

Musical Ancestries: Thailand Script

MUSICAL ANCESTRIES™ – THAILAND

NARR: Chet was nervous...here in Thailand, half a world away from St. Louis, on the first day of school, and he didn't know anybody other than his teacher, Ms. Dara! He and his Mom had arrived in Bangkok last week so she could help the company she worked for set up a new office. Because it would take a year, Chet was attending an English-speaking school with Thai kids his age. *"How much fun is that?"* he'd thought. Now, standing at the school entrance, he wasn't so sure.

Lots of kids filed into the school, laughing and chatting, happy to see each other again. He glanced at Mom, took a deep breath, and headed up the steps. She stayed behind. No self-respecting 5th grade guy needs his Mom the first day of school. Just inside the door, he was greeted by "**Kru** Dara", her proper title as a teacher. He bowed in a respectful **wai** greeting, placing his palms together in front of his chest, and bowing his head till his nose touched his index fingers.

CHET: Good morning, Kru Dara.

KRU DARA: Good morning Chet! It's so good to have you here. You are in Prathom 5 – 5th grade. Your classroom is down this hall, third door on your left.

CHET: Thank you, Kru Dara.

NARR: Walking into the classroom, he saw a seating chart, and found his desk. A friendly boy sitting on his right smiled and said...

ARAN: Hello! I'm Aran. You must be Chet?

CHET: Yes. How'd you....? Oh...the seating chart! Yep, I'm Chet. Hi!

ARAN: You're American, right? How did an American boy get a Thai name?

CHET: I didn't know it was Thai. Chet's short for Chester – my Dad's name.

ARAN: Oh! In the Thai language, Chet means "brother".

CHET: Really?! What does Aran mean?

ARAN: "Forest".

NARR: Just then, Kru Dara entered the room. Aran quickly added...

ARAN: "...And Kru Dara's name means "evening star."

CHET: Nice.

KRU DARA: Alright students, it's time for us to get started. I see some of you are catching up with old friends and making new ones. That's great. We'll have plenty of time to visit later, but for now, let's talk about the upcoming academic year.

NARR: In Thailand, the school year begins in mid-May, which is usually a period of heavy rain. The first semester ends in early October. Then, a three-week semester break, and the second semester starts the end of October and runs through March.

KRU DARA: Here's what we'll be studying in Prathom 5, an elementary level. We're in school 7 hours a day, and we study eight core subjects: Thai language, mathematics, science, social science, health and physical education, arts and music, technology, and foreign languages.

NARR: Chet swallowed hard. Whoa – that sounded like a lot when she ran them all together like that! He caught the “arts and music” part though, which he was pretty excited about. He also liked math and PE, so that was good. *And* he'd be able to learn Thai! Then it dawned on him... Kru Dara was speaking *English* to the class, even though all his classmates were Thai. Later that day, she explained that two programs were taught in English – the Gifted and English Programs. “*Lucky for me!*” he thought.

Chet got lucky another way, too...Kru Dara was his teacher for Music and Arts. He'd learned a bit about the culture at the Thai Temple in St. Louis, but was eager to experience music and arts *in Thailand*. He was also lucky, because Aran and Kru Dara lived near him, and they got to know each other well outside of school, too.

KRU DARA: One of the more curious things for visitors is our traditional Thai calendar. It's different from the *Western Gregorian* one. Our calendar is **543** years ahead, so the year 2021 is year 2564 in Thailand!

ARAN: [Laughing] We're half-a-century ahead of you guys!

CHET: Wow! That's wild!

NARR: Kru Dara explained that for most of the world, the New Year begins on January first. In 1941, Thailand's Prime Minister decreed that they would adopt the Western calendar. So, New Year's Eve (December 31st) is now a day to celebrate. Holiday parties include family and friends, lots of food (especially shellfish and seafood), gift-

giving and countdown parties with fireworks, performances and laser shows. To mark the changing of the year with good luck and prosperity, Thais also visit temples that evening. It's the spiritual way to begin the New Year with peace of mind.

