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ROBERT GARFIAS

A Musical Visit to Burma

During 1973 and 1974 I was able to spend a period of nine months in the Union of Burma under a special cooperative grant between the United States Government and the Ministry of Culture of the Union of Burma for the purpose of pursuing studies in the traditional music there. I had, for a number of years previous to this, had a strong interest in the music of Burma purely on the basis of the excitement generated by hearing the few available recordings of it. This interest was further intensified by a few brief visits to Burma during the sixties. Somehow, in spite of careful listening to the recordings, there remained much that was elusive about the structure of the music and method of its performance. When the opportunity of studying for an extended period of time in Burma presented itself, I of course immediately pursued the opportunity with all vigour and enthusiasm.

My knowledge of the structure and practice of Burmese music until that time was necessarily of a very sketchy nature. There is little written documented material on the theory and performance of Burmese music, and even good recordings are extremely difficult to find. I did know that there was a very important tradition for the solo harp in Burmese music and also that there was a large ensemble generally related in structure to other gong orchestras of Southeast Asia and Indonesia. Partly because I knew that there had already been some studies of the Burmese harp tradition by highly qualified scholars in recent years and also because my interest lay more strongly in the direction of ensemble music rather than solo traditions, I decided to concentrate on the gong and drum orchestra of Burma. To this end, upon arriving in Burma and with the help and cooperation of the staff of the Ministry of Culture of the Union of Burma I was able to make contact with a number of outstanding musicians of this tradition. I began immediately by taking lessons on the two main instruments of the ensemble, the drum circle, called *patt waing* in Burmese, and the small double-reed instrument called *hne*, actually a quadruple-reed instrument. In addition to this I also endeavoured to take lessons in the singing of Burmese classical music. It seemed vitally important to me to begin with a practical exposure to the music. Without this it would be all too easy to misinterpret what one hears on the basis of one's previous musical experiences. Beginning to understand the music as a Burmese musician does from step one, it seemed to me, was the only logical and reasonable way to approach the study of the music. Together with this practical aspect of my studies I endeavoured to pursue all questions leading to the historical, theoretical and practical knowledge acquired by Burmese professional musicians, amateurs, and scholars. Whereas it is painfully apparent that a period of nine months is extremely inadequate for a thorough and definitive statement on the theory and performance of Burmese music, I do believe that in the process of striving toward this end I was able to collect a vast amount of material and to gain a fairly clear insight into many of the characteristics of the Burmese musical tradition.

What is called classical Burmese music or Burmese art-music is still extremely strong; perhaps much stronger than what one finds in neighbouring countries of Southeast Asia. This may be due, in part, to the long period of political isolation which Burma has undergone for the past ten years, but it should also be added that the isolation is, of course, not complete. Even in Rangoon and Mandalay one still is constantly reminded of the overall pervasiveness of con-

temporary rock styles, and it seems that all over the country the electric guitar has made heavy inroads on the popular music. Still, and in spite of this, the knowledge of and performance of the older Burmese musical styles survive in great complexity and with great numbers of professional musicians and experienced amateurs.

