

Music Notation of Traditional Thai Music for Piano Solo

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Thai music for piano solo arranged by Sumitra Sucharitkul and Col. Choochart Pitaksakorn was notated according to the interpretation of Professor Dr. Natchar Pancharoen, the only person who learnt Thai music by rote on the piano with the two masters. The main objectives of notating all pieces of piano solo music into the standard score is to promote the Thai music to the public.

The most important musical element is the use of ornaments which are characteristic in Thai music. The major difference between Tiew Hwan (slow variation) and Tiew Keb (fast variation) is the movement of the melody. In slow variations, the melody imitates the style of Thai singing which is highly ornamented, while in fast variations the melody moves steadily with more notes and less ornamented. However, specific performance details, such as articulations, fingering and dynamics have not written in the notation. The pianists have some room for interpretation on their own.

“Solo” in Thai classical music is created for playing by one instrument and used for “showing off” the skills of the player on that certain instrument. Solo for the Thai piano music follows the authentic Thai classical music approaches. The harmony used is western standard, arranged with advanced classical piano techniques.

Every piece contains specific characters of variety of Thai classical instruments mixed with piano techniques. Most Thai pieces arranged for the piano are in western style which does not strictly comply with Thai classical notation. As for the Thai music solo, there are only 2 musician composers – Khru Sumitra Sucharitkul and Col. Choochart Pitaksakorn - who arranged the music with the traditional Thai style.

Khru Sumitra Sucharitkul (1907-1984) is the model for Thai piano solos. She was a court pianist in the era of King Rama VI. She also played the piano together with Thai traditional string ensembles. Khru Sumitra was taught by many Thai classical music teachers. She included western techniques in her music but still preserved the Thai classical tunes with the use of fundamental harmony. Many times, there were melodies played in an octave apart with no harmony. Only 3 pieces were notated which are Tab Lao Charoen Sri, Nok Khamin Sam Chan and Phaya Soke (Natchar Pancharoen, 2008:16-17)

The other musician composers, Col.Choochart Pitaksakorn (1934-) is a violinist and conductor. He is honoured as the National Artist in Performing Arts (western music) in 2010. He arranged a great number of Thai classical pieces for western band. Choochart's solo uses advanced harmony with insertion of counterpoint. The outstanding character is the use of chromatic notes in his harmonic arrangement while the melodies are decorated with Thai classical music elements. Although Col.Choochart is known for his skills in playing the violin or the viola, he is also a skillful classical pianist. So his Thai piano solo arrangement is full of advanced classical piano techniques. Col.Choochart arranged altogether 7 Thai piano solo pieces: Somsongsaeng (tao) , Sai Yoke Sam Chan, Lao Pan, Fon Ngiew, Nok Khamin Sam Chan, Phaya Soke Sam Chan and Saratee Sam Chan. Both Khru Sumitra and Col.Choochart transferred his music by demonstration, teaching by words and by rote, which are the methods of teaching Thai classical music. Most works of Khru Sumitra were performed in court while Col.Choochart's works were performed in public during 1971-1983. The only person to whom his music was transferred is Dr. Natchar Phancharoen.

Up to present, these musical pieces have never been notated. The first piano solo notation was made by Dr. Natchar who wanted to preserve and spread this piano works which are regarded as a Thai piano literature. She then asked the author to invent the method for Thai classical piano solo notation.

The notation for Thai piano solo is not only comply with the western standard but also includes the invention of methods used for notating the techniques played by variety of Thai instruments. So it is crucial to understand the composer's intention to convey elements of certain Thai classical instruments and bring it to the score to be playable by the piano.

The main propose of the notation is to make it a universal communication for pianists or other western musicians to understand and play the music, regardless of his or his knowledge of Thai music. Therefore, the process of notation includes many factors. In terms of the theory, the use of time signature and key signature has to be planned. The melodic and rhythmic patterns have to be set up. The harmonic arrangement has to enhance the melodies. The essential factor is the use of ornaments which make the piano convey Thainess and make it possible to notate the piano techniques.

In the process of notation, there is another crucial factor at the beginning of the notation process that is the knowledge and understanding of fundamental Thai music which will help to path the way to the appropriate and correct notation.

Fundamental of Thai Music

There is a need to understand fundamental Thai music before notating that is the understanding of rhythm, tune (Thang-style), and playing techniques.

