

# Thai Court Music : The. Significantly Musical Feature in Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

Thai music is the one of the most important music culture of Thai people. The objective of my research of the Characteristics, theory, comparative of Thai and western music practice performance, since the books of music Thailand are limited for references. The most of my research will be written from my own experience. In the past and interview, especially in Thai music instruments of Saw- Duang, Saw-U and Saw-Sam Sai to bring also and effective way in bringing my that culture understanding between East and West.

## Instruments

The court music has been the most significantly musical features in Southeast Asian region for centuries. Besides shape of music instruments, combination of ensemble, Thai music is strongly influenced and shared playing techniques, repertoire, musical forms, rhythmic patterns and etc with surrounded neighboring countries. Neither history nor ethnography could possible confirm thier originated heritages only segmentation of languages that made people difference. The ASEAN musical instruments have been parted of their cultural rituals and ceremonious events. Singing has played a leading role in all cultures, more importantly, their share the same appreciation in literatures and poetry. The dential similarity among neighboring cultures especially Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, Malaysia and Indonesia are truly developed within their cultural unique identities. By the time that Thai, Burmese, Laotian are tonal languages but not Cambodian that have made much difference in styles, modes and repertoire.

## Customs

The Thai music master is highly honored in Thai culture, and tutorial process cannot begin until an elaborate ceremony to pay respect and honor to “Kru” (teacher) is performed publicly.

### **Traditional Pedagogy**

Traditionally, the student must humbly ask the master for being accepted as a pupil and show proper respect to him and the Thai music instruments as the spirit of the music. Traditionally, student resided within the teacher's house as part of family members whereby he served teacher in a proper job he can possibly do. In the meantime, practicing and ensemble had to be perfectly precise and disciplined. Nowadays, the traditional pedagogy is nearly the end, it hardly find in big cities, excepted in some provincial areas or with some the great teachers.

### **Pedagogy of Thai Music**

In the late 13th and early 14th centuries AD, Thai classical music was strongly supported by the Royal Courts even though, it had shared the playing technique and literature as Chinese, India, Burmese, Laotian and Cambodian music. It has been generally assumed that Thai originated from an area in Southern China and formed their kingdoms for centuries. When the Chinese imposed on the Thais in the 13th century, they migrated down south to the Golden Land (Suvarnabhumi). Because of the trade route between Asia and Europe that had made Thai for being multiculturalism of the region. India and China were the most powerful in both trades and cultures whereby their musical idioms also influenced the aspect and philosophy on Thai court musical aspect.

The Thai Kingdom had been settle in the Golden Land for centuries before Sukhothai period (between the 13th and 14th century) after it was rid of Cambodian predominance. King Rangkamhaeng founded the first kingdom in 1287. In 1292, he invented the Thai script based on Cambodian and Burmese scripts. Thus the culture of these two countries have been influential on Thai culture. In 1347, Ayutthaya became the capital of Thailand under the rule of King U-Thong. At that time, Thais developed their own culture and music. In the meantime, Music and Theater Art were strongly established for the Royal Court and some aristocrats.

In the 17th century the Ayutthaya Kingdom was occupied and demolished by Burmese intruders: King Phrachao Taksin fought back and drove the intruders away and Thonburi became the new capital of Thailand in 1782, establishing the new Chakri dynasty and assumed the name King Rama I.

The Rattanakosin or Bangkok period, from 1782 to the present, has been described as the Thai Renaissance. A new modern state was formed with its own culture and unique society. Fortunately, most of the kings from the Chakri dynasty were highly gifted in music, particularly

King Rama VII, whose compositions are still performed today. Thai classical music has been an important part of the Royal Court throughout the 19th century and early 20th century. Several kings used to play musical instruments and also participated in musical plays. Thailand, with a population of 65 million and the size of France, can be roughly divided into four regions. (Montri Tramote,1957,p.98)

