

The Earth Music of Thamkrabok Monastery

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In 1956, Phra Luang Paw Charoen Panchard, as a young monk on a spiritual pilgrimage, discovered a remote valley surrounded by limestone mountains filled with caves. He was so impressed by the beauty and peacefulness of the area that he returned the following year with his brother, Phra Chamroon, his revered aunt, Luang Paw Yai, and several colleagues, to live in one of the caves in order to practice Buddhism. It was there, during this period, that the group established Thamkrabok Monastery (TKB). Since then, TKB has become a center for healing, spiritual practice, innovative art and architecture, horticulture and the creation of music for the sake of spiritual growth. The monks and nuns who live there also work with recovering drug addicts, who participate in a vigorous construction program, building temples, educational centers and sculpture complexes. It is in this remote tropical environment an hour and a half north of Bangkok in the province of Saraburi that Luang Paw's Earth Music was developed.

Luang Paw's office is on the second floor of a concrete building placed in the midst of dense vegetation. The first time I (SP) opened the door to his office in 2000 I was surprised to find an air-conditioned room filled with computers, faxes and copying machines. I asked where the music was coming from and was guided to a computer where a monk was composing Earth Music. In this article we describe the development of this concept for musical composition.

THE EARLY HISTORY OF EARTH MUSIC

In the early 1980s Luang Paw Charoen began experimenting with a technique for allowing an individual to make a deeper connection between the natural world and his or her spirit. He was convinced that the more connected a person is with nature, the better able that person is to become psychologically centered and find his or her spiritual path. He was convinced that the key to finding this path lay in the cracks in the earth, rocks, trees and broken pavement.

For over 50 years Luang Paw Charoen has studied the rocks themselves. He believes that rocks are the source of knowledge. He has created many works based on his ideas about rocks, such as paintings, drawings, prints and silk-screening on clothing, paintings on mirrors using rock waters, lava sculptures and Earth Music [1].

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Luang Paw Charoen has stated, I have two points in mind. Firstly, we find a way that will enable us to retain the purest, most original form of music, so that the output directly represents nature. Secondly, we need to fit the outcome into an internationally agreed notational system so that it can be shared and communicated to a wide range [2].

TRACING THE LINE

Earth Music melodies are based on lines that have been taken from nature and then transposed into a note system. A person takes a sheet of transparent plastic and colored pens suitable for copying fine lines onto plastic and then investigates a natural setting in search of an inspiring line (Fig. 1). The lines can be silhouettes of objects or lines or cracks on their surfaces—for example, shapes of stones, plants and other objects or cracks on the surface of the earth or on buildings. They can even be traces of events, like the salty traces of sweat on the robes of high monks during the *tudong* [3].

After a crack is selected, it is traced onto a 4 × 30-inch transparent plastic sheet; the location of the source of the original line is noted at the top of the sheet. The use of different-colored pens permits the drawing of several lines on the same sheet. The tracings are 18 bars long, which is Luang Paw Charoen's personal standard for the length of a melody.

ABSTRACT

Since 1981, Luang Paw Charoen Panchard, Abbot of Thamkrabok Monastery in the Lopburi province of Thailand, has created music based on shapes found in nature. Cracks in walls, stones or the soil are traced onto transparent plastic sheets and transformed into musical notes. Luang Paw believes that the process of making this earth music results in spiritual healing and growth.

Fig. 1. A drawing of a crack in a rock being made on a piece of plastic. (Photo © Luang Paw Charoen Panchard)



The transparent plastic sheet is then brought back to the abbot's office, and a selected line is superimposed upon a prepared grid. Dots are placed at the intersection of the crack line and the grid lines, and the dots converted into musical notes.

