

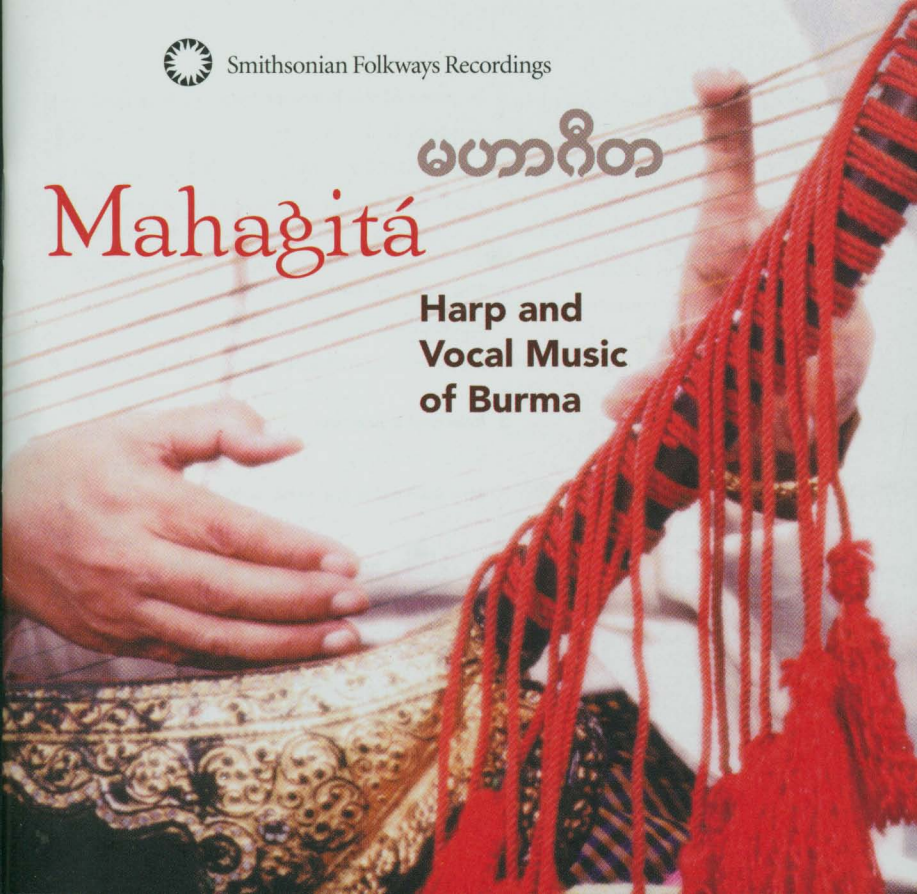


Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

မဟာဂီတ

Mahagita

**Harp and
Vocal Music
of Burma**





Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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CD 9628



Mahagitá: Harp and Vocal Music of Burma

Featuring **Inle Myint Maung** အင်းလေးမြင့်မောင်
and **Yi Yi Thant** ရီရီသန်

Burma's preeminent player of the arched harp and one of Burma's most respected singers provide a beguiling sampling of the Burmese *thachin gyi* (classical song) repertoire in these stunningly beautiful recordings made in Rangoon in 2000. The Burmese arched harp, a little-known treasure among Asian musical instruments, figures prominently in Burma's classical music tradition. That tradition, developed over several centuries in Burma's royal courts, exhibits the restraint, subtlety, and elegance of many aristocratic traditions—but in an idiom uniquely Burmese. **Extensive notes, photos.**

- | | | | | | |
|---|--|-------|---|----------------------------------|------|
| 1 | In praise of the Burmese harp | 12:01 | 5 | A huntsman enchanted | 9:08 |
| | ဇမ္ဗူရောင်ကွန် (ဘွဲ့ ညှင်းလုံး) | | | ဖန်ထွေလာ (မွန် အပိုး) | |
| | ဇေယျာအောင်ချာ (ကြိုး ညှင်းလုံး) | | 6 | Longing in a forest glade | 5:47 |
| 2 | The glory of the king | 6:19 | | နန်းရွှေ (ပတ်ပျိုး ပြည်တော်ပြန်) | |
| | ပြည်ပြည်မင်းပေါင်း (သီချင်းခံ ညှင်းလုံး) | | 7 | The twelve royal gates | 6:49 |
| 3 | Rain and a princess | 11:12 | | ကိုးမျက်စုံ (တေးထပ် ငါးပေါက်) | |
| | မိုးလုံး ပတ်လည် (ပတ်ပျိုး အောက်ပြန်) | | 8 | The king's potency | 7:53 |
| 4 | Lonely in the forest | 8:55 | | ဆယ်ဆယ်ရောင် (ဒိန်း မြင်စိုင်း) | |
| | ခိုင်ပန်းစုံ (ပျီးဒယား အပိုး) | | 9 | Waiting | 8:09 |
| | | | | စိန်မြူးကြာညောင် (ဘောလယ် ပုလဲ) | |



