

Masters struggle to save folk music traditions

By Jon Bugge

The sun had not yet risen when Kong Nei and his family were ordered to walk to a labor site near Phnom Tkov in 1978. Finding himself at the mercy of the Khmer Rouge, Nei knew what would come next.

"They lied and said it was not safe where we were and that we should move," he says. "I knew myself they would kill us but I could do nothing. So at three in the morning, I went with my wife and six children." A military skirmish broke out near the site and the soldiers fled leaving their prisoners behind.

Two decades later, Nei's survival has helped save an almost forgotten musical tradition he carried through those horrific years.

As part of the Cambodian Master Performers Program (CMPP), Nei is reputed to be Cambodia's most skilled charpey player—the distinctive instrument resembling a guitar with two strings. Nei, who lost his sight to smallpox, learned the charpey when he was 13 years old. Often compared to the blind American musician Ray Charles, Nei occasionally appears at the Sovanna Phum theater in Phnom Penh and booked a concert in Siem Reap on New Year's Eve.

But Nei is just one of 19 musicians brought together to preserve the threatened art of traditional Khmer music. The pioneering work of CMPP has resurrected the careers of previously well-known and respected musicians to pass on their skills and knowledge to another generation of Khmer performers.

The initial aim of the project was to find musical masters and archive their works. Since then, the CMPP has grown into 15 different projects to stem the loss of musical knowledge in Cambodia.

The effort is coordinated by a new umbrella NGO called Silapak Khmer Amatok, which means Khmer Living Arts. The change in name illustrates the diversity of activities including shadow puppets and training students in technical music production.

One of their projects is an attempt to catalogue what remains.

In the early 1970s, Mao Pheung, a former professor at the Royal University of Fine Arts and one of the program's masters, was commissioned by the King to create a musical encyclopedia. This document, which was never completed, was lost during the Pol Pot regime. Now Pheung has been commissioned to write it again. Ultimately, it could document as many as 500 songs and include an inventory of Cambodia's musical instruments, biographies of artists and transcriptions of many of their songs.

The vast majority of the pre-Khmer Rouge musical recordings have been lost. While most preservation work has focused on reviving classic Royal arts such as apsara dancing, common folk music is often overlooked. This means that without the work of inspired individuals many of these skills and art forms could be lost within ten years, explains Charley Todd, project coordinator for CMPP.

The work of CMPP has been compared to that of the Buena Vista Social Club, the revered

group of aging Cuban jazz masters credited with saving their music from obscurity. Both have resurrected pre-revolutionary music and saved it from being lost for ever. While the Cuban effort has attracted international acclaim, Cambodian musicians are still relatively unknown.

Only a few of Cambodia's musicians survived the purges of the Khmer Rouge. An estimated 80 to 90 percent of professional musicians died under the regime between 1975 and 1979.

Those dire statistics inspired one young Cambodian musician, Arn Chorn-Pond, 37, to found CMPP and resurrect the music of the masters before it was lost forever.

When Chorn-Pond was ten, he was forced to labor in the fields under Pol Pot, but his life was spared because of his musical talents.

His father and grandfather had run an opera that toured the country before the Khmer Rouge. His survival was in part due to the fact that the regime picked him to play the khim (a stringed instrument struck with hammers similar to the dulcimer).

But Chorn Pond knew the plight of most musicians during this period.

Chorn-Pond's first khim master under the Khmer Rouge was killed a week after the two met. His second teacher, Youen Mek, credits Chorn-Pond with saving his life. Chorn-Pond pleaded with KR cadres to allow Mek to play with a spared group of musicians. Chorn-Pond even stole food, a capital offense, to ensure Mek's survival.

Eventually, Chorn-Pond escaped and made it to the refugee camps in Thailand. Here he was adopted along with two other boys and moved to Lowell, Massachusetts, in the US.

In Lowell, Chorn-Pond realized how he could help his country. He began to give speeches about the genocide in Cambodia. At the end of each speech, he would perform a short flute solo.

With his talent for oratory and flute playing, his message spread. Chorn-Pond continues his work fundraising in America and arranging Khmer music festivals. A documentary of his life was recently released called "The Flute Player".

When he returned to Cambodia for the first time in 1989, Chom-Pond found his khim master working as a street barber in Battambang. After an emotional reunion, Chorn-Pond sought out other master musicians.

In 1996, his efforts culminated in the creation of CMPP to revive the country's thriving musical scene, once considered among the most vibrant in Southeast Asia.

The program now supports 20 masters and about 200 students. So far, the musicians have recorded more than 200 traditional songs that will be available on CD in 2004.

But to ensure the longevity of this music, the group not only encourages students to appreciate the art form but a new audience as well.

In one novel approach, four American students and jazz musicians are studying with the masters in Cambodia. They are experimenting with fusing traditional jazz and Khmer music.

Todd describes the philosophy as "fluid collaboration" that will spark the music to evolve.

Through this project, the organization's leaders hope to show how Khmer music can evolve based on its rich heritage. The jazz quartet, The Khmer Jazz Ensemble, will play at Mith Samlanh/Friends restaurant in Phnom Penh on Saturday 29th from 7 to 10 pm.

There are also plans to establish a music summer camp with the students and master players. While informal versions of the camp have been held for the last two years, they plan to develop a more structured operation. Eventually, it is hoped, this will encourage young Cambodians to sing the same songs their ancestors once did since, without a change in the attitudes of young Cambodians, the work of the organization would be futile.

"There is a growing revival in the classic arts," says Todd. "We are getting more and more students."

But ancient knowledge is not the only thing at risk. Some instruments are on the verge of disappearing as well. In another aspect of its quest to preserve Khmer music, CMPP is seeking out these nearly extinct instruments and the people who can make and play them.

That was the case with the mum, a two-stringed instrument that resonates with a gourd placed over the heart. It appears on the bas-reliefs of the ancient Bayon temple in Siem Reap.

The program tracked down a man in Rattanakiri in October considered to be among the last mum players. He is now joining the masters program.

While the program's director says he does not know how many masters are left, or how many songs remain unrecorded, he plans to make Cambodia a center of music once again.

By 2020, Todd says he believes Cambodia will take its place as a regional leader in the arts with a reputation for creating groundbreaking music using traditional instruments.

While it seems a Herculean task, the example of musicians like Chorn-Pond has inspired others to keep Cambodian's traditions alive in a world quickly moving into the future.

"It is unclear how much has already been lost but at least now we are preserving the remainder," says Todd.

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