

Teachers on Tape: Innovation and Experimentation in Teaching Thai Music

by Pamela Myers-Moro

Thip and I met at the Central Post Office, then walked a couple blocks to Suriwong Road where her teacher is living at the Trocadero Hotel. Thip brought a big basket of food: barbecued chicken, rice, fried noodles, salted beef, fruit, and sweet desserts, which she served with utmost politeness, hardly taking any food for herself. Her teacher is an old fellow, wearing short pants and a sleeveless shirt, delighted by the apparent wonders of the world—the television (which remained on with the sound up all evening), the tape recorder, all the good foods and even the foreign visitor. Later in the evening, three female students arrived for lessons, all young adults, and played together as a khruang saay [stringed instrument] ensemble. The aged teacher had been a student of the renowned Luang Phairau Siangsau, and insisted on playing for me a cassette tape copy of an old, distorted record of the master playing. The tape's quality was so poor that the students could hardly contain their giggles, but the old gentleman insisted on playing it. When the tape was over, he bent over to way [make a respectful gesture toward] the tape machine, because his great teacher's music was inside. (Based on field notes, June 11, 1986.)¹

Here a Thai musician quickly—almost as a reflexive response—pays respect to his teacher. This is nothing remarkable—rites for showing homage to teachers, including deceased ones, are an integral and enduring part of the cultural system of Thai music. The twist here is that the teacher is corporeally absent, and the recorded sound of his performance comes from a machine, a tangible object sitting on the floor with us, issuing music as once did the fiddle of Luang Phairau Siangsau.

In his provocative book *The Recording Angel*, Evan Eisenberg playfully wrestles with the effects of recording upon musical meaning, and on our consumption and experience of music. At one point he suggests that when listening to a musical recording, “. . . unless one turns out the lights or follows the score, one confronts the deep embarrassment of listening to musicians who aren't there” (1987:72). Yet the man who appears to salute the tape player may not be experiencing recorded sound as Eisenberg suggests, but as music that comes from a teacher and is not entirely disengaged from the human producer.

There is a sense of experimentation and flexibility in the current teaching of music in Bangkok. Thai musicians employ strategies to satisfy different types of students in varying contexts of learning. While many musicians distinguish between the traditional and the new (a contrast often phrased as the past versus the present), virtually all teaching of Thai music today makes use of some innovation and experimentation, particularly regarding technology for sound reproduction: tape recording, computer-generated sound, and notation in various media. Although the introduction of new technology does not necessarily turn a musical system topsy-turvy, it must be reckoned with, and may mesh with long-held socio-musical values in surprising ways.

Thai Music

Classical Thai music is one of the art traditions long associated with the palaces of Siamese royalty and nobles.² The musical repertoire serves both entertainment and ritual purposes, and includes accompaniment for various genres of dance-drama. Music has been officially fostered by government offices, most notably the Department of Fine Arts, the Department of Public Relations, and the military, as well as the royal family, since Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932. Most universities have an academic program and/or club for Thai music, and instruction in Thai music is required in the nation's school curriculum for children. Thai music and dance is an essential part of the cultural material presented to foreign visitors, and many musicians augment their income by performing in shows for tourists. Classical music is, however, but one of many musical forms enjoyed by the Thai people, along with a multitude of commercially disseminated pop styles (from Thailand and abroad), folk musics and classical European music.

As in Java, Bali and other parts of Southeast Asia, the musical ensembles of Thailand include tuned gongs, wooden- and metal-keyed xylophones, vertically-held flutes and reed instruments, bowed string instruments—held upright upon the leg or resting upon a peg on the floor—drums and often a vocalist or two. Thai music is also similar to other Southeast Asian musics in structure, with its polyphonic stratification (many versions of a melody at once). A small pair of hand-cymbals (*ching*), shaped like inverted bowls or small bells and connected with a length of

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string, sounds on metrically important pitches. This outlines the skeleton of a composition that is played by all instrumentalists and filled in according to the idiom of each instrument, the taste of the individual musician, and other factors that might shape a given performance.

