

Endangered Thai Music Culture: The Current Situation of the *khrueng sai pi chawa* Ensemble¹

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Abstract

The *khrueng sai pi chawa* (KSPC, “Thai stringed instruments with Javanese oboe”) ensemble in Central Thai society is a unique ensemble for its repertoire, its tuning, and its contemporary cultural context. In 2012, only one institution maintains a complete professional ensemble, performing only for special occasions. In my ongoing fieldwork research in Thailand, I have found that this special ensemble has a long history and complicated circumstances involving both the royal literature *Inao* and the politics of authority in its transmission. *Khrueng sai pi chawa* is very highly regarded, but rarely performed among Thai musicians. I consider it to be an endangered musical form, in part because of the very strict custom that the only musicians able to perform are those who have had direct contact and studied with teachers who played in *khrueng sai pi chawa*, and they must receive special permission to perform. This permission can only come from those who have played KSPC in the past,

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and very few continue to perform actively. Another factor is that few Thai musicians appreciate or fully understand the function of this unique ensemble. From my extensive interviews, I found that knowledge of KSPC is limited at present to only a few musicians who assert the authority to perform and teach KSPC to the next generation, and this authority emanates from their position within the Music Division of the Fine Arts Department of the Thai government in Bangkok.

Introduction

I am focusing on the current situation of the *khrueng sai pi chawa* (“Thai stringed instruments with Javanese oboe”, from here on abbreviated KSPC) ensemble in Central Thai society. KSPC is a unique ensemble for its repertoire, its tuning, and its contemporary cultural contexts, and in 2012 only one institution, the Music Division of the Fine Arts Department of the Thai government, maintained a complete professional ensemble, which performs only for special occasions. Several more institutions in Thailand have KSPC ensembles; however, in most cases when they perform they need players of certain instruments to come from the Fine Art Department to perform with them. In my ongoing fieldwork research in Thailand in 2012, I found that this special ensemble has a long history and complicated cultural circumstances involving both the royal literature *Inao* and the politics of authority in its transmission.

I will describe the presentation of the Thai epic poem *Inao* in traditional performance forms, which also relates to the function of the KSPC ensemble in the performance of national literature. This includes the study of music repertoire, the history of the musical instruments, and the beliefs and values held by the musicians and participants in this special musical ensemble in traditional and contemporary contexts.

The KSPC ensemble demands a very high level of musical mastery, and is restricted to very few musicians, a large proportion of whom are men, who have obtained permission from master teachers to perform. Evidently, they have all studied directly with the teachers who were the founders of KSPC situated in the Fine Arts Department since the reign of King Rama VI. Although this ensemble can play the same musical preludes that are used in theater forms, they are performed with the most elaborate, rapid and difficult variations of any ensemble. As a result, KSPC is very highly regarded, but rarely performed among Thai musicians. I consider it to be an endangered musical form because of the very strict custom that the only musicians able to perform are those who have direct contact with a teacher who has played in KSPC; the fact that there are very limited occasions for which it is appropriate to perform KSPC; and that there are now only a few musicians still alive who are able to perform KSPC. Furthermore, few other Thai musicians appreciate and fully understand the function of this unique ensemble.

To perform KSPC, musicians not only have to learn the repertoire in multiple melodic modes, they must be able to memorize and create multiple new melodic variations of each song to suit their particular instrument, called *thang* (idiomatic instrumental style); and most importantly, they must do this and still be able to fit their parts together as a group. Songs provide opportunities for each performer to show off their skill, but in order to play ‘politely’ and symbolically pay respect to one another, musicians should not do this the whole time. Learning and practicing the same song together is necessary in order to achieve a balance of ensemble collaboration and individual display. However, challenging one another with creative *thang* is customary for highly skilled musicians because they trust that the other musicians will be able to respond in turn. Sometimes, when musicians have to perform with someone of less skill or someone they do not know well, they tend to hold back on their *thang* because they do not want to make musicians uncomfortable or cause them to become lost.