There are in Burma today a number of traditional music styles, and even the line of demarcation between the traditional styles and modern popular music seems to merge into a kind of grey area in which these different traditions are mixed. The purest form of the old classical music tradition can be thought of as having two different aspects. These derive from the ancient court traditions. One was court chamber music and the other was the court ceremonial or outdoor music. The outdoor music was played by the gong and drum orchestra which is known in Burmese as *hsaing*. It is difficult to say at what point in history this orchestra first appeared but it is certainly safe to say that it has existed, in something close to its present form, for well over three hundred years. Apparently, in its traditional court setting, the *hsaing* ensemble was used to provide outdoor ceremonial music of a somewhat functional nature: to mark the hours of the day, to announce the presence and movement of the guards, to provide accompaniment for dance and theatre within and without the palace walls, and to perform the songs of the classical or art-music tradition. The chamber music ensemble included, in the days of the monarchy, a number of different instruments, one of the most important of which was certainly the Burmese harp called *saung* or *saung gauk*. The Burmese harp is certainly one of the most important instruments of the classical tradition. The technique of playing this instrument has been subjected to the most thorough development and experimentation. Since it is a very personal instrument, it can be played alone or with the minimal accompaniment of the bell and the clapper to mark the rhythm, and can also accompany the voice in a number of different and somewhat loosely structured styles. The *saung* gradually became influenced by the innovations of outstanding masters of this instrument. This developed to such a degree that the *saung* style of playing eventually influenced not only the *hsaing* ensemble but also the playing of other instruments, even the newly imported European piano and guitar. Many Burmese musicians say that the characteristic figures of ornamentation and variation heard throughout all styles of Burmese music were originally developed by the innovators of the *saung* style. Although today the *saung* is the foremost remaining instrument of the chamber music style of the court, there is also one additional instrument, the bamboo keyed xylophone called *patala*, which still survives. The *patala* and the *saung* are both used primarily to accompany the voice, although on occasion they can be heard played as solo instruments. Most of the other instruments of the old chamber music ensemble have fallen into disuse and are no longer heard. Among these, however, is the *mi jaung*, a crocodile zither similar to the Thai *chake*, which is still found in Burma amongst the Mon minority peoples in the area around the city of Moulmein, although as recently as the 1920's and 1930's it was still played by classical Burmese musicians. Another instrument of the court chamber ensemble long fallen into disuse is the old mouth organ called *hnyin* which today is found only amongst some of the tribal peoples living in the hills surrounding the central area of Burma. There was also a bowed instrument of the type found in the classical music of Thailand which has completely fallen into disuse and has been replaced by the western violin. Frequently the violin is used to accompany the *patala* in performances of Burmese classical chamber music, and both instruments are used to accompany the voice. However, rarely, if ever, is the violin used in conjunction with a *saung*.

We have today, then, these two genres of Burmese classical music, one tracing its origin back to the court chamber music and finding its manifestation today in the use of the *saung*, the *patala*, and the violin to accompany the voice in the performance of the classical songs. The second ensemble is the outdoor gong and drum ensemble or *hsaing*. It is interesting to note that whereas many foreign visitors to Burma are pleased or even enthralled by the sound of the Burmese harp, many find the volume and stridency of the *hsaing* ensemble difficult to listen to. However, it is interesting that the repertoire of both of these ensembles is almost identical.

There is one vast body of traditional classical music and this has been preserved in a number of written manuscripts, the original dates of which are uncertain but which have been printed regularly in several different editions even up to the present day. The two main books are the *Maha Gita* and the *Gita Wi'Tou Theni*. Each of these books contains the texts of several hundred songs, and these are regarded by professional musicians as the main body of classical Burmese music. In the course of talking with musicians in Burma I have met several professional musicians who know all of the songs in the *Maha Gita* and *Gita Wi'Tou Theni*. There are a considerable number of repetitions of texts in both books. No notation is given and very



Rangoon: the Hsaing ensemble of Sein Chit Tee

naturally slight variations occur in the texts and melody of one musician's interpretation as opposed to another. Long and vehement arguments go on as to which tradition is the correct one, and at present some officials within the Ministry of Culture of Burma are attempting to standardize these different variants, an extremely difficult task when there are professional musicians who believe strongly in the correctness of their own version of these particular pieces. What is important to bear in mind, I believe, is that in spite of the great differences in style of performance between the *saung* and *patala* on the one hand and the *hsaing* ensemble on the other, they are still drawing from one main body of music, and furthermore, that within each of these traditions there are a great number of possible variations based on the period of the education of the particular musician as well as the geographic area and the particular family or dynasty of musicians from whom he has learned. All of this creates a great variety of styles and a richness of the living tradition.



Young girl playing the Burmese Saung Gauk harp

In addition to this classical music there are a number of styles of Burmese music which are traditional and which have also been subjected to various changes and influences. All over Burma, besides the music of the various tribal peoples, Kachin, Karen, Shan, etc., there are a number of regional folk music styles of the Burmese themselves and their closely related neighbours the Arakanese. These are primarily songs with some kind of rhythmic or melodic accompaniment, usually a small ensemble dominated by some form of drum. In addition to this there are a number of special folk music ensembles, many of which take their name from the particular type of drum which is used; for example, the *dophat* is an ensemble using a double-headed barrel drum suspended from the neck of the player. Here the singers make great use of textual improvisation using the *dophat* as accompaniment. Another ensemble is the *ozī*, which takes its name from a long goblet-shaped drum, in which the drummer, along with the ensemble, sings and dances with the drum. These musicians draw from a number of traditional tunes associated with the *ozī* and improvise on occasion new texts to these. *Byaw* is another ensemble which has gradually come to be associated with the joyous ceremonies in connection with a young boy's temporarily entering into the Buddhist monkhood. The *byaw* has a particular rhythm which the listener quickly associates with the joyous occasions, and as such the *byaw*, when introduced into the course of a theatrical performance or even a chamber music or *hsaing* performance, immediately gives the atmosphere of felicity. Furthermore, the *byaw* is almost always used at the end of a concert or dramatic performance held in connection with a

joyous occasion and as such symbolizes the close of the performance and a well-wishing to the audience.

