

Thai Classical Music and Its Movement from Oral to Written Transmission 1930-1942: Historical Context, Method, and Legacy of the Thai Manuscript Project

Panya Roongruang

Introduction

The research topic “Thai Classical Music and its Movement from Oral to Written Transmission, 1930-1942: Historical Context, Method, and Legacy of the Thai Manuscript Project” aims to study the changes in the transmission of Thai classical music, which was largely an oral tradition until the Thai Music Manuscript Committee began its work in 1930. By 1942, when the Project ceased its work, over 400 compositions of the Thai classical repertoire, had been transcribed into Western staff notation. The manuscripts were never published, with the exception of two compositions, the *Homrong Yen* and *Tham Khwan* suites. The entire collection disappeared from Thai society after the Fine Arts Department burned in 1958. Luckily, a visiting American ethnomusicologist, David Morton, had saved the collection one year earlier by microfilming it in its entirety as part of his research of Thai classical music. The author located a copy of these five rolls of microfilm in the archives of Kent State University’s Center for the Study of World Musics, but found that many pages of the microfilmed scores were illegible. In response, he established the Lost Thai Music Manuscript Restoration Project in 1993, which has as its eventual goal the restoration of the entire collection by converting the microfilmed scores to computer-generated notation (using the Finale computer program), for later publication for public use. Copies of several compositions are used for study in this research.

This research draws upon methodologies from the fields of ethnomusicology, historical studies, musicology, and analytical and comparative music theory. The historical aspect of the research comprises a historical study of the social background of Thailand before and during the time in which the Committee

Dr. Panya Roongruang Instructor Dept. of Communication Arts

worked in order to determine the reasons why the Committee was established, as well as to examine the background of the Committee and its members, through an investigation of all available documents. The ethnomusicological aspect involves and examination of ideas of music creation, preservation, and musical change in relation to its social context. The musicological aspect of the research encompasses a study of the Committee's processes and methods of transcription, and includes interviews of persons related to the Committee and its work.

The analytical and comparative study involves the entire body of the Committee's transcriptions, in order to gain a total picture of the works so treated. Selected pieces are analyzed and compared to current versions of the same pieces. The researcher concentrates on the rationale, method, and legacy of the Thai Music Manuscript Project. Although Thai masters drew on Western ideas of notation, creating many Thai notation systems, and these have become useful teaching aids in Thai music today.

Finally, the continuity of the Committee's work and the resulting change in Thai music related to the manuscripts, coordinated with changes of social context, are examined in light of several ethnomusicological theories, including semiology, contextual analysis, reflectivity, reflexivity, and the concept of music as a symbolic construction.



(Good and poor quality microfilms)

เพลงเรื่องฝรั่งทำเพลง Phiang Ruang Farang Ram Thao

ดั่งเพลงฝรั่งดั่ง

(Restored music computer printing)

As mentioned earlier, the research focuses its attention on the resulting Manuscript Collection and its contents, and is also concerned with the process of change from oral to written transmission that occurred during the time period of the transcription work (between 1930 and 1942). In addition, it delves into the contextual factors that led to the formation of the Committee. These include the beginnings of the study of Western music in Thailand during the early twentieth century, the political changes that occurred in conjunction with the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, and the ensuing Westernization of Thai culture that followed under several military regimes, including the subsequent dissolution of the royal musical establishment, the near banning of the performance of Thai classical music during the pro-Western military regimes that followed, and official encouragement to play Thai music on Western instruments, as well as a rising concern that Thai music, normally transmitted orally, would be lost.

History

More than two and a half centuries passed between the musical transcriptions of the first Western pioneers who visited Thailand and those completed by the Thai Music Manuscript Committee. Those foreign travelers who attempted to describe

Thai music in notation included Nicolas Gervaise (1662/2205-1729/2272), a French missionary who included music in his history book, *Histoire naturelle et politique du Royaume de Siam*, published in 1688/2231; Simon de La Loubere

A Siamise - Song. pag. 113.

