

SIAM FOLK TUNE “LANNA” FOR STRING ORCHESTRA

Nora-ath Chanklum

Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Corresponding author:

Nora-ath Chanklum
noraath@gmail.com

Received: 1 February 2024

Revised: 31 May 2024

Accepted: 2 June 2024

Published: 27 August 2024

Citation:

Chanklum, N. (2024). Siam folk tune “Lanna” for string orchestra. *Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies*, 24(2), 530–539.

This article discusses the compositional materials and process of “Lanna” for string orchestra based on folk tunes from Northern Thailand (Lanna). The composition comprises 6 movements for a duration of 50 minutes. The composer carefully selected folk tunes and rendered a balance between the borrowed ones and the newly composed materials through the careful mix of musical elements, including keys, melodies, rhythmic patterns, idioms, and re-created the sound to imitate the performance techniques of the original instruments. Certain Western compositional techniques were adapted to fit the original melodies in order to retain the identity of the work and provide a balanced blend of the original Eastern and the new Western melodies, thereby creating a new perspective of sound as well as an inspiration for other composers to continue crafting music in this genre. Traditional Lanna tunes, including Fon Phang, Pan Fai, Noi Chai Ya, and Lao Duang Dokmai are presented partly in multi movements to convey traditional melodies. Imitations of certain singing and playing techniques are also transcribed via selections of instruments in the ensemble, especially the violin solo, to portray both the authentic Lanna atmosphere and the blend of the two cultures.

Keywords: Contemporary folk music; Lanna folk tunes; Siam folk tune; string orchestra

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional or folk music has been remarkably recognized and utilized by native composers as musical materials for melodies, rhythmic patterns, vocal styles and idioms. Moreover, during the 19th and 20th centuries, popular tunes, architectures, and cultural heritage were integrated into new compositions and were performed worldwide in various forms and ensembles (Nawigamune & Pidokrat, 2007). Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893), a Russian composer, also applied Russian folk tunes, *O Lord, Save Thy People*, and *U Vorot* to his famous *1812 Overture*. Béla Bartók (1881–1945) was a Hungarian composer and musicologist who collected a number of folk tunes, notated those orally transmitted tunes with modern notation, and arranged them with Western harmonization, as seen in his *Romanian Folk Dances*. In Thailand, Narongrit Dhamabutra composed *Symphony of Rattanakosin* using four Thai classical compositions as fundamental music structure before adding his own unique musical language (Dhamabutra, 2017). Dnu Huntrakul and Charan Manopetch created *Songs of the Mountains* (1988) using pop tunes from Northern Thailand with a new arrangement of flute, fiddle, and drone-like sound from pedal notes to create a more colorful harmony (Center for the Promotion of Arts and Culture, Chiang Mai University, 1986).

Thai literature is a valuable resource for various beautiful poems that describe Lanna’s culture and history (Ruengruglikit, 2001). Important Thai literature includes Professor Emeritus Saraswadi Ongsakul’s *Lanna History*, Professor Dr. Prasert na Nakorn’s *Nirat Hariphunchai*, and many versions of the poems *Lilit Phra Lo* (Ruengruglikit, 2001). The composer was mostly inspired by two Thai songs depicting part of the poems

mentioned. The first version was *Pheasant Song* with lyrics by S. Kessiri and music by Slai Krailert (Nawigamune & Pidokrat, 2007). The other version was *Yo Yot Phra Lor* with lyrics and music by Phayong Mukda (Nawigamune & Pidokrat, 2007). The composer partly used the latter as the introduction section of the first movement.