မဟာဂီတ

Mahaḡitá

Harp and
Vocal Music
of Burma

Inle Myint Maung

အင်းလေးမြင့်မောင်

Yi Yi Thant

ရီရီသန်

*The generous support of the Asian
Cultural Council made it possible
to produce these recordings.*

1 In praise of the Burmese harp 12:01

ဇေယျာအောင်ချာ (ကြီး ညှင်းလုံး)
ဇေယျာအောင်ချာ (ကြီး ညှင်းလုံး)

Zabu yaun kún (bwé, hnyinloùn) and Zeiya aun cha
(coù, hnyinloùn)

2 The glory of the king 6:19

ပြည်ပြည်မင်းပေါင်း (သီချင်းခံ ညှင်းလုံး)

Pyi pyi mìn baùn (thachin gan, hnyinloùn)

3 Rain and a princess 11:12

မိုးလုံး ပတ်လည် (ပတ်ပျိုး အောက်ပြန်)

Moù loùn pa' le (pa' pyoùn, au'pyan)

4 Lonely in the forest 8:55

ခိုင်ပန်းစုံ (ယိုးဒယား အပိုး)

Hkain pàn soun (yoùdayà, apoù)

5 A huntsman enchanted 9:08

ဖန်ထွေလာ (မွန် အပိုး)

Hpan htwei la (mun, apoù)

6 Longing in a forest glade 5:47

နန်းရွှေ (ပတ်ပျိုး ပြည်တော်ပြန်)

Nàn shwei (pa'pyoùn, pyidobyan)

7 The twelve royal gates 6:49

ကိုးမျက်စုံ (တေးထပ် ငါးပေါက်)

Koù mye' soun (teida', ngàbau')

8 The king's potency 7:53

ဆယ်ဆယ်ရောင် (ဒိန်း မြင်စိုင်း)

Hseze yaun (dein, myin zain)

9 Waiting 8:09

စိန်ခြူးကြာညောင် (ဘောလယ် ပုလဲ)

Sein chù ca nyaun (bòle, palè)



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Introduction

Ward Keeler

The country of Burma shares long borders with India, Thailand, and China, but the music of the ethnic Burmans (the predominant ethnic group in the multiethnic nation of Burma) has nonetheless retained a highly distinctive character, setting it apart from that of all its neighbors. The music on this recording, the သီချင်းကြီး (thachin gyi ‘great song’) repertoire, is no exception.¹ Yet for Burmans, it is exceptional: for them, it is the most refined and prestigious of all their musical genres. Consisting of a vocal line and a harp line, each song exhibits elegance and restraint, the hallmarks of an elite musical tradition performed, as here, by masters of the genre.

Like classical music traditions elsewhere in the world, these songs do not attract a mass audience. Everything about them—the lack of simple and repetitive melodic lines, the linguistic difficulty of their lyrics, and above all, their aesthetic of allusiveness and emotional restraint—places them at a far remove from the pop genres heard constantly in the mass media. But to those willing to listen, Burma’s classical songs are ravishingly beautiful.

The thachin gyi repertoire developed over several centuries, supported by the royal courts of central Burma. It eventually came to include several hundred poetic texts, each with its own musical setting. The collapse of the last royal court, when Mandalay fell to the British in 1885, brought an end to the genre’s most important source of patronage. The genre’s

transmission has been in doubt ever since. As part of a newfound cultural nationalism, the current regime, which has renamed the country “Myanmar” (a rather fancy equivalent in Burmese to the more colloquial “Bama”), has recently encouraged the country’s citizens to take a greater interest in their cultural heritage, including thachin gyi. It is hard to know whether this official effort will have long-lasting effects.²

Inle Myint Maung, harpist, and his former student, the singer Daw Yi Yi Thant—the performers on this recording—are preeminent practitioners of thachin gyi. Both of them express worry about the future of the classical-song tradition. They have taken on students, but do not feel that they have trained anyone likely to devote enough time to the genre to become truly proficient in it.

The instruments

The arched harp (sain gau’) consists of sixteen strings suspended between a long, gracefully curved wooden neck and a lacquered resonator covered with deer skin painted red. The strings were formerly made of silk; now they are usually made of nylon or plastic. Gold lacquer and glass or semiprecious stones give many harps a brilliant look. The arch ends in a piece of acacia root that should be in the shape of a leaf of the bodhi tree, under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. The harpist usually holds the instrument in his or her lap while sitting cross-legged on the floor, with the arch on the player’s left side. Normally only the thumb and index finger of the right hand pluck the strings;

departing from this rule, as Inle Myint Maung does, means diverging from classical practice.

An accomplished harpist displays an impressive virtuosity, even when playing with a vocalist: long solo introductions, interludes played between sung stanzas, brilliant cadenzas, and free-time passages, enable a harpist to demonstrate his or her improvisational skills and dexterity, which are sometimes dazzling. Burmese consider the harp their most prestigious instrument and grant it great respect.