TRANSPPOSITION OF SHAPES INTO MUSICAL NOTES

In order to create Earth Music out of lines from the earth, Luang Paw Charoen uses a system consisting of numbers, similar to the Chinese musical notation system. The procedure is easy:

1. On a piece of cardboard, draw a grid of 1-cm squares, as shown in Fig. 2a.

2. Using bold vertical lines, divide the grid into 3/4 or 4/4 time signatures (each centimeter horizontally equals a quarter note) (see Fig. 2b). The vertical (y) axis is numbered 1 through 7 repeatedly, as shown in Fig. 2. Luang Paw Charoen has chosen the following correspondences:

1 = Do; 2 = Re; 3 = Mi; 4 = Fa; 5 = Sol; 6 = La; 7 = Si(Ti)

3. Place the transparent sheet of plastic containing the traced line over the grid (Fig. 2c).

The system to convert the shapes from the traced line into musical notes uses the 8-tone scale, which can later be transposed into the 12-tone notational system

on which Western music is based. Figure 3 shows the system of notation used for the basic scale and higher and lower octaves (all in the key of C; 1 = Do = C).

4. The points from the traced line that one wants to use as notes can be selected by any one of the following criteria: (1) by using the points that intersect either the vertical or horizontal lines of the grid (our examples here use this method), (2) on the basis of defined rhythm, or (3) by following one's own inspiration.

5. The selected points are then transposed into musical notes. In Fig. 4 we see: (a) the original points on a grid, (b) their transposition into numeric notation similar to the standard Chinese method of scoring music, and finally (c) the potential for transposition into a European 12-tone notational system (an idea originated by Hans Kaempfer).

In addition, every melody is transposed onto separate cards as time note values, but not as tone note (sound) values, which opens possibilities for the generation of further melodies (Fig. 5) through repetition of bars and using notes from more than one card. The symbols on the separate cards are easily learned. For instance, a zero stands for a note; a zero filled with black represents a pause. Single underlines indicate eighth notes, and double underlines, sixteenth notes. The code for the note values is shown in Fig. 6.

Some people play music directly from the numbers. An additional step, taken in a few cases, is to transpose the line into

Fig. 2. Four patterns: (a) neutral, (b) 4/4 beat, 3/4 beat, and (c) pattern with superimposed plastic strip. © Luang Paw Charoen Pancharad