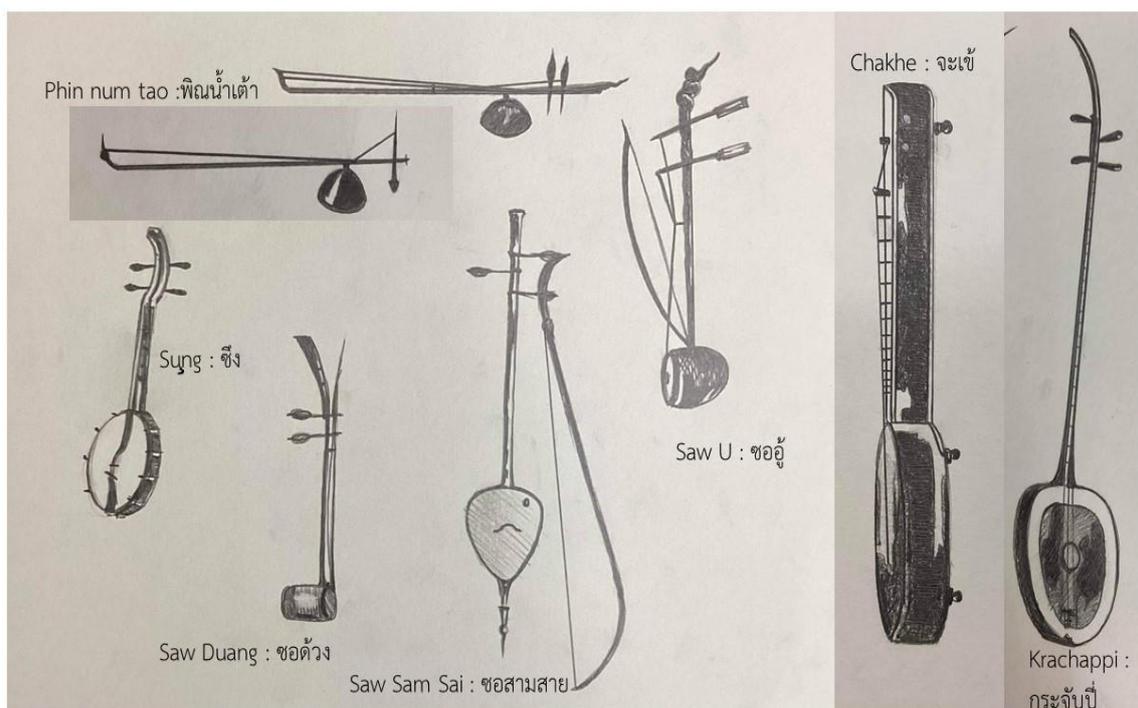
The Central region is the center of Siamese culture and royal tradition. It extends from the Bangkok plain to the Sukhothai province. In the Northern Region, Chainmail is the center. It has its own culture and music, which is closely related to the culture and music of the central region. Northeastern culture has been strongly influenced by the Laotian culture which is entirely different from the central region. In the South, once annexed by Malaysia, the culture has been highly influenced by the former rulers.

### Instruments and Ensembles

1. The Instruments - classified by 4 categories of the performance are plucked, bowed, beaten and blown instruments. Only the important instruments are named as follows (Miller D Perlman,2014,p.22-27)

