



Master Samruay Premjai

Uncle Samruay – the Last of the Thai Traditional Music Teachers

The SPAFA crew visited the Premjai House of Music to explore its hospital-based concept of a school/repair centre, where Patsri Tipayapapai interviewed the 69-year-old renowned master musician Samruay Premjai.

The people of Thailand have been making indigenous musical instruments since ancient times, during which they also adapted instruments of other countries to create what are now regarded as Thai musical instruments. Through contact with Indian culture, the early Thai kingdoms assimilated and incorporated Indian musical traditions in their musical practices, using instruments such as the *phin*, *sang*, *pi chanai*, *krachap pi*, *chakhe*, and *thon*, which were referred to in the *Tribhumikatha*, an ancient book in the Thai language; they were also mentioned on a stone inscription (dated to the time of King Ramkhamhaeng, Sukhothai period).



Illustration of Sukhothai period ensemble of musicians

During the Ayutthaya period, the Thai instrumental ensemble consisted of between four and eight musicians, when songs known as '*Phleng Rua*' were long and performed with refined skills.

The instrumental ensemble later expanded to a composition of twelve musicians, and music became an indispensable part of theatre and other diverse occasions such as marriages, funerals, festivals, etc.. There are today approximately fifty kinds of Thai musical

instruments, including xylophones, chimes, flutes, gongs, stringed instruments, and others.



Family heritage: the 100-year-old angklung

Traditionally, Thai musicians were trained by their teachers through constant practising before their trainers. Memory, diligence and perseverance were essential in mastering the art. Today, however, that tradition is gradually being phased out. Maestro Samruay Premjai is one of the last few living traditional teachers of Thai music.

He was born with music in his blood – traditional Thai music –

and has subsequently been living his almost seventy years of life making music, and being surrounded by music and musical instruments.

Samruay's grandparents were musicians and performers. He is the son of Maestro Prung Premjai, who was a master musician during King Rama VI's reign. It was Maestro Prung who adapted the Javanese *angklung* musical instrument into a three-piece *angklung* (the *angklung* consists of two bamboo tubes attached to a bamboo frame; originated from Indonesia; and is common in the making of music in Southeast Asian countries). The antique musical organ which he created, now more than a hundred years old, has become heirloom and heritage of Samruay's family (image above).

Today, Samruay's house in Bangkok is well known as a school for traditional music. Named the Premjai House, it is also a service centre for the making and repairing of a diversity of Thai musical instruments, including the *ranard* (xylophone), *kim* (zither), *saw* (violin), *klui* (recorder style flute), etc..

Lack of formal education did not prevent Samruay from attaining mastery in music. The forth child of seven siblings, Samruay learned to play music from his father. "My family was so poor," he said, I did not have a chance to study in the military school or police college. I studied at a temple school, and became interested in music.

His mother made the decision to send him away to study music under Chalad Promwongse, a local music maestro, who taught him to play the *khawng wong* (a set of gongs of various sizes in a circle). Samruay studied Thai classical music for a year before starting to perform *likay* (a dramatic performance art popular in Southern Thailand) with a



Ranard



Workshop in Premjai House

theatre troupe, receiving four baht (about 0.07 Euro) a night for his services. That was in the 1950.

He studied under six teachers, who taught and influenced him significantly in his musical development. For over forty years, he has been performing, touring and teaching traditional Thai music, all over the country, in one capacity or another.

Today, Samruay lives in a kind of hospital. He calls it the hospital for Thai musical instruments. This is where he passes his days teaching music to the young; repairing musical instruments; eating and sleeping; and filling his time with the sound of music. The Premjai House grooms new generations of musicians; its building contains several rooms and sections for practicing music and where musical instruments – which are ‘warded’ on the basis of their conditions – are repaired. Apart from teaching here, Samruay provides consultation to various institutes, repairs their musical instruments, and lectures at university faculties of music. He also regularly teaches at a private school, where mostly foreigners learn to master classical Thai musical instruments.

Samruay (everyone addresses him as ‘Uncle Samruay’) is at the forefront of promoting and preserving the precious heritage of traditional Thai music. An amazingly active and passionate man, at his age, the master musician, who was recognized as the ‘Best of Bangkok’ in 2000, almost single-handedly runs the place. He poignantly proves the adage that if you do what you love in your life, you live fully by the love of what you do. For Uncle Samruay, music is his love and life.