1. Rhythmic Patterns Describe the rhythm of the piece whether it is Sam Chan, Song Chan or Chan Diew (slow, medium or fast tempo). Each rhythmic pattern has different cymbal marks. The notes on the beats of Ching and Chap (down and up beats) are important for indicating the rhythm.

2. Tunes Analyse of melodic patterns in each piece and indicating whether there is the use of what instrumental elements in each passage: Tiew Rong (singing style), or Keb (playing style). Most pieces include vocal part such as Sai Yoke. The piece which contains Tiew Keb are Nok Khamin Sam Chan and Phraya Soke Sam Chan.

3. Playing Techniques Both Khru Sumitra and Col.Choochart arranged by inserting Thai classical instruments' techniques for playing on the piano. In the process of notation, there is a need to understand the playing techniques of each instrument: which technique is used. TiewHwan (slow tune) uses mainly "Euan" (singing tune, expanding main notes) because it comes from vocal part. Strings instruments contain trills. Melodic Percussions use Kro (long beats playing, a kind of trills). TiewKeb is used for showing off the musician's skills. There are many types of techniques. The main techniques are repetitions whereas the interact between high-pitch and low-pitch instruments uses canon and imitation. The piano has to include all of these techniques.

Apart from understanding the fundamental Thai music, Thai style of music notation has to be studied to check the correctness and completeness of the piece. It can be notation for any instruments. TiewKep can also be used such as Nok Khamin Sam Chan from Ton Pleng Ching Suite or Sarathee Sam Chan.

Notation Approaches and Process

Dr. Natchar's performance and interpretation which is unique is used. The method is listening and jotting both directly and from recording. Only Col.Choochart's Phaya Soke Sam Chan is notated by original notated score. Khru Sumitra's Nok Khamin Sam Chan and Praya Soke Sam Chan notation are taking from her recording. After that, notate from Dr. Natchar's interpretation and arrangement to complete the playing techniques and harmony but still keep Khru Sumitra's.

The process of notation starts from fundamental western music concern, which is setting the time signature, key signature, notating the melody and the harmony as follows:

Time Signature

First, jotting down the main notes for the melodic structure and listen to the notes on ching's (a percussion) rhythm. The down beat of Thai traditional music is “Chap” which falls on the last note of the bar whereas it is the first note of the bar in western music. After that, look at the Chan (tempo) of Thai music which not only tells the speed but also indicates the position of ching's rhythm and drum's pattern.

When writing the down beat of the melody and listen to the position of the cymbal, it is found out that the down beat falls on every 4 beats in Sam Chan and every 2 beats in Song Chang. It has to be notated to be understandable both for western and Thai music perspectives. So there come the use of 4/4 in Sam Chan pieces and 2/4 in Song Chan pieces. This is accordance with the use of cymbal beats. From the notation, Chap beats fall on the left hand bass.

In Chan Diew pieces, 2/4 is used as the speed is twice faster than Song Chan. The notation is done by twice reducing the length of notes—there is Ching and Chap twice in each bar.

Example: Illustration of Ching (-) and Chap (+) in Sam Chan piece (Sai Yoke)



Example: Illustration of Ching and Chap in Song Chan piece (Lao Pan)



Example: Illustration of Ching and Chap in Chan Diew piece (Somsongsaeng Tao)



However, there is no need to change the time signature but the note on the first beat of the bar has to be a down beat. The change of time signature makes the music structure understandable. Apart from 2/4 and 4/4, there are also 2/2 or 4/8 as found in western notation which is directly translated from Thai classical music.

Key and Key signature

The method of playing Thai classical music on the piano is by memorizing the Thai notation and transpose to Do, Re, Me Fa, etc. So most pieces are in C Major. All Khru Sumitra's piano solo pieces are in C Major whereas Col.Choochart's include other keys such as Khamen Sai Yoke in E-flat Major. Before deciding the use of key signature, the notes are notated from its pitch as it is listened. It is not difficult to find the key signature even it is not in C Major.

There is a specific case in Lao Pan which starts with C Major. This piece has D as central note. It sounds like D Minor but towards the end, the key signature is changed to C Major. So there is the use of D minor Key signature and change to C Major. As for other pieces which are in C Major, transposition occurs many times. The new key signature will not be used as in Nok Khamin Sam Chan, Saratee Sam Chan.