The vocalist holds in his or her hands two other small instruments: two tiny bells connected by a string, called the *sì*, and a small bamboo or wooden clapper, called the *wà*. The singer sets the tempo of the song, or section of a song, by playing these instruments according to specific patterns. Tiny as they are, the *sì* and the *wà* correspond respectively to the gongs and the drums of other Burmese ensembles, and, indeed, of many musical ensembles throughout Southeast Asia.

Thachìn gyì can be sung by men or women. In the past, male singers were expected to sing in a loud, strong voice, in contrast to women's softer, more restrained style. Today, however, men also sing *thachìn gyì* in this more subdued fashion.

The artists

Inle Myint Maung, harp

Burmese proper names draw from a relatively small pool of possible syllables, and people differentiate among bearers of common names with supplementary information, such as what work they do, what titles they hold, or where they're from. *Inle* refers to Inle Lake in eastern Burma and the region where U Myint Maung is from originally. (U is a respectful title for an adult male in Burmese, much like "Mister" in English.) He appends *Inle* to his name to identify himself, although he has long lived in Mandalay, and many would refer to him instead as *Saùn Myint Maung* ("Harp Myint Maung").

U Myint Maung was born in a village near Inle Lake on 3 June 1937, the elder of two children. All his relatives on his father's and mother's sides were interested in music, although none of them were professional musicians, but rather were traders of various sorts. U Myint Maung was told that when his father was courting his mother, he would go to her village late in the day and play the *hkuni' loìn maìn* (a set of seven gongs) before engaging her in conversation. His father also played the Stroh violin³ and the bamboo xylophone (*pa'talà*).

U Myint Maung's father began sitting his son in his lap and teaching him to play the *hkuni' loìn maìn* when he was seven years old. At the age of ten, he started receiving instruction on the *pa'talà*, the mandolin, and the banjo. At fourteen, he started learning to play slide guitar and the *doun mìn*, a 26-stringed plucked zither. All four of these string



instruments are of foreign origin, but in Burma they are played in imitation of the way the Burmese harp is played.⁴ Finally, he was invited to study harp at the Mandalay State School of the Arts, where his teacher was Daw Khin May. He studied there for two years and then opened his own music school in Taunggyi. Soon thereafter, however, in 1962, he moved to Rangoon, and in a time-honored Burmese tradition of apprenticeship spent a year in the household of the famous harpist Saun U Ba Than, where he received instruction from the master while serving as his assistant in teaching others. In 1965, he won a competition for the

post left vacant by the death of his former teacher, Daw Khin May, at the State School for the Arts in Mandalay. He retired from the school in 1991, but still trains students privately. However, he laments that he finds no truly committed students in an age in which everyone is more concerned to make their way economically than to hone their skills in musical genres that they may well love, but which they know will bring them no meaningful income.

U Myint Maung credits U Ba Than with teaching him to read Western notation. Equipped with that knowledge, starting in 1965, U Myint Maung began gathering and notating *thachin gyi*. He eventually documented more than five hundred compositions. He says that there are well over seven hundred of these songs, but that for the remaining two hundred or so only the texts remain extant, the music having apparently now been lost with the death of most of the repertoire's practitioners.

Frequently in *thachin gyi* after the vocalist sings a line, the harpist repeats the line, but with embellishments. It is here that a virtuoso player can demonstrate the remarkable capacities of the instrument. Like his teacher U Ba Than, U Myint Maung is famous for the inventiveness of his embellishments. Departing from tradition, he sometimes writes original compositions for harp without any vocal part.

U Myint Maung was married in 1959. His wife, Daw Khin May (not to be confused with his teacher of the same name), is a harpist and teacher in her own right. They have five children. He has been invited to tour in several countries in East Asia, and in 1987 he traveled to London, where he performed for the BBC.

Daw Yi Yi Thant, vocalist

Daw Yi Yi Thant hails from a village near Shwebo, a town west of Mandalay in Burma's hot, dry, central region. Interested as a girl in Burmese music, she first learned only contemporary songs, but was intrigued to hear of a special genre of music called *thachin gyi*, which not many people knew. She took this as a challenge, one she found all the more compelling when she was told that learning only a few songs from the *thachin gyi* repertoire was not enough—that to become truly competent required learning a great many difficult compositions. To take up the challenge, she joined U Myint Maung's household in Mandalay as an apprentice. She lived there four years, starting in 1969, while she learned songs and the harp. She imagined herself eventually taking a teaching position at the State School of the Arts, but on a trip to Rangoon in the early 1970s she was invited to perform on the radio and television, and her career as an artist in Rangoon was immediately launched. At many public and private gatherings in and around Rangoon, she continues to perform a wide repertoire of Burmese songs, from the classical *thachin gyi* to the more popular hits of the past few decades. U Myint Maung considers her his finest voice student, and the two have collaborated on several audiotapes. She has also recorded many popular songs with other artists.