Patsri:

Master Samruay, is your family living with you in this Premjai house/ music hospital?

Master Samruay:

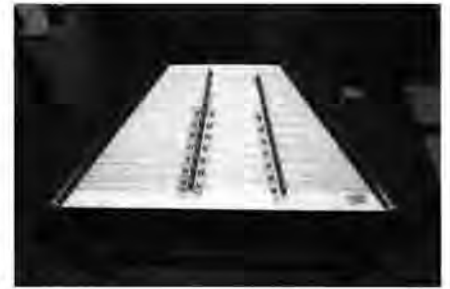
Yes, my wife – a farmer – owns the land that this house is on. We have five children. I have seven brothers and sisters, but there is only one other sibling remaining now, my 74-year-old sister. My children are musicians, and know how to repair musical instruments. My grandmother was an actress and my grandfather played in the *Pi-Phat*, a popular form of Thai music ensemble.

Patsri:

When you were young, have you ever thought that one day you would become a teacher?

Master Samruay:

Never. When I was six years old, my father played the *angklung*, and made a version of it. Following his tradition, I have, for almost 47 years, made '*angklung Lao*' which became known as '*angklung deaw*' or '*solo angklung*'. I learned Thai classical instruments because I grew up with them. I first started teaching by instructing my children. I did not use notation; my father said that we had to understand music tempo before starting to practise music and play instruments.



Kim

Patsri:

Why are you so fascinated by Thai musical instruments, and which one did you first learn to play?

Master Samruay:

My father transmitted and taught me to respect every instrument as if it is an animate thing, alive and breathing like a living being. I began to learn the *grab* and *chap*. The *grab* is a type of wooden rhythm clapper, and the *chap* is a round cymbal.

THE HOSPITAL SCHOOL

Patsri:

For how long now have you opened the school?

Master Samruay:

It has been opened for 21 years. A friend of mine left his children with me to study music, and it started from there. I accepted more students, and gradually, the need for a school became apparent. Also, at that time I did not have enough income to support my ensemble, even though we played for many important events at numerous places; so, I began to teach. Musicians in those days were not the privileged celebrities you find today; there were times when we did not receive payment for our services.

"The sound of traditional Thai ensemble music might be likened to a stream or river: the main current, the main melody, flow relentlessly onward surrounded by secondary currents that meander in and out of the main flow; here and there little eddies and swirls come suddenly to the surface to be seen momentarily, then to disappear as suddenly. There are no high points and no low points to the ear not educated to this kind of music; it flows onward in a steady non-differentiated band of sound, almost hypnotically, the various threads of seemingly independent melodies of the individual instruments bound together in a long, never-ending wreath like a Greek frieze that constantly repeats the pattern that decorates the top of a wall."

**From 'The Music of Thailand' by
David Morton**

Patsri:

Did you get the first generation of students by yourself or did they apply to study with you directly?

Master Samruay:

Six students came to me by themselves, accepting that to undergo training they would have to be in my custody.

Patsri:

How did the idea of starting a Hospital for Thai Musical Instruments come about?

Master Samruay:

There was a time when my children broke the instruments, and I realized I should open the hospital rather than take them to the shops.

Patsri:

How many doctors and divisions in the hospital?

Master Samruay:

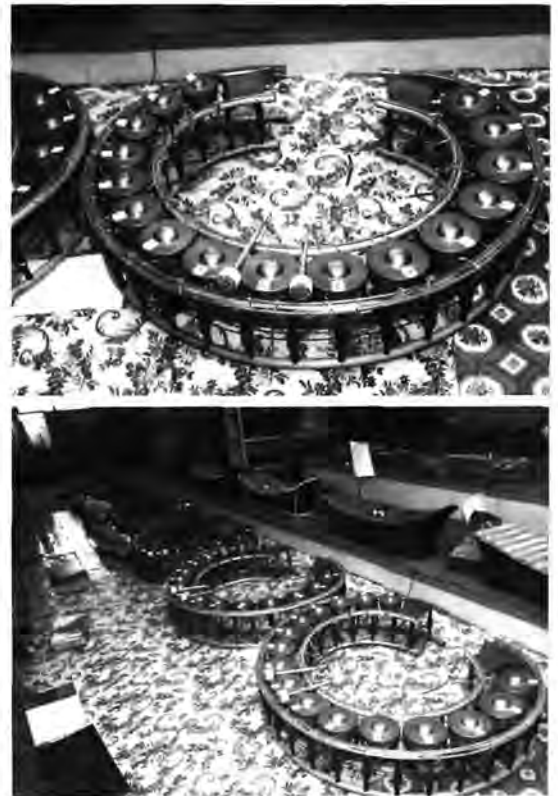
There is only one doctor. It is me. I am both director, chief surgeon and janitor. We have wards as in hospitals. Musical instruments are like human beings; they have an anatomy consisting of parts that can be replaced. Without essential organs, they are dead as they can not make sound. We have every type of treatment here, except abortion.

