

Thailand

Phin Pia

by Andrew Shahriari

Arrival. While most foreign tourists only have time to see Bangkok, a sprawling city of more than six million people, the rest of Thailand is largely rural. One of the largest other urban areas is Chiang Mai, a city in northern Thailand with a population of roughly 300,000. Certainly significant, but small compared to the congestion of the capitol.

Northern Thailand is a common tourist destination for Bangkok Thai as prices are cheaper, the air is cooler, the people are friendlier, and the pace of life is slower. Forget the beach, head to the mountains for a hill-tribe trek, visit some of the oldest temples in the country, or have a massage at one of the many spas in the area. While luxurious hotels are commonplace, the savvy spender can find comfortable lodging for a hundred *baht* or less (roughly \$2.50US) and spend half as much on lunch and dinner.



Tourists enjoying a *khantoke* dinner.

Northern Thai cuisine is generally milder than other regional Thai dishes. One of the most popular venues for sampling the local fare is at a *khantoke* dinner cultural show. Patrons sit around a small circular tray (*khantoke*) eating a variety of Burmese and Lao influenced morsels by scooping them up with a handful of sticky rice. Afterwards, guests are entertained by a variety of music and dance presentations that are distinctly northern, such as the Fingernail Dance (*faun leb*) or the Sword Dance (*faun dab*). Such dances are accompanied by stringed and percussion instruments. While these dinner shows are reflective of musical activities found in local culture, the “packaged presentation” undermines their authenticity for many foreign tourists. Nevertheless, these shows present the best opportunity for short-term visitors to sample the unique traditions of the region.

The *phin pia* is one of northern Thailand’s most distinctive musical instruments. Though infrequently found at *khantoke* dinner shows, the instrument has gained increasing exposure through academic interest and the current trend in promoting regional culture. A quiet instrument, perhaps reflective of the soft-spoken *khon muang* (the local population), it has become one of the premiere examples of northern Thai music in recent years.

First Impressions. An ethereal “ringing” timbre emanates from the soft wavering sound of the *phin pia*. Intimate and entrancing, this music is meant for a close companion or the musician himself.

Aural Analysis. The *phin pia* is a chest-resonated stick zither, meaning the performer uses his lung cavity to amplify the sound of the instrument. The resonator is made from a coconut shell, while the “stick” and tuning pegs are made of wood. The most vital part of the instrument is the *pia* head, which is made of various metals,

typically silver or bronze. This metal piece is often designed in the shape of an elephant head or a variety of mythological creatures.

Phin pia usually have two or four strings, though they can have as many as seven. Though these strings were once made of twined silk, today they are typically made of metal, substituting a guitar or dulcimer string for use on the *pia*. The primary string is known as the *pok* string and is played using overtones. This requires a special technique in which the player lightly touches the string at a harmonic node with the side of his index finger while simultaneously plucking the string with the middle or fourth finger. The melody is produced by sounding different harmonics on the *pok* string as well as plucking the other strings, which are tuned using thread loops that attach to the main pole. (Note these loops at about the waistline of the performer pictured.) The latter performance strings are sometimes sounded using a technique, known as *jok*, in which the musician reaches the smallest finger under the *pok* string to play the others. The upper left hand will also pluck these strings as well as press the *pok* string to obtain a new set of harmonic pitches.



A *phin pia* musician

A distinctive aspect of the sound is the use of *vibrato*, a wavering of the volume. This is produced by subtly moving the coconut resonator back and forth away from the chest. This effect is generally used on sustained pitches and requires a quiet setting (or close amplification) to be heard adequately.

Cultural Considerations. The *phin pia* is considered among the most ancient of instruments in Southeast Asia. Evidence of the instrument's use as royal entertainment is found in the *bas relief* iconography of *Angkor Wat*, the ancient capital of the Khmer kingdom of the seventh to thirteenth centuries. Among the *khon muang*, the instrument was more commonly associated with courting rituals. While such rituals have largely disappeared, this initial function of the *pia* remains a key component of its historical value and cultural image.

Though other instruments were often used for courting, the *pia* was considered ideal in this capacity for several reasons. The instrument is both time-consuming to make, due to the metal headpiece, and requires a challenging performance technique that is difficult to master. A young man earnest enough to make and play the *phin pia* was believed to reflect a dedicated and devoted character, desirable qualities to a young lady.

Being played bare-chested, the instrument also allowed the man to show off his physique, a strong build suggesting that he was a hard worker and a good farmer; thus, someone who would provide well for a family.

As traditional northern Thai houses are two stories, the quiet volume of the *pia* was a good excuse for a suitor to invite himself up to the balcony so that his lady friend could better hear his music and poetic singing. The intimate timbre of the instrument has inspired some of the most endearing melodies found in northern Thai music, several specifically for performance on the *phin pia*. *Sao Mai*, the accompanying audio example, translates as “Silk Maiden.” Though this melody is played on a variety of instruments in numerous contexts, the alluring quality of the *phin pia* overtones suggests an image of a suitor wooing a young lady as she spins silk to pass the evening hours.

During the mid-twentieth century, the *phin pia* was stigmatized by government propaganda as a “backwards” and “vulgar” instrument. Young men, wanting to appear modern and “civilized,” abandoned the instrument for guitars to serenade their love interests. Older men had long “hung up” (literally hanging the instrument on the wall) their *phin pia* as a sign of fidelity to their wives. By the 1980s, the *phin pia* was mostly a memory of a bygone age.

Fortunately, during the 1990s, a surge of interest in Thai regional cultural traditions prompted scholars in Chiang Mai and Lampang to take a greater interest in local musical activities. The *phin pia* captured the attention of a few of these scholars who committed themselves to preserving the instrument through education and performance. The *phin pia* gradually became a primary focus for many who considered it a musical icon of *khon muang* cultural heritage.



A *phin pia* musician is honored at a parade in Lampang, Thailand

Today students learn the instrument as a source of regional pride and several remaining elderly practitioners of the instrument have been acknowledged as “living national treasures.” While the instrument’s original function as a courting instrument has all but vanished, the *phin pia* is now regarded as one of the most important music instruments in northern Thailand and has achieved great visibility through tourism and promotional efforts. The

mid-century negativism for *phin pia* performers has been replaced with admiration for these musicians as bearers of an ancient cultural legacy. While much has yet to be learned about the earliest history of the instrument, it seems the future role of the *phin pia* as a vibrant part of northern Thai musical activity is firmly established.