

Resital



E-ISSN 2338-6770

Submitted date : May 28th, 2025
Revised date : June 13th, 2025
Accepted date : July 8th, 2025

Correspondence Address:
College of Music, Mahidol University
Salaya 25/25 Phutthamonthon Sai 4
Road Salaya, Phutthamonthon
Nakhonpathom, 73170 Thailand.
E-mail: tanarat.cha@mahidol.ac.th

Reimagining Thai, Jazz, and Classical Musical Identities in “Phosop”: The Music of Awakening the Spirit

Tanarat Chaichana^{1*}

¹ Jazz Department, College of Music, Mahidol University

Abstract: Historically, Eurocentrism has profoundly influenced the development, perception, and evaluation of cross-cultural music, shaping composers' perspectives and reinforcing biases related to notions of identity and authenticity. This dynamic also exposes underlying power imbalances between Western and non-Western cultures, especially in musical collaborations. In response, this paper advocates for a reconciliatory approach that addresses these issues and strengthens the concept of decolonization in music composition. This study examines an original composition for orchestra, jazz quartet, and khaen, titled “Phosop,” identifying how it embodies the principles of cultural recognition, the dismantling of hierarchical structures, and the promotion of collective participation through a deliberate process that integrates jazz, classical, and Isan Nuea music. The collaborative interaction among these distinct styles exemplifies a shared musical dialogue that balances individual expression with collective creation, honoring diverse cultural heritages. Eventually, this work advocates for a participatory and dialogic model of music-making that fosters inclusivity, encouraging composers to critically engage with the histories and contributions of various musical traditions by adopting inclusive practices. These practices aim to elevate and honor cultural narratives through artistic work, thereby challenging Eurocentrism in global or cross-cultural music composition. Such efforts contribute to the cultivation of a more equitable and dynamic global musical landscape, fostering cross-cultural understanding and amplifying diverse voices.

Keywords: Decolonization; Jazz; Isan Nuea music; Classical; Cross-cultural music; Global music



© 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

1. Introduction

Throughout history, many prominent Western composers have engaged with non-Western musical traditions, either through direct collaboration or by drawing inspiration from their distinctive sounds and styles. A well-known example is Claude Debussy's fascination with Javanese Gamelan music, which profoundly influenced his development of new musical languages that enriched Western art music (Gunawan et al., 2023). Similarly, Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot* reflects an interest in Eastern themes, interpreted through a Western lens (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000). While these instances exemplify genuine exploration and curiosity, they also raise critical questions about authenticity and cultural identity. Such musical exchanges can inadvertently reinforce existing power imbalances by marginalizing the cultures they reference. This dynamic is reflected in the dominant presence of Western musical forms in global media and hierarchies that prioritize European traditions, often perpetuating stereotypes about non-Western cultures (Boyce-Tillman, 2007).

These biases continue to shape perceptions of identity and authenticity for non-Western cultures, revealing underlying power imbalances in cross-cultural interactions. When elements of non-Western traditions are incorporated into Western music, they are often portrayed as exotic or 'other,' highlighting a significant imbalance in which the originating cultures remain marginalized and underrepresented within Western narratives (Taruskin, 2006). This raises critical concerns about the authenticity of such interactions, as they can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or distort the cultural contexts they aim to reflect. Historically, Western dominance has often overshadowed non-Western traditions, entrenching hierarchical structures that marginalize non-Western voices and subvert genuine cultural exchange (Kim, 2017a). Addressing these issues requires careful reflection on the ethics of cross-cultural musical collaborations and a critical awareness of the power dynamics at play.

Jazz, recognized as one of America's most influential art forms, exemplifies how a rich tapestry of cultural influences can shape a genre rooted in African American traditions. Emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, jazz is characterized by innovative rhythms, improvisation, and the blending of styles such as blues, ragtime, and gospel (Gioia, 2011). Jazz pioneers like Duke Ellington exemplify how cultural exchange, driven by musical innovation, can expand artistic boundaries. Ellington's fusion of jazz orchestration with classical elements expanded the scope of African American musical practice, incorporating influences from South America, the Middle East, and East Asia, and contributing to a vibrant and globally resonant genre (Stokes, 2004). As jazz evolved, its compositions increasingly drew from diverse cultural

sources, fostering cross-traditional dialogue and creativity. This trend has also grown increasingly in recent years, particularly in the Southeast Asian region, including Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Mazlan et al., 2024). However, this musical hybridity also presents opportunities and challenges, particularly concerning representation, authenticity, and power dynamics, paralleling issues encountered in classical music. Some jazz musicians, often unaware of the fine distinctions between cultural appreciation and appropriation, may neglect to engage with the authentic practices of other cultures (Agawu, 2016). Recognizing the line between inspiration and exploitation is crucial for cultivating genuine, ethically responsible cross-cultural exchanges in jazz and classical music.

