



# The Role of Music Education in Preserving Thai Cultural Heritage

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the vital role of music education in preserving Thai cultural heritage, with a focus on traditional Thai music. By examining the historical development of music education in Thailand and the integration of traditional music into formal and community-based programs, the paper highlights how music education serves as a key mechanism for transmitting cultural knowledge and fostering national identity. The paper also addresses the challenges of modernity, globalization, and resource constraints while emphasizing the opportunities for innovation through technology, lifelong learning, and intergenerational engagement. Ultimately, the survival of traditional Thai music depends on collective efforts across government, educational institutions, and communities to ensure its continued relevance and vibrancy for future generations.

**Keywords:** Music Education, Thai Cultural Heritage, Traditional Thai Music, Cultural Preservation, Lifelong Learning

## 1. Introduction

Cultural heritage in Thailand encompasses a rich tapestry of traditions, beliefs, arts, and practices passed down through generations. It is deeply rooted in the country's history and is reflected in various forms, including festivals, rituals, literature, and performing arts. Among these, traditional Thai music holds a significant place as a living representation of the nation's cultural identity. Music, with its unique scales, rhythms, and instruments, not only serves as entertainment but also plays a vital role in religious ceremonies, royal events, and community gatherings. It is a crucial element of Thai cultural expression and embodies the values, stories, and spirit of Thai society (McGraw, 2013).

Music education in Thailand serves as a bridge between generations, ensuring that traditional music is not only preserved but also revitalized for future audiences. Historically, Thai music was passed down through informal, oral traditions, where apprentices learned directly from master musicians. However, with the advent of formal education, music has become an integral part of the curriculum in schools and universities. This formalization of music education provides a structured way to transmit traditional music and ensure its survival in the modern era (Wong, 2001).

Music education plays a pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage by actively teaching



students the techniques, instruments, and historical contexts of traditional Thai music. Schools and cultural institutions are central in this effort, as they provide the resources and platforms necessary to keep traditional music alive. By learning and performing traditional music, students not only acquire technical skills but also connect with their cultural roots, helping to sustain Thai cultural identity in a rapidly globalizing world (Miller & Williams, 2008).

This paper aims to explore the role of music education in preserving traditional Thai music, focusing on how educational initiatives can maintain and revitalize Thailand's cultural heritage. It will examine the challenges faced by music educators in balancing tradition with modernity, as well as the opportunities that exist to enhance the preservation of traditional music through innovative educational approaches. The paper will also discuss the broader implications of integrating cultural heritage into music education, highlighting the importance of such efforts in maintaining national identity and cultural continuity.

## 2. Historical Background of Thai Music

**Traditional Forms of Thai Music:** Thai music is a complex and diverse art form that reflects the country's cultural and regional diversity. The key traditional music genres include classical, folk, and ritualistic music, each serving distinct purposes within Thai society. Classical Thai music, often associated with the royal court, is characterized by intricate melodic patterns and the use of traditional instruments such as the *ranat ek* (xylophone), *khim* (hammered dulcimer), and *pi* (oboe-like instrument) (Morton, 1976). Folk music, on the other hand, varies by region and is often linked to local traditions, celebrations, and daily life. Genres like *Mor Lam* (from northeastern Thailand) and *Luk Thung* (Thai country music) reflect the rural experiences and social narratives of different communities (Wong, 2001). Ritualistic music, deeply embedded in religious and spiritual practices, is performed during Buddhist ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and other rites, playing a crucial role in marking life's significant moments (Miller, 1998). Historically, Thai music developed in tandem with the country's religious and social structures. It was not merely a form of entertainment but also an essential element of rituals, courtly life, and storytelling. Music has been integral to preserving oral traditions, as many historical narratives, legends, and religious teachings have been passed down through song and performance (Morton, 1976). Thai music, with its distinctive tonal scales and instruments, reflects the country's cultural influences, from indigenous traditions to external influences from neighboring regions such as India, China, and Cambodia.