2. COMPOSING MATERIALS AND PROCESS

Siam Folk Tune “Lanna” covers Thai Lanna traditional music and literature in 6 movements. The first movement, *Prelude* which was inspired by *Tang Chiang Mai* (/tāŋ ciāŋ mài/)¹, was originally performed by Thai traditional fiddle ensemble. The melody itself is also suitable for an overture-like piece familiar to Western music tradition. The second movement, *Lanna’s Life*, was developed from *Fon Ngiao* (*Se Le Mao*) [(/fɔːn ɲiáw/), (/sěː lēː mǎw/)] with enjoyable melodic lines. *Fon Ngiao* is also one of the famous pieces of Lanna music, portraying Lanna’s culture and its people’s way of life. Furthermore, the main motif from the composition was also utilized to unite all the movements together. The third movement, *The Hermit*, was inspired by *Rue Si Long Tham* (/lūː sǐː lǒŋ tʰām/). The composer later added harmonic language to evoke a gigantic cave and complex mountain range together with violin solo to imitate Lanna traditional scale. The fourth movement, *Song of the Mountains*, which was inspired by *Nor Sue Lae* (/nɔː suː laː/), is festive music of the Muser or Lahu people. The violin solo had been added throughout the movement to imitate the playing style and techniques of Khan, a traditional wind instrument. The fifth movement, *The Flowers Song*, was inspired by the melodious *Noi Chai Ya* (/nɔːj cǎj jāː/) and *Lao Duang Dokmai* (/lāːw duāŋ dɔːk máːj/). It depicts the beauty of Lanna flowers as well as to honor Princess Dara Rasmi of Chiang Mai, princess consort of King Rama V of Siam. The composer composed the movement in Scherzo with 6/4 time signature instead of the traditional 3/4 time signature. Finally, the last movement, *The Procession and Dance*, was inspired by *Fon Phang* (/fɔːn pʰǎːŋ/) and *Pan Fai* (/pàn fāːj/) and tunes to initiate a grand procession of musical instruments.

The new arrangement was designed to be performed by the string ensemble whose main role is to imitate Lanna specific rhythmic patterns and melodies. The scale series of Lanna music has a uniquely different structure to Western classical music. The ensemble includes a violin solo, 3 first violins, 3 second violins, 2 violas, 2 cellos, and 1 double bass, which can be flexibly arranged according to other composers or performers’ preferences. What is more important than members of the ensemble is the role of the violin solo. The composer designs the violin solo lines to present the main melodies as well as to interweave with other melodies, emphasizing the special Thai heterophonic harmony texture. Other string instruments in the ensemble also play an important role since they imitate woodwinds and brasses with specific playing techniques like *col legno*, *pizzicato*, and *tremolo*.

Details of the 6 movements with folk melodies and rhythmic patterns of *Siam Folk Tune “Lanna”* are as follows:

2.1 The Prelude (05.27)

The Prelude is an overture with the traditional melody *Tang Chiang Mai* as the opening theme. *Tang Chiang Mai* was used as the opening section here since it is normally used as a greeting theme in many formal events in Chiang Mai province. Originally, *Tang Chiang Mai* was sung alternately by male and female singers like a conversation and was gradually developed to be performed by traditional bands as the very first composition in almost every occasion. The composer selected a few bars of the original music shown in Figure 1 and later expanded the dotted-eighth-note motif in violas with transparent harmonies.



Figure 1: The traditional melody *Tang Chiang Mai*

Throughout the movement, the composer carefully altered meter, changes from simple time to compound time, like 4/4 to 5/8 and 7/8, while presenting the same melodic line to create a mixture of different feelings as well as tensions of the melody itself.

All movements are cyclically united with the “*Mong Sae*” (mōŋ sǎj/) motif from *Fon Ngiao*. The motif is also presented in the opening of the second movement (see Figure 2).

¹ Pronunciation guide of the titles was provided according to the Full PIA chart by the IPA (International Phonetic Association) from <https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org>.

Figure 2 : "Mong Sae" theme (bar 17)

2.2 Lanna's Life (04.53)

The second movement, *Lanna's Life*, describes how Lanna's rich culture has embraced varieties of artistic cultures from nearby regions for centuries. *Fon Ngiao* (*Se Le Mao*) has been chosen as the main theme in this movement. *Fon Ngiao* originally accompanied a dance of the Ngiew hill tribe people and was later developed to accompany a Buddhist blessing chant with instruments (Kanchanapradit, 2013).

The *Mong Sae* motif, which imitates drums and cymbals, is a very popular tune and is used in the opening section of this movement (see Figure 3). All instruments are played with open strings. The movement started off with a fast tempo to provoke a natural atmosphere and harmonies.

