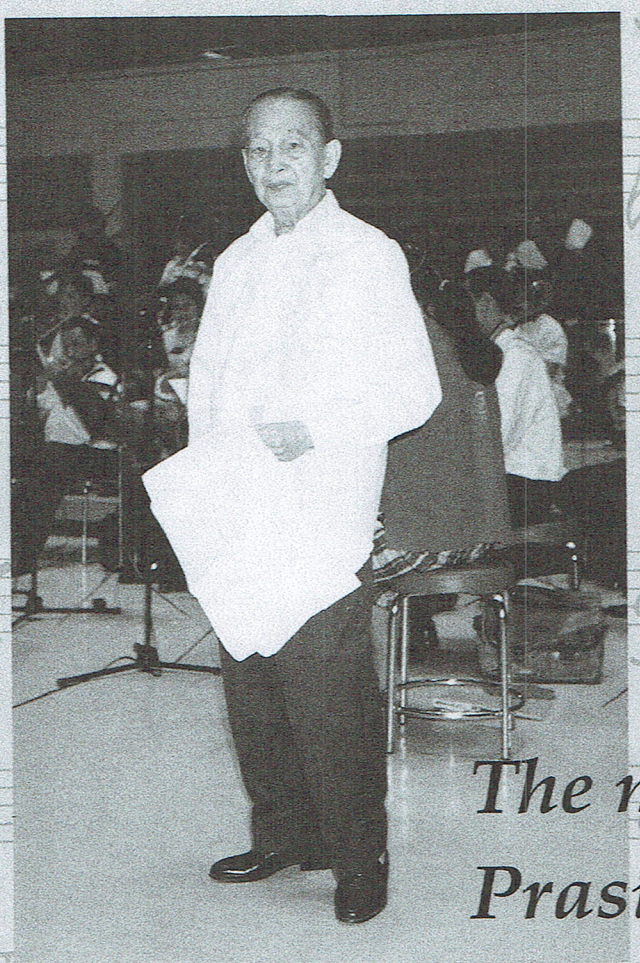
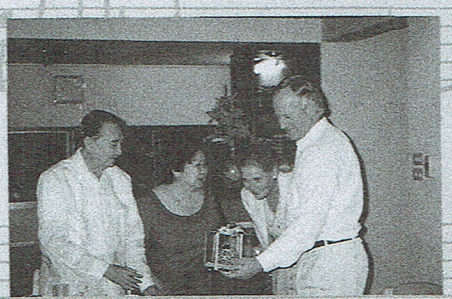
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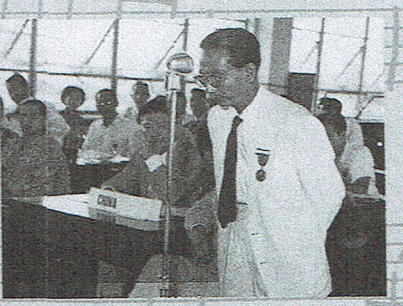
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The music of Prasidh Silapabanleng







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A study of a unique artist and his music: Prasidh Silapabanleng (1912-1999)

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Preamble

In the summer of 1998, Donald Mitchell, the distinguished scholar and leading champion of Thai music in England, brought my attention to the veteran Thai composer Prasidh Silapabanleng, whom he had met a few years earlier. Dr Mitchell kindly arranged a meeting for me with the composer when I visited Bangkok in September 1998, and lent me a tape of some of his music, including the piece entitled *Siang Tian* (or *Thian*) and a copy of the manuscript score of it. Thus I was able to familiarise myself with the music while still in England. The influence of Thai classical music was clear enough at this stage, but it was not until I actually met the composer and listened to the music with him and other experts in Thai music that I realised just how skillfully the links between Thai and Western music had been made. The occasion was further enhanced by a live concert of music by Prasidh Silapabanleng's father, the great composer Luang Pradit Phairoh, enabling me to know the Thai sources for the music examined below.

Within a couple of months of this fruitful encounter, Ajarn (maestro) Silapabanleng's importance to Thai culture was recognised in his elevation to the status of National Artist in composition, but within a year came the sad news of his death, on the 4th of September 1999. He remained active as a composer to the very end and was just beginning to gain the wider recognition he deserved. The consolation is that he knew that the interest and acclaim had finally come. This paper is dedicated to him, with respect and admiration.



Prasidh Silapabanleng on the eve of his being made a Thai National Artist (Composer)

Prasidh Silapabanleng's life and work

Prasidh Silapabanleng was born in 1912, the son of one of the greatest Thai musicians of the time, Sorn Silapabanleng (1881-1954), universally known by the title of Luang Pradit Phairoh, which was bestowed on him by King Rama VI. 'Luang' is an indicator of rank and 'Pradit

Phairoh' means 'inventor of beautiful sound'. To many, this illustrious performer, teacher and composer of Thai traditional music, and at the same time a leading innovator, is the greatest Thai musician of the twentieth century. It would seem normal, therefore, that his son would continue the family tradition and become another leading Thai musician. He did, indeed, learn much about Thai music from his father, but, with great candour and, as it would turn out, prescience, the master declared that his son's talents as a performer on the Thai instruments were too modest to ensure a career in that area, and suggested instead that he should study Western music. I suspect that the senior musician was, consciously or unconsciously, encouraging his son to live out what he himself had already touched upon in his own music: a bringing together of Thai and Western classical music.

The plan was for the young Prasidh to complete his schooling, then go somewhere such as the Philippines where it would be relatively cheap to study Western music. The Royal Fine Arts Department in Bangkok (probably the most important centre of Thai music) engaged him as a teacher. During this formative period in Bangkok, he also undertook the study of Western music theory and composition with a leading authority on both Thai and Western music, Phra Chen Duriyanga (who did much to bring Thai music to a wider public through staff notation). When a troupe of musicians and dancers from the Fine Arts Department was invited to Japan, Prasidh was included, under the watchful eye of his elder sister. At the Imperial Academy of Music in Tokyo, he met Klaus Pringsheim, who was teaching there, and the meeting had a profound and lasting effect on his development as a composer.

Pringsheim, who was born near Munich in 1883 and died in Tokyo in 1972, had an extraordinary career. After studying mathematics with his father and physics with Röntgen, the discoverer of X-rays, he went to Vienna in 1906 and became repetiteur and assistant conductor at the Hofoper under the great composer and conductor, Gustav Mahler (1860-1911), being his pupil and close friend. He is mentioned in some of the biographies of Mahler, attending the final rehearsal of Mahler's Fourth Symphony with the composer conducting (La Grange, 1995 : 395) and also the first performance of the Seventh Symphony in Prague (19 September 1908) along with Alban Berg, Otto Klemperer and other distinguished musicians (Hefling in Blaukopf, ed., 1986 : 174). Mahler recommended him for the post at the German Opera in Prague where he went, and there he conducted from 1909 until 1914, moving on to Bremen, then Berlin, where he conducted a cycle of all the Mahler symphonies and songs with orchestra (1923-4).

No less important in Pringsheim's life than his association with Mahler was his stay in the Far East, which occupied almost half of his life. From 1931 until 1937, he was employed by the Imperial Academy of Music in Tokyo. Of special interest to this study is his short but fruitful period in Thailand (1937-9) as music adviser to the Royal Department of Fine Arts in Bangkok. He therefore became intimately acquainted with the traditional music of both Japan and Thailand. Pringsheim returned to Japan in 1939 and remained until 1946, and was even briefly interned there in 1944 as an opponent of the Axis powers, despite his German origins. After a few years in California (1946-51) he once more returned to Japan, where he spent the rest of his life.

