

Traditional Singing in Thai khon Performances

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Abstract – *The purpose of this research is to study the history and form of traditional vocal performance for Thai khon. The research was conducted through an analysis of data from two locations: The Bunditpatanasilpa Institute, Ministry of Culture and the Office of Performing Arts, the Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture. Both institutions have taught khon vocal performance from the time of HM King Vajiravudh (Rama VI). The results of the research indicate that the style of singing in Thai khon performance at these two institutions have similarities with the style practised during the time of HM King Vajiravudh. On the other hand, each institution has maintained a distinctive individual character. The Office of Performing Arts places emphasis on the impact of emotion as a function of aesthetics in khon, while the Bunditpatanasilpa Institute initiated a singing style for male performances and chorus, emphasizing melody and placing importance on emotion where it is suited to the performance. Singing in Thai khon performance is an art and a science that expresses the competence and wisdom of the singer.*

Keywords – *Khon, performing arts, singing, Thai culture, traditional music.*

INTRODUCTION

Khon is a form of masked dance drama created by combining traditional Thai entertainment such as rabam, ram and krabi krabong. It was originally associated with the royal courts and performed infrequently due to the high number of cast members and costumes required [1]. Its royal association gave khon a reputation as a high and prestigious art, which was reserved for the most important occasions [2]. The earliest evidence of khon performance is found in the writings of French ambassador Simon de la Loubère from his embassy to Siam in 1687:

“...Cone [sic] is a figure-dance, to the sound of the violin, and some other instruments. The dancers are masqued [sic] and armed, and

represent rather a combat than a dance. And tho’ every one runs into high motions, and extravagant postures, they cease not continually to intermix some word. Most of their masks are hideous, and represent either monstrous beasts or kinds of devils” [3]

The khon has been referred to as a war dance by many people since La Loubère’s observations due to the weaponry and aggressive postures used in the performance [4]. Yet the composition of modern khon is much too delicate and intricate to be dismissed as a war dance, especially the verses used to accompany the dance.

The focus of this investigation is the incorporation of vocal performance in Thai khon productions and how the inclusion of singing changed the style of the show and its music. Jakkrit Duangpatra [5] has identified four distinct eras in khon development: 1) Original khon performance with no singing; 2) Mixed khon performance that emerged during the middle of King Rama IV’s reign (1804-1868) and lasted until the end of King Rama VI’s reign (1880-1925). During this period singing began to be incorporated; 3) Blended khon Performance, which replaced mixed khon performance and saw verses take a much more prominent role in khon production; 4) Khon controlled by the National Theatre. Importantly, Duangpatra’s division does not examine the style of vocal performance in-depth and does not present the regulations and methods of singing in khon performance. For this reason, the researchers designed this investigation to supplement Duangpatra’s work because they felt that the style of vocal performance, regulations and methods of singing in khon performance were underrepresented in international academic literature.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This investigation aimed to study the history of vocal performance for Thai khon productions; and to study the format of vocal performance for Thai khon productions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a qualitative investigation that utilized document study and field research in two purposively selected locations: The Bunditpatanasilpa Institute, Ministry of Culture and the Office of Performing Arts, the Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture. These two locations were chosen because they are the foremost institutions for Khon teaching in Thailand. The research sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique and respondents were divided into three groups: key informants (national artists, experts and *khon* teachers), casual informants (singers and Khon performers) and general informants (audience members). All informant contributions were supplemented by the knowledge of the lead researcher, who had experience as a *khon* singer since 1990. Research was conducted from October 2012 to March 2014 in three phases: 1) Document research and initial survey of the research area (October 2012 to March 2013); 2) Field study (April 2013 to December 2013); 3) Data analysis (January 2014 to March 2014).

The research tools used during this investigation were basic survey, interviews, observation and focus group discussion. Basic survey of the research area was conducted during phase one of the investigation to gather preliminary data about the research context. Two types of interview were employed, structured and non-structured. The structured interviews were conducted according to a pre-defined plan and respondents were asked questions in four categories about their personal information, the inheritance of *khon* singing, general *khon* singing methods and *khon* singing techniques. Non-structured interviews were used to gather in-depth knowledge unrestricted by pre-determined questions, although the same four categories were used as the structured interviews. Throughout phase two of the investigation, the research team conducted participant and non-participant observation in the research area, recording any observations in note form. The final part of phase two was a set of focus group discussions. The organization of the focus group discussions was led in six stages: 1) informants were invited to participate in focus group discussions; 2) two discussion groups were arranged according to the two research locations; 3) the lead researcher outlined the aims of the discussion, distributed materials and managed the discussion according to pre-defined questions; 4) following discussion, academics were invited to conclude the main points from each area of

discussion; 5) the lead researcher gave his own conclusions from the discussions; 6) researchers analyzed notes from the discussion and a sound recording of the discussion.

