensemble was therefore a successor to the UCLA group. More recently an ensemble was established at Southwestern Texas State University (San Marcos) when a touring ensemble from Sri Nakharinwirot University in Bangkok left its instruments there, but this ensemble requires the presence of a Thai teacher; when none is available, the ensemble is moth-balled. The recent establishment of the Academy of Thai Classical Music at Wat Dhammaram in Chicago by the Thai community there has added another "official" group. Perhaps the pioneering days are coming to an end. This article tells the story of the difficulties inherent in establishing any "foreign" ensemble in alien territory as well as the particular challenges faced in establishing Thai classical music in an American institution of higher learning.

The Coming of Thai Classical Music to Kent State University in Ohio

The distant sound of opportunity knocking was heard at Kent State University's Center for the Study of World Musics one day in late 1977 in the form of a letter from a Thai musician living in Bangkok. Inquiring about the possibility of earning a master's degree in Musicology, Prof. Kovit Kantasiri, chairman of the Faculty of Music at Chulalongkorn University, also mentioned that he was skilled in playing Thai

classical music. Having spent fourteen months in northeast Thailand doing field work for my doctoral dissertation (1972-4), I was naturally very interested. Eventually, Prof. Kovit arrived for the Fall quarter, 1978.

Up to this point, World Music performances at KSU had consisted only of single instruments, e.g., Japanese *koto* and Chinese *zheng*. It occurred to me that were we able to purchase a set of instruments from Thailand, we might be able to form a Thai classical ensemble whose music is rarely heard in the West. Since my research had been in the Lao musical tradition of the Northeast, an area whose music is totally different from the Central Thai classical tradition, there was no hint of the challenges that lay ahead.

A set of instruments was purchased in the fall of 1978 soon after Prof. Kovit's arrival. They included two xylophones (*ranat ek* and *ranat toom*), two gong circles (*kawng wong yai* and *kawng wong lek*), three kinds of fiddles (*saw duang*, *saw oo*, and *saw sam sai*), a flute (*klui*), an oboe (*bee nai*), a zither (*jakay*), a dulcimer (*kim*), and a variety of rhythmic percussion instruments including *ching*, *chap*, *mong*, *grup*, and various drums. The only other set of such instruments in the United States at that time was to be found at UCLA, but they were no longer used in performance. KSU, nonetheless, claimed the distinction of having the only functioning Thai ensemble in the US. Our distinction, however, was to be delayed because the instruments only arrived in mid-April, 1979. This delay was especially alarming since we had scheduled our first concert for late May, only six weeks later.

In Thailand the performance of classical music is primarily an oral tradition. Although Thai composers create relatively fixed compositions, these are not normally written down, nor is there a definitive version. In performing Thai music, each instrumentalist *realizes* the melody into the characteristic idiom (or *tang*) of his/her instrument. The resulting texture has been described both as heterophonic (simultaneous variants) and polyphonically stratified. The ability to

realize a given melody into a specific idiom is a skill developed only over a long period of time and based on extensive hearing of Thai music. Most performers in the KSU Ensemble were and continue to be non-Thai (Americans and other foreign students) who therefore lack this cultural foundation so crucial to the performance.

Prof. Kovit was fortunately an outgoing and effective teacher as well as performer and wrote out "parts" for the two pieces we played in the May concert. Although none of us, except our teacher, really had a feel for the sound of Thai music, we managed to perform, though not without difficulties, two standards from the repertory--"*Kamen sai yok*" and "*Lao siang tian*"--with the remainder of the program filled out with solos by Prof. Kovit and arrangements of Thai pieces (by Thai composers) for Western string ensemble.

The performance of a little known and lightly documented musical tradition such as that of the Thai in an alien environment created hitherto unseen problems and required solutions that were sometimes unorthodox. Not the least of these was maintenance of the instruments. The Thai tuning system comprises seven more or less equidistant steps in an octave, and tuning is accomplished by specialists who tune by ear. Whereas the fiddles and other strings can be tuned easily by changing the tension on the strings, the xylophones and gong circles must be tuned by adding or subtracting from the lead and wax tuning weights mounted on the underside of the keys. Various solutions short of the proper (but difficult) one were attempted. Ordinary modeling clay worked well enough for the xylophones but deadened the tones of the tuned gongs. Auto-body filler was found to work better on the latter, though its relatively light density sometimes required rather sizable lumps.