It is hardly surprising that Prasidh Silapabanleng was prepared to forsake family and homeland in order to study with this prominent musician in Japan. He persuaded his sister to leave him behind in Tokyo and he spent no fewer than four years studying with Pringsheim, even obtaining a

degree in composition. The importance of this phase cannot be overestimated. By now, he had focused entirely on this art, without attempting a corresponding proficiency on any instrument, Western or Thai. On his return to Bangkok, Ajarn Prasidh resumed his association with the Fine Arts Department as an assistant to his former teacher, Phra Chen Duriyanga, and also conducted the symphony orchestra. The outbreak of war and the subsequent Japanese invasion of Thailand seriously disrupted his career, and for three or four years he was forced away from music altogether by his duty as an interpreter in the Thai-Japanese army. When the war ended, he and his wife promptly resigned from the Fine Arts Department and established, with Luang Pradit Phairoh, a school for Thai music, the Phakavali Institute of Dance and Music. They also formed a drama company, in which his wife directed the plays and he composed the music and conducted the small pit orchestra (of around fourteen Western instruments). He estimated that he had written about forty songs, as well as a great deal of incidental music, during that period (When, almost half a century later, a compact disc was produced of his music, the conductor John Georgiadis selected five of these songs and made special arrangements of them for the recording). The increasing popularity of Western films converted many of Bangkok's theatres into cinemas and Ajarn Prasidh's own company was forced to close.

When he was in his early forties, Ajarn Prasidh entered an international composition competition, almost by accident. The Queen of Belgium had sent a letter to the Fine Arts Department inviting Thai composers to participate in the event, to be held in Brussels. The Department, however, only made it public fifteen days before the deadline. At first, Ajarn Prasidh was planning to have nothing to do with the competition, but a pupil persuaded him to change his mind. In those fifteen days, he drafted a kind of symphony, which he entitled *Siamese Suite*. The first movement, 'Moon over the Temple', had been composed for his examinations in Tokyo, and the fourth movement, 'In Bangkok's Chinatown', was taken from his theatre music. The middle movements were called 'In the Grand Palace' and 'Siamese Lament', respectively. At the same time, he was invited to a UNESCO conference in Manila, where the National Symphony Orchestra of the Philippines gave the first performance of the *Siamese Suite,* for which he received a standing ovation. Much further from home, he was placed fifth in the Brussels competition, earning a commendation. In Manila, he also met David Morton, the first major Western authority on Thai music, whose writings are still staple fare for English readers. He was to become a principal informant to the young American during his period of fieldwork in Bangkok (1958-60).



'Siamese Suite' was performed for the first time at the 1st Regional Music Conference in Manila, the Philippines (August 29-31, 1955)

After his successful trip to the Philippines, Ajarn Prasidh was invited to Paris,

where he demonstrated the *ranatek* (leading Thai xylophone) and the principles of Thai music to other composers (he was unfortunately unable to recall names, so it remains tantalising to speculate on which famous French composers might have come into contact with this wonderful music on that occasion). Meanwhile, in Bangkok his main source of income was from another theatrical venture, again in collaboration with his wife. This time, a greater measure of security was achieved by aiming the shows at tourists, and the enterprise continued until husband and wife decided to retire, at the age of sixty.

This creative phase culminated, when Ajarn Prasidh was well into his sixties, with what must be considered his masterpiece, or at least the first signs of it. To commemorate the centenary of his father's birth, he selected one of the master's most famous compositions, *Siang Tian,* and reworked it as a string quartet. It is ironic that this inspiration should have been followed by a lengthy period during which Ajarn Prasidh ceased work, becoming withdrawn and depressed. His condition obviously alarmed his family, so his wife and son sought expert help from their doctor. The wise advice seemed to have nothing to do with medicine or even psychotherapy but was based on the simple premise that what makes composers happy is composing! The doctor suggested that Ajarn Prasidh should provide a work for the anniversary celebrations of Prince Mahidol. Thus it was that the composer, now aged 77, recovered both his health and compositional gifts, and the work to which he returned was *Siang Tian.* He spent a happy year enlarging the original string quartet version into the piece known today, scored for full orchestra with female chorus. It was given its first performance in the National Theatre, with works by other Thai composers (this extraordinary piece will be discussed in detail later).



Mr and Mrs John Georgiadis heard the traditional version of Prasidh's 'Siang Tian,' during their visit

But this was far from the end of the story. When Ajarn Prasidh was 82, he attended a wai *khru* ceremony (an important occasion in Thai culture, when the teachers are honoured). He engaged in a conversation with the European gentleman seated immediately next to him, who informed him that he had just come from Tokyo where his research had involved Klaus Pringsheim. He had met Pringsheim's son (the same age as Ajarn Prasidh) who had mentioned the Thai composer and wondered if he was still alive. This scholar was none other than Donald Mitchell, and of course his companion was able to confirm that Ajarn Prasidh was very much alive! This led to a discussion of his music, and Dr Mitchell requested the score and a copy of the rather crude recording of *Siang Tian.* This great champion of Thai music, not to mention that of Ajarn

Prasidh's teacher's teacher, Gustav Mahler, was quick to recognise the quality of the work and bemoan the fact that its composer had been so clearly neglected. He contacted a company in Hong Kong, and there was talk of arranging a recording of *Siang Tian* with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. Chinese musicians were, however, unable to cope with the vocal demands of the piece; then the score and tape were sent to John Georgiadis in England. This distinguished musician, formerly leader of the London Symphony Orchestra, visited Thailand for short periods as conductor of the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra. His reaction to the work was no less enthusiastic than Donald Mitchell's, so Ajarn Prasidh's son, Dr Kulthorn Silapabanleng, a successful engineer and businessman, decided to sponsor a recording in Thailand (February 1995). Thus it was that *Siang Tian* was issued on CD in 1996, with Georgiadis conducting the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra. The opportunity was seized to include seven other tracks by Ajarn Prasidh, including the *Siamese Suite,* Georgiadis' own arrangements of theatrical songs (both mentioned earlier) and another arrangement of a piece by Ajarn Prasidh's father, entitled *Damnern Sigh,* which also started as a version for string quartet. Since then, *Siang Tian* has become something of a classic. Many Thais do not understand it, but as we shall see, the more perceptive and musically informed certainly do. John Georgiadis mentioned that he himself could not have composed anything like it, and, moreover, he did not think any Western composer could have managed it. This is one of the most insightful remarks and the reasons behind it are the subject of the main part of this study.

Siang Tian: a synthesis of Thai and Western music

One of the main differences between Western classical music and that of Thailand, or just about anywhere else on earth, is in the role and status of the composer. Several cultures treat this person as anonymous, which is not the case in Thailand, but what the composer actually does is far from the Western concept. For a start, pieces are very often the work of more than one composer. So it is with *Siang Tian.* Luang Pradit Phairoh's composition of 1933 is a response to a pre-existing piece and is often performed within a larger structure comprising two other sections by other composers. This is the form known as *thao* (or, completely, *pleng thao*) which enjoyed a golden age in the early twentieth century (in other words during the lifetime of Luang Pradit Phairoh) as a principal form of Thai music. It arose as a kind of competition between rival groups of musicians. A known piece would be taken and disguised through artful variations and the losers would be those who failed to identify the original piece. This is not so far removed from European improvisation duels (for example those involving Beethoven) which also elicited great skill in variation, often taking the theme to such remote places that it became hard to recognise. A Western set of variations, however, does not follow a predetermined formal scheme: there does not have to be a particular number of variations, nor a set pattern of tempo or key relationships. In the *thao*, there are some basic principles which identify it as a form as well as a process and make it one of the most elegant examples of symmetry in all music. There are three variations, known as *chan*. In fact, *chan* literally means 'level' and refers to tempo, so it is more accurate to say that there are three main sections, as the process of variation continues throughout the piece. These sections progressively contract, so that each one is roughly twice as fast, and half as long as the previous one. The first, the *sam chan*, is the longest and really the most noble and complex part of the *thao*. The middle section is

called the *song chan* and the final section the *chan dio*. One of the paradoxes of *thao* is that the variations (more precisely the *chan*) seem to be performed in reverse order: *sam, song* and *dio* mean three, two and one, respectively. This may not be so hard to explain, given that the slow to fast progression of the form is especially satisfying, and also that the *chan dio* may well have been the first variation. The original themes for many *thao* were quite simple tunes, possibly taken from the classical repertoire or from the folk music of Thailand and its neighbours. They would therefore suit the faster *chan*, which are also the simplest melodically. Thus it was that the majority of *thao* started from the *song chan* and the melody was then expanded into a *sam chan* and contracted into a *chan dio*. There are several exceptions, with some *thao* based on the *chan dio* or even the *sam chan*. *Siang Tian* is usually known as *Lao Siang Tian*, indicating, if not its actual origins in a tune from Laos, at least a conscious essay in the musical style associated by the Thais with that country. In this particular *thao*, the *sam chan* is the part composed by Luang Pradit Phairoh, while the *song chan* and *chan dio* are the work of other composers. Ajarn Prasidh, basing his work on his father's, also confines himself to the *sam chan* (he expressed an aversion to the *song chan* and *chan dio*, which he considered sounded like folk music).