George E. Lewis, a pivotal figure in contemporary music, makes significant contributions to discussions on cultural identity through innovative approaches that bridge Western and African American musical practices. Born in Chicago in 1952, Lewis immersed himself in the city's vibrant musical scene, drawing inspiration from his African American heritage (Krakow, 2024). His early experiences shaped a cross-cultural music concept that blended formal Western training with improvisation rooted in African American musical traditions. This duality informs his work, placing him at the intersection of "Afrological" and "European" perspectives—a classification acknowledging contrasting yet complementary structures in a practical musical exchange context (Lewis, 1996a). Lewis's contributions extend beyond musical practice to include philosophical and social explorations that challenge conventions and foster a deeper understanding of cross-cultural music practices. By examining Lewis's insights, composers gain valuable perspectives on the evolving nature of music in a globalized world, where interactions among cultural traditions continuously inspire and transform the artistic landscape. His concepts encourage a reevaluation of music as a medium for cultural dialogue, emphasizing the importance of understanding and respecting diverse influences. Therefore, understanding Lewis's views prompts a reconsideration of creative expression and the structures governing musical practice amidst the complexities of cultural identity in an interconnected world. In this context, music's decolonization emerges as a form of resistance and a catalyst for ongoing evolution (Lewis, 2008a).

As artists and composers engage in cross-cultural collaborations, Eurocentrism raises critical questions about authenticity, representation, and the ethics of cultural exchange. Often, Western frameworks predominate, overshadowing the rich diversity of global sounds and styles, which can lead to homogenized musical practices and overlooked cultural nuances. Building on George E. Lewis's insights, this paper advocates for alternative approaches to cross-cultural music composition that integrate various traditions, particularly Western classical, jazz, and Isan Nuea music,

grounded in a thorough understanding of their cultural contexts. It demonstrates a practical process for collaborative, respectful, and creatively blended composition methods that aim to foster more meaningful dialogues. As audiences become increasingly interconnected in a globalized society, adopting an ethical approach rooted in mutual respect and cultural sensitivity is essential. This paper provides an example of how authentic, inclusive, and reconciliatory musical dialogue can be cultivated in such a context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Eurocentrism in Cross-Cultural Music Making

Eurocentrism is a worldview that centers European culture, history, and values, often resulting in the marginalization or exclusion of other cultural expressions. Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" investigates this tendency, describing how Western cultures perceive and depict the East as exotic, backward, and uncivilized, thereby reinforcing the notion of Western superiority (Said, 1978). Eurocentrism in music has historically influenced the creation, understanding, and valuation of practices across different cultures. Its emergence is closely tied to colonial expansion, during which European powers imposed their cultural norms upon colonized nations. This process entrenched the idea of Western musical superiority in global consciousness, positioning Western music as the standard by which all other styles are measured. Scholars such as ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood have argued that privileging Western music has marginalized indigenous musical traditions and fostered a narrow definition of what constitutes "legitimate" music (Hood, 1971).

Carfoot (2016) highlights that colonial legacies continue to influence contemporary musical practices, affecting both production and narrative framing. Colonial histories are embedded in the classification and valuation of genres, generating systemic biases that favor Western forms while marginalizing others. Additionally, examining power dynamics in global musical exchanges reveals that representation is often linked to privilege and authority. Eurocentric principles tend to amplify certain voices while silencing others, which can lead to a homogenization of musical expression and undermine the authenticity of diverse cultural practices.

To effectively challenge dominant Eurocentric narratives in music, scholars emphasize the importance of understanding socio-cultural contexts, elevating marginalized voices, and recognizing the agency of these voices in shaping musical identities. This approach underscores the necessity for ethnographically grounded methods that center on local epistemologies, social structures, and cultural meanings, thereby addressing inequalities rooted in colonial and imperial hierarchies (Nettl, 2005). Additionally, Kim (2017b) advocates for creating equitable, non-hierarchical

intercultural collaborations by dismantling existing power structures and moving beyond Eurocentric ideologies, emphasizing that genuine musical exchange requires acknowledging both the cultural and contextual significance of music and its aesthetic qualities. Without such efforts, global music industries risk perpetuating inequalities, appropriating non-Western music, and sustaining Western-centric standards that marginalize contributions from diverse cultural origins.

As a result, this push for equity highlights the importance of acknowledging differences and fostering intercultural communication that is more than superficial or commercial. Viewing music as a dynamic, fluid cultural exchange necessitates confronting biases in scholarly and practical analyses. Embracing this approach can help prevent stereotypes and misrepresentations associated with Eurocentric perspectives, leading to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the vast diversity of global musical expression.

2.2 George E. Lewis on Decolonization in Music Composition

2.2.1. Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives

Lewis's presentation of the Afrological perspective is deeply rooted in the cultural stories and practices of the African diaspora. It views improvisation as a fluid, community-centered process that emphasizes collective participation and shared experience. This approach draws on various African musical traditions, where improvisation is often central and intertwined with storytelling, rhythm, and call-and-response patterns. Afrological improvisation fosters a sense of immediacy and relevance, with artists actively engaging with their audience to create unique musical events that resonate with cultural memory and social context. It celebrates musical discourse as an ongoing, evolving conversation rather than a fixed structure, allowing for individual agency and creativity within a communal framework (Lewis, 1996b).

In contrast, the European perspective is rooted in Western classical music traditions, characterized by structured notation and often hierarchical approaches to composition and performance. This paradigm emphasizes accuracy, formality, and strict adherence to established norms – elements that can overshadow the spontaneous and interactive qualities highlighted in the Afrological view. Here, improvisation is often seen as a technical exercise, typically confined to specific contexts that prioritize individual virtuosity over collaborative exploration. As a result, European improvisation tends to create a dichotomy between the artist and the audience, positioning the performer as an authority whose role shapes the listener's experience.