Say Samon ny tepacan Son Seia coney nua Tehaon

Keun ditou nayey pleng ny to tchaoua pleng day, pleng laban le tchaouy tchaouy

pleng ny colharua pleng So nayey, peny Dongle chaduey Takong

quodong nang Tchang Tchaylex Tcha deun ey. *p. 68.*

Notations transcribed by Gervaise, La Loubere

No other scholars have attempted to create authoritative transcriptions of Thai classical works comparable to those of the Committee. The Committee's transcriptions are therefore valuable, not just for Thai musicians, but for the world.

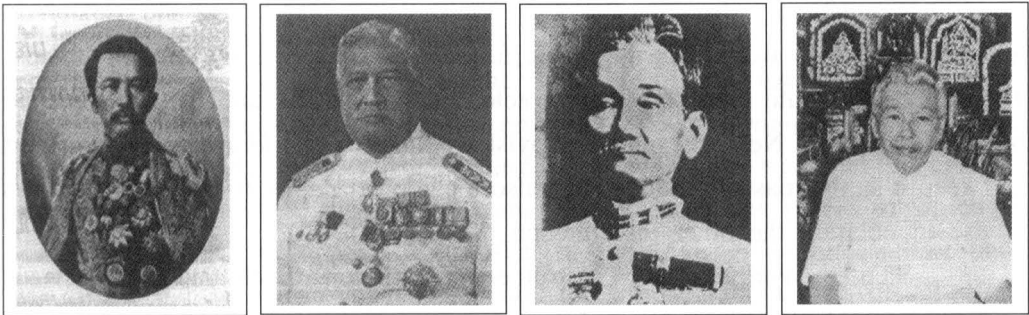
Although Thai music was not a written tradition until the 1930s, it was transmitted successfully because of its stability and restrictive rules. The structures and forms, creative idioms, methods of playing instruments, functions of compositions, and individual genres for specific social contexts were all standardized. The disciplined methods of transmission embodied in the wai-khru (homage to the teacher) ceremony and the tradition of learning by rote gave Thai music deep traditional roots.

Since the nineteenth century, Thai society has experienced great changes, which have come about through modernization. These social changes have caused resulting changes in people's ideas about music. The formation of the Thai Music Transcription Project, begun in 1930, was one result of this modernization.

Even though Thai communities are now largely modernized, and the Thai people have shifted from a traditional way of life to a more modern lifestyle, traditional music still plays an important role in Thai society. However, some functions of music have changed. The performance of live music for daily entertainment no longer exists, having moved from the court and private homes of the elites to the stage and the modern mass media. Much of the entertainment music formerly provided by Thai classical musicians has been replaced by Thai, Western, and modern music from other sources. Ritual music retains its function in the monasteries and in the rural areas, but in urban areas only survives in a modified form, depending on an individual's need to suit his or her lifestyle in a modern society. Thai music remains well preserved in the educational institutions as well as in cultural centers.

Music, in relation to its social context, is in a state of continual change. Changes in Thai music generally occurred slowly in the past, depending on the rate of change in Thai society, but changed quite rapidly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, largely as a result of Western influences. These changes altered both the music itself as well as its functions. Other changes in Thai society, involving adaptations from the Western world, have taken place in politics, education, personal perspectives, arts, and lifestyle. The Thai Music Manuscript Project is an obvious example of cultural preservation made by a large group of scholars, administrators, and artists who strongly supported Thai culture, but at the same time realized that Western knowledge could be used as a powerful tool to this end.