Teachers and Music Lessons

Being a musician is often practically synonymous with being a music teacher in Thailand. While prospective teachers must be granted approval ritually—to insure that their teaching will be successful—there appear to be few actual restrictions upon who may become a teacher, at least in the modern context. Virtually every musician is a teacher. The only musicians I encountered who did not yet teach were either students who were not accomplished enough or amateur players. One reason for this is pragmatic: today, the best way for a musician to earn a living is to teach, either at a school, through a government department or bureau of some sort, or private. Almost universally, the word *khruu*—teacher—is used as a term of address for musicians. The term is derived from the Sanskrit *guru*.³

Traditionally, a student learns Thai music by rote. Teacher and student sit facing one another, either at two instruments turned back to back, or on opposite sides of a single instrument, with the teacher playing backwards (in

the case of stringed instruments, teacher and student may sit side by side, each on their own instrument). Over and over, the teacher plays phrases from the piece being learned, at first small fragments and then longer and longer segments as the student commits the song to memory. Learning to play a composition is essentially learning the song by heart; most technical difficulties in playing are worked out through the many repetitions. The precocious or the advanced may memorize a song more quickly than others, but still the learning occurs one-on-one with the help of a teacher, and until recently there were no short cuts. The traditional teaching of music in Thailand requires an intimate connection between teacher and student, if for no other reason than the amount of time and social contact involved.

The word “traditional” is, of course, problematic. Yet the musical instruction of the past contrasts with the conditions of today in the minds of musicians. It is the amount of actual contact between teacher and student that constitutes, in my estimation, the greatest contrast between the instruction of Thai music today and in the past, or at least as the past is recalled. Although even in the past instruction could not have occurred strictly one-on-one, for the master musicians ran “houses” with large numbers of performers and students, it appears that only in recent years



Mr. Phichit Chayseri playing ranaat thum.

have actual classes in music been taught. Today, a child may attend an institute and sit in a classroom studying the *khim* (hammered zither) alongside a dozen other *khim* students, while a teacher stands in front of the group, writing numerical notation (a 20th century invention) on a blackboard. A young adult may choose to study for a degree in music at a university, gaining knowledge through a standardized, formalized, and necessarily segmented curriculum. These situations involve a fundamentally altered social experience of learning; one of the most obvious alterations is the amount of time spent together by teacher and student, and the manner in which that time is arranged, scheduled and counted.

Use of New Technology

The cassette tape player/radio is surely one of the most sought-after material acquisitions, particularly in Bangkok. The machines are essential to the enjoyment of pop music, which can be heard on a crowded radio dial and on relatively inexpensive cassette tapes. Not surprisingly, the tape player has been incorporated into the study of classical music as well.

I discussed the use of tape recordings in music teaching with Mr. Phichit Chayseri, a professor of music at Chulalongkorn University. He explained that among his "formal students," those who come to his home for lessons and study by what he feels are relatively traditional methods, the tape recorder is indispensable. Phichit stressed that virtually no students in Bangkok, even the most serious ones, have time to come for daily lessons as in the past. He likened the tape recorder to a "teacher at home," since the student could listen over and over to the correct way to play a composition, reinforcing her own memory. I observed the tape recorder used in lessons at Phichit's home on at least two occasions.

The young woman is in her late teens, and has studied piano for a number of years; she can play several Beethoven sonatas. She only began studying the khaung wong yai [gong-circle] a year ago, but evidently has progressed very quickly. Her mother is a professor of medicine at Chulalongkorn University, and plays the ranaat eek [wood-keyed xylophone] as a hobby. The lesson was held on a breezy outdoor patio, on which an entire ensemble of instruments was set up, though no other students were present. The student sits at the khaung wong, while the teacher plays the ranaat thum [a lower-pitched xylophone]. When I asked how the student learns the correct style characteristic of khaung, Phichit relied, "I play khaung [on the xylophone]." The student brought a small tape recorder with her, and taped portions of her lesson. She did not use any written notation. Generally she and Phichit played simultaneously, he calling out certain words to her now and then as they went along. It was a light-hearted, snappy lesson. They did not "drill" small passages. The student said hardly a word the entire afternoon but laughed, giggled, smiled frequently. She is learning the phleeng

ruang [suites] repertoire, and she kept paper and pen near nearby, checking off titles on a list of compositions. (Field notes, February 15, 1986.)