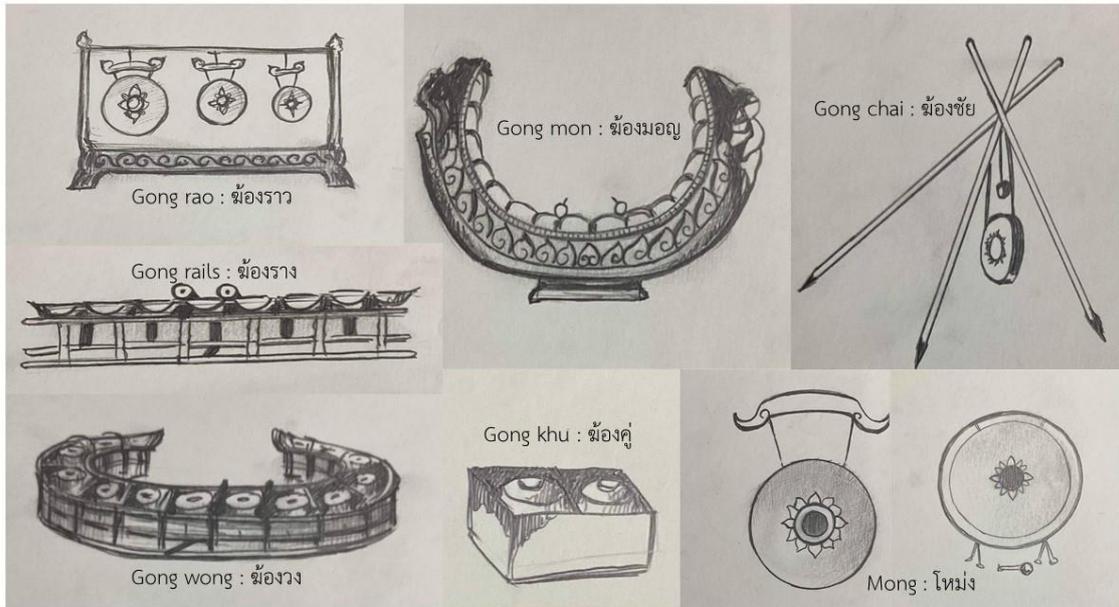
1.1 Plucked Instrument: Jakae

1.2 Bowed Instrument: Saw - Duang, Saw - U and Saw - Saamsai

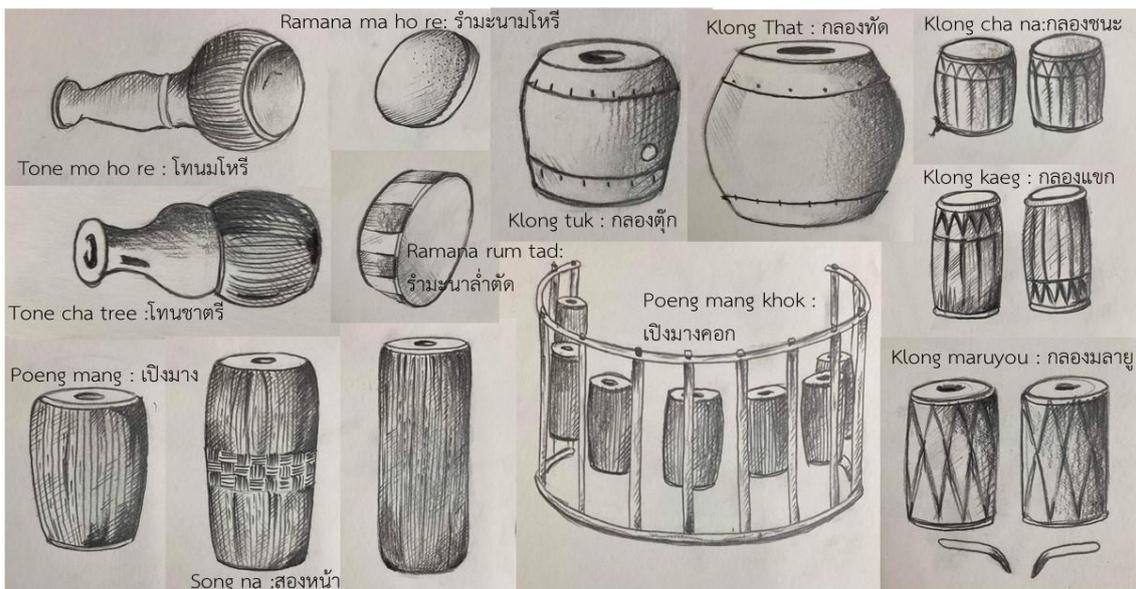


1.3 Beaten Instrument : 2 kinds

1.3.1 Melodic Percussion : Ranad - Ek, Ranad - Thum, and Gongwong



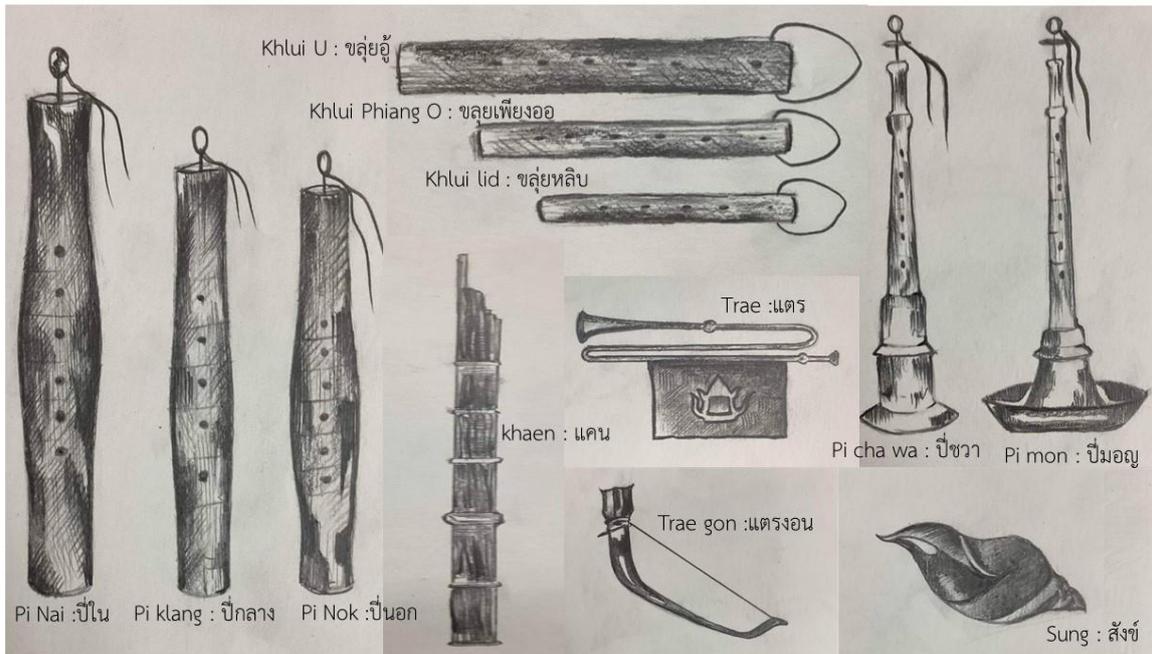
1.3.2 Rhythmic Percussion: Ching, Krub and many kinds of drums



#### 1.4 Blown Instrument: 2 kinds of woodwind

##### 1.4.1 Reed Instrument: Pi family.

##### 1.4.2 Reedless Instrument : Klui family



## 2. The Ensembles - classified by the leading, instrument into 3 main groups

### 2.1 Piphat : The combination of the percussion and the woodwind

### 2.2 Khrung, Sai : The combination of plucked, bowed, woodwind and rhythmic percussion

2.3 Mahori : The combination of the Piphat and Khrung Sai ensemble but the melodic instrument size is smaller than the normal Piphat in order to make the balance tone with the string ( the plucked and bowed instruments )

### 2.4 Ensemble in Thai Orchestra (Court ensemble )

## Elements of Music

The Thai music scale consists of seven different tones per octave with equal distance between each other.

