International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance. Study, Group on the Performing Arts of Southeast Asia Symposium (7th 2024). Proceedings of the 7th Symposium.
Addendum: Inoue, Sayuri. (2024). *The Role of Notation in the Transmission of Myanmar Classical Songs*.

# THE ROLE OF NOTATION IN THE TRANSMISSION OF MYANMAR CLASSICