Title
Mahagita: Harp and Vocal Music of Burma. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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Author
Garfias, R

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Review
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Recording Reviews


By any analysis this is a recording of significance. It is one of very few recordings of Burmese music and of these it is even more rare because of its high artistic quality. In addition, it is a clear and tangible document of the high point of the Burmese Royal court tradition of many hundred years.

The Mahagitä, in this case, meaning the compendium of great or royal songs, is the base of the Burmese classical music tradition for both the chamber music as well as the gong and drum ensemble, the hsaing. Both ensemble types, while sounding entirely different in style and sonority, nonetheless rely basically on the set of several hundred songs contained in the Mahagitä.

The Mahagitä itself exists in several versions varying as to the inclusion or exclusion of certain particular songs, but all exist in text version only. Recently some Burmese musicians have attempted to transcribe the Mahagitä repertoire but the task is immense and forbidding. I look forward to seeing the effort meet with success before too long I hope.

In the teaching of the repertoire, song and instrumental accompaniment always go together; one is not taught without the other. In its most basic form, the accompaniment consists of two parts: one, the higher voice, outlining the melody; while the second, or lower voice, alternates between providing anchor tones, that are sometimes the lower octave of the main melody note or another pitch, a third, fourth, fifth or ninth below the melody, or at other times joins the melody line alternating note by note in melodic passages. This two-part pattern is more readily noted in watching a performance on the bamboo xylophone, patala, as one can see the left hand playing the second pattern and then watch it jump up to join the melody in a short melodic section.

In Burma great importance is given to the basic underlying accompaniment structure. Its preservation and a clear knowledge and mastery of it are required before a musician can move on to more freely improvised variants. This is where most hsaing performances and many virtuosic piano, patala, or guitar performances of the repertoire depart from but never lose hold of the fundamental pattern.

U Myint Maung was the undisputed master of the repertoire as played on the Burmese harp, the Saung Gauk, until regrettably he died in 2002. Previous masters, such as the late U Ba Than, could play light, delicate, and yet highly technical variations on the basic Mahagitä song, something shown to great advantage on the 1953 Folkways recording Burmese Folk and Traditional Music (FE 4436 LP), sadly now long out of circulation. More often
in real life, U Ba Than, like U Myint Maung, stayed much closer to the fundamental base of the Mahagitá songs and in so doing reinforced their orthodoxy and mastery of the respected tradition. Two years before he died, U Myint Maung proudly gave me a complete set of his recordings of the Kyo songs of the repertoire, only a small initial part of the repertoire but taking up four complete cassettes. On these cassettes his playing adheres almost to the note to the basic pattern. On the present new Smithsonian recording we have a judicious blend of the basic pattern with tasteful and delicate additions. The masterful Myint Maung is joined by one of the very best interpreters of classical music today, Yi Yi Thant.

The performances are uniformly excellent. The CD includes a sampling of most of the major song forms in the Mahagitá compendium. Besides the old court forms, the bwe, tachin gan, and youdaya, there are also a dein, theida, and bole. The bwe and tachin gan along with the Kyo, or cou songs form the oldest part of the classical Burmese song repertoire. Youdaya are songs in the Thai style and are an important mainstay of the repertoire. It is particularly gratifying to have the two pa’pyou songs included on the CD. The pa’pyou songs are complex in form and were the most popular court songs during the last Burmese monarchy. They are graceful and elegant and are here excellently sung by Yi Yi Thant.

The relationship between the harp and voice is fluid and almost improvisatory in feeling. The Burmese spoken language has important tonal elements in it that are even more important in song than in common speech. Certain melodic patterns are associated with specific speech tone patterns, such that it is a challenge to make a song that is graceful and at the same time respects the tone patterns implied in the original poetry. Although the voice part and the harp part are fixed by tradition, the harp part can add small touches and figures that, in the hands of an excellent musician such as Myint Maung, make the music flow gracefully. Yi Yi That’s singing is graceful and effortless and capable of a great range of feeling. In the song, “A Huntsman Enchanted,” her voice takes on an almost playful quality. On the final song on the CD, the very well-known lament “Sein chu ca nyaun,” she expresses deep sadness and a quality of forlorn loneliness.

In the face of the continuing situation in Burma (Myanmar) with little prospect of improvement in the near future, it seems all the more fitting that the tenacity and perseverance of musicians such as these on this recording be valued and appreciated. I can think of no better introduction to the music of the Burmese people. Everyone involved in the production should be congratulated. It is a pity that the ever-smiling and positive U Myint Maung could not live to see it.

Robert Garfias
University of California-Irvine