Thai Music at Kent State University

by Terry Miller

Kent State University was first introduced to Thai music when Professor Kovit Kantasiri, a well-known Bangkok *saw* (fiddle) player, arrived to earn a masters degree in 1978. With his help, and money from Max T. Miller, my father, we ordered an extensive set of instruments. When they arrived only five weeks before our first concert, in May of 1979, our excitement was overwhelmed by our feelings of inexperience! The ensemble was then directed by Professor Kovit or Professor Jarernchai Chonpairot, Ph.D. students at Kent. Since 1982, I have kept the ensemble going, sometimes with help from Thai musicians in the area, sometimes without.

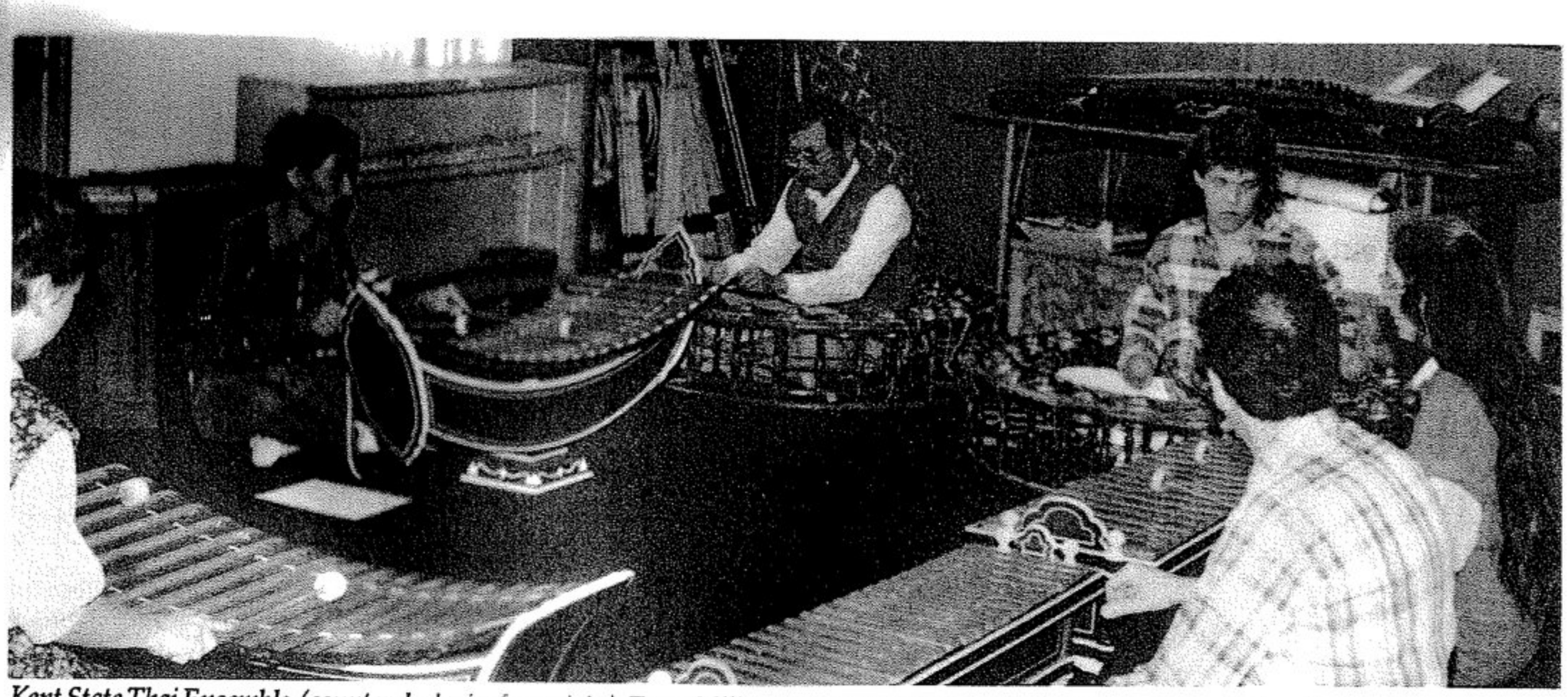
The ensemble includes all Thai classical instruments except for the large drums (*glawng tut*). Sometimes using transcriptions supplied by musicians at Payap University in Chiang-mai, we are able to play most of the well-known *sepah*-type compositions, such as *"Kamen sai yok," "Lao siang tian,"* and *"Nok kao kamae"*, including the tri-partite (*pleng-tao*) form. We have also played some overtures (*hom rong*). When we have singers, we include them, but the tonal inflections of the Thai language, realized in subtle ornaments and melismas, make singing extremely difficult for non-Thai speakers.

Instrument maintenance is a major challenge for us. The Thai xylophones and gong circles are tuned with lumps of wax and lead shavings, but fine tuning with this material is difficult. In cold or dry weather, the lumps can easily fall off. I purchased a set of metallophones in 1988, and used them as a tuning standard for the rest of the ensemble. Our bamboo flutes suffer from low humidity in the winter, and drum heads change with the weather.

The ensemble is staffed by undergraduate and graduate students, mostly from the School of Music, but few stay with the ensemble for longer than two years, making it difficult to improve. We play one public concert each spring, and sometimes perform for special events such as Thai Nights, exhibition concerts, or workshops.

We added Northeast Thai village instruments in 1987, including *bong lang* (vertical xylophone), *pin* (lute), *wot* (panpipes), *kaen* (mouth organ), and *glawng yao* (drums). These are especially useful at folk festivals and school workshops because anyone can play simple music on them immediately, whereas the classical instruments require considerable expertise.

Although presently we continue to play without expert guidance, we hope that one of these days another Thai musician will enter a graduate program here and lead the ensemble. ◗



Kent State Thai Ensemble (counterclockwise from right): Terry Miller, Sara Miller, David Binh, Chia Chun Chu, Dahru Veino, Anne Prescott.