The percussion parts take on a heightened importance in KSPC because they are the only ones that maintain consistent rhythmic

patterns while other musical instruments avoid playing on the beat and employ complicated variations. If one musician gets lost, they would focus on the *saw u* because this instrument has a lower sound than any other in the ensemble. Each performer responds in the moment to the music, choosing their melodic variations based not only on what their teacher taught, but also on what other musicians are playing at that moment so that they will not play overly similar variations. Therefore, the musicians are improvising, to some extent, while they perform, and they try not to be predictable so they play differently with each performance. This unique ensemble requires intensive ensemble rehearsal to build a new vocabulary of interactions between musical instruments that will function smoothly and confidently.

They perform with intensity when on stage, but are relaxed when they finish. After each performance, the ensemble would normally talk about the specific sections of songs where there were mistakes, or the sections that they liked the most. They actively assess the ability of each musician and consciously choose whether or not to perform with them again. Performance together thereby functions as a test for the less experienced musicians.

The most well known musicians who perform KSPC at present are *Khru* Peep Konglaithong, *Khru* Pakorn Rodchangphuean, *Khru* Jiraphon Pechsom, *Khru* Chaweangsak Phothisombat. These musicians learned from the same teachers in the Fine Arts Department and are now located around the country. Three of them specialize in stringed instruments and one in *pi*. While they come together to perform for special occasions, they do not work together regularly to train younger musicians to perform KSPC.

From interviews conducted between January and June 2012, I have found that knowledge about KSPC is transmitted directly from musicians/teachers who have performed in the past, although at present there are only a few musicians who assert the authority to perform and teach KSPC to the next generation. Several musicians have tried to build their own KSPC ensembles in high schools and colleges, but have difficulties in maintaining their groups because no student will be present for more than four years and this is insufficient time to build the trust required to perform the difficult *thang* of KSPC.

Students who have learned some of the repertoire for KSPC while in school sometimes come together to perform KSPC in school or after they have graduated, but this seldom occurs. Most of the time, the teachers are the ones who perform KSPC.

Common Well Known Ensembles in Central Thailand

Here I briefly describe the meaning of the Thai musical instruments in the Central Thai classical tradition and the common well-known ensembles.

1. The *piphat* ensemble is commonly used to accompany the *khon* (masked dance drama) and for rituals such as the *waikhru* ceremony, honoring spirit teachers, funerals and temple events. The main musical instruments are *ranat ek*, *ranat thum*, *khong wong yai*, *khong wong lek*, *thapon*, *klaung that*, *klaung khaek*, *pi*, and *ching*.

2. The *khruangsai* ensemble is commonly used to accompany weddings and indoor events because the sounds are softer. The main musical instruments are *jakhe*, *saw duang*, *saw u*, *khlui*, *khim* (sometimes), *thon-rammana*, and *ching*.

3. The *mahori* ensemble is basically the combination of *piphat* and *khruangsai* ensembles with exceptional instruments such as *saw sam sai* (three-stringed fiddle), and with adjustments in percussion to balance the overall sound.

Several kinds of ensembles perform for only special occasions, such as *piphat nanghong*, *piphat maun*, and *bualai* for funerals, and *pi-klaung* for royal processions and Thai martial arts. KSPC is only performed for very special occasions, including funerals to honor the ones who have passed away who were great supporters of KSPC in the past.

Khruang Sai Pi Chawa Ensemble

KSPC is believed to have been created in the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767), and was used during the early to middle Rattanakosin period (1768-1932) for entertainment, not for ritual. The ensemble was not then known as KSPC but as *klaung khaek khruang yai* (large drum ensemble). The photo below shows the single instrument version

of the KSPC ensemble. The musicians in the picture are Thai government employees from the Fine Arts Department performing at the Thai National Theatre.



Figure 1: *Khrueng Sai Pi Chawa* Ensemble of the Fine Arts Department. Photo by the author.