Lewis proposes a pathway toward reconciling these two distinct philosophies by fostering dialogue and integration. He advocates that musicians and composers develop an awareness of both paradigms, embracing the creative potential that lies at their intersection. This reconciliation can lead to new forms of improvisation and musical expression that honor African American cultural practices without dismissing the formal techniques of Western music. In essence, Lewis's proposal for reconciliation encourages an inclusive approach that values both community-centered improvisation (Afrological) and individual technical mastery (Eurological). This synthesis not only broadens the expressive possibilities of improvised music in Western contemporary music but also challenges normative hierarchies, fostering a more equitable and dialogic musical landscape where diverse cultural practices mutually enrich one another (Lewis, 1996c).

2.2.2 A Power Stronger Than Itself

In *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, Lewis explores the concept of decolonization in music by analyzing how the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) challenges conventional Western musical paradigms and cultural dominance. Established in the 1960s in Chicago, the AACM represents a significant movement that redefines artistic expression through the lens of African American experiences and cultural heritage. Lewis explains that the AACM embodies decolonization by fostering artistic freedom and encouraging musicians to draw inspiration from their own cultural roots rather than conforming to mainstream musical standards. This movement aimed to dismantle existing structural inequalities within the music industry and provided a platform for innovative, culturally diverse expressions (Lewis, 2008b).

Importantly, the AACM's philosophy emphasizes community and collaboration, providing an alternative to the competitive and commercially driven aspects of the music industry. Through collective creation, the AACM fosters an environment where musicians can freely experiment with new sounds and techniques, reconnecting with different cultural traditions that have often been marginalized or overlooked. By spotlighting the work of AACM members, Lewis illustrates how their contributions challenge colonial narratives in music, encouraging a reconsideration of the historical and structural forces that have shaped American musical development. Lewis also views jazz, an inherently African American art form, as a dynamic and continually evolving platform for creativity, cultural expression, and social commentary. He emphasizes the importance of improvisation, collaboration, and community practiced in jazz in its expansion beyond its traditional boundaries. Lewis advocates for understanding jazz not merely as a genre but as a vital cultural movement that

confronts issues of identity, race, and innovation, reflecting and addressing the complexities of contemporary society.

Finally, Lewis argues that the AACM's efforts are crucial to the ongoing process of decolonizing music, creating space for new conversations about identity, culture, and artistic expression in today's musical landscape. This perspective underscores the importance of self-determination and the revitalization of cultural narratives, demonstrating how music can serve as a powerful catalyst for social change and artistic liberation (Lewis, 2008c).

2.3 The Musical Practice of Northeast Thailand (Isan Nuea music)

Charoen Chaichonphairote, a prominent Thai ethnomusicologist, identifies three distinct musical cultures in northeastern Thailand: the musical tradition of the northern region (Isan Neua), which includes fourteen provinces, significantly shaped by Thai-Lao ethnic group, indicated by the red square in Figure 1; the musical practices of the lower region, known as Isan Tai, comprising three provinces and primarily influenced by Khmer music; and the musical culture of the Thai-Khorat people from Nakhon Ratchasima Province, which has influenced the music of central Thailand (Chaichonphairote, 1983)

Figure 1: The upper region of northeastern Thailand (indicated by the red square; Hafner & Keyes, 2025)



The Isan Nuea music style reflects the lifestyle of Thai-Lao communities residing in the broad plains, where the Mekong River serves as both a symbol of their existence and a vital natural resource. This is especially true for agriculture, as the area often experiences harsh weather conditions, including severe droughts, particularly during the dry season that typically lasts from late January to mid-May. As a result, the people of Isan Nuea use singing and instruments to alleviate their hardships in challenging weather conditions. They rely on this music to connect with local spirits for support when ill (*lum phi faa*), enjoy leisure time after working in the paddy fields, or accompany religious processions (*hae*), such as *hae bangfai* or *hae phawet* (Sumrongthong et al., 2017).

The music of Isan Nuea frequently features the *phin*, a small, fretted lute, and the *pong lang*, a wooden melodic percussion instrument like the xylophone, among its own collection of specific musical instruments. Among these, the *khaen*, a bamboo mouth-organ traditionally played in northeastern Thailand and Laos, stands out as one of the most iconic. During performance, the player adjusts the pitch by covering the small holes drilled into each of the pipes. The *khaen paet*, which features sixteen pipes in two rows, typically spans a two-octave diatonic scale comparable to Western musical temperament and is widely used in Isan Nuea music. This versatile instrument can serve both for solos and to accompany singers, such as in *molam* performances. Unlike Western mouth organs, where the fingerings are arranged sequentially from low to high pitches, the fingerings on a *khaen paet* can seem unconventional or confusing; nevertheless, they are well-suited to the pentatonic scales and traditional melodies of Isan Nuea music (Miller & Williams, 2008).