Daw Yi Yi Thant exhibits qualities that are greatly prized among Burmese singers. Her voice carries well, so that it sounds the same whether listeners are close to her or at a distance (a trait that mattered a good deal before electronic amplification became common



in Burma, starting in the 1950s). Her voice is pleasant in both the upper and lower registers. In addition, her diction is clear. This is a rather complicated matter: because Burmese is a tonal language, the same syllable has different meanings according to the pitch and vocal quality with which it is pronounced. A melody may put a syllable at a lower pitch than a preceding one, even if the tonal qualities of the two syllables would place the second one at a higher pitch in speech. A gifted singer such as Daw Yi Yi Thant can sing in such a way as to suggest the original tone of a word (particularly at the end of a phrase), even if the melody contradicts the tonal relations among syllables in a series when spoken.

Performance practice

At present, *thachin gyi* are performed almost exclusively on television and radio, or in the context of government-sponsored local, regional, and national musical competitions. However, when U Myint Maung first lived in Mandalay, in the 1950s, and on into the 1960s and early 1970s, when a fair number of older practitioners were still living, musicians would often gather in one person's home and spend the night playing this repertoire. Such a night's music would include only the basic song types (*coi*, *bwé*, and *thachin gan*) from about seven till ten or so, and these would be in the *hnyinloin* tuning. (For information about song types and tunings go to www.folkways.si.edu/catalog/40492.htm.) A few modern tunes (*than zan*) might then follow. But starting at about eleven, the musicians would begin playing pieces in long series, each series lasting about forty-five minutes or so. These pieces would include songs from several different song types, but they would be linked thematically: one series would consist of songs making reference to flowers, another to rain, another to remote villages, and so on. A series would always conclude with a *coi*. The singer would be accompanied by the *si* and the *wà*, a harp or a Burmese bamboo xylophone (*pa'-talà*), or, less traditionally, both. The *si* and the *wà* might be played by the singer; alternatively, another person present might play them.

In the course of the night, the hosts of these sessions would serve all present a meal. As economic conditions worsened, the meal was reduced only to drinks and snacks, and such gatherings became less frequent. Finally, so few people well-versed in *thachin gyi*

remained alive that these informal sessions ceased altogether.

One evening during the months I lived in Mandalay in 1987–1988, U Myint Maung invited me to his home when Daw Yi Yi Thant was coming up from Rangoon. They performed several pieces for the pleasure of the few friends assembled, as well as their own enjoyment. (This might be compared to Renée Fleming and James Levine performing some *lieder* of an evening—and virtually no one choosing to attend.) Such events are rare, and it remains to be seen whether younger musicians who are studying *thachin gyi* under the encouragement of the government will revivify the tradition of classical Burmese musical soirées.

The contents of songs

Each *thachin gyi* consists of phrases written in florid, often archaic, Burmese. Single phrases in a song are likely to be repeated, and sets of phrases may also be repeated. (These repetitions are indicated in the Mahagitá collections with parentheses, brackets, and numbers in superscripts.) Between repetitions, accompanying instruments repeat phrases without any singing, adding their own variations. Songs end with unmetred phrases.

Burmese written expression diverges quite widely from the spoken language, even in ordinary writing. The more artful or high-flown an author wishes any written communication to appear, the greater this distance from readily intelligible speech becomes. One way to achieve an elevated style is to replace basic grammatical forms indicating, for example, subject and object, or aspect, or subordination, with equivalent but far less colloquial forms.

Prolixity is also found artful. Many monosyllables in Burmese carry meaning, but they will often be paired with other monosyllables of similar meaning, even in speech. In literature, a great many monosyllables will be strung together, adding little to the sense but providing greater dignity to a phrase by virtue of its length and repetitiveness. At the same time, it is characteristic of Burmese literature, of prose and even more so of poetry, to reduce or obscure the grammatical relations between words and among phrases. This abstruse and difficult style relates topics and agents to each other only vaguely, and descriptions and actions are then attributed ambiguously to any or all of them. To the uninitiated, the effect is highly confusing; to the cognoscenti, it is the essence of aesthetic pleasure.

To illustrate the course a single *thachin gyi* takes, here follows a close translation of the song on the first track. The 2 at the end of a line indicates that the material in parentheses preceding it is sung twice. (The line breaks do not reflect Burmese orthographic practice. They are provided here for clarity, but the Mahagita collections do not make such breaks in the texts.)

In praise of the noble harp (named) "Emerald jingle sound"

မြခြုံသံစောင်းဘွဲ့

Myáchuthan Saùn Bwé

(ဇမ္ဗူရောင်ကွန် သရကွံ။ မျက်စုံလှုံမောင်း။ ရွှေစောင်းမြခြုံသံ။)၂

(Zabuyaun kún, thaye'hkan. Mye'soun hlyan maùn. Shwei saùn myáchu than.) (2)

(The *Myáchuthan* harp is made of sandalwood and studded with brightly shining jewels. Their light flashes all over Jambudipa.⁵) (2)

(ဝိသုကံငယ်လေး ဘန်နှင်းတော့လား။)၂

(Withúkan nge lei, hpan hnin tó là?) (2)

(Maybe it was made by Visukamma?) (2)

(ပရမေသီရိဘုန်းရှိ မြတ်ဘုရင်ငယ်မှာ။ ဆက်စိုးစံရွှေ။ နန်းစဉ်ရွှေဘွဲ့ထားငယ်နှင့်လေး။)၂