Melodic notation

The melodic notation must be thorough and needs the understanding of the Thai thematic melody. The analysis of the melodic structure has to be done: find out that each element comes from the improvisation of which melody. In the Tiew Hwan that mainly uses Euan, many times, there is an extension of main notes which can be regarded as rubato in western music. For performing, although it has to be played from reading the notation, the performer has to be capable of inserting their ways of techniques. But this may be different from the original arrangement. So in notating, the methods of notation all playing techniques have to be invented to notate as the arrangement requires.

Melodic notation techniques: First jot down all the notes as they are listened. Use musical signs or ornaments. If this can not be done, notate the notes with correct rhythm as follows :

Main notes



Notating method



From the example, the down beat of this phrase is C. The technique used is “Euan”. This extends C with the use of ornamental notes or trills which imitating the playing on the Saw (fiddle).

Main notes



Notating method



Long notes can use tremolo sign and add grace notes. From Bar 3, the main note is only C but it can be elaborated by adding “Euan” notes followed by G on the 3rd beat. In Tiew Hwan pieces, there are a lot of Euan notes. Euan will be played in the same way.

In Tiew Kep and Single Chan pieces, apart from the addition of notes, there are also playing techniques which is different from Tiew Hwan such as fast notes and glissando. The notation of fast notes uses the faster notes such as from eighth notes and sixteenth notes or thirty-second notes as in the example of Somsongsaeng tao:

Notation contains ornaments and playing techniques



from the following main notes



It can be seen that there is the addition of grace notes and improvisation by using thirty-second notes to make the melody elaborated and interesting. However, there are other techniques which cannot be matched with suitable signs such as trill and tremolo with notes which are not in the interval of second. The use of trill is only for the interval of second. So other intervals the sign will be used between the certain notes. Moreover, there is the use of glissando which is unique in the pieces of Khru Sumitra. The notation of melodies is the heart of Thai piano music score because the melodies are decorated with many techniques. The musical theme can be improvised in many ways which gives the music Thainess. The invention of notation method for appropriate ornamental notes is important. Also the writing of clear rhythmic patterns is very crucial.

Harmonic Arrangement Notation

Most harmony in Thai piano classical music in TiewHwan played in the form of bass followed by block chords. As for Tiew Keb pieces, mostly it uses the method of counterpoint. The process of harmonic notation includes the notating before the melodies, notating along with the melodies, and notating after the melodies.

The notation before the melodies is used when the melody has a lot of techniques and is difficult for catching the main rhythm. The performing of these techniques use heterophony which the main theme is inserted in the improvisation. So it is important to find the main rhythm or the down beats in the first place. In this case, first of all, the harmony is provided to get the position of the down beats and the structure of the phrases. This method is used in Phraya Soke, Sarathi Sam Chan and Nok Khamin Sam Chan (Both Thangs). The notating along with the melodies is the method used in translating the pitches. Most harmonic progressions are in standard method but consist of the unique style of the composer. The type of harmony is decided, repeat listening follows and notating precisely according to the harmony. The form of Sweet Tiewpieces consists of melody and chords such as Kamen Sai Yoke, Lao Charorn Sri Suite or Somsongsaeng Tao. In these pieces, the melodies can be notated alongside with the harmony. The notation of Nok Khamin Sam Chan and Phaya Soke which Khru Sumitra performed is to notate the melodies prior to the harmony because the melody is more obvious with a little use of harmony. Other harmonic arrangement mainly notated after the melodic notation.

Notation of other details

Details in western music are repeat marks, tempo, ritardando in some parts. Those which are not notated are dynamic, articulation and fingering. This is to give the performer chance to interpret and invent their own styles apart from the notation.

In the last process of notation, it is important to prove and make corrections by comparing it with the Thai notation counterpart. It has to be done before taking it to perform to make it playable and clear. The correction process contains the melodic improvement and the harmony check to comply with the western theory. At the same time, the notation has to be completed according to its Thai music notation. The author uses the Finale notation program for printing out the notation and also check the pitches.

The studies and transfer of Thai piano music in the future can be studied from the notation together with transferring by rote. Therefore, the invention of effective Thai music notation is needed and it is very important. Moreover, the knowledge and understanding of Thai music is also essential. All of the approaches of music notation have just started. The better more appropriate methods is needed to standardize Thai piano music and to use as a method to teach Thai piano music which is regarded as an authentic Thai piano literature.