

TRADITIONS

Across Three Generations: A Solo Piece for Thai Gong Circle

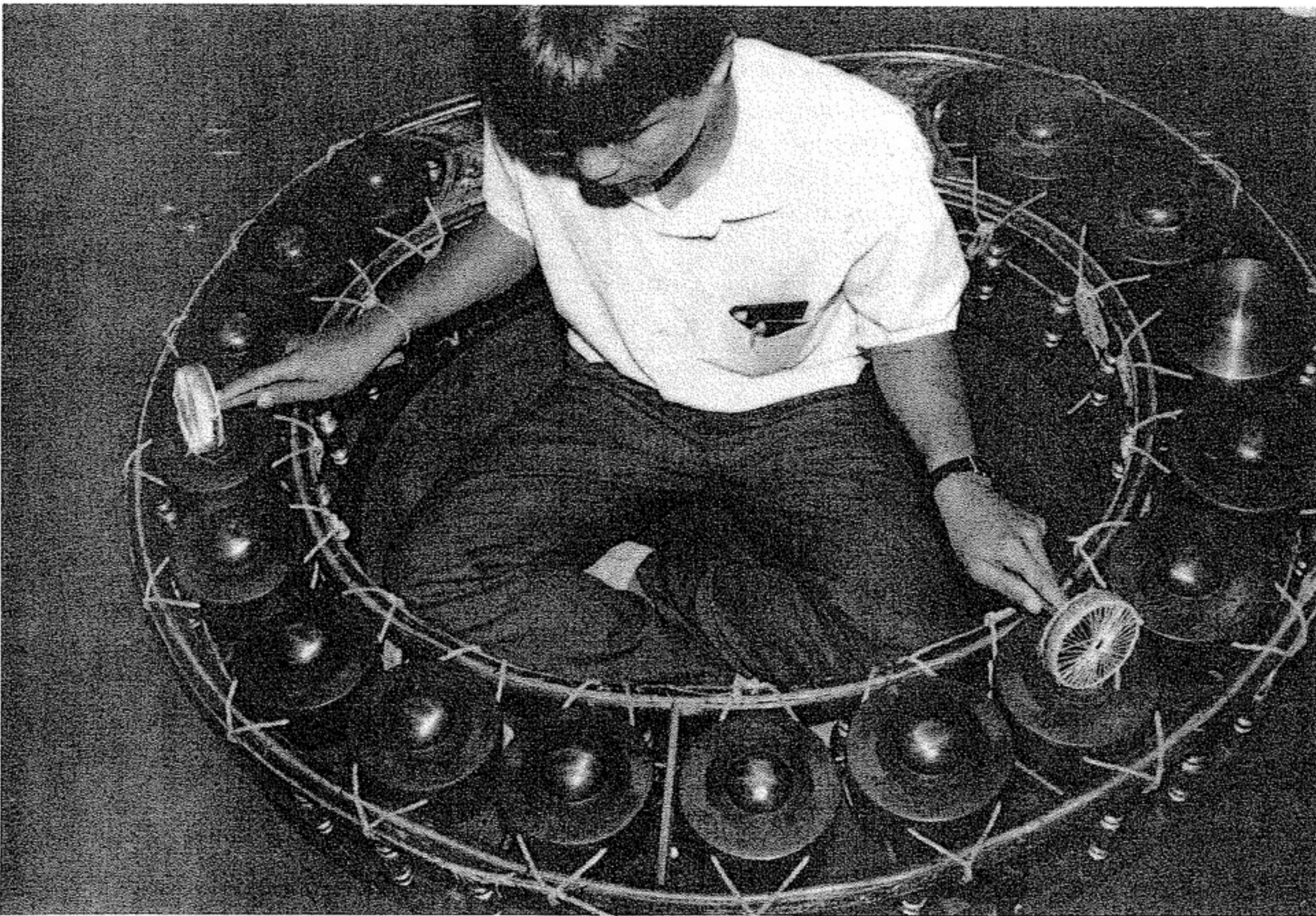
by Deborah Wong

Teacher-student relationships are at the heart of the Thai classical music tradition. A teacher's decision to pass on certain solo pieces to a student indicates a deep commitment between them, and the inheritance of a teacher's repertoire of solo pieces is a matter of great pride. Solo pieces (called *phleng dieo*)¹ are not simply pieces played by a single performer. They are special virtuosic renditions of pieces that show off the skill of the performer, the style of the performer's teacher, and the techniques possible on the chosen instrument. There are a group of nine great solo

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pieces that are said to have been handed down over time, referred to as the *phleng dieo lak*, or the basic solo pieces.² They are generally learned in a certain order, and last from two to over forty minutes.

