

Talking Reeds and Singing Voices:

Music from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam

By Amy Catlin

Photo by Amy Catlin for the Smithsonian



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- 1 The Hmong use the *njang* or jaw's harp as a courtship instrument. In his left hand this young man holds the wooden carrying case for the instrument.
- 2 This free reed flute is one of many wind instruments Sam Ang Sam learned to play in Cambodia.

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Music from Southeast Asia can be heard throughout the United States today. Most regions in the United States have Lao, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Hmong cultural associations that organize festivals such as New Year celebrations, where music is performed. Here the many traditional activities are mixed with modern elements, and visitors are welcome to observe and participate.

At the Festival of American Folklife, however, we are concentrating on the music that represents the older strands of tradition; those strands that stem primarily from village and home life. One of the basic instrument types found throughout the region is the *free reed*, whose simplest form is a leaf held in the hands or lips and blown to produce noise, or, in the case of the talented, music. The Hmong and Cambodians are known for their skill at playing tunes on such a leaf, which is a popular worldwide folk instrument.

Another free reed instrument is the *jaw harp*, made of a thin strip of cane or metal that is attached at one end to a frame and plucked at the other. Of course, this must be held at the mouth (jaw) while inhaling or exhaling at each rhythmic stroke to produce music. By changing the shape of the mouth cavity, the various notes of the melody are amplified to an audible level. The jaw harp is found throughout the world; it is also called a Jew's harp or guimbard. Southeast Asian jaw harps are different in their basic design, however, because the vibrating "tongue" of the instrument is usually cut only a hair's breadth from the frame surrounding it. Also, this tongue is often shaped like an extremely elongated triangle, sometimes with two additional points flanking the apex.

The Hmong use the jaw harp to convey messages in courtship. A young man serenades the one he has chosen by composing his thoughts into words and then expressing them through the jaw harp. The young woman replies with her own instrument. Hmong is a tonal language with eight tones, so it is possible to produce the rising, falling, or straight tones at the appropriate high, middle, or low pitch levels on any melodic instrument. Thus, the "talking drums" of Africa have a counterpart in the "talking reeds" of the Hmong.

A free reed may also be inserted into the side of a horn or pipe. A delicate sound is produced by covering the reed with the mouth and alternately blowing and sucking with firm, gentle pressure. These free reed pipes measure from a few inches to several feet in length and produce a low, haunting tone. Elaborate ornamented melodies can be played by the addition of finger holes. Again, the Hmong melodies are based upon the rising and falling contours of speech. Courtship may be the subject of a player's thoughts, or other personal poetry may be transmitted through these talking reeds.

The singing of the Hmong need not always be translated into instrumental form. Many people are experts at performing spontaneous sung poetry, which may express longing, nostalgia, and love of nature or one's village. Courtship is often conducted by singing alternately for hours in order for the couple to understand each other's feelings and thoughts. For shyer couples, however, the voice is masked by the talking reed. Interestingly, Hmong children do not sing because singing's function is to court and to express deep thoughts; although parents do sing lullabies to their children.

Cambodians also use various types of free reed horns and pipes. The *pey pork* is played by inserting the entire end of the pipe containing the reed into the mouth and cheek. It produces gentle, ethereal melodies that accompany melancholy dance. Two basic ensemble types are used for festivals and dance:

the *mohori* and the *pinpeat*. The *mohori* ensemble contains mostly string instruments, such as the bowed spiked fiddle (*tro*) and the plucked *chapei*. The *pinpeat* contains xylophones, metallophones, gong-chimes or horizontal sets of small tuned gongs, drums, finger cymbals, and the penetrating oboe (*seralai*). This ensemble accompanies masked dance, classical dance, and the shadow play. The folk version of shadow theater, (*ayang*), uses small translucent leather puppets to tell humorous stories, with improvised dialogue and contemporary satire predominating.

When several free reed pipes are joined together, the reed organ is formed, which is found from Bangladesh to Borneo. The Hmong *gaeng* is played at celebrations and funerals by older men who often dance and perform acrobatic feats, such as somersaults, while continuously inhaling and exhaling into the mouthpiece. Sometimes several *gaeng* players compete, and some Hmong people dance in groups along with the players. Their dances have titles such as *Welcome* and *Friends*.

The Lao counterpart (*kaen*), unlike the curving Hmong instrument, has straight pipes. It is played for courtship, shadow puppetry, and to accompany expert singers (*mawlum*). Often two singers will improvise a dialogue on a romantic or philosophical topic and dance to the *kaen* music between each response. Percussion instruments may join in some forms. The *kaen* also participates in the *lanat* ensemble, which contains xylophones, fiddles, fipple flute, gong-chimes, drums, voices, and finger cymbals. This ensemble plays for group dances at festivals and celebrations.

Many of these instruments produce music that is audible only in intimate groups, but their delicacy of sound is treasured. The Vietnamese monochord *dan bau* is such an instrument. Its single string is stretched by one hand to change its pitch after being released (not struck) by a stick held in the other hand. All the tones produced are harmonics, as in the jaw harp. Thus, it must be played in quiet places and in close company. The *bat truong quan* is another monochord, but it can be heard outdoors where it accompanies groups of boys who call out their challenging riddle-songs to a nearby group of girls who must reply. The single string is actually a rope about eight feet long strung tautly over a pit three feet wide and braced up in the center. The two sides of the rope are struck with sticks in a rhythmic drone. The pit is lined with seashells to increase its capacity for reflecting the sound.

Of course, these instruments and ensembles represent only a tiny fraction of the traditions that originated in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, and that are continually being brought to America. They contribute immensely to the richness of our kaleidoscopic cultural quilt, and we welcome the opportunity to learn from them.

Photo by Nicholas Bocher for the Smithsonian



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3 Da Inthirath demonstrates the Lao *kaen*, a type of mouth organ.

4 The *dan tranh*, here played by Kim Oanh, is a traditional Vietnamese instrument.

Suggested reading

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Recordings

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Laos. *Musiques de L'Asie Traditionnelle* Volume 2. PS 33502 (includes Hmong *gaeng*).

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