Figure 3: The *Mong Sae* motif performed with open strings

The *Fon Ngiao* main theme later appears in bar 32 with the first violins in 7/8 meter, which totally changes the melodic lines. At the same time, cellos and double basses present ostinato line based on the same theme but in a contrary motion.

The *Mong Sae* motif is presented in many special features to emphasize its importance. Firstly, it is presented in 2/4 meter by the second violins and cellos with pizzicato. Secondly, the motif changes to 7/8 meter with more complex harmony in heterophonic texture from bar 125. Lastly, all performers sing the words “mong sae” together to end the joyful movement (see Figure 4). Singing and striking on the instruments is utilized universally to enhance the color of the ethnomusicological musical atmosphere.

Figure 4: *Mong Sae* words sung by all musicians for the joyful moment

2.3 The Hermit (06.29)

The third movement, *The Hermit*, begins with one of the most famous Lanna tunes, *Rue Si Long Tham*. The tune is believed to be so melodious that it could lure a hermit with its tunefulness and finally led the hermit away from his dwelling (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: The original version of *Rue Si Long Tham*

Therefore, the atmosphere in this movement is preoccupied with mysteries with the use of a complex polychord, which is generally called a mystic chord (see Figure 6). The mystic chord, regularly used in compositions from the late Romantic period, contains 4 notes from Eb, Gb, Bb, to C. The composer also explores mixing Western music scales with Lanna scales by tuning the violin solo a little closer to the latter: the 3rd and 7th notes are lower and the 4th note is higher.



Figure 6: The mystic chord in bar 9

Furthermore, to present the authentic Lanna musical language as much as possible, the composer also implemented many specific performance techniques like string bending, trill, and ornamentations.

2.4 Song of the Mountains (05.32)

The fourth movement, *Song of the Mountains*, was inspired by *Nor Sue Lae*, festive music of the Muser or Lahu people from Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, and Tak provinces. Tribal music takes an important part in enhancing the rich Lanna musical heritage. Each tribal musical language has its own identity and conveys both secular music and court music beautifully.

An important traditional wind instrument made from bamboo and guard called *Nor Sue Lae Khan* was utilized in this specific movement to emphasize a performance technique called “drone” or pedal notes on B and E to create a unique sounding atmosphere found in the tribal music of this region (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: The drone technique in *Song of the Mountains*

The movement begins with the implication of program music, describing the vast atmosphere of a mountainous area. The first violins present notes in a higher range in *pp* and parallel fourth intervals while the second violins to present descending melodic lines adorned with densely embellishing chords. The violin solo is the only leading instrument to present the beauty of hilltribe songs from far away (see Figure 8). The melodies are constructed from the pentatonic scale along with diminution of repeated notes to imitate agitated Thai folk rhythmic patterns. For other supportive melodic and harmonic lines, violas and other strings use pizzicato, col legno, and tapping performance techniques to imitate the percussive sound of percussion instruments.

Figure 8 shows the beginning of the musical score for 'Song of the Mountains'. The score is for a string ensemble in 3/4 time, with a tempo of 50 beats per minute. The instruments are Violin, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The score begins with a first measure (marked '1') where the Violin I and Violin II parts play a half note G4 and a half note A4 respectively, while the other instruments are silent. This is followed by a series of chords and moving lines in the Violin I and Violin II parts, with the other instruments providing harmonic support. The dynamics range from *pp* (pianissimo) to *ppp* (pianississimo).

Figure 8: The beginning of *Song of the Mountains*

2.5 The Flowers Song (06.26)

In the 5th movement, *The Flowers Song*, the composer intended to express gratitude to Princess Dara Rasmi of Chiang Mai, who was a great supporter of art and culture, including music from the Lanna area. Princess Dara Rasmi brought music teachers from the Royal Palace in Bangkok to pass on music knowledge to Lanna musicians. The princess also revised traditional Lanna songs and created new compositions to accompany dances and plays (Buranavitayawut, 2018). *Noi Chai Ya* and *Lao Duang Dokmai* tunes which open the movement were specially crafted after Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (see Figure 9). *Noi Chai Ya* was a dramatic play created by Princess Dara Rasmi using Lanna dialect and tunes. Therefore, *Flowers Song* is an integral composition of the two tunes mentioned as they contain similar musical materials and lyrics relating to flowers and love stories.

