FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4436


O ZI
SAING
SAUNG
SI DAW
DON MIN
PATT WAING
BON GYI THAN
MAUNG SAING
KYO SONG
BYAW THAN
PATTALA
DO BUTT

# BURMESE FOLK AND TRADITIONAL MUSIC

RECORDED IN BURMA
**Notes by Maung Than Myint**

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS LIBRARY

FOLKWAYS FE 4436

# BURMESE FOLK AND TRADITIONAL MUSIC

O ZI
SAING
SAUNG
SI DAW
DON MIN
PATT WAING
BON GYI THAN
MAUNG SAING
KYO SONG
BYAW THAN
PATTALA
DO BUTT

**Recorded in BURMA**

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES
INSIDE POCKET

Library of Congress Catalogue Card No. RA 56-278


FOLKWAYS FE 4436

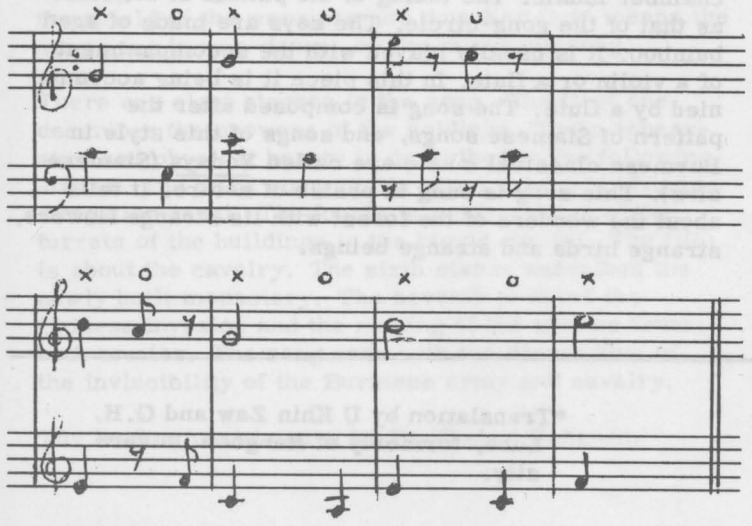
ETHNIC FOLKWAYS LIBRARY Album No. FE 4436


# BURMESE FOLK AND TRADITIONAL MUSIC

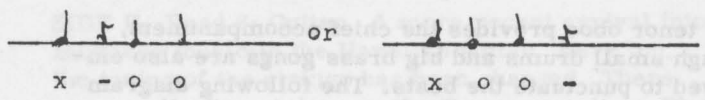
Introduction and Notes on the Recordings
by Maung Than Myint

Burmese language is not accentual but tonal. Rhythm in a language such as English is largely dependent upon differences of emphasis or accent upon the syllables in a word and the words in a sentence. Differences of emphasis or accent do occur in Burmese, but not to the same extent. Consequently emphasis or accent is not used very much, if at all, in the composition of Burmese verse. Burmese verse rather depends upon the schematic arrangement of words with certain sounds recurring at fixed points. That is to say, Burmese verse has rhyme, but it has little or no accentual rhythm. On the other hand timing, especially such as depends upon the number of syllables pronounced in a given period and caesuras that mark the period, are of greater importance in Burmese than in English. In Burmese singing, the caesuras are even more important than the set of syllables or words in each measure.

Thus before listening to Burmese music one should get acquainted with Burmese time. The singer keeps time with a pair of tiny bells and a small clapper in his hand. The clap coincides with each of the rests mentioned till the final note of the section when it coincides with the tonic.



This is the simplest of Burmese time -- the simple duple. The bell (o) and the clapper (x) go alternately. In the quadruple there is a rest ( - ) on one or the other of the middle beats.




This much for the time. Now a word about Burmese scale. I mention the word 'scale' with some apprehension because scholars of Burmese music both ancient and modern have not decided upon that point so far. It is probably sufficient to say that the Burmese scale is a peculiar diatonic major scale with indeterminate Fourth and Seventh, though some musicologists like Paul Edmunds suspect that the pentatonic scale is the foundation of Burmese music. In the Burmese scale Fourth and Seventh are both "neutral," that is the Fourth is neither half-a-tone above the Third as in the European diatonic major scale, or full tone above it as in theoretical Chinese heptatonic scale, but just about midway between the Third and the Fifth. And the Seventh is similarly between the Sixth and the Octave.

U Khin Zaw, an accomplished student of Burmese music, asks the following questions:

Was the Burmese scale pentatonic in origin?
Did it adapt itself to an equal tempered seven-tone scale from Siam (Thailand) towards the end of eighteenth century?
Did the intervals then become less and less equal until they nearly approximated the Chinese scale with indeterminate Fourth and Seventh?
How did the indeterminate Fourth and Seventh come about?