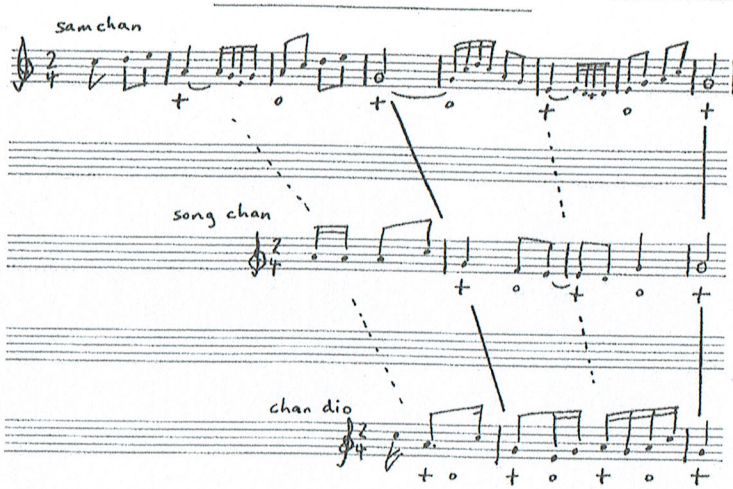
When the *thao* began to take shape, during the reign of Rama III (1824-51), it was in response to the need to provide longer opportunities for singers between instrumental interludes. In the existing *song chan* and *chan dio*, the singer was not given much scope for the florid and ponderous lines which are a hallmark of Thai classical singing (indeed, during a performance of the complete *Siang Tian thao* which I was fortunate to witness in the house of Ajarn Prasidh, 23 September 1998, the singer did not even sing at all during the *song chan* and *chan dio*). Although purely instrumental *thao* are common, probably the finest version is where vocal and instrumental sections alternate. Each *chan* of *Siang Tian* is in four sections, comprising a vocal section followed by a repeated instrumental one:

section 1	a vocal
	b instrumental
(repeated)	
section 2	a vocal
	b instrumental
(repeated)	
section 3	a vocal
	b instrumental
(repeated)	
section 4	a vocal
	b instrumental
(repeated)	
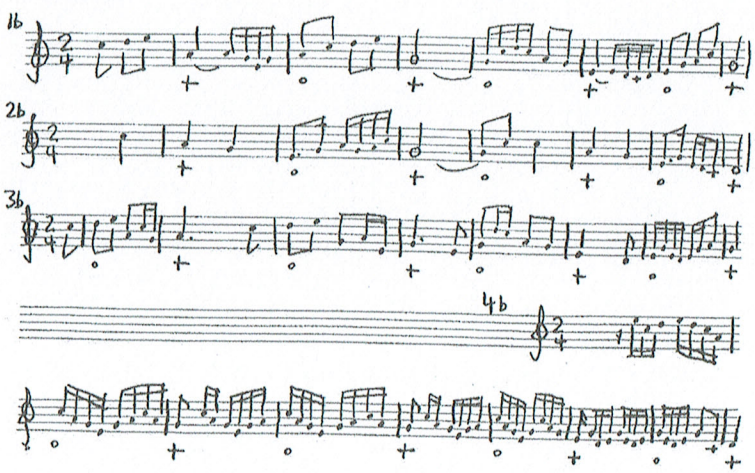
These divisions (1a, 1b, 2a, 2b etc.) are used in the subsequent analysis of the sam *chan*.

The difference between the *chan* is obvious to any listener, thanks to the presence in Thai music of the small, thick cymbals called *ching*. The name is onomatopoeic: an open, glancing strike of the two little cymbals gives the sound 'ching', while the closed sound, caused by bringing one down on the other and holding it there, is 'chap'. The *ching* strokes are shown in notations by the symbol o and the *chap* strokes by the symbol +. This regular 'ching-chap' alternation continues throughout Thai pieces and its function is sometimes equated with that of a conductor. The sound always penetrates what can sometimes become loud music in these Thai ensembles of primarily percussion instruments. Quite simply, the rate of 'ching-chap' doubles from one *chan* to the next. Although there are some increases in tempo within each *chan*, this change happens suddenly, at the beginning of the next *chan*. This is a good example of where increasing speed means decreasing complexity. The 'chap' strokes tend to fall on important notes (while the 'ching' strokes are analogous to up-beats). These

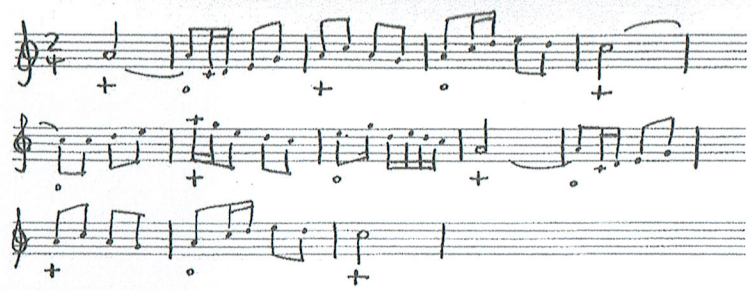
Ex. 1a
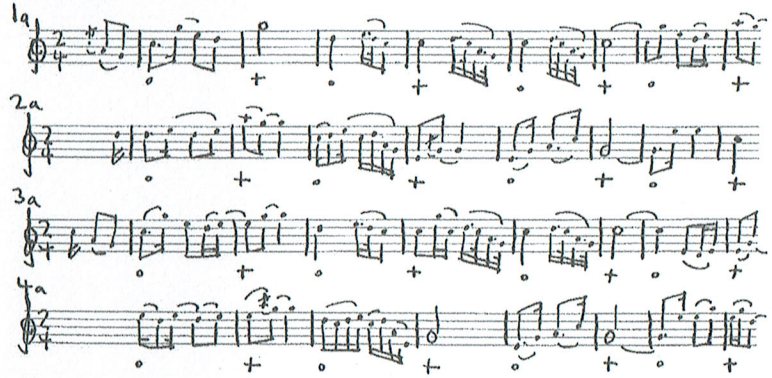