Figure 9 shows a part of the musical score for the *Noi Chai Ya* tune, covering bars 50 to 63. The score is for a string ensemble in 3/4 time, with a tempo of 78 beats per minute. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The instruments are Violin, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score begins with a first measure (marked '1') where the Violin I and Violin II parts play a half note G4 and a half note A4 respectively, while the other instruments are silent. This is followed by a series of chords and moving lines in the Violin I and Violin II parts, with the other instruments providing harmonic support. The dynamics range from *mp* (mezzo-piano) to *pp* (pianissimo).

Figure 9: A part of the *Noi Chai Ya* tune (bars 50–63)

The movement conveys happiness and joyfulness like a scherzo but in 6/8 meter instead of 3/4. Percussion instruments is used to open the movement with an ostinato pattern while a violin solo presents the *Noi Chai Ya* melody. The *Mong Sae* motif is also presented in bars 19–20, and later in bar 31 while *Noi Chai Ya* is applied alternately. In bars 53, the meter is slower and changes to 4/4 in order to present a different articulation and interpretation from the original version by Chao Sobhon na Chiang Mai and Ms. Fah Mui.²

The *Lao Duang Dokmai* tunes is introduced in G minor by a violin solo. The answering short motif is also from the same tune. When the violin solo finishes the last note, the viola brings *Lao Duang Dokmai* in with another sweet sensation. Later, the violin solo comes back in B-flat major with a delicate harmony (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: The *Lao Duang Dokmai* tune

At the end of the movement, *Noi Chai Ya* resumes in D major and 5/8 meter with one-octave higher melodic line. The melodic lines are designed to be performed by the second violins and cellos to create a colorful contrast and tension. The movement ends softly with ostinatos and pizzicatos.

2.6 The Procession and Dance (08.54)

The Procession and Dance, the final and the summary of the entire composition, portrays images of a grand procession. A series of dances are accompanied by a Tung Nong drum ensemble, which plays an important role in driving the magnificent procession. The composer used one of the rhythmic patterns of the Tung Nong drum ensemble as the core rhythmic pattern along with different clusters in harmony to imitate different sound layers using drums of different sizes and sound qualities. A new melodic line was also composed to imitate the bombastic and prominent sound of the Pi Nae, a Thai wind instrument.

The first song that opens the movement is *Fon Phang*, which has existed since ancient times to worship the Lord Buddha. In the procession, all dancers normally hold lanterns or ‘phang prateep’ and follow the dance

² The original version can be watched on YouTube channel “LungMA Boranman”.

steps led by Sabad Chai drums (Thai victory drums). Women dancers also dress in the Thai Lue tribal style with skirts or sarongs and short shirts decorated with silver plates and silver ornaments.

In the middle of the movement, *Pan Fai* or the cotton spinning tune, is presented with a rather fast tempo representing the celebration of both the townspeople and the hill tribes. The *Pan Fai* song is known for its beauty and has been sung and performed in many different versions (see Figure 11). *Pan Fai*, which was composed by Master Chaiyalangka Khrueasen, the 1987 National Artist in Performing Arts major (folk music), describes the process of cotton making and woven cotton fabric (Center for the Promotion of Arts and Culture, Chiang Mai University, 1986). The most famous version of the song was created by the Thai singer Charan Manopetch and Mai Thai Ensemble by Dnu Huntrakul, the Silpathorn artist (Center for the Promotion of Arts and Culture, Chiang Mai University, 1986).

At the end section, the drum motif resumes with variations on the same melody in a slightly faster tempo, according to Thai musical style. The violin solo ends the entire movement with part of the *Tang Chiang Mai* and *Mong Sae* recycling motifs. The Tung Nong rhythmic patterns are adapted to be performed by specific members of the string orchestra with clusters used to imitate certain pitches of the gong.

The *Fon Phang* tune is presented by the cellos while other instruments present Tung Nong rhythmic patterns with smoother tone qualities. All melodic lines begin with accents and gradually diminish to reflect the sound of percussion instruments whose sound is softer and fades away once being struck.