A few months later, on April 13th, the *traditional* Thai New Year is also celebrated. Based on the *solar* calendar, the **Songkran Festival** takes place – a national holiday that lasts four days! There's music with drums, gongs, chimes, cymbals and more... lots of dancing... and a parade for the New Year, or "Songkran".

KRU DARA: The name **Songkran** comes from an ancient **Sanskrit** word that ties in with the Asian zodiac and astrology.

CHET: That's neat – so you basically get *two* New Years!

KRU DARA: Yes, Chet, I guess we do! But we really go "all out" with the Songkran Festival.

ARAN: Yeah, we do! It's fun... and wet, too!

KRU DARA: Along with music and dancing, Songkran is celebrated with a ceremonial table. On it is the **Buddha** image, along with elaborate fruit and vegetable carvings. A watermelon might be carved to look like a gorgeous flower with colors ranging from the dark green rind to a lighter green inside, to almost white, then pink and then the deep red fruit. Or a gourd might be carved into a beautiful bird, with individual feathers! The carvers perfect their skills for years. It's truly an art.

CHET: I'd really like to watch how they do that.

KRU DARA: You *can*... next April, when Songkran comes around again.

ARAN: Maybe we could see that together, Chet! I'd like that.

CHET: Me too.

KRU DARA: During Songkran, there's a traditional water ceremony. It's a meaningful ritual to ask blessings and forgiveness from the elders. You respect them by pouring fragrant water on the palms of their hands.

The Buddha image sits on a table at the center of a cleansing water ceremony. You "Make Merit" by bathing the Buddha image with fragrant water, by visiting temples, or by giving donations to the monks. Songkran is the time you "wash off" last year's bad luck and douse yourself with good fortune. After you've "Made Merit", you pay respect to others and create friendships by throwing and sprinkling water on each other.

CHET: Oh, yeah! I could get into that!

ARAN: Yep, it's fun – and you can really get soaked!

KRU DARA: Some people observe the Songkran by cleaning their homes – it does wonders for your peace of mind in the coming year.

CHET: I don't know that would do much for me!

KRU DARA: [Amused] Well, you're 10 – you might change your mind in a few years!

CHET: [He and Aran chuckle] I dunno'...

KRU DARA: [Amused] Tomorrow, boys, we start exploring various types of Thai music in class... I'll see you then.

NARR: The next day, Chet was eager for music class! He told Aran about some ancient chants he'd heard at the Cherokee Buddhist Temple in St. Louis ...and about a classical music class he'd taken at the St. Louis Thai Temple.

ARAN: Oh, this is gonna be great, Chet!

KRU DARA: Students, this semester, we're learning about the Classical and Folk Music of Thailand. For many centuries, music wasn't written down, but passed on by oral tradition until the modern Bangkok period. This semester, we'll get an overall view of Thai instruments, ensembles and dance. We'll also learn a traditional tune and perform it by the end of the year.

Today, we start with traditional Thai instruments. Though they *can* be grouped by the regions they come from, we're looking at them from a *musician's* point of view – by the way they are played.

NARR: Kru Dara explained that instruments are played in four basic ways: plucked, bowed, struck and blown. String instruments can be played several ways, so she started with those that are plucked or strummed.

KRU DARA: These Thai instruments are similar to lutes and zithers. One of them is a fretted floor zither with three strings, called a **jakhe**, the Thai word for crocodile!

CHET: That makes sense, Kru Dara. Look how low it sits on the floor, and its frets stick up like the bumps on a crocodile's back!

ARAN: At least it doesn't bite... unless you play a wrong note!

NARR: Kru Dara smiled and moved on to the second group of stringed instruments, those that are played with a bow. Most of these are one, two or three-string instruments of different shapes and sizes

that are played like vertical violins. Their sounds differ by how high or low they're pitched and the materials they're made from... anything from bamboo to a metal can! The **saw sam sai** is thought to be the most beautiful of these. A three-string spiked instrument with a coconut shell body, it is also used in classical music.