Ex. 1b



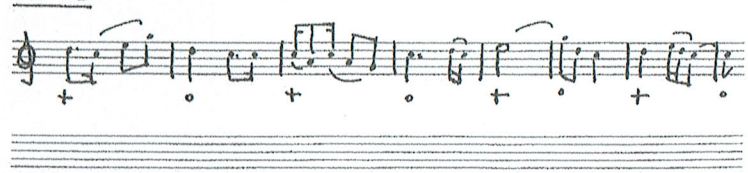
Ex. 1c
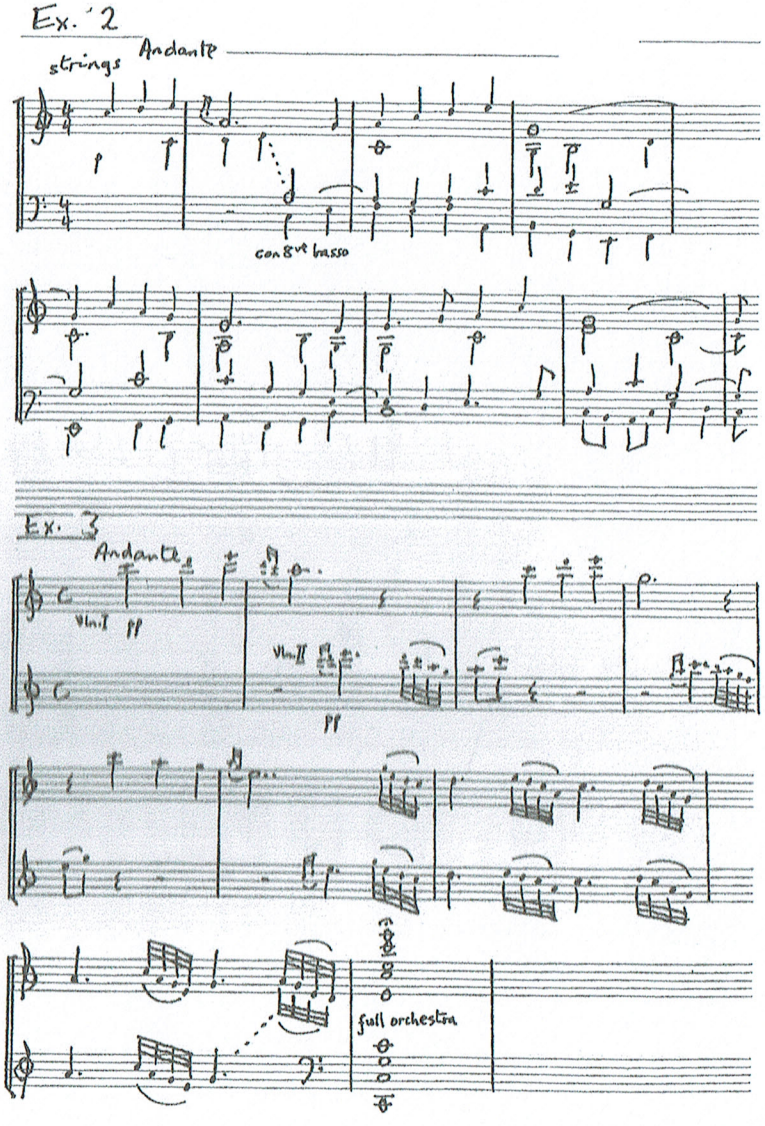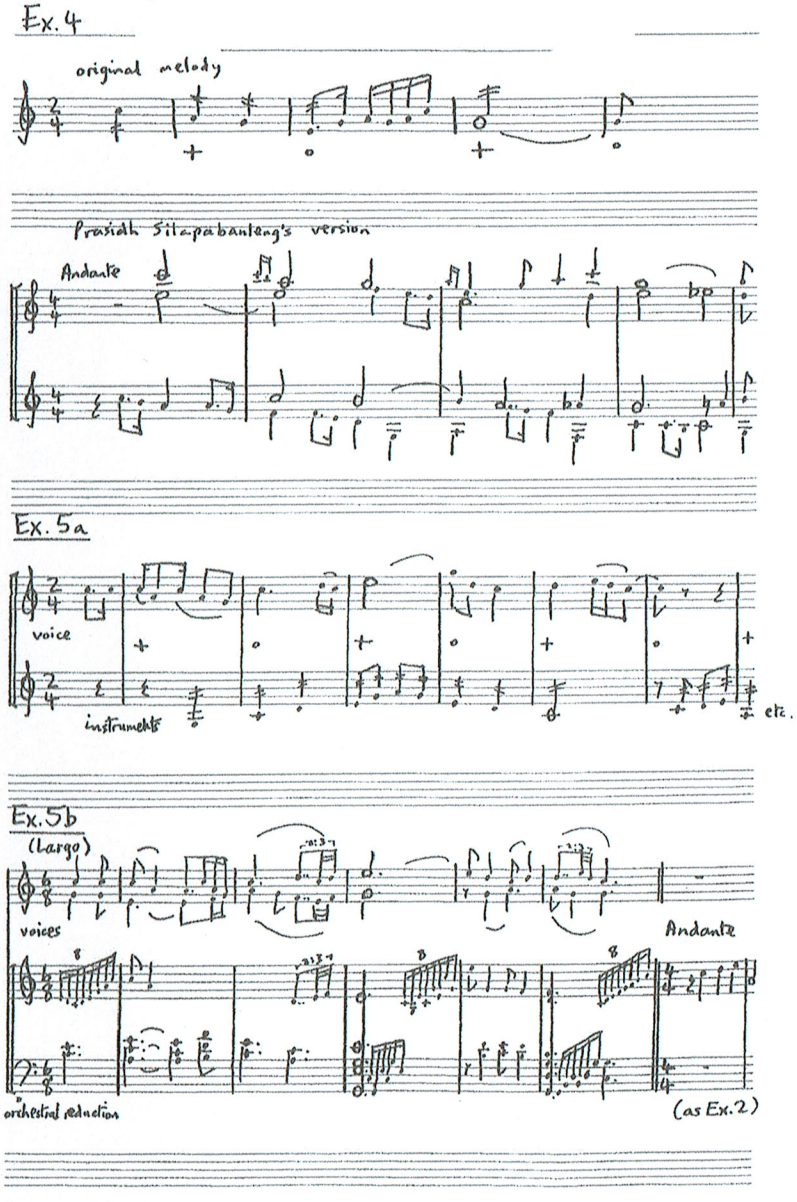


Ex. 1d



Ex. 1e

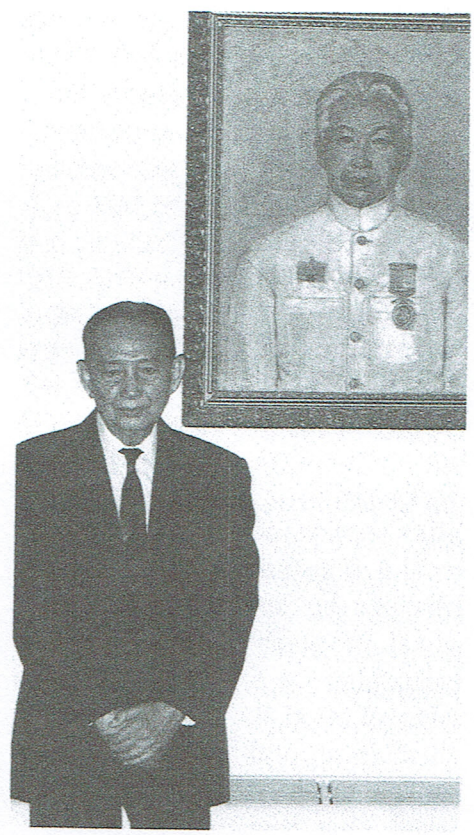



Ex. 2
strings
Andante
con 8va basso
Ex. 3
Andante
Vln I
pp
Vln II
pp
full orchestra


Ex. 4
original melody
Pravidh Sitapabanteng's version
Andante
Ex. 5a
voice
instruments
etc.
Ex. 5b
(Largo)
voices
Andante
orchestral reduction
(as Ex. 2)

important notes thus bunch more closely together through each *chan*. This means that there is less for the musicians to do, by way of improvisation between the important notes, and also, of course, as the *chan* becomes shorter. In theory, we would expect each *chan* to take half the time of the previous *chan;* in practice it is even less (largely because of the tempo increases within a *chan*, so by the time the *chan dio* is reached, it may sound like little more than a lively coda).