KSPC is a unique ensemble of Thai stringed instruments (*khrueng sai*) and Javanese oboe, including one *jakhe* (three-stringed zither with a sound box shaped like a crocodile), one *saw u* (two-stringed coconut body fiddle), one *saw duang* (two-stringed snakeskin fiddle), one *khlui lip* (vertical block flute), one pair of *klaung khaek* or *thon rammanna* (drums), one pair of *ching* (small brass cymbals), and one *pi chawa* ('Javanese' oboe).

The *pi chawa*, a high pitched oboe, is ostensibly from Java and is similar to the *pi chanai*, but the conical wooden tube, with seven upper holes and one lower hole for fingering, is approximately 27 centimeters long; with a wooden bell (7-8 centimeters in diameter), the whole instrument measures 38-39 centimeters long. Also similar to the *pi chanai*, the *pi chawa* has a disc on the tube between the quadruple reed and the body. This instrument is associated with the drums *klaung khaek*. Formerly used in the royal palace and in military processions, the *pi chawa* is now heard primarily as accompaniment to

boxing, in certain funeral ensembles and for episodes from the *Inao* story in *lakhon* drama.³

An idiosyncratic aspect of this kind of string ensemble is that it includes the *pi chawa*, which could suggest that this musical ensemble may have some influence from Java, Indonesia. In addition, double- and quadruple-reed musical instruments and drums in the Malay world are associated with ritual music for death, for signaling the king's arrival and are deeply connected with the martial arts. These include *sila* or *silat* dances from Southern Thailand and Malaysia, kick boxing (*muay Thai*) in Thailand and fighting with wooden swords (*krabi krabong*).

The Instruments of the *Pi* (Reed Instrument) Family and Their Function

There are several kinds of *pi* that are played in musical ensembles in Thailand, and these ensembles perform ritual music and accompany dances. Ensembles with *pi* are normally accompanied by a pair of drums (*klaung khaek*) that are sometimes played with mallets and sometimes with bare hands, and one pair of brass cymbals (*ching*).

Double reeds (two palm-leaf pieces)

Pi nai is normally included in the *piphat* ensemble, which performs inside the palace and accompanies the masked dance theater (*khon*).

Pi klang is used for shadow puppet theater (*nang yai*).

Pi nauk is used for dance-drama (*lakhon*) performances outside the palace.

Quadruple reeds (four palm-leaf pieces)

Pi maun is of ethnic Mon origin, and in Thailand is performed at funerals.

Pi chanai was formerly used in royal processions, such as on the royal barge on which the king travels from his palace to the temples.

³ Miller, "Thailand", 245-247.

Pi nae and *pi chawa* have the same construction but differ in size, and were formerly used for military processions.

Only one kind of *pi* is played with the stringed instrument ensemble, the *pi chawa*. The string ensemble itself has no clear history and is not specifically associated with ritual, theater or dance. It appears to have been more accommodating to the incorporation of foreign instruments, such as *khim*, piano, violin, organ, accordion, and *pi chawa*, than other ensembles.

The KSPC ensemble requires that instruments be tuned differently than in other ensembles.⁴ For example, because the *pi chawa* has a high fixed pitch (f'-c''), the *saw duang* (the range of which is normally g'-a'') has to be tuned up four steps (to c'') to match the pitch of the *pi chawa* in order to play in the ensemble. However, the *saw u* (with a range of c-d') and *jakhee* (with a range of c-f') do not change their original tunings, but the players need to modulate the melodies of each song to match the pitch of the *pi chawa*. To illustrate, if a melody begins with the note G (second pitch of *pi chawa*), the *saw duang*, which has been tuned up from G to C, can play mostly normally, but with changes in finger position. On the other hand, the *jakhe* and *saw u* which have not been tuned up, need to transpose the pitch of the song from G to C and then change the *thang* to play melodic patterns that suit the instrument and the fingering to make the melody proceed smoothly. The combination of these changes in pitch and melodic variations makes this particular musical ensemble unique in sound and character. These changes require musicians to be very skillful and robust because the repertoire for KSPC is intentionally hard, fast, and long (except when singing or accompanying dance), and also includes many internal modulations. However, the *saw duang* player sometimes does not change their tuning but moves the noose that fastens the strings to the neck closer to the sound box to shorten the sounding length of the strings by half.