The *khaen* in Isan Nuea functions primarily as a leading instrument, providing a tuning pitch for ensembles and guiding musical dynamics, articulations, and tempos during group performances. A key element of Isan Nuea music is *lai*, which refers to the modes and melodic lines of traditional pieces. This concept originates from *khaen* performances, where local musicians refer to it as *lai mae bot* (fundamental modes). Highly experienced or respected *khaen* players are often honored with the title *maw khaen*, recognizing their skill and vital role as masters of the instrument in preserving the oral traditions of this musical style (Champadaeng et al., 2023).

Another notable feature produced by the *khaen* is a drone. As with Hindustani classical Indian music, *khaen* performances also feature sustained pitches, referred to as *sieng sep*. These sustained notes, including the root, perfect fourth, perfect fifth, and octave, are clearly heard in Isan Nui music and are produced when the *khaen* player continuously covers the holes that correspond to these pitches with their fingers. Alternatively, players may fill these holes with adhesive substances called *kitsoot* to achieve the same drone effect during their performance (Adler, 2020).

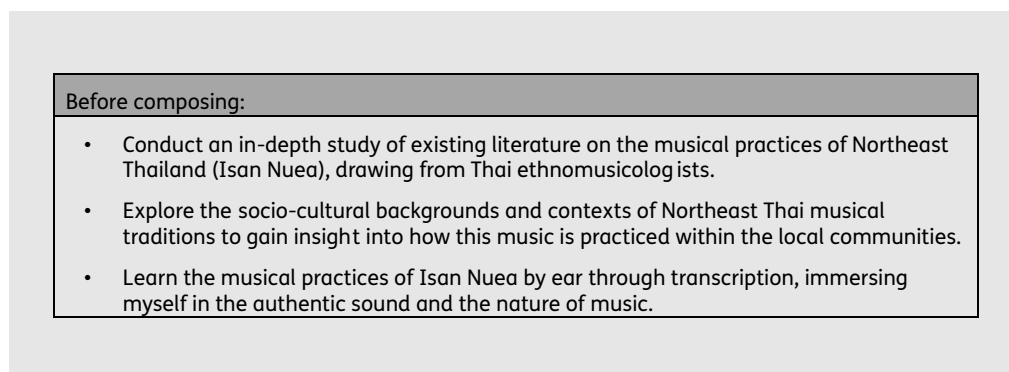
3. Methods

The Making of “Phosop”

In line with the approaches advocated by Kim (2017) and Lewis (2002, 2008), avoiding Eurocentrism and decolonizing cross-cultural music composition requires a thoughtful and respectful engagement that critically addresses the underlying power dynamics between cultures. Although I possess formal training in Western classical and jazz music, I recognize the importance of broadening my understanding of the musical traditions from Northeast Thailand. To do so authentically, I chose to learn the Isan Nuea style primarily by ear, immersing myself in the music in a manner similar to that of Isan Nuea practitioners, as described in ethnomusicological literature (e.g., Chaichonphairrote, 1983; Miller & Williams, 2008; Sumrongthong et al., 2017). Furthermore, drawing on Berliner's insights in *Thinking in Jazz* (1994), I adopted a learning approach common among jazz musicians: immersing myself in recordings, listening attentively, and playing along to internalize the subtleties of jazz language and improvisation. Inspired by this method, I selected two performances of Isan Nuea music by *khaen* players Buahong Phajung (see Wat Pa Ban Koh, 2011) and Sombat Simlah (see Simlah, 2005). I transcribed these performances to deepen my understanding of Isan Nuea musical practices within Western notation and to present this material to other composers or performers possessing formal training in Western classical and jazz music. However, my evaluation remains centered on the perspectives of Isan Nuea practitioners, emphasizing an approach that prioritizes authentic representation over reliance solely on Western methodologies and traditions. This process aimed to ensure a genuine engagement with the tradition and to honor its cultural context and practices before beginning work on my original composition.

Guided by this philosophy, my composition process is based on the following principles:

Figure 2: The entire structure of the composition process of “Phosop”



While composing:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure that the compositional process respects and honors the musical heritage of the three distinct styles involved Western classical, jazz, and Isan Nuea.• Prioritize ethical representation of different musical practices being integrated throughout the creative process.• Incorporate the distinct musical elements while understanding their authentic meanings.• Foster opportunities for collaboration among classical, jazz, and Northeast Thai (Isan Nuea) musicians, encouraging input for improvisatory expression and creative exchange from all participants.
After composing:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continue reflecting on my compositional perspectives to identify and address potential biases or neglect of the authentic meanings within these three musical practices.• Document the entire research and composition process through videos, audio recordings, and written narratives.• Share the outcomes and insights with academic communities, practitioners, and the public to promote awareness of decolonization in music.

This methodology emphasizes collaboration, respect, equality, and ethical engagement, establishing a foundation for creating meaningful cross-cultural music that genuinely honors and integrates the intertwined traditions involved.

4. Results

“Phosop,” the Music of Awakening the Spirit

The title “Phosop” is Thai for “the goddess of rice,” and I composed this piece to honor and celebrate the vital contributions of Thai farmers, a significant segment of the Thai population. It recognizes their unwavering dedication to the nation's rich heritage and seeks to encapsulate the profound connection between the rhythms of nature and the lives of farmers, showcasing their enduring spirit.