KRU DARA: There's one more stringed instrument, but *this* one's played by striking the strings. It's called a **khim**, a Thai version of the hammered dulcimer, but because you *strike* the strings, it's the perfect bridge into our next category... percussion instruments.

NARR: Percussion instruments are struck or shaken. There are *many* types of Thai drums...plus shakers, clappers, and **finger cymbals** (called **ching**). There are pitched percussion instruments like xylophones and metallophones. But the most unique to Thailand are **gong-chimes**, mounted in circular frames. One type, **khong wong**, is flat on the floor with the player sitting in the middle. The other, **khong mon**, holds the gongs in a "U"-shaped *vertical* frame.

The final group, wind instruments, are blown. There are flutes of many different sizes and shapes. Free-reed instruments include types of "mouth organs" made from various materials like bamboo and gourds, and there are quadruple-reed oboes.

KRU DARA: Now that we have an overview of traditional Thai instruments, let's talk about ensembles.

We'll start with the most characteristic classical ensemble, the **piphat**. Symbolizing Thailand's dancing dragons, this midsized orchestra generally includes two xylophones (**ranat**), an oboe (**pi**), barrel drums (**klong**), plus two circular sets of tuned horizontal gong-chimes. Piphat ensembles can play in a loud outdoor style with hard mallets, or a softer indoor style using padded hammers.

NARR: Piphat ensembles vary in size and instrumentation, depending on their purpose. Traditional funeral ceremonies use a larger group with highly-decorated vertical gong-chimes. Smaller ensembles accompany different types of Thai drama, like the shadow puppet theatre and the **khon dance drama**.

The second type of ensemble, **khrueng sai**, uses some of the percussion and wind instruments of the piphat, but has a larger string section. Flutes in several ranges can also be added, as can a goblet drum and a small hammered dulcimer. Mostly used for indoor performances, **khrueng sai** ensembles often accompany the **stick-puppet theatre (lakhon lek)**.

Chet nudged Aran:

CHET: I'd really love to see stick puppets performed sometime – it sounds cool.

ARAN: It is... we gotta do it.

NARR: Kru Dara pretended not to hear the boys, but made a mental note. She continued her lesson with the third type of Thai classical ensemble, the **mahori**. Traditionally played by women in the courts of both Central Thailand and Cambodia, they use the same instruments as the other two ensembles, but without the **pi** – the loud and rather shrill oboe. Mahori ensembles have three sizes – small, medium and large. Each includes the three-string saw sam sai vertical violin, a delicate-sounding, middle-range bowed instrument with silk strings. Because of that quieter sound, the saw sam sai is used to accompany the vocalist, who is featured more in the mahori than in any other classical Thai ensemble.

KRU DARA: Before we move from classical to folk music, I should explain that not too long ago, Thai *classical* music was considered backward-looking. That may have been because the nation wanted to

modernize in the 20th century. But now, the government sponsors and funds traditional arts, which has helped classical Thai music be appreciated again. (It's one of the reasons we have this class!) Films like ***Homrong: The Overture*** have also helped this cause – it's a movie about a famous traditional **ranat ek** (xylophone) performer.

NARR: As she moved on to folk music, Kru Dara started with **luk thung**, Thai country music. Developed in the mid-1900s, it reflects the daily life of rural Thais. Some of its early stars added other Asian influences, but many of its most popular artists came from the central city of **Suphanburi**, including megastar ***Pumpuang Duangjan***, who pioneered **electronic luk thung**. By the late '90s that modern pop-influenced version became (and still is) Thailand's most popular music.

Mor lam is from Thailand's north-eastern Isan region, near Laos. Like luk thung, it focuses on rural life, but its rapid-fire, rhythmic vocals are set over a funk feel in the percussion. The lead singer, also called a **mor lam**, is often accompanied by a bamboo mouth-organ, the **khene**. There are several regional types of mor lam, plus some modern versions, which makes some people feel that mor lam is commercializing traditional Thai culture.