In 1929/2472, Prince Damrong presented his ideas concerning the demise of Thai music, as well as his preliminary study of Thai tunes, to the Committee of the Royal Academy. The study found that of the known compositions dating from the Ayuthaya Period (1350/1893-1767/2310), approximately 140 pieces were lost, leaving only the titles in the ancient mahori text collection called *Prachum Bot Mahori Boran* (ประชุมบทมโหรีโบราณ), as well as the poems for greeting the teacher, *Pleng Yao Wai Khru* (เพลงยาวไหว้ครู); for some pieces, the titles were unknown. He proposed his idea to preserve the Thai classical repertoire through staff notation, and was the founder of the Thai Music Manuscript Project, which began in 1930.



*Prince Damrongrachanuphap, Phra Jenduriyang, Phraya Sanawhduriyang,
Luang Pradit Phairoh*

The Committee's working processes

Committee consisted of four working groups:

1. The Thai music performers. Performers were required to be Thai music masters and to have a good knowledge of the Thai classical repertoire.
 2. The music transcribers. Transcribers were required to be knowledgeable in Western music notation and capable of transcribing music as it was being performed. This group was directed by Phra Jen-duriyang.
 3. The Western music performers. These musicians, although Thai, were unfamiliar with Thai music. They were, however, needed to play the transcriptions, as they had been notated, back to the Committee, so that they could verify their accuracy.
 4. The Thai Musical Notation Approval Committee. This committee was made up of experts in Thai music, and charged with approving the transcriptions.
- Piphat* music (*thang piphat* ท่วงปี่พาทย์) was selected for transcription because it is the foundation of Thai music and because it has the most complex

and flexible instrumental idioms. The committee's working process was divided into five steps:

Step 1. Transcription of the *khawng-wong-yai* part (*thang-khawng ท้างฆ้อง*). The performer would play his part on the *khawng-wong-yai*, and then the music transcriber would notate the part in Western staff notation. The *khawng-wong-yai* part was transcribed first because it serves as a reference, being the principal melody elaborated upon by the other instruments of the ensemble.

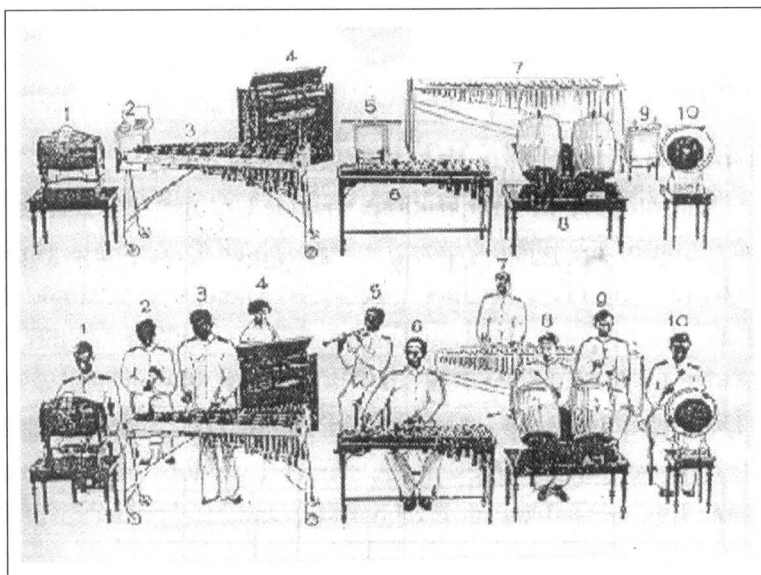
Step 2. Listening to the *khawng-wong-yai* part. The Western musicians (who were generally unfamiliar with Thai music) would play the *khawng-wong-yai* part on the piano, as it had been notated, back to the Committee members. If the Committee noted any discrepancies between the part played and the version in their memory, they would ask the music transcriber to correct the music promptly. The musicians would then play the corrected part repeatedly until it was approved by the Committee. Next, the music copyist would copy the *khawng-wong-yai* part and keep it as the master version. They also made other copies for other transcribers to use in notating the other instrumental parts.