(Paramei thiri hpoùn shí mya' hpayin nge hma. Hse'soùn san shwin. Nàn zin shwei bwé htà nge hnín lei.) (2)

(The glorious lord his majesty reigns in his palace, enjoying his traditional titles.) (2)

(မြတ်သလွန်တော်ပါး။ ရွှေနားငယ်လျှောက်ရန်။ ကျူးသံမြည်ညှင်း။ ငွေနှင်းလေအပြန်။)၂

(Mya' thalun do pà. Shwei nà nge hyau' yan. Cù than myi hnyin. Ngwei hnin lei apyan.) (2)

(By the royal couch—to address the royal ear—the sweet sounds emerge—cool breezes blow.) (2)

(သာဘွယ်ဘန်သည်လေ။ မှန်နန်းမြင့်ဦး။)၂

(Thabwe hpan thi lei. Hman nà n myín ù.) (2)

(It [the harp] gives joy—in the most exalted chamber in the palace.) (2)

(မဟာအမရနန်းမ ထွတ်နရိန်ငယ်မှာ။ နတ်ပဉ္စသိန်လက်ချိန်ရွှေစောင်းကျူးသည်သို့လေး။)၂

(Maha amará nà n má htu' narein nge hma. Na' Pyinsá Thein le' chein shwei saùn cù thi thoú lei.) (2)

(In the mighty palace of Amarapura—it is as if the divine musician Pancasikha⁶ put his hand to the harp and made it yield sweet melody.) (2)

သံဝန်ထူးပါလို့။ ပျံ့မြူးငယ်ထွေသာ။ ဒီပါအေးတော့သည်။

Than hwun htù pa loú. Pýán myù nge htwei tha. Dipa eì dó thi.

Its sound is unmistakable—its joyous notes spread far and wide—the world (Jambudipa) is at peace.

ဩဘာတော် ညွှန်းသည့်နှင့်။ ဘက်ကျန်းငယ်တေဇာ။ ဇေယျာကြွေးတော့သည်။

Oba do hnyùn thi hnín. Be' cùn nge teiza. Zeiya cwei dó thi.

It sings the praises of the king—his glory spreads even to neighboring islands (besides Jambudipa)—[the harp] calls out blessings upon him.

Translated by John Okell

Track notes

Songs are listed by title,⁷ followed by song type and tuning. (Information about song types and tunings can be found at www.folkways.si.edu/catalog/40492.htm.) For example the first selection is called *Htan taya tei shim*; it is of the *coù* song type; and it is in the *hnyinloùn* tuning. English labels have been appended to the songs. These are not literal translations of the titles, but brief indications as to the subject matter of the songs.

1. In praise of the Burmese harp

ဇေယျာရောင်ကွန့် (ဘွဲ့ ညှင်းလုံး)

ဇေယျာအောင်ချာ (ကြိုး ညှင်းလုံး)

Zabu yaun kún (bwé, hnyinloùn) and Zeiya aun cha (coù, hnyinloùn)

Both of these songs describe the beauty of the Burmese harp.

ဇေယျာရောင်ကွန့် (ဘွဲ့)

Zabu yaun kún (bwé)

The harp is beautiful and fills the palace with its soft and melodious sound. Its music makes the world calm. It sings the king's praises far and wide. (See the more literal translation above.)

ဇေယျာအောင်ချာ (ကြိုး)

Zeyia aun cha (coù)

The king dwells in the palace, while the noble harpists play enchantingly. The sweet sound of the harp melts the heart of those with hearts to melt.

The attentive listener can hear two different rhythmic patterns played on the *si* and the *wà* in these two songs. The first pattern, with two strokes on the bells for every stroke on the clapper, runs through the first song. The second, in which the bells and clapper alternate, starts on the last word in the first song (at 7:36), and continues through the introduction to the second song U Myint Maung plays on the harp, and through the second song itself.

2. The glory of the king

ပြည်ပြည်မင်းပေါင်း (သီချင်းခံ ညှင်းလုံး)

Pyi pyi mìn baùn (thachìn gan, hnyinloùn)

Numerous lesser kings flock to the royal palace to seek the protection of his royal majesty and to offer him their lovely daughters. The young maidens are as sweet and shapely as goddesses. The king is like the bright moon in the heavens, surrounded by stars.

Rhyme in Burmese poetry is often subtle and complex. It tends not to follow rules obvious to a listener unschooled in the literary tradition. For example, rather than repeating at the end of lines of regular length, rhymes tend to shift position in each line of a composition. In this piece, however, the rhymes are sometimes relatively obvious. At the beginning of the song, the rhyme *-aùn* recurs in every other syllable starting with the fourth and continuing through the sixteenth. Midway through the song, the pattern *-oun -á -á* recurs in three phrases in a row. (Note that rhyme is recognized as such in Burmese only if the tone and other phonic features of syllables are identical.) In other portions of the song,

as in most songs, the rhymes stand out much less clearly.