Two other forms of traditional Burmese music which fall outside the realm of the pure classical music are the *nat pwe* and the *anyeint*. The *nat pwe* is a special music and dance performance used in connection with the propitiation of the spirits or *nats*. Each of the spirits has a particular song type and rhythm with which he is associated, and during the performance each dancer attempts to become possessed by the spirit of the *nat*. This type of spirit propitiation survives in Burma hand in hand with very strong Buddhist traditions. The music used for the *nat pwe* is played by the same *hsaing* ensemble but the repertoire is entirely different and exclusive to it.

Anyeint is a special form of lighter entertainment, something not quite as theatrical as the traditional Burmese theatre with puppets or the *pwe*, which is a drama with live actors. The *anyeint* makes use of a small group of players dominated by the *anyeint* herself, a woman who is a singer and dancer and who requires the help of auxiliary actors, most especially a number of clowns. In its simplest form the *anyeint* consists of a number of clowns appearing on the stage talking, joking, and often going through ribald antics, all the while being accompanied by rhythmic and melodic punctuation provided by a *hsaing* ensemble. The clowns often go so far as to make thinly disguised political criticism. The clowns are generally safe from any kind of restrictions or prohibitions which the government or the community may wish to impose on them. They are, in general, free to speak their minds and in some way reflect what the community, in fact, wants to hear. At the end of a period of joking, singing, and mock dancing the *anyeint* herself will appear from behind the stage. There may be a short interchange between

An Anyeint dancer in Mandalay executing a leap in the course of a dance



the clowns and the *anyeint* and then she will begin, with the accompaniment of the *hsaing* ensemble, to sing a short song and subsequently to dance to it. The *anyeint* dance performance itself is generally very short. After this the *anyeint* retires upstage to allow the clowns to take over the performance until she returns for one or more of these short performances. The melodic and rhythmic types used by the *anyeint* are easily identified as separate from the other Burmese traditions.

Although both the *anyeint* and the *nat pwe* might be classified as some sort of theatre, there exist, in addition to these two forms, two types of theatre of more clearly dramatic content. These are the *pwe*, which is a theatre with live actors drawing either from the Buddhist *Jataka* tales or from Burmese history or current events, and the now somewhat rare *you'thei*, the Burmese marionette or puppet theatre. Both of these forms of drama share many common characteristics. Both make extensive use of interruptions in the flow of the drama by the clowns, who are free to introduce any sort of dialogue they choose and which can be completely separate from the line of the original story. Both forms of drama, the puppet theatre and the theatre with live actors, use the *hsaing* ensemble as an accompaniment and draw primarily on the repertoire of the *Maha Gita*, but with the addition of special theatrical tunes, such as overtures, closing tunes, interlude music, and to some extent on other sources of Burmese music as well in order to enrich the drama. This process of enrichment of the action on the stage is a very important principle of Burmese theatre. To give an example there is a classical song in the *Maha Gita* called the *Myin Gin*. This piece was used in the days of the old monarchy to prepare the horses for battle by singing songs of praise about them to get them to move to the rhythm of the music, thereby exciting them in preparation for the onslaught. This melody is well known amongst Burmese audiences and is generally introduced in the course of a drama when the horse motif needs reinforcement. There is one *pwe* dealing with the magic flying horse called *Manika*. The first time that *Manika* appears in the play, his own theme is introduced, but it is mixed with strains of the *Myin Gin* in order to give it both his own characteristic tune and also to suggest the melody used for horses. I was able to witness one additional and very interesting usage of the *Myin Gin*. This was in a play dealing with a young man whose father, the king, suddenly dies, and before he assumes the crown, the young man wanders throughout the country pretending to be insane, testing the loyalty of his friends and his father's subordinates. In the process of doing this he appears in one scene riding a small hobby-horse and dancing around in feigned madness. At this moment the melody of the *Myin Gin* is introduced to reinforce the horse motif. Such usage of programmatic material is very common in all forms of Burmese drama and even in performances of pure music without drama. In the course of a certain composition, for example, in order to give a more regal and noble atmosphere in place of the usual interlude which would follow the vocal melody, the musicians may introduce, for example, the *Si Daw*, which is the old royal processional music. This adds an atmosphere of serenity, nobility, and associates it with the old days of the court.