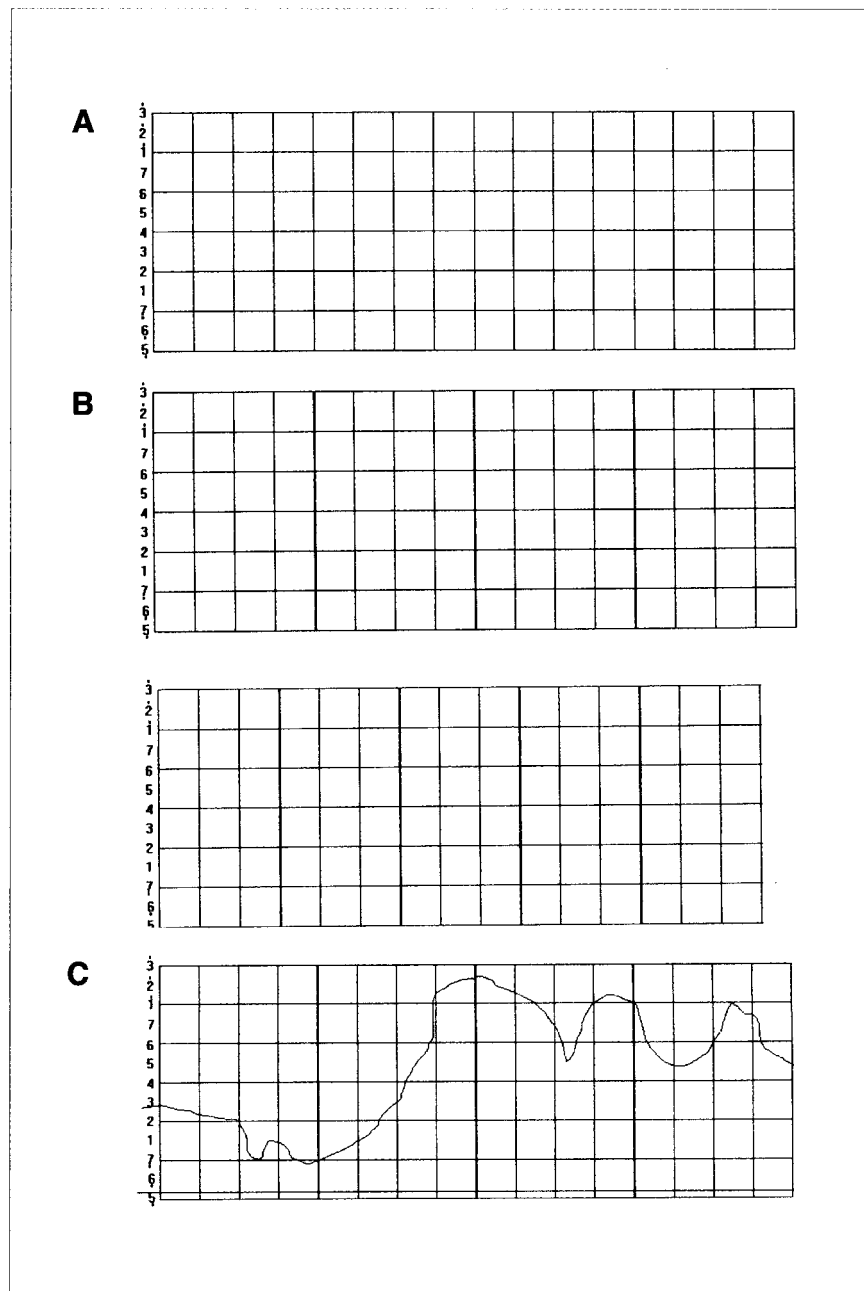
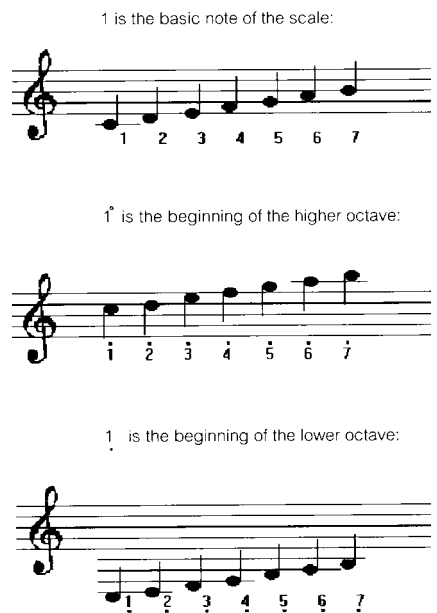


Fig. 3. Three scales based on a system of eight tones. This figure indicates the notation used for the basic scale and higher and lower octaves. © Luang Paw Charoen Pancharad



4/4 0 _ _ _

3/4 0 _ _

1/2 0 _

1/4 0

4/8 0000

4/16 0000

0.

Examples

= $\overline{000}$ = 0.0 = $\overline{0.0.0}$

Applied to our example:

$\overline{0.0000}$ 00 | 0 00 $\overline{0000}$ 0 | 0.0. $\overline{0000}$ 0 | 0_ $\overline{00}$ $\overline{00}$.

Fig. 6. The code used on the cards. A zero stands for a note; a zero filled with black represents a pause. (© Luang Paw Charoen Panchard)

There they made a meditative composition based on pentatonic scales, which they called *Earth Message* (EM). They then performed ultrasonic brain scans of subjects listening to *EM*. These brain scans showed that people listening to the Russians' version of Earth Music go into a deep state of meditation. Through the brain scans, this team of composers and psychologists demonstrated that their pentatonic music has a meditative and relaxing effect:

An electroencephalograph (EEG) scan performed on subjects listening to the music "showed the highest concentration of brain vibrations and the activation of functions in the area of the pineal gland"; after the music was played, "we were able to register the enrichment of the protein content of the body fluids as well as improved binding of phosphorus in the protein fractions of the body fluids." The researchers contrasted this condition with "strong egotistic status, stressed mood and depression . . . shown to decrease molecular mass of the proteins in the body fluids" [6].

