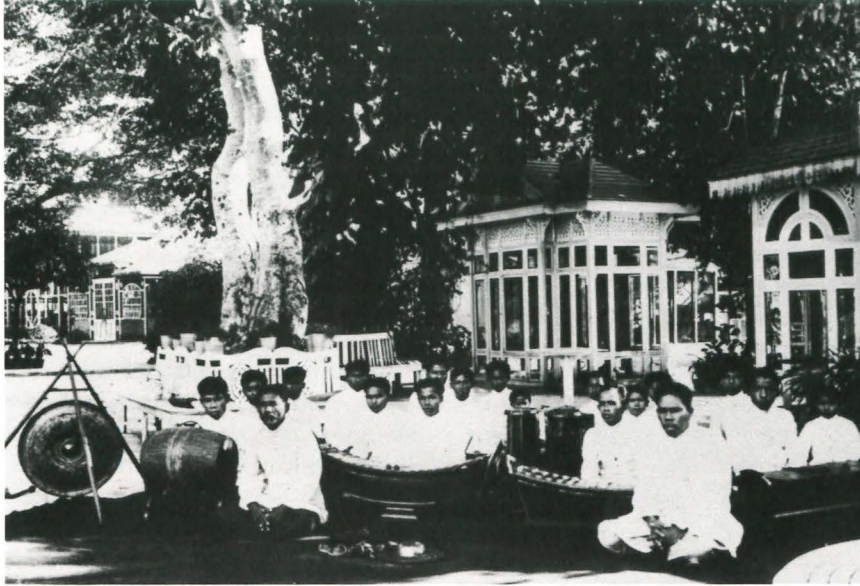


Performing Arts of the Royal Court



A phii phat ensemble performs at the former Bang Khun Phrom Palace in Bangkok in 1921. Ensembles such as these, previously supported by the court, are now supported by the Department of Fine Arts or Thai universities.

Photo by Somdet Khrommaluang Sri Rattanakosin, courtesy Thailand National Archives, Department of Fine Arts

by M.R. Chakrarot Chitrabongs

In his deep sleep one peaceful night, King Rama II of the royal house of Chakri, who reigned 1824–51, dreamt that he was sitting in a beautiful moonlit garden. The brightly shining full moon slowly floated toward him. He also heard the strains of a most wondrous music. He sat there in awe of the sight and sounds until the moon floated away and the music faded. The King woke up, but the magical music was still vivid in his memory. He immediately summoned the court musicians and played the song for them on his *saw sam sai*, the three-stringed fiddle. The song was given the name “Bulan Loy Luen” or “The Floating Moon.” One of the most famous songs in the whole of the Thai classical music repertoire, it gives us a glimpse into the role of music in the royal court of the early Bangkok period.

King Rama II ascended to the throne 32 years after the inauguration of Bangkok as the new capital city in 1782. Bangkok had been built by King Rama I, who reigned 1782–1824, to replace the old capital, Ayutthaya, which had been totally destroyed by warfare in 1767. Within a decade, by 1792, the glittering architecture of Bangkok’s Grand Palace and Royal Chapel became the new symbols of national integrity and identity. The

royal court, with all its component parts, was reinstated as the seat of power. One of the components was the court performers, who were retainers of the king and were charged with ceremonial and entertainment duties.

In the early Bangkok period, court or “classical” arts were extremely refined. The female court performers enjoyed the sanctity of the exclusively female “inner court.” Their upbringing, designed to give them a refined deportment considered essential for members of the nobility, included music and dance training from the early age of five or six. The female court performers specialized in the *lakhon nai*, which may be literally translated as “the dance-drama of the inner court.” This style of *lakhon* places emphasis on dance movements, musical quality, and highly crafted costumes.

Male performers were also retained by the king. They provided instrumental music for state ceremonies. The *lakhon nok*, or “dance-drama outside the royal court,” was performed by male dancers and female impersonators in lively presentations which were much more suited to the general audience and were of lesser artistic quality than the *lakhon nai*. Only males could participate in another genre of classical performing art, the *khon* masked dance. The sole story performed in the *khon* is the *Ramakian*, the Thai version of the

Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. Celebrating Lord Rama in accordance with the Hindu belief that Rama was an earthly manifestation of Vishnu, the Protector of Humanity, the *Ramayana* appears in all aspects of Thai arts and culture and is thought to have been introduced into Thailand well before the development of Thai culture itself.

