



(Las 7357)

Thailand: Lao Music of the Northeast

Although a relatively small country, Thailand consists of four central regions, each with its own music: the central plain around Bangkok, the south, the north, and the northeast. It is from the latter region that the music of this album comes. The sixteen provinces of the northeast are culturally related to the nation of Laos across the Maekong River, and thus the musical practices of both are quite similar.

In contrast to central Thai music, where the tuning system includes seven equidistant steps in an octave, Lao music includes seven *non*-equidistant steps which approximate those of a major diatonic scale. Virtually all music is pentatonic, however. Two such scales are found: the *lum* scale following the pitches D E G A B, and the *yao* scale following the pitches D F G A C, the initial pitch of each being the finalis of “tonic”.

The most significant instrument is the *kaen*, a free-reed bamboo mouth organ consisting of six, fourteen, sixteen, or eighteen tubes. The *kaen baet* with sixteen pipes is standard today in Northeast Thailand while the *kaen jet* with fourteen is more common in Laos. *Kaen* music is normally played solo and improvised. Performers may improvise following the *lum* scale in three modes: *lai sootsanaen* (beginning on G), *lai bo-sai* (C), and *lai soi* (D). Although there are said to be only two modes, *lai yai* (A) and *lai noi* (D), which follow the *yao* scale, there is a third mode in E which is usually used for performing a piece called “bong lang”. *Kaen* music is one of the few non-Western traditions using polyphony, for each mode pitch adds fifths and octaves plus the appropriate drones for each mode.

A number of less important instruments are also found. The *pin* or *sung* is a plucked lute with from two to four strings whose body may be shaped in any way chosen by the maker. The *hun* or *hoon* is a bamboo jaw harp. The *saw-bip* is a two-stringed

fiddle whose body is a metal can such as for Hall's Mentho-lyptus lozenges. Finally, the *kaw-law*, popularly known as the *bong lang* after its best-known piece, is a vertical xylophone with twelve logs string on heavy cords from a tree trunk. Although an ancient type of instrument, the *kaw-law* only became prominent in the last fifteen years.

There are many types of singing, all called *lum*, whose texts are sophisticated written poems. A singer is called a *mawlum*. The most common genre, that heard on tracks 13-15, is called *lum glawn* and includes two singers, one male and one female, who alternate in a performance which lasts from about 9:00pm to about 6:00am with accompaniment provided by a *kaen*. The initial portion, lasting most of the night, is called *lum tang sun*. After an introductory vocalise on the words "oh la naw" (oh, fortune), a section in speech rhythm, and another vocalise, the main body of the poem begins. Although the poetry is memorized, the melody is improvised in close reaction to the tonal inflections of the words. *Tang sun* has a strict meter and follows the *lum* scale.

About 5:00am begins *lum tang yao* in speech rhythm and following the *yao* scale, the emotional highpoint of the performance. Finally the performance closes with *lum doi*, a lighter section which remains in the *yao* scale but shifts to strict meter. *Lum doi tammadah* (ordinary) is improvised but there are also two, *doi kong* and *doi pamah*, which follow a fixed melodic pattern. All may be heard on track 15. Although the two *mawlum* feign a developing love affair which must end at dawn, the singers are usually professionals hired for the occasion.

Tracks 1-12: Instrumental Music for Kaen, Pin, Hun, Kaw-Law Saw-Bip

Track 1

Pin solo, *lum plun* played by Sommai Salat (b. 1954) of Mahasarakam province. The *pin* heard here has four strings, one for melody and three for accompaniment tuned a fifth lower. The player plucks the strings with a piece of cow horn sometimes stopping a string to make parallel fifths with the melody. *Lum plun*, whose accompaniment and melody are imitated, is the lighter type of theatre in northeast Thailand and uses *kaen* and *pin* for accompaniment.

Track 2

Kaen solo, *lai sootsanaen* played by Twang-koon See-aroon (1938-1979) of Roi-et province, and one of the best *kaen* players in northeast Thailand until his untimely death. His performance here represents old style playing.