However, from the point of view of Luang Paw Charoen, the only thing that the brain scans prove is that people relax when they listen to certain kinds of music. While the Russians emphasize the meditative state that EM induces, Charoen emphasizes the connectedness that occurs when a person enters into the process of finding his or her line and discovering its infinite potential.

At TKB, *Earth Message* is sometimes played to patients who are nervous or have difficulties sleeping. They seem to find it quite beneficial. The music created at TKB, while tonally more inclusive than the pentatonic music created by the Russians, does have healing qualities because the activity of making Earth Music connects the maker with nature. All in-

formation derived from natural life and natural equilibrium and energy is healing, because illness comes from disturbed equilibrium and alienation from nature and sane living.

MUSIC AS TRACE OF KARMIC ACTION

There is no intended relationship between the music produced at TKB and Buddhist teachings, except that Phra Santi uses the music he improvises as an aid to deep meditation. However, one can find a relationship all the same. In Buddhist practice, the "great renunciation" calls for relinquishing the supremacy of the mind (as well as that of

the body). It is good that the notes are already there, given by nature, instead of having to be found by "composing," which can cause an increase of mind-use. Everything that blows up the ego and increases the mind is a hindrance to the "middle way," which requires simplicity and purity of the heart.

There is a paradox in Buddhism that one of the most spiritually noble and rewarding deeds is giving without thinking of any reward. Therefore, all of the products of the monastery are free. Luang Paw Charoen gives his musical material away to those who are interested in it. Nor are there reformatory intentions in this research. This is a search for pure knowledge. No message is intended.

Some listeners have written words to go with Earth Music compositions. The following is an example of one of these compositions:

I have two souls, one my mother gave me,
 One the sound of stones and water falling.
 Each leaf which falls sings like the white sea.
 The roots of the tree make the earth rumble.

And psyche means both soul and butterfly.
 Falling from this sheath we rise above.
 Rising and falling my mother breathes.
 Beating its wings the butterfly will sing.

Where can I go when the forest is clear?
 Who will recreate nature's vast song book?
 What joy exists to sleep on her floor?

Fig. 7. The dodecapronic or 12-tone scale by which a transcription including the true tone levels (tones and semi-tones) is possible. (© Luang Paw Charoen Panchard)

The chromatic scale consists of twelve sounds in equal intervals. The transposition into Luangpor Charoen's scheme could be done with the following code:

1	C	1 1/2 = C sharp/D flat
2	D	2 1/2 = D sharp/E flat
3	E	
3 1/2	F	4 = F sharp/G flat
4 1/2	G	5 = G sharp/A flat
5 1/2	A	6 = A sharp/B flat
6 1/2	B	
	etc.	