3. Rain and a princess

မိုးလုံး ပတ်လည် (ပတ်ပျိုး အောက်ပြန်)

Mòu lòu'n pa' le (pa' pyoù, au'pyan)

The sky is blotted out by rain-clouds, the rain-bearing wind blows, the thunder rumbles like the beating of the drums of the gods, but the rain still holds off. Your beloved is stricken by longing for you and spends her days lying listless with her head on the pillow. I can think of no respite, but will lie here till the wind blows away the clouds and the sky lightens again.

Like many classical-arts traditions in Southeast Asia, Burmese courtly arts balance tension and excitement with contrasting impressions of calm or release. One way songs in the *thachìn gyì* repertoire achieve such balance lies in the way they end, usually with a slow, dignified section. Often this consists only of a slowing of the tempo and long melismas on the last few syllables of a song. And many of these melismas are similar, no matter how different the songs to

which they provide the closing. In other instances though, the conclusion (*thahpyan*) is more elaborate. In this song, the *thahpyan* lasts close to two and a half minutes, almost a third as long as the main portion of the song. Slower and more deliberate, it represents dispersal of tension following the heightened excitement of what precedes it, while musically it brings the vocal line down to the tonic pitch.

4. Lonely in the forest

ခိုင်ပန်းစုံ (ယိုးဒယား အပိုး)

Hkain pàn soun (youdayà, apoù)

Beholding all the delights of the forest—the flowers, the bird-calls, the scents—your loving lord longs only for you, my beloved, back there in the palace, surrounded by your many attendants. I am listless and moody. All I can do is join my palms and raise my hands in supplication to the Three Gems⁸ and to the gods.

The name for the song type of which this composition is an example, *youdayà*, is the Burmese rendering of the ancient Siamese capital, Ayutthaya, that Burman armies

sacked on two occasions. Burmans and Siamese fought many wars over the centuries. The goal was not to conquer territory, but labor. Southeast Asia was historically underpopulated—resources outstripped people's capacity to exploit them fully—and victors would transport whole populations to their own territory in order to make use of the vanquished people's labor. Among the people forcibly removed to Burma were artists and musicians from Ayutthaya, and Burmese claim that Thai artistic practices were incorporated into their own traditions as a result. Contemporary Thais, however, find nothing familiar in these *youdayà* songs.

5. A huntsman enchanted

ဖန်ထွေလာ (မွန် အပိုး)

Hpan htwei la (mun, apoù)

There are so many pleasant things in the forest, the old leaves falling and new leaves just budding out. The forest is green like an emerald palace. A prince comes into the forest to hunt, but the beauty of the forest enchants him, and he cannot hunt.

Burmese do not think of *thachin gyi* as songs in which a singer is accompanied by an instrumentalist. Instead, instrumentalist and vocalist are thought of as equal participants in the performance. This helps explain how a harpist can perform an “introduction” that lasts close to three minutes, as U Myint Maung does in this track. Such an opening sequence prior to the vocalist’s entrance enables an instrumentalist to display his or her skills at their fullest. In this instance, U Myint Maung includes a percussive sound—tapping on the body of the harp, rather than plucking its strings—that is both surprising and piquant.

6. Longing in a forest glade

နန်းရွှေ (ပတ်ပျိုး ပြည်တော်ပြန်)

Nàn shwei (pa’pyoü, pyidobyan)

The young king has come to a forest glade that is wide and delightful. Here I am in the midst of all the delights, but I long to be reunited with my beloved. This, my dear queen, is something you cannot know. Here in the forest I yearn for you, and try to hide my tears.

Songs of the *pa’ pyoü* type, of which this song and track 3 are examples, are of more recent composition than *coü*, *bwé*, and *thachin gan* songs. *Pa’ pyoü* songs quote these compositions, while adding new elements. They are the most numerous songs in the repertoire, and they were especially popular at court, probably because it was flattering to knowledgeable listeners to be able to identify the allusions made to the rest of the tradition. In any case, these songs are considered especially difficult to perform well.

7. The twelve royal gates

ကိုးမျက်စုံ (တေးထပ် ငါးပေါက်)

Koü mye’ soun (teida’, ngàbau’)

This song, attributed to Dewá Inda Maun Maun Ci, names the twelve gates that surround the royal palace in Mandalay.

The names of several illustrious poets and statesmen (often in Burmese history these identities were interchangeable) are given in the Mahagitá collections as the authors of many *thachin gyi* texts. It is not always easy to verify these attributions, nor can

one determine what role the authors had in creating the music to which the texts are set.

8. The king’s potency

ဆယ်ဆယ်ရောင် (ဒိန်း မြင်စိုင်း)

Hseze yaun (dein, myin zain)

When the sun sends forth its powerful rays, the darkness is dispelled. In the same way, when the glory of the power of our noble king shines forth, all lesser kings who have been plotting rebellion or hatching disaffection cast out their disloyal thoughts and bow in submission, seeking the protection of his majesty. Word that our noble king, lord of mankind, is dwelling in glory at his royal palace in Mandalay, the center of the isle of Jambudipa, spreads throughout the land. Multitudes of vassal kings flock to submit and seek his protection, offering their tribute and gifts, and His Majesty graciously accepts them, ruling over his domains to keep danger at bay.