**Evolution of Music Education in Thailand:** The teaching of Thai music has evolved significantly over time. Traditionally, music was transmitted informally through a master-apprentice system, where students learned by observing and practicing under the guidance of a master musician. This method was deeply personalized, with a strong emphasis on oral transmission and hands-on practice. Musical knowledge was passed down through generations within families, temples, and communities, ensuring the continuity of traditional forms and practices (Wong, 2001). The formalization of music education began in the early 20th century, influenced by the broader modernization efforts within Thailand's education system. Western music education models, which emphasize notation, theory, and institutionalized learning, were introduced, leading to the establishment of music schools and departments in universities. This shift brought both opportunities and challenges. While it expanded access to music education and formalized the study of Thai music, it also introduced Western pedagogical methods that sometimes clashed with the oral traditions central to Thai musical heritage (Petty, 2015). Western

classical music, which became part of the curriculum, influenced the way Thai music was taught, often leading to a hybrid approach that blended traditional Thai practices with Western theory and techniques. This has had a lasting impact on music instruction in Thailand, creating a dynamic and evolving educational landscape that seeks to balance the preservation of traditional music with the demands of contemporary music education (Petty, 2015).

### **3. The Importance of Music Education in Cultural Preservation**

**Transmitting Traditional Knowledge:** Music education plays a critical role in the transmission of traditional knowledge, ensuring that the musical forms, techniques, and instruments that define Thai cultural heritage are passed down to future generations. For instance, traditional ensembles such as Khon (masked dance-drama), Piphat (a type of classical ensemble), and Luk Thung (Thai country music) are central to Thailand's musical landscape, each with its distinct repertoire, instruments, and performance practices (Morton, 1976). Through formal education in schools and universities, as well as informal community programs, students learn the intricacies of these musical forms, including how to play traditional instruments like the ranat (xylophone), saw sam sai (three-stringed fiddle), and klong (drums). The preservation of these forms relies heavily on the continuation of oral traditions and the master-student relationship, which has historically been the backbone of Thai music education (Wong, 2001). This hands-on approach, where students learn by imitation and direct practice under the guidance of a skilled master, remains vital even in more formal educational settings. It is through this close mentorship that not only the technical aspects of the music are passed on, but also the cultural values, stories, and rituals that are embedded in the music itself. Music education, therefore, acts as a conduit for maintaining the continuity of Thai musical traditions and cultural expressions.

**Cultivating Cultural Identity:** Learning traditional music is more than just acquiring musical skills; it is a process of cultivating a sense of national and cultural identity. For many students, engaging with traditional Thai music helps them connect with their heritage, fostering pride in their cultural roots and an understanding of the historical and social contexts of the music (Miller, 1998). By learning traditional repertoires, students are not only preserving the music but also actively participating in the ongoing development of Thai culture, ensuring that it remains vibrant and relevant in modern society. Several music education programs across Thailand focus on cultural preservation by integrating traditional music into their curricula. School initiatives, such as those sponsored by the Ministry of Education, often include traditional Thai music as part of the standard curriculum, emphasizing its importance alongside other subjects (McGraw, 2013). Community-based programs also play a vital role in preserving traditional music, particularly in rural areas where folk music traditions are at risk of disappearing. These programs often involve collaborations between local musicians, educators, and cultural organizations to teach traditional music to younger generations. For example, initiatives like the Baan Krua Music School in central Thailand have successfully used traditional music education to strengthen cultural identity within communities (Petty, 2015). These programs highlight the power of music education as a tool for cultural preservation, helping to ensure that traditional Thai music remains an integral part of the country's cultural fabric.