The importance of the *Ramakian* in Thai culture becomes clear when one notes that immediately after the 1782 inauguration of Bangkok,



Dancers wearing elaborate headdresses, masks, and dress perform a battle scene between Rama and his enemy, Thosakan, during a stage production of the khon. Photo courtesy Royal Thai Embassy

King Rama I ordered the restoration of three important literary works that had been partly destroyed during the fall of Ayutthaya and the ensuing social disintegration – the *Tripitaka* Buddhist Canons, the “Law of the Three Seals,” and the *Ramakian*. The King had compiled a new set of manuscripts for these works from what had remained, combined with what scholars could remember. The *Ramakian* was the King’s own composition in verse. One version of many, it is the longest and most complete compendium of all the earlier royal court and popular versions, and is popularly known as “The Rama I Version of the *Ramakian*.”

Oddly, King Rama I wrote the *Ramakian* for the *lakhon nai* and not for the *khon*. What makes this surprising is that the main characters are fierce demons and monkey warriors, roles rarely danced by women. The reason for the choice is revealed in the very last verse, in which the king clearly stated that his composition was intended

for entertainment purposes only. The *khon*, on the other hand, was traditionally part of the royal regalia and was performed for the glorification of the king. The king’s statement is a very important indicator of the role of the performing arts in this period. Court entertainment was considered as essential an element in Thai culture as religion and law.

During the Second Reign of the Bangkok period (the reign of King Rama II), the court arts flourished, partly due to relative political stability and freedom from armed conflicts, and partly to the fact that King Rama II himself was an accomplished artist. Many works of art are attributed to him, including a masterpiece of poetry written for the *lakhon* entitled “Inao.”

Royal patronage ensured the livelihood of the royal court artists during the reigns of Kings Rama I – III, the so-called early Bangkok period. However, profound changes were to take place during the “middle Bangkok period,” in the reigns of Kings Rama IV and V. Western powers had made their presence strongly felt in the Southeast Asian region during the mid-19th century, and the need to attend to them resulted in an influx of Western cultural elements. Western military band music was imported to serve the Western style military; to welcome state visitors, new Thai performing art genres were invented that corresponded to the musical concert and the opera. These many new roles for performing artists to fill inflated their number to such an extent that the royal court could not support them all.

Other members of the royal family and the nobility began to retain performing artists in their households. The new patrons encouraged their charges to be dynamic and creative, to compete amicably with each other. Highly gifted artists were sought, and grand music masters came to the fore, composing more and more wonderful music and writing variations on old themes. At this time, the demands on the musicians’ intelligence, dexterity, and stamina were intense. Instrumentalists trained for hours each and every day in the search for fame and recognition. Successful performing artists were given titular honors, and their achievements were recorded for posterity.

The princely patrons considered it their duty to serve the state by supporting the performing arts. Two notable examples may be cited. When King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V, who reigned 1868-1910) expressed his wish for a

Thai classical equivalent to the Western concert, Prince Naris (son of King Rama IV), an artist, architect, and designer, created a completely new artistic genre, the Thai musical concert. In response to another request, the Prince and his associates created the Thai version of the Western opera. Known as *lakhon duekdamben*, it was a derivation of the classical *lakhon nai* in which the presentation was livelier while the artistic quality was maintained. The dancers also

themselves in "households," living and working as professional groups as well as training their own children and other youth.

At present, the Fine Arts Department is officially responsible for the continuation of the national heritage, preserving the royal court performing arts and training new generations of classical artists. It now supervises 11 Colleges of Dramatic Arts situated in various parts of the country. The method of training is wholly and deliberately traditional, so that the art form remains intact not only at the performance level, but in spirit as well. Students still undergo the various stages of *wai khru* initiation rites and pay ritual homage to the grand masters of the past and present. Their instructors are still regarded as teachers, mentors, and parents, as they have been through the ages.

Although, as was mentioned, most of the princely palaces ceased to patronize performing artists for a period of time, a few have revived



Children perform in a modern ensemble of traditional Thai musical instruments at the Thailand Culture Centre in Bangkok. Photo by Richard Kennedy

spoke and sang their own lines, just as in opera.

The golden age of Thai classical performing arts waned between the two World Wars and especially during the Great Depression, which also deeply affected the Thai economy. Palace households could no longer support numerous retainers and disbanded their groups of musicians and dancers. The royal court performers were transferred out of the royal household into a newly created government department called the Fine Arts Department. Other artists found employment in government institutions such as the Public Relations Department and the music departments of the armed forces, or maintained

their interests. At least three are now running music and dance schools to which modern parents can send their children at a very young age. The most outstanding example of royal patronage in our time is that shown by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, daughter of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, the present monarch. At the onset of the Information Age, Thai children, youth, and adults are enjoying a spirited vitalization of the classical performing arts under her leadership. Her Royal Highness is undertaking Thai classical music and dance training. She has become an accomplished musician, often performing with groups ranging from secondary school children to military cadets, university students, senior citizens, and grand musical masters.

SUGGESTED LISTENING

Royal Court Music of Thailand. Smithsonian / Folkways 40413.

Classical Music of Thailand. World Music Library KICC-5125.

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