

Creating the Thai Music: Rabam Nakkharat

Pramot Teangtrong¹ and Sirima Panapinun²

^{1,2}Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University

E-mail : ¹pramot.te@ssru.ac.th, ²sirima.pa@ssru.ac.th

Abstract

The creation of the Thai music "Rabam Nakkharat" aims to explore beliefs and cultural practices associated with the mythical serpent Naga and to compose a suite of traditional Thai music. The compositions include both double and single rhythmic patterns, accompanied by the Thai drum (Taphon) to emphasize the two-beat structure. Performed by a piphat ensemble with soft mallets, the music draws inspiration from myths and beliefs, interwoven into traditional melodies that portray the beauty of culture and reverence for Naga. The composition reflects the elegant motion of Naga in water, merging the majestic and powerful aspects of nature through its rhythmic and melodic structure. The melodies are designed to depict the graceful and distinctive characteristics of Naga, including fluid and gentle movement. The double rhythmic pattern conveys conciseness and sweetness, while the single rhythmic pattern brings liveliness and excitement, enhancing the audience's emotional engagement.

Keywords: Creativity, Thai Music, Rabam, Nakkharat

1. Introduction

Thai dance is a form of artistic performance that reflects the elegance and intricacy of Thai culture. Characterized by diverse styles in both thematic content and accompanying music, Thai dance has evolved since the Ayutthaya period and became increasingly elaborate during the Rattanakosin era. Each dance performance typically embodies narratives and values distinctive to its historical context. The composition of accompanying music plays a crucial role in shaping the mood and atmosphere of the performance, ensuring a harmonious integration of movement and sound. This is particularly evident in ritualistic contexts, where the selection of music and instruments must align with the thematic essence and purpose of the performance to create a holistic sensory experience. Furthermore, an examination of the role of dance music in Khon, the traditional Thai masked dance drama, reveals that the composition of music tailored to the characters and their roles is essential in enhancing realism and adding depth to the performance's expressive and narrative dimensions.

Storytelling through dance is a fundamental element that not only embodies aesthetic grace but also serves as a medium for conveying meaning. Thai dance encompasses various forms, including solo, duet, group performances, and choreographed dance sequences, all of which have evolved into standardized folk dances and Thai-style ballroom dance. This evolution has significantly contributed to the development of diverse forms of performing arts and continues to influence contemporary artistic expressions (Manissa Vasinarom, 2020). Despite its progression, Thai dance remains deeply rooted in its unique cultural identity and spirit. Beyond its artistic beauty, it serves as a vital means of preserving and narrating historical accounts and valuable stories, ensuring their continuity across generations.

In the realm of performance accompaniment, dance music plays a crucial role in shaping the mood and rhythm of a performance, ensuring harmony between the narrative and choreography. The selection of musical pieces and instruments is deeply intertwined with the thematic content and purpose of the performance. In Khon, the traditional Thai masked dance drama, dance music is particularly significant, highlighting the necessity of musical composition that aligns with the roles and characteristics of the characters. This careful alignment enhances the expressive depth of the performance, enriching its overall artistic and narrative dimensions.

The inspiration behind musical composition is a fundamental aspect of artistic creation. The meaning of supernatural narratives originates from the belief in the divine power of sacred beings, deities, spirits, or ancestral souls. Humanity has long utilized these entities as symbols or representations of spiritual unity, accompanied by rituals of veneration to seek protection and blessings. The symbolic beliefs embedded in the way of life of the people of northeastern Thailand, as well as those residing along the Mekong River, are deeply intertwined with the mythology of the *Phaya Naga*, a divine entity regarded as the progenitor of water sources and the provider of fertility to the land. Moreover, one of the enduring mysteries that continues to captivate global curiosity is the *Bung Fai Phaya Naga* (Naga Fireballs), a phenomenon deeply rooted in religious beliefs and *Phaya Naga* legends (Charoenmahavit, 2021). While religious faith remains central to local traditions, it has also been increasingly associated with tourism activities, particularly among travelers seeking spiritual tranquility and auspicious blessings for their lives. This trend is exemplified by the growing popularity of pilgrimage journeys among artists, celebrities, and performers who travel to sacred sites to trace the revered presence of the *Phaya Naga* (Jansuri, 2021).

The belief in the *Phaya Naga* serves as a significant source of inspiration for the composition of *Rabam Nakarat* (The Naga Dance). The narratives surrounding the *Phaya Naga* have been preserved as a cultural tourism resource, structurally interwoven with the geographical and communal landscapes of various localities. These narratives are depicted in mural paintings that illustrate encounters between the *Phaya Naga* and the Buddha, incorporated into architectural ornamentation, and adapted into various forms of media, including film (Ratchanon Thawiphon, 2023). The integration of *Phaya Naga* mythology into Thai classical dance thus represents the perpetuation of a profound cultural and religious belief, reinforcing an essential aspect of Thai heritage.

Building upon the aforementioned insights, the researcher has synthesized various elements to create a Thai musical suite titled *Rabam Nakarat* (The Naga Dance). This composition exemplifies the integration of traditional Thai musical culture with deeply rooted beliefs that hold significance in Thai society. The creation of this dance music not only showcases the elegance and intricacy of Thai melodic structures but also reflects the transmission and evolution of Thailand's musical heritage within a contemporary context. The study and development of *Rabam Nakarat* hold immense value, both in preserving traditional art forms and fostering a profound sense of cultural pride, ensuring the longevity of Thai artistic heritage for future generations.

1.1 Research Objective

1.1.1 To explore the beliefs and cultural practices associated with the Naga.

1.1.2 To create the Thai music suite "Rabam Nakkharat."

2. The Creative Process

The study of the Naga

In Theravāda Buddhism, the Phaya Naga (Nāga) symbolizes beings of pure minds who are spiritually elevated beyond ordinary creatures. They are classified into 1,024 types and organized into four principal clans: Virūpakkha (golden-hued), Erapatha (green-hued), Chabyāputta (multi-colored or iridescent), and Kanhagotama (black-hued). Among these, the Virūpakkha clan holds the highest rank, with one of its leaders serving as a celestial king (Mahārāja) governing the western quadrant of Cātummahārājika, the first heavenly realm in Buddhist cosmology.

According to Sanskrit scriptures, the Nāgas originated from either Lady Kadrū or Lady Surasā and the sage Kaśyapa, hatching from eggs. They can be further categorized by habitat into two types: Jalaja (water-dwelling) and Talaja (land-dwelling). Additionally, they are distinguished based on their engagement with sensual pleasures into two groups: those who indulge in worldly desires and those who abstain. The state of being reborn as a Nāga is believed to result from the accumulation of meritorious deeds still tainted by the defilement of passion (rāga).

Figure 1: Figure Statue of the Naga



Source: Pramot Teangtrong, 2017

In Thai culture, Nagas are considered semi-divine beings with supernatural powers, symbolizing water and fertility. They are shapeshifters, capable of bringing both benefits—such as healing diseases, granting blessings, and supporting Buddhism—and harm, such as causing illness or disrupting rituals. This belief is supported by stories involving revered figures, such as Phor Pu In and Luang Pu Mun Phurithatto. The influence of Nagas is evident across various facets of Thai society, including:

- Art and Architecture: Seen in Buddhist artworks, such as depictions of Nagas supporting the crystal staircase during the Buddha's descent from heaven.
- Traditions and Rituals: Evident in ceremonies like ordination rituals, the Loy Krathong festival, rice-offering rites, and rain-invoking ceremonies.

- Mysticism and Superstition: Integrated into practices like house orientation, raising main pillars, and invoking rain through Naga-associated rituals.
- Buddhism: Nagas are believed to guard sacred Buddhist sites, such as Phra That Phanom and Phra That Maha Chai.

The enduring belief in Nagas continues to influence the lifestyle, traditions, and cultural practices of Thai society, bridging the past and present.

Methods

The Creation of the Thai Music: Rabam Nakkharat

The creation of Rabam Nakkharat integrates artistic and cultural elements inspired by the Naga mythology in Thai culture. Drawing from the beauty of traditional Thai art in temples, palaces, and ancient monuments, elements such as frescoes, stucco sculptures, and ornamental motifs were key inspirations for crafting melodies and rhythms that reflect the sanctity of Nagas.

Composition and Musical Elements

In the realm of music composition, the graceful patterns of the Naga's form are adapted into melodies characterized by fluidity and continuous rhythmic flow, resembling the serpent-like movements of the Naga. The melodic rises and falls are designed to align with the coiled shapes of the Naga as depicted in artistic creations. Instrumentation is selected with great care, utilizing a *pi phat* ensemble, which includes the **ranad ek** (high xylophone), **ranad thum** (low xylophone), **khong wong yai** (large gong circle), **khong wong lek** (small gong circle), **pi nai** (reed pipe), **taphon Thai** (two-headed drum), **ching** (cymbals), and **krap phuang** (bamboo clappers).

Figure 2: Figure Pi Phat Ensemble



Source: Pramot Teangtrong, 2025

The composition of the *Nakarat Dance Suite* features a melody structured into two sections: an 8-beat *na thap* melody in a two-layer rhythm and an 8-beat *na thap* melody in a single-layer rhythm. This structure adheres to the traditional framework of dance compositions established by master musicians of earlier generations.

The suite's structure features double-meter rhythms (8 rhythmic cycles) and single-meter rhythms (8 rhythmic cycles), adhering to traditional frameworks established by past Thai music masters.

Innovative Approaches

The composition employs the inner piphat tuning system, where the pitch is elevated by one note above the lower register. The tonal system follows the Sol pentatonic scale with notes Sol, La, Ti, Re, Mi, serving as the suite's foundation.

The Creation of the Thai Music: Rabam Nakkharat new melodies were developed using the Thai music composition theory by Pichit Chaiseri, who categorized composers into four types:

1. Inspired Innovators: Those who create melodies purely from inspiration.
2. Traditional Conservators: Those who adhere to traditional frameworks with precision.
3. Modern Adaptors: Those who blend tradition with contemporary styles while retaining core principles.
4. Pathfinders: Those who develop entirely new compositions, pioneering unexplored musical directions.

Artistic Interplay

The connection between visual art and music is reflected in several ways:

- Spiral melodies echo the entwined Naga patterns on temple pillars.
- Grandiose tones evoke the golden Nagas of royal palaces.
- Melodic flourishes mimic the tail movements of Nagas in artistic depictions.

This music suite not only celebrates the cultural and artistic legacy of Nagas but also revitalizes Thai traditional music, ensuring its relevance and continued appreciation in modern society.

The Rhythmic Patterns of Ching Used in the Composition

The rhythmic patterns played by the ching (small Thai cymbals) in this composition follow the standard rhythmic theories of Thai music.

--- Ching	--- Chap	--- Ching	--- Chap	--- Ching	--- Chap	--- Ching	--- Chap
--------------	----------	--------------	----------	--------------	----------	--------------	----------

Fast Melody with Single-Meter Rhythm (Chan Diaw) for Ching

-Ching- Chap	-Ching- Chap	-Ching- Chap	-Ching- Chap	-Ching- Chap	-Ching- Chap	-Ching- Chap	-Ching- Chap
-----------------	-----------------	-----------------	-----------------	-----------------	-----------------	-----------------	-----------------

Rhythmic Patterns (Na Thap) for the Melody of "The Dance of Naga"

The rhythmic structure (na thap) used in Rabam Nakkharatis guided by the taphon Thai (traditional Thai drum). The taphon performs rhythmic cues for both double-meter rhythms (song chan) and single-meter rhythms (chan diaw) using the two-mallet na thap technique. The rhythmic details are as follows:

Na Thap for Double-Meter Rhythm (Song Chan) in Two-Mallet Style Played with the Taphon Thai

- - -Ting	-Tha-Tup	--- Phrueng	--- Phrueng	—Theng	-Tha-Tup	--- Phrueng	--- Phrueng
-----------	----------	----------------	----------------	--------	----------	----------------	----------------

Na Thap for Single-Meter Rhythm (Chan Diaw) in Two-Mallet Style Played with the Taphon Thai

- - - Tup	- Phrueng- Phrueng	- - - Tup	- Phrueng- Phrueng	- - - Tup	- Phrueng- Phrueng	- - - Tup	- Phrueng- Phrueng
-----------	--------------------------	-----------	--------------------------	-----------	--------------------------	-----------	--------------------------

Symbol Representation of Notes

In the process of recording musical notation for creative purposes, the researcher has chosen to use Thai characters as symbols to represent the seven musical notes. The correspondence is as follows:

๐ (Do): Represents the note C

๑ (Re): Represents the note D

๒ (Mi): Represents the note E

๓ (Fa): Represents the note F

๔ (Sol): Represents the note G

๕ (La): Represents the note A

๖ (Ti): Represents the note B

This system aligns with traditional Thai music theory while facilitating the integration of Western musical elements into the creative process. Using Thai characters not only simplifies the notation but also preserves the cultural identity inherent in Thai classical music composition.

Notation and Symbol Representation in the Composition Process

The researcher employs a system of dot-based symbols to indicate the pitch range of musical notes.

Low Notes: A dot (".") placed below the note symbol represents a lower pitch.

High Notes: A dot (".") placed above the note symbol represents a higher pitch.

Notation Table for Analysis

For analyzing the melody related to the Mongkol Sutra, the researcher utilizes a two-line notation table to display the roles of the left and right hands.

Top Line: Represents the right hand, used for playing the larger gong circle (khong wong yai).

Bottom Line: Represents the left hand, also used for the khong wong yai.

Each line contains 8 measures, ensuring uniformity and clarity in the notation.

Integration of Art and Melody

The melodic structure strongly reflects connections between artistic elements and the composition:

Temple Naga Motifs: The entwined Naga patterns on temple pillars inspire swirling melodic movements.

Golden Hues of Palace Nagas: These evoke a sense of grandeur and elevate the tonal atmosphere.

Naga Tail Curves: The coiling shapes of a Naga's tail in art inspire intricate melodic phrases, particularly within the double-meter rhythm (song chan).

This integration demonstrates how the artistic and cultural motifs of Nagas are seamlessly transformed into musical expressions, enriching the melody with symbolic and emotional depth.

The result of the creation

The composition of a single-layered piece for Rabam Nakarat (The Naga Dance) emphasizes simplicity in musical structure while maintaining aesthetic elegance and an engaging rhythmic character that aligns with the essence of Thai classical dance. The piece is designed to vividly convey the imagery of the Phaya Naga gracefully performing intricate movements, adhering to the conceptual framework of Thai dance music. This is achieved through carefully crafted melody, rhythm, and harmonic structure.

The composition employs the nathap song mai (two-stroke rhythmic pattern) played on the taphon Thai drum, utilizing both two-layered meter (atra changwat song chan) and single-layered meter (atra changwat chan diao). The overall structure consists of eight rhythmic cycles in atra changwat song chan and eight rhythmic cycles in atra changwat chan diao, ensuring a balanced and dynamic rhythmic foundation for the performance.

The Composition of Rabam Nakarat in Two-Layered Meter (Song Chan)

----	--- ร	--- ม	- ช - ล	--- ร	- ม - ล	คํ ๓ ช คํ	- ร - ม
----	ม ม ม ม	ร ค ร ม	- ช - ล	--- คํ	- ล - -	- ช - คํ	ชํ ม - ร
- - คํ ๓	- - ช ๓	- - คํ ๓	- - ช ม	----	- คํ - ม	รํ คํ - ๓	----
--- ช	--- ๓	--- ๓	--- ม	----	----	- ม ร ๓	- ๓ - ช

The Composition of Rabam Nakarat in Single-Layered Meter

- - ร ม	ช ล ช ล	คํ ล ช คํ	รํ มํ รํ มํ	- - ร ม	ช ล ช ล	คํ ล ช ล	คํ รํ คํ รํ
- ล คํ ล	- ม ช ม	- ร ม ร	- ล คํ ล	- - คํ ล	ช ม - -	- มํ รํ ๗	- ล - ช

3. Conclusion

The Naga Dance song is a type of Thai dance music that incorporates both double-level and single-level rhythms, accompanied by two wooden clappers that complement the melody. It is performed with a piphat ensemble using soft mallets. The melody evokes the emotions and feelings of the song, conveyed through musical elements that create a pleasing sound with low, resonant tones. The music delicately intertwines gracefulness through flowing melodies, represents the movement of the Naga through rhythm, and portrays the mysticism of the creature through changes in the melody.

The creation of the Thai Naga Dance suite blends various aspects of Thai cultural heritage-art, beliefs, and music-harmoniously. It allows the audience to experience the grandeur and sanctity of the Naga through the beautiful music and elegant performance, preserving and passing down Thailand's invaluable cultural legacy for future generations.

4. Acknowledgements

The researcher would like to express gratitude to administrators of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University to provide fund to support this research for developing the university's personnel

References

- Charoenmahavit, B. (2021). bangfai phaya nak kan sur khwammai nai sangkhom Thai [Naga fireballs “Bang Fai Phaya Nak”: The interpretation in Thai society]. *Journal of Business Administration & Social Sciences Ramkhamhaeng University*. 4(1), 16-26.
- Chaiseri, P. (2020). *Composing Thai music*. Chulalongkorn University Press.
- Jansuri, A. (2021). mutelu: khwam chura kap kanthongthieo [Mutelu: Beliefs and Tourism]. *Journal of Arts & Cultural Perception*. 20(1), 220-240.
- Thawiphon, R. (2023). The landscape of sacred Naga legends in cultural tourism sites in northeastern Thailand. *Valaya Alongkorn Rajabhat University Graduate Journal*, 17(2), May–August 2023.
- Vasinarom, M. (2020). The creation of performing arts by public policies. *Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University*, 10(1), 1–15. ISSN 1906-3431.