

***Mawlam* and jazz in intercultural musical synthesis¹**

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Abstract

This paper discusses contemporary practices of synthesising musical elements associated with traditional Isan music, especially the *khaen* and *pin* instruments, with Western derived musical elements. It is based on extensive fieldwork and draws on the contemporary musicological insight that musical meaning arises in the performance of music rather than residing in a ‘score’. This places the emphasis on the performers’ concepts and practices which are understood through ethnographic fieldwork. The process of intercultural musical synthesis raises a variety of musical and extra-musical questions about established orthodoxies in music. The objectives, processes and outcomes of Isan musicians who use traditional performance practice in contemporary musical forms demonstrates that the task of bringing into alignment musical elements from disparate musical systems is but one of the challenges faced by musicians working towards music-cultural hybridity. There are also a range of cultural and ethical factors involved in the combination of Isan and Western derived musical elements. The concept of improvisation that has grown up in jazz and ‘world music’ understands it to be a practice

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involving personal musical expression. However the idiomatic conventions of traditional *khaen* and *pin* playing are more tightly circumscribed and the concept of artistic freedom does not play a significant role in Isan music. Isan musicians who aim to situate their performance within contemporary jazz and ‘world music’ contexts are in a potential conflict between musical and cultural ideals as the value of personal artistic expression enshrined in the ethos of jazz collides with notions of musical and cultural authenticity of Isan music.

Introduction

The process of intercultural synthesis involves combining musical and cultural elements and traits from disparate origins. The study of musical hybridity draws into focus the variety of ways in which notions of musical style and idiom are constructed and played out in different genres. Music is often studied and explained in the musicological terms derived from the European analytical tradition. Although musicology’s disciplinary territory has expanded, its theoretical orientation has tended to concentrate on the sounding elements. The focus on music’s structural elements overlooks the important cultural work it does. Musical hybridity involving music drawn from different cultures shows that music is more clearly understood when considered as a cultural and social practice with deeply rooted social meanings that cannot be understood in the narrow reductionist terms of analytical musicology. This discussion explores how music, as an agent of intercultural exchange, fulfils a variety of roles as it functions as vehicle for cultural, personal, and artistic expression. Although this article employs processes and term used in Western musicology, these are employed for the purpose of explaining the cultural work that music does. Interdisciplinary conjunctions are crucial in explaining aspects of music that lie beyond the theoretical scope of analytical paradigms that concentrate solely on the relations

between sonic elements. A comprehensive suite of theoretical tools brings forth understanding of both the cultural work done by music and the specific ways that musical sounds do this work. The musical synthesis discussed here involves the creative combination of elements from the foundational musical system of Isan called *mawlam*, and elements and practices from jazz, both of which I refer to as parent forms. This does not involve grafting together entire musical systems, but creatively combining selective elements. As a means of clarifying the fusion process this research adopts the theoretical framework developed in my PhD thesis (Garzoli 2015) in which music, as a concept in the broad sense, is disaggregated and broken down to constituent parts which represent different levels or domains which can then be interpreted in analytical terms that have been developed specifically for the purpose. This provides the greatest resolution and clarity to various type of musical detail. In my previous study of music that combines Thai classical music (*phleng Thai doem*) and European derived elements, I distinguished between three primary factors that needed to be considered. These were; intonational (tuning) factors, idiomatic/stylistic factors and cultural/historical factors that make up these two musical systems. As there is no conflict between tuning systems in the music discussed here, I concentrate on stylistic/idiomatic and cultural/historical factors. I will discuss the use of traditional instruments, repertoire and performance practices drawn from Isan music in contemporary intercultural musical fusion that brings together the disparate musical styles of Isan music and jazz. This will be done through a study of the music of contemporary Isan jazz fusion ensemble Boonhugsa whose music blends these forms. While the band draws stylistic elements from *luk thung* Isan, its primary goal has been to combine melodic and rhythmic patterns and instrumental timbres of the *khaen* and *phin* that are historically associated with traditional *mawlam*, with the idiomatic harmonic and rhythmic gestures, instrumentation, and concept of improvisation associated with jazz.

