

**Sam-Ang Sam**

Khmer music is a vital aspect of Khmer life and culture, epitomizing Cambodia—its society, arts, customs, and beliefs. Khmer music in Cambodia and in the Khmer communities in Thailand and Vietnam has been shaped by four very different influences: Indian, Chinese, European, and indigenous traditions. Hinduism and Buddhism inspired local religious music; the great Indian epic, the *Ramayana* influenced dance. The oboes and double-headed barrel drums of Khmer ensembles originated in India. The Chinese introduced two-stringed fiddles, hammered dulcimers, drums, and cymbals; the Europeans, musical notation.

Not surprisingly, ancient Khmer civilization, which reached its peak during the Angkor period from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, had a great influence on all aspects of culture including music. In the cities of Angkor stand gigantic structures that symbolize the union of celestial beings with earthly ones. Carved on the walls of those great temples are figures of the *apsara* (celestial nymphs or dancers) and musical instruments, such as the *pinn* (angular harp), *memm* (bowed monochord), *khse muoy* (plucked monochord or musical bow), *sralai* (quadruple-reed oboe), *korng* (gong), *chhing* (small finger cymbals), *sampho* (small, double-headed barrel drum), *skor yol* (suspended barrel drum), and *skor thomm* (large, double-headed barrel drum)—all still played today. Because instruments of contemporary Khmer music are similar to those on the bas-reliefs of Angkor, we have every reason to believe that present Khmer musical forms are the continuation of the ancient Khmer musical traditions.

Khmer music is still passed on orally from master musician to pupil as it likely was in ancient times. Virtually every village in Cambodia has a group of these musicians. In these ensembles, female vocalists are the norm; however, women are rarely musicians.

The musicians have a melody in mind but do not play it straight; instead, they embellish it. This ornamentation is inherent to rendering Khmer music.

Khmer music is varied. Some is ritualistic; other music is primarily entertaining. Ritual music has the power to put a medium into a trance or please the spirits. Other less serious forms of music, such as that played at weddings, enliven the atmosphere and the mind. Music accompanies every Khmer from the cradle. It reflects the soul and character of the Khmer people.

*Sam-Ang Sam is a Cambodian American ethnomusicologist and a MacArthur Fellow. As founder of the Sam-Ang Sam Ensemble, he has released several albums to stimulate interest in the various Cambodian performing arts. He now serves as dean at Pannasastra University, Phnom Penh.*

