

# Variation Techniques in Thai Classical Music Compositions

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## Abstract

In general, variation is one of the most popular techniques of modifying a given musical idea. In Thai classical music the variations are found as parts of a composition as well as in creating a new composition. This paper aimed at: 1) examining the variation techniques in Thai classical music compositions, and 2) variation techniques for creating new Thai classical music compositions. Qualitative method, through document and field work, was used in this study. Selected compositions of different forms-*phleng klet*, *phleng tap*, *phleng diao*, and *phleng thao*, were analyzed.

The results of the study showed that there were two types of variation technique variation techniques within compositions and variation techniques used for the creation of new compositions. Variation techniques within compositions were created through various types of imitations, sequences, Pitch levels. On the variation techniques that were used for the creation of new compositions, the new compositions may be in the same length, in one-half length, or in double length of the original composition. If there are three variations originated from one composition and played in succession, from *sam chan*, *song chan*, and *chan diao*, it is called *phleng thao*.

## Keywords

Variation / Variation technique / Thai classical Composition / Instrumental Idiom / Vocal Idiom / New Composition





## Introduction

Melody is an important and essential element in most of music cultures. In Thai music culture a melody is used for both individual instruments as well as for a whole ensemble. In Central Thailand the classical music had been patronaged by the courts. Musicians of excellent skills were appointed as royal or government musicians. These included composers, musicians, singers and dancers. Thai classical musicians had worked for the royal courts since Ayudhya period until Bangkok period. The most prosperous time for Thai classical music was during the time of King Rama the V and VI. Many genres of music had been developed, such as phleng thao, meaning a series of variation of a composition-extended version, middle (original) version, and shortend version. Besid phleng thao variations, a genre of composition was also created and developed to its highest peak. This is called phleng thayoi, meaning going one by one at different time. This phleng thayoi is similar to a fugal form of Western music. In phleng thayoi a composer has to create a melodic passage similar to a theme or subject for two groups of the instruments to flee and to chase. When the chasing group can catch up with the fleeing group, The session is ended. Then a new session is to begin; the composer will invent or create a new subject or new theme for another session.

*Phleng Thayoi* is a type of composition in Thai classical music; its main feature is its brilliant imitation techniques (luk lor luk khat) which is similar to the fugal techniques in Baroque music of the Western culture. The word “thayoi” means coming or going one by one at a time. In Thai music it describes the imitation process of a theme or a compact of melodic passage or melodic figure between the fleeing and chasing melodic pattern played by a group of higher pitch instruments and a group of lower pitch instruments. Normally the higher pitch instruments may start off with a melodic passage of a certain length of four or eight measures); and then the melodic pattern is shortened its length into half until the melodic passage becomes a one half beat imitation. Finally the chaser group can catch up with the fleeing group and the two groups join together in one melodic pattern, indicating the end of the imitation session. (Chonpairot, 2020: 1-12)

On variation techniques in Thai classical music, there are few documents that deal with it in depth study. Prof. Montree Tramote is the one who had written about it in term of its history and its techniques. For instance he wrote about many aspects or characteristics of Thai classical music in a series of Thai classical music of three book-Book 1, 2, and 3 which were published by. The Fine Arts Department.

Characteristics of Thai classical music. (Tramote et al., 1996) According to its drumming pattern, Thai music may be divided into 3 types prop kai, song mai, and special. Propkai and song mai drumming patterns are used to accompany the compositions of duple time, whereas the special type of drumming pattern is used for compositions of triple time and duple time combined. The length of each composition is counted with the numbers of drumming pattern rather than numbers of beat or pulse. Classification of compositions into three types:





- 1) song chan, original version, or middle length version;
- 2) sam chan, meaning third variation or extended length version; and
- 3) chan diao, meaning first variation, diminutive version or shortened version. On the Length of each drumming pattern.

Prop kai drumming pattern.of 2/4 time.

Sam chan or third variation consists of 16 beats or 8 measures.

Song chan or second variation consists of 8 beat or 4 measures.

Chan diao or first variation consists of 4 beats or 2 measures.

Song mai drumming pattern, also in 2/4 time.

Sam chan pattern consists of 8 beats or 4 measures.

Song chan pattern consists of 4 beats or 2 measures.

Chan diao pattern consists of 2 beats or 1 measure.

#### Example of the Variations

**First Variation.** Consisting of 4 measures; 2 measures – 1 drumming cycle.

Notes on the 4<sup>th</sup> pulse and the 8<sup>th</sup> pulse are main pitches or structural pitches.