### **4. Challenges in Teaching Traditional Thai Music**

**Modernization and Globalization:** One of the significant challenges in teaching traditional Thai music is the impact of modernization and globalization. As Thailand becomes increasingly integrated into the global cultural landscape, Western music and global music trends have gained widespread popularity, especially among the younger generations. Western genres such as pop,

rock, and hip-hop dominate the media, creating a cultural shift away from traditional music forms like Piphat and Luk Thung (Nettl, 1985). This influence of Westernization has led to a decline in interest among younger people in learning traditional Thai music, as they often perceive it as outdated or irrelevant in comparison to contemporary global music styles (Morton, 1976). The challenge for music educators is to find ways to make traditional Thai music appealing to the younger generation while ensuring that the music's cultural significance is not lost. The allure of modern music, with its global appeal and technological integration, often overshadows traditional music, making it difficult for educators to engage students in preserving these cultural forms (Wong, 2001).

**Institutional and Structural Challenges:** In addition to cultural shifts, there are institutional and structural challenges that affect the teaching of traditional Thai music. One of the primary issues is the lack of resources available for music education. Many schools and communities lack the necessary instruments, funding, and infrastructure to support comprehensive traditional music programs (Miller, 1998). Furthermore, there is a shortage of trained educators who specialize in traditional Thai music. The master-student relationship that once played a pivotal role in music education is not as common, and formal music education often lacks the depth of traditional knowledge that comes from these direct mentorships (Wong, 2001). There is also a noticeable gap between formal music curricula and community-based practices. While formal music education often emphasizes standardized curricula that include Western music theory and notation, many community-based music practices rely on oral traditions and more fluid learning environments. This disconnect can make it difficult to integrate traditional music into the formal education system, where standardized assessments and curricula do not always align with the practices and values of traditional music (Petty, 2015).

**Balancing Tradition with Innovation:** Another challenge is the tension between preserving authenticity and incorporating modern elements into traditional Thai music. Educators face the difficult task of keeping traditional music relevant in contemporary society while maintaining its cultural integrity. There is often a debate between purists, who advocate for preserving traditional forms in their original state, and innovators, who seek to blend traditional music with modern styles to attract broader audiences (McGraw, 2013). Balancing tradition with innovation requires careful consideration. While incorporating modern elements can make traditional music more accessible and appealing to younger generations, it also risks diluting the authenticity of the music and disconnecting it from its cultural roots. Music educators must navigate these tensions to ensure that traditional Thai music remains a living art form that evolves with the times while retaining its core cultural significance (Miller, 1998).

## 5. Opportunities and Strategies for Enhancing Music Education

**Integrating Technology in Music Education:** The use of digital platforms offers significant opportunities for teaching and preserving traditional Thai music in a modern context. Online platforms allow educators to create and share instructional videos, interactive tutorials, and digital music libraries, making traditional Thai music more accessible to students who might not have direct access to master musicians or traditional music classes. These digital tools can help bridge geographical and resource gaps, providing broader access to traditional music education (Rice, 2014). Moreover, digital platforms open the door to global exchange and collaboration. Thai music educators and students can connect with international audiences, share performances, and participate in global cultural exchanges that promote the richness of Thai music traditions. Virtual classrooms and online music lessons offer opportunities to collaborate across borders,

encouraging a wider appreciation for traditional Thai music and integrating global perspectives into Thai music education (Burnard & Murphy, 2013).

**Revitalizing Interest in Traditional Music:** To combat the declining interest in traditional Thai music among younger generations, various initiatives have been launched to make traditional music more appealing and relevant. Music festivals that showcase traditional performances alongside modern music acts can attract younger audiences, creating a platform for cultural exchange and appreciation (Miller, 1998). Media and cultural campaigns - such as television shows, YouTube channels, and social media content - can promote traditional Thai music in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences. Government and institutional support also plays a crucial role in revitalizing traditional music. Government-sponsored programs that include traditional Thai music as part of the national curriculum can help ensure that students are exposed to their cultural heritage from a young age. Institutions like the Ministry of Culture can fund projects that focus on preserving and promoting traditional music, such as scholarships for music students, grants for music festivals, and public campaigns that raise awareness about the importance of Thai cultural heritage (Petty, 2015).