To shed some more light on what is meant by variation in Thai music, Ex. 1a (see page 11) shows the opening phrases of the first instrumental section of each *chan* of *Siang Tian thao*. Due to the telescopic form of the *thao* variations, the corresponding material of each *chan* is half the length of the previous one (and the tempo roughly double). Bearing in mind that it is the *chap* strokes (shown by the + symbol) which mark the important structural points of the melody, it can be seen how these three melodic extracts relate to each other, through their adherence to a shared skeletal outline, in this extract based on the points with the following notes: *a-g-e-g*, with the two *g's* as most important notes. When the music is performed by an ensemble (as would normally be the case) this shared outline is crucial in governing each instrumentalist's improvisation and relating it to those of the other members of the ensemble. It means that there exists what may be described as a concept of compulsory unisons spaced quite evenly throughout the course of the melody, and across the three *chan*, rather like moments of focus or nodal points which bring together the divergent instrumental lines. This can be observed at the two *g*'s of the conceptual skeletal outline (connected in Ex. 1a with unbroken lines), while a near, if not exact, unison obtains at the *a* and *e* of the conceptual skeletal outline (connected in Ex. 1a with dotted lines).



Prasidh, standing close to a protrait of his father, the great composer Luang Pradit Phairoh

It would be reasonable to ask if this process of variation on a shared melodic outline applies not only to the three *chan* but also within a *chan*. Confining ourselves to the longest and most elaborate *chan*, the *sam chan* created by the father and reconceived by the son, Ex. 1b shows the opening phrases of the four instrumental sections, evidence that they do follow, more or less, the same outline. There is also some exact repetition of material from section to section, especially at their ends, to make their relationships palpably obvious, as though the shared melody gradually emerges from its more disguised manifestations in each section. Ex. 1c shows the phrase which ends sections 1b, 2b and 4b. It is varied, by the use of more short notes and a slightly modified outline, in section 3b.

The relationships of the vocal sections to the instrumental sections are less apparent, though they clearly relate to each other. Exs. 1d and 1e (vocal) repeat the analytical exercise of Exs. 1b and 1c (instrumental). The beginnings of the vocal sections seem to relate, and it further appears that they relate most closely in alternating

Rehearsal letter	Tempo	Scoring	Corresponding section of original *sam chan*
-	Andante	orchestra	-
A	Largo	voices + orchestra	1a
B, C	Andante	orchestra	1b
D	Largo	voices + orchestra	2a
E, F	Andante	orchestra	2b
G	Largo	voices + orchestra	3a
H, I	Allegro	orchestra	3b
J	Largo	voices + orchestra	4a
K	Allegro	orchestra	4b
	Andante	orchestra	"
L	Allegro	orchestra	"
	Andante	orchestra	"

pairs: 1a with 3a and 2a with 4a. This process continues throughout the four vocal sections until they all converge on nearly identical versions of the concluding phrase shown in Ex. 1e.

A substantial portion of each section, vocal and instrumental, can therefore be described as identical, or nearly so. Without embarking on a lengthy discussion of what is meant by 'identical' in an oral tradition such as Thai music, it must be stressed that any notated version is only of one performance or a theoretical blueprint. Musicians playing *Siang Tian* could make these phrases identical or vary them slightly (and to them notation is irrelevant anyway).

For the purposes of this discussion, we may remain with the *sam chan,* as this is the part composed by Luang Pradit Phairoh and the basis of Ajarn Prasidh's composition for orchestra with voices also called *Siang Tian,* which he subtitled *Romance based on a theme by my father.* The glorious theme, which lingers in the memory with its rich harmonisation and orchestration, is given in Ex. 2 (Luang Pradit Phairoh's original was given in the first lines of Exs. 1a and 1b). It epitomises the similarities and differences in the compositions of father and son. On balance, the similarities are the more striking feature. The harmonisation and orchestration certainly transform it into a noble theme of Elgarian proportions; one can even imagine stirring words being added. Yet the Thai original is remarkable in its own right. Perhaps its most obvious feature is the two downward leaps (of a fifth and then a sixth) which stand out in the Thai melodic language based primarily on smooth conjunct motion. Ajarn Prasidh's piece is no mere rhapsody based on a theme by his father, but a close and systematic reworking of the entire *sam chan* of *Siang Tian.* The broad formal scheme is virtually identical. The sections of Ajarn Prasidh's unpublished manuscript score are marked (see above), to which I have added their scoring and relationship to the structure of his father's composition.

The opening andante for orchestra is a free introduction based on the main theme (Ex. 3). Apart from this melodic content, its main reference to Thai music is in the way the instruments, particularly the violins, sound rather like Thai singing. To the Western ear, perhaps the opening overlapping phrases in the 1st and 2nd violins may sound quite Mahlerian (especially the first movement of the Tenth Symphony) or like the opening of Britten's 'Sea Interludes' from

Peter Grimes. At the other end of Ajarn Prasidh's work, the two andante sections (after letters K and L) are part of the original piece but he has balanced the sense of relentless moving on in increasing speed with these reflective sections which revert to the mood of the opening. In other words, he has slowed the tempo of the original at the point where the energetic dialogue gives way to the smooth near-unison of the earlier sections. Apart from this, he is faithful to the original tempi: all vocal sections are unified by the largo marking and general texture (though the simple duple metre of Thai notations is changed to the compound duple time signature of 6/8 in these sections), while the instrumental sections (written in 4/4 rather than 2/4) gradually speed up, exactly in the manner of Thai music. Two important things are not attempted by Ajarn Prasidh, I would say for obvious reasons. There is no 'ching-chap' equivalent and no transcription of the Thai drumming, which clearly marks out the phrases by repeating rhythmic patterns known as *na thap*. They are essential features of Thai music, holding the music together and directing the ensemble. During vocal sections the solo singer will be accompanied by the *ching* and drum(s). To have imitated them in the orchestral version would have taken literalness too far and caused a kind of jarring of media, rather like pieces based on Indian music which add the *tambura* drone instrument to Western instruments. Instead, Ajarn Prasidh's genius for compromise leads him to accompany his singers with the orchestra, but in reduced sonorities, in obeisance to the sparse texture of the Thai original.

Even without the original 'ching-chap' and *na thap* of the time-keeping instruments, the essence of *Siang Tian* remains, and Thai musicians have no problem mentally fitting them to Ajarn Prasidh's piece. The repeated instrumental sections could also have been treated literally, but one imagines that any composer worth his salt would wish to vary them. Ajarn Prasidh's approach exemplifies his unique balance of Thai and Western demands. The repeats are indeed varied, but in simple and discreet ways. For example, section 1b is repeated with the beautiful melody an octave higher, while in later sections some of the regular fast patterns of the Thai version are arranged as more irregular (dotted) or even doubled values, and some of the dialogue phrases (discussed below) may be extended. The alteration of regular rhythms to dotted values may strike Thai ears as more Western than Thai, but it may equally be one of Ajarn Prasidh's responses to the style of the lower-pitched xylophone, the *ranat thum*, which adds all kinds of syncopations and quirky irregularities to the smoother rhythms of the other instruments. For this composer, however, the most obvious variation resources are precisely those which are undoubtedly Western: harmony and orchestration. Once again he uses his extensive palette with the skillful restraint of an accomplished craftsman. The overt melodic features of the original are transformed by his harmony and orchestration and his special insight into the essential features of Thai music. The result is a beautiful and unique balance and synthesis of his father's legacy with that of his teacher (Klaus Pringsheim).