In the marionette theatre or *you'thei*, the puppets are stock characters: the king, the ministers, the prince, the princess, the clowns, the ogres, etc., and therefore the type of play that can be produced tends to draw exclusively on the traditional and historical plays. As in other forms of Burmese drama, the clowns are free to introduce more topical information and material. In the *pwe*, the theatre with live actors, there is considerably more freedom and very often, especially today, plays staged in modern dress and in a modern setting are very often introduced with a mixture of modern western music, sometimes even rock, and the traditional Burmese music. One of the interesting, very traditional characteristics of the *pwe* which is preserved even today is the interruption of the play at about midway point with the introduction of the interlude called the *hna'pathwa*. The performance itself begins somewhere around seven or eight in the evening and will last until three or four in the morning, with the *hna'pathwa* interlude usually appearing somewhere around midnight or 1 a.m. The *hna'pathwa* was originally a duet between the *min tha* and *min thami*, the prince and princess, although in general there are more likely to be one or two princes and four, five, or six princesses along with a good number of clowns. This interlude is basically a classical dance and usually borrows from very traditional classical material, but in the course of the performance of the *hna'pathwa* the audience can become aware of the true quality and skill of the performers.

Taking once again an overview of some of the characteristics of Burmese classical music, it is interesting to note that with the possible exception of the instrumental interludes and tunes used by the *hsaing* ensemble for the theatre, everything else in the classical Burmese repertoire is basically vocal, that is, there is a text and a vocal melody preserved in the tradition, although the particular usage required for the drama or for any particular performance may



The bronze gong circle Kyi Waing

mean that only the instrumental version of the composition is performed. Still, in their basic conception, the melodies are originally vocal, and when they are played as instrumental pieces they are played as instrumental variants of an original vocal tune. When reference is made to a song by the musicians, it can be sung using syllables which imitate the sound of the instruments, but the truly knowledgeable professional musicians, even though they may not be singers themselves, know the original melody to the song and can sing it with the text. Another interesting aspect of classical Burmese music is that although the music is basically vocal there are very, very few professional singers as such. At a typical chamber music performance in someone's home any one of the guests may decide to pull out his copy of the *Maha Gita* to refresh his memory as to the text of the song and sing any song that may be his favourite. Very often a home entertainment of this type consists of several of the guests alternately singing their songs with the instrumental accompaniment of whoever happens to be there,

very often a professional musician who has been invited. For recording sessions, radio broadcasts and concert performances it is very often an instrumentalist whose vocal interpretations of certain songs are very much admired who does the singing, although in fact there are few musicians who are known primarily as singers. The basic vocal nature of all the songs of the Burmese classical repertoire is important because even when songs are performed instrumentally the audience is aware of the texts and associates the original poem with the particular melody. Especially when these compositions are used in connection with the drama, the added richness of the understood text adds another powerful layer of meaning to the drama that is being viewed on stage.