The practice of combining Thai and Western (European derived) musical elements has a long history in Thailand. What began in the late 19th century, during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868) when

Western military advisors working in Thailand introduced music tutors to instruct the Thai military bands and help drill soldiers (141, Miller 1998, 330, Myers-Moro 1993, 242) has become a widespread and well-established practice that has resulted in a diversity of hybrid styles. There are numerous Thai terms used to describe the various subgenres and styles of fusion music which are generally understood to mean music that blends various Thai and Western elements. While the music discussed here may be considered to be *dontri Thai prayuk* (lit. to ‘adapted’ or ‘applied Thai music’), the term is generally applied to other hybrids. I use the English terms ‘fusion music’ and ‘synthesis’ rather than the various synonyms, such as ‘syncretic’, or music resulting from ‘transculturation’ (Kartomi 1981, 234-35) because fusion best reflects the diversity of views of the musicians.³ As with other hybrid musical forms in which musical elements may be isolated from their cultural origins, the musical and cultural objectives of the band reflects a coming together of musical and cultural values that provide a window into music’s role in articulating social identity. While there is a tendency to interpret fusion music in relation to the postmodern concept of ‘pastiche’ in which various supposedly disembodied objects are drawn together without reference to their past, I prefer to think of this type of music as an example of late modernism as it is characterised by conventional aesthetic and structural qualities drawn from broader cultural narratives. Evens-so, the challenges faced by the musicians in attempting to resolve musical, expressive and ethical contradictions inherent in musical fusion are exemplars of the modernist-postmodern dilemma. Before discussing the case study of Boonhuga’s musical and cultural objectives and processes, it is necessary to give an overview of the two musical systems (parents) that are combined.

Mawlam

Although originating in Laos, traditional *mawlam* and the bamboo mouth organ called *khaen* that is associated with it, are

³ Fusion music in this context does not refer to the musical genres known as ‘jazz fusion’, ‘rock fusion’ or ‘fusion music’ that emerged in America in the 1970s and 80s.

strongly associated with the geographical region of Isan and its culture. This of course means they are associated with the rural poor, leading some to think of *mawlum* as 'bumpkin' music (Amporn Jirattikorn 2006, 43). Whether through performances of traditional vocal repartee known as *lam khlawn* or through the largely symbolic presence of the *khaen* in modern styles of *lam sing*, *luk thung* and pop, Isan music is a powerful marker of Isan identity and ideas about its cultural heritage. Ideas about identity have previously been flashpoints in Thailand's political history, especially when these have violated or openly challenged the primacy and authority of the dominant central Thai culture and its institutions. However such tensions seem not to arise in music that does not comprise words. While traditional *mawlam* involving vocal repartee has historically been considered a voice of moral authority, which has at times been pressed into service for partisan political purposes (Tausig 2016, 414-15, Mitchell 2011), this study does not address its important role as potential agent of political action because that was not considered its primary goal by the musicians concerned. As with all music, Isan music sounds as it does because it has certain sonic properties, it is presupposed that these must be present in fusion music in order for it to have the qualities that mark it as Isan music and thus achieve the performers' goals of asserting Isan cultural identity. The uniqueness of the Isan elements and their stark differences to the jazz elements with which they are combined make Isan fusion music a useful tool for of making explicit the link between notions of geographical and personal identity and the musical sounds that represent them. This relationship invokes the theoretically diffuse and problematic, but in this case indispensable concept of authenticity, which is the bedrock upon which ideas about identity in music are articulated. The term 'authenticity' has significant theoretical baggage which it accumulated through its use by scholars of popular and early classical music (see Frith 1996, Hall 2000, Cook 1998, Moore 2002). Its scattering of meanings led to confusion and calls for its abandonment (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, 30). But the notion of cultural identity drives the fusion process and allied concept of cultural authenticity and its expression in music cannot be lightly dismissed, especially as it is foregrounded by the musicians. In this