“Phosop” is composed in three distinct passages, reflecting themes of freedom, gratitude, and unity. Divided into sections labeled A through J (see Figure 3), the composition seeks to achieve a harmonious balance among its varied styles. One notable segment allows the jazz quartet complete freedom for improvisation, while another highlights orchestral instruments influenced by contemporary music. Additionally, a dedicated section for *khaen* performance enables the musician to improvise and interact dynamically with both the orchestra and the jazz quartet.

Characterized by a rich orchestral arrangement, “Phosop” seamlessly weaves traditional Thai musical elements with the expressive freedom of jazz improvisation,

resulting in a distinctive auditory experience. The instrumentation of “Phosop” includes 23 different orchestral instruments along with four instruments from the jazz quartet: alto saxophone, piano, double bass, and drum set. Additionally, it features the *khaen*, a bamboo mouth organ integral to the cultural landscape of northeastern Thailand.

Figure 3: The musical form of “Phosop”

Sections:	A	B and C	D	E and F
Events:	The first theme of “Phosop” created by the call-and-response techniques.	Collective improvisation by the alto saxophone and <i>khaen</i> . A written solo guide for the <i>khaen</i> part, inspired by transcriptions of performances by Sombat Simlah and Buahong Phajung.	The second theme of “Phosop” was created through free improvisation.	Both the piano and trombone parts, featuring opportunities for free or improvisatory expression
Measures:	mm.1-30	mm.31-62	mm. 63-92	mm.93-106

Sections:	F and G	H and I	J
Events:	The third theme of ‘Phosop’ was developed through a combination of intervallic patterns derived from the <i>khaen</i> transcriptions, call-and-response techniques, and free improvisation.	The improvisation of <i>khaen</i> .	Collective improvisation by the alto saxophone and <i>khaen</i> . The four themes of “Phosop” were crafted with rhythmic displacement and syncopation, highlighting African American musical traditions.
Measures:	mm.107-164	mm.165-200	mm.201-230

A performance of the piece available on YouTube (See Thailand Phil, 2024) features esteemed soloists on the *khaen*, a traditional instrument from northeastern Thailand, renowned for its enchanting sounds that often echo across the region's rice paddies. Written for Western symphony orchestra and jazz quartet, “Phosop” pays tribute to diverse musical cultures and emphasizes their equality, blending jazz, classical, and Thai music into a cohesive whole.

The premiere of “Phosop” was performed by the Thailand Philharmonic Orchestra in collaboration with “Pomelo Town,” a renowned Thai jazz band. The ensemble featured Noppadol Tirataradol on bass, Krit Buranavitayawut on alto saxophone, Darin Pantoomkomol on piano, and Sarute Wjitwechakarn on drums. A notable highlight of this performance is the Thai *khaen* artist Tontrakul Kaewyong. This event was part of the Thailand International Jazz Conference (TIJC) 2024, held in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand.

To watch the performance of “Phosop,” please visit:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqIZ-VKfb-o>

Figure 4: The performance of “Phosop” in the Four Dances for Devas Concert as part of the 2024 Thailand International Jazz Conference. Image by Thailand Phil, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqIZ-VKfb-o>



5. Discussions

As Berliner (1994) explains, many jazz musicians immerse themselves in recordings, listening attentively and playing along to internalize the subtleties of jazz language and improvisation. Berliner emphasizes that this approach helps develop a sense of phrasing, timing, and style, which are essential for jazz performance. Similarly, I have applied this method to my learning of Isan Nuea music by transcribing recordings, which has allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of Thai music from a jazz composer's perspective. To gain an understanding of motivic development, which also plays a crucial role in this *khaen* performance, and to demonstrate how Isan Nuea musicians utilize modes in constructing melodies and improvisational elements, I transcribed a live recording of a performance of “Lai Se” by Buahong Phajung, a renowned *khaen* player from Udon Thani Province. Recognized for musical excellence in both Thailand and Laos, Buahong has also contributed to Isan Nuea music education organizations along the Thai-Lao border.

An interesting aspect of this transcription is how Buahong Phajung, the maw *khaen*, performs “Lai Se” to convey the musical story as he improvises on his instrument. Notably, he predominantly uses intervallic patterns starting from E (see Figure 5), such as E to G, E to A, and E to B. Additionally, Buahong incorporates several sixteenth-note motifs, such as A-G-E, as seen in measures 9–11 and measure 23 in the same figure. These motifs help intertwine melodic ideas from previous patterns, while

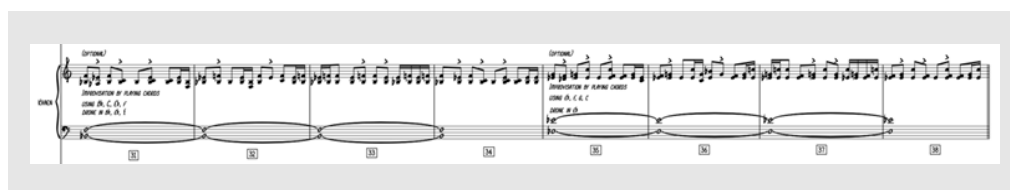
the rhythmic accents on the upbeat are evident at various points throughout the transcription.

Figure 5: Transcription by the author of Buahong Phajung's performance of "Lai Se" – red circles indicate the use of the pitch E.