Step 3. Working each instrument's variation. Each individual music performer would play his part based on the master version of the *khawng-wong-yai* part for the music transcriber to notate. Sometimes before the performer would play his particular melody, he would ask for the *luk-khawng* (principal melody) to be played first, for reference. The music transcriber would then sing the *luk-khawng* for the player or perform it on a Western instrument. After listening to the *luk-khawng*, the music performer would play his instrument's version phrase by phrase (normally two to four measures), for the transcriber to notate. If he played too many notes at one time, the transcriber might have difficulty completing the transcription. Then, the transcriber would ask the performer to repeat the phrase again. Sometimes the performer would not be able to repeat the phrase identically because he had forgotten the idiomatic variation he had just played. Thus, he had to begin again with a new variation. This situation occurred often and much time was consumed before each composition was transcribed in its entirety.

Each group of music transcribers and music performers worked separately. For example, for the suite *Phleng Ruang Sawng-mai Prasat-thawng*, the *ranad-thum* part was played by Sangad Yamakupt and notated by Sari Yongyuth. Sari Yongyuth, who is still living, told the author that some pieces were performed by one of two or more musicians, depending on who was available at the time.

Step 4. Listening to each individual variation. The Western musicians would then play each individually notated part for the Approval Committee, using the Western equivalents of each instrument of the Thai ensemble. The Committee would ask the musicians to play the *khawng-wong-yai* part first, followed by each instrumental part as it appeared in the score, before playing the entire piece in full ensemble. The Committee would then either make corrections or approve the transcription. If the Committee wished to make a change, they would stop and the transcriber would correct the notation immediately. After the ensemble played the entire piece, the Committee would correct the transcription until they were satisfied that it was accurate.

Step 5. Score copying. After all the parts were approved by the Committee, the music copyists would combine the parts into a full score. The instruments that appeared in the score from the top to bottom were: 1) *pi-nai*, 2) *ranad-ek*, 3) *khawng-wong-yai*, 4) *khawng-wong-lek*, 5) *ranad-thum*, 6) *ranad-thum-hlek*, 7) *taphon*, 8) *ching*, 9) *mong*. This was the order of the instruments for most of the transcriptions, except for a few pieces in which the *khawng-wong-lek* part appears above that of the *khawng-wong-yai*.¹ Staff paper was prepared by a music copyist and took the form of 14" x 8.5" stencil-printed blank staff pages with instrument names. When the task was completed, the master score was preserved for publication. (They were never published, however.)



A Western band Thai instruments substituted

¹ *Phleng Ruang Mon Plaeng* was scored this way.

The Committee members worked diligently to complete their task. By the end of the Committee's work in 1942/2485, 475 Thai classical compositions had been set down in staff notation, including over 100 pieces in full *piphat* score and a few hundred in parts. Unfortunately, this extremely valuable work was not completed because of political movements and the ignorance of those in authority. The complexity and difficulty of the task was not only in the working processes, but also in the music itself, as, for example, converting music from the Thai tuning system into Western staff notation presents special difficulties.

Problem solving

Although Western staff notation is not suited to all the world's musical traditions, it has been an effective tool in the transcription and preservation of Thai classical music, despite differences between the Thai and Western tuning systems. The problems created by these differences can be solved by thinking in terms of the Thai musical system, although reading from a score written in the Western system. When performing the music in the Collection on Thai instruments, musicians simply ignore the accidental signs.

The development of a special notation for the *taphon* drum made staff notation even more useful for Thai music. After the Committee's years of hard work (in particular that of the music transcribers), the job was done well, and 475 Thai compositions occupying 3,887 pages were transcribed and approved by the Committee.

Compositions included in the microfilms

The total number of compositions included in the five rolls of microfilm is 218,² if each title of the *phleng ruang* and the *phleng tab* genres (in which each composition consists of many smaller pieces) is counted as a single piece. (The details of each music genre are not appropriate to present at this time.) The Collection is extremely valuable, because it is the only written document that reveals the Thai music traits as they existed during the period of 1930/3473 to 1942/2485. The transcriptions represent the standard versions of that time, since the entire collection was created by an established committee made up of the leading musicians and music scholars of the nation.

