



## Ballroom Dance Music in Thai society

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### **Abstract**

This historical qualitative research on music aimed to study the history and development of Western ballroom dance music in Thailand in order to find the relationship between the music and Thai society and culture. The research revealed that ballroom dance music was a Western entertainment culture introduced to Thailand during the reign of King Rama III. According to the memo written in 1840 by a European named Frederick Arthur Neale, there was a dinner party in Wang Na (the palace of the vice-king) which European ballroom dance was included. Because of trading and diplomatic progression, Thailand and Western countries did develop their relationship. There were journeys between the two territories, brass bands created by foreign soldiers, and the invention of ballroom dance musical ensemble during the reign of King Rama V. Up to the reign of King Rama VII, many Thai students pursued their education in foreign countries of both Europe and America, which made them experienced more of Western music performances. Among these students was Luang Sukhumnaipradit who became the very important person of ballroom dance music in Jazz style. These factors made great progression in ballroom dance music and resulted in the invention of big bands. There were many skillful musicians and song writers such as Uea Sunthonsanan, Luan Khwantham and Kaew Achariyakul who became famous during this period of time. Moreover, nightclubs and sound recording businesses were the important stimulants to the popularity of ballroom dance music. There was also a Thai-style ballroom dance rhythm named Taloong Tempo. However, the development in technologies changed the taste of popular music and decreased the importance of ballroom dance music. The ballroom dance music, nevertheless, is still buried itself inside Thailand's entertainment culture and moves together unceasingly with the cultural waves.

**Key words:** ballroom dance music, Thailand, history

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### **Introduction**

Thailand possesses the diversity of cultures with particularities in tradition, belief, social value and convention. This is because Thailand has history concerning the diversity of nationalities and because of the communication with remote countries which consequently brought variety of cultures into this territory. However, Thais could still reserve their culture

in its traditional form. The examples of Thai outstanding cultures are costumes, food, belief, religion, arts, and music. Each kind of culture has its own importance which is in accordance to its role. Some cultures have roles in living when some have roles in relaxing and entertaining Thai society. On the Thai entertainment culture part, every arts has significant roles in the living of Thai people.

Important entertainment cultures of Thailand are performing arts such as Khon, theatrical arts and music performance. It is the great advantage for Thai people that Thai royal court never neglects these national arts. During many periods of time, Thai kings contribute themselves so much to these arts, creating the strength in Thailand's musical culture and performing culture up to these days. During the change in Thailand's regime, Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram became the prime minister of Thailand in 1939. Under his state convention policy where every citizen had to strictly obey and follow their leader, new Western-influenced culture was created. Musical culture during this period of time was modified and new regulations were used upon Thai music. What was formerly called "Thai music" had to be renamed into "Thai traditional music". Thais were encouraged to listen to occidental music, called "Western music", and to attend the parties with Western ballroom dance, which was named "Lilad". Moreover, the Royal Thai Army Band was ordered to establish a foreign-style ensemble. Thai government also ordered the Public Relations Department to establish ballroom musical ensemble to be used as a governmental device to disseminate its policy and information. Concerning holistic perspective, the importance of Thai traditional music and performing arts toward Thai society did decrease. However, it could be concluded that this state convention policy was of advantage to other contexts of Thai people's living such as commercial and financial contexts. As the result, this period of time should be viewed as the true beginning of new entertainment culture and the true beginning of the diversity of these cultures in Thailand.

The main role of occidental music after the change in Thailand's regime was not limited to entertain people, but it also was used to accompany the dance in parties, which was in accordance to the government's policy already mentioned. At the beginning, this dance was limited to the upper class society but later it was found in every class of people.

This could be concluded that the cultures from Western countries were disseminated and buried themselves into the cultures of Thai society and consequently became a part of Thai culture.