case the notion of authenticity is less theoretically problematic because of how the musicians themselves conceptualise the idea. Thais use the term *dang doem*, which means ‘original’, when discussing music that they consider to be authentically Thai. For them, this reflects the shared assumption that in order to make a legitimate claim to represent culture, new music must express familial closeness to its origins and its essential qualities must be present in form, texture, timbre, and style, which is most typically achieved through their complete or partial reproduction. For musicians in this study, it is a basic assumption that the Isan musical quality that invokes identity is most clearly asserted through the accurate and faithful performance of iconic and defining elements of Isan music. This understanding reflects Bohlman’s explanation (Bohlman 1988, 10) of authenticity. Thus the aesthetic qualities of music are validated as authentic through a process of intersubjective consensus arising within the cultural group.

Jazz

Jazz was introduced to Thailand in the 1920’s and a type of jazz-based fusion became established in Thailand in the 1930’s through the establishment of the ensemble at the Department of Public Relations (Mitchell 2011, 43). This band combined Western and Thai instruments to create a new form of Thai music termed *sangkit prayuk* (Myers-Moro 1993:248).⁴ Its influence can be heard in *luk krung* and other Thai musics. The regional spread of Western musical influences which was under way in the 1950’s hastened during the Vietnam War when a large number of American soldiers were based in Isan. This gave Isan musicians who were employed in clubs and bars to entertain soldiers opportunities to encounter American music, including jazz, traces of which gradually made their way into local music. Whilst *mawlam* is closely associated with Isan and Lao culture, Thai understandings of jazz do not focus on its origins. Isolated from its cultural beginnings and separated from the social forces that shaped

⁴ The ‘Department of Public Relations Jazz Band’ also performed under the name of ‘Suntaraphon’ who have been one of the most successful and popular Thai bands of the twentieth century.

its historical development, other meanings have become attached to jazz. Most notably, jazz has been interpreted in Thailand as a signifier of a type of hi-so affluence and sophistication. This can be seen, for example, in the use of jazz in the marketing of expensive consumer goods, to which advertisers attempt to associate, to derive benefit from its elevated social status.⁵ The prestigious cultural status of jazz stands in stark contrast to the lowly status of *mawlam* with which it mixes.⁶ Despite the widespread acceptance of jazz as a marker of affluence and sophistication, this idea is mostly rejected by the Thai musicians who play it. Whatever social advantage they may gain through their involvement in it, they tend to see jazz, especially its improvised quality, as a form of creative expression and discuss it in the specialist aesthetic terms that circulate among its proponents. Part of the appeal of jazz for Isan fusion musicians is the fundamentally important role that improvisation plays in it. This provides a conceptual (if not stylistic) bridge between the genres. While improvisatory practices are the basis for Isan music and a cornerstone of the jazz ideal, there are important differences in how the practice is conceived and executed. Jazz and Isan musicians may share the idea that improvisation involves a specialised form of musical knowledge and highly developed skill sets but they have different ideas about what improvisation is for and relate to the concept in very different ways. In jazz, which musicians think of as an ‘art’ form in the European sense, improvisation is a means of creative expression which endows performers with creative licence, whereas in Isan music, which is not understood in terms derived from the European aesthetic tradition, it is not a vehicle for personal artistic expression but is one of the performing activities involved in presenting a show (*sadang*).

Boonhugsa

Boonhugsa formed in Chiang Mai 2009 as result of discussions between founding members Warong Boonaree

⁵ Hi-so is short for high society. This is generally considered to be the wealthiest strata of Thai society to which many aspire.

⁶ The issue of combining musical systems that exist at opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum is dealt with in an expanded version of this article.