Having analyzed the transcription of this *khaen* performance, I began to transform this traditional music practice into "Phosop" by composing a dedicated part for the *khaen* player. In this passage, I drew inspiration from the rhythmic patterns and accents emphasized in the piece I transcribed, incorporating eighth and sixteenth notes accented on the upbeats. The primary focus of my composition was to develop a motif based on intervallic patterns, primarily centered around B \flat notes (see Figure 6), inspired by Buahong Phajung's playing style and the Isan Nuea tradition. Furthermore, I emphasized the importance of artistic freedom, allowing the *khaen* player to improvise over the written part, thereby reflecting George Lewis's concept of expressive improvisation.

Figure 6: Passage featuring the *khaen* in "Phosop," mm. 31–38.



Another notable feature of Isan Nuea music is the *thamnong kern*, an introductory section that generally occurs before *thamnong lak*, which features the melody parts. *Thamnong kern* is often created through improvisation by the Isan Nuea players known as *don*. To illustrate how *thamnong kern* is practiced, I selected a transcription of Sombat Simlah, a master *khaen* player from Mahasarakham Province, performing his rendition of "Lai Teay Kong," a well-known Isan Nuea composition.

As shown in Figure 7, Sombat Simlah begins his *thamnong kern* with 13 measures of rapid rhythms, which I have labeled as section A. This segment features his spontaneous improvisation with sixteenth notes based on a B \flat minor pentatonic scale, centering primarily around the pitch F. He employs intervallic patterns similar to those in Buahong Phajung's performance, building melodic movement predominantly from F to E \flat , F to B \flat , and F to A \flat to structure the melody of the *thamnong kern*. These intervallic patterns predominantly feature perfect fourths and fifths when compared with Western harmonic conventions. The performance culminates in the sound of a B \flat minor chord, constructed from four notes, serving as the conclusion to this introductory section (*thamnong kern*).

Figure 7: Thamnong kern section of Sombat Simlah's performance of "Lai Teay Kong," transcribed by the author



To incorporate these elements of Sombat Simlah's *thamnong kern* into "Phosop," I adapted these techniques in two key areas. First, I applied the intervallic patterns observed in Sombat Simlah's performance to the piccolo, first and second flute, and first and second clarinet parts. In these sections, the melodic movement primarily revolves around G notes, often transitioning to other pitches such as G to B, G to C, or G to A \flat (see Figure 8). The second technique involves the use of rapid sixteenth-note rhythms reminiscent of those in Sombat Simlah's performance. Additionally, I emphasized the use of fourth intervals to build chords, as exemplified by the Am11 chord in measures 189–194 in the *khaen* part, again inspired by the sound of Sombat Simlah's performance (see Figure 9). This process allows me to integrate musical material drawn from traditional Isan Nuea performance, thereby broadening my compositional approach.

Figure 8: Intervallic patterns derived from Isan Nuea in the orchestration of “Phosop,” mm. 143–149



Figure 9: The khaen part in “Phosop,” mm. 189–194



As George Lewis notes, unlike traditional Western classical composition, which often emphasizes hierarchical structures and focuses on harmony, melody, counterpoint, and theme development through variations, African American musical practices, including their compositional processes, tend to be more communal and participatory. These practices emphasize collective rhythm and value shared expression and interaction in melody and harmonic development, as exemplified in jazz music. Therefore, I incorporated these elements into my composition, particularly in measures 209–216, as shown in Figure 10. In this section, I emphasized syncopation and rhythmic displacement – characteristic features of jazz – in the wind and brass parts. Additionally, I employed call-and-response techniques similar to those used in jazz improvisation by African American musicians to develop melodic lines. These techniques are evident in the harp, marimba, third flute, and English horn parts, which feature short motifs in sixteenth-note triplets with rhythmic patterns in Eb, Ab, Db, and a call-and-response interplay in motifs based on Db, Bb, and F within the triplet rhythm. Finally, polyphonic texture—an essential feature of African American musical tradition—was integrated throughout this orchestral passage, providing multiple independent layers across different instruments, especially between measures 209 and 216 within the same section. When combined with syncopation, rhythmic displacement, and call-and-response techniques, this approach demonstrates how African musical practices can influence and enrich Western orchestral composition, aligning with the broader concept of decolonization in music.

Figure 10: “Phosop,” mm. 209–216, with orchestral writing that emphasizes African American musical practices

The image displays a page of a musical score, specifically measures 209 through 216. The score is written for a large orchestra, with multiple staves for various instruments including woodwinds, brass, strings, and percussion. The notation is complex, featuring many beamed sixteenth and thirty-second notes, suggesting a fast, rhythmic tempo. The score is arranged in a traditional format with systems of staves. The page number '208' is visible in the top left corner of the score area. The overall style is contemporary and emphasizes intricate rhythmic patterns.