Three young men came by with a rammanaa and a new thoon, the pair of small drums which are generally played at the same time by a single person. One of the students had made the thoon (a "goblet drum"). He'd bought the ceramic body and then put on a leather head, lacing it up with twine. Phichit said to me, "Isn't he smart? He made it himself." He gave the young man an out-of-commission drum body he'd had lying around, and asked if he'd make one for him, too. The students had come to learn the standard naa thap or rhythmic patterns for the thoon and rammanaa. They set up their portable Sony tape recorder, then Phichit sat down and chanted out the syllabic rendition of naa thap,⁴ sometimes playing along on the drums, sometimes not. Occasionally the students added ching to clarify difficult patterns. The naa thap for these drums are very standardized: there is one for each chan [metric level] of each given category of songs (for example, all "Lao"-derived songs). Time is saved: the students will go home and play the tape over and over until they have memorized all the patterns. (Field notes, March 8, 1986.)

It seemed that the only students who make use of the tape recorder during lessons were those who studied more or less traditionally, that is, through one-on-one contact with a teacher rather than in a classroom. Students and amateurs who learned with written notation apparently did not feel the need to record lessons. So the tape recorder serves only as a practical extension of the teacher, and is not in itself altering the relationship between teachers and students very much. Furthermore, the machine allows a certain amount of instruction to occur that otherwise might not be possible in the context of modern life—by context I refer vaguely to the "lack of time" that seems to be on the tip of many at least middle-class Thai tongues, a lack caused by everything from the lengthy white-collar work day to demanding educational programs for the young to the notorious Bangkok traffic jams. Both the *khaung wong* student and the three young men would learn far more slowly if they studied with a teacher only once or twice a week, and even more slowly than they might have in the traditional context where a student lived with the teacher.

While it would seem possible for musicians to learn new repertoire by listening to commercially available cassette recordings, I met no one who admitted to having done so. Some even seemed puzzled when I suggested the possibility. As an outsider, I could see little difference between learning from a tape recording made at one's own lesson, and learning from a commercial recording. This suggests that learning still involves an actual social relationship between a teacher and student. One musician, who is intensely aware of *thang* (stylistic school or lineage) affiliations and the protection of knowledge they involve, complained of the commercial recording of a composition which he felt was so supernaturally powerful that it should

have remained secretively guarded. He specifically complained that since it had been recorded, "just anyone" could learn the composition from the tape. Dissemination of music via commercial tapes appears at this point to be esoterically denied, exoterically feared, and may exceed the bounds of acceptable music learning.

One amateur musician described for me, however, how she enjoys playing her *sau duang* (a two-stringed fiddle) along with tape recordings she has purchased, so long as the tape is of songs for which she has notation. She acknowledged the difficulty of playing along with a *thang* or rendition different from that given to her by her teacher, yet advised me: "If you try it and you find you're playing something different than the recording, just keep going and it will come out okay eventually."

Compared to tape, an even more efficient means of transmitting music from teacher to student is written notation. Written notation is used as the primary means of transmitting music solely with students who are very young, beginning level, or amateur musicians (Myers-Moro 1990). Notation allows students to receive a new song from their teacher at every lesson, and yet not memorize any material (though some students may work hard to memorize a song even if they initially learn it from notation). I witnessed some amateurs who rarely practiced their instruments, yet who enjoyed playing from collections of notated songs at weekly sessions with a teacher. Highly motivated students are quickly weaned away from written notation, and will use it only as a mnemonic device. In the transmission of music, the use of tape recordings and written notation contrast strongly. The choice of which medium to use corresponds with how teachers perceive and label the intent and accomplishments of students.