(Yodh) and American jazz saxophonist player Ralph Thomas. The primary rationale behind the band's creation was to develop a contemporary form of musical expression that combined essential traits and characteristics of *mawlam*, especially traditional performance practices associated with the *khaen* and *phin*, with the artistic and expressive concepts commonly associated with jazz, thus creating a musical medium that married concepts of Isan cultural identity to the musicians jazz-inclined artistic aspirations. For a number of years the band played regularly at the popular North Gate Jazz Co-op. As a result of their popularity in Chiang Mai, they were invited to perform at festivals and made appearances on national television. Although the band comprised Thai and non-Thai musicians, Yodh, who is the ensembles most potent creative force, is an experienced and accomplished performer of Isan musician from the artistically and culturally rich province of Ubon Ratchathani in the south eastern region of Isan. A cornerstone of the bands formation was that their songs be based on the musical principles that give Isan music its stylistic and structural characteristics. The Western concepts and elements are important to the quality of their music but rather than simply adapting Isan melodies, and timbres to jazz harmonies and rhythms, the vision of the band was that elements drawn from the *mawlam* tradition act as the primary compositional and aesthetic platform. This means that the Isan musical elements are dominant and function as the host parent and the jazz elements are shaped to fit accordingly. Because Boonhugsa employ traditional musical phrases taken directly from the *mawlam* repertoire and not generic approximations of the style, the music is conceived as Isan music and is evaluated from this cultural and aesthetic perspective. This is not done out of piety or a sense of preservationist duty (fusion music obviously does not attempt to preserve Isan music in a completely pure form) but is done out of aesthetic, structural

and cultural necessity. Yodh plays *phin*, *khaen* and *pong lang* and is the principal composer/arranger of the material.⁷ He began learning music at an early age and through family connections he met local *mawlam* Sartit Chalermpon, Somjit poothor master *phin* player Thongsai Thapthanon and other established artists. He studied *khaen* with master musician Klom Tattawong and *mawlam* poetry with master composer Noom Yenjai who composed the first *lam plern* version of the Thai epic *Khun Chan Khun Phaen*. The popularity of *Lam klawn* had already waned considerably and was being displaced by modern forms such as *lam plern* and *lam pan* by the time Yodh became interested, however through environmental exposure and his training in *khaen* he learned what he considers the correct approach to the traditional rhythmic/melodic system of *lam klawn*. During the period that the band was most active, its membership changed a number of times; and at the time of this research fieldwork the line-up included Thomas, a professional African American saxophone player from Chicago who had performed and recorded with Marvin Gaye, Jermaine Jackson, Smokey Robinson, Rick James, and Howling Wolf. Drummer Jantima Kitisri (Goh is a career musician with experience performing jazz, blues and groove based music. The bass player Jip was the least experienced member and had only played electric bass since 2007. Keyboards were played by long time Thai resident, German national Rudi Junior. He had no formal training in keyboards but was able to perceive harmonic structures and ‘busk’ his way through songs with jazz style chord changes. The non-Thai band members are the least familiar with Isan music and whilst they have the technical skills to play Isan based music they do not have specialised knowledge or mastery of it. This means that the crucial role of maintaining the essential quality of Isan music is left to Yodh.

⁷ *Pong lang* is a xylophone made from circular timber sections.

Essential ingredients

The most iconic sounds in Isan music are *khaen* and *phin*. *Khaen* is the most significant traditional instrument in Isan as it is the basis for the tuning system used in throughout the region and of the Isan repertoire (Miller 1998:321-22). Its traditional role is in accompanying traditional *mawlam* vocal repartee performances called *lam khlawn*, but it is now widely used in other settings including in popular and fusion music. It is also used as a solo instrument, in non-vocal forms, and the *lam phi fa* (ผีฟ้า), the *lam khuang* healing/renewal ritual (Adler 2010). Although sharing familial similarities with other mouth organs found in south-east Asia, the precise origins of *khaen* are unknown. Tracing its origins is practically impossible because there are no surviving ancient *khaen* due to its delicate construction, the harsh physical environment where it is used, and the relatively rapid rate at which bamboo deteriorates.⁸ Similarities in tuning and melodic style make *khaen* phrases compatible with Western music so jazz elements can be brought into alignment with *mawlam* phrase length, melodic contour, and rhythm without contradicting established idiomatic practices. The *phin* is also used in fusion contexts. During a performance, the *phin* was traditionally tuned to produce a pentatonic mode (five note scale) which corresponded to the *khaen*. Recent developments in playing styles and contexts have led some *phin* players to add more frets which enables them to play in more than one key. The *phin* repertoire derived from *khaen* but it has developed its own idiomatic conventions as a result of the influence of famous players such as Thongsai Thapthanon whose virtuosic style is widely copied and is considered the gold standard among *phin* players.

