

THE OVERTURE (Home Rong)

DIRECTED BY ITTHISOONTORN VICHAILAK

PRODUCTION COMPANY: SAHAMONGKOL FILMS INTERNATIONAL CO., LTD.

DVD, 104 MINUTES, COLOR, 2004

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Sorn and the butterfly. ©2004 Sahamongkol Films International Co., Ltd.

REVIEWED BY PATRICIA SHEHAN CAMPBELL & LUM CHEE-HOO

T HE OVERTURE IS AN EXQUISITE IF SEMI-FICTIONALIZED TELLING OF THE LIFE OF SORN SILPABANLEENG,

later known as the highly regarded master performer, composer, and teacher Luang Pradithpairau. The epicenter of this film is the sound and circumstances of Thai classical music from the late nineteenth century through the date of the master's death in 1954. Through the unfolding of his life events, the status of Thai music, its sponsorship by the court at Bangkok, its regulation by the government during World War II, and its tremendous culture of competition between players and ensembles are revealed. The film reminds viewers of the role of music in the forging of cultural identity in Thailand (and more broadly of music as emblematic of identity elsewhere in the world), and of how this delicate symbol of cultural identity has oftentimes been denied, forsaken, or gone unrecognized.

The story opens with the melancholic sound of a two-stringed fiddle woven into images of a butterfly in flight, alone, then in chase by a bare-chested little boy, Sorn. The butterfly lights upon the wood key of a xylophone, the sun shining brightly on it, beaming its rays through an open window and

across the teakwood floor in almost ethereal fashion. Sorn was born into a musical family, and began playing the ranaad-ek (wooden xylophone) when just a child. Early in the film (and in his life), he is forbidden to play the instrument, following the beating to



Sorn secretly practices the ranaad-ek in an abandoned temple. ©2004 Sahamongkol Films International Co., Ltd.

death of his older brother by rival musicians. Secretly, Sorn defies his family to follow his passion, and practices feverishly in an abandoned temple until his father acquiesces, counseling him to lead a moral life in music. The father's wisdom, reflecting an important Thai tenet, sternly advises his son "From now on, you must treat music as divinity itself."

PORTRAYED AS A TALENTED AND COCKY ADOLESCENT in the film, Sorn impresses local audiences with his musical abilities. His impeccable aural skills (he could name any key, sight unseen) were matched only by the brilliant virtuosity of his mallets on the wood keys. It was not until he was publicly humiliated in a spontaneous music competition by the fictionalized master musician Khun In that Sorn then dedicated himself completely to the ranaad-ek, and in one scene, he is depicted with chains connecting his wrists to signify the grueling discipline of his self-imposed practice. Sorn eventually created a set of new techniques for playing the instrument which, while depicted as radical and initially unacceptable by other musicians and sponsors in the film, have since become standard practice for Thai musicians who can manage it.

WORD OF SORN'S MUSICAL TALENT GREW, and the story continues, tracing his appointment as ranaad-ek player to the royal Thai classical music ensemble. Ultimately, he defeated an older and more experienced player, Khun In, in a face-off competition of high dramatic tension where the perspiring Khun In appears to go into a trance-like state, frenzied until he freezes and can no longer play, his two mallets chattering repeatedly on the same keys. (The actor, who plays the competitor Khun In, is a present-day ranaad-ek player now widely known in Thailand, whose recordings of the traditional xylophone in duet with piano are featured in the Thai media and are heard in Thai restaurants from Sheffield, England, to Seattle, Washington.)

While much of *The Overture* is historically correct, it is occasionally re-conceived by the director, including Sorn's death scene as an old man surrounded by family and friends, still singing his music, his index fingers bouncing over his bedspread like the mallets he had played. The film is at times overly dramatic and beyond the natural, yet the beautiful cinematography is effective in telling the story of Sorn and the musical life of Thailand during this period. Interspersed between the stories of the young Sorn were glimpses of Sorn as a respected elderly teacher who was dealing with the political tensions created by the government under the rule of Field Marshal Pibulsonggram in the 1930s in its attempt to modernize Thailand. Thai traditional music was then seen as an uncivilized practice, and modernization brought regulations to conform to music that is first approved by the officials of the Department of Fine Arts, to perform it in Western tuning, in uniform, and as seated on a chair, rather than in the traditional manner on the floor.

Sorn's life is a manifestation of the argument he offers to the visiting military officer who comes to his home one day late in his life to request that he abandon the ranaad-ek. Sorn explains, "If we don't nourish the roots, the tree will surely be destroyed." The modernization period in Thailand was followed by a re-establishment of Thai cultural traditions over the last half-century. Important among them has been the restoration of Thai traditional music at the court and its development in universities and selected



Khun In is defeated in the ranaad-ek competition by the young Sorn.
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secondary schools. Supported by the King and his daughter (the Princess is an expert musician herself), and in fact popularized by the film itself since its release in Thailand, the ranaad-ek and Thai music at large is experiencing a tremendous boost, a re-awakening. Sorn, his father, their teachers and their students, and their co-musicians would be gratified if they only knew.

The film is suitable for students in secondary school and university classes, particularly with regard to studies in music and Southeast Asian cultures. Prior to viewing, educators will do well to prepare students through a set of questions that focuses their attention on the featured musical instrument, ranaad-ek, and on the social, cultural, and political themes and streams that run through the story. Dialogue following the viewing can help students to come to an understanding of the functions and values of music in traditional and modern Thailand, and the ways in which expressive culture is subject to government regulation—in Thailand and elsewhere. Through a sequence of listening lessons, students can be led to explore the musical genres of the Thai court, and to compare them with the sounds of Thai popular music and

its fusion of Thai and western pop elements. Further directions in the instructional use of the film may be partly dictated by the questions students raise as a result of their having viewed it. ■

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