The repertoire for the KSPC is extraordinarily small – so far I have found only twenty pieces recorded – although some musicians,

⁴ Puangpen Rakthong, "A Study of the Thai Stringed Ensemble with Javanese Pipe" (in Thai).

including *Khru* Peep Konglaithong, claim it was much larger in the past, The current common repertoire that I have found consists of these pieces:

1. Overtures (*phleng reuang chomsamut, rako, lompatchaikhao, aiyaret, longlom, kheakmuan bangchang*), ending with a foreign language suite and *sarama* (*pi* and drum solo).

2. Regular songs, including *patcha, tayoi khmen, kraonai, tap nimit, bramkhaobot, saensanau, khaekmaun, khaek oot, khaek lopburii, klomnari, arthun, and sarathi*.

3. Ending songs *ok tale, phra athit chingduang, tao kin pakbung, and thaun samau*.

Previous Research on KSPC

Very little research has been done on the KSPC ensemble. Thai scholar Puangpen Rakthong wrote a master's thesis about KSPC in 1996,⁵ but since then no one has done further research about this ensemble. In 2006, Nattapong Sukuman wrote a master's thesis⁶ about one set of songs which are used for KSPC, however, his work focused on the songs' history, musical transcriptions, and analysis, and not on the ensemble in cultural context. Also, in 2009, Sililak Chalontham wrote a master's thesis focusing on an analysis of one of the songs performed by KSPC.⁷ Additionally, in her book about dance, drama and theater in Thailand, Mattani Moj dara Rutnin explains the historical development of various performance forms, but offers little detail about traditional music or about *Inao*.⁸

In a program note for a KSPC performance on December 4, 1949, *Khru* Montree Tramote (1900-1995) explains the history of KSPC and its repertoire as "The Orchestra of String Instruments with the Additional of Javanese Pipe" that performed five songs [using his

⁵ Puangpen Rakthong, "A Study of The Thai Stringed Ensemble with Javanese Pipe" (in Thai).

⁶ Nattapong Sukuman, "The Relationships of Melodic Patterns for Kraung Sai Pii Chawa Ensemble: A case Study of Phleng Raueng Chom Samuth" (in Thai).

⁷ Sililak Chalontham, "Kruang Sai Pijava Ensemble: A Study of Pheng Ar-Thun Thao" (in Thai).

⁸ Mattani Moj dara Rutnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand*.

spellings]: “1. Homerong Lonhol Song, third level with Sarama; 2. Klomnaree Thoa; 3. Oh Lao; 4. Tayoy Khamea Third Level; and 5. Ton Borrathed Thao with Sarama Kheak.” He wrote that the KSPC ensemble normally starts with a short overture and then follows with songs for *pi chawa* such as *sarama*, *plaeng* and the Language Suite (*auk phasa*).⁹ *Sarama* is a unique song for *pi chawa*, which borrows ideas from Java. He believes that it came to Siam during the reign of King Borommakot along with the *Inao* story, and that it also accompanied the *krit* and wooden sword dances.¹⁰ The three songs Klomnari, Tayoy Khamea, and Ton Borrathed Thao, when sung, also use lyrics from King Rama II’s version of the *Inao*. This clearly shows the relationship between *Inao* literature and KSPC.

The drum solo patterns have been studied by Kumkom Pornprasit.¹¹ She also discusses the use of drums and *pi chawa* to accompany the performance of *Inao* literature.

In 1994, Pongsil Arunrat wrote his master thesis on the biography and works of *Khru* Phraya Prasanduriyasap (Plaek Prasansap) (1860-1924) and explains that Phraya Plaek Prasansap was the first music director of the Fine Arts Department, Bangkok Thailand and used to perform and teach Thai music for royalty at Wang Burapapirom during the reign of King Rama VI.¹² He studied *pi chawa* with *Khru* Nudum and studied *piphat* with *Khru* Choy Sunthonwathin. Phraya Prasanduriyasap had composed many Thai musical songs. *Khru* Montree Tramote was his last student at the Fine Arts Department and Pongsil Arunrat had a chance to interview him about the history of *Khru* Plaek Prasansap before he passed away. I interviewed Pongsil Arunrat on May 14, 2012 at his house. I found that many of the songs that KSPC performs were composed by *Khru*

⁹ Montree, *The Orchestra of Stringed Instruments with the Addition of Javanese Pipe* (in Thai).

