

DISK REVIEW

LAOS

The Voice of the Khene: Enchanted Airs from the Lao Pan Flute. Music of Asia Collection. SevenOrients 777. CDM.LT1 (December 1998). Compact disk.

The music of Laos is still one of the least well-known musics in the world, with no upland group's music ever having been studied systematically on site and comparatively little fieldwork of any sort having been accomplished anywhere in the country. This situation stems largely from the fact that the country was virtually closed to outsiders from 1975 to 1990. Terry MILLER's pioneering 1985 study *Traditional Music of the Lao*, for example, is based on Lao music as it existed in northeast Thailand. Since then, the presence of a sizable Lao immigrant population in the United States and Europe has allowed an increasing number of people to come into contact with the music of Laos. Recently, a well-designed and unusually useful website (lang-xan.com/music/khene.html) makes available several important scholarly studies on Lao music in English and French and even includes musical examples; MILLER's 1998 article in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Volume 4, provides perhaps the best general overview available.

In this environment, compact disks such as *The Voice of the Khene* help make available examples of Lao music to listeners who might otherwise never encounter such music. This disk features music of the *khene*, a free-reed mouth organ, and the predominant melodic instrument in rural Laos. Unlike the Thai version of the instrument, *khaen*, which usually has sixteen pipes, the Lao *khene chet*, the most common *khene* until the late twentieth century, has only fourteen. Other types of *khene* with varying numbers of pipes are used by numerous ethnic groups within Laos. Outside the country, similar instruments include the *sheng* of China and the *shō* of Japan.

The Voice of the Khene is by no means the first disk dedicated to the music of this instrument, which has become something of a national emblem for Laos. Already in 1989, Jacques Brunet's *Laos: Musique pour le khene/Lam Saravane* (Ocora C559 058) presented perhaps a better selection of music for the *khene* than the disk under review here, which unpromisingly enough bills itself in the subtitle as "Enchanted airs from the Lao pan flute (sic)." Other disks of Lao music, which is highly diverse due in part to the isolation that regions maintain from each other and poor facilities for transportation and communication, almost always include music for the *khene*, in what usually turns out to be a smorgasbord of tidbits from here and there throughout the land. This disk, on the other hand, includes only solo *khene* playing, by Khapha Inthisane, director of an ensemble of traditional Lao musicians based in France, and Tern Mahavong, "one of the last Khene musicians who still plays the ancient style of Khene used in the nineteenth century" (liner notes). *Khene* music, with its striking cluster-chord harmonies and melodic line near the bottom, is often used to accompany vocal performances, but this disk provides only instrumental compositions. Since many of these pieces are instrumental renditions of what are in fact songs, the liner notes supply the texts for the songs, both in Lao and English. *Khene* music may, like much of the other music of Asia, take its inspira-

tion from nature (the sound of the rustling of bamboo) or from other objects that emit sounds (one piece included imitates the sound of a train leaving the station). Its primary function, however, is to accompany a song and it is a pity that no singing is included on this disk. It would be interesting, for example, to hear the same piece first done in a vocal version and then in a solo *khene* version.

The recording quality of this disk is excellent; performances, in so far as I can judge, are good as well. A considerable variety of *khene* playing styles, melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic types, and varying sounds of instruments may be discovered in the music offered here. Though this disk is a welcome addition to the small amount of Lao music commercially available, we will still have to wait longer for a balanced picture of Lao musical culture to emerge.

REFERENCES CITED

MILLER, Terry

- 1985 *Traditional music of the Lao: Kaen playing and Mawlum singing in northeast Thailand*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- 1998 Laos. In *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Volume 4: Southeast Asia, eds. Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams, 335–61. New York: Garland.

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