**Role of Schools, Universities, and Cultural Institutions:** Schools, universities, and cultural institutions are at the forefront of efforts to preserve Thai music. Collaborative efforts between these institutions can lead to the development of comprehensive music programs that blend traditional practices with modern educational approaches. For instance, universities with music departments can partner with local schools and cultural organizations to create after-school programs that focus on traditional Thai music, providing students with the opportunity to learn from master musicians while also benefiting from formal music education (McGraw, 2013). Examples of successful programs include the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra's outreach program, which integrates traditional Thai music into its repertoire and offers educational workshops for students, and the Thai National Music Institute, which combines traditional music instruction with contemporary music education techniques to attract a broader range of students. These programs demonstrate how blending traditional and modern approaches can create a vibrant educational environment that both preserves cultural heritage and meets the needs of modern students (Wong, 2001).

## 6. Case Studies and Best Practices

**Successful Music Education Programs in Thailand:** Several schools and organizations in Thailand have successfully integrated traditional Thai music into their curricula, serving as models for how cultural preservation can be achieved through music education. For instance, Mahidol University's College of Music offers a comprehensive program that combines traditional Thai music studies with Western music education, allowing students to gain a well-rounded understanding of both local and global musical traditions. The program includes courses on Thai classical music theory, traditional instruments, and performance practices, ensuring that students are proficient in traditional Thai music while also being prepared to engage with modern musical contexts (Petty, 2015). Another notable example is the Baan Krua Music School, which focuses on preserving Thai folk music by teaching it to younger generations in a community-based setting. The school emphasizes the oral transmission of musical knowledge, maintaining the traditional master-student relationship. By combining formal music education with community engagement, the Baan Krua Music School has successfully revived interest in folk music among younger students and has become a key player in cultural preservation efforts (Miller, 1998). These programs highlight how integrating traditional music into formal and informal educational settings can foster a deeper appreciation of cultural heritage while ensuring

the survival of Thailand's rich musical traditions.

**Global Perspectives on Cultural Preservation Through Music Education:** Looking at how other countries preserve their musical heritage through education can offer valuable insights for Thailand. For example, Japan has successfully preserved its traditional music through formal education by incorporating instruments such as the koto, shamisen, and taiko drums into school music curricula. Japanese schools also emphasize cultural festivals and performances that celebrate traditional music, fostering a sense of pride and continuity among students (Tokita & Hughes, 2008). Similarly, in Ireland, the preservation of traditional Irish music has been supported by the integration of folk instruments such as the tin whistle, fiddle, and uilleann pipes into school programs and community initiatives. The Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann organization plays a key role in teaching traditional Irish music through structured classes, competitions, and festivals, ensuring that traditional music remains an active part of Irish cultural life (Vallely, 2011). From these examples, Thailand can learn the importance of creating structured programs that not only teach traditional music but also involve students in performances and cultural celebrations. Additionally, fostering community-based initiatives that engage both educators and local musicians can help sustain traditional music outside the formal education system, ensuring that it remains vibrant and relevant.

**Lessons for Thailand:** (1) **Integration in Formal Education:** Like Japan and Ireland, Thailand can further integrate traditional music into the national school curriculum, ensuring that students receive consistent exposure to traditional instruments and performance practices. (2) **Community Involvement:** Encouraging community-based music programs that bring together educators, students, and local musicians can help keep traditional music alive, especially in rural areas where folk traditions are more prevalent. (3) **Cultural Festivals and Competitions:** Organizing cultural festivals and competitions can promote traditional Thai music and create opportunities for students to engage with their cultural heritage in a celebratory context.

## 7. Future Directions

**Strengthening Policy and Support for Music Education:** To ensure the preservation of traditional Thai music, there is a growing need for policy reforms that prioritize music education with a focus on cultural heritage. The current educational policies should be revised to include more comprehensive programs that emphasize the importance of traditional music within the national curriculum. These reforms could encourage schools to allocate more time and resources to traditional music instruction, and integrate it into broader educational goals related to cultural preservation and national identity (Petty, 2015). Government and private sector roles are crucial in supporting traditional music education. The government, through the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture, can increase funding for music education programs, provide scholarships for students specializing in traditional Thai music, and create incentives for schools to prioritize traditional music in their curricula. Additionally, the private sector, including corporations and non-profit organizations, can play a role by sponsoring music programs, supporting cultural festivals, and funding research and documentation efforts to preserve traditional Thai music (McGraw, 2013). Collaboration between government agencies and private entities can ensure that traditional music education receives the necessary support and visibility.

