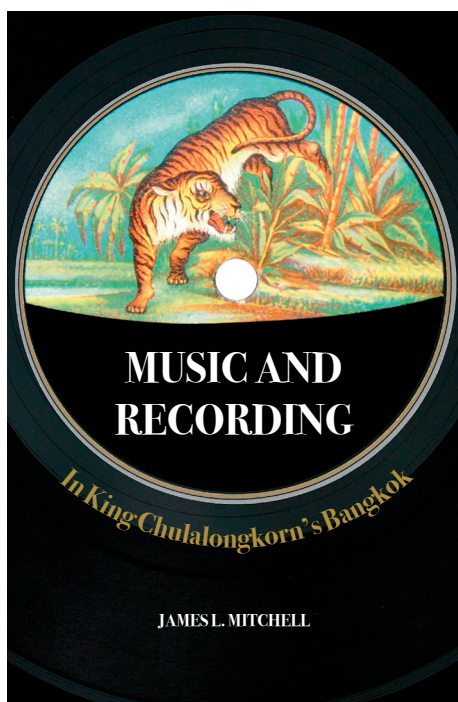


*Music and Recording in King Chulalongkorn's Bangkok* by James L. Mitchell (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2022). ISBN: 9786162151873. 765 Baht.



James L. Mitchell's new book *Music and Recording in King Chulalongkorn's Bangkok* was seeded when Mitchell encountered problems dating Thai recordings while researching his previous book *Luk Thung: The culture and politics of Thailand's most popular music* (Silkworm Books, 2015). Subsequent research for this book was done at the EMI Archive in London as well as through other Thai and European language documents. He states that "This book is the first comprehensive history of Siamese music during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V)" (xiii), and that "Above all, it is the record of the first recorded sounds of Siam—the first intersections of an ancient musical tradition with a revolutionary Western technology" (xiv), but the book is broader than the title and introductory comments suggest.

Chapter One describes Bangkok during King Chulalongkorn's reign and comprises a collection of mini-histories exploring the origins of education, entertainment and the civil service. The broad focus is on the modernization of Bangkok as it is transformed from a city where commerce and social life were conducted on water, to a modern metropolis with a growing network of roads and tramlines. The establishment of French, British, American, and German interests in Bangkok is discussed as is the prestige the Siamese elite associated with European clothing, arts, architecture, and household items. In considering the role Europeans played in reshaping Bangkok during this period, Mitchell attributes to them significant influence, especially Italian architects. These early pages also hint at a problem with the structure of the book. Vignettes and anecdotes about changes in the physical layout and social life of Bangkok, hardships encountered by travelers and anecdotes about the financial straits of business owners broaden the scope of the narrative, but many of these stories don't to go anywhere directly related to music and at times the mention of music seems incidental.

Chapter Two foregrounds the significant role played in the social and commercial life of Bangkok by the many thousands of people who migrated there from China. Their importance to Bangkok's historical development is described through the rise to prominence of a number of businessmen as well as the *ang-yi* criminal associations. The confluence of these interests gave the various branches of the Chinese community significant political and social power which enabled them to stall the economy through

strike action. Particular attention is paid to Chinese Catholic businessmen with numerical evidence showing the extent to which Catholicism penetrated Siam (51). Mitchell observes that many of these Chinese businessmen were conspicuously disdainful of the leaders of the *Qing* dynasty but expressed loyalty to the Thai monarchy. The story is spiced through other details such as the sale of American protection to Chinese immigrants by American Consul James Hood and the difficulties Christian missionaries faced converting the *ang yi*.

Music takes a more prominent role in Chapter Three. Here Mitchell describes various forms of dance-drama, fundamental principles of Thai musical organization, performance practice, types of repertoire, music and drama venues, details of various performers and other stakeholders, repertoire and performance context. For the first time in English, Mitchell provides biographical accounts of some of the most celebrated Thai musicians from what is regarded as the most important period in Thai music history.

It is regarding the discussion of Thai classical music (*dontri Thai*), an area in which I have some familiarity, that a few points can be made. Mitchell describes the *wai khru* teacher honoring ceremony and royal *khon* as “Buddhist ritual ceremonies” (76). But relations between religion and performance in Thailand are seldom so clear-cut. The *wai khru* ceremony features elements drawn from Hinduism and Brahmanism as well as Buddhism. In the course of the ceremony, the presiding officiant, dressed in the white robes of a Brahmin, is transformed from an ordinary man to a Brahmin and finally to a *rusi* (hermit or *por khao*). Once the transformation has occurred, the officiant (now in the form of *rusi*) invites gods to participate through a series of recitations (*kata ongkan wai khru*) in Pali, which in Thailand is associated with Buddhism (Sanskrit is associated with Hinduism), but the gods that are invited are from the Hindu pantheon. Similarly, the Ramakien story told in *khon* theatre is the Thai adaptation of the Hindu Ramayana epic, and the Thai version also contains characters drawn from Hindu mythology. Thais may see no contradiction in this juxtaposition, but the various elements of these rituals and stories are understood to originate in different spiritual traditions. Mitchell has also joined the long line of scholars to perform the musicological high-wire act of attempting to describe time and rhythm in Thai classical music. He states that existing melodies are disguised by:

diminution, augmentation and the doubling and halving of tempo. Thus a *sam chan* (level three) piece is twice the length of a *song chan* (level two) piece, which is itself twice the length of a *chan diao* (level one) (see Morton 1976, 15–16, 180–82). However, the speed of each level can vary greatly depending on the ensemble and type of composition. (84)

It is not clear if by length Mitchell means “duration”, but as there is no reference to notation that would allow length to be measured by distance in notated form, it can be supposed that by “length” he means length of time, which is implicitly conflated with tempo. In describing Thai music through tempo, Mitchell’s description focuses on the wrong detail. The structuring principle, as Mitchell alludes, is rhythmic level (*chan*)

but the salient characteristic and primary factor is not tempo or “speed”, but density of rhythmic activity.

*Chan* is determined by the density of rhythmic activity that occurs between *ching* (finger cymbal) strokes that mark coordinating points (*luk tok*) and the number of *hawng* (measures) in the *nathap* (rhythmic cycle) not tempo. It is entirely possible for a melody in *song chan* (second level) to be the same tempo (speed) and duration (length) as *chan diao* or *sam chan*. The claim that “The instrumental ensemble used [in *duekdamban*] was a mixture of *piphat* and *mahori* ensembles, focusing on the instruments with softer timbres” (103) is also debatable. While the ensemble that accompanies *Lakhon duekdamban* comprises instruments of a type used in both *mahori* and *piphat*, the tuned percussion instruments used in *mahori* are smaller than *piphat* instruments and are not used interchangeably. Additionally, the two ensembles play different repertoire (*piphat* is used in both sacred and entertainment repertoire and *mahori* in only entertainment repertoire). Accordingly, *mahori* and *piphat* are seen as separate and in this regime of classification, the ensemble used in *Lakhon duekdamban* belongs to the *piphat* family and is classified as *piphat duekdamban*.

The book finds its voice and a more secure footing in Chapter 4 which deals more directly with the goings-on in the business and commercial side of the Siamese recording industry. This is an impressive historical contribution and is equally the best researched and presented chapter as well as the most entertaining. In it, a rich and detailed history of the origins of the fledgling recording industry in Bangkok emerges from previously fragmented details. The hazards experienced by travelers to Bangkok described in Chapter One become more than inconveniences and take shape as primary factors that influence the industry’s formation and ultimately condition the historical record. The main characters here are the businessmen, mostly of European and Chinese decent, who are drawn into each other’s orbit by the pull of commercial opportunity and the prevailing entrepreneurial spirit. In creating this, Mitchell describes a flurry of messy activity as representatives from mostly European record companies arrive in Bangkok and attempt to establish themselves while navigating the shifting allegiances of what Mitchell has painted as a fraught commercial landscape (that they themselves seem to make more slippery).

Rather than appearing as consummate professionals, Mitchell, perhaps unintentionally, has portrayed the Westerners as clumsily undermining their own financial commitment to Siam by their inability to organize or communicate effectively. This highly engaging phase of the story illustrates an environment in which the protagonists are entangled in a procession of problematic situations. These include: doubts over the popularity of songs they recorded; the quality of the technology used; concerns over the possibility of exposure to “sharp” and “sly” business practices; actual sly and sharp business practices (including attempted blackmail perpetrated by a Gramophone Company employee); fears that corporations might have no regard for territorial rights, bungled shipping arrangements, penny-pinching by record companies aiming to nickel-and-dime Thai performers; incorrect record pressings due to confused instructions; record playing machines sold commercially only to become “crippled” as they failed to withstand the rigors of transportation and climate; and so on. One can only guess at the

headaches within the communications at Gramophone Company caused by their main recording expert George Dillnutt's ignorance of the fact that the individual Dillnutt was dealing with was not named Kee Chiang as he thought, but that his name was Joseph Kuang and that Kee Chiang & Sons was the company Kuang worked for and with whom Dillnutt and the Gramophone Company wished to do business. Representatives of Western companies are shown to lack competence, albeit under extremely trying conditions, and willing to deflect blame when things turn sour. Whether it was Mitchell's intention to do so or not, he has painted an error-ridden portrait that is probably more amusing now than it would have seemed at the time.