Beat, Tempo and Melody - Thai classical music is normally played in duple meter, roughly equivalent to the 2/4 beat. The three tempi are slow, moderate, and fast which are called “saam chan”, “song chan” and “chan diau” respectively. (Utidi Naksawad,1979,p.59)

Thai songs are generally composed by using the pentatonic scale (5 tones). However,

if the song has 7 tones, there might be some changes in tones (metabole). As for songs with different intonations, such as Laotian, Cambodian, Burmese or Vietnamese, the pentatonic scale is preferred. Mon songs are sometimes composed in 6 tones, while some Indian intonations use 7 tones. Heterophony is characteristic of Thai songs which originates from the interpretation of the basic melody or “look kong”

### Forms

The main form of Thai classical music are saamchan (slow), songchan (moderate) and chandiau (fast). Thai composers like to adapt a song chan melody to a new saamchan melody. So a saamchan melody is twice as long as a songchan melody and a songchan melody is twice as long as a chandiau melody. If a melody consists of all 3 tempos, it is called ‘Pleng Tao’.

### Emotion in Thai Songs

Thai songs can be express in sentimental stylist expression and sensitivities, such as happiness, sorrow, romance or sweetness. Nevertheless, Thai songs do not present themselves in well aristocrat but emphatically drama as in Western art music. Thus composers and the players were used a wide dynamic range from faint to very loud. In contrast, Thai songs are normally played gently and sweetly reflecting a feature of restraint in Thai culture. Overt Displays of emotion in an extreme manner are not an accepted practice.

### Customs

Customarily, traditional music teachers are highly respected not only by their students but by society as well. To be a prospective music student, he/she must hold a special ceremony called wai kroo (honor to the teacher) prior to the first lesson. In this ceremony, the student has to offer flowers, candles and incense to the teacher. The ceremony begins with the prayers and Buddhist chants and homage to the God or Spirit of Music. Then the teacher prays for the wisdom of the new students, and gives a preparatory lesson. The student needs to practice and study with the teacher for a long time. It is a very complicated and a duous process to study and practice until he/she gets approval from the teacher to be a professional musician. After the pupil has been accepted as a professional musician, he/she must have another ceremony, which is more elaborate than the first. Usually, the ceremony takes place on a Thursday but the preparations begin the preceding day. The ceremony lasts for a whole day from early morning to the late night with several events.( Jarenchai Chonpairot,1968,p. 36)

Well known musicians from surrounding areas and students from the school are invited to this ceremony. Music masters perform a **Piphat** ensemble playing certain types of music,

such as pleng napat or secret melodies for each section of the ceremony. There are also **Pleng - Pram - Auk, Semaw - Kaotee, and Grao - rum**. The climax of the ceremony is **the Krub**, where musicians from different levels participate. During the krub, young musicians are asked to study more difficult music, advanced musicians are asked to be music teachers, and the most experienced musicians may be asked to preside at the other wai kroo ceremonies.

At the end of the ceremony, there is a classical music contest, where contestants perform the most difficult solos. The entire ceremony serves several purposes :

1. Teachers and students join together and pay respect to music teachers who are deceased.
2. Students are taught to respect their own teachers all the time and thereby gain more confidence from their teachers and for themselves
3. All musicians meet in one place to put aside their rivalries and to love and respect each other
4. Musicians are encouraged to gain more confidence in participating in more competitions
5. Teachers and students can put aside their previous disagreement and misunderstandings.

Always thereafter, a professional musician should perform a brief wai kroo ceremony honoring his teacher before each performance. Once a year, it is the tradition for all professional musicians to meet in a place to respect their teachers, living and deceased. This is considered as an important ceremony in the life of a musician.

While working with the musical instruments, teachers as well as students must be very careful to care for and respect the instruments. It is considered grossly impolite to step on an instrument or bang them on the floor. When the instruments are not in use, they must be kept in a place befitting respect; for example, the dapon drum, a sacred drum, should be kept in a high place. Any person without the proper training is not allowed to use the musical instruments.