¹⁰ Montree, *The Orchestra of Stringed Instruments with the Addition of Javanese Pipe* (in Thai).

¹¹ Kumkom, “Sarama” (in Thai).

¹² Pongsil, “Biography and Works of Kru Phraya Prasanduriyasap (Plaek Prasansap)” (in Thai).

Plaek Prasansap and some of the lyrics came from the version of *Inao* by King Rama II.

The *Inao* Story: Nation and Royal Literature

All the versions of the epic story *Inao* from the Chakri kings include prescribed musical preludes to each scene. These compositions play a crucial role in depicting the emotional content of the story. In my preliminary research, other than the standard Thai music ensembles (*piphat*, *khruangsai* and *mahori* which sometimes accompany dance at present), I have found that these musical preludes from *Inao* comprise the repertoire for KSPC.

The *Inao* epic poem is an anonymous work with origins before the modern Chakri dynasty, the current royal house of the kingdom of Thailand which has ruled since 1782. The epic was closely associated with the power of royalty and was exclusively performed in the court until the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1932. In contrast to *Ramakien*, the Thai rendition of the Hindu *Ramayana*, and the only other major epic story associated with royal power in Thailand, *Inao* concerns the everyday lives of royalty and is easily understood by common people.

Inao is one of the many Thai national literary works composed by Thai kings, and it won a prize for being the most aesthetic poetic composition for performance. This expanded story came from the south of Thailand, also known as *jawa*. However, the term *jawa* referred not only to the island of Java in Indonesia, but also to the whole Malay world. The story was strongly influenced by the Malaysian and Indonesia *Panji* story and the Balinese *Malad* story, both of which are about a wandering young king, his nation, his points of view on politics, and his unexpectedly complicated love life.

Inao is an example of royal literature in Thai culture. It first appeared in Thailand during the Ayutthaya period. King Borommakot, who lived during 1733-1758, had two daughters, Chow Fa Mongkut and Chao Fa Kuntun, who composed two versions of *Inao* based on a story told to them by a Javanese maid. These are known as *Inao Lek*

and *Inao Yai (Dalang)* or the ‘small Inao’ and the ‘big Inao’.¹³ Supond, a well-known Thai historian, provides a brief summary of the *Inao* story in his book, stating that the *Inao* story was very famous during the Ayutthaya period. He also recounts how much the last king of Ayutthaya, King Suriyamarin, or Phra Chow Akekatad (r. 1758-1767), loved to watch *Inao*, and as a result, he lost a battle with Burma because he was busy watching the play when the Burmese and Siamese were at war.¹⁴ He also mentions that the story had been told to King Rama I of the new kingdom of the Chakri Dynasty (r. 1782-1809) by Phra Maha Nek Watt Asia, a famous monk at a temple. Therefore, King Rama I and others helped to compose a new version of *Inao* which was based on his memory and the *Inao* versions available to him. In the period of King Rama II (r. 1809-1824), another version of *Inao* was written, based only on the *Inao Lek* story.¹⁵

The version of *Inao* by King Rama II was believed to be the best *Inao* ever written. Many other artists subsequently helped to make it a complete story for theater, including the version of King Rama III (r. 1824-1851), Sunthorn Phu, a very famous poet during the reigns of Kings Rama II-IV, and choreographer Luang Pitak Montri.¹⁶

The versions of *Inao* composed by royal authors at various times that have been published are: King Rama I’s version, first published in 1917; King Rama II’s version, first published in 1921; ‘Staff of the National Library’ version, first published in 1921; Damrong Rachanuphap’s version in the Wachirayan library, first published in 1921; King Rama III’s version, first published in 1919; and King Rama V’s theatrical version, also first published in 1921.