If the timbres of Thai music have been 'translated' into Western sounds, the harmony has been created as a completely original feature. One of the best examples is the opening melody (which really identifies the piece as *Siang Tian*) at letter B in Ajarn Prasidh's score (Ex. 2), corresponding to the opening of section 1b of his father's *sam chan*. In so far as Thai music is notated at all, this theme will be written as a unison melody (our discussion of harmony must therefore focus on its negation as well!). The entire *thao* of *Siang Tian* is in fact given in this way in the anthol-

ogy of Thai classical music in staff notation published by the Fine Arts Department in 1961, which I have used for my musical examples of the Thai version, along with some interpolations based on an actual performance by expert Thai musicians. It is understood that far more will be going on in performance than is actually indicated by the single melody, although some pieces, including *Siang Tian,* keep close to a kind of collective unison for large stretches. The music tends to be thought more horizontally than vertically, and is a very good example of what is usually termed heterophony. To attempt what must be a considerable simplification of a complex and sophisticated process, the musicians improvise their individual lines (*thang*) to fit a shared basic melody. The further they depart from this melody the more crucial it is to realise that they will agree on the important notes along its way, playing them in unison, but otherwise follow their own paths without special consideration of harmonic relationships. *Siang Tian* is an example of a kind of *thao* pioneered by Luang Pradit Phairoh to be performed in a rather quiet, gentle style. In such pieces, the performers remain close to the melody, sustaining its long notes by means of *kro* (tremolo). This also means that Ajarn Prasidh need not be concerned with any attempt to reproduce long stretches of complicated *thang* but is free to concentrate on harmonising and orchestrating a clear melody. As we shall see, he does occasionally draw on his knowledge of the resources available to Thai musicians in ways which reflect not only his understanding but also his sense of balance and what is appropriate, in other words his instinct for good taste.

The brief analytical investigation of Siang Tian was intended to give some idea of just how beautifully the *thao* structure is contrived, though this aspect is Ajarn Prasidh's inheritance rather than his creation. It has been stressed that he further applies the principle of variation to the harmonic and textural elements, so that sections are never repeated exactly but are either varied by means of the harmonisation or instrumentation, or both (remembering that he is working exclusively with the *sam chan*). At the beginning of section 2b (letter E) for example, the original melody is varied by harmony and texture (Ex. 4). The addition of the dotted figure (played here on clarinets) is perhaps an example of where Ajarn Prasidh had the jaunty style of the *ranat thum* in mind.

Some remarks concerning Ajarn Prasidh's harmonic style have already been made; his orchestration is a model of clarity and economy and a 'normal' symphony orchestra is used:
2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 cors anglais, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, 3 timpani, harp, strings, plus female chorus.

Apart from the timpani, no percussion is called for, and this is another example of the composer's avoidance of banal literalness. He has completely re-thought the Thai soundworld in terms of the orchestra. Even his treatment of the vocal sections has an original touch. In the Thai version, they would be performed by one singer. Ajarn Prasidh turns this into a small chorus of sopranos and altos (with just three per part). The sopranos sing the original melody and the altos provide a simple harmony or sing in unison with the sopranos. The words, in Thai, are from a love poem and are those of Luang Pradit Phairoh's *sam chan,* though not actually by him. The title itself suggests using the flame of a candle (*tian*) — whether it stays alight or goes out — as a kind of oracle. The various English translations 'Vision of Light' or 'Oracle of Light' seem to capture the poetry of the original Thai. Although the singers used for the recording are all Thai, they do not have the rather plaintive timbre used in Thai classical music but are much closer to a Western sound (not only is that in keep-

ing with the composer's principles but it must be remembered that such a sound is familiar to more Thais, through popular music and international genres, than that of Thai classical music). An important feature of Ajarn Prasidh's version is the more clearly demarcated sections. The Thai version flows without breaks and one obvious way this is achieved is by the overlapping of vocal and instrumental sections. The singer re-enters just before the ends of the instrumental sections, while the instruments interrupt the vocal sections well before their end, with the phrase given in Ex. 5a. This melodic device is never used in Ajarn Prasidh's version; once again, this would appear to be a case of avoiding the literal translation. His version, at the same point in the music, is shown in Ex. 5b (which continues with the music given in Ex. 2).

I have left, until this stage of the discussion, one important aspect of Thai music usually considered first, for the reason that a potential problem turns out not to be one. Tuning is a likely area of conflict, where the process of translation from Thai to Western music can become problematic. Thai music is based on an approximately equidistant heptatonic scale (this means that each step is a slightly flat whole tone, and there are no semitones). Many pieces, including *Siang Tian,* omit two degrees (generally the fourth and seventh) to give a pentatonic scale. This may not happen quite as strictly as implied, since either or both of the omitted notes may appear sporadically, as passing notes, while the overall impression remains of a pentatonic melody. The *sam chan* and *chan dio* of *Siang Tian* are pentatonic (apart from a solitary F, the fourth degree, in one vocal phrase in section 3a of the *sam chan*); the fourth degree is used, though very sparingly, in the *song chan.* Like its near neighbour, the pentatonic *sléndro* tuning of Indonesia, the Thai pentatonic scale is not the same as the Western 'black-note' pentatonic scale. The question then is: how far away is it? The answer is that it is certainly easier to relate to the Western tuning than is *sléndro.* The distinguished young Thai musician and scholar, Dr Somsak Ketukaenchan, suggested that the Thai tuning is very easy to relate to the Western one, at least in its pentatonic version, omitting the fourth and seventh degrees (personal communication, September 1998). His case would seem to be strengthened by the relative ease with which Thai music is rendered in staff notation (something notoriously difficult for the *sléndro* tuning). Furthermore, his hypothesis can be tested by a simple comparison of the Thai and Western tunings, along with the *sléndro* tuning for further comparison. Since no tuning is as rigid as the values suggest, it is to some extent theoretical and based on simple arithmetic (with the Thai values rounded up to the nearest whole number). As note letters do not apply in the Thai and Indonesian examples, numbers will be used, roughly corresponding to the Western

Western					
note	C	D	E	G	A
interval	200	200	300	200	
Thai					
note	1	2	3	5	6
interval	172	172	343	172	
Indonesian					
note	1	2	3	5	6
interval	240	240	240	240	

C (1) D (2) E (3) G (5) A (6). The numerical values between these degrees are in the standard Cent system, wherein an equally tempered semitone has 100 cents, thus an equally tempered whole tone has 200 cents, an equally tempered minor third 300 cents, and so on, to a complete octave of 1200 cents.

We therefore have an element of objectivity, as well as Thai opinions, including those of the composer himself, in proposing that the tuning problem is by no means insurmountable. We may even go a step further to suggest that it is hardly a problem at all. The Thais accept that their tuning is distinctive and not Western but they do not appear to have much difficulty in hearing the essential 'Thainess' of their music rendered in Western tuning. Ajarn Prasidh offered an additional reason for his use of Western tuning (there are, of course, obvious reasons, such as the choice of Western instruments and notation, not to mention Ajarn Prasidh's own 'bi-musicality'). His pragmatic explanation was that he needed the Western tuning because he used Western harmony and therefore required a palette which included the semitones absent in Thai music.



Prasidh with his favourite students, Ms Savali Phakaphan (a Thai National Artist - Vocalist) and Ms Upsorn Kuramarohita (pianist)

There remain to be discussed certain special Thai features in Luang Pradit Phairoh's composition which were preserved or modified by his son. Whereas harmony may be regarded as a Western addition, counterpoint is an inherent part of Thai ensemble performance. This may range from virtual unisons to markedly different *thang*, related according to principles already discussed. In the former, the melodic instruments of the ensemble play the same melody, with occasional slight deviations and additions from one or more of them. The characteristics of individual *thang* depend on certain idiomatic features associated with a particular instrument or demanded by its structure, acoustics and playing techniques. Thus, to take perhaps the most prominent instrument, the leading xylophone (and higher-pitched of the pair), the *ranat ek* plays the fastest and most obviously virtuosic music. For much of the time it maintains patterns of fast, regular notes, known as *kep*. In slower music, the longer notes are sustained by tremolo, known as *kro*. *Siang Tian* was composed as a piece relying on *kro* in gently shimmering textures. Apart from the decorative use of tremolo in the violins for a few bars, to accompany the theme in the wind and brass, Ajarn Prasidh does not resort to this effect. This is again to do with his avoidance of the literal, and the obvious fact that whereas the Thai instruments (mainly percussion) use *kro* as a means of sustaining long notes the Western instruments have no similar need for it.