The Isan musical system is based on two *khaen* modes; *thang san* and *thang yao*. The term *thang*, which means path or way in normal use, means melodic pattern in this context.⁹ *San* (สั้น) and *yao* (ยาว) are types of mode and the names, distinguish types of melodies. The melodic modes of the *khaen* modes are usually pentatonic (comprising five notes), although there are exceptions. Each mode

⁸ For a detailed description of *khaen* see (Sanong 2012, Miller 1998, 1985)

⁹ It has a number of other musical meaning that are not relevant here

is distinguished by a drone that sound continuously and a “target” a note that defines the tonal center (*key*). *San* and *yao* modes comprise three sub-modes that may be considered melodic forms. *San* modes are *sudsanaen* (สุดสะแนน), *posai* (โป้ซาย), and *tidsoot* (ติดสุด). Melodies in *thang san* may not have specific names but it is the traditional mode for *lam klawn*. The *yao* modes are *thang yai* (ทางใหญ่), *thang noi* (ทางน้อย), and *thang sae* (ทางเซ). Within the *thang yao* category of melodies are *lam toey*, *lam phuen*, *lam plern lam dern*, *lam long*.¹⁰ It is important to acknowledge that the feeling of Isan music in *khaen* cannot be reduced to the pitches of the modes alone; articulation, breath control, phrasing, and rhythm are equally significant in creating the unique idiomatic quality of Isan music. Although it is not a Thai analytical concept, it is possible to interpret these modes as reflecting the qualities of Western major and minor scales dues to their melodic (intervallic) qualities.¹¹ *Thang san* comprises properties compatible with the Western major scale and *thang yao* comprises properties compatible with the minor. This is highly relevant in fusion music as the harmonic/melodic quality of the mode is the most significant factor in influencing how their melodies can be harmonised with jazz chords. Although fusion musicians such as Yodh embrace the indigenous musical system described above, one of the challenges he faces, is maintaining the essence of Isan music in the fusion transformation. Beyond an (unspecified) threshold, changes made to certain defining Isan elements can distort the essential Isan quality of the music. Musical phrases that are not recognised as reflecting the Isan style are considered inauthentic. This creates a special challenge for improvisers who aim to remain within the aesthetic orbit of Ian music but the same time create new musical ideas in their improvisations.

Fusion process

As the term implies, intercultural musical synthesis involves combining elements from different musical-cultural systems. Fusion

¹⁰ There are sub categories of toey including toey tamada (normal), toey kong, toey phama (Burma)

¹¹ An interval is the musical term used to describe the distance between two notes

musicians do this by ordering and shaping musical sounds to achieve certain aesthetic/cultural outcomes. In adapting stylistic elements from the two parent genres, the overarching goal is that the music faithfully reflect its origins because without a basis in established and recognised musical principles, creativity drifts free of the idiomatic moorings that constrain the music and its shape and cohesion. The process by which the specific musico-cultural objectives are met can be explained by exploring the fusion process at two levels. Firstly, at the level of musical structure, the phrase structure and rhythm of the Isan melodies is used to underpin the overall formal structure of each song. The *mawlam* modes and melodies have particular structural characteristics that have an established and recognised musical logic which has survived over a long historical period and wide geographical region. The presence of these properties provide the structural framework to support the more sonically complex jazz derived materials and timbres. Their presence ensures the coherence and stability of the musical structure and narrative. For Isan musicians, the absence of melodic and rhythmic constraints that underpin and define Isan genres leaves Isan-based fusion music without any coherent aesthetic or structural foundations. Secondly the sounds of the *khaen* and *phin* performing *mawlam* and *lam khlawan* melodies accompanied by electric bass played in the idiosyncratic style of Isan music recreate an image of Isan in the mind of the listener. By using the timbre of the *khaen* and *phin* and the melodic/rhythmic language associated with these instruments, which can only be executed by those with specialised skills in the highly patterned approach to fingerings, articulation and breath, the music invokes the *mawlam* tradition. The presence of these sonic features links the experience of listening to ideas about Isan culture and history. Thus the practices of performing in the spirit of the original musical form by preserving essential traits and elements, which is at the heart of the fusion ideal, has both structural and aesthetic rationales. The extent to which these aims are met depends on the extent to which the music faithfully expresses the spirit and structure of the original. As the aspirational link between the performer's personal and cultural identity and musical sounds is only made in the faithful reproduction of the tradition, this link can be made explicit by pointing out specific