Leaving these queries to be solved by future research, it appears that the present Burmese scale permits Burmese musician to play within it the approximate keys of C F B and E.

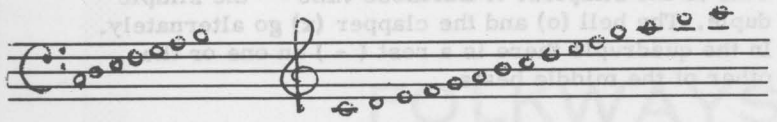
Notes on the Recordings

SIDE I, Band 1: KYO SONG. U Khin Zaw describes this type of song as "a labor chant for concerted action that germinated in ancient row-boats, grew into a boat-song, and then developed for royal ears into its present high order of melodic and literary grandeur."

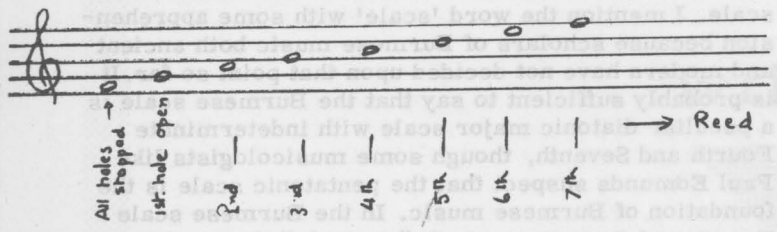
This is one of the three royal barge songs and is called 'Phaung Ngin Kyo' ဘောင်ငင်ကြော်: sung or played when the barge is being towed out by rowers in open boats. The other two are 'Phaung Lar Kyo' ဘောင်လာကြော်: sung or played when the barge is underway, and 'Phaung Saik Kyo' ဘောင်ဆိုက်ကြော်: sung or played when the barge makes port.

The first minute of the record is the prelude and the actual song starts after that. The main instrument in this song is the gong-circle, a set of twenty-two brass gongs arranged in a circle and played with padded sticks.

The gongs are tuned in the following manner:



The tenor oboe provides the chief accompaniment, though small drums and big brass gongs are also employed to punctuate the beats. The following diagram illustrates the tuning of the oboe.




SIDE I, Band 2: BYAW THAN. U Khin Zaw calls it "stick-struck drums song," as the player of the drums in this type of music uses sticks rather than his hands in striking the membrane of the drums. The accompanying instruments are tenor oboe, gong-circle and small cymbals.

Byaw Than is a folk-song closely associated with the main event in a Burmese boy's life - the novitiating ceremony. A Burmese boy becomes a novice about the time he attains the age of puberty. He is not considered a grown-up until he has been novitiated into a Buddhist order. His term of service in the religious order may be only a nominal period. In former days it was a month but now it is a week, or in some cases only a few days.

This period of separation is trying both for the boy and his lover. In this song the boy is about to be novitiated. He tells how he is being led to the monastery:

> As I walk East and gaze West over my shoulders,
> I see the pagoda with its gold banners and streamers.

In the second verse his sweetheart plies him with questions:

> With a bamboo wrapperful of literature under your arm,
> Darling, you are about to enter the monastery.
> Please tell me to the tune of your sweet voice
> What are your lessons all about.*

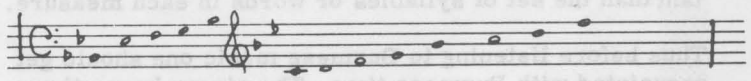
SIDE I, Band 3: Burmese Drum-Circle. Patt Waing. This is a set of 21 drums arranged almost in a circle. The player sits in the centre and plays the drums with bare hands. The arrangement of the 21 drums according to pitch is shown here:

SIDE I, Band 4: Burmese gong-frame. Maung Saing. The main instrument here is the gong-frame. It usually consists of twelve gongs in three frames holding three big gongs, four medium sized gongs and five smaller ones. When arranged in three rows the lowest gong is at the left in the top row and the highest and smallest is at the right-hand corner in the bottom. It barely has two octaves and thus only melodies can be played on it. It therefore needs a strong supporting instrument.

SIDE I, Band 5: Burmese Orchestra. Saing. The orchestra consists of a drum-circle, a gong-circle, an oboe, a flute, a gong-frame, bass drums, cymbals, clappers and bells. It is the orchestra of Sein Be Dar, court musician to the last two kings of Burma.