[ 1<sup>st</sup> Phrase - - - - - ] [ 2<sup>nd</sup> Phrase - - - - - - - ]

**Second Variation.** Consisting of 8 measures; 4 measures + 1 drumming cycle.

Note on the 8<sup>th</sup> pulse and note on the 16<sup>th</sup> pulse are the main pitches.

[ 1<sup>st</sup> Phrase - - - - - = - - - ]

[ 2<sup>nd</sup> Phrase - - - - - - - ]





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**Third Variation.** Consisting of 16 measures; 8 measures = 1 drumming cycle.

Note on the 16<sup>th</sup> pulse and note on the 32<sup>nd</sup> pulse are the main pitches or structural pitches.



On the diagram of ching (hand cymbal) stroke: presenting the difference among phleng sam chan, song chan, and chandiao composition, Signs of ching stroke used by Khunying Chin Silpabanaleng and David Morton.

Sam chan สามชั้น	-	+	-	+
Song chan สองชั้น	+	-	+	-
Chan diao ชั้นเดียว	+	-	+	-

- = undamped, unemphasized stroke

+= damped, emphasized stroke.

(Morton, 1961: 11)





Another symbols for ching stroke

Sam chan	O	+	O	+
Song chan	+	O	+	O
Chan diao	+ O	+ O	+ O	+ O

(Morton, 1961: 11)

O = undamed ching strok; + = damed ching stroke.

The pulses of the Thai metric pattern, the strong pulse is on the last beat of each column.

Sam chan	-	+	-	+
	1	2	3	4
Song chan	=	+	=	+
	1	2	3	4
Chan diao	-	+	-	+
1	2	3	4	1

(Morton, 1961: 12)

Five Mode Patterns in Thai Traditional Music

Mode 1 (C Mode)	123	56	1			
Mode 2 (D Mode)	12	45	71	=	23	56
Mode 3 (E Mode)	1	34	671	-	3	56
Mode 5 (G Mode)	12	456	1	=	56	123
Mode 6 (A Mode)	1	345	71	=	6	123

(Morton, 1961: 36)

In Western Music Culture, these were scholars who wrote about variations and its related terms. Forms in Western music. (Copland, 1957) What to Listen for in Music. New York





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1. Sectional Form:

Two part form, or binary form, represented by A B.

Three part form, represented by A B A.

Rondo rondo form, represented by A B A C A D A.

Free sectional arrangement.

2. Fugal Form:

The four principles fugal form are:

- 1) the fugal proper
- 2) the concerto grosso
- 3) the choral prelude
- 4) motets and madrigals.

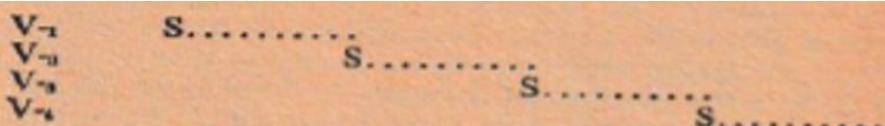
All fugues begin with exposition. Every fugue begins with an announcement with unadorned fugue subject. Then the subject will appear for the first time in one of four voices: soprano, alto, tenor, or bass. The subject is heard in each one of the four voices, one after each other, as shown below:

Voice 1                    S -----

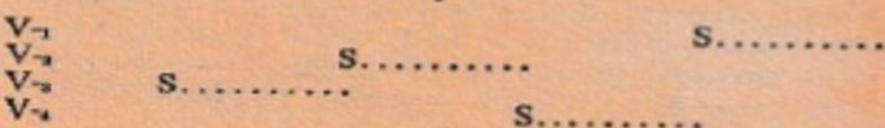
Voice 2                    S -----

Voice 3                    S -----

Voice 4                    S -----



Or the order of entrance may be thus:

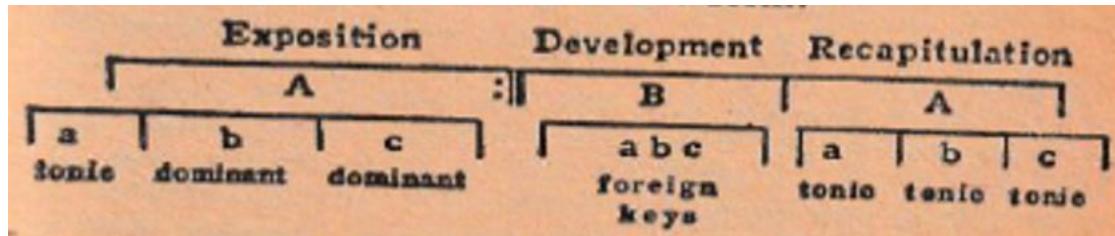


(Copland, 1957: 107)





3. Sonata Form. The first movement of any sonata, symphonies and string quartets and the like, is always in sonata allegro form, this is the diagram showing the general outline of the form.