Much less famous than mor lam, **kantrum**, is played by the *Khmer* – Cambodian people who live near the border. It's very fast traditional dance music. **Cho-kantrum**, its *purest* form, has a core of singers, percussion and **tro** (a type of vertical fiddle). In the mid-1980s, electric instruments modernized it. In the late '80s, Darkie became kantrum's biggest star, later crossing into mainstream markets.

KRU DARA: Now that we have an overview of traditional instruments and the different types of music and ensembles, let's learn about dance, another of Thailand's greatest cultural treasures.

Traditional Thai dancing is enchanting, combining graceful body movements with elaborate costumes and music. There are six different forms of Thai dance. Performances are usually accompanied by narrators and a Thai piphat orchestra.

NARR: The first of the 6 forms, **Khon**, is one of Thailand's highest art forms. It is a masked dance drama traditionally performed *only* for the royal family, but now performed outside the royal court. The stories are based on the Indian epic, **Ramakien** (The Glory of Rama). Most of the dancers are men, who play different characters, including women, demons, and monkeys.

2. **Lakhon** performers are mostly women, unlike khon performers. Instead of having individual roles in a performance, the women work together and perform as a group, telling many of the stories with the help of the music.
 3. **Li-khe** is the most popular form of dance in Thailand. Many elements go into these shows, from elaborate costumes to slapstick humor. Especially popular in villages throughout Thailand, performances are funny and engaging.
 4. **Ram wong** (meaning "to dance in a circle"), is one of the most popular forms of Thai folk dance. Men and women come together in pairs and dance in the circle with slow, graceful movements. Of the six dance forms, this one is the most social.
 5. **Shadow Puppetry**, one of the oldest art forms in Thailand, is a very special form of dance, but it's becoming rare. Performed from behind a white screen, a person controls the puppet while music helps tell the story.
 6. **Lakhon lek** is the other form of Thai dance which uses puppets in the performance. Although it's not practiced as much now, this art was once very popular. The puppets are usually about two feet tall, and each is operated by three people in performance.
- The first semester was almost over when Kru Dara began class one day by saying...

KRU DARA: Students, you've all worked hard and gotten to know all the different instruments, ensembles and dances. As a reward, we're going on what Chet would call "a field trip". Your parents have already given their permission for us to go to the Thailand Cultural Center... and experience a live khrueng sai ensemble as they accompany a lakhon lek (stick puppet) performance – two things we studied this year!

NARR: The class was thrilled, showing their appreciation for Kru Dara with applause and beaming smiles. The field trip was a huge success. Chet's classmates felt very proud to share their culture with him, and he appreciated their friendship.

A couple weeks later, Chet and his Mom invited Aran (now Chet's closest friend), his parents, and Kru Dara and her husband to a beautiful traditional Thai dinner. As they were enjoying the delicious meal, Chet became serious...

CHET: I'd like to say something. Aran, you've been a great friend to me, teaching me so much about Thailand...everything from games to the proper way to act in your culture. I've learned so much from you, "Aran-the-Forest"! Thank you.

ARAN: It has been my great honor, "Chet-my-Brother"! You have taught me so much, too, about America and how *you* see my world. Looking through your eyes, I now see my country of Thailand in a whole new way. Thank YOU!

CHET: Kru Dara – "the evening star" – you really *have* been a guiding light to me. Thank you for your kindness, your friendship, and all the many lessons you've shared with me, Aran and the class. You're the very best teacher I've ever had.

KRU DARA: Oh Chet, thank you. It has been my very deep joy. And do you know what the *best* part is? We all have *next* semester together, too!

CHET: [Smiling] Yes! AND we've got the New Year and Songkran festivals coming up these next few months! I can hardly wait!

ARAN: [Laughing] Yeah! You can hardly wait to get *soaked*, right?!? You know, I'm glad you came to Thailand... We joke about it, but you really ARE "Chet-my-Brother". You're one of us now!