Chapter 38

The East in the North: Southeast Asian Music in Wisconsin

Program 38 Performances

1. Voices of Hmong, "Hmoob zha." 2. Wang Chou Vang, *Tan blai* solo. 3. Nao Chay Yang, *Qeej* solo. 4. Sophea Mouth, *Tro* solo. 5. Bayon Dontre, Wedding music. 6. Bayon Dontre with Chanda Ra, "Memories of Lost Love in Michigan."

Khmer Musical Traditions

To most Americans, the culturally diverse Southeast Asian nations have been relatively little known. The memory of World War II campaigns in Burma and Malaya had begun to fade by the 1960s when the United States became engaged in the undeclared war in Vietnam. In the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia, the war was conducted for several years in secret, but by the beginning of the 1970s, the conflict in these lands became too intense to remain cloistered. A part of this secret war was the recruitment of upland tribes in Laos by the Central Intelligence Agency to disrupt the supply lines running from North Vietnam through Laos to the Viet Cong–controlled areas of South Vietnam. These groups were known as the Montagnards, a name stemming from the French colonial period when Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam were lumped together as "French Indochina." Occasionally the media referred to the hill tribes as "Meo tribesmen"—*meo*, "savages," is a Chinese term. Their name for themselves, *Hmong*, "free people," has only started to become better known in the United States.

In Southeast Asia a sharp social and cultural distinction is made between the lowland peoples and those of the hills. The lowland Vietnamese and the Khmer of Cambodia (and the Han Chinese to their north) cultivate rice in irrigated paddies on the fertile plains, live in permanent settlements, and are part of the dominant national culture, linked to national "great traditions" maintained by cultural institutions in the urban areas (Crystal 1983).

Thus the Khmer musical traditions carried on by the Cambodian refugee community in Janesville had the benefit of formal institutions in Cambodia to support music education and performance. Moreover, in Cambodia, music is viewed as essential in a host of social settings. Foreigners visiting Phnom Penh have been astonished to note that musical performances were a required feature even at boxing matches (Mao and Ho 1969). Before the match, music (played by male, rarely female, flutists) invokes the spirits; during the match, music accompanies and keeps pace with the action, stopping only between rounds or when a boxer winds up prostrate on the mat.

Music at boxing matches is but one indication of a Cambodian's lifelong involvement with music. From a mother's lullabies, through haircutting ceremonies, weddings, traditional festivities, and finally funerals, live musical performances are viewed as essential. Cambodians in the United States feel strongly that the wedding ceremony above all requires traditional music.

Sophea Mouth—a refugee from western Cambodia who has lived in Lake Geneva, Janesville, and is currently a student in Madison—had formal music lessons as a child in Cambodia. Although the ensemble Sophea Mouth led until recently, Bayon Dontre, would use electric guitars, synthesizers, and a modern drum set to play contemporary Cambodian pop music, when they played for wedding ceremonies they used traditional instruments: the *tro* (a two-stringed Southeast Asian violin), the *chapei* (a plucked fretted lute-type instrument), and the *roneat* (a bamboo xylophone). A Cambodian wedding is serious and solemn. Even among the most humble families, weddings cannot be celebrated without music. A particular tune to which wedding participants sing the appropriate words must accompany each phase of the ceremony, from the cutting of the hair, the adornment with flowers, the calling forth of the bride, the saber dance, and the viewing of the bride and groom to the final phase when the groom follows the bride to the nuptial chamber.

Because of the formal nature of musical education and performance in Cambodia, Sophea Mouth compares Cambodian music to Western classical music. The Cambodian tradition, however, does not rely on written music, and musicians improvise and vary the tonality a great deal within either the five-tone or the seven-tone scale—the ones most frequently used.

Hmong Music/Sacred Speech

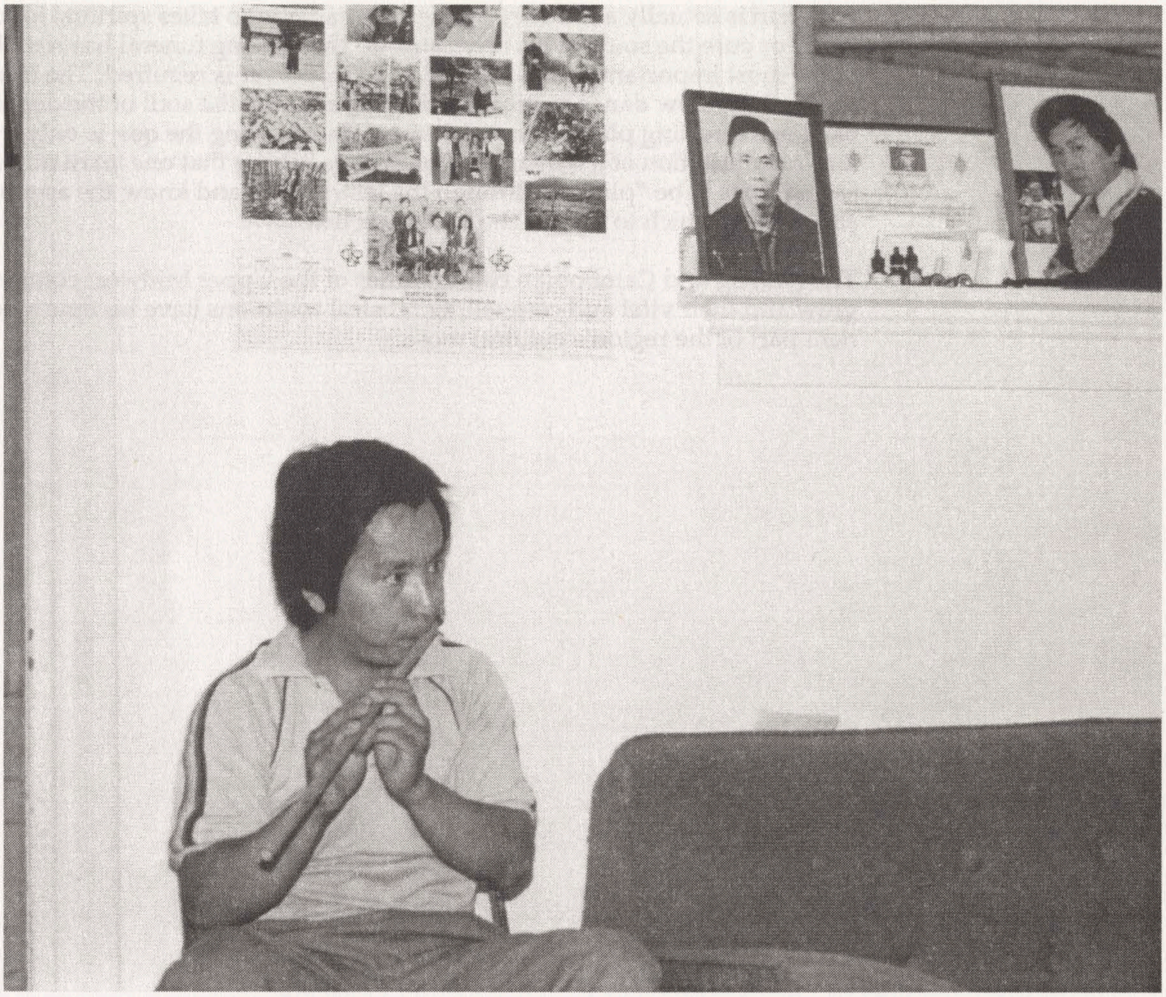
The Khmer traditions typify the lowland culture, while the Hmong, the largest group of Southeast Asian refugees in Wisconsin, are highlanders. In their homeland, they are but one of a number of distinct hill tribes who practice slash and burn agriculture, periodically migrating when the fertility of the soil is exhausted, and who maintain separate tribal cultural traditions, often as distinct from other neighboring hill tribes as from the lowland culture.

Coming from a nonliterate society, the Hmong had not only to learn English, but also to learn the concept of a written language. Semi-nomadic highland tribespeople suddenly had to learn to navigate the cities of an urban, industrial society.

Hmong music is expressive and powerful, although not as complex and refined as the Cambodian urban tradition. It shares many characteristics with that of the neighboring Lao, employing some similar singing styles and many of the same instruments (Miller 1985).

Unlike the Cambodians, the Hmong do not typically play traditional music in ensembles of diverse instruments. They emphasize soloistic playing, though in recent decades Hmong rock bands have brought a form of ensemble play to Hmong culture. The traditional instruments may be as simple as a leaf, the edge of which is held taut by the lips to produce a musical tone. The Hmong also play a two-stringed fiddle, similar to the Khmer tro, and like the Lao, their word for it is *saw.* They use many wind instruments, flutes like the *tan blai,* and the instrument which is afforded the most significance within the culture, the *qeej* (pronounced "kaeng").

Qeej music is produced by metal free reeds fitted within bamboo tubes. The ends of the tubes are gathered in a wind-chest into which the player forces air through a blowpipe. The joints are made airtight with an insect product similar



Wang Chou Vang playing the tan blai in his Eau Claire home, 1988 **Photo: Jim Leary**

to beeswax. The reeds only sound when the player's finger covers an air hole on the particular tube, forcing the stream of air through the reed. Historical studies often mention this type of instrument as a forerunner of the accordion. While Lao players tend to hold the bamboo tubes in a vertical position, Hmong qeej players tend to hold the tubes horizontally, near the ground, swinging the instrument and performing dance motions while they play.

One type of motion stems from a tradition of martial art contests between qeej players in which each musician, while playing, attacks his opponent using the feet. Qeej player Joe Bee Xiong of Eau Claire asserts that in the distant past such battles could be fought to the death, the coup de grace being a kick that would drive the opponent's blowpipe through his palate into the brain. In the United States, such battles are only symbolically represented by two young qeej players rhythmically circling and kicking at each other's feet.

According to Sheboygan qeej player Vue Yang, the playing during the mock battles is "just music" (Yang 1990 I). But there also exists another category of qeej playing, where the music has a lexical meaning in the tonal Hmong language: a musical rendering of a sacred text. Here, the musician is actually a shaman, a religious leader who takes spiritual journeys to guide or cure the souls of his compatriots. The Hmong funeral has remained one of the most important rituals for which a qeej player is required. The musical text and the slow dance motions of the player guide the soul of the departed back to the resting place of the ancestors. Thus playing the qeej is only the surface manifestation of a demanding process requiring that one learn numerous sacred texts to be "played" through the instrument, and know the appropriate situation in which to invoke the particular text.

The Hmong and Cambodian communities of the Upper Midwest continue to grow and their vital and compelling musical traditions have become a permanent part of the region's cultural mosaic.