The excerpts from *Inao* that are used as sung lyrics in KSPC represent some of the most famous and recognizable passages from the story; all of them describe the love between Prince Inao, who is not yet king, and his wives. One such example is *Klomnari*, a lullaby for helping one of his wives go to sleep while thinking of her beauty.

¹³ Supond, *Inao* (in Thai).

¹⁴ Supond, *Inao*, 644 (in Thai).

¹⁵ Supond, *Inao*, 644-649 (in Thai).

¹⁶ Supond, *Inao*, 650 (in Thai).

In this song, the prince compares her eyes as to the eyes of a deer and thinks her body is small and elegant like a bird. In this scene, before Inao goes to fight, he is saying goodbye to his wife. The duty of the king-to-be is to ensure that his father's territory is kept safe by marrying a princess from a neighboring kingdom.

The reasons for including these particular passages in the performance of KSPC are ambiguous. Changing the texts would not be acceptable because they were chosen for KSPC by Kings Rama II and Rama V, and so faithfully honoring their choices honors them and glorifies their power.

The *Inao* texts used in KSPC show the ordinary human side of royalty. They make many mistakes just because of love. They take revenge because of love. They even give their lives just because of love. Most of the female characters in *Inao*, who are princesses and their servants, are symbols for territory because they are treated as property for marriage between kingdoms in order to guarantee peace. Fighting over these women symbolizes taking over territory by force. In the end, no matter how the prince acts, his duty is always to follow his father's wishes.

My personal experience as a Thai citizen and student of Thai music exemplifies the importance of nationalism in the study of music. My teachers told me when I was young that the reason I perform Central Thai traditional music and dance, which are not popular in the Isan region where I lived, is not for myself, nor for other ordinary people, but for the king. If others and I would not continue to do so, we, as a Thai nation might lose our national identity to other cultures. The king is held as a symbol of the nation, and performing music and dance for the king literally means to pay respect to, and support the nation. Today, *Inao* is taught as part of the school curriculum, and is explicitly associated with King Rama II. While the musicians who perform KSPC use the lyrics from *Inao* because it is a tradition passed down from King Rama II and done without question, these texts amplify the idea that the king's instructions are to be followed without question, just as Prince Inao acts according to his father's wishes. The subject of texts, and the act of reproducing them faithfully, both highlight the absolute authority of royal power.

Royal Authority and the KSPC Ensemble

Unlike other musical ensembles where many musicians from different teachers can play together easily, KSPC is played by the musicians who have studied in one direct line only. Traditionally, Thai music students have strict obligations to their music teacher. Before becoming a student, one has to ask permission from the teacher by offering a silver bowl with a flower, money, a candle, and incense. If the teacher agrees to teach, the student later needs to participate in the *wai khru* ritual where the student, teacher, and spirits are called to witness an act by the student.¹⁷ The student who continues to study a special repertoire needs to demonstrate their ability to learn the harder songs at this ritual as well. Students have to perform occasionally and show loyalty to the teacher by not mixing styles of music into one another.

In the past, many Thai music students lived with their teacher and helped around their house as a form of payment. In contrast, at present many students study with Thai music teachers in schools and do not stay in their houses. Trust therefore becomes an issue between teachers and students more so than in the past. Teachers consider carefully before they give any special repertoire to any student. Some Thai music teachers are considering loosening their traditional rules for students because they must now exist in a changing contemporary system for music education. Some still follow the traditional way of teaching Thai music.

