

# Phra Phutha: A Thai Music Composition

## *Based on Astrological Beliefs*

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### **Abstract**

This research project aimed at creating a Thai composition to express Thai astrological beliefs about the legend of Phra Phutha (Mercury) one of the Nine Planetary Deities – Phra Athit (the Sun), Phra Chan (the Moon), Phra Angkarn (Mars), Phra Phutha (Mercury), Phra Pharuehatsabodi (Jupiter), Phra Suk (Venus), Phra Sao (Saturn), Phra Rahoo (Pluto) and Phra Kate (Neptune) – and to create a body of knowledge in the form of a new musical composition transposed in the style of descriptive music (Program music) to show the particular characteristics of Phra Phutha deities. This article will deal with the music related to Phra Phutha, which is divided into three parts, namely, the prologue, the lyric and the epilogue. The musical style and movements display tactics in communication and talk through gentle and sweet words, which is the specific characteristic of Phra Phutha.

The musical performance relies on three traditional Thai woodwind instruments – the Khui Lip (High pitch pipe), the Khui Phieng-or (Medium pitch pipe) and the Khui Ou (Low pitch pipe). The melodies are relying on the method of altering the melodies, imitating and interrupting, as well as accelerating and reducing the tempo. This music is an innovation which is derived from the arrangement of musical elements and other contexts. It is an example of a new method of composing Thai music.

**Keywords:** *Thai Music, Composition Techniques, Thai songs, Thai Composition, Thai Classical Music, Phra Phutha, Planetary Deities.*

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## Introduction

Beliefs which come from thoughts about, acceptance of or confidence in something, whether it be abstract or concrete, will result in human beings performing activities in accordance with those beliefs and using them as guidelines to lead their lives or incentives to different kinds of behavior. In Thai society, beliefs, be they related to superstition, astrology, animism or sacredness, have had influenced the Thai way of life since olden times. Animism is the belief that everything in nature – forests, hills and mountains, trees, rivers or things of wonder, are inhabited by spirits. This belief is extended to include natural phenomena, for example, thunder, earthquakes and solar eclipses. At first, it was believed that the spirit dwelling in these natural elements had the power to cause things to happen. This belief later became more concrete and was eventually established as a religion (Anumanrajadhon, 1990:44). Some supernatural powers that do not have physical substances that have powerful energy which influences human physical and psychological conditions (i.e. death and fear) are, for example, lightning, earthquakes and storms. These natural phenomena have been personified as deities who take control of natural elements, for example, the God of the Wind, the God of Fire and the Goddess of Water. These personifications have been developed in order to allow human beings to create the images endowed with the divine characteristics of deities, expressing people's faith in those divine characteristics (Chaiseri, 2001). The Nine Planetary Deities – Phra Athit (the Sun), Phra Chan (the Moon), Phra Angkharn (Mars), Phra Phutha (Mercury), Phra Phareuhasbodi (Jupiter), Phra Suk (Venus), Phra Sao (Saturn), Phra Rahoo (Pluto) and Phra Kate (Neptune) – is a group of deities that has been revered in Thai society and has influenced the Thai way of life since ancient times. Thai astrological doctrine has described their disposition, supernatural powers, weapons, background and birth. Details of the legend of the Nine Planetary Deities are connected to many other Thai beliefs. Some are related to ancient regulations and one has been expressed in Thai verse which, translated into English, reads, "It is forbidden to build a house on Saturday, organize a crematory ceremony on Friday, hold a top-knot shaving ceremony on Tuesday and organize a wedding ceremony on Wednesday" (Suvanvecho, 2003:218). Another particular activity forbidden on Wednesday is seen in the statement, "Having a haircut on Wednesday and having the hair/teeth pulled out on Thursday are forbidden." This is because Wednesday is believed to be the day of growth and development and having a haircut on Wednesday will cause a person's brain to become dull.

There are many ways of communicating or transferring one's thoughts to other people. One way is through works of art, particularly through music, which enables an artist to express and transfer his feelings and emotions. Lyrics are made of a series of sentences. Some are able to conjure up courage and grandeur; some are able to create strength while some may be able to evoke feelings of sadness; some may encourage listeners to march along and some may make them dwell in their fantasies, for example, as in a lullaby or a dream song; some may be able to make listeners want to go for a walk; and so the list continues. All this depends on the ability of the composer who will establish the goal of making his melodies create certain feelings (Chaneduriyang, 1984:16). For this reason, this researcher has composed these musical pieces to embody Thai astrological beliefs about the spe-

cific characteristics of the Nine Planetary Deities. The repertoire which is selected to describe in this article is Phra Phutha.

Phra Phutha has a unique characteristic, which is his way of communicating and talking through sweet words. Regarding the principle of Thai music composition, the composer must decide what style of song he is going to write. He should know whether he is going to follow the traditional style that is the combination of imitating and interrupting techniques for the sake of entertainment or the style of tremolos with long and dragging sounds, known as “the Tang Kraw.” However, this does not mean that the melodies are simply expanded or reduced; something has to be added in order to produce the appropriate outcome (Tramote, 1995:39-43). As for the classification of Thai musical compositions, they can be classified into four types according to the type of composer; creative inspiration - referring to a composer creating his song from inspiration; classical conservatism - referring to a composer creating his repertoire in accordance with traditional rules that he or she has been observed; trendy tradition – referring to a composer whose concept amenable to the current Thai musical trend occurred at the time when composing music, but still maintain the traditional principles; and lastly, contemporary – referring to a composer who is able to produce musical innovation (Chaiseri, 20132).