This song, like track 2 above and a great many others in the *thachin gyi* repertoire, praises the king in terms that, to many contemporary ears, smack of sycophancy. Yet it is important to recall that glorifying patrons is a time-honored practice in

musical traditions the world over, giving us, among others, West Africa’s praise songs, and many a baroque masterwork in Europe. Many Southeast Asians, and other people as well, find the ideal of a benevolent, charismatic, and powerful ruler who assures the well-being of their world both attractive and persuasive. This does not blind them to the failings of many actual leaders; Burmese history shows how often rulers failed to fulfill the ideal. But the wish persists, and we should avoid treating its expression condescendingly or skeptically.

9. Waiting

စိန်ခြူးကြာညောင် (ဘောလယ် ပုလဲ)

Sein chü ca nyaun (bòle, palè)

The princess waits for her husband, the crown prince, to come to her at night. Dawn is approaching, yet still he doesn’t arrive. In former days they lay together on the richly decorated bed, but this lonely night she lies on it alone. He once promised her his life-long love. Now he forgets those promises and looks for other women. The princess wonders why he no longer loves her.

Longing, regret, and loss also figure importantly in *thachin gyi*, as they do in many expressive traditions. But distinctive to the Burmese classical tradition, and expressed with extraordinary skill by Daw Yi Yi Thant in this rendering, is the manner with which such feelings are sometimes conveyed: not with dramatic intensity, but with a meditative, almost detached quality. “Rain and a princess” (track 3) takes a

different tack: Daw Yi Yi Thant sings much of the song in the upper reaches of her voice, descending to a lower range in the concluding section. But here, it is only in the concluding section (the *thahpyan*) that the vocal line moves higher, suggesting a more focused pain. For most of the song, Daw Yi Yi Thant sings in a quiet, inward-looking style, expressive of a deep and resigned sorrow.

Endnotes

- ¹ See the Guide to Pronunciation on the web site for information on how Burmese words have been transcribed.
- ² On the relations between Burmese classical music and the current regime, see Douglas (2001).
- ³ The Stroh violin, a hybrid violin with two metal amplifying horns, was developed in London around 1900 by John Matthias Augustus Stroh, and was brought to Burma by the British.
- ⁴ Interested listeners can hear examples of how these instruments are played on two CDs produced by Rick Heizman: *White Elephants & Golden Ducks* (1997) and *Green Tea Leaf Salad* (2000).
- ⁵ Jambudipa, in Buddhist cosmology, is the southernmost of the four great landmasses, and constitutes the known and familiar world. It is separated from other continents by impassable seas.
- ⁶ Pancasikha (in Burmese, *Pyinsá Theingá*) was a *na'* who at the time of the Buddha tuned his harp first too taut, so that the strings broke, then too loose, so that they made no sound, and finally to just the right degree of tension, thus confirming the Buddha's teachings on the merits of a middle path.
- ⁷ Most songs have titles, but they are rarely known or referred to by such names. Instead, they are known by the first phrase of their texts. That practice has been followed in listing the selections in Burmese below. The actual title of the first selection appears in the translation provided above. But in the following, it is listed in the more common way, that is, by its opening words.
- ⁸ In Buddhism, the “Three Gems” refers to the Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings), and the Sangha (the community of monks).

Further reading

Overall, Burmese music remains a very much understudied field. The most complete reference on the Burmese harp is Muriel Williamson's *The Burmese Harp: Its Classical Music, Tunings, and Modes*. Williamson and two other American ethnomusicologists, Judith Becker and Robert Garfias, have written the most extensively on Burmese music outside Burma. Each of them contributed sections to the article on Burma in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Stanley Sadie. References to the other publications, and those of other scholars, with a general account of Burmese music, are found in Keeler (1998). Another ethnomusicologist, Gavin Douglas (2001), has written a dissertation on the current régime's patronage of Burmese music, based on recent fieldwork in Burma.

Becker, Judith. 1980. “Burma: Instrumental Ensembles.” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Stanley Sadie. London: Macmillan.

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For expanded liner notes, additional tracks, and technical notes about the tunings go to www.folkways.si.edu/catalog/40492.htm

Discography

Birmanie: Musique d'art. 1989. Recording and commentary by Jacques Brunet. Translation into English by Derek Yeld. Ocora 559019/20. Two CDs.

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La Harpe Birmane. 1980. Commentary by Jacques Brunet. Musiques de l'Asie Traditionelle, 22. Playasound PS 33528. LP.

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Sandaya: The Spellbinding Piano of Burma. 1998. By U Yee New. Produced by Rick Heizman. Shanachie 66007. CD.

White Elephants and Golden Ducks: Enchanting Musical Treasures From Burma. Various artists, 1997. Produced by Rick Heizman. Shanachie 64087. CD.