Phya Sok is usually the first solo piece learned because it is short (only one section), and *Krao nai* is generally the last because it is very long and technically demanding.³ *Phya* is an honorific noble title, and *sok* means sad or mournful. The oldest form of *Phya sok* is in *song chan*,⁴ the second metric level. It is said to be over two hundred years old, dating to the Ayuthya period (14th-18th centuries); in this form, the piece can be performed by a *mahori* ensemble, a mixture of string and percussion instruments. It is also sometimes used in *khon* [masked dance drama] and various



The khong wong seen from above: the student musician is playing an octave. Note his hand position and the thongs tying the gong kettles to the frame.

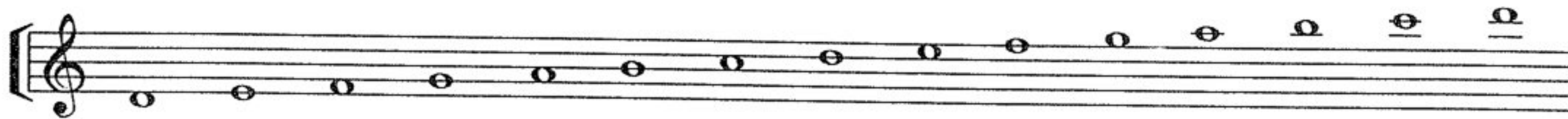


Figure 1. The range of the khong wong yai.

kinds of *lakhon* [a general word for many kinds of drama] in sorrowful contexts, usually for high-ranking or noble characters. Sometime toward the end of the reign of Rama IV (1851-1868), Phra Pradit Phairo (Mi Duriyangkun, commonly known as Khru Mi Khaek),⁵ one of the most famous musicians of the early nineteenth century, composed a *sam chan*, or expanded third metric level form of *Phya sok*, that could be performed by a singer alternating with a *mahori* or *piphat*⁶ ensemble. He also created a solo version in *song chan* that is still basic for all melodic instruments (Montri 2523/1980:559-560). A special solo version of *Phya sok* is also played on the *pi chanai* (a quadruple-reed instrument) at royal and aristocratic funerals.

The solo style probably dates from the court of Rama III (r. 1824-1851). A work for solo *pi nai* (a quadruple-reed instrument used in the *piphat* ensemble), created by Khru Mi Khaek (the pre-eminent musician of this period), is generally considered the first real solo work. Sangat Phukhaothong (1989:220) suggests that Khru Mi Khaek "cleared the way" for the solo style as it is known today;⁷ if there were others before him, their names have been lost.

A basic concept behind solo pieces is *thang*, literally "way" or "path." For musicians, *thang* has two special, related meanings: the style of a particular kind of instrument, and the style of a particular teacher. A disciple generally studies a single instrument in depth (usually the teacher's specialty), in order to absorb the *thang* of both the instrument and the teacher.⁸ A teacher can have many students; among these, only a few will achieve the technical ability or make the commitments of time and loyalty that are the mark of true disciples (*luk sit thae*).

What is the solo style? The late Dr. Uthit Naksawat (1987:47-48) wrote that the solo style is possible only on melodic instruments⁹ and not on metric or colotomic instruments like *ching* or *ching-chap* [small hand-held cymbals] or drums. Sangat (1989:221-23) says that solo pieces fall into two groups, those for bowed and blown instruments and those for struck or strummed instruments.

Bowed and blown instruments are capable of producing a continuous stream of sound (all blown instruments use circular breathing) that makes their style similar to that of singing (although there are no *phleng dieo* solo pieces for voice). This style is melismatic and sustained and is known as the "sweet way" (*thang wan*) of realizing a part. Struck instruments like the *ranat* [xylophone with 21 or 22 keys that often leads the ensemble] are particularly suited for a second style, called *thang kep* or the "picking-up

style," which consists of rapid notes. This style is considered very exciting and can embroider a basic melody until only experienced musicians can pick it out of the stream of notes.

Each section of a solo piece is usually played twice, first using the "sweet style" and then the "picking-up style." Ending with a very fast section of *thang kep* is an exciting way to conclude a piece. In solo pieces for *ranat ek* (xylophone), however, each section of the piece is played four times to allow more variations.