In returning finally to the authentic lead/wax mixture in 1982, however, I felt as if I must be reinventing the wheel, since I had no guidance as to how a Thai tuner worked. The individual gongs, suspended on leather thongs, had to be removed in order to be turned upside down. The tuning material was heated in a toaster oven at first, but later it was found more efficient to melt it in the bowl of a large spoon over a candle. However, the newly installed tuning lumps tended to fall out at inopportune times. It was finally determined that I must heat both the gong and the wax so that they would cool at the same time, and this solution has worked best. In any case, the drier air of the American winter and our central heating still encourage the lumps to become brittle and fall out, sometimes in the middle of a concert. The remainder of the instrumentarium is easier to maintain, providing it is kept in a humidified room to prevent the wood and bamboo from cracking.

If practical problems seemed to dominate our attention from time to time, musical problems constantly challenged us. Overriding all was the process of transmission. Traditional musicians are trained by masters through a process that is as thorough as it is time and labor intensive. The teacher transmits each part of each composition to the students phrase by phrase until learned. Most of the day is spent with the students in a kind of organized practice which

includes correcting previously taught material and adding new phrases. The results are exceptionally good, for even student ensembles are capable of playing extended and complex compositions, all from memory.

We departed from Thai traditional pedagogy in another fundamental way. Students in Thailand, whether in school or studying privately, are expected to pay respect to their teacher (s) in a series of ceremonies generally called *wai kroo*. The Thai musicians who taught at KSU did not require a *wai kroo* ceremony or the traditional behavioral patterns expected in the master-student relationship. While those matters of etiquette which could be easily accommodated were observed, e.g., not stepping over instruments, others were not, e.g., the student keeping his/her head lower than that of the teacher. In most things all agreed that "when in America, do as the Americans do."

Because most players changed each year, we had little continuity. While the ideal might have been traditional rote-style teaching, which is demonstrably more thorough, we had to compromise between tradition and expediency because the teachers lacked the time and in order to realize another necessary goal, a performance during the spring of each school year. Both Prof. Kovit and his successor, Prof. Jarernchai Chonpairot, gave the student players written-out parts. Prof. Jarernchai preferred to use a simplified version of the melody in notation and instructed the player in the proper idiom of the instrument, but there was still too little time for most players to absorb the tradition. Nonetheless, our performance skills increased and our repertory grew. The spring concert of 1980, in which both teachers were present, was also heavily attended by the new influx of Lao refugees and their sponsors. For variety, we added performance of Lao-style music for *kaen* (free-reed mouth organ) and voice.

Prof. Kovit graduated in 1980 and returned to his post at Chulalongkorn University, and Jarernchai passed his candidacy exams in 1982 and also returned to his post in Maharakam. There being no Thai musician available to teach the ensemble, the task fell on me. With considerable anxiety I organized a new group in the fall of 1982. Among the members was Ms. Marcia Cooper, who had formerly been a faculty member in music at Payap College (now Payap University) in Chiangmai, Thailand. Her suggestion that Thai musicians at Payap record each instrumental part for each piece separately was a most fortunate idea. These tapes were transcribed into staff notation and given to the performers who learned to play them as they might any orchestral part. While this procedure violates the traditional practices of Thai music, it is one of the many and necessary compromises we had to make to cultivate this rare plant in an alien environment. In 1986, however, Prof. Jarernchai discovered that having the players first learn to sing the melody in unison made it easier to play idiomatically later.

Two notational compromises were also made. To the extent that a Thai notation system is used, it presents the pitches in arabic numbers arranged in measures having the accent in the *final* position, since Thai music, like certain other Southeast Asian musics, is end-accented. If the numbers are

converted to notes on a staff, the accent must be shifted to the first (downbeat) position in order to avoid unending confusion on the part of non-Thai performers. Furthermore, a Thai performer following the arabic numbers, which only show the skeleton of the melody, knows how to play it in the proper idiom of the instrument at hand but a non-Thai does not. However, staff notation is capable of showing far more rhythmic and melodic detail than is Thai arabic notation, and that is why the former was chosen. This compromise, nonetheless, is not as radical as it may seem. For years the Fine Arts Department in Bangkok has published Thai music in staff notation, either in book form or in issues of *Silapakorn Magazine*. Our notation matches the conventions of this Westernized-Thai notation.

While our chief goal is to understand Thai music through performance, we also perform in public and want to sound as well as possible. It is harder to make a Thai classical ensemble sound well than to make a Javanese or Balinese gamelan sound well because the latter two groups primarily use metallophones, i.e., instruments of fixed pitch. Furthermore, individual players contribute to the matrix of sound by adding given densities of notes depending on the instruments. In other words, few players are responsible for the complete melody. In Thai performance, each melodic player is responsible for the complete melody in that instrument's idiom, and some of the instruments, such as the fiddles, are fretless. Therefore, until players have mastered the techniques of these more difficult instruments, especially fiddles, zither, and flute, it is nearly unavoidable to sound like a beginning ensemble with out-of-tune notes, harsh timbres, and a lack of the nuances that make Thai music artistic.