**Promoting Lifelong Learning in Traditional Thai Music:** Another future direction for preserving Thai music lies in promoting lifelong learning opportunities for traditional music. Beyond formal education, communities should be encouraged to create spaces where individuals of all ages can learn and engage with traditional Thai music. This could include community

centers, cultural hubs, and online platforms that offer music lessons, workshops, and performances (Miller, 1998). Emphasizing lifelong learning allows traditional music to be passed down outside of formal schooling, ensuring its continuity across generations. Intergenerational learning is particularly vital in this context. Creating opportunities for younger and older generations to engage with traditional music together can foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage. Elder musicians and master performers can pass down their knowledge to younger generations in settings that encourage cultural transmission, such as community music workshops, festivals, and family gatherings. These practices ensure that traditional music is not only preserved but also adapted and kept alive within the context of contemporary society (Wong, 2001). By promoting lifelong learning and intergenerational engagement, traditional Thai music can remain a dynamic and evolving art form, capable of adapting to modern challenges while maintaining its cultural roots.

## 8. Conclusion

Music education plays a pivotal role in preserving Thai cultural heritage by transmitting traditional knowledge, fostering cultural identity, and ensuring the continuity of Thailand's rich musical traditions. Through both formal and informal education, students learn traditional Thai music forms, techniques, and instruments, allowing them to connect with their cultural roots. Despite challenges such as modernization, globalization, and institutional barriers, successful music education programs in Thailand have shown how traditional music can thrive when supported by strong educational frameworks. Additionally, global examples of cultural preservation through music education offer valuable lessons that can be adapted to the Thai context, ensuring that traditional music remains a vibrant part of the nation's cultural landscape. The future of Thai music education lies in a continued commitment to preserving cultural heritage through dedicated policies, community engagement, and lifelong learning opportunities. Strengthening government and private sector support for music education programs focused on traditional Thai music is essential for ensuring that future generations can appreciate and carry forward Thailand's musical heritage. Furthermore, collective efforts from schools, universities, cultural institutions, and communities will be crucial in keeping traditional Thai music alive. By promoting intergenerational learning and embracing modern educational tools, Thailand can ensure that its musical traditions not only survive but also evolve and thrive in the years to come. Ultimately, the survival of traditional Thai music for future generations depends on a shared responsibility to protect and promote the nation's cultural heritage through education, collaboration, and innovation.

### Originality & Body of Knowledge

*Originality:* This paper offers a unique exploration of the role of music education in preserving Thai cultural heritage, specifically focusing on traditional Thai music. By examining the historical evolution of music education in Thailand and the challenges posed by modernization and globalization, it provides an original perspective on how music serves as a medium for cultural transmission and identity formation. The paper's originality lies in its integration of formal and community-based educational approaches, case studies of successful programs, and lessons drawn from global practices. These elements highlight innovative strategies for balancing tradition with modernity in sustaining Thai musical traditions.

*Body of Knowledge:* The study significantly contributes to the academic discourse on cultural preservation and music education by presenting a comprehensive analysis of how traditional Thai music can be revitalized and sustained through education. It advances knowledge by examining the interplay between historical practices, such as the master-student mentorship system, and contemporary educational models influenced by Western pedagogy. The paper addresses critical challenges in teaching traditional Thai music, including resource constraints, globalization, and shifts in cultural preferences. Furthermore, it offers actionable strategies for leveraging technology, fostering community engagement, and promoting lifelong learning to enhance the preservation of traditional Thai music. These insights provide a valuable framework for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners aiming to integrate cultural heritage into modern education systems.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical treatment of experimental subjects (animals & human):** The research was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration regarding human subjects, so formal ethical approval was not required.

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