SIDE I, Band 6: Burmese Harp. Saung. It can safely be inferred that the Burmese harp originated in India and that it came to Burma as a part of Hindu expansion. The first Burmese harp had only three strings. It later developed into a seven-stringed musical instrument and it was said that even as late as the reign of King Bodaw Paya (1782-1819), Minister Myawaddi, a great Burmese composer, played a harp with seven strings. In fact it was the same Minister Myawaddi who developed the Burmese harp into a thirteen-stringed instrument which we now use.

This particular piece of music is played by U Ba Than of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. Burma. There are four different ways of tuning the Burmese harp to suit the types of tune played. This piece is played with the thirteen strings arranged as follows.



SIDE I, Band 7: Burmese Xylophone. Pattala. The Pattala is one of the main instruments in Burmese chamber music. The tuning of the pattala is the same as that of the gong-circle. The keys are made of aged bamboo. It is usually played with the accompaniment of a violin or a flute. In this piece it is being accompanied by a flute. The song is composed after the pattern of Siamese songs, and songs of this style in Burmese classical music are called Yodaya (Siamese airs). This song is sung in praise of nature. It tells about the wonders of the forest with its strange flowers, strange birds and strange beings.

---

*Translation by U Khin Zaw and G.H. Luce, formerly of Rangoon University.

SIDE II, Band 1: Burmese Kim. Don Min. The Burmese Kim is a descendant of the Cambodian Kim. One of the later additions to Burmese musical instruments. This is a musical interlude usually played between acts in Burmese dramatic performances.

Side II, Band 2: The Royal Drums. Si Daw. The main instruments here are drums. In this type of music there are usually a pair of big drums about 25 inches in diameter and about four feet in length, with membranes at both ends. The other instruments are one or more bass oboes, cymbals and a gong-circle.

As the name implies, the drums were played on royal ceremonies and occasions in the days of Burmese kings. At present they are played on auspicious occasions which call for pomp and grandeur.

SIDE II, Band 3: Shwe-bo Drums. Bon Gyi Than. Shwe-bo is the name of a town in Upper Burma, once a capital of Burmese kings. These drums originated there. Usually played in pairs, they are about ten inches in diameter and about two and a half feet long, with membranes on both ends. They are hung across the breast, and played on both of the drumheads with the hands.

The other instruments are oboe, cymbals and clappers. These drums are played on joyous occasions such as the rice-planting festival, the pagoda festival, etc.

SIDE II, Band 4: Short Drums. Do Butt. Burmese folk-music played with one or more short drums, a tenor oboe, cymbals and clappers. This is typical festive music played all year round on all festive occasions.

SIDE II, Band 5: Pot Drums. O Zi. The pot drum is so named because of its pot-shape. The membrane is usually of cow-hide. This drum is strung across the shoulders of the player, who hits it with both hands. The usual accompanying instrument is the flute, but sometimes the oboe is substituted. Of course there are the indispensable cymbals and clappers.

SIDE II, Band 6: Martial Song. Kar Gyin. It is claimed to be the oldest song in the history of Burmese music. Burmese scholars of music trace the origin of this song as far back as eleventh century, the time of the Pagan Kings or the Temple Builders. Kar means the shield of the warriors and thus Kar Gyin means the song sung in war-dance, or the marching song.

There are eight stanzas in the song. The first one describes the prowess of the soldiers. Their appearance and physical beauty is described in the following stanza. The third stanza tells about the great Thindwe irrigation canal. The fourth is a description of the turrets of the buildings in the king's capital. The fifth is about the cavalry. The sixth stanza describes the newly built monastery. The seventh is about the Chinese invasion and the raining of the arrows from both armies. The song ends with the description of the invincibility of the Burmese army and cavalry.

The leading part is sung by Ba Thet of Rangoon.

SIDE II, Band 7: Violin. Among the Western musical instruments that are played extensively throughout Burma, the violin ranks first. Like its Western prototype, the Burmese violin has four strings. But the tuning of the strings is different. The first string is C, and the third string is tuned to C one octave lower; the second string is G and the fourth string is G one octave lower.

The violinist in this piece is Maung Kyaing, who conveys impressions of a cock fight.

SIDE II, Band 8: Guitar. A more recent arrival into Burmese music is the Hawaiian guitar. Here too, the tuning of the strings has been changed. There are usually five strings on the Burmese guitar. The first to fourth strings are tuned in the manner of the violin. The fifth and lowest string is tuned to F in the lower octave.

This is a classical composition composed after the pattern of Siamese music. The player is U Sein Maung, of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

SIDE II, Band 9: Piano. A piano in the drawing room of a well-to-do Burman is not an uncommon sight. Burmese have learned to play Burmese songs on the piano without changing its chromatic keyboard.

This is a modern composition in which a girl is compared to a flower, fragile but lovely and hard to get. It is played by Maung Than Myint.

Edited by Harold Courlander
Production director, Moses Asch