Patsri:

Are there many instruments in the Mortuary Room?

Master Samruay:

Not many. We have been taught that we can neither burn nor destroy the musical instruments that are no longer be playable. We have to throw them away; usually into the sea.



Khwang wong gongs

Patsri:

What instruments are most susceptible to damage?

Master Samruay:

According to my personal experiences, the *kim* and *saw* are the most vulnerable. Strings are the main problem for *kim* while handles and strings are the Achilles' heels of the *saw*.

Patsri:

Where do you find the materials to make or repair instruments?

Master Samruay:

I go into the forest to obtain wood for the main parts; and over the years these expeditions have taken me to all of Thailand's provinces except Mae Hong Son.

Patsri:

Who usually sends instruments to you for repair?

Master Samruay:

Usually, public schools which are still using some very old musical instruments.

STUDENTS

Patsri:

The students who take Thai classical music training also receive compulsory education at normal schools, don't they?

Master Samruay:

Yes, they do. They normally come during the week-ends. I teach them myself. My assistant is my 18-year-old niece, who I taught since she was very young.

Patsri:

Can you remember every student?

Interview with the maestro





Glimpses into the Premjai House

Master Samruay:

I can remember their faces but not their names.

Patsri:

Are there any naughty children?

Master Samruay:

Many! I have to remain very calm with them. Some of them pretend not to understand anything that I say, and are not easy to instruct. When I was young, before going to school, my duty was to make flower garlands, and weave 'ngob', which is a hat made of bamboo and palm leaves. During lunch time, I came home to continue weaving the 'ngobs'. In the evening, I would catch fish for my mother to cook for dinner. Fish was part of our staple. We ate rice cooked with sweet potato. The present generation is totally different from mine.



Storage area

Patsri:

What would a student usually experience here in terms of musical development?

Master Samruay:

In three months, they should be able to master three 'payots', and play in an ensemble. A *payot* is a term that denotes a phrase in a musical piece. We teach by using hand languages. After that, we will teach them how to play with other musicians, and only then will they be able to perform as a part of an ensemble.

Patsri:

How old do the students have to be when they enter the school, and how old is the oldest student that the school has ever had?

Master Samruay:

They should be at least 6 years old, and the oldest we have had was a 72-year-old student!!

"The Thai scale system is thought to have been derived originally from the Javanese tuning system. The current pentatonic scale consists of seven notes, each being precisely equidistant from one another. In such a tuning system, there is never a perfect fourth or perfect fifth. In fact, besides the octaves, not one note in the Thai scales system can be tuned with the European/Western notes. When Western classical music was introduced to Thailand before the turn of the century, and became incorporated into the Thai culture."

Christina Ciraulo

Patsri:

Are there children who told you directly that they did not want to continue, and have you ever dismiss a student?

Master Samruay:

Yes, there are students, particularly those learning to play the *ranard*, who found it a very difficult instrument to master, but I encouraged them to persevere. I have never dismissed a student. Most of them gave up studying because their parents did not have time to take them here.

Patsri:

Any graduated students who came back to help you teach at the school?

Master Samruay:

There were some but they did not know how to manage children, and discouraged the students by upsetting them. You really need to adapt to the needs of the students. I try every means to earn their respect, and ensure that they are comfortable with me. When there is intimacy, the learning/teaching process becomes easier.

TEACHING METHODS

Patsri:

How much are the fees for the study course?

Master Samruay:

In the past, course fees included the offering of flowers, incense joss sticks and twelve baht. As the fees were negligible, students and their parents too were less concerned about motivation and discipline. Students did not find it difficult to drop out. Now, I require every student to deposit 300 baht [US\$8.50] at the beginning, and if they pass the first three months with satisfactory progress, I will return 270 baht to them. They also receive a graduation certificate from the school. We basically charge 30 baht for a full term.



Master Samruay

Patsri:

What instrument is the most popular with children now?