Pieces appropriate for "solo-izing" (*kan dieo phleng*) have certain qualities. Their melodies usually include all seven pitches of the scale. Ideally, pieces will have repeated sections, giving the performer a chance to play variations of the same material. Finally, their basic melodies should be "impressive" and "deeply moving" (Uthit 2530/1987:50-51). Uthit (op. cit.:47-48) says that these pieces "show off" three characteristics: the ways different instruments realize melodies (i.e., their *thang*), the technical skill of the performer and the performer's memory and confidence.

Since classical musicians rarely use notation when performing, and the systematic use of notation to collect and preserve pieces is a recent development, memory is the cornerstone of the tradition. A musician is only as good as his or her ability to recall pieces. While playing a solo piece, a musician thinks of two melodic lines at once: the "basic melody" (the Thai equivalent of the Javanese *balungan*, usually played by the *khong wong yai* [great or large gong circle] in ensembles), and the solo version that is being performed. The confidence that comes from being cognizant of both parts at once can be attained only by playing a piece over and over again, until the performer no longer has to think or to look at the instrument. This can mean playing the part hundreds of times, to the point that the musician no longer even finds it interesting. Only then, some teachers say, will the performance sound confident and beautiful to a listener.

Luang Pradit Phairo (1881-1954) was one of the most famous classical musicians of the twentieth century. His birthname, Son Silapabanleng, was superseded by various titles as he progressed through the ranks of court positions for musicians, ending with the title Luang Pradit and the name Phairo ("Beautiful Sound"). One of his students remembered learning the master's solo pieces for *khong wong yai* (Subin 1987:59):

"Khru Luang Pradit Phairo didn't teach his solo pieces the same way to each student—he took each student's individual ability into consideration. If a student



Figure 2. Two ways of ornamenting the same melody: sabat (top) and khwai mu (bottom).



Figure 3. Section of acrobatic khwai mu.

had the skill to play a part as soon as it was taught to him, the master would modify it in order to show off the student's special skills. But if a student tried two or three times and still didn't get it, the master would change the part and make it easier. Likewise, if a student couldn't remember a part and had to ask the master to show him again, it usually wasn't exactly the same as before. It was like this because the master was always thinking up new ways to do his solo pieces. Sometimes he'd think of a new version in the middle of the night; at dawn, when it was still dark, he'd come up to where we [young] disciples stayed and raise our mosquito nets and wake us up so he could teach it to us right away."

Theoretically, a master musician should be able to solo-ize a piece on demand. Accounts from the early years of the century (regarded by many contemporary musicians as the golden age of classical music) mention musicians who could improvise brilliantly in musical competitions, sometimes spontaneously borrowing from and improving on rival versions. Today there are few musicians who can actually do this, and the contemporary emphasis is on playing pieces exactly as a teacher hands them down.

The *khong wong yai*

Straight racks of gong kettles are found in nearly every part of Southeast Asia, and include the Javanese *bonang*, the Sundanese *degung*, the Balinese *trompong* and *reong* and the Philippine *kulintang*. The Thai version is called the *khong rang* and has eight kettles, but is no longer played (Morton 1976:46-47; Dhanit 1987:30). Circular gong racks now appear only on mainland Southeast Asia, although there are old models of the Javanese *bonang* in the shape of an arc (Morton 1976:46, citing Jaap Kunst). The earliest evidence for knobbed gong kettles on a curved frame comes from the twelfth century at Angkor Wat Hindu-Buddhist temple (Morton 1976:4,6,10), where a frieze of musicians in procession includes two representations of

gong racks, one with eight gong kettles and the other nine, set in arch-shaped frames and played by single musicians using two mallets. In Thailand, the earliest pictorial evidence of the circular gong rack is from the mid-eighteenth century (Morton 1976:46-48), but no known instruments survive.

The contemporary Thai *khong wong yai* has sixteen gong kettles and a range of just over two octaves (Figure 1). Although the Thai scale contains theoretically equidistant steps, pitches 3 and 4, and 7 and 8, are in practice slightly closer, though not as close as a Western half-step. The instrument is played by a single musician who sits inside the circular frame holding a mallet in each hand. The mallet heads are made of circular pieces of water buffalo or elephant hide that can be padded around the perimeter with layered strips of cloth; rice paste glues the cloth to the hide. The frame of the *khong wong* is usually made of rattan that has been heated and bent into a circular shape. The bronze gong kettles are forged by first casting them in saucer-shaped molds and then reheating and hammering the resulting plates into their final shape, like the Javanese *bonang*, but the resulting sound is generally more resonant. The *khong wong* kettles are tied onto their frame with thongs and are fine-tuned with a mixture of wax and lead shavings stuck inside the kettle knob. In Bangkok, a *khong wong yai* costs US\$400-700 depending on its quality and decoration (extra carving, painting, gold leaf, etc.).