(Copland, 1957: 115)

4. Variation Form. The variation in music has two different aspects; the first aspect is that the variation is used as a device in music. That is any of the elements in music may be varied --- any melody, any harmony, any rhythm. Also the variation as a device may be applied to any form---sectional, sonata, fugal, etc.

4.1) Basso Ostinato or ground bass, the first type of variation, is the earliest type of variation form.

4.2) The Passacaglia. P. 98. The passacaglia is the second type of variation form. A passacaglia begins with a statement of the theme unaccompanied. This theme is the foundation for all further variation.

4.3) The Chaconne. The chaconne was a slow dance form in three-quarter time.

4.4) Theme and Variation. P. 102. The theme and variations is the last, and most important of the variation forms. Five general types of variations may easily be distinguished: 1) harmonic, 2) melodic, 3) rhythmic, 4) contrapuntal, and 5) a combination of all four previous types.

Forms in Western music in Harvard Dictionary of Music (Randel, 2003). The Harvard Dictionary of Music, Fourth Edition. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Canon. Imitation of a complete subject by one or more voices at fixed intervals of pitch and time. Fugue. The most fully developed procedure of imitative counterpoint, in which the theme is stated successively in all voices of the polyphonic texture, tonality established, continuously expanded, opposed, and reestablished.

Imitation. The statement of a single motive or melody by two or more parts or voices as the others enter in turn. If successive statements are at the same pitch level, the imitation is said to take place at the unison. Imitation often takes place at different pitch levels. Especially common is a regular alternation between statements at the interval of a fifth above or a fourth below.

Rondo. A multi sectional form, movement, or composition based on the principle of multiple recurrence of a theme or section in the tonic key. Nice.

Sequence. The repetition of a phrase of melody (melodic sequence) and/or a harmonic progression (harmonic sequence) at different pitch level, the succession of rising or falling by the same or





similar interval. In a melodic sequence the repetition occurs within a single voice. A melody may be transposed exactly, retaining its precise interval content and thus probably effecting a change of key, or sequence may proceed diatonically, the melody retaining only its general contour and remaining in the same key.

Sonata formFirst, it refers to the structure of an individual movement. Second, sonata form occurs also a wide variety of genre---symphonies, overtures, and string quartets. The sonata consists of two parts: ---

1. The first part is known as the exposition. It is repeated; the second part, which leads eventually back to the tonic, was also generally repeated. The second part or development section consists of two large sections---development and recapitulation.



#### Variation. .

A technique of modifying a given musical idea, a form based on a series of such modifications. Variation is one of the most basic and essential of musical techniques and is widely distributed, playing an important role in the musics of South Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa.

Types of Variations: 1) Basso ostinato or ground bass variation; 2) Constant- melody variation; 3) Constant-harmony variation; 4) Melody-outline variation; 5) Formal-outline variation; 6) Fantasy-variation; and 7) Serial variation. (Siegmeister, 1943)

A fugue is a form of musical composition in which the voices come in one after another. The most important about the fugue is the Subject---usually a short, compact melody---which is announced at the beginning of the piece. It is immediately taken up by the second voice entering at a certain fixed pitch relationship to the first voice which meanwhile takes up a contrasting melody known as the Counter-subject. Fugues may be in three, four, or five voices, each entering in turn which the Subject---always a given number of tones higher or lower than the previous entry. This whole process is known as the "Exposition." It is always characterized by a sense of cumulative growth, because each voice, after it has completed the subject, continues to weave an independent melody of its own. The end of the Exposition thus leaves us with three, four, or five voices blended perfectly together. (Apel, 1950: 108-109)

"Form is the general principles and schemes which govern the structure-at-large of a composition. In other words, a musical form is the plan of construction comparable to an architect's ground plan which exists in the mind of the composer. The most important at least, the most clearly defined forms may be classified as follows:





### “I. Single Forms

Repetition Forms: 1) a a' a" . . . Variation form; 2) a b (simple binary form) or ||: a :||: b :|| (rounded 'Binary form; 3) ||: a :||: b a :|| Rounded binary form; 4) B: a :B b a Sonata-form; 5) aba Ternary form; 6) abaca Five-part form (also called \*Rondo form); and 7) a b a c a b a \*Rondo form (Rondosonata form)

II. Compound Forms (consisting of various "movements") A. Instrumental: \*sonata; \*concerto; suite;toccata

B. Vocal: (Apel, 1950: 278) \*cantata; \*mass; \*passion; oratorio; classification or which represent borderline cases. For instance the fugue which is classified above as a continuation form might also be considered in a way a repetition form, owing to the characteristic alternation of expositions and episodes."

