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Thai Music and Dance in the Heart of Bangkok's Slums: The Forgotten Children of the Mercy Centre Become Beautiful

Although American Roman Catholic priest Father Joseph Maier founded the Mercy Centre in the heart of Bangkok's Khlong Toey slums in the early 1970s, music was not part of the program until around 2010 when Dr. Mick Moloney began raising funds to support the teaching of Thai classical music. With additional donations, the music program has grown exponentially, adding Northeast Thai *pong lang* ensemble and providing a dance teacher for the young women. Participation has risen from a mere handful to the majority of children living in the Centre. Having a music program has also made an increasing number of public performances possible, both on stage for various festivals and on television, giving the Centre a visibility and image it formerly lacked. Performing in public, wearing beautiful costumes, and receiving accolades has boosted each child's self-esteem in ways not previously possible. While music from Thailand's northeast is widely popular, its classical music and dance are less so. That such an apparently "elite" tradition could serve to express the artistry of slum children surprises many, since Mercy's children all come from the city's lowest social groups. Indeed, some have non-Thai (e.g., Cambodian) parents. The music and dance program has thus changed Mercy's public image from one of despair into one of optimism and beauty.

Keywords: Thai classical music, Thai dance, Northeast Thai pong lang ensemble, Father Joseph Maier, Mercy Centre, ethnomusicology, progressive music education

Introduction

Few place names strike greater fear in the minds of Bangkok, Thailand's ten million plus citizens than "Khlong Toey," the city's vast slum around the Port of Bangkok that include slaughterhouses where thousands of hogs are butchered daily. Getting there can be a challenge. Taxi drivers routinely refuse to go there, claiming they don't know the area or saying it is too dangerous to enter. Although

close to Sukhumvit Road and its many upscale ex-pat communities, to a Tesco-Lotus hypermarket, and to Bangkok University, once you cross the railroad track and enter the slum, you do find yourself in a distinctly different world. Lanes are narrow, children and adults throng the area completely closed in with small shops, houses, street vendors, and a constant hubbub of activity. In some ways Khlong Toey resembles other areas in Bangkok, but this place is fundamentally different. As a "slum," it is not surprisingly also an area with a concentration of drug dealing and abuse, alcohol abuse, child abuse and trafficking, prostitution, robbery, and Bangkok's worst poverty. It was Khlong Toey and its endless needs that attracted American Roman Catholic priest, Father Joseph Maier, in 1972 after ministering to remote Catholic communities in northeast Thailand and northern Laos for five years.

Saturday morning rehearsal with several American visitors observing. Father Joe at the rear. Note that all photos are by Terry E. Miller, and provided copyright free, with permission.

Ethnomusicology Meets Music Education

While in North America the fields of Music Education and Ethnomusicology are mostly seen as distinct, ethnomusicological research routinely encounters pedagogy. Music transmission practices throughout the world are aspects of "music education" in the broadest sense but normal areas for study by ethnomusicologists. Less frequent are explorations by music education researchers into these practices. The author has previously written about the unexpected effectiveness of how Thai classical music is transmitted to students of all ages and backgrounds (see "Lessons from Thailand: Why Thai Music Teachers are so Successful." *The Orff Echo* 46-2 (Winter, 2014): 22-27). Because music transmission at Mercy is less formal than that seen in classrooms, this venue provides an unusual opportunity for researchers in both fields to address the stress and despair of slum life while teaching music and dance to raise self-esteem.

The author, first trained in organ performance and Western Musicology, drifted into Ethnomusicology after having been drafted into the U.S. Army in 1968 and assigned to Vietnam for the year 1969-70. There he encountered Southeast Asian music for the first time, both that of Vietnam as well as Thailand, the latter through a week-long leave in January, 1970. Subsequently, he conducted Ph.D dissertation research in northeast Thailand for fourteen months. Since then he has continued to research and write about matters involving Thai music.

Dancers and musicians practice Isan (NE Thai) music with teacher in background.

A Place of Healing and Hope

Father Joe, as he is known to all, began his ministry in Bangkok already fluent in Thai. Soon after arriving, Father Joe joined with a Thai nun, Sister Maria Chantavarodom, to found the Human Development Foundation as an umbrella organization and the Mercy Centre in the heart of Khlong Toey, specifically in an area called "Jet sip rai" (Seventy rai [similar to acres]). For many years Father Joe lived in a surprisingly humble house within the squalor of Khlong Toey, but at the insistence of a wealthy donor who feared for Father Joe's safety and health, he later moved into a modern residence on the grounds of Mercy Centre. Over the years the Mercy Centre has grown into a large complex that includes offices, residences for around two hundred rescued children, classrooms, a small chapel, and recreational areas. In addition, Mercy operates some twenty-three pre-schools in various areas of Bangkok whose students live with their families in those areas. Father Joe's work has been the subject of three books, two (*The Open Gate of Mercy* and *Welcome to the Bangkok Slaughterhouse*) written by him with internationally known author Jerry Hopkins, and Greg Barrett's *The Gospel of Father Joe: Revolutions* and *Revelations in the Slums of Bangkok*.

Music played only a minor role in the Mercy Centre's education and therapeutic work for most of its 48 years even though Father Joe had a music background. It was Irish singer, musician, and scholar, Dr. Mick Moloney, Professor of Music and Irish Studies at New York University, who first proposed adding music to Mercy's program in 2007 after he began living part of the year in Bangkok and discovered Father Joe's mission. Moloney, though not a specialist in Southeast Asian music, proposed adding Thai classical instrumental music to the program. To that end, Moloney, along with another Irish musician, Donie Carroll, began raising money to purchase musical instruments and pay teachers. He continues to organize at least one benefit concert per year in New York City to raise money for a growing number of part-time teachers, mostly senior or graduate students from various Bangkok universities.

In the early years of the program, few students participated, and the instruments sat idle much of the time. Because the purpose of the program was to offer a gratifying participatory experience to children who had grown up impoverished and abused, Thailand's classical instrumental tradition did not at first appear to have been an obvious choice. What Thai people call *phleng thai doem* and non-Thai call "classical music" was long associated with the aristocracy and the court. It was customarily performed in the great homes of old Siam's richest and most powerful families, as court entertainment, and for rituals, both private and national.

As the term *classical* suggests, it was the most highly developed form of music in Siamese culture, requiring elaborate and expensive instruments and a cadre of skilled musicians who could spend all their time learning and practicing elaborate and often lengthy compositions created by master musicians. Fortunately, however, even serious Thai compositions can be played by beginners using simple instrumental idioms, since the versions for each instrument are not fixed in the details.

Two male teachers instruct two female students on ranat thum (foreground) and ranat ek (background).

Some Important History

Until the Revolution in 1932 when the absolute monarchy of Rama VII (King Prajadhipok) was overthrown, and Siam became a constitutional monarchy, classical music had been largely the domain of the wealthy elite. In the years following the revolution, when the court was vastly reduced in wealth, the old court music establishment was moved to what came to be called The Fine Arts Department (*Krom Silapakon*), a part of the new government bureaucracy. Many musicians who had previously been employed by aristocrats now had to seek employment elsewhere, even in commercial entertainments such as the many forms of commercial *lakhon* (dance drama) then in vogue. Making the situation even worse, military strongman Field Marshall Plaek Phibun-songkhram became Prime Minister, serving two terms: 1938-44 and 1948-1957. During his first term, he issued a series of cultural edicts including some that suppressed old

traditions and required modernizations. These included a near total ban on the performance of classical music. This led to a requirement that musicians sit on chairs rather than the floor and a preference for classical music to be performed on Western percussion instruments. Classical music remained largely in *exile* for decades, only having emerged slightly by 1959-60 when David Morton, then a doctoral candidate at UCLA, did his pioneering dissertation research.

By late 1972 when I (the author) began doctoral dissertation research in Thailand the ban had been unofficially lifted. But the study of music was not yet considered academic except for a limited program at Ban Somdet Chao Phraya College in Bangkok where students could major in what was called "music education." Otherwise, Thai classical music was limited to extra-curricular music clubs at each college or university. It was only during the 1980s that music came to be accepted as an academic discipline, first in Bangkok and gradually in the provinces. During the 1990s, additionally, both classical and regional music programs began flourishing not just at the university level but throughout public education. Within the first decade of the new century, music study had become normal and widespread throughout Thai academia, from pre-school to graduate school, though none of the schools were designated as conservatories in the European sense.

When Thai classical music was being incorporated into the program at Mercy, Thai classical music was already a form of music open to all people or all ages, regardless of social or economic status. While it has never been competitive with Thailand's many forms of popular music, including some modern types derived from "traditional" forms, classical music is seen as a valid and continuing expression of what is again being touted as "Thainess," ironically an idea that originated with Prime Minister Phibun-Songkram, whose policies decimated Thai music in the mid twentieth century. Audiences and parents are therefore accustomed to hearing classical music performed at school fairs and competitions, on television, and as part of both religious and national festivals, whether they understand and appreciate it or not. Nonetheless, it can be assumed that few of the children living or studying at Mercy, on account of their difficult backgrounds, had previous opportunities to play—or even hear—classical music.

Dancer and musicians perform Isan music on-stage for a World Festival held outdoors at Central World Mall.

Understanding Thai Musical Literature

Father Joe and Mick Moloney selected and hired part time teachers who now normally teach on Sunday mornings in a large room on the third floor of the main building. Because there is no air-conditioning, the windows are open allowing the sounds to permeate the larger area around Mercy. Though an odd sound within Khlong Toey, such sounds are commonly heard around other schools throughout Bangkok. But these are not the only musical sounds emanating from that resonant room high up in the building. There is also a set of popular "combo" instruments that competes with the classical music, and it has the added advantage of amplification. For some time, only boys or young men were attracted to the popular music, while only a few girls/young women played classical music. While the popular group continues to function to this day, the classical program has grown so dramatically in recent years that the popular music is now somewhat eclipsed and has ceased to represent Mercy's music students to the public.

Thai classical music is especially challenging in that each musician must play his or her instrument with enough competence to reproduce a complete composition. While all Thai music was composed at some point by an individual teacher/player/composer, it was also not written down in notation. Instead, the composer transmitted the *structure* directly to his disciples as all sat at their instruments. These compositions are well thought out, complex in texture, and fixed in form,

but only in a fundamental way, not in the details. Normally the composer dictates his composition by playing the most fundamental idiom, that of the larger gong circle (*khawng wong yai*). This instrument's idiom is relatively slow moving and consists mainly of octaves, fourths, fifths, along with some individual pitches. Considered the least dense version of the composition, it is called the *luk khawng* (gong circle version).

Each musician in the ensemble, regardless of instrument, imitates and reproduces this on his or her own instrument in the same basic form, but as each learns the structure he/she begins to "realize" that structure in the particular idiom of the instrument. The higher xylophone (*ranat ek*), for example, realizes the structure in continuous octaves in contrast to the low density of notes on the large gong circle, this called *thang ranat ek* (higher xylophone idiom). The lower xylophone (*ranat thum*) plays a complex and rhythmically varied version, while the smaller/higher pitched gong circle (*khawng wong lek*) plays an active and more continuous idiom. Beyond these fundamental instruments certain ensembles may use any of three bowed instruments, two having two strings (*saw duang* and *saw u*) and one having three strings (*saw sam sai*), though the latter is too difficult for beginners. One of two possible blown instruments may be added, an end-blown fipple flute (*khlui*) or a quadruple reed with a bulbous wooden body (*pi nai*). Each of these instruments also has its own distinct idiom. Melodically, then, Thai classical music has a complex heterophonic texture (i.e., simultaneous variations), with all musicians playing the same fundamental compositional structure but each in the distinct idiom of the instrument at hand.

This sounds quite challenging and is even difficult for Thai college music majors. The students at Mercy simply have no time to develop such sophistication since their only lessons are simultaneous with their only rehearsal, all held jointly in one room on Sunday morning. Thai music, however, admits to all levels of idiomatic complexity, from simple "basic melody" versions to those of virtuosos. Beginner ensembles, in fact, sometimes play in unison or near unison. This flexibility is one factor that makes Thai classical music accessible to players at any level.

Students practice Thai classical music on xylophones while teacher (standing) offers coaching.

In addition to the melodic instruments, there are rhythmic instruments that articulate the music's colotomy (rhythmic/metric structure). Thai music is organized in cycles and the beats articulated audibly by a pair of small bronze cymbals connected with a string, the onomatopoetically named ching (or *ching chop*). Players produce two sounds, the undamped, weaker beat "ching" when struck together with a glancing blow and the damped, stronger beat "chap" when struck and held (damped) together. A colotomic cycle is four beats: ching, chap, ching, chap, the final "chap" being the strongest beat of the cycle and called the *siang dok*. Thus Thai music is "end accented," and what sounds like a downbeat to non-Thai ears is heard as the final beat of a cycle by Thai musicians. Since the children at Mercy had likely only heard popular music previously, which is front accented because it is Western in style, they would have to adjust when playing classical music, though this must be learned intuitively, since Thai teachers would not articulate the differences. Nonetheless, playing the *ching* is a task that can be given to beginners. Even first-time players can be handed a simple gong and beater or a pair of wooden sticks to be struck together, usually on the final stroke of the cycle.

More challenging are the drum patterns that match the *ching* cycle. While the latter does not change, drum patterns are highly varied depending on which drum-beat system (*nathap*) is used and at which of the three density levels (*chan*). There are three such levels: third level (*sam chan*), second level (*sawng chan*), and first level (*chan dio*). *Sawng chan* is considered the "normal" or "basic" level, with sam chan, twice the length of *sawng chan* and being the augmentation/doubling of the melody, and *chan dio*, half the length of *sawng chan*, being the diminution of the melody. In other words, when realizing the expanded level (*sam chan*) players fill in extra pitches between the fundamental pitches and when realizing the shortened level (*chan dio*), reduce the pitches to only those that are fundamental to the composition's structure. Thai music is famous for its *phleng thao* compositions, in which the same melodic structure is realized in all three levels, starting with *sam chan*, and played continuously. In that case, the *ching* player must know when to change patterns. Additionally, there are drum patterns for other kinds of repertory, the details of which exceed the scope of this article.

Overall, the Thai classical repertory has a broad range of genres and styles that vary from highly complex, motivically organized compositions to short, lyrical compositions that in many cases have become near "folk/popular melodies" known to most Thai and heard in many forms other than classical. These include arrangements for dance band, piano solo, orchestra, and as background music. The players at Mercy Centre mostly play the shorter, more lyrical pieces, though their ability to approach more sophisticated compositions, especially those that accompany dance, has increased as the program has grown.

A teacher helps dress young dancers in traditional dance costumes.

A Trajectory of Change

Two other factors changed the trajectory of Thai music at Mercy over the past four years. First, the author and his wife donated a full set of musical instruments from northeast Thailand, an area commonly known as Isan. Thailand has four named regions whose musical cultures were each distinctive in the past but now less so as regional musics have been co-opted or adapted by musicians in Bangkok and in academia. Thai classical music is characteristic of Bangkok and the central plain extending as far north as Sukhothai and as far south as Nakhon Srithamarat. Northern music, chiefly in the form of small instrumental ensembles, flourishes in the provinces of the far northwest bordering Laos and Myanmar and in the north's most prominent city, Chiangmai. Southern music, chiefly as shadow theatre (*nang talung*) and human theatre (*nora*), flourishes in the most southern provinces, with the cities of Nakhon Srithamarat, Phattalung, and Songkhla being most significant culturally. Northeastern music flourishes in the vast expanse of provinces on the Khorat Plateau, bordered on the north and northeast by the Maekhong River that divides Laos from Thailand, and on the south by Cambodia. However part of Isan, the three provinces bordering Cambodia, are primarily Khmer/Cambodian culturally.

When the author began his dissertation research on northeast Thai music early in 1973, the Isan region was considered an undesirable backwater of the kingdom, the poorest region, and the region from which most menial workers in Bangkok (gardeners, maids, taxi and tuk tuk drivers, and day laborers) originated. Isan food, language, dress, and mannerisms were considered worse than low brow—vulgar—by most central Thai. Isan music, then primarily *khaen* free-reed mouth organ played alone or accompanying narrative or repartee singing (*lam*), was incomprehensible to central Thai, since the language spoken and sung was essentially Lao. While Lao is part of the Tai language family, it is little understood by central Thai speakers.

Between that time—the early 1970s—and the advent of the 21st-century, a major shift of attitude occurred that was driven in part by the success of certain new forms of Isan music. Several factors came into play. First, tens of thousands of people had over time migrated from Isan to Bangkok in search of work, since Isan was undeveloped and depended largely on agriculture, a sector that was subject to great fluctuations in the weather, from drought to flood. Besides, Isan produces sticky rice (*khao nio*), not the sweet-smelling "jasmine rice" that has made Thailand famous worldwide. Isan/Lao food was also considered disgusting, primarily aspects like raw minced beef (*lap*), raw fermented fish (*pla ra/pa dek*), and even green papaya salad (*tam mak hung/som tam*) with its field crabs still in the

shell. Workers in Bangkok who came from Isan typically tried to rid themselves of their accents, spoke central Thai, and assumed the lifestyle of their ostensibly superior compatriots.

The same period saw the rise of a new genre of popular song, the *luk thung*. *Luk thung* songs contrasted sharply with the older dance/jazz songs popular among Bangkok's elite, the *luk krung*, literally "children of the city." *Luk krung* lyrics were poetic and sophisticated, attempting to express emotions and experiences appropriate to *hi-so* (high society) life. *Luk thung* ("children of the fields") songs expressed the experiences and feelings of ordinary villagers and working people in more direct terms. Their lyrics were nevertheless poetry but poetry easily understood by people of any level of education.

Luk thung composers, referencing the lives of regional workers and farmers, often invoked the sounds of regional music, and there were *luk thung* songs representing each of Thailand's four regions. *Luk thung* songs for an Isan audience were typically in the Isan language and referenced local music with the *khaen* mouth-organ idiom or imitations of traditional singers (*mawlam*). Some songs even included the actual instruments, and as *luk thung isan* grew in popularity, some traditional singers "crossed over" into *luk thung* while these songs began to be included in performances of local theater (*lam phloem* and *lam mu*) . Besides the vast market of northeasterners living in Isan, there was a significant population of Isan migrants living in Bangkok, this segment having greater economic resources than their relatives and friends back in the villages.

Over time—the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond—Isan-style *luk thung* songs came to dominate the national market, both because there were far greater numbers of listeners and for their sheer energy, power, and overall attractiveness. Like their city cousins, the *luk krung* song, many were actually in an old ballroom dance beat, the "cha cha cha." In Isan large troupes that performed nothing but *luk thung* songs on temporary stages set up at fairs and festivals swamped the older forms of traditional theatre, *lam mu* and *lam phloen*. These genres, which were built around both old and new stories and accompanied by slightly modernized Isan music, had to update themselves by incorporating more and more luk thung songs.

Eventually these nearly crowded out the original story. But the raging success of Isan *luk thung* among Isan people, heard variously live, on radio, and on television, began attracting people from other regions, and gradually, *luk thung* songs from Isan came to dominate throughout Thailand. This was a significant element in the shift from general disapproval of Isan culture to becoming increasingly "cool." Isan music became the energy of the popular music culture in Thailand. Indeed, John Clewley's chapter on "Thailand: Songs for Living" in *World Music: The Rough Guide* (London: Penguin, 2000, II.241-53), though

expected to cover a broad range of Thai music styles, focuses primarily on Isan's *luk thung* artists.

It was only because Isan *luk thung* songs led the way towards acceptance of Isan culture that the adoption of the "*pong lang* ensemble" at Mercy became possible. *Luk thung* songs were still mostly sung in the Isan language and therefore difficult for non-Isan people to understand. The development of the *pong lang* ensemble during the later 1970s into the 1980s offered a lively form of instrumental music that not only omitted language but added the visually engaging spectacle of dance.

The main instrument, the *pong lang*, is a vertical xylophone of graduated sizes of logs strung together with rope and hung on a frame, largest (lowest pitched) logs on top. Tuned pentatonically (notes 123 56), the *pong lang* allows for two players, one playing simple but engaging melodies with two wooden beaters and a second at the side continuously striking two logs a fifth apart to create drones. Typical instruments have a range of about 2 ½ octaves, thus some 12 or 13 logs. Drones are also characteristic to the sound of the *khaen* mouth organ, when players hold or plug two pipes to sound continuously (though they also respond to tonguing). As an instrument, the *pong lang* developed from a simple field instrument consisting of a few logs, a cultural characteristic of Kalasin Province in the far northeast. When the author "discovered" the instrument in 1973, it was already being played separately in Isan restaurants in Bangkok but otherwise little known outside Kalasin Province. Over time it has become one of Isan's iconic instruments along with the *khaen* and a plucked lute to be discussed below. Because its tuning is both pentatonic and in conformity to Western tuning, most listeners find the music immediately accessible, quite unlike the music of the classical ensembles.

Pong lang music gradually developed into a small ensemble, with other local instruments being added over time. The oldest and most basic was the *khaen*, a raft-form free-reed mouth organ having 6, 14, 16, or 18 bamboo pipes, each with a silver-copper alloy free reed fitted into the pipe inside a carved wooden windchest. Instruments with 16 pipes have been standard since the mid twentieth century. Players inhale and exhale through the wooden windchest while opening and closing finger holes on the bamboo pipes to produce sounds, since pipes only sound when the finger hole is covered. The tuning is heptatonic, with tones and semitones resembling a Western diatonic scale rather than the central Thai equidistant tuning. Since any pipe whose finger hole is closed will sound, it is possible to produce sonorities somewhat resembling "harmony."

In addition, each *khaen* mode requires two pipes to be closed with fingers or plugged with the black insect wax that seals the pipes into the windchest (*khisut*)

to produce drones. Rather than producing continuous sounds, the drone pipes respond to tonguing. Another traditional instrument added was the *phin*, a village-created plucked lute having 2 to 4 strings and a series of frets that define pentatonic tuning. Players pluck the strings with a plectrum, sometimes running their fingers over and stopping two strings simultaneously to produce parallel "harmonies." By the time the *pong lang* ensemble had developed fully in the 1970s, however, electrified phin having solid bodies with pickups had become common.

One of the more unusual instruments incorporated is the *wot*, originally a child's sound maker consisting of a circular bundle of short bamboo pipes cut on one end at an angle to split the air, all of this formed around a ball of beeswax. A child tied a string to the other end and swung the toy around him/herself in the air to produce sounds or threw it like a torpedo for the same effect. By 1973 the same man who was promoting the *pong lang* instrument in Kalasin Province began playing a pentatonically-tuned wot like panpipes, twirling the instrument (like an old IBM Selectric type ball) to get melodies. Obviously, the *wot* had to be amplified to be heard. In recent years the *wot* has become the symbol of Roi-et Province, with several giant sculptures of a wot on display in the provincial city. As I write, the provincial government is erecting a 101- meter tall tower in the center of the city, the top part built to look like a *wot*; it is 101 meters because Roi-et means one hundred and one.

The ensemble required percussion as well. Some instruments, such as ching, thin cymbals called *chap*, and *krap* wood blocks, were borrowed from classical music. While drums can vary, the most prevalent have been the *klawng yao*, waisted, single-headed long drums hung on a player's shoulder with a strap. Such drums are found widely within Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, probably having originated from the Burmese *ozi*.

But there is one more "instrument" that is as confounding as it is attractive: the *phin hai* (literally, stone lute). This "instrument" has been exploited fully at Mercy. Originally the *phin hai* was a series of three or more clay pots in graduated sizes with thin rubber belts fastened over the upper openings. Intended to produce bass sounds, the player plucked the bands which resonated in the pots. Such instruments became obsolete when amplification was adopted along with a preference for the electric bass *phin*. The original practice required an attractive female performing a simple dance while plucking the bands. Although the *phin hai* lost its musical function, the most attractive female dancer in the troupe continued to perform behind and over the now empty pots, simulating the hand motions of the past. In many performances, she has become the center of attention and her dances ever more creative.

While *pong lang* music was itself tuneful with a lively beat and played by an energetic group of performers, what made the ensemble far more attractive was the addition of dancers, especially young women clad in attractive costumes invoking the traditional colors and design patterns of Isan. The male players wore traditional blue village shirts with a long, colorful sash around the waist (*pakaoma*). The women usually had their hair made up attractively and smiled throughout the performance. Some dance groups also included male dancers and even transgender males appearing as women. New songs were created to depict simple pantomimed stories, such as boy and girl falling in love, young men and women happily going to the fields, fishing or hunting scenes, etc. Everything about *pong lang* ensemble is "pleasant" and avoids any lingering negative associations with Isan food, language, and other stereotypes.

After the *pong lang* ensemble developed in Isan, it began to be promoted more broadly elsewhere in the Thailand. The signal that Isan music had been accepted as "Thai" came when the Thai government began presenting the ensemble internationally. At last the nation's cultural officials had found a kind of Isan music they did not find embarrassing. Without the barrier of Lao lyrics, *pong lang* ensemble was seen as ideal for Buddhist and national festivals, "folk" festivals, four-regions shows, and as a representative of Thai culture abroad.

Where Thai classical music was often complex and confounding, *pong lang* music was tuneful and lively. Where traditional Lao singing and *khaen* playing was esoteric, *pong lang* was immediately accessible. Where Thai classical dance was slow moving and subtle, *pong lang* dance was lively and often realistic. During the 1990s *pong lang* ensembles began appearing in school, college, and university programs, not just in Isan but in Thailand's other three regions. In Isan, however, *pong lang* became the pre-eminent college ensemble, and grand festivals of and competitions among *pong lang* ensembles have become the predominant form of public Isan music.

When the author and his wife proposed adding a *pong lang* ensemble to Mercy's music program, the stage had long been set, but no one anticipated that the response would be so enthusiastic. Not only were Mercy's children now able to participate in what was considered Thailand's "coolest" ensemble, but there was space for an unlimited number of young women to dance. Competent teachers were hired, and Saturday rehearsals (later moved to Sunday), now required of everyone, became the highpoint of the week. Importantly, Father Joe saw that the pong lang ensemble had transformed a small and mostly unnoticed program into an attractive and effective aspect of Mercy's outreach. Father Joe found money to buy dance costumes for the children and encouraged everyone to participate. The

young woman who has been teaching dance now for several years (Miss Sarocha Jeedklam) has developed an unusual level of rapport with the young female dancers, and they work exceptionally hard for her.

Giving Voice to Forgotten Children

Consider the transformation of these young female dancers. All were born and raised in Bangkok's most notorious slums. Most were cast off, abused, inflicted with AIDS, or orphaned by parents who were imprisoned or simply disappeared. In Thai society, these children had no status whatsoever; their life prospects were grim. Suddenly they were wearing beautiful traditional dance costumes and performing for adoring audiences both within Bangkok and beyond, live and on television. Accompanied by the mostly male instrumentalists, they became the new face of the Mercy Centre. As expressed by American ethnomusicologist Joanna Bosse, they were "becoming beautiful," a thought also echoed earlier by writer Jerry Hopkins when he observed them in performance (see Joanna Bosse, *Becoming Beautiful: Ballroom Dance in the American Heartland* [Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015])

In 2017, having a large group of dancers, Father Joe decided to augment the Thai classical instruments with the addition of two-stringed fiddles (*saw duang* and *saw u*), vertical bamboo flute (*khlui*), and a small Chinese-derived two-bridge hammered dulcimer (*khim*), allowing the dancers to begin performing Thai classical dances along with the more folkish Isan dances. It appears that some of the enthusiasm associated with the *pong lang* ensemble transferred to the Thai classical ensemble, with more players, especially boys, joining. Since Thai instruments are relatively expensive, Father Joe purchased student model instruments, including inexpensive plastic flutes (*khlui*) for everyone to use.

Mercy's music program had thereby gone from a few students playing a small group of Thai instruments on an irregular basis to a major rehearsal each Saturday or Sunday enjoyed by virtually all students as well as the occasional visitor or donor. As they have become better known, they have been offered more opportunities for public performance. These have brought both visibility and a positive image to Mercy and its newly energized students.

Considering the context of modern Bangkok, where popular music, both Thai and Western, permeates society and where nearly everyone wishes to be perceived as "modern," the attractiveness of traditional Thai and Isan music performance at Mercy comes somewhat as a surprise. Perhaps not having to present themselves as modern and hip—something they were neither seen to be nor thought of themselves being—gave them permission to assert their "Thainess" with an unapolo-

getic gusto. Whichever is the case, their appearances at public events, some seen by a broad public, have not just aided Mercy's reputation but immeasurably enhanced the images of self held by the student participants. Having come from some of the worst backgrounds imaginable, they have found a venue where they are seen as talented, beautiful, and normal.

Father Joe offers advice and encouragement to a group of young dancers.

Moving Forward

While Mercy's program was created without reference to any other programs as an apparent opportunity, the idea of using music and dance as therapy for children with difficult backgrounds is occurring elsewhere too. Founded in 1997 by Dr. Jane Aronson, *World Wide Orphans* (www.wwo.org) is an organization operating in several countries that uses *Element of Play*® as the basis for their programs to help children in stressed situations. As stated in their website:

> Element of Play® is a program developed by WWO to transform the lives of children and families in communities impacted by the trauma of conflict, disaster and poverty. The evidence-based program helps children meet developmental milestones in the areas of communication, social-

> emotional, fine & gross motor and cognition, and build the necessary skills to engage with their peers for both social and academic success. In Haiti, for example, they use drumming and dancing as a form of therapy with children stressed by earthquake, poverty, crime, and neglect.

For some, the question might remain: is Mercy's program a form of music therapy or has it become show business? Perhaps better to ask whether show business can also be music therapy. In the beginning there was no intention of forming a group for public performance; it was entirely a kind of in-house music therapy. Thus, the answer is clear: by creating opportunities for public performance in which the children of Mercy are seen by the broader public as "beautiful," "talented," "energetic," and "happy" not only reflects well on Mercy but builds self-esteem among young men and women who were otherwise viewed negatively. It is quite the trajectory for a child to come from abandonment, abuse, and disgust to such a positive place both among themselves and the general public. Formerly seen only as "slum children" in need of help, Mercy's young musicians and dancers are now seen as equals among Bangkok's school-age children. With such a change in self-image, they have markedly greater hope for better futures.

Postscript on the Future

As this study is being written, plans are afoot in Thailand to move the Port of Bangkok further south of the city while turning the current port area into new development, including yet another mega-mall (N.B. Bangkok has several of the world's largest malls). If this happens, not only will the Khlong Toey slums be eliminated, but along with that, the Mercy Centre. Where the people of Khlong Toey will move is unknown, and whether Mercy will be moved and rebuilt or closed permanently is also unknown. Father Joe, who turned 80 in 2019, recognizes not only that this will adversely impact thousands of people but will effectively eradicate the Mercy Centre's oasis of peace and safety.

However, he also takes comfort in knowing that during the approximately fifty years of Mercy's existence the Thai government has improved its education system to include more under-advantaged children as well as improved its social services, gradually reducing the necessity of Mercy's mission. Regardless of whether Mercy continues or closes, its legacy remains the many lives saved, the educations given to slum children, and career opportunities that developed from the generosity of donors and preparation given to the children. Not the least of these will have been the transmission of music and dance to a generation of children who otherwise would know nothing of these arts.

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