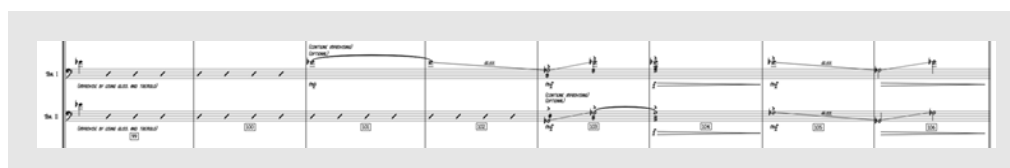
Drawing on George Lewis's concept of Afrological improvisation, which highlights spontaneity and individual expression, I composed a passage in “Phosop” (measures 67–74; Figure 11) to evoke the feeling of spontaneous improvisation. During this section, I initially expressed myself through piano improvisation, disregarding the fundamentals of tonal harmony in Western music theory. This approach enabled me to experiment freely with the piano, liberating me from the constraints of common-practice music theory, and then translate this sense of individual expression into the orchestration for the string sections. In addition, this process allowed me to nurture creative spontaneity, moving away from the conventional harmonic or modal frameworks typically associated with the Western compositional style. As a result, this orchestral section reflects the authentic spirit of the composer, unrestrained by pre-established harmony, form, or interval structure.

Figure 11: String writing in “Phosop,” mm. 67–74, showing composition techniques inspired by spontaneous improvisation



Another key feature of Afrological improvisation, as emphasized by Lewis, is the importance of individual self-expression. To highlight this, I created an opportunity for two trombonists in the orchestra – an environment where improvisation is typically infrequent – to explore this approach by incorporating character sounds through glissandos and tremolos in measures 99–107 (see Figure 12). This technique enables them to stand out within the orchestra, interact with the jazz rhythm section, and enjoy freedom of expression on their instruments, fostering a collaborative relationship with my original composition.

Figure 12: Trombone parts in “Phosop,” mm. 99–106, featuring opportunities for free or improvisatory expression



George Lewis's essay examines the contrast in aesthetic values between Western classical music and African music, noting the emphasis placed on communal participation by Afrological music. This is exemplified through collective improvisation, where multiple instruments improvise simultaneously. In “Phosop,” this collective improvisation between the alto saxophone and *khaen* creates a distinctive dialogue (measures 209–216; see Figure 13). This improvisation facilitates spontaneous communication between two different musical cultures – specifically, Isan Nuea music and jazz. This interaction enables the two musicians to engage in a real-time dialogue, responding to each other's ideas and fostering a creative musical connection. Consequently, the rhythm section also gains a stronger sense of unity and cohesion as they listen to the collaborative improvisation and respond accordingly, resulting in a more integrated performance. Additionally, this collective improvisation is enhanced by the interplay within the polyphonic texture created by the orchestra, as previously shown in Figure 10.

Figure 13: Collective improvisation for the khaen and alto saxophone in “Phosop,” mm. 209–216



Beyond the realm of discussion on compositional techniques, I believe that the entire experience I have gained from composing “Phosop” offers a profound way to reimagine the concept of musical hybridity, revealing it as a deeply immersive and transformative approach. This journey has allowed me to see how cross-cultural practices, particularly in music, can open new avenues of artistic expression. The composition “Phosop” exemplifies this by blending Thai, jazz, and classical music, illustrating how distinct styles can engage in a vibrant dialogue that transcends boundaries. It balances the uniqueness of individual voices with the richness of collective creation, honoring diverse cultural heritages in a way that feels both respectful and revolutionary. This collaborative interaction embodies a participatory and dialogic model of music-making, emphasizing the importance of understanding and respecting various influences in cross-cultural practices. As a reevaluation of music as a vibrant medium for cultural dialogue, this process invites a reconsideration of creative expression and the structures that govern musical practice amidst the complexities of identity in an increasingly interconnected world.

Furthermore, the combination of different musical traditions in “Phosop” reflects a process of reconciliation that challenges Eurocentrism within the global musical landscape through the musical exchange of three distinct musical styles. It challenges hierarchical structures and amplifies collective participation, embodying principles of cultural recognition and dismantling oppressive frameworks. Through its deliberate integration of jazz, classical, and Isan Nuea elements—each resonating through numerous musical examples—the piece fosters authentic dialogue and cultivates a rich, inclusive musical conversation. Such an approach strives to prevent stereotypes and misrepresentations rooted in Eurocentric perspectives, encouraging a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of global musical diversity. Finally, the compositional process behind “Phosop” has helped me redefine the concept of musical hybridity, viewing it not just as a mixture of sounds, but as a powerful act of artistic expression—one that celebrates cultural interconnectedness, authenticity, and the vital exchange of voices across borders.

6. Conclusions

As Kim (2017) and Lewis (2002, 2008) advocate for a reconciliatory approach to decolonization in music—an approach emphasized in this paper—by highlighting the significance of acknowledging socio-cultural and contextual factors, dismantling hierarchical power structures, and promoting collective participation, communication, and respect for traditions, my compositional process embodies these principles. In this context, three distinct musical styles — jazz, classical music, and Isan Nuea music — actively communicate and interact, creating shared musical experiences that

harmonize collaboration and feature opportunities for individual expression. These collective efforts serve as a foundation for equitable performance settings and the development of innovative musical forms that still honor diverse heritages while challenging existing power structures. Together, these interconnected ideas highlight the vital role of participation and dialogue in shaping a more inclusive and dynamic musical landscape, eventually fostering a deeper appreciation for the richness and diversity of global music.