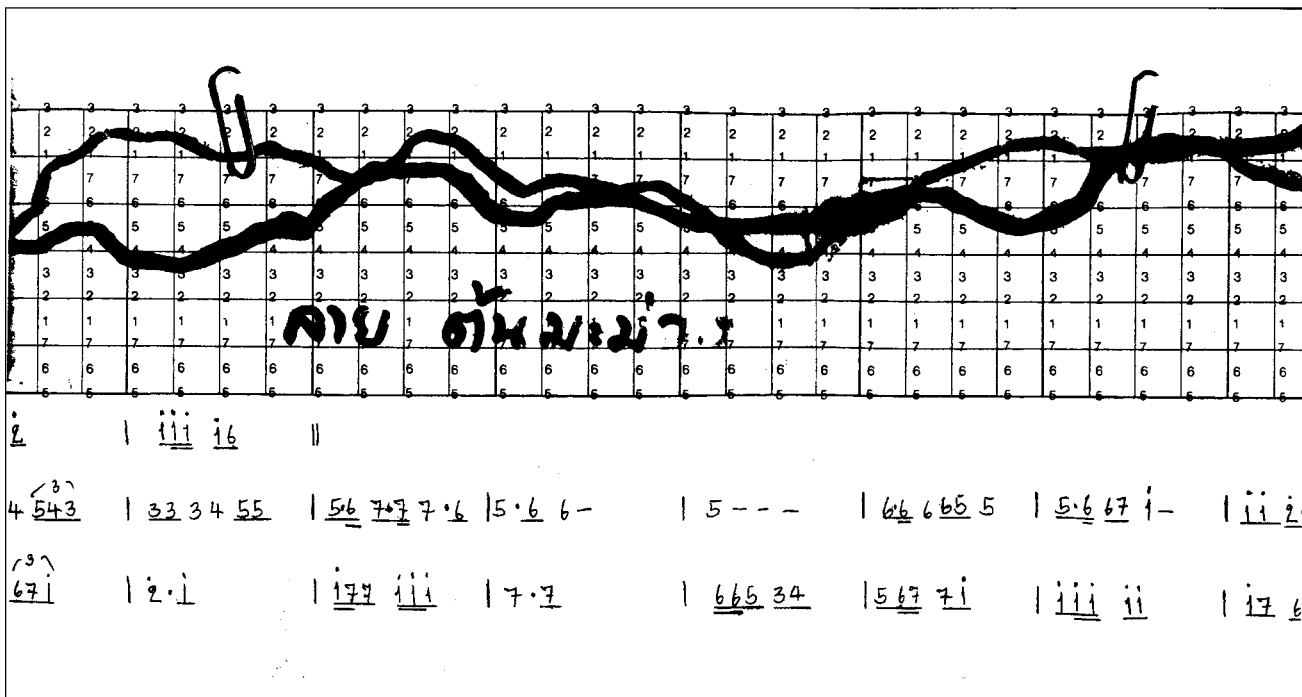


Fig. 8. (top) Transparent plastic superimposed on a grid; (bottom) Charoen's original notations on 4-in-wide strips of cloth. (© Luang Paw Charoen Panchard)

When nothing but wind will fall over your skin?

Rise then my soul which lies buried in me.

Fly up to the heavens and take your sword.

Rain down on the foolish who rape the earth.

Protect her great voice before it's too late [7].

Thamkrabok provides many cassettes and CDs of pieces and compositions, mostly performed on the organ or through Studio. Luang Paw Charoen explains some of his ideas on the sleeve of this CD:

This music reflects life and the orders given to us by the earth. It also testifies to the Karmic Law: that "the action never dies." According to the nature of the cosmos, nothing gets lost. The effects of all kinds of forms, sounds, flavors and tastes can go on for aeons. The person who gets touched by this music will be able to experience directly its meaning according to the level of his or her own inner clarity. The commandments given by Mother Earth through earthquakes, lightning and thunder can be understood by the one who has the ears to listen. Who can escape from the powerful thunder, that voice of warning, which makes us look for shelter, in order to save ourselves from the exposure to lightning?

Even the enlightened individual has to consider the voice of the earth and sky, especially when the question arises, whether to leave the earth or to stay longer.

All the beings that have ever died have been conserved in the different layers of

the ground. They can reappear in the form of sound. There is a record of every action in the world, from the appearance of a river to the series of actions done by a human being. It is like the shiny trace of a snail on a rainy road, still visible after the snail's passing by.

By this method the trace of "the action that never dies" can for the first time be perceived in the form of music. Just as

the crack in the ground or in a relic may give us information about its degree of devastation, we can get well-defined information through the mourning sounds of a melody.