Data were categorized into one of two groups: data relating to *khon* performance and data specifically relating to the vocal performance in Thai *khon*. Data within each category were subdivided into primary sources and secondary sources. All data were validated using a triangulation method. Additionally, interviewed respondents were given transcripts of all recorded data and asked to verify their comments after the event. All data were then organized according to the two research aims and analyzed by means of typological analysis and analytic induction. The results are presented here as a descriptive analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The music of Thai royal dramas, including *khon*, is distinctive. Sidney Moore introduced this collection of music to the Western world with his pioneering essay on *Thai songs in 7/4 meter* [6]. Moore showed that, while known to Thai people through the research of Montri Tramote [7, 8], the music of Thai theatre was almost unknown to the West. Moore argued that the significance of the genre was in its use of an additive meter, when most Westerners assumed that all Thai music belonged to a duple meter system.

“The setting in which the 7/4 songs are usually performed is that of the dance-drama (*lakhon*) and the masked dance-drama (*khon*). The latter is based on the *Ramakian* [sic.], the Thai version of the Ramayana. The customary procedure is for the musicians to supply the vocal music and the character's conversations from their unobtrusive position at the side of the theater.” [9].

While the music of *khon* has now been researched more thoroughly, the singing practices have remained more obscure. Singing in modern *khon* has been influenced by the singing used in *lakhon nai* performance art. The relationship between the two types of stage performance revolves around the story told as part of the act: The Ramakien (Thailand's national epic, based on the Ramayana). This similarity facilitated the borrowing and mixing of techniques and components between the two arts, such as singing. However, commentary or dialogue was first used in *khon* performances during the reign of King Rama V and it had a distinct identity, separate from *lakhon nai* [10].

Originally, *khon* singing always accompanied *na-phat* music. *Na-phat* was a collection of about two-hundred musical works dating back to the Ayutthaya period of Thai history (14th to 18th century). These are the works to which Moore [11] refers in his analysis of Thai songs. This specific music helped uninformed audiences distinguish between characters and actions by adjusting the speed and melody to suit on-stage movements [12]. The music thus acted as a set of signals or codes to help the audience generate meaning, permitted by its unique structure.

“The pieces that perform actions [phlengprakaupkiriya, another name for phleng na-phat]...replace actions, events, movements...the animate or inanimate, people, animals, or objects, the corporal or incorporeal, the real or the supposed, the past or present, and things of the imagination, such as gods and ghosts and demons...” [13]

The singer was required to chant in the correct manner according to the character they were representing. At the end of each sequence, the singer was required to ‘call’ for the right music to enable the

next musical phase [14]. In this way, the music could be considered more important than the story and certainly the music was the foundation for the enactment of the story. In traditional *lakhon nai* by contrast, the story was the foundation upon which the music and movements were created (although *na-phat* music was still used in *lakhon nai*). Another important difference between *khon* and *lakhon* (not *lakhon nai*) was in the dialogue between characters. In traditional *khon*, the character dialogue was represented by a singer, whereas the *lakhon* characters performed their own dialogue. This is perhaps partly due to the wearing of masks in *khon*.

Lakhon nai singing styles began to influence *khon* masked drama during the reigns of King Rama V and King Rama VI. The *khon* form needed modernization and adaptation to retain popularity in the courts. Incorporation of *lakhon nai* techniques allowed this, especially with the introduction of prompters and choral singing [5]. The inclusion of *lakhon nai* techniques led to the modification of *khon* production, so that it now incorporates introductory elements of *lakhon nai* (as indicated in Figure 1) as well as the original *na-phat* pieces.

Table 2. Singing techniques used in *khon* performance

Technique	Bunditpatanasilpa Institute	Office of Performing Arts
Emotional expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Singers must study the script and literature to determine the emotion of characters at specific points in the play. Singers must convey emotions adequately in their voice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Singers must study the script and literature to determine the emotion of characters at specific points in the play. Singers must reflect the emotion of the character by adjusting their voice to the mood of the moment – for example, anger is represented by a loud and firm voice.
Sound projection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vocal sound must be projected in the same key and rhythm of the music. The singing voice must be projected with the melody and should rise and fall with the orchestra. The vocal performance must be considered as a whole. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sound must be projected clearly and loudly. The lyrics must be well-articulated. The key is determined by the singer.
Introduction (<i>lakhon nai</i> style)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditionally, women sung the introduction but now men sing due to the intriguing variation of the sound and the larger number of male singers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women sing the chorus, men sing solos. (There is an entire debate to be had about the representation and position of women in Thai drama. A good starting point is <i>Mae Naak and company</i> by Catherine Diamond [15].)
Other special techniques	Sieng prip; Sieng proy; Hoy sieng; Huan sieng; Kran sieng; Klok sieng; Kleun sieng; Kleuk sieng	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Ron sieng</i> <i>Om sieng</i>

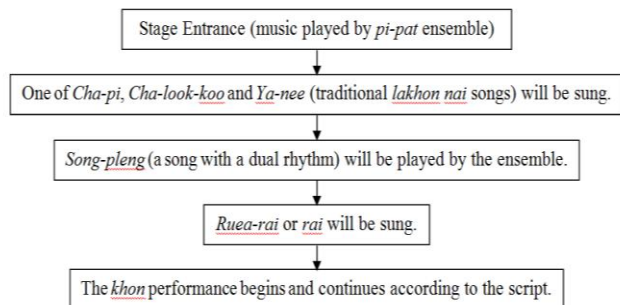


Figure 1. A standard order of introductory music for modern *khon* performance

The performer will also add individual experience intuition and singing intelligence to the performance to create a very specific character. This is a reflection of the technical ability and expertise of the performer. Interviews with informants revealed that each singer has their own specific singing style. Regardless, there are accepted forms for conveying emotion, which differ with the four categories of character in *khon* performance (hero, heroine, ogre and monkey). These specific forms are indicated in table 3.