Upon the conclusion of this research, I strongly advocate that composers and performers with training in Western music undertake rigorous critical engagement with and comprehensive education in the historical and socio-cultural contexts of diverse musical traditions. This approach should be prioritized with the aim of cultivating profound respect for and nuanced understanding of the authentic musical practices inherent to these varied traditions. It is also crucial to thoughtfully analyze established musical practices and norms beyond Western paradigms, critically questioning issues of authority and the cultural significance attributed to various styles and compositions. Furthermore, composers and performers should consider producing works that convey the narratives of marginalized communities, highlighting their histories, struggles, and cultural identities, in order to amplify their voices through artistic expression. I believe that my original composition, “Phosop,” exemplifies this approach and can contribute to awakening and promoting these beliefs.

7. Acknowledgments

I would like to formally express my deepest gratitude to the Jazz Department of the College of Music at Mahidol University for their outstanding support and partnership. In particular, I wish to extend special thanks to Mr. Noppadol Tirataradol, the senior lecturer in the Jazz Department and project manager of the Thailand Jazz International Conference. His unwavering dedication to the advancement of jazz education and performance has played a pivotal role in shaping the development of jazz music in Thailand. Through his visionary initiative in organizing the Four Dances for Devas concert, he has brought my original composition to life, emphasizing the concept of decolonization in music composition and showcasing the transformative power of jazz within Thai society.

8. References

Adler, C. (2020, June 17). Khaen: The bamboo free-reed mouth organ of Laos and northeast Thailand: Notes for composers. <https://christopheradler.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/khaen-for-composers.pdf>

- Agawu, K. (2016). Appropriating African music. In *The African imagination in music* (pp. 305–334). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190263201.003.0009>
- Berliner, P. F. (1994). *Thinking in jazz: The infinite art of improvisation*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226044521.001.0001>
- Born, G., & Hesmondhalgh, D. (Eds.). (2000). *Western music and its others: Difference, representation, and appropriation in music*. University of California Press.
- Boyce-Tillman, J. (2007). Music and value in cross-cultural work. In O. Olivier (Ed.), *Music and conflict transformation: Harmonies and dissonances in geopolitics* (pp. 40–52). I.B.Tauris. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755619955.ch-003>
- Carfoot, G. (2016). Musical discovery, colonialism, and the possibilities of intercultural communication through music. *Popular Communication*, 14(3), 178–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2016.1193184>
- Champadaeng, S., Buengbon, A., Sriphet Kla, S., & Sapso, K. (2023). Isan khaen player: Technique, method, and success in playing. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Mahasarakham University*, 38(1), 63–74.
- Charoenchai, C. (1983). *Northeastern folk music*. Department of Music, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University, Mahasarakham Campus.
- Gioia, T. (2011). *The history of jazz* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Gunawan, I., Zikri Z., A., & Bedantara, G., S. “Grain Gamelan”: Adaptation of one more grain Band's songs to gamelan pelog slendro. *Resital:Jurnal Seni Pertunjukan*, 24(3), 288–305. <https://doi.org/10.24821/resital.v24i3.11172>
- Hafner, J. A., & Keyes, C. F. (2025, May 25). Land. In *Thailand, Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Thailand/Land>
- Hood, M. (1971). *The ethnomusicologist*. McGraw-Hill.
- Krakow, S. (2024, September 11). George E. Lewis embodies a unique strain of musical Afrofuturism: The trombonist, composer, improviser, and academic expands the definition of “Black music” in uncountable directions. *Chicago Reader*. <https://chicagoreader.com/music/the-secret-history-of-chicago-music/george-lewis-voyager-trombone-composer-columbia/>
- Kim, J. (2017). Cross-cultural music making: Concepts, conditions, and perspectives. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 42(1), 19–32.
- Lewis, G. E. (1996). Improvised music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological perspectives. Reprinted by permission of *the Black Music Research Journal*, 16(1), 91–122.

- Lewis, G. E. (2008). *A power stronger than itself: The AACM and American experimental music*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226477039.001.0001>
- Mazlan, C. A. N., Abdullah, M. H., Imam Koning, S., Hidayatullah, R., Jamnongsarn, S., & Awang Hassim, D. S. H. (2024). Jazz guitar reharmonization in Malay Asli Music: A case study on harmonic adaptation in pedagogy. *Resital: Jurnal Seni Pertunjukan*, 25(3), 460–516. <https://doi.org/10.24821/resital.v25i3.14907>
- Miller, T., & Williams, S. (Eds.). (2008). *The Garland handbook of Southeast Asian music*. Routledge.
- Nettl, B. (2005). *The study of ethnomusicology: Thirty-one issues and concepts*. University of Illinois Press.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Simlah, S. (2005). Lai Teay Khong [Folk music of E-San Khaen solo, Vol. 5]. *Ocean Media. Spotify*. <https://open.spotify.com/track/6BCPBVMJyMZd4Qn5WyNVvG?si=0f5282436ee343a8>
- Stokes, M. (2004). Music and the global order. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33(1), 47–72. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.33.070203.143916>
- Sumrongthong, T. et al. (2017). *Thai music culture: The North Isan region*. Chulalongkorn University.
- Taruskin, R. (2006). *Music in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: The Oxford History of Western Music*. Oxford University Press.
- Phil, T. (2023, May 31). Four dances for devas (world premiere), Paddy Fields, “Phosop”. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqIZ-VKFb-o>
- Koh, W. P. B. (2011, December 13). Buahong Phajung's performance of Lai se, (0.08–0.53) [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQsIODlore4>
-