KSPC is part of this tradition, except that it is limited to special contexts and occasions. I have interviewed several musicians who studied at the Fine Arts Department in the past and are in the direct line of study for KSPC, including the *pi* player *Khru* Peep Konglaithong, and his wife, and all the stringed players from the same institution, most importantly the ‘*sam thahan sua* for KSPC’ (three musicians who play stringed instrument for KSPC): *Khru* Jirapon Petchsom from Roi Et province, *Khru* Chawangsak Pothisombat from Chiang Mai province, and *Khru* Prakorn Rodchangphuean from Chulalongkorn University. They are at retirement age, but still teach

¹⁷ Wong, *Sounding the Center*.

and perform Thai music, mainly stringed instruments. These three have tried to build their own KSPC ensembles outside of the Fine Arts Department, however, they have had little success in the Thai music society because of a few limitations. For example, at their own institutions, they do not have qualified teachers for every instrument in KSPC and, their students normally finish their degrees in four years which means that those students who have learned KSPC have only a very limited time to practice their skills, and most of them have no opportunity to perform KSPC without their teachers. Other music teachers and musicians have only had the chance to watch, but have never played KSPC because their teachers did not study KSPC in the past.

All of these musicians have told me very similar stories that their knowledge of KSPC began in Central Thailand, specifically from the Fine Arts Department. They all studied at the same place, the same repertoire, and with the very same set of teachers. They all said that the way a musician performs is a form of musical conversation, so musicians have to share a very similar vocabulary and experience in order to tell the same 'story', and to not merely copy each other's words. The musicians have a chance to create their own musical dialogue and have fun while doing it. However, they also need to practice at least twice before performing in front of others to make sure that they will have decent conversations and not make anyone too angry. These musicians do not normally compose music, but they do sometimes arrange new ways to perform the same songs they have learned. Without notating, transmitting and performing KSPC often, some songs will never be played again. There is another main reason that Thai music compositions are disappearing, revealed in a conversation between a composer and a Thai musician/composer. Bruce Gaston is an American-born composer who has been involved for a long time in Thai traditional music and in the Thai education system as a musician and composer. He studied with the well-known musician Master Boonyong Gatekong. Master Boonyong studied with

his father and in the Sinlapabanleng's school,¹⁸ which has a very big influence in teaching Thai music in the public education system. In a written article, Gaston recounts their conversations about how to compose Thai music in the Thai music culture. Master Boonyong said that some Thai music students just want to compose songs without first having a deep understanding of the complexity of Thai music itself, and that if students like that came to him asking for the tricks to compose the songs, he does not teach them. He is willing to let the knowledge of music die with him because he strongly believes that music composers need to know enough before they can compose. They must be very good musicians, know all kinds of songs and functions of the songs in Thai society, and gain respect and authority from society, and only then they would know when they are ready to compose new songs.

The current situation of KSPC is dangerous because there are no new compositions and only a few musicians can perform and participate at an acceptable level for Thai music society. At present, there is only one professional ensemble in the Fine Arts Department. In my interviews, the musicians also express concern about KSPC in the future, but they do not yet have any solution for keeping this tradition alive. It will be up to the musicians in the future to preserve this special KSPC after these great musicians have passed away.

Hope for the Future

I have interviewed two great string musicians at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand about the KSPC ensemble, and they both told me that they have a Thai music curriculum for students to study KSPC at school in their third and fourth years, but unfortunately, no one has ever reached a high enough skill level to study it. After our conversations, they told me that they might reconsider their offerings because they want this musical ensemble to continue to exist. In practice, musicians who play KSPC have to be born into that community. At present, many great musicians have

¹⁸ A 'school' of music refers to places where music is taught according to one style or lineage in particular.

passed away and few students are now alive who play this kind of music, yet the customs limiting its transmission remain. Little knowledge of this ensemble is being passed on to the next generation because of these traditional beliefs.

Before my current fieldwork, I contacted people in Thailand electronically and by telephone to research KSPC. On October 2, 2011, I had a conversation with Prasarn Wongwirojruk, who played *saw duang* at the event. I asked him about a picture that he posted on his Facebook page. It is a picture of him and a group of students and teachers performing KSPC for the funeral of the well-known and highly respected Thai musician and music teacher of singing and stringed instruments, *Khru* Jaroenjai Sontonwatin on April 28 or 29, 2011. I asked which songs they had performed and he responded: *nanghong* (funeral suite), *phanfarang* (from the foreign language suite), *hera len nam*, and the rest he could not remember. The picture of the ensemble included two *jakhe* players, showing that there can be flexibility in the number of *jakhe*, in this case because one of the *jakhe* players was also the singer and he wanted to pay respect to his teacher by playing *jakhe* instead of singing.