### **Traditional Pedagogy**

Traditionally, a student needs to seek permission from a teacher to study music or to play a musical instrument. Students should practice hard to get consistent guidance from the teacher. Normally, teachers do not accept money for lessons so students usually offer flowers, fruits, rice or food instead. Some students who live with their teacher help with the housework. Students must keep their teacher's versions (\*angs ) of melodies secret and can only use them

in a major performance or contest. If he wishes to play these versions elsewhere or wants to teach another person, permission must be sought from the teacher first. Usually, teachers are not very willing to reveal their most beautiful versions to all students except for a diligent and gifted student. (Morton D, 1976, p. 56)

Today, traditional pedagogy is almost impossible to find in some big cities like Bangkok except in some provincial areas. The number of traditional musicians have grown fewer since many great musicians have passed away. Indeed, in the past, traditional musicians were patronized by kings, royal families and some rich people and there was good support for many musical concerts. Today, however, traditional musicians have to work at the non-musical enterprises for survival and have little support from the authorities. Music schools are by nature today, more commercial than professional institutions. Students seem to have less respect for their teachers because they pay money for their lessons.

### Wai Kroo Ceremony

The ceremony of respect to the teacher by the students is called wai - kroo as described before. Usually during a wai kroo ceremony, a **Piphat** ensemble plays sacred **pleng napat** melodies. Near the end of the ceremony, the teacher will perform **pleng yai** and after the students of various teachers will either play together or solo. In the past, solo pieces were in the format of a contest among the students. Today, the wai - kroo ceremony is still celebrated throughout Thailand but the contests are quite rare.

### Notation

In the past, notation was never used by either teachers or students. If a student tried to write down a passage which is taught in the class at the presence of a teacher, the teacher would be very annoyed. They would insist that the students memorize the melody and imitates everything. Today, notation is sometimes used because the old system is not entirely reliable to all. For many styles which cannot be notated, students make up their own symbols to represent them.

There are four kinds of notation as mentioned below:

1. Using the numbers from 0 to 5, which are placed on two or three lines representing different strings. This type is used in earlier examples; higher numbers can be used for higher left hand positions.

2. Using the numbers from 1 to 9 to indicate fingers and strings. To indicate higher position, the symbol o might be used above the number. (Note that there are different notations depending on the Instruments)

1 = open string on the lower string

2 = index finger on the lower string

3 = middle finger on the lower string

4 = ring finger on the lower string

5 = little finger on the lower string

5 = open finger on the upper string

6 = index finger on the upper string

7 = middle finger on the upper string

8 = ring finger on the upper string

9 = little finger on the upper string

3. Using the number similar to “2” with the exception that the numbers 8 and 9 are not used and the player must choose which octave to play the note in.

4. The use of solmization symbols ( do re mi ) written in Thai letters .

C : do

D : re

E : mi

F : fa

G : sol

A : la

B : ti

Western notation is used to play Thai classical music too. Since flats and sharps are necessary in the Thai tuning system, the music is much simpler to read than Western music typically is. If the Western instruments play Thai music, however, accidentals must be used to approximate more closely to Thai intervals although they will not be in exact. Western stringed instruments without frets (such as violin, cello, and viola) can play Thai music with the correct intonation if the player is well - trained.

### **A typical lesson**

A Thai teacher will do his best to teach his student, but often reserves certain techniques or passages for only his most beloved students. The student must play exactly or

imitate as accurately as possible what his teacher taught him. Teachers usually concentrate only on teaching technique and style, however, for a traditional teacher, does not teach theory or notation. In the past, there was no theoretical or notational system published not clearly articulated. Furthermore, most performers had little interest in such matters. Study was, therefore, conducted by the rote method.

Beginners practice very hard at doing exactly what the teacher has instructed. They must begin slowly and practice until they can play the exercises at a quicker tempo. The teacher may change how a given passage is played at each lesson, since the students must learn to play a given melody differently in each performance. An advanced student is required to make up his own variations and techniques through his own experience while performing.

### Comparing the Styles of Different Teachers

Each teacher has his own style. The great teacher must be able to create a full melody ( Look dum ) from the basic melody ( look kwang ) in his own way depending upon the technique of playing each individual instrument. It is significant that a great teacher can create a wide variety variations on a certain melody on one instrument alone.

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