It is of course not possible to say a great deal about the theory of Burmese music without entering into the complexities of the practice and its history. Very briefly, one observes that the Burmese make use of a basic seven-tone system, which perhaps superficially sounds somewhat like the western major diatonic scale but with a noticeable lowering of the seventh and third degrees and a slight raising of the fourth degree. This has led some to make the assumption that the Burmese scale is therefore equidistant or has at least a tendency towards equidistance. I would argue that in view of the great use made of different modes, the different characteristics associated with each of the modes, and the fact that the modes can be recognized by their tonal characteristics and not only by differences in pitch, the whole phenomenon of equidistance is perhaps something observed by western listeners as a result of comparing it with western scales rather than something which is innately felt by Burmese. The differences between scales begun on one pitch and those begun on another are remarkably perceptible to Burmese musicians and audiences. The theory of modes is extremely complex and furthermore there are a great number of these modes. The fact that the basic tuning used for the harp is different from that used on the xylophone and from the tuning used by the *hsaing* ensemble, adds greatly to the complexity of the system. The same modes played on each of these three different kinds of instruments will produce different internal structures. The piano is widespread in the use of classical and popular Burmese music, and the pianist can choose a number of different ways of interpreting the classical modes by a judicious use of the chromatic alterations possible on the western keyboard. The differences in the modes, regardless of which instrumental setting is used, is readily noticeable even to a westerner after a short period of exposure. There are definite characteristics, melodic and tonal, to each of the modes, and certain compositions are preferred in one mode type as opposed to another. To reinforce these differences, the same composition played in one mode will often be given a different treatment when played in another. The use of time periods associated with the modes is today found only in the concert or ceremonial uses of the music in connection with special Buddhist ceremonies but not in the theatre, as is the case in Indonesia. Even in connection with the *nat pwe* or spirit possession performances the musicians will begin the evening playing in one mode, after a certain point change to a second mode, and end with a third mode. Sometimes, before these three modes are performed, yet another mode will be played in the late afternoon before the actual ceremony of offering begins. Such performances are in many cases musical entertainments offered to the entire community and guests from the neighbourhood, and, as such, are not an actual part of the ceremony, but do function as an important adjunct to the entire festive occasion. It is interesting, however, that in connection with the drama this pattern of playing in one mode after another in a fixed sequence is not observed. On the contrary, the musicians must be prepared to change modes quickly, depending on the action on stage. Since, in the *hsaing* ensemble, the retuning of the drum circle takes a considerable time, each drum must have a small bit of tuning paste made from a mixture of cooked rice and ash very carefully applied to the centre of it in order to produce the correct sound and pitch for the particular note desired. It is therefore often impractical to quickly retune the drums. On such occasions the clowns will often take over and make jokes and talk with the musicians even while the leader of the ensemble is retuning the drum circle. Sometimes, if the particular selection to be played is short, the musicians may continue in the same mode, and by a judicious omission of certain pitches for which others are substituted, the player can play the piece in a tuning which is not the correct one for the mode.

One of the very important basic aspects of Burmese music, one which Burmese musicians themselves note quickly, especially when they compare their own music with the music of neighbouring Thailand, is that, whereas Thai music is fundamentally monodic, the basic structure of Burmese music consists of two parts. This does not mean two independent parts in a

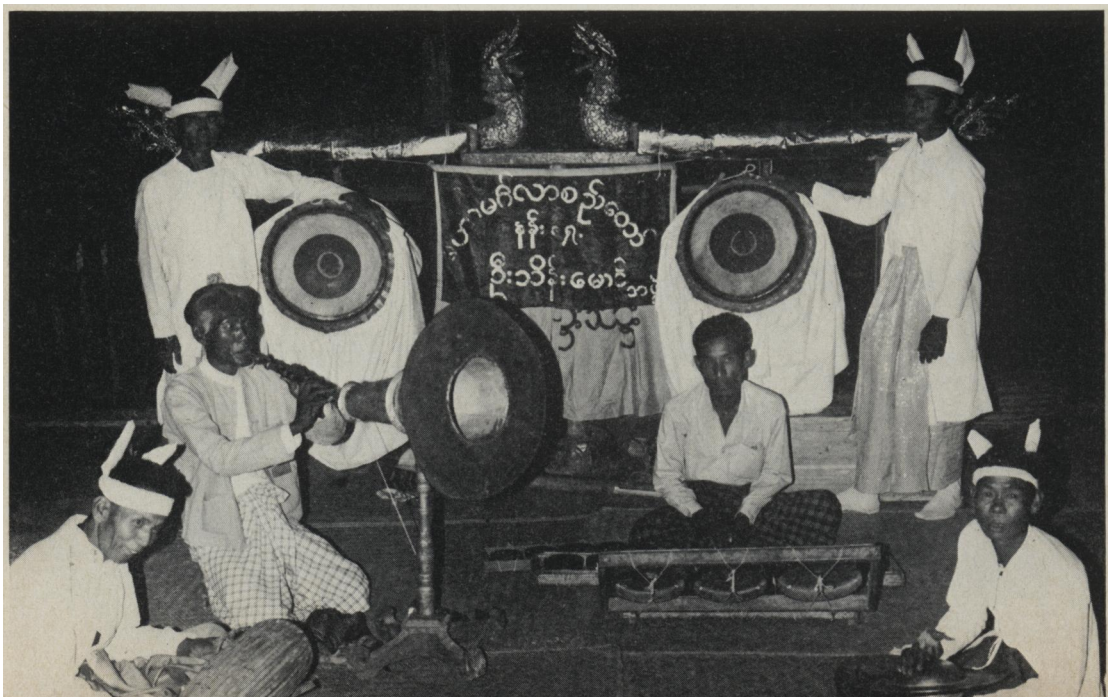
The Prince and the Princess of the Burmese marionette theatre You'thei