musical elements whose presence is essential to the Isan musical quality. While acknowledging the shortcomings of Western originating analytical approaches in explaining non-Western music, the question of how this is achieved and measured is best explained through analytical processes. It is through a type of Thai analytical musicological insight that the extent to which traditional melodies and rhythms faithfully and accurately observe the idiomatic orthodoxies of the tradition are revealed. The practice of combining elements from different systems raises the possibility that certain musical and cultural elements to be blended may be in some way incompatible and must be brought into alignment or they will clash, as occurs when the tuning systems of Thai classical and Western music are mixed. In contrast to Thai classical and Western musical conjunctions, the Isan tuning system is compatible with the Western tuning, thus allowing for Western style harmonisation of Isan melodies. To accommodate modulation to other 'keys' as may occur in jazz, the *phin* and *pong lang* can be modified by adding frets to the *phin* and additional keys (bars) to the *pong lang* to enable them to produce additional notes.¹² The scope of available notes on the *khaen* however cannot be extended. The most significant difference between jazz and Isan music is in the absence of harmony as a structural component of musical organisation and expression in Isan music. Indeed in early examples of Isan fusion, the electric bass played the main melody, until it became common practice to adopt its current harmonic role. The logic and pitch structure of the *mawlam* phrases are adaptable to chordal accompaniment so the most obvious and practical way in which Isan music can accommodate Western elements is in the harmonisation of Isan melody. Historically this has been done by accompanying traditional melodies with basic (primary) harmonies, however, the musicians discussed here employ more complex harmonies derived from jazz.¹³ The increase in the harmonic

¹² The capacity to play chromatic music is one of the defining features of fusion music and the adaptation of harmony is indicative of the influence of Western music on Isan music.

¹³ Primary triads are three note chords built on the first, fourth and fifth degrees of the diatonic scale. They are considered the most basic musical structures used in Western music and are heard in nursery rhymes, song such as 'Happy birthday' and in the blues style.

complexity of the texture adds drama and colour to the musical narrative but it does not influence the improvisations on *khaen* and *phin* which are played in accordance with the conventional principles and constraints that govern the idiom. For example it is taboo to use the note occurring on flat sixth scale degree in *thang yao* as this produces an undesirable melodic quality that is considered *som* (sour) (Chapman 2002, 129, Miller and Jarernchai 1979, 129) so care is taken with note choice to ensure melodies have the appropriate tonal quality.

Repertoire

In keeping with the primary objective of playing Isan (rather than jazz) based music the band's repertoire comprises complete songs and well-known musical phrases from *mawlam*. While a comprehensive and detailed explanation of the musical practices and repertoire is beyond the scope of this discussion, the following summary provides examples of the band's repertoire and some particulars of how the fusion process applies.

Song #1) Perhaps the most iconic *mawlam* melody is the *thang san* melody *Sudsanaen* used to accompany to *lam khlawn*. Yodh performs this on *khaen* according to traditional instrumental practice. Their version, named 7-11, begins with the *sudsanaen* melody played on *khaen* followed by a second melody based on the Lao *san* melody *lam siphon don* (4 thousand islands) which is a variation of *sudsanaen* but with a lilt in the rhythm.¹⁴ *Khaen* improvisations are based in *thang san*, the primary mode of *sudsanaen* to jazz harmonic accompaniment.