² *Thai Classical Music Book One* mentions that 417 compositions are included in the Collection. It is possible that the authors may have counted each component piece within the *phleng-ruang* and the *phleng-tab* as a separate composition, in addition to the pieces included in the *Phleng Chud Homrong Yen* and the *Tham Khwan*, which were published by the Fine Arts Department but not included in the microfilms.

The Collection can be used as an encyclopedia of Thai music for a wide variety of purposes. Musicians can use it as a resource to learn new pieces, to compare the *thang* (instrumental idiom) of each instrument, or to refer to in order to verify the accuracy of a piece that one already knows; it can also be used as a document for ethnomusicological study. It is a trustworthy document not only for cultural preservation, but also for cultural restoration. The music included in this collection deserves to be published for international use.

Continuity and change

Although some of the musical traits of the past found in the Thai Music Manuscript Collection have changed, a majority of them are retained. The greatest change that has taken place in Thai classical music is in the function of music associated with its social context, especially in the case of the semi-ritual *phleng-ruang* genre. Due to the changing nature of modern Thai society, as well as the genre's austere, motivic style and the long duration of its compositions, *phleng-ruang* music is in gradual decline. The ritual music directly associated with the main portions of the Buddhist ritual (as in the *phleng-homrong* and the *naphat* genres), however, retains both its original musical traits as well as functions, as in the past, because of the restrictions placed both on the music itself and its utility.

Music of the *sepha* style (melodic, song-like music), such as the *phleng-tab*, *phleng-thao*, and *phleng-kled* genres, still functions as entertainment in Thai society. However, the presentation of these compositions has largely moved from live performances (which are rare today) into the new media of the modern world, such as radio, or, less frequently, television broadcasts. The more widely used compositions can be found on such permanent media as compact discs, cassette tapes, or videotapes, and thus can be utilized by people at their convenience. Such recordings, which feature both music for entertainment and restricted ritual music, are used both for household purposes as well as commercial uses.

The styles and musical idioms used by classical musicians today have changed slightly since the introduction of the improved twenty-two key *ranad-ek*. The performance practice of today utilizes more virtuosic and exciting techniques. The style and idioms found in the Collection are considered a classical standard, which makes it a valuable resource for Thai classical musicians.

Purposes and accomplishments

The Thai Music Manuscript Committee's two main purposes for transcribing Thai compositions into Western staff notation were: 1) to create standard versions of Thai compositions, and 2) to preserve Thai music in written form. In terms of standardization, the Committee did three things: 1) it standardized each composition's principal melody (*luk-khawng*); 2) it standardized the pieces and order of the pieces of the ritual music repertoire [*Phleng Chud Homrong Yen* (Evening Prelude), *Homrong Chao* (Morning Prelude), *Homrong Klangwan* (Midday Prelude), *Homrong Khon* (Masked Drama Prelude), *Homrong Thet* (Sermon Prelude)], as well as nineteen pieces in the *phleng-ruang* (music associated with ritual) genre; and 3) it standardized the idioms of each instrument in the *piphat-khruang-yai*, *piphat-mai-nuam*, and *piphat-duekdamban* ensembles (the last of these in only a few pieces).

During its tenure, the Committee transcribed 218 pieces (if each *phleng-ruang* suite is counted as a single piece), or 475 (if each component piece in each *phleng-ruang* suite is counted separately). Among these transcriptions, approximately forty percent are in full piphat score, or otherwise in two, three, or four parts; sometimes only the *khawng-wong-yai* part is transcribed. The compositions transcribed in full score accomplished the purposes of preservation for both the compositions themselves and their instrumental idioms. The compositions transcribed in two, three, and four parts accomplished the purpose of preservation for both the principal melodies and instrumental idioms (but only as they appear in the parts), and the compositions whose *khawng-wong-yai* parts were the only parts transcribed are sufficient to preserve the principal melody in *khawng-wong-yai* idiom. The purposes accomplished include the compositions' standardization, transcribing and preserving the old standards of Thai music in a written format.