The musical score for Figure 11: *Pan Fai* tune (bars 97-106) is presented in two systems. The first system (bars 97-102) includes staves for Violin, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The second system (bars 103-106) includes staves for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score is in 4/4 time and features various musical notations including accents, slurs, and dynamic markings (mf, mp, p). The Violin I and II parts play a melodic line with accents and slurs, while the Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass parts provide a harmonic accompaniment.

Figure 11: *Pan Fai* tune (bars 97-106)

The drone or ostinato technique is a distinctive and essential characteristic produced by traditional instruments like Khan. The low string instruments can imitate this sound character by applying consecutive fifth intervals and accented notes. Every time the same melody is presented, it is arranged differently, including variations such as unison, register changing, and arpeggiando to add colors to the entire movement. Later, *Fon Phang* overlaps with *Pan Fai* from bars 147-160 in different meters (see Figure 12).

Siam folk tune "Lanna" for string orchestra

The image displays a musical score for a string orchestra, specifically for the Siam folk tune "Lanna". The score is divided into three systems of staves. The first system (measures 147-152) includes staves for Violin, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The second system (measures 152-155) continues the same instrumentation. The third system (measures 156-161) includes staves for Violin, Violin I, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score features various musical notations, including triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings such as *f* (forte) and *rit.* (ritardando). The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4.

Figure 12: Overlapping *Fon Phang* and *Pan Fai* tunes

Although *Fon Phang* and *Pan Fai* are in the same meter, *Fon Phang* was arranged with more space for a slower pace. When the two melodies are presented together, they give the feeling like each ensemble is passing each other to the opposite direction.

One more important compositional technique is the cyclical idea, which has been applied both in the main motifs and in the rhythmic patterns. For example, in bar 168, when the Tung Nong rhythmic patterns are back, the tempo suddenly changes while the violas and the cellos present parts of the *Mong Sae* motif again in bar 172. Later in bar 174, the violin solo presents *Tang Chiang Mai* for the last time with an exciting ending section.

3. CONCLUSION

The composer strongly believes that *Siam Folk Tune “Lanna”* is a set of compositions that reflects the importance of Thai art and culture and can strengthen the cultural roots amidst the current social changes and fluctuations in the modern era. *Siam Folk Tune “Lanna”* is a creative work which has been subject to a thorough research methodology together with a tactful Western compositional process. The string orchestra, which performs with conventional performance techniques, conveys Lanna’s spirit via imitations of the local singing and rhythmic styles. After studying the musical score and the performance of this work, other musicians and conductors can apply the similar idea and compose pieces that reflect their own interests and expertise. They can further their studies in the field by using specific advanced compositional skills, applying other traditional music from other regions of Thailand, or presenting their new compositions on certain occasions to transfer both beautiful Western and Thai musical languages to young Thai students and musicians, as well as others who are interested in this field.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project *Siam Folk Tune “Lanna”: A New Composition based on Thai Folk Tunes for String Orchestra* was fully funded by the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT) in 2020.

REFERENCES

- Buranavitayawut, K. (2018). “Noi Chaiya/Selemao” -an East-meets-west jazz atmosphere interpretation by the Pomelo Town Jazz Ensemble. *Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University (Humanities, Social Sciences, and Arts)*, 11(3), 1492–1507. <https://he02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Veridian-E-Journal/article/view/157045>
- Center for the Promotion of Arts and Culture, Chiang Mai University. (1986). Chaiyalangka Khruesen: National Nan fiddle artist. *Bulletin of Lanna Studies*, 1(2), 38–39. [in Thai]
- Dhamabutra, N. (2017). *Symphony of Rattanakosin*. The Thailand Research Fund. [in Thai]
- Kanchanapradit, J. (2013). Tracking Fon-Ngeue songs: Musical relationships among ethnic groups in the Mekong River Basin. *Journal of Mekong Societies*, 9(2), 79–98. <https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/mekongjournal/article/view/11073>
- Nawigamune, A., & Pidokrat, N. (2007). *Folk music*. TK Park. [in Thai]
- Ruengruglikit, C. (2001). *The early Ayudhya poetry: Characteristics and influence*. Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. [in Thai]