Track 3

Kaen solo, *lai bo-sai* played by Sootee Chaidilut (b. 1907) of Roi-et province. There is a brief "modulation" to *lai sootsanaen* with a return to *lai bo-sai*.

Track 4

Kaw-law solo, *lai sootsanaen* played by two musicians from Ban Najan in Glasin province. Logs #2 and #7 (G and g) are struck as donres by one player while the other plays the melody with the two hammers imitating the *kaen* solo *lai sootsanaen*.

Track 5

Kaen solo, *lai soi* played by Sootee. As is typical of *lai soi*, Sootee modulates temporarily to *lai noi*.

Track 6

Kaen solo, *lai yai* played by Twang-koon. Twang-koon called this “*lai yai sao yik mae*” (“the girl pinches her mother”) and it includes a passage in free rhythm imitating a singer performing *lum tang yao*.

Track 7

Hun solo, untitled, played by Sootee Chaidilut. Sootee fashioned his own instrument of bamboo, about fourteen inches long. His improvisation is in the manner of *kaen* playing.

Track 8

Kaen solo, *lai noi* played by Sootee.

Track 9

Kaen solo, “*bong lang*” played in the E mode by Twang-koon. This piece, also called “*wua kjun poo*” (“the cow climbs a hill”) imitates both the gait of a cow and the clunking of the metal cow bell mounted on its back (a *bong-lang*).

Track 10

Saw-bip solo, *lum plun* played by Tawng-koon. Here the player again imitates the sounds of *lum plun* theatre on a homemade fiddle with two wire strings.

Track 11

Kaen solo, “*maeng poo dawm dawm*” in *lai bo-sai* by Tawng-koon. *Maeng poo* means “bees around the flowers” and imitates their buzzing sounds.

Track 12

Kaen hok solo, *lai noi* played by Tawng-koon. While the *kaen* heard on other tracks has sixteen pipes, the *kaen hok* has only six and is rarely heard. Here Tawng-koon proves that it is not merely a child’s toy.

Tracks 13-15: Lum Glawn (Vocal)

Track 13

Lum tang sun sung by Mawlum Boonpeng of Ubon. Her poetry, a typical *glawn gio* (courting poem) begins with an invitation to the male singer to divorce his wife and marry Boonpeng who promises to divorce her husband. Then follows exquisitely beautiful poetry about her feelings for him and how she waits for him.

Track 14

Lum tang sun sung by Mawlum Wichian of Ubon. His poetry, also a *glawn gio*, answers Boonpeng as they begin the evening's banter.

Track 15 *Lum tang yao* sung by Wichian followed by Boonpeng. *Tang yao* typically opens with references to thunder since it signifies life-giving rain. Boonpeng begins with bawdy references, but says she dislikes this kind of poetry and changes to one of great beauty describing the skies. Wichian's poem is related to the traditional story of Galaget, a Lao prince. Without a break, he changes to *lum doi* and each alternates to the end.

Recordings were made during 1973-74 using a Tandberg 11 reel-to-reel recorder under a grant from the Social Science Research Council. Master tape engineered by George Faddoul of Kent State University School of Music.

Track Lengths:

1. *Pin* solo, *lum plun* 3:48
2. *Kaen* solo, *lai sootsanaen* 1:03
3. *Kaen* solo, *lai bo-sai* 2:23
4. *Kaw-law* solo, 3:02
5. *Kaen* solo, *lai soi* 2:04
6. *Kaen* solo, *lai yai* 1:44
7. *Hun* solo, untitled 2:58
8. *Kaen* solo, *lai noi* 2:02
9. *Kaen* solo, "bong lang" 2:14
10. *Saw-bip* solo, *lum plun* 1:19
11. *Kaen* solo, "maeng poo dawm dawk" in *lai bo-sai* 1:15
12. *Kaen hok* solo, *lai noi* 0:58
13. Lum Glawn A (Vocal) 4:37
14. Lum Glawn B (Vocal) 5:37
15. Lum Glawn C (Vocal) 14:39



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