This project also influenced the Committee members to create other new and useful tools for the transmission of Thai music. These included: 1) Luang Pradit-phairawh's Thai numeral notation; 2) Luang Pradit-phairawh's *Master's Method for Playing Khawng-wong-yai*, a method for *khawng-wong-yai*; and, 3) Khun Samniang-chanchoen's *Tamra Taphon* (Taphon Textbook). Luang Pradit's notation is still in use at the School of Music of the Luang Pradit-phairawh Foundation in Bangkok. Although his notation system has been developed into several similar versions, the most widely used at the present time is the Thai

solfege system, with each of the seven tones of the scale represented by a Thai letter.

The *khawng-wong-yai* method continues to serve as a reference for musicians and is also a useful text showing how to practice on the instrument. The method of playing put forth in this document can help a player build a strong basic technique on the *khawng-wong-yai*.

Finally, the *taphon* textbook can be very useful in helping a student practice the *taphon* drum correctly.

Representation

Because many of the Committee's members had studied Thai music for many decades prior to beginning their work with the Committee, the Manuscript Collection represents many musical traits characteristic of the time period at least seventy years before the Committee ceased its activities in 1942/2485. Thus, many compositions in the Manuscript Collection appear as they were performed a century earlier. Many of these traits are still characteristic of the Thai music of today, although others have changed over time.

Bibliography

- Bang-on Piyapan. 1995. **Prawattisat Thai Kanpokrawng Sangkhom Sethakit Lae Kwam Samphan Kab Tang Pratet Kawn Samai Sukhothai Jon Thung Paw Saw 2478** [ประวัติศาสตร์ไทย การปกครอง สังคม เศรษฐกิจ และความสัมพันธ์กับต่างประเทศก่อนสมัยสุโขทัยจนถึง พ.ศ. ๒๔๗๘ Thai History: Political, Social, Economic and International Relationships Since Sukhothai to 1932]. Bangkok: Odeon Store Press.
- Chai Ruangsinsin. 1980. **Prawat Sangkhom Thai Boran Kawn Satawat Tee Yisibha** [ประวัติสังคมไทยโบราณก่อนศตวรรษที่ยี่สิบห้า History of Ancient Thai Society before 1982]. Bangkok: Pikanet Press.
- Dhanit Yupho. 1963. **The Khon and Lakawn**. Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts.
- , 1952. **Classical Siamese Theatre**. Bangkok: Hatha Tip.
- Ellis, Alexander J. 1885. "Appendix to Mr. Alexander J. Ellis's Paper on The Musical Scales of Various Nations Read 25th March, 1885." *Society of Art, Journal of Arts* 33 (October 30): 1102-1111.
- Fine Arts Department. 1971. **Note Phleng Thai Lam Nueng** [โน้ตเพลงไทยเล่มหนึ่ง Thai Classical Music Book 1]. 2nd ed. Bangkok: The Department.
- , 1955. **Tham Kwan** [ทำขวัญ Music for Invoking Spiritual Bliss]. Bangkok: Thai Wattapanich.
- , 1951. **Ngan Sangkeetasin Khawng Krom Silapakawn** [งานสังคีตศิลป์ของกรมศิลปากร The Musical Works of the Fine Arts Department]. Bangkok: Thaprajan.
- , [n. d.] **Hom Rong Yen** [หม่อมโรงเย็น Evening Prelude]. Bangkok.
- Gervaise, Nicolas. 1988. **Histoire Naturelle et Politique du Royaume de Siam**. Paris: Chez Claude Barbin.
- , 1928. **The Natural and History of the Kingdom of Siam, AD 1688**. Translated by Herbert Stanley O'Neill. Bangkok: Siam Observer Press.
- La Loubere, [Simon] de. 1986. **A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam [1693]**. 2 vols. Translated by A. P. London (Reprinted as The Kingdom of Siam); Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969. (Reprinted as A New Historical Relation, Bangkok)
- Luang Pradit Phairoh. 1982. **Sawn Thawng** [ศรทอง]. Bangkok: [n. p.].