During my current fieldwork, I have attended several KSPC performances and interviewed many musicians, mainly from the Fine Arts Department. Below is a picture of the KSPC ensemble with an additional *jakhe* that I took on February 17, 2012. This was the first live performance of KSPC I witnessed and documented.



Figure 2: *Khrueng Sai Pi Chawa* Ensemble with an additional *jakhe* performing at the Cultural Center Chulalongkorn University. Photo by the author.

I also recorded another KSPC performance at *khru* Jaroenjai Sontonwatin's funeral on April 21, 2012 after she had passed away for a year. The picture below shows this KSPC ensemble performing at a funeral in Bangkok. The musicians are from the Fine Arts Department.



Figure 3: *Khrueng Sai Pi Chawa* Ensemble of the Fine Arts Department performing at a funeral. Photo by the author.

Performances of KSPC in 2012:¹⁹

1. February 2012 at Chulalongkorn University performed by musicians from Fine Arts Department.
2. March 16, 2012 at Thai National Theatre to honor Phraya Plak Prasan Duruyasab.
3. April 21, 2012 at Wat Thapsirin to honor *Ajarn* Jareanjai Sunthonwathin's funeral.
4. August 18, 2012 at the Thai National Theatre to honor *Khru* Tongdee Sujaritkul.
5. September 2, 2012, performed for the funeral of *Khru* Somboon Boonwong.
6. September 16, 2012, performed with Princess Sirindhorn to honor *Khru* Jareanjai Sunthonwathin.
7. November 9, 2012 for the Royal Barge Procession for the Royal Kathin ceremony.
8. November 16, 2012 at the Thai National Theatre to honor *Khru* Luang Phairau Siang Sau.

In Closing

In contrast to the epic story *Inao* which is performed using multiple kinds of Thai music ensembles, is flexibly adapted for performance, and enjoys great support from royalty and ordinary people, the KSPC ensemble is slowly fading out of the spotlight. At present, KSPC is rare, in that the ensemble is maintained in only a limited number of places and performed only for specific occasions. I have found that several musicians from the military who know how to play KSPC have moved to work at the Fine Arts Department instead, confirmed in an interview with one such musician, *Khru* Suwat Atthakrit. Therefore, at present there is no KSPC ensemble in the military. The *pi klong* ensemble is used only for the Royal Barge procession when the musicians of the Fine Arts Department join with the military. I have documented a KSPC student group led by *Khru* Jirapon Pechsom performing to honor *Khru* Silapi Tramote's funeral

¹⁹ As of mid-November, 2012.

in June 2012. They were from Roi Et Province, Northeast Thailand. *Khru* Silapi Tramote used to play in KSPC in the past and he taught *Khru* Jirapon Pechsom at the Fine Arts Department in Bangkok. Several listeners at the June performance had never seen a KSPC ensemble, other than the one from the Fine Arts Department in Bangkok, and many others who attended the funeral had never seen any KSPC ensemble and knew little about it. I talked to other musicians from the Fine Arts Department that same day about their reaction to this student group performing KSPC. Two string musicians said that it was good to hear other ensemble perform KSPC, while one music teacher did not appreciate that KSPC existed outside his own institution because of the skill level of students who performed KSPC and their choice to use lower-quality practicing instruments to perform. This musician told me the reason why the KSPC ensemble from the Fine Arts Department could not perform was because a few musicians were out of the country for government business. Instead of finding other musicians who could play with them, they chose to not perform at all. Some musicians have raised the standards so high that almost no one can perform in an ensemble, so this puts KSPC in an endangered position. This is because they keep a strict custom that the only musicians able to perform are those who have direct contact with a teacher who has played in KSPC, along with the rare opportunity to perform and not enough trust for others. This unique ensemble will not survive for long without transmission and support from the Thai music society.

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