“Imitation. (Apel, 1950: 367) The restatement in close succession of a melody (subject, motive) in different parts of a contrapuntal texture. This device is most consistently employed in the \*canon, in which the full length of a voice-part is imitated in another (canonic imitation). Applied to subjects, it forms an essential feature of the \*fugue (fugal imitation) as well as of the 16thcentury motet and of the various pre-fugal forms, the \*ricercare, \*canzone, \*fantasia,\*capriccio. While in a fugue the imitation is normally restricted to one subject,there are usually a variety of such subjects in the earlier forms.”

**Formal Design of Phleng Thao**, a set of three variations of one composition. Khamen La O Ong as analyzed by David Morton. (Morton, 1961: 22-23) Extended Version: 32 measures. 8 measures = 1 drumming rhythmic cycle.

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Middle Version: 16 measures 4 measures = 1 drumming cycle

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Shortened Version: 8 measures. 2 measures = 1 drumming rhythmic cycle.

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(Morton, 1961: 21&23)

### Study Method

This study was a qualitative study through the analysis of written document and music performances. Important books on music, both on Thai music and Western music were reviewed. They are books written by Prof. Montree Tramote and his associates on Thai classical music published by the fine art department; the traditional Music of Thailand by David Morton. Books on Western classical music were also reviewed, such as The Music Lovers' Handbook by Elie Sieemeister; What to Listen for in Music by Aaron Copland; Harvard Dictionary of Music edited by Don Michael Randle.

Notations of phleng thaophleng lao siang thian and phleng khaek toi mo were analyzed as well as two of phleng thayoi compositions phleng khamen rajaburi and khaek lopburi were analyzed.





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Two objectives of the study are: 1) how the variations are used in phleng thao; and 2) how the variation were used in phleng thayoi.

Tramote et al. (1996: 2-3) **Thai Classical Music Notations, Book 1.** Bangkok: The Fine Arts Department. Characteristics of Thai classical music. According to its drumming pattern, Thai music may be divided into 3 types prop kai, song mai, and special. Propkai and song mai drumming patterns are used to accompany the compositions of duple time, whereas the special type of drumming pattern is used for compositions of triple time and duple time combined. The length of each composition is counted the numbers of drumming pattern rather than numbers of beat or pulse. Classification of compositions into three types--song chan, original version, or mid length version; sam chan, meaning third variation or extended length version; and chan diao, meaning first variation, diminutive version or shortened version.(p.2) Length of each drumming pattern.

Prop kai drumming pattern.of 2/4 time.

Sam chan or third variation consists of 16 beats or 8 measures.

Song chan or second variation consists of 8 beat or 4 measures.

Chan diao or first variation consists of 4 beats or 2 measures.

Song mai drumming pattern, also in 2/4 time.

Sam chan pattern consists of 8 beats or 4 measures.

Song chan pattern consists of 4 beats or 2 measures.

Chan diao pattern consists of 2 beats or 1 measure.

### Example of the Variations

**First Variation.** (4 measures = 2 drumming cycles)

[ 1<sup>st</sup> Phrase - - - - - ] [ 2<sup>nd</sup> Phrase - - - - - - - - ]

**Second Variation.** (8 measures = 2 drumming cycles)

[1<sup>st</sup> Phrase - - - - - = - - - - - ]

[2<sup>nd</sup> Phrase - - - - - - - - - ]





Third Variation. (16 measures = 2 drumming cycles)

[ 1<sup>st</sup> Phrase - - - - - - - - ]

[ 2<sup>nd</sup> Phrase - - - - - - - - ]

Two composition of Music scores and performances of phleng Lao Siang Thian and Phleng Khaek Toi mo were analyzed for the principle of the variation interms of its augmentation and diminution; two phleng Thayoi scores and their performances were analyzed for their melodic variation from one given melodic passage.

#### Results of the Study.

1) On the anakysus of variation within phleng thaq compositions.

1.1) Lao Siang Thian Third Variation, Section 1. Song Mai drum cycle.

32 measures, 8 drumming rhythmic cycles. The last note that fall on the endingpulse of each drumming rhythmic cycle normally are in the same pitches.

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Lao Siang Thian Song Chan (middle variation) , Section 1.