Table 3. Accepted forms for conveying emotion in each of the *khon* character groups

Character	Emotion	Singing technique
Hero	Love	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gentle, no shouting or forcing the voice Clear annunciation and articulation Sounds of words may be altered with musical ornaments Deliberate pronunciation of important words Can change the singing style to make the sound more exotic
	Happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intense, not too slow, clear Adjustment of pitch to reflect happy emotions – using audience reaction as a gauge. Can be sung solo or as a chorus.
	Sadness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Soft Longer sounds
	Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Depends on the scale of character anger Firm and violent sound but not too abrasive Intense The singer must watch the performer and respond to the dance postures
Heroine	Love	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Soft Increased frequency
	Happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The singer must watch the performer and respond to the dance postures
	Sadness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The singer must understand the part of the play they are singing about and the reactions of the character. They must then adjust their emotions accordingly. Longer sounds
	Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intense and clear The singer must watch the performer and respond to the dance postures The heroine must sound angry but retain beauty – not over-exaggerating the anger.
Ogre	Love	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dignified, sonorous and melodious Variation can be used to match the character actions Intense and fast Singers must sounds as though tortured by love
	Happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis on lyrics Use of melisma Not too elaborate Must sing according to the successes and hopes of the character in each situation
	Sadness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The singer must watch the performer and respond to the dance postures A variation of techniques can be used
	Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasize lyrics Can be abrasive on emphasis of some lyrics but should not be over-exaggerated Intense, loud and clear Not too slow Do not use too many techniques – portrayal of emotion more important than harmony

Table 3 (cont.) Accepted forms for conveying emotion in each of the *khon* character groups

Character	Emotion	Singing technique
Monkey	Love	• Strong and bold
		• Clear and intense
		• The singer must watch the performer and respond to the dance postures
		• No additional musical ornaments or elaborate techniques
	Happiness	• Focus on speed and intensity
	Sadness	• Just enough emotion – not melodramatic
		• The singer must watch the performer and respond to the dance postures
	Anger	• Emphasize the sound and the lyrics
		• Intense
		• Must display anger but must not shout

There are six skill categories that each singer must excel in when performing *khon* drama: expertise in rhythm choice, artistic bravery, performance accuracy, emotional sensitivity, euphonic use of sound and knowledge of *khon* postures. These categories highlight the multi-faceted difficulty of *khon* singing and the importance of the singer as a key component in the aesthetic image of *khon* art. Given the two different styles of *khon* singing, that based on *lakhon nai* and that based on the *na-phat*, there are two different types of audience reaction. For the introductory singing based on *lakhon nai*, the audience appreciates the music according to the beauty of the sound, melody and compatibility with the orchestra. For the *na-phat* style, the audience appreciates the music according to the accurate portrayal of emotion, as well as the quality of sound.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Khon singing is an art that requires incredible skill and application of knowledge. This investigation found that the singing in traditional *khon* performance has evolved over time, incorporating trends from other Thai arts and contemporary theatre. There are two types of singing in modern *khon* performances: *Lakhon nai* techniques and *khon* techniques. The *khon* singing techniques are used with *na-phat* music to emphasise the character and personality of the individual performers. The singers must know and apply a range of specific singing styles for each character. *Khon* vocal performance taught at two of the major institutes in Thailand has a common origin but each institution has maintained a distinctive individual character. The Office of Performing Arts places emphasis on the impact of emotion as a function of aesthetics in *khon*, while the Bunditpatanasilpa Institute emphasizes melody and places importance on emotion where it is suited to the performance. Individual singers also have the freedom

to add their own personality to the music. Following this investigation, the researchers would like to make some suggestions for future performance and research. In order to better conserve the traditions of *khon* singers, a handbook or reference guide could be created detailing the specifics required for each character. This could be supplemented by a cultural investigation to determine why certain sounds and styles of singing are associated with certain moods and emotions. Furthermore, an analysis of the accuracy of current professional *khon* singers would indicate performance areas that are inconsistent with the music theory. These aspects could then be emphasised at the higher education level by The Office of Performing Arts and the Bunditpatanasilpa Institute to benefit the inheritance of *khon* vocal performance. It is hoped that this investigation may contribute to the documentation of an under-researched, yet important part of Thai art and that future investigations may focus on ways to broaden knowledge of *khon* vocal traditions. Through research and application, *khon* vocal performance will be preserved for the benefit of future generations.

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