Other favourite Thai devices include short, exciting bursts of very rapid notes, suddenly added to the otherwise even texture. When just a few notes are used to spice up longer notes, this is known as *sabat* ('fluttering'). Longer passages of very fast notes are called *khayi*. Both are used by Ajarn Prasidh, though the former (*sabat*) may go almost unnoticed, as an occasional pair of grace-notes, as, for example, in Ex. 6. At the same time, it can be said that *sabat* is an essential feature of Ajarn Prasidh's own musical language. It contributes so much to the wonderful effects at the very beginning of the work
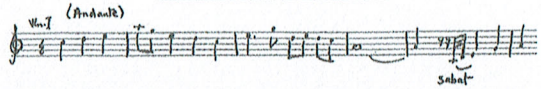
(Ex. 3) and decorates the melody in Ex. 4. A clear example of *khayi* comes in the repeat of the instrumental section 2b, where Ajarn Prasidh varies a short dialogue passage by doubling its note values. The first dialogue, between oboe and flute, and the *khayi* variant (strings) are shown in Ex. 7. Again, such a diminution is quite in keeping with Western practice, but its inspiration is Thai, as *khayi* is a favourite means of variation and this is exactly the kind of thing one might expect Thai musicians to improvise in order to impress the audience and introduce an element of surprise into the smooth flow of the music.

Attention has been drawn to the way in which the uniformity of texture may be broken by passages of dialogue. Where this happens, the ensemble is divided between those instruments 'asking the question' and those 'giving the answer'. In practice, a phrase from the first group (led by the *ranat ek*) may be answered with an exact repetition from the other group or with a different phrase. These devices are known as *lug loo* and *lug khat*, respectively, and usually occur later in a piece. (While the 'question-answer' analogy applies to *lug khat*, what happens in *lug loo* is really more a matter of 'question-question'!) Luang Pradit Phairoh introduces two short phrases of *lug loo* in section 2b and makes more extensive use of both *lug loo* and *lug khat* in section 4b. In section 3b, he uses the *lug loo* idea but the overlapping of the phrases turns 'question-answer' or 'call-response' into what is familiar to Western ears as canon (Ex. 8). Curiously enough (yet another example of avoiding slavish imitation), Ajarn Prasidh does not use canon at this point, though he certainly applies it elsewhere in his score. For example, it is used clearly at the beginning of section 1b where the theme on the first violins is followed canonically by the violas (see Ex. 2).
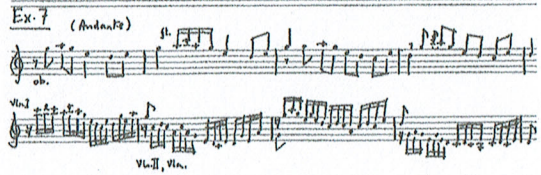
The use of canon in a musical tradition based on a type of polyphony known as heterophony is especially interesting. The relationship of canon to heterophony has been examined in detail by Donald Mitchell (1996/R1998). Although he does not discuss Ajarn Prasidh or Klaus Pringsheim, he vigorously proposes connections between Thai and Western music, with several examples from Mahler and Luang Pradit Phairoh. Building on Dr Mitchell's thesis, it is easy to add Mahler's pupil, Klaus Pringsheim, and the pupil of both Luang Pradit Phairoh and Pringsheim, Ajarn Prasidh, to the discussion of Mahlerian and Thai counterpoint. Pringsheim, followed in Mahler's footsteps and demonstrated something of a preoccupation with counterpoint. His compositions include an intriguing set of 36 2-part canons for piano (1959), and his final work was a *Theme, Variations and Fugue* for wind orchestra (1971-2) (*Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians,* 1984:1819). Dr Mitchell's important point is to demonstrate how closely heterophony and canon are related. Canon is, after all, a polyphony obtained by using the same melody in all parts, though starting at different points. Heterophony can almost be defined in the same way, but the entries tend to be much closer, even simultaneous (at different speeds).

We have already seen how Thai musical dialogues can develop into canons. It is rather like the difference between a speaker either pausing to listen to the reply or deciding to carry on talking through it! A good example of how Ajarn Prasidh takes the dialogue material from his father's work and varies it comes in section 4b. Ex. 9a gives the original version, while Ajarn Prasidh's version and his varied repeat (later) of the same material are shown in Ex. 9b and Ex. 9c, respectively. The examples from the orchestral score given here are confined to the actual dialogue material, in quavers, corresponding to the semiquavers used in the Thai notation. Ajarn Prasidh's added counterpoint above this in bro-
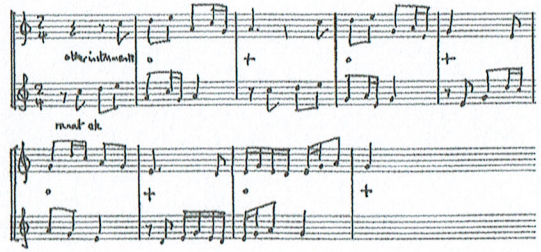
Ex.6
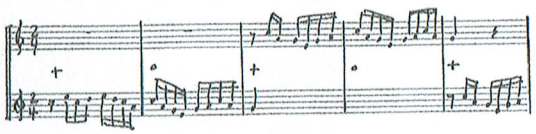


Ex.7
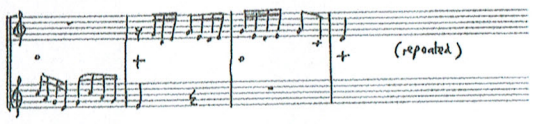


Ex.8
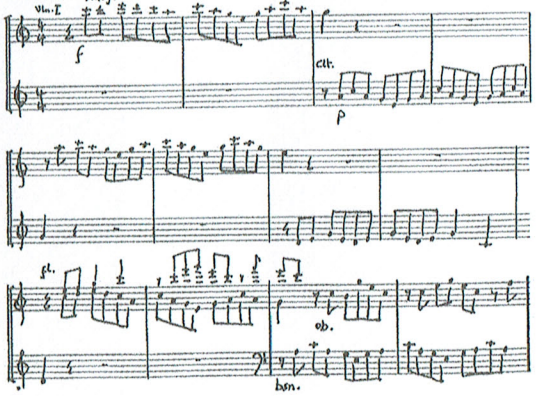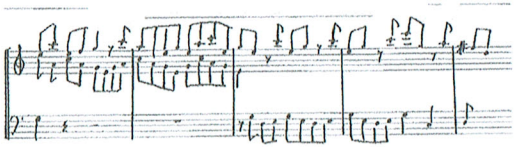


Ex.9a
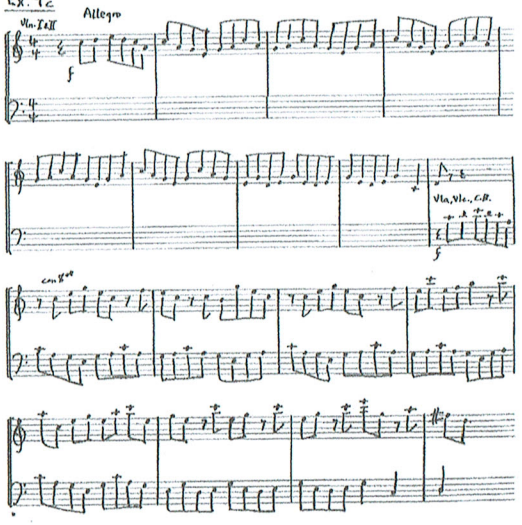




Ex.9b





Ex.9c



less short notes to vary the repeat is included in the examples, but the accompanying crotchets are omitted. The use of F# in the phrase endings here stands out strongly and may introduce to some ears an element of humour by its sudden incongruity (it is the only time that Ajarn Prasidh departs from the pentatonic set of his father in the melodic material of the composition). It may be that he is reminding us, late in the piece, that Thai music is not solely pentatonic but that the xylophones, gong-circles and other melodic instruments have two extra notes to call upon. Perhaps an even more satisfactory explanation is that he is simply deploying his compositional resources and sense of dramatic timing.