polyphonic relationship, but a single melody with a vital second part which is sometimes in octaves, sometimes harmonizing at the fourth or fifth, sometimes playing the basic note while a higher part plays an appoggiatura or suspension. Such additional tones are characteristic of the melody but may draw on tones which are not among the basic tones of the mode. In this way the lower melodic part generally outlines the main tones of the mode or reinforces the main tone of the mode while the upper part may use tones which are of secondary importance in the particular mode. This characteristic two-part sound is something strongly Burmese in character and, I believe, unique to this music. It is something which is heard when either the harp, the xylophone or the drum circle is played. It is such an important characteristic of Burmese music that it even forms the basis for the Burmese style of playing the western piano. For the Burmese musicians the sound of these two parts, sometimes in unison, sometimes supporting the melody with a fourth or fifth, sometimes sustaining the main tone under a suspension or some other secondary melodic passage, forms an atmosphere and a sound that is, to them, as rich as the westerner's appreciation of a fuller traditional harmony.

Burmese music has, even in the days of Burmese kings, had a way of absorbing popular, modern elements into its overall style. In the *Maha Gita* one of the largest song categories is a form called *patt pyo*. These were songs of a more popular nature in the court or new songs composed after the establishment of the main body of the songs in the *Maha Gita*. They drew from various more traditional song types within the *Maha Gita* and also made use of new material. They are considered today the most difficult and, in fact, the high point of the classical literature. During the early period of European contact new forms of music came to be introduced, some of them with a slight western influence, and these were called *tan zan* or *kala bou*. These two names are used to refer to more modern compositions which are still very close to the classical Burmese style and use the traditional modes and the melodic and instrumental style. Most of these are twentieth century compositions, and Burmese audiences can differentiate the *tan zan* or *kala bou* from the early period of British occupation, from the World War II period, and from the post World War II period. In the present day, with the introduction of rock and other forms of modern western music, it has become more difficult for the traditional Burmese theory and practice to absorb the new song forms, and a sharp dichotomy between the modern western style and the Burmese traditional style is apparent. Linking these two forms together is the great popularity of Hindustani film music. The most widely appreciated form among Burmese audiences are the Indian songs of the type so frequently used today in India and which are set in Raga Yaman. This melodic type seems to fit nicely with the Burmese mode *nga bauk* with the result that almost all of the even slightly

Si Daw Gyi – music for the King's procession from the palace





The drum circle Patt Waing. Each drum is tuned by applying a mixture of cooked rice and ash to the centre of the head just before playing each piece

traditional Burmese popular songs are done in *nga bauk*. The actual pure forms of rock which have been introduced into Burma in recent years seem to fall beyond the scope of the Burmese traditional mode and melodic practice. However, since the contact with modern developments in rock in the west are still extremely tenuous because of the isolation of Burma from regular contact with the West, the scope of rock performances seems to be drawing on rather narrowly defined sources. The dichotomy between the modern rock music and the more traditional forms of Burmese classical and popular music is also an indication of the dichotomy which is beginning to make itself felt in Burmese society between the extremely modern youth and the more traditional older generations and rural populations. This is something which can be readily noted everywhere in the world at the present time, but perhaps because of the still very strong traditions in Burma one notices the dichotomy with even greater force than in other places. The traditions of the performance of Burmese music and theatre are still extremely strong, perhaps because the Burmese isolation has prevented the more modern and perhaps less fully understood western forms of popular music from making greater inroads. However it does seem inevitable that one of two courses must eventually follow: either that the government takes a closer look at the standardizing and codifying of classical music performances, which must eventually begin to choke their natural life, or a greater influx of radically different and unabsorbable western styles will eventually inundate the classical tradition. In spite of this it is extremely heartening to find in Burma a tradition surviving in a very viable form and performed still with much enthusiasm and popular support. ■