Skillful teachers adapt their teaching styles to serve students of various ages, capabilities and levels of motivation even within a single teaching session. One example is what might be called the family music lesson, for which a teacher may be hired to visit the family home once a week to instruct various family members individually and/or lead the family together as a musical ensemble. Sometimes such groups include a family's servants as well as children. Accompanying my *sau duang* teacher, Mr. Niphaan Thanarak of the government's Department of Public Relations, I visited lessons in the homes of several upper-middle-class families. At one, female members of the extended family were present (they did not all live in the same house but came together for music study) as were two of their children.

I spent three hours this morning at the comfortable home of an affluent family on Soi 31.⁵ Niphaan teaches several women there every Wednesday morning, and today he also gave first lessons to a little boy and girl. The women all play the khim, though there was another teacher giving a lesson on the ranaat in another room. A black grand piano stood in one corner. The

women played from large notebooks of notation. I played along with them on the songs I knew, while Niphaan took the boy, about 12 or 13 years old, outside for his first lesson on the sau duang. His mother told me proudly, ". . . he already studies khon [masked dance-drama]." The lesson had to occur outside because the sound was offensive to the other players: the boy's initial attempts to pull the bow across the unfingered strings were scratchy and awkward. Later, Niphaan gave the girl her first lesson on the khim; he did not use notation but taught her note by note until she'd memorized a few phrases. Because Niphaan is often dour and shy during my own lessons, I was surprised to find him energetic and good-humored with the children. He eventually joined the group of adult women, and we played through a few songs, Niphaan correcting the students when they lost their place. (Based on field notes, March 12, 1986.)

One can imagine that the teacher's adjustments to the needs and desires of the various students might be similar to those of the master teachers of the past, with their households of students. The major difference would be the relative infrequency and shorter duration of the family lesson today.

Besides the use of tape cassettes and written notation in lessons, the newest pedagogical technologies are those used in classroom, rather than individual, instruction. Group instruction in itself is a radical change. This is now the primary style of teaching at some private institutes for the study of Thai music, created in part as responses to Yamaha and other popular schools which teach Western instruments such as electronic keyboards. Classroom instruction is also used at the Wittayalay Natasin—an arts school for young people—run by the government's Department of Fine Arts. At least at the level of beginning students, there is little one-on-one contact between teacher and student. The staff at the Foundation of Luang Pradit Phayrau, a music school run by the descendants of renowned composer Luang Pradit, not only teach students in groups but also seem driven to use the newest technologies to invigorate the study of traditional music.

Ch. was busy consulting with a colleague on a new personal computer program which will help teach students how to read musical notation. The computer produces a series of numerals, grouped in sets of four (as in some forms of Thai musical notation); as each successive numeral appears, the pitch it represents is sounded by the computer. A student observing such a program would learn to associate the appearance of a numeral with the sound of a particular pitch. Ch. explained that currently he teaches by singing into a microphone while writing the notation on a chalkboard, but he thinks that the computer will make this job more efficient and possibly more interesting for the students. He is also excited about plans to store notation on computer, to create a "library of notes" that will "eliminate human error." He pointed out that cumulative errors on the part of teachers have gradually altered many songs in the Thai repertoire, but computer storage will prevent this from occurring



Siri Wichaweet with krap seephaa.

in the future. Ch. also envisions students taking music software home in order to learn new songs.

Another device of Ch.'s is the "electric board" which is used to teach classes of khim students. The instructor sits off to one side, holding a control panel covered with buttons. When pushed, the buttons cause lights to appear on a board in front of the class. The board has lines painted on it to represent the strings of the khim, and the lights show where and when the strings should be struck in order to play a song. (Field notes, May 22 and 27, 1986.)

For the most part, the adaptations used at the Foundation are simply modernizations of earlier innovations such as written notation that are designed to meet the needs of large group instruction. Computerized notation is merely a change of medium (from paper to software disk), though the computer's ability to generate sound potentially eliminates the human teacher who might sing or play an instrument to bring notation to life. The electric board is actually a magnified representation of the instrument it is designed to teach. It is necessary because an entire classroom of students could not see the teacher demonstrating upon a real *khim*, and the teacher would not have time to demonstrate in front of each student.