Song #2) *Lam plern* is a more recent melodic pattern. This version aims to faithfully reproduce the *lam plern thang yao* melody which is combined with various other melodic phrases including a phrase taken from the Ed Ames song 'My love is gone for me' which has been widely adapted in Isan music. While this song is the least modified in the repertoire it is important because the electronic genre of *lam plern* is a suitable vehicle for improvisation on a typical Isan *nathap* (rhythm). *Lam plern* may also be performed on *khaen* but because it is generally played slowly on *khaen* it is performed

¹⁴ This melody is also known as *kon sawan*.

on *phin* to create a more energetic performance. Yodh plays it on a modified *phin* that allows modulation between modes in a way that is impossible on a standard *phin*. When improvising, his solos are based on a combination of standard idiomatic licks and melodic gestures including phrases that he learned by listening to and learning from Thongsai Thapthanon and original phrases that he has developed as part of his own *thang* (style). The modified *phin* enables him to transpose these phrases and thus maintain the Isan quality the while modulating with the harmonic accompaniment.

Song #3) *Serng boon bung fai* (rocket festival song). This well-known melody associated with the famous rocket festivals held throughout Isan has been recorded by numerous *mawlam* and *luk thing* singers including Waipoj Petsuphan. Boonhugsa performances are based on the signature melody which may be harmonised with simple or complex harmonic structures that add stability or tension to the accompaniment.

Song #4) *Maeng tap tao* (Water insect). This melody is from the standard *pong lang* repertoire. Echoing earlier forms of Isan music the bass also duplicates the main melody as was historically does in *pong lang* and other Isan ensembles.¹⁵ Yodh improvises in the typical *pong lang* style which is based on creating variations of the *sudsanaen* pattern. He does this drawing upon what he called a ‘library of *sudsanaen* licks’ he has memorised. When improvising on the *pong lang* he performs melodic ideas that are similar to those he plays when playing *sudsanaen* on *khaen* but the instrumental idiom (*thang khrueng*) of the *pong lang*, which is usually played at in songs at faster tempos, gives the performance a quality unlike that of the *khaen*.

Conclusion

The practice of creating jazz-influenced fusion music in an authentic Isan style requires the presence of certain musical elements essential to Isan genre. This creates a challenge to the musicians who

¹⁵ *Pong lang* is both the name of the instrument and an ensemble in which it features. This ensemble was developed in schools and is not connected to the ‘older’ history of *lam klawn*. Despite this it has become a symbol of Isan

look for creative ways to adapt non-Isan elements that may contradict and diminish the Isan quality. This is especially so when musicians improvise, as the concepts and practices of improvisation as it occurs in jazz do not correspond with those in traditional Isan music. The *phin* and *khaen* that are symbolic of Isan can be played in a variety of ways, but in order for Isan-jazz fusion to retain its essential Isan quality, they should be played so that certain properties essential to Isan genres are retained. It is essential that they are performed in a style that remains within the orbit of Isan music so the music faithfully reflects its origins and is therefore authentic. For Yodh, this can only be achieved by performing Isan repertoire on Isan instruments in the specific traditional stylistic idiom. His concern for structural and aesthetic coherence is indivisibly linked to traditional practices grounded in lam klawn which influences his own practice down to the level of individual note choice. The strong emphasis on the Isan elements and their particular structural attributes and aesthetic qualities ensures Boohugsa's music retains links to Isan culture and identity. While traditional performers of mawlam see themselves as entertainers, Boohugsa are primarily concerned with ensuring their performances are underpinned by practices which derive their aesthetic and structural coherence through their historical legacy. Their reliance on traditional musical concepts and practices for structural and aesthetic cohesion guarantees that the highly valued cultural diversity that is widespread in contemporary music does not lead to the erosion of cultural representation.

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