The musical composition named Phra Phutha belongs to the contemporary type. It is a compilation of all kinds of knowledge that the researcher has gleaned from the Ph.D. Program in the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts at Chulalongkorn University and his 15+ years experience in musical performance. This has resulted in a concrete composition.

### **Research Method and Process**

This musical composition is based on the qualitative research. The content of this creative research consists of the study of the particular characteristics of one of the Nine Planetary Deities (Phra Phutha), following the Thai Astrological Text in the Chalerm Triphob Doctrine, together with additional information from an interview with the President of the Association of Astrologers in Thailand under the Royal Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen and an interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the information. From the information collected, a Thai musical piece has been created, employing different musical theories on the sound qualities of each type of musical instrument, musical elements that may affect the listeners' emotions, an assemblage of musical groups and the methods of writing Thai music. This has resulted in musical innovation in Thai musical circles. The researcher divided his research into three phases. The first phase was involved with the study and review of academic documents as well as interviews with major informants who are exerts in philosophy, religion and Thai astronomy. The second phase was an analysis and interpretation of the symbolic meanings of Phra Phutha's characteristics, to be used as concepts for composing the melodies, which are based on musical elements that are able to create musical emotions appropriate to the characteristics of Phra Phutha. Finally, the musical composition was submitted to the Committee to adjudge its correctness and appropriateness. And this descriptive music was performed for approximately 30 minutes in the Music Hall in the

Art and Culture Building on Chulalongkorn University campus.

### Description of the Composition



Figure 1. Phra Phutha from [www.horolive.com](http://www.horolive.com).

Methods employed in Phra Phutha repertoire aims to narrate emotions expressed in the characteristic of Phra Phutha. The Chaloem Triphob Doctrine states that the God Issuan created Phra Phutha from seventeen large elephants. (See Figure 1) Through the God's magical powers, the elephants were ground into refined powder and the powder was wrapped in a leaf-green cloth, sprinkled with divine water, from which Phra Phutha arose to become one of the Nine Planetary Deities of the auspicious type, who would yield a sense of gentleness and sweetness (Wisandaroonkorn, 1997). For this reason, those born on Wednesday, or Wan Phutha in Thai, are reputed to be gentle in behavior, polite in manner, sweet in words and witty in talk or discussion in the same way as the "God of Rhetoric". The main characteristic of Phra Phutha is "communication and talk" in the same way as Hermes or Mercury, the God of Medicine and Communication, a son of Zeus and Maya, in Greek mythology. Therefore, the style and melody of Phra Phutha repertoire will show his communicative strategy through sweet and gentle words.

However, in interpreting the above information and using it to write Phra Phutha repertoire, the researcher has chosen to employ three kinds of traditional Thai woodwind instruments of different sound qualities and pitches (high, medium and low), the Khui Lip, the Khui Phieng-or, and the Khui Ou for this musical performance (See Figure 2).

The symbolic interpretation of the characteristic of Phra Phutha, which involves a conversation is suggested through the following – the wind blowing from the musician's mouth into the musical instrument producing tones suggests the notion of three people engaged in a conversation in the form of music. The musical elements are used to affect the listeners' feelings. The tempo in the music is one of the most important factors that stirs the feelings. When the music increases

in speed (Fast tempos), feelings of happiness, excitement, wonder, anger or fear will be stirred. If the music's tempo is reduced in speed (Slow tempos), feelings of sadness, silence and gentleness are felt. The sound level (Pitch) is related to the frequency of the musical sound, which can be measured in rounds per second. These are both high pitched (sharp) and low pitched (deep-toned). The use of a high pitch can create a sense of grandeur, imagination, excitement, anger or fear. The use of a low pitch can create a sense of sadness, boredom, dignity or violence. Sound control (Articulation) is a way of making musical performance communicate emotions to the audience, for example, staccato notes are very short and crisp can create an atmosphere of fun, joy, fear or anger and Legato notes are long and connected can create an atmosphere of sadness, gentleness, softness or violence (Farrar, 2003).



Figure 2. Photos of the Khui Lip (top), the Khui Phieng-or (middle) and the Khui Ou (bottom).

The Phra Phutha repertoire is divided into three parts. The prologue is the introduction that deals with the emotions expressed in the song and prepares the listeners for later parts of the song. The lyric is the part that shows the manner of communication and talk, which is the special characteristic of Phra Phutha, presented through different strategies. The epilogue is the conclusion and end of the song. The chart is as follows:

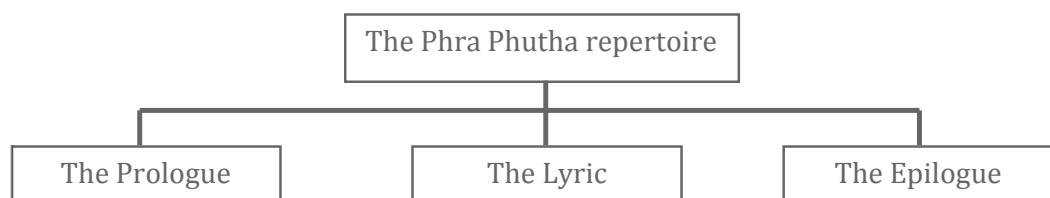


Figure 3. The main form of the Phra Phutha repertoire.