U Myint Maung and Daw Yi Yi Thant together recorded five audiocassette tapes of the *thachin gyi* repertoire. Four of those tapes have been released commercially. All four are entitled *Mahagita* in Burmese and *Myanmar Harp* in English. The English title is followed by a series number between 1 and 4. In Burmese, the first three are confusingly marked "Series 1," but further particulars are provided as follows: (1) *Acheigan coi*; (2) *Bwé*; (3) *Thachin Gán*; (4) *Coù Athanzinmyà hnín athanzânmyà*. No information is provided as to the place and date of production.

Credits

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Music production by Rick Heizman

Assistant Producer in Burma: Ko Doo

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Rick Heizman is a professional free-lance musician in San Francisco, California. He works primarily as a guitarist: performing, teaching, composing, and recording. A fascination with other musics of the world has lead him to take many trips abroad, and to collect and study a variety of instruments. His passionate interest in Burma began with his first visit there, in 1981. He has been back many times, and has recorded and produced a number of CDs documenting Burmese music for several labels. (See the Discography.)

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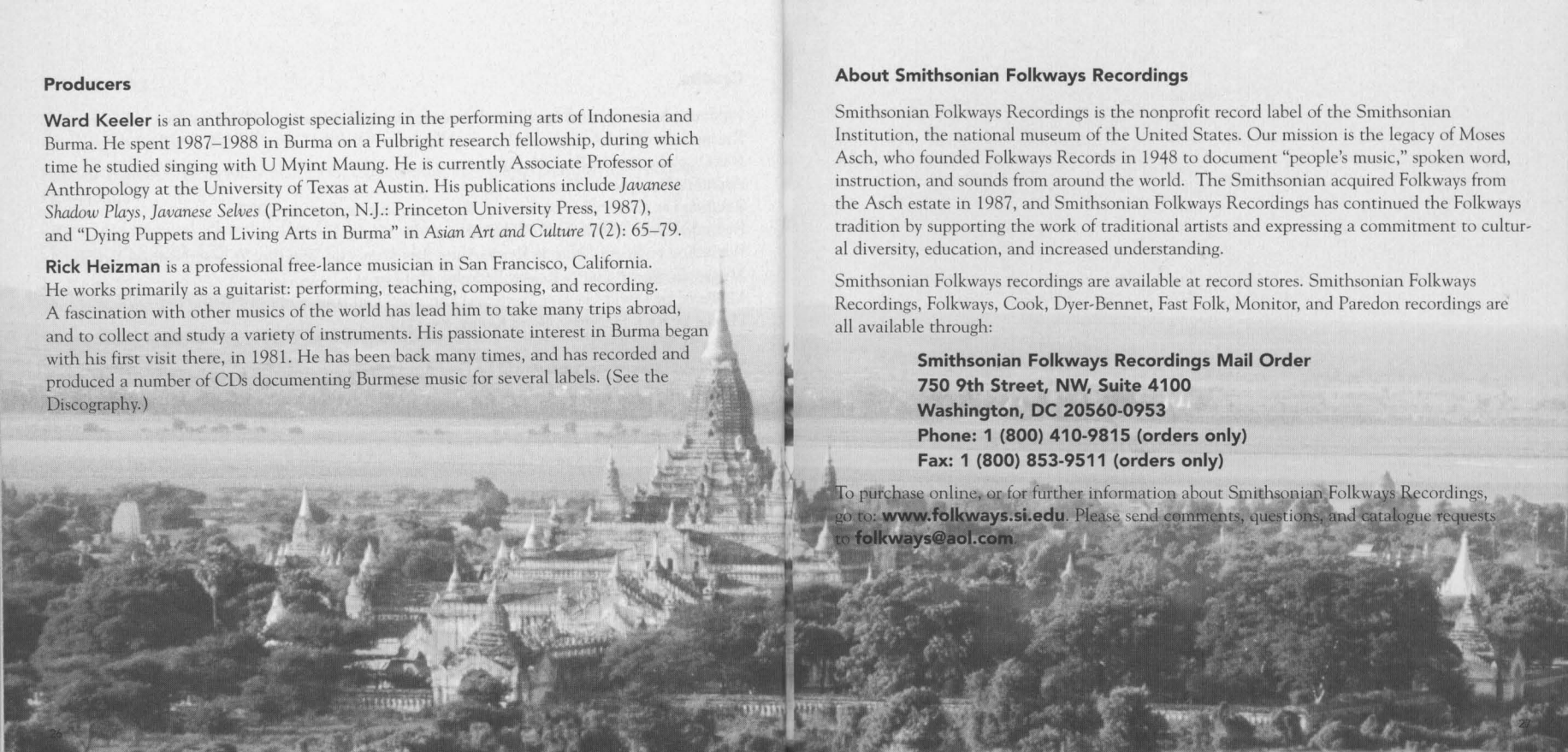
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Above: Inle Myint Maung, who died in Mandalay on 5 September, 2001, while this CD was in production. We mourn the passing of this musician, who devoted most of his life to studying and promoting the thachin gyi repertoire.



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