The real change that motivates and necessitates these experiments with technology is the shift from individual or

small-group instruction (such as the family lesson) to classroom learning. Technology in itself does not change society, but rather fills needs created by social changes. This becomes the primary question: why do music students of the 1980s and '90s study in groups? On the surface, at least, the explanations are economic and, as alluded to earlier, always tied to notions of *time* in the sense of pace of life, the fullness of days. It is economical—less expensive, less time-consuming—for one instructor to transmit music to many students at once. This is accomplished more rapidly if all the students are studying the same instrument than if each is learning the idiomatic melodies characteristic of different instruments in an accomplished ensemble. To the extent that such instruction truly is economical, group learning may today be making what was once an elite tradition accessible to a broader population. In the last decade and a half or so, vastly more Bangkokians study Thai music as amateurs, hobbyists, and beginning level students than in many decades past. Classical music and dance, with their royal associations and deep ties to national identity, have become activities which the urban middle-class, in particular, wants to claim. Changes in pedagogy and the instruments of teaching imply changes in who shall play music, who shall listen, and why.

Were classrooms and groups the only contexts for learning Thai music, the tradition would be poised for radical change. The notion that computer storage of notation will "eliminate human error" denies the creativity and flexibility of generations of musicians trained at the side of master teachers. The heavy reliance upon recording of any sort, be it computer software, written notation, or even the cassette tape, could possibly impede a student's leap to improvisation, a skill which all accomplished musicians must learn.

A classroom student does not gain the religious or supernatural knowledge central to the musical tradition—the key to relationships with other musicians, with implications for the entire cultural place of both teachers and music. As long as students labeled by their teachers as "serious" are drawn away from their notation and tapes, or use them only in certain situations, the Thai musical craft (repertoire and performance practice) may not be so swiftly altered.

Not all experimentation in teaching is confined to using new technology or teaching large numbers of students simultaneously. Siri Wichaweet is a musician who takes pride in developing new ways of *explaining* how to play a musical instrument. He is a specialist in *krap seephaa*, one of the very few musicians alive who can perform the recitation genre that is accompanied by rhythmic patterns on pairs of wooden sticks, held in each hand. He described himself as an academic rather than performing musician, and he teaches every summer at workshops for school music instructors sponsored by the Ministry of Education.

He claimed that though he had only studied with his own teacher for one month (a rarity, if true), he has taken ten years to figure out new techniques with which he can teach others efficiently. He joked to me that he could teach Phichit Chayseri—the musician described earlier who used the tape player in lessons—to *krap* [play the sticks] in five minutes—within two Phichit could produce a good loud crack. This reminds us that even among those Thai musicians who value tradition and traditional teaching most highly, some individuals delight in experimentation and creative innovation. ▀

Notes

1. This essay is based upon excerpts from my doctoral thesis in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, 1988. Most of the introductory and concluding ideas, however, were added in July 1991. I conducted field research in Bangkok in 1985-86, funded by Fulbright IIE.

2. The foreign name of the Thai nation was officially changed in 1939 from Siam to Thailand.

3. The reciprocal of *khruu* is the term *luuk sit*, meaning "disciple."

4. The syllables serve as a code, indicating exactly what kinds of strokes are used, and where the strokes are placed on the drum heads to produce a particular rhythmic pattern. It is possible to chant or sing all the information a drummer needs to know in order to play properly; similar syllabization of drum patterns occurs in India and throughout Southeast Asia.

A similar pedagogical shorthand is used for the *khaung wong* or gong-circle. A teacher may sing or call out certain syllables that indicate the gong(s) to be hit, with which mallet, brief rhythmic patterns, etc. This system is called *nauy paak*, *nauy* being the most common syllable on which melodies are sung (equivalent to "la" in English), and *paak* translates as "mouth."

5. A *soi* is a lane or road, often numbered, which branches off of a main thoroughfare.

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