It is time that through Luang Paw Charoen's method the inhabitants of this world get a stimulus to become conscious that "the action never dies." This insight could increase their responsibility as well

Fig. 9. An excerpt from one of Phra Santi Saengnimitchai's compositions. (© Luang Paw Charoen Panchard)



as their liveliness. Listen to the music, open your heart and soul. Expand your consciousness. Nature talks to you all the time. Harmonize yourself. Tune yourself to hear more from our mother Earth about the Prime Beauty of Nature, Simplicity at the Highest [8].

References and Notes

1. See <east-westdetox.org.uk/abbott.htm>.
2. Supaphon Kanverayetin, "Thamkrabok Monk in Search of Nature's Sound of Music," *Bangkok Post*, 28 Dec. 1987, XLII, No. 360, sec 3, p. 1.
3. The *tudong* is an annual spiritual pilgrimage made on foot, in which participants sleep under umbrellas in nature. The word comes from the Pali *duttanga*, which means practices to shake off defilements. The sweat occurs because the pilgrimage takes place in April, which is the hottest month of the year in Thailand.

4. See <www.yohea.com/story_monk.shtml>.

5. See <www.yohea.com/story_monk.shtml>. The scientists who participated were G.I. Shipov of the International Institute for Theoretical and Applied Physics in Moscow; Narong Nimsakul of the Institute of Modern Medicine in Bangkok; A.B. Burlakov, a geneticist at Moscow State University; N.A. Naumov of the Institute of Space Research and the Institute of Applied Mathematics; V.L. Voeikov of the biology department at Moscow State University; O.I. Kaekina, a Moscow neurologist, Russia; and M. Donnya, also of Moscow; see <www.yohea.com/contrib_em.shtml>.

6. See <www.yohea.com/luang_por.shtml>.

7. "Sound of the Soul," by Sidsadee, in *Music from the Earth*, written and edited by monks at TKB and published by TKB in 1999.

8. CD notes from *Earth Rhythm*, TKB, 2000, translated from the Thai by Chi Suganya and Phra Hans.

Manuscript received 29 August 2002.

Born in 1948 in Switzerland, Phra Hans Ulrich Kaempfer is a monk in TKB Monastery responsible for the detoxification and rehabilitation of Western patients. He has played classical guitar for 20 years. He made major contributions to the book Sounds of the Earth, which was published by TKB in 1999.

Sheila Pinkel is an artist and Associate Professor of Art at Pomona College, Claremont, California, whose research about the Hmong and the aftermath of the Indochina Wars led her to TKB in 2000. Since 1990 she has done extensive research on the lives of Cambodian and Hmong refugees living in Southeast Asia and the United States.

ANNOUNCING

Leonardo Music Journal Volume 13

Groove, Pit and Wave—Recording, Transmission and Music

Despite Thomas Edison's assumption that the gramophone was nothing more than a sonic autograph album, suitable only for playing back the speeches of famous people, over the last 100 years recording has radically transformed the composition, dissemination and consumption of music. Similarly, the business-like dots and dashes of Morse and Marconi have evolved into a music-laden web of radio masts, dishes, satellites, cables and servers. Sound is encoded in grooves on vinyl, particles on tape and pits in plastic; it travels as acoustic pressure, electromagnetic waves and pulses of light.

The rise of the DJ in the last two decades has signaled the arrival of the medium as the instrument—the crowning achievement of a generation for whom tapping the remote control is as instinctive as tapping two sticks together. Turntables, CD players, radios, tape recorders (and their digital emulations) are *played*, not merely heard; scratching, groove noise, CD glitches, tape hiss and radio interference are the sound of music, not sound effects. John Cage's 1960 "Cartridge Music" has yet to enter the charts, but its sounds are growing more familiar.

For *Leonardo Music Journal* Vol. 13 we consider the role of recording and/or transmission in the creation, performance and distribution of music.

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