- Luang Pradit Phairoh. [n. d.]. “Lak Kan Ti Khawng Wong” [หลักการตีฆ้องวง Principles and Practices on the Large Circle Gong]. Bangkok: Hand-written Manuscript at Luang Pradit Phairoh Foundation.
- Miller, Terry E. 1992. “The Theory and Practice of Thai Musical Notations.” **Ethnomusicology** 36, 2: 197-222.
- Miller, Terry E. and Jarernchai Chonpairot. 1994. “A History of Siamese Music Reconstructed from Western Documents, 1505-1932.” In **Crossroad** vol 8-2, pp. 1-192. Dekalb, Ill.: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University.
- Montri Tramote and Wichian Kultan. 1980. **Fang Lae Khaojai Dontri Thai** [ฟังและเข้าใจดนตรีไทย Listening and Understanding Thai Music]. Bangkok: Thai Khasem Kanpim.
- . 1964. **Sap Sangkhit**. [ศัพท์สังคีต Musical Vocabulary]. Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts.
- Morton, David. 1976. **The Traditional Music of Thailand**. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Panya Roongruang. 1988. **Dontri Thai Prakawb Siang** [ดนตรีไทยประกอบเสียง Thai Music in Song]. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University.
- . 1981. **Prawat Kan Dontri Thai** [ประวัติการดนตรีไทย History of Thai Music]. 3rd ed. Bangkok: Thai Wattapanich.
- Pat Koed Swang. 1994. **110 Pi Sattaejan Phra Jenduriyang Phu Wang Ragthan Dontri Sakon Khong Thai** [ร้อยสิบปีศาสตราจารย์พระเจนดุริยางค์ผู้วางรากฐานดนตรีสากลของไทย 110 Years Anniversary of Prof. Phra Jenduriyang: Founder of Western Music in Thailand]. Bangkok: Arawan Kanpim.
- Phoonpit Chiangkul. 1992. **Prawattisat Thai Samai Mai Lem Nueng** [ประวัติศาสตร์ไทยสมัยใหม่ เล่มหนึ่ง Modern Thai History Book1]. Bangkok: Odeon Store Press.
- Samniang Chan Choeng, Khun. 1992. **Tamra Taphon** [ตำราตะโพน Taphon Lessons]. Bangkok: Ruankio Kanpim.
- Seelig, Paul J. 1932. **Phleng Sayam** [เพลงสยาม Siamese Tunes]. Bandung: Hug & Co.
- Thaemsuk Numnont. 1981. **Kanmuang Lae Kantangpratet Nai Prawattisat Thai** [การเมืองและการต่างประเทศในประวัติศาสตร์ไทย Politics and International Relationships in Thai History]. Bangkok: Thai Wattapanich.

- Thai Music Transcription Committee 1930-42. 1957. **Manuscript on Thai Musical Transcriptions.** [microfilm]. Ohio: Archives of World Musics, Kent State University. [Manuscript of 260 pieces on 3,887 pages, microfilmed by David Morton, 5 reels.]
- Utit Naksawat. 1982. **48 Pi Khang Khaprajao Lae Bot Kwam Bang Ruang** [สี่สิบแปดปีของข้าพเจ้าและบทความบางเรื่อง My 48 Years and Other Articles]. Bangkok: Charoenwit Kanpim.
- . 1869. **Thritsadi Lae Kan Patibat Dontri Thai** [ทฤษฎีและการปฏิบัติดนตรีไทย Theory and Practice of Thai Music]. Bangkok: Charoen Kanpim.