Siamese Romances

Two important events furthered Ajarn Prasidh's career after my visit to Bangkok in September 1998. His importance to Thai culture was recognised in his elevation to the status of National Artist in composition, and a concert including his music was given on 2 November (1998) by the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra (under a Thai conductor) at the Assumption University. The main work was the *Siamese Romances in D*, on which Ajarn Prasidh was working when I visited him. It is a suite of five short movements, the second and third of which are based on compositions by Luang Pradit Phairoh: *Lome Nua* and *Lome Pama*, respectively. The word *lome* is the equivalent of 'romance', while *nua* and *pama* suggest regional styles (northern and Burmese, respectively). Luang Pradit Phairoh's pieces are charming miniatures as befits their character as serenades, and were composed in the gentle *kro* style so closely associated with the master. Ajarn Prasidh's versions use similar orchestral forces and harmonic resources to those of *Siang Tian*.

Ex. 10 shows the relationship of Ajarn Prasidh's arrangement of *Lome Nua* to his father's melody. The latter is my transcription (transposed for ease of comparison) of a recorded version kindly made available by Ajarn Prasidh. It was performed by an ensemble of Thai zithers, and I have indicated only the main melody, plus the prominent snatches of counterpoint. An especially delightful example is the sequential passage from the end of bar 17 to the beginning of bar 21. The layout of the example has been dictated by the need for comparison, so Ajarn Prasidh's orchestral version (only the instrument playing the tune) is on the upper of the two staves and my transcription of Luang Pradit Phairoh's melody is on the lower stave. The clear relationship is slightly disrupted between bars 8 and 9. At this point, the Thai version has an extra bar which is added at the end of the example as a kind of footnote (marked*). At bar 17, the discrepancy is rectified by an extra bar in Ajarn Prasidh's version. At bar 26, the two versions appear to part company more decisively. Ajarn Prasidh's version (the melody on the cor anglais at this point) has a slightly varied repeat of the sequential passage of bars 18 to 20 while the version performed on the Thai zithers has a completely different coda figure (involving some repetition within itself). Both versions are balanced, albeit in these different ways, and are closely related for most of the time. Ajarn Prasidh has chosen utmost simplicity for his arrangement and has not extended the piece to the full length of his father's, which not only repeats the material shown in the transcription (as does the orchestral version) but adds another section of the same length (not included in this transcription).

Lome Pama was performed as a *ranat ek* solo lasting barely a minute during the special concert I attended in Ajarn Prasidh's house (23 September 1998), and it merits special attention in any study of Thai music. Its most striking feature is an irregular *ching* pattern: instead of the equal spacing between the alternating *ching* and *chap* strokes

normally encountered in Thai music, the space between the second *ching* and *chap* strokes is halved. The pattern is repeated in each of the four phrases of the melody, thereby curtailing the phrase-length to seven bars. Ex. 11 makes this clearer. The lower of the two lines is my transcription (transposed for ease of comparison) of the *ranat ek* solo. It was played through twice, in the gentle *kro* (tremolo) style. Ajarn Prasidh's tempo (andante cantabile) is slightly slower than that of the *ranat ek* performance and, moreover, he marks the reprise lento cantabile. The broadening of his father's melody is further achieved by a completely different time signature, giving the feel perhaps of a slow waltz or even a Mahlerian Ländler, and an 'ironing out' of the irregular metre into phases of eight bars of 3/4. Yet the relationship to the original melody is always clear. Since the first violins carry the tune throughout, Ex. 11 gives just that line to show the connection. It is only in the final phrase, where Ajarn Prasidh composes more elastic rhythms, that there is a slight problem in matching the two melodies (the gap in the *ranat ek* line is purely for analytical purposes and of course did not occur in performance). Ajarn Prasidh adds a fifth eight-bar codetta phrase, based on the melody of the opening phrase, between the first statement of the whole piece and its varied repeat. The two pieces, *Lome Nua* and *Lome Pama,* are instantly recognisable as the work of Ajarn Prasidh to any-



Prasidh Silapabanleng, the musician and composer was enthusiastically received by Thai musicians

one familiar with his *Siang Tian* and they continue his unique work of musical translation, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Conclusion

The music examined in this study offers both specialised and general perspectives. The first point to make may seem too obvious to mention, but it should not go by unnoticed. For these works of Ajarn Prasidh to have been possible at all reminds us of the presence of what may be called universals in music, and perhaps there is more to connect Thai and Western music than separate them. At the same time, the expert composer cannot rely on a simplistic appraisal of what makes each instantly recognisable as music but must use a much deeper knowledge of both to ensure that such affinities really are unearthed and fully explored. *Siang Tian,* as well as the *Lome Nua* and *Lome Pama* movements of the *Siamese Romances,* represent what may well be unique in the world's music: a son, expert in two musical traditions, using his bi-musicality to recreate a work of his father, a leading light of his nation's traditional music. Listening to Ajarn Prasidh's version of *Siang Tian* while following a transcription of his father's work demonstrates how faithfully he has preserved the original. This may, therefore, suggest that we have been examining nothing more than an orchestral (plus female chorus) arrangement of a famous Thai composition. On one level, this is undoubtedly true but what Ajarn Prasidh has achieved is far more subtle. The clarity of his model is never obscured; he never imposes his own compositional skill in such a way as to suggest that he is trying to 'improve' on his father's work. This may have something to do with the natural respect of a son for his father that is so strong in Asian cultures, but it probably has even more to do with his unerring instinct for what is appropriate in Thai music and

Ex.10

Violin I
Thai zithers
5
clarinet
10
Violin I
15
oboe

Ex.11

Violin I
Ranat-ek
20
harp
25
flute
cor anglais
30
(cor anglais)
harp
35
25 (Thai zithers)

in the Western elements used in his response to it. The piece remains throughout in C major, and the pentatonicism of the original shines through every bar, yet the harmony adds a chromaticism which takes the music to the gates of Vienna but never to the realms of bad taste. The use of the voices virtually encapsulates Ajarn Prasidh's approach to the whole piece. The Thai words and melodies are preserved but a simple and effective harmony is supplied by the altos. The resulting sound world is unique in its synthesis of Thai and Western music, to the extent that one cannot say which one it resembles more. The simplicity of Ajarn Prasidh's version disguises the complexity of his musical profile and the decisions he took in preparing his work. One of the many things which impressed me is that Ajarn Prasidh's *Siang Tian* has not only become something of a favourite among the foreign residents of Thailand but has also been so enthusiastically received by Thai musicians (who will have heard countless attempts at arranging Thai music by Westerners). It has resulted from a deep love and understanding of his father's and nation's traditional music, and from months of hard work to ensure that his compositional skill never causes the light of *Siang Tian* to be dimmed.

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In 1980, he co-founded the English Gamelan Orchestra, the first group of British musicians dedicated to the study, composition, and performance of music for the Javanese Gamelan (Faber and Faber, 1990).

Neil has written, broadcasted and lectured extensively on Indian and Javanese music, having been invited to address conferences in India and also to interview several leading musicians, including Vilayat Khan, Ram Narayan, Hariprasad Chaurasia and Shivkumar Sharma at the Nehru Centre in London, and his interviews with Ravi Shankar and other famous musicians have been published in the Gramophone magazine.

He is currently working on two research projects concerning Thai music. One is a study of the distinguished Thai composer, the late Prasidh Silapabanleng, and the other is a joint study, with Dr. Bussakorn Sumrongthong of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, on the shared concepts of unheard melodies in Thai and Javanese music.

Neil Sorrell is a recipient of the 1999 Hafiz Ali Khan Award, an international award presented by the Ustad Hafiz Ali Khan Memorial Trust, Gwalior, India, in recognition of contributions to Indian classical music.

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author's note

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