Master Samruay:

It goes by trends. The *ranard* is the biggest hit at the moment. One reason for this is due to the movie, 'The Overture'*. The *kim* used to be popular too.

Patsri:

Do you choose the instruments for the students or you let them pick what they want to play?



Illustration of ensemble performance

Master Samruay:

It is based on their needs, but I also have to see if an instrument that a student chooses is suitable for him/her. Fifteen years ago, students did not have the right to choose; they were assigned to an instrument.

Patsri:

If we do not use scale or notation in the teaching method, will it change the way that the students perceive traditional music?

Master Samruay:

Well ... we use the musical scale and notations here but we do not want the students to be too dependent on them, because they might lose that sense of affinity for the musical pieces.

Patsri:

Do you think that this method of teaching music without notation does not help with the preservation and promotion of Thai classical music?

Master Samruay:

I use it sometimes but I think if we attached to it too much, we will lose our aesthetic and intuitive sense of music.



Ranard

ANGKLUNG

Patsri:

How long does it take to make an *angklung*, and do you also open a course on making the instrument?

Master Samruay:

It takes about 10 days to make each piece. We make to order only, so you will not find our products at any market. No, I do not conduct a course on making *angklungs*; it is so difficult that nobody really wants to learn how to make it, and not many people are interested to.

Patsri:

Do you think it is worth the efforts? I mean, you have to drive all the way to the north of Thailand to find the materials, and the production all involved much time and money. Do you think the money that they pay you for it is worth your time and energy?



Jakae (Kabue), a string instrument



Ranard xylophones

Master Samruay:

If I make forty *angklungs* for a single order, it is worth it. For your information, the wood is from Tak Province in northern Thailand. I have to select every single piece of wood by myself, because if not, ninety percent of the wood they deliver – when you order for them – would not be suitable and can not be used.

PERSONAL

Patsri:

What is your favorite instrument?

Master Samruay:

My favorite instrument is *khawng wong* because I am very good at it. However, I like the others too.

Patsri:

Have you ever thought about transforming a traditional Thai musical piece into a new version that is more up-to-date, as many composers are doing now?

Master Samruay:

Yes, I have but I think it is just a trend. Soon, people will forget and do not want to hear it anymore. Then, a new fad will begin again, like a cycle.

Patsri:

What is your vision on Thai music in the future?

Master Samruay:

As long as we have HRH Princess Sirindhorn**, it will continue to be promising. Thai classical music remains prominent today because of her interest and concern that have influenced and will influence generations of musicians.

Patsri:

And what do you think about Thai classical music class in compulsory education?

Master Samruay:

I hope that the curriculums are more systematic. They do not correctly group the children. I know that in some schools, they teach *klui* to students in Grade 1; they are too young to study that particular instrument. Physically, their fingers are not ready for the versatility needed on the flute. Highly educated individuals designed the curriculums, but they are not in touch with the reality.

Patsri:

What are the current needs of your music hospital?



Master Samruay:

We need more resource persons but if possible we also want people who sincerely admire Thai classical music to work here.

Patsri:

What do you wish for most at this moment?

Master Samruay:

I need a larger space for constructing new classrooms because our school has a large number of students. Although all my expectations are not realised yet, I have another dream: a musical museum as a learning centre for those who are interested in musical instruments, and also as a place to keep collections of the instruments too.

Patsri:

Would you like to say anything to the readers/young musicians?

Master Samruay:

Studying Thai classical music requires a strict attitude to discipline and practice. In the past, it was more difficult than now. Children were not accepted easily by the schools. Nowadays, parents are the most important factor as they are the ones who direct their children toward this or that interest and activity.

In my life, to receive an honour award from HRH Princess Sirindhorn is the ultimate moment of pride. She works harder than I do in promoting Thai traditional music. Her Majesty said to me that only one person such as myself in each province should be enough for the country. I was elated by her comment.

Footnotes:

* *The Overture* is a 2004 Thai movie based on a fictionalized account of the life of maestro musician Luang Pradit Phairao who was a classical musician in the king's palace. It also focused on the significance and aesthetics of Thai classical music and instruments. The film, winner of several awards in Thailand, was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

** *Somdet Chulachalongkornrajavidyalaya Chao Fa Maha Chakri Sirindhorn (born Her Royal Highness Princess Sirindhorn) is the third child of Their Majesties King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit of Thailand.*

Illustration by Pattanapong Varanyanon