The researcher has employed the strategy of transferring the melodies from the main melody to display tactics in conversation, imitating and interrupting techniques and the acceleration and reduction of the tempo to demonstrate the fact that conversations may include both accord and conflict. The details can be explained as follows:

The Prologue  
The first sentence

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

For the first sentence of the prologue, the three musical instruments simultaneously play the same melody in the first two musical chambers but at the end of the sentence in the two back musical chambers, they play different melodies in the form of vertical sound harmony. The second sentence is presented using the imitating and interrupting technique, led by the *Khlui Lip* (taking the lead), followed by the *Khlui Phieng-or* and the *Khlui Ou* (imitating the lead). The performance consists of the imitating (Look Lor) and interrupting (Look Khat) technique, together with a slightly vertical sound harmony. The tempo is fast at the end of this part, suggesting the beginning of a conversation which consists of some dispute because of differences in the opinion about the topic of the conversation. The third sentence expresses agreement on the topic of the conversation so the tempo becomes more relaxed and slows down. The same melody is applied in this sentence.

The Lyrics

The first section (Setting up the topic of conversation)

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The first section is a conversation within the group, using the melodies of the Khlui Ou as the main melody, serving as the main narrator and setting up the topic of the conversation. The melodies of the Khlui Lip and the Khlui Phieng-or, which are played in accompaniment with the Khlui Ou consist, mainly, of inserting the melodies skipped by the Khlui Ou. The researcher has also written melodies that have never existed in Thai music, for example, the melodies in the 11th and the 12th bars of the Khlui Lip and the melodies in the 3rd and 4th bars of the Khlui Phieng-or. This is to make the melodies in this part represent a lively and convivial conversation.

### The Second Section (conflict)

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The melodies of the second section exhibit conflict or discord in the conversation. So, the tempo is faster than that in the first part and the tempo is fasted at the end of this part. The composition tactic involves the insertion of what is left to be played by the main instrument in the outline of the melody as in the first part in order to show that it deals with the same conversation but conflicts have started. This is achieved by using the harmony of many intervals, the interrupting technique, the use of duration as well as the use of harmony at certain points, and the use of stops or insertions into the style that is being played (the 8th to the 10th bars). These are tactics that have never before been used in the performance of Thai music. The melodies at the end of this part are the same way but the tempo is slowed from the 15th bar onwards to show that the conversation is starting to achieve mutual understanding.

### The Epilogue (conclusion)

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The Khlui Lip



The Khlui Phieng-or

The Khlui Ou

The final part is the conclusion of the conversation, presented through turning the melodies of the first part into the main melodies, which is a way of emphasizing that the conversation is still about the same topic. The three kinds of pipes play the same melodies as the controlling song. The melodies are slightly adjusted in accordance with the tactic required for playing each kind of pipes. The rhythm of the ending of the song slows down suggesting that the conversation is continuing smoothly and becoming a success.

### Conclusion

The result of this creative research is a Thai musical composition in a new style achieved through the use of three kinds of traditional Thai pipes playing different styles. The Phra Phutha repertoire is divided into three parts. The first part is the

prologue, which introduces the emotions which are expressed through the music and prepares the audience for the second part, the lyric, which deals with communication and conversation and is a specific characteristic of Phra Phutha. This part is divided into two sections - the first section setting the topic of the conversation, in which ideas correspond with one another, and the second section being the conversation with its conflicts and, finally, conclusion. The final part shows that the conversation ends with success. The repertoire has a style and melodies that suggest tactics in communicating and making polite conversation with gentle words, which is in accordance with the characteristics of Phra Phutha, who is the deity of "Communication and Talk". The three kinds of Thai musical instruments – the Khui Lip, the Khui Phieng-or and the Khui Ou, are able to communicate meaning through the wind from the mouths of the musicians creating the melodies. The strategy of converting the melodies from the main ones mirror those used in making a conversation. The use of the imitating and interrupting technique as well as the acceleration and reduction of the tempo in playing the music is to show that there is both accord and conflict in the conversation.

### Discussion

Phra Phutha composition is an innovation in Thai musical art, can be used as a case study for the new trend in Thai musical composition that communicates or narrates the story of something through the interpretation of its symbolic meaning found in the information contained in the form of music. The use of musical instruments of different sound qualities can affect the emotions expressed by the repertoire. There is a limitation in the choice of Thai wind musical instruments that can create a variety of sound qualities and melodies because there are so few of them and all of them are made of wood. The authors suggest that the innovation of the more new style of the wind musical instruments could support the new greater length for the musical scale in the future of the Thai musical composition.

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