The bowed strings constitute the greatest challenge. Since the Thai tuning system has seven equidistant steps in an octave, none of which exactly match the Western equal-temperament system, and Thai bowed strings do not have frets, Western players have trouble knowing just how "flat" or "sharp" to play the notes. Fortunately, our players had help in this regard from two Thai string players, Ms. Natchar Pancharoen, who joined the ensemble in 1980, and Ms. Seesom Eamsunpang, who came in 1983 as a graduate assistant; both graduated in 1985 and took positions at Chulalongkorn University. These "strong" players tend to lead and focus the "weak" beginning players. In any case, building a string section in Thai music is not dissimilar from building one in a junior high school Western orchestra.

One problem has remained insoluble for the present—the vocal part. Thai is a tonally-inflected language, and the melody, though based on fixed pitches at certain points, is nonetheless realized in relation to the linguistic tones. Furthermore, to be done correctly, the melody includes extremely subtle rhythms and ornamentation, neither of which is easily notated. Even a Thai singer trained to sing Western music

will have to make major adjustments before sounding Thai. Therefore, our ensemble has depended on having a native-speaker singer render the vocal parts, and when none is available, there is no vocal music.

Notwithstanding the many (and possibly to some, extreme) compromises that have been made, Thai music must be said to flourish at KSU. Performing the music has proven to be a far more effective way of teaching the structure of Thai music than merely lecturing about it. Those who have played Thai music, and many of those who have heard it, have come away with a special interest in Southeast Asia, an interest that has sometimes blossomed in the distant places in which our graduates find themselves. None has yet organized another student ensemble, but some have organized refugee musicians or travelled to Thailand as a result.

Although the KSU Thai Ensemble works each year towards the goal of a spring concert and an occasional off-campus performance, it is viewed primarily as a teaching tool in the study of world musics. Even those who had only a passing interest in Asian music have often come away with a new perspective on their own Western classical music. While they may have thought the particular etiquette related to Thai music and its instruments was unusual, they have come to see that Western musicians too have their customs and habits. Students have also had a positive experience in dealing with a foreign music which, to paraphrase Prof. William Malm, is very different from each person's previous experience, but absolutely logical in its own way. I believe this has had a broadening effect on our students.

While those who participate learn to penetrate the complex web of sound that constitutes Thai classical music, those who hear only the concert, both Thai and Americans, continue to face the challenges presented by this rarely heard music. Many Thai, both students and residents, come to hear us perform, but not necessarily because they understand or prefer this kind of music. They do it out of respect for their tradition and perhaps to see whether *farangs* (Westerners) really can play this kind of music. The American audience appreciates the music on various levels, depending on their training and experience. Some hear the sound as a series of intricately woven versions of the melody and are aware of the accents marked by the *ching* and the overall phrasing, but others hear only the totality. For many it is like hearing the Thai language—appreciating the undulation of the tones, the timbre of the voice, the inflections—but understanding none of the words. Naturally, a few find it too difficult to accept, just as some find Thai food too spicy.

In the meantime, our players continue to nurture a rare and perhaps exotic musical plant in an academic greenhouse where more and more students are being exposed to one of the world's most charming musical flowers.



Fig. 1. The Kent State University Thai Ensemble rehearses before its 1985 concert.



Fig. 2. Singer Duangjai Thewtong is accompanied by the ensemble at Illionis College.



Fig. 3. Rehearsal of strings and flute.



Fig. 4. Japanese student Tone Takehashi practices the *ranat ek* xylophone.



Fig. 5. The *jakay* is a 3-stringed crocodile-shaped zither, here played by Elizabeth Howard.



Fig. 7. Suzanne Ealy, playing *saw duang* fiddle, is flanked by master Thai musicians Kovit Kantasiri (right, playing *ton* and *rammana* drums) and Jaretnchai Chonpairot (left, playing *kawng wong lek* [gong circle]).



Fig. 6. Sirirat Visesku, playing *saw oo* fiddle, practices with Sara Stone Miller, playing *kawng wong yai* (gong circle). Photographs courtesy of the author.

Fig. 8. Master fiddler, Prof. Kovit Kantasiri (center), playing the *saw duang*, practices with Sunpong Boonsiri (left) playing *saw oo* fiddle and Dusanee Vanichvatana playing the *kim* dulcimer.



Fig. 9. Led by Kovit Kantasiri (lower right), four student performers prepare a performance.



Fig. 10. Gene Mothersbaugh, playing *ton* and *rammana* drums, practices with Tom Brennan, playing *kawng wong yai* (gong circle).



Fig. 11. Student instructor Seesom Eamsunpang teaches Gerald Moore in playing the *kawng wong yai* (gong circle). Photographs courtesy of the author.