Mitchell's documentary research has, for the first time, uncovered dates, repertoire and key personnel involved that enable a historically verifiable account of the early recordings. Where there are gaps in the documentary record, as in the case of French company Pathé, Mitchell fills them in with educated and well-reasoned speculation about the most plausible series of events. In doing so, he proposes that some mistakes were made by previous scholars in their speculation about the business activities and catalogue numbers of Pathé. By consulting personal journals and clarifying how Pathé assigned identifying numbers, Mitchell offers new historical evidence that aims to straighten the record on how Pathé did its work, who did it, and when.

This is a highly valuable contribution to contemporary knowledge of Thai music, musicians, the recording industry, and Bangkok. But the abundance of detail and the manner in which the information is presented lacks focus. In the flurry of anecdotes, the reader is often given minutia without sufficient contextual information. This asks a lot of the reader who, in order to follow the narrative, must know, for example, what "tax farming" is, what "matrices" are, what "metal galvano" is, who the "Wild Tigers" are, who is part of the "elite" in Thailand and what is their relevance. At the other extreme, images such as rare advertisements add richness but the overall picture would be more complete if the description of the recording industry included technical information about the recording process and some indication of the materials used. The absence of specifics in otherwise detailed descriptions can be disorienting and attempts to get at source material are frustrated by some dead links in the footnotes. The tone in handling issues of race, culture, gender, and class may also seem out of step for some readers. For readers familiar with Bangkok and its music scene, there remains a tantalizing, unanswered question: What is the relationship between the Robinson Piano Company started by Walter George Vaughan Robinson on Charoen Krung Rd in the first decade of the 20th century and which is "almost forgotten now" (194), and the current Robinson Piano Company in Bangkok, that has existed since 1927 and which also began life on Charoen Krung Rd?

The expansive scope of the book gives it an encyclopedic quality and while the information will be of interest to many readers, its sprawling contents are never quite harnessed into a coherent narrative. The cast of businessmen, ensembles, individual performers, their patrons, distributors, recording engineers, corporate institutions, and various other topics covered are positioned as coordinates within a wide horizon that itself remains out of focus. In cases where individual recordings are linked to people, events or places, the themes of music and the recording industry have minor roles

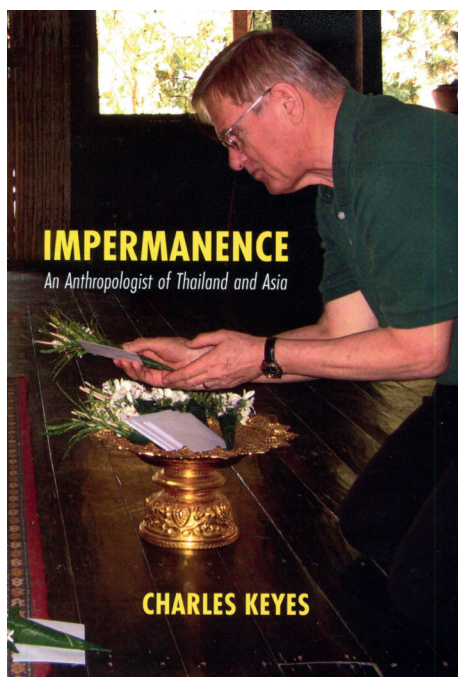


and appear as scattered and at times, barely visible reference points for anecdotes not necessarily related to music. The abundance of information raises questions of relevance which begs the question: how can the relevance of the various strands of information be evaluated in the absence of a grounding and overarching theme to which they could be relevant? The absence of an overall framing context gives the book a feel as though it comprises data that were aggregated but not sorted according to any criteria or organized around a set of disciplinary interests that could give it shape and definition.

These misgivings aside, this book is a significant contribution in the study of Thai music, the history of Bangkok, and the history of recording there. It presents information not previously assembled, and this is too important to be overlooked. The book should be read by anyone with an interest in Mitchell's topics.

John Garzoli

*Impermanence: An Anthropologist of Thailand and Asia* by Charles Keyes (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2019). ISBN: 9786162151385 (paperback). 625 Baht.



This book is a personal memoir or autobiography of Charles ‘Biff’ Keyes (or *Ajarn* Biff to his former Thai students). Keyes was professor emeritus of Anthropology and International Studies at the University of Washington (UW), past President of the Association for Asian Studies, and a renowned anthropologist of Mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand.

The viewpoint and life experience of others can provide inspiration and motivation when reading a memoir. This autobiography is about Keyes’ life story beginning from his childhood roots in Nebraska and growing up in Idaho Falls, to become a distinguished anthropologist. It also provides a detailed depiction of his long and productive career at UW. He trained numerous graduate students in sociocultural anthropology and forged academic links between institutions in the

US and Thailand, Vietnam, and the Lao PDR.

I first saw the draft manuscript of this memoir on his computer when my friends and I visited his family in Portland, Oregon in 2019. I was struck by the word “impermanence” on the book’s cover, so asked if he was a Buddhist. He responded