The Western ballroom dance culture was introduced to Thailand during the reign of King Rama V. In *Siam Samai Chronicles* by Samuel J. Smith (2006: 247) which recorded historical incidents of Siam during the reign of King Rama V, there was a part which mentioned the King's birthday celebration in 1884. It was written that on Monday at 8 PM, Chao Khun Krom Tha invited royalties and noblemen of Siam and foreign government officers to a meeting at his house. During the meeting, there were performances of Pi Phat ensemble, Mahori ensemble and trumpet band. In the house, there were decorations with lamps and other accessories. Chao Khun Krom Tha hired a Western musician and a singer, giving 250 baht to each of them. This showed that Western ballroom dance music was popular among upper-class people. The host hired foreign musicians in high compensation and participants enjoyed occidental ballroom dance very much. Therefore, it could be viewed that there was clearly a value toward ballroom dance music among people from upper class. Emeritus Professor Dr. Poonpit Amatyakul, (2011: 18) gave a speech in Silpa Bhirasi Lecture that "... in 1877 during the reign of King Rama V, there was an American soldier with Italian descent whose name was Captain M. Fusco who became the teacher of Royal Siamese Navy Band. He was the founder of brass ensemble for dancing (ballroom dance) to serve the Harbour Department and to play at state guest receptions..." The information mentioned revealed the popularity of ballroom dance music among nobilities in Siam. Since the Harbour Department had to constantly communicate with Western merchants, it played a significant role in organizing ballroom dance. This role continued through the reign of King Rama VI, where the trade between Siam and Western countries went on and many members of royal family and upper class people

pursued their education in European countries. These made Thai people acquainted more with occidental musical culture. The King contributed so much to music and performance arts of both Thais' and Westerners'. He established Phran Luang School, which became the very first music college in Thailand, to make the teaching of music and performing arts more standardized and professional-oriented.

In the reign of King Rama VII, Hotel Phayathai was established by the royal intention to have a first class hotel for state guests and foreigners who visited Siam. The establishment was also to earn extra income for Privy Purse due to economic recession during the World War I. Hotel Phayathai, apart from being an international standard hotel, was the place that had a musical ensemble for ballroom dance. This band, named Rainbow, was founded by Luang Sukhumnaipradit (Pradit Sukhum) and played mainly Jazz tunes and ballroom dance music.

This study on ballroom dance music is significant because of many reasons. This genre of music has been presenting itself for a very long period of time up to the present. Ballroom dance music, therefore, changes accordingly through the trend of each era and becomes the music with great diversity of characteristics. It still serves Thai society by providing enjoyment in listening and accompaniment for ballroom dance. The popularity for traditional ballroom dance music, however, now exists only among people with particular interest. These people are expected to be born or live during the very first era of ballroom dance music in Thailand and therefore are currently of old age. Moreover, many new-generation ballroom dancers do not give enough attention to the rhythm, which is actually an important characteristic of ballroom dance and consequently alter the genuine ballroom dance culture. Furthermore, ballroom dance music is interesting because of great variety in its format and composition style and especially because of the attempt to put Thai characteristics into some of the ballroom dance music. This at-

tempt was done by re-arranging a Thai traditional song with new musical sections and the rhythm of European and American ballroom dance music. This resulted in Thai-style ballroom dance tunes with interestingly harmonious blend of Thai and Western culture. There is also the composition of ballroom dance music with Thai rhythm. This was done by developing the rhythm of Nang Taloong, the shadow puppet performance of Southern people, into the music suitable for ballroom dance. This Taloong Tempo became popular among ballroom dancers in Thailand and became internationally well-known genre of ballroom music up till now. Since the period of governmental support on ballroom dance during the reign of King Rama VII up to the present, many ballroom dance songs of great diversity and of previously mentioned Thai-style tempo have been created. The popularity for these pieces of music changes accordingly to each period of time. Some pieces are still appreciated and some pieces are already forgotten by Thai society. The role of this genre of music has been altered from the accompaniment for party dance into the accompaniment for competition, exercise, personality development, etc. As the result, the researcher considered that although Thai ballroom dance music also comprises of Western music characteristics, it has long become a permanent component of Thai culture. Therefore, it is significant to study this genre of music in order to gather the body of knowledge and the information of the history and the development of Thai composers' ballroom dance music. This would consequently make this study one of the historical evidences of this musical genre.

### **Objectives**

To study the history and development of ballroom dance music in Thai society.

### **Research Question**

How to describe the Western-style ballroom dance music presenting in Thai society and culture in

terms of its history, its development and its relationship toward Thai society?

### **Methodology**

This research paper is a part of the dissertation named 'Ballroom Dance Music in Thai Society and Culture'. The researcher used historical qualitative research methodology. Primary data, which was the data from the interview of National Artists, important people of Thai popular music and the experts contributing to the development of ballroom dance music in Thailand, was analyzed, synthesized and interpreted. Secondary data was the data from printed materials, books and journals which were written by writers or scholars and which had the information about relating incidents or the interview of ballroom dance artists of the earlier era of ballroom dance music in Thailand.

### **Results**

#### **History of Ballroom Dance Music in Thai Society and Culture**

From the study, the history of ballroom dance music in Thai society and culture could be divided into two eras:

##### **1) The Beginning Era of Western Ballroom Dance Music**

Western music was introduced to Thailand during the reign of King Ramathibodi II of the Ayutthaya Era, which was in the 16th century. In that period of time, a Portuguese general named Afonso de Albuquerque did send Duarte Fernandes in a first diplomatic mission to Siam in 1511. Travelling together were two Dominican Portuguese missionaries whose names were Frailr Jeronimo da Cruz and Sabastiano da Canto. Both were included in the journey to perform religious rituals for the Portugueses who were on the trip. However, there was no evidence of religious propagation and the missionaries, due to their short stay in Ayutthaya, could not speak Thai lan-

guage. Later in 1662, King Louise XIV sent a group of French diplomats to Somdet Phra Narai Maharat who then donated the land by a river to construct a church and a seminary. This site was called "Saint Joseph Camp". Amatyakul (2011: 15) stated that during the reign of Somdet Phra Narai Maharat, French people did bring into Siam some musical instruments such as brass trumpets, violins, and harmoniums. They also taught languages and science knowledge to the children of courtiers. During that time, the relationship between the two countries went very well until the reign of Somdet Phra Narai Maharat ended. The following king did not give attention to the missionaries and there were antis against Catholicism which terminated the international relations between the two countries for about 80 years.

The missionaries returned to Thailand in the reign of King Rama III of Rattanakosin Era. The missionaries built seminaries for children which taught Western chorus performance to Siamese girls as well. Besides religious propagation, the missionaries also helped performing government service of Siam. Dan Beach Bradley, for instance, became the great contributor to the advance of printing and medical practice in Thailand. All of the religious songs used in Siam in earlier period were of Latin language in the style of Gregorian chants. Later when the missionaries had learned to speak Thai, Thai lyrics were also used in the songs. Moreover, there were evidences of the spread of Western ballroom dance music in Thailand during this era. This genre of music, found in the upper class society, was introduced to Thailand by the foreigners who entered the country in order to contact Thai authorities about military and commercial matters. There was a memo about the party in Wang Na to which Phrabat Somdet Phra Pinklao Chaoyuhua invited European merchants. The memo, written by Frederick Arthur Neale (1852: 92), revealed that "...On Christmas day 1840, the Prince Chou-Fa invited all the Europeans then residing at Bangkok to spend the day at his palace...amongst the crews of

the English vessels we mustered a couple of fiddles, a hautboy, a flute, a fife and a drummer, and with the magnificent band commenced the business of the day with the British National Anthem. Everybody joined in chorus, and though the music was execrable, and the singing alarmingly out of time..." In the memo, there was also information about ballroom dance rhythm as the writer stated that "...Jigs, reels, country dances, and Highland flings were all executed to admiration..." This showed that Western entertainment culture was very popular among upper class people. This was because Thai society needed to adapt itself to Western culture for accommodation toward transnational military, diplomatic and commercial matters.

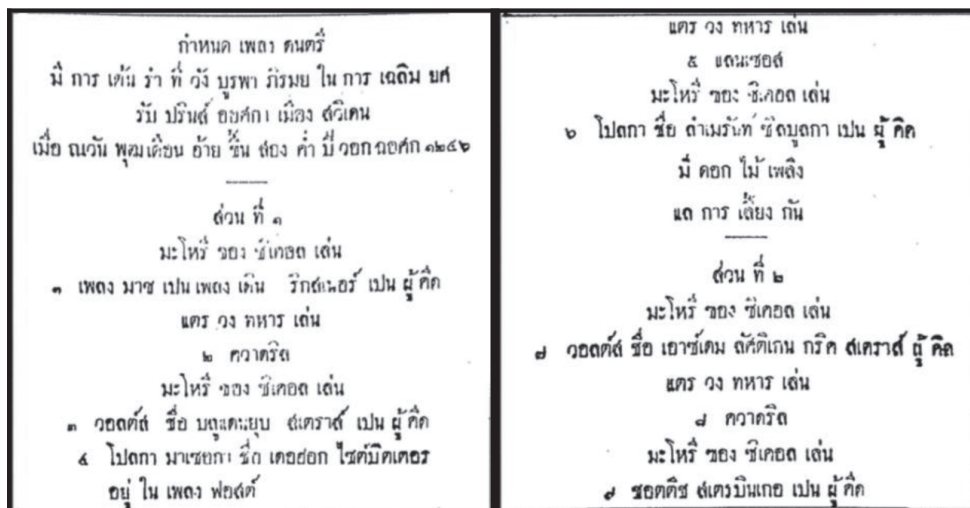
In the reign of King Rama IV, there were two British soldiers, named Captain Impey and Captain Thomas G. Knox, entering Thailand. They came to perform governmental service and teach how to play bugle horn as a military signal device. They also taught Siamese people to use royal anthem as found in European culture. They used the melody of the Great Britain's God Save the Queen without any use of Thai lyrics. There was relating information in the 29th Annals, which was the memo about the journey



**Figure 1** The group of diplomats during the reign of King Rama IV who brought the royal letter and royal tribute to Queen Victoria.

Source: <http://thailand.prd.go.th/ebook/imprint/page3.php>

of Thai diplomats to the Great Britain in 1857 organized due to the royal intention of King Rama IV to establish diplomatic relations. The group of diplomats had an audience with Queen Victoria and had received a good reception in Western style. The diplomats had witnessed the occidental dining etiquette and European ballroom dance. According to the memo of Anna Leonowens, King Rama IV could dance along the Waltz rhythm and could also tell about



**Figure 2** The section in the third book of Siam Samai Chronicles where the information about ballroom dance music was presented.

Source: The Siam Samai chronicles

the detail of the dance. However, there was no evidence about the person who taught this European ballroom dance to the King.

During the reign of King Rama V, there was an American soldier with German nationality named Jacob Feit who served under the crown since 1867. He firstly worked in Wang Na and later became the music teacher for the soldiers of Wang Luang (the royal palace). Subsequently, an American soldier with Italian descent named Captain M.Fusco became a teacher of the Royal Siamese Navy Band. Amatyakul (2011: 18) stated that Captain M.Fusco was the founder of ballroom dance musical ensemble to serve the Harbour Department and to play at state guest receptions. This historical incident was recorded in *Siam Samai Chronicles* by Samuel J. Smith. In the page 319-320 in the 14th paper of the third book of the *Chronicles*, there was information relating to ballroom dance written in 1884. The section stated about the organizing of ballroom dance songs. There were songs in variety of rhythm such as Quadrille, Mazurka, Polka, Schottische and Waltz. There was a strings ensemble by a musician and a brass band of the royal court's soldiers. Both of the band played ballroom dance songs alternately. The songs were of Romantic Period such as *The Blue Danube* which was a Waltz tune by J. Strauss II.

Moreover, *Siam Samai Chronicles* also stated about the performance mocking the African slaves in Europe and America. In the performance, a group of European people painted their faces black and imitated the African singing agitation. Since the incident occurred in 1884, the songs in the performance were supposed to be of Blues music which African slaves preferred to sing after work. Apart from the diplomats' journey, many members of the royal family also went to European countries in order to pursue their education. Many princes preferred Western music, especially Prince Paribatra Sukhumbhand who studied music as well as military subjects. During the reign of King Rama VI, every genre of music and perform-

ing arts was under the great support from the King. There was the establishment of Phran Luang School to create musicians of both Thai and Western music. European ballroom dance became more popular. This could be viewed from the time of celebration inside the palace during which the King Rama VI himself was the host for the ballroom dance party. The dance music in Jazz style was believed to be already presented in Thailand as well. Khun Saman Siang-Prajak (Thao Sinthunakhon) revealed that when he was a student in the Royal Strings Ensemble and a boarder of Krom Mahorasop (Entertainment Department)'s Phran Luang School, every student was strictly prohibited by Phra Chen Duriyang (Piti Wathayakon) from practicing Jazz music. This was because the practice of Jazz music could ruin the ability in playing Western classical music. Moreover, since Jazz music was belonged to African people, musicians of upper-class Western classical music consequently should not get involved with it.

The reign of King Rama VII was the joint of many changes such as the change in regime, the entertainment culture which changed accordingly to the society, and the governmental policy which encouraged people to be of the international standard, an issue which would be mentioned in the following topic.



**Figure 3** The Rainbow was playing at Phayathai Hotel  
Source: Old picture at Phayathai Palace

## 2) The Flourishing Era of Ballroom Dance Music

It could be assumed that the reign of King Rama VII was the flourishing era of ballroom dance music. During this period, Western social value dissembled among the people of upper class and middle class. Many people drank European-style beverages and a lot of European travelled to Thailand and some even settled down in this country. This encouraged the growth of liquor business. The ballroom dance, brought to Thailand by the people who had returned from their education in foreign countries, was also a preferred Western culture.

After Luang Sukhumnaipradit had graduated from America in 1926, he returned to Thailand and founded a modern Jazz band with his fellow students. The band "Rainbow" was founded in order to give Thais the opportunity to experience the real Jazz music. The members of the band were Vice Admiral Manit Senawenin on piano, Mr. Jiam Limpichat on saxophone, and Luang Sukhumnaipradit on banjo and mandolin. Later, Rainbow Band had altogether eight musicians: 1) Mr. Nart Thawonbutr on piano 2) Mr. Bun-Uea Sunthonsanan on saxophone 3) Mr. Jiam Limpichat on saxophone 4) Mr. Jampa Lemsamran on trumpet 5) Mr. Sali Klom-Apha on drum set 6) Mr. Wut Sutsathian on violin 7) Mr. Sombun Siriphak



**Figure 4** The ground floor of Wiman Chakri Palace which was used as the dining space with musical ensemble played at the floor outside.

Source: Kamontam Kuabutr

on bass 8) Luang Sukhumnaipradit on banjo. This band founding was in accordance to the royal intention of King Rama VII, who wanted Phayathai Palace to be a first-class hotel with Western musical ensemble played for Thai and foreign people who came for ballroom dance (Amatyakul, 2011: 21-22)

After the regime change, Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram became the prime minister in 1935. The government under his authority launched state convention policy. This policy encouraged people to adapt their social value to match with Western one such as dressing, listening to Western music, having government officers go to ballroom parties in the weekend and participate in ballroom dance which was named "Lilad" in Thai language. Moreover, the government encouraged the Royal Thai Army Band to create a big band as an official support to ballroom dance. There was also the establishment of Wong Dontri Lilad Krom Khosanakan. This ensemble, which had a mission to disseminate the governmental news and support governmental entertainment activities, played Western music and broadcasted through the radio one or two times a day. After that, there were many Western musical ensembles created such as the Royal Thai Army's Duriyayothin Band, Krom Khosanakan Lilad Ensemble, Suntharapon Band, Tor Ngek-Chuan's Yus Band, and Khitasewi Band. These bands alternately played in ballroom



**Figure 5** People are dancing inside the restaurant which is in the Bangpoo Resort.

Source: Kamontam Kuabutr

parties and restaurants such as Hoi Thian Lau Restaurant, Europe Hotel, Trocadero Hotel, Siam Hotel, nightclubs and bars. Apart from the places mentioned, there was also another place for ballroom dance near Bangkok: Bangpoo Resort of Samut Prakan Province. This resort was built around the year 1937 from the intention of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram who wanted it to be the recreation place for every people. This place was proper because it was adjacent to the sea and was not far from Bangkok. Bangpoo Resort was officially opened in 1939 but it had to be temporarily closed in 1941 due to the Greater East Asia War where the Imperial Japanese Army landed and used the place to be a passage way to battle the Allied Forces. In 1958, Bangpoo Resort, under the ministrations of the Quartermaster Department Thai Army, was open daily to sell food and drink. There were music performance and Lilad dance organized at 12.00-18.00 on every Sunday. From the fieldwork study, there were still some people who tried to reserve Lilad dance. There were many musical bands each of which came to play every week. This reveals that the ballroom dance music is still presented in the society through a very long period of time up to the present where everything is surrounded by technologies and music for modern style dance.

Music for ballroom dance was of great diversity both in the format and in the composition method, especially the composition which included Thai identity in it. This was committed by re-arranging the melody of Thai traditional songs with new musical sections and ballroom dance rhythm of European and American. The result was the ballroom dance music in Thai style. This kind of music was interesting because both Thai and Western culture was blended harmoniously in it. Furthermore, there was the invention of ballroom dance music with Thai rhythm. This was done by developing the rhythm of Nang Taloong, which was the shadow puppet performance of Southern people, into ballroom dance music. This Taloong Tempo was popular among ballroom dancers in Thai

society and was internationally well-known up to these days.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Ballroom dance music was introduced to Thailand in the latter part of the reign of King Rama III of which the evidence was the memo by a European recording about the ballroom party in Wang Na. The music also came to Thailand by the diplomats who went to European countries for diplomatic relations and witnessed Western ballroom dance music in the palace of Queen Victoria. It could be concluded that Western ballroom dance music was disseminated by both Westerners and Thais. The diplomatic factors and international commerce formed the link between these foreign cultures and Thai entertainment culture. This genre of music changed accordingly to the period of time and the eras of Western music. The listeners expanded from a small group of people in the royal court, merchants and foreign soldiers to common people. This Western culture, therefore, buried itself in Thai culture and society and became a part of Thai culture.

From the holistic perspective, the ballroom dance music written by Thai composers was obviously of Western music style. However, the melodies and lyrics which were of Thai style were included harmoniously with the Western music. Moreover, there was the invention of ballroom dance rhythm in Thai style, named Taloong Tempo. The rhythm was created by Luan Khwantham who was the music composer of the same period of time with Uea Sunthonsanan who created ballroom dance music with true Thai identity. This showed the blend of Thai and Western culture which became an important entertainment culture of Thai people.

Ballroom dance music exists and has been developing for almost a century along with the progress of Thai society up to the present time. Despite the long endurance, ballroom dance music does not deteriorate despite the decrease in popularity which oc-



curs because of the change in entertainment business caused by the global advancement in technology. As the result, the people of new generations have less knowledge of Thai ballroom dance music. There were only the older generation and a small group of people with particular interest who still preserve the value of Thai-style ballroom dance music. Other factors that lessen the popularity of this kind of music are the popularity of entertainment spots and the newer generation's preference in modern music. The pref-

erence is altered correspondingly to the change of Western entertainment culture that entered into Thai society more easily by the advancement in global communication. The researcher supposes that the result of this research may increase the interest in traditional ballroom dance music among Thai newer generations and that this historical research in music would become an important evidence of Thailand's culture.

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