8 drumming rhythmic cycles. Theoretically, the last note (pitch) of the melody that falls on the ending beat of each drumming rhythmic cycle, should be in the same pitches.

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Lao Siang Thaian, shortened Version, 8 drumming rhythmic cycles. Theoretically the note that fall on the ending beat of each drumming rhythmic cycle should be of the same pitch.

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1.2) Khaek Toi Mo, Third Variation, Song Mai drumming cycle.

12 measures; 4 drumming rhythmic cycles. Theoretically the last note of the melody that falls on the ending beat of each drumming rhythmic cycle should be of the same pitch.

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Song chan or middle variation, 8 measures; 4 drumming rhythmic cycles.

Theoretically the last note of the melody that falls on the ending beat of each drumming rhythmic cycle should be of the same pitch.

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Chan Diao or shortened variation; 4 measures and 4 drumming rhythmic cycles.

Theoretically the last note of the melody that falls on the ending beat of each drumming rhythmic cycle should be of the same pitch.

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2) On the analysis of melodic variation in phleng thayoi compositions.

2.1) Khamen Rajaburi

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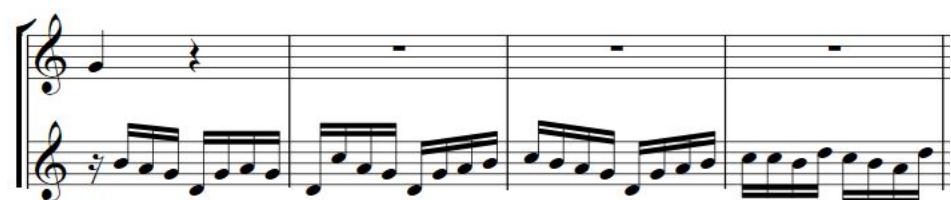
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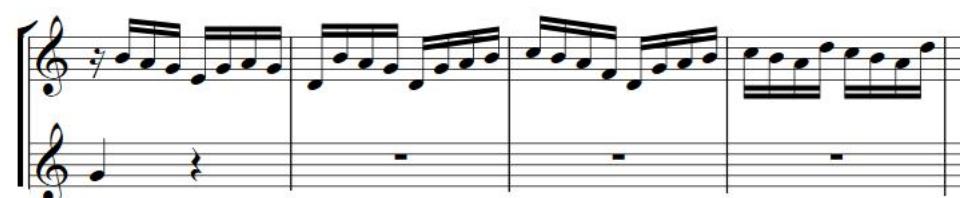
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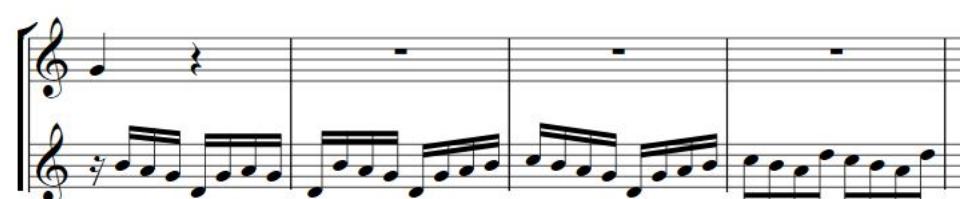
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## 2.2) Khaek Lopburi

Khaek Lopburi, Third Variation, Section 2.

Creation of Imitation Techniques on Pitch D.

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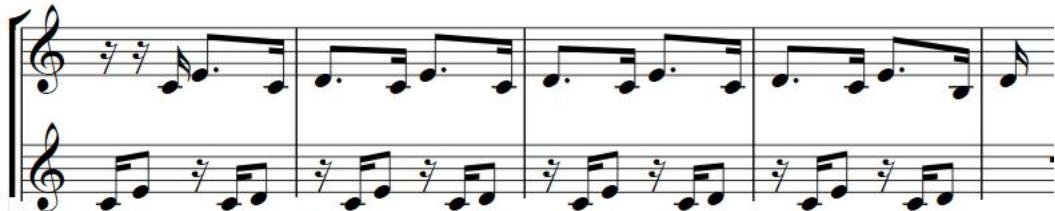
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## Conclusion and Suggestion

### Conclusion.

On phleng thao variation, in extending or shortening of an original version of a melody, the composer normally retains the last note of the melody that falls on the last beat of each drumming rhythmic cycle.

### Suggestion.

Therefore these main notes or structural note are to be maintain in each version.

Variation techniques in both phleng thao and phleng thayoi are rich resources of any composer or song writer, or music educator.





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