The *khong wong yai* is essential in both of the two major kinds of percussive ensembles (*mahori* and *piphat*) because it plays the "basic melody" (*thamnong lak*).¹⁰ If available, it can be joined by the *khong wong lek*, small gong circle that plays an octave higher but in a slightly different style. A number of playing techniques are possible on the *khong wong yai*, but octaves (both simultaneous and broken), fourths, and fifths are the most common in ensemble playing.

Solo playing requires considerable skill because it uses a much wider array of playing techniques. There are, for instance, several ways of damping, shorter and longer ways of inserting *glissandi*, and a specialized vocabulary for many techniques. The exact alternation of the right and left hands (the equivalent of fingering on the piano) is a matter of much concern and a teacher's exclamation "*Phit mu!*" (Your hands are wrong!) is common in *khong wong* lessons.

Phya sok has only one section (called a *thon*), making it short for a solo piece and thus a good one to start with. The solo version for *khong wong yai* always repeats the one section.¹¹ The first time through is in the *sabat* style, which literally means "to flutter" and involves adding a lot of grace notes to the basic pitches. The second time through must (at some point) include a rather acrobatic technique called *khwai mu* (*khwai*, to cross or twist; *mu*, hand) in which one hand plays repeated ostinato notes while the other moves around striking different pitches. Figure 2 compares the same bars from the first and second times through of *Phya sok*: the top staff illustrates the *sabat* style, and the bottom staff shows the same measures in the *khwai mu* style. The *khwai mu* technique can sometimes require near contortions by the performer. In Figure 3 the right hand plays repeated C's and B's at about 11 o'clock if the gong circle is seen as a clockface; the left hand has to reach a full octave across to about 4 o'clock, resulting in a strait-jacket effect for the performer.

Three generations of *khong wong yai* teachers

My teacher, Professor Nikorn Chantasorn once told me that although he had studied how to "compose" solo versions of pieces, he had no desire to do so—who is he to change his teacher's *thang*? Yet he admitted in a different conversation that he had changed his teacher's pieces "a little, here and there." The value of preserving a teacher's *thang* and a musician's pride in individual skill and imagination can lead to contradictions. The past is sometimes regarded as better than the present: musicians were "more skillful", pupils were "more loyal", and there were "more pieces" that have since been forgotten. Pride in receiving solo pieces from a teacher derives in part from their arrival into the present out of a glorious past.

I began to receive Professor Nikorn's heritage of solo pieces during my second year of study with him. My technical ability was in many ways not yet up to the task, but my relationship with Professor Nikorn approached that of a traditional disciple. He not only taught me completely free of charge, but also put aside time to teach me every morning despite his many responsibilities. I would go to his university music department and practice until he arrived; our lessons (on *khong wong yai* and *ranat ek*) often lasted two or three hours, and frequently extended into lunch together at the school cafeteria. Sustained one-on-one daily contact of this kind is fairly unusual in contemporary Thai music departments; most music majors learn pieces in class or group settings, but since I learned more slowly, Professor Nikorn generously spent extra time with me. Every year, Professor Nikorn has two or three students (usually male, usually from musical families) who spend much of their free time with him in order to learn more, but traditional pupils like these are a minority.

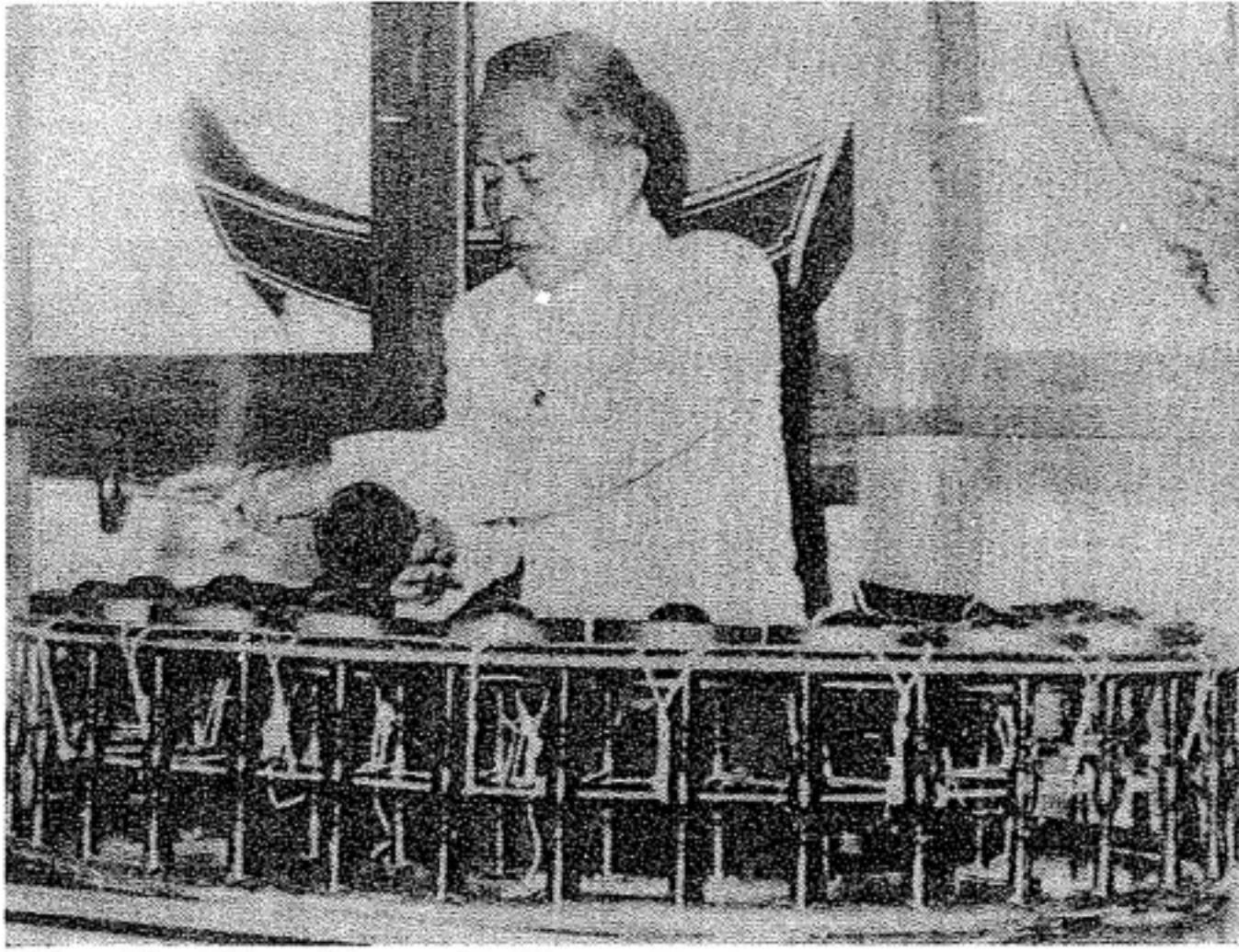
Nikorn was born into a musical family but left his

hometown of Nakhon Pathom at an early age to study at the Fine Arts Department School of Dramatic Arts in Bangkok.¹² As a teenager, he sought out Khru Son Wongkhong, one of the old court musicians and a master teacher of the *khong wong*. Professor Nikorn became one of Khru Son's disciples in the traditional manner, going to his teacher's house for lessons every day as well as helping out by doing yardwork and running errands.

As a young man, Nikorn was active in some of Bangkok's most renowned ensembles. By then he was leading a double life, working at a bank by day and performing at night. Eventually he decided that another degree might turn his life around and he entered the music education program at Srinakharinwirot University at the age of thirty-eight. His knowledge of traditional repertoire and his extensive performance background quickly made him indispensable and when he finished his bachelor's degree at age forty-two in 1987, he was immediately hired by the department. On a typical day, Professor Nikorn arrives at the department around 8 a.m. and then gives individual and group lessons all day long. Seven nights a week, he leads the musical ensemble at a large outdoor restaurant in north Bangkok; on Saturdays, he gives lessons to children at the Thailand Cultural Center. To call him a



Professor Nikorn Chantasorn (right) teaching at Srinakharinwirot University. As is customary in a *khong wong* lesson, he plays the *khong wong* part on the *ranat thum* and the student follows.



Khru Son Wongkhong playing a solo piece on the khong wong yai.

full-time musician is almost an understatement.

Professor Nikorn's relationship to Khru Son is clearly an important part of his musical identity. He vividly remembers asking Khru Son to be his teacher:

"When I was fifteen or sixteen I decided to ask Khru Son if I could be his disciple. I wanted to learn his solo pieces—I *really* wanted to learn them! I saw him at school every day, but I went to look for him at his house. I remember it was raining really hard, but I went to his house anyway, and bought some fruit on the way.¹³ I asked if I could be his disciple, and he said yes.

"After that I went to his house in the afternoon every day after school was over. I'd practice for awhile and then sweep the yard or whatever. We'd all eat dinner together—there were several other students too—and then Khru Son would teach us for a few hours after that. I'd get home at nine or ten. Sometimes Khru Son would take us along when he was playing somewhere at night."

Khru Son Wongkhong (1902-1975) is one of the great teachers and performers from the final generation of court musicians. The bloodless coup of 1932 ended the absolute monarchy and the era of court patronage. During the reign of Rama VI (r. 1910-1925) he was a principal *khong wong* player in the palace; he later performed with the Royal Department of *Piphat* and *Khon*, and eventually taught in the Fine Arts Department until his retirement. His last name, Wongkhong, is testimony to his fame on his principal instrument, the *khong wong yai*.

Khru Son's renown was also due to the fact that he was one of the preeminent disciples of Phraya Sano Duriyang (1866-1949), a great court musician of the previous generation. Although Phraya Sano was especially acknowledged as a great singer, he was skilled on many other instruments as well and passed on his body of solo *khong wong* pieces to Khru Son. He is commonly regarded as the composer of these solo pieces, but may well have

inherited them from his own teacher(s). Unlike many other musicians of his skill and status, Phraya Sano apparently preferred to arrange existing pieces as solos rather than compose. Poonpit (1986:128) quotes him exhorting his disciples to "study and preserve the things of old—the things that went before—and only then gradually compose anew."

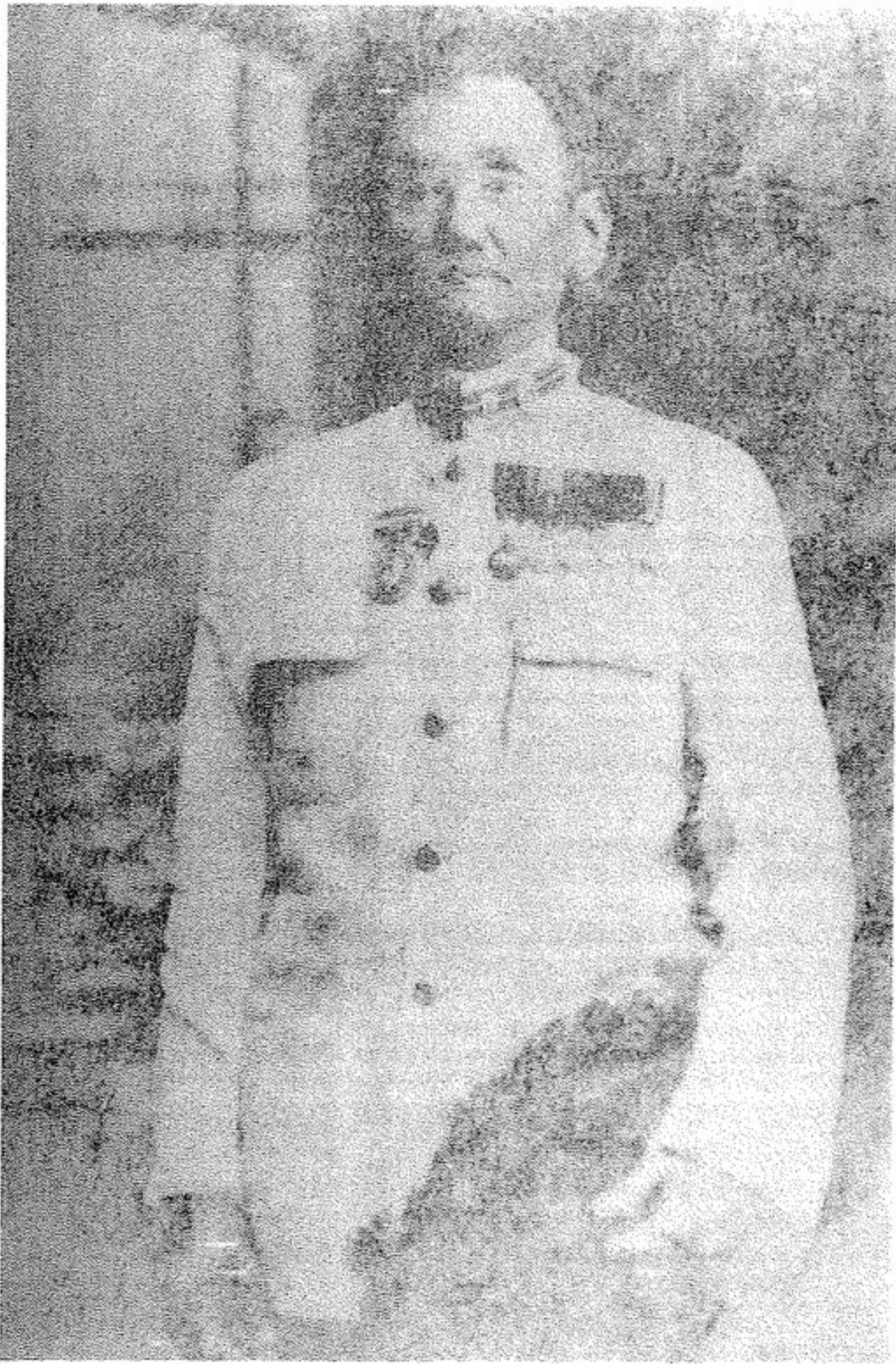
Phraya Sano's legacy is these solo pieces and his many famous disciples. His mark on twentieth-century Thai music is profound. His style continues to form one of the two or three major *thang* or schools of contemporary classical music (Myers-Moro 1988a:215-18). Phraya Sano's career spanned the reigns of the last three absolute monarchs of Thailand (Rama V-VII). He performed and taught in several of the most renowned court ensembles, including the Inner Palace of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868-1910) where he taught a number of the King's wives and concubines and advised the King on his compositions for dance-drama (Poonpit 1986:126-27). Poonpit (1989) has discovered several very early recordings attributed to Phraya Sano, and believes that he was the first Thai musician to record solo pieces.¹⁴

Khru Son is said to have received Phraya Sano's four famous solo pieces for *khong wong*, but he also arranged many pieces himself,¹⁵ including a short virtuosic version of *Sarasoen Phra Barami*, the King's Royal Anthem (played before movies and at the end of concerts). The most famous and demanding piece he inherited for solo *khong wong* is undoubtedly *Krao nai*, used in the *Ramakien* (Ramayana) dance drama for the mustering of the demon troops. In 1975, the Fine Arts Department invited Khru Son to record Phraya Sano's solo *khong wong* pieces. *Krao nai*, over forty minutes long, proved to be too much for his heart. Khru Son actually died during the performance.

Professor Nikorn is thus a repository of at least two generations' worth of solo works for *khong wong yai*. He has inherited not only Khru Son's works but Phraya Sano's as well, and the pieces attributed to Phraya Sano were possibly passed down from earlier generations. Professor Nikorn is justifiably proud of this inheritance, and has won several important competitions performing these works. Passing on the pieces, as he sees it, is his duty. He says:¹⁶

"Many Thai musicians are tightfisted with their knowledge. They're afraid that someone might steal their important pieces. But if a piece dies with you, what's the point? Passing on a piece does honor to your teacher."

Phya sok is now alive in the memories of Professor Nikorn's students, who represent at least a fourth generation in a long line of teachers and disciples. But the role and influence of teachers doesn't necessarily end with their death. One morning in the middle of my lesson, Professor Nikorn suddenly said he'd dreamt about Khru Son the night before. I asked what he was doing in the dream, and Professor Nikorn said, "We were just sitting



Phraya Sano Duriyang.

and talking." I asked what they were talking about. "I can't remember," he said, and laughed. "But I know I was sitting there asking him questions just like you are now." ▮

Research for this article was supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies; Title VI Foreign Language and Area Studies; the Asian Cultural Council; and the University of Michigan Alumnae Council. Thanks are due to everyone in the Music Education Department at Srinakharinwirot University-Prasarnmit, to Dr. Sarat Bunyarajpan (the Dean of Humanities at SWU-Prasarnmit) and Chumphon Pancha for the photographs of their respective grandfathers, and especially to Professor Nikorn.

"Thailand: Solo Works for *Khaung Wong Yai*," a record with notes, featuring Nikorn Chantasorn, will appear in 1992 as part of the series *An Anthology of South-East Asian Music*, published by Barenreiter-Musicaphon and the Institute for Musicology of the University of Basle. This recording contains many of the pieces described here, including *Phya sok* and *Krao nai*.

Notes

1. I have used the Library of Congress system for transliterating Thai into the Roman alphabet.

2. As a group, these nine pieces are referred to as the *phleng dieo lak*, or the basic solo pieces. Most performers would agree that these pieces are *Phleng Thayoi*, *Phleng Thayae dieo*, *Phleng Nok khamin*, *Phleng Lao phaen*, *Phleng Choet nok*, *Phleng Phya sok*, *Phleng Sarathi*, *Phleng Khaek mon*, and *Phleng Krao nai*.

3. *Krao nai* is rendered in all three *chan* or metric levels as a solo piece. See Becker 1980 for a discussion of Thai metric levels and their similarities to Javanese concepts of *irama*.

4. *chan*: Literally "level," the special musical meaning of this word refers to metric level or the expansion or contraction of a melody [cf. Javanese *irama*]. The core or most basic version of most pieces is the *song chan* or second metric level version. The *sam chan* or "third level" version expands the second level so that two "measures" become four, and so forth. *Chan dieo*, or the "single level," contracts the second level in half (two measures become foreshortened to one). A special musical form called *thao* is built around the concept of *chan*, realizing a melody first in *sam chan* and then proceeding through *song chan* and *chan dieo* (see Becker 1980).

5. Noteworthy court musicians were often given non-hereditary titles of noble rank. The Thai convention is to give a musician's conferred name first and his birth name in parentheses. The titles *Phraya*, *Phra*, and *Luang* appear in this essay. See Myers-Moro 1988b for more information. Teachers of every kind are always addressed by the honorific titles of *khru* (teacher) or *achan* (professor).

6. *Piphat* is a percussive ensemble with a core of five instruments: *ranat ek*, *khong wong yai*, *taphon*, *klong that*, and *pi nai*. Accompanied by the *ching chap*. This core can be expanded by adding the *khong wong lek* and the *ranat thum*, a lower-pitched xylophone. Used to accompany *khon* and ritual dance drama.

7. All translations of Thai source materials are my own, including comments from interviews.

8. In practice these two meanings of *thang* are virtually the same, because every teacher has a personal idea of what the *thang* of an instrument should be.

9. That is, *ranat ek*, *ranat thum*, *khong wong yai*, *khong wong lek*, the various kinds of *pi* and *khui*, and all the stringed instruments.

10. This is the Thai equivalent of the Javanese concept of *balungan*, and has several names in Thai including the "mother text" (*mae bot*), the "flesh of the piece" (*nua phleng*), and simply the "khong pitches" (*luk khong*). Although the *khong wong yai* part is commonly regarded as playing the skeletal melody, most musicians will acknowledge (if pressed) that in practice the *khong wong* always adorns and elaborates this melody. The basic melody can thus be

written out but is almost never actually played. In other words, the most basic version of the melody exists only as an abstraction of the *khong wong yai* part. My thanks to Manop Wisuttipat for several long conversations on this complex subject.

11. In the notation at the end of this article, the repeat begins at m. 132.

12. The Fine Arts Department School and College of Dramatic Arts was established in 1934 as the National Dance and Music School in Bangkok (two years after the end of the absolute monarchy and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy). This government conservatory of music and dance reassembled the teachers and performers formerly in the Ministry of the Royal Household and the Royal Department of *Piphat* and *Khon*. It was given its present name at the end of World War II. Extremely competitive, it awards degrees equivalent to middle school, high school and college. Its official aims are "(1) To serve as a government institution for teaching music and dance, (2) to preserve and popularize the music and drama of the Thai Nation, and (3) to make the musicians and actors of Thailand as honorable as those in others" [sic] (Department of Fine Arts 1949).

13. When students ask to become a teacher's disciple, they usually bring a small gift of fruit or flowers.

14. Phraya Sano apparently made an Edison wax cylinder recording of solo *ranat ek* sometime before 1915, but it does not survive. He also made a German Odeon record (ca. 1903-1909), and a Parlophon record (ca. 1918-25) of solo *pi nai*, though Poonpit suspects that the performance on the Parlophon record may be a re-release (or a pirate) of the earlier Odeon recording (Poonpit 2532/1989).

15. Khru Son himself solo-ized the pieces *Nok khamin*, *Toi rup*, *Dok mai sai*, *A hia*, *Thayoi dieo*, *Sut sanguan*, and *Narai plaeng rup*. He received four pieces (*Phya Sok*, *Sarathi*, *Khaek mon*, and *Krao nai*) from Phraya Sano.

16. It is said that some teachers choose to teach the "true" form of solo pieces to only their closest pupils, and may even "close the way" (*pit thang*) or change a piece when teaching them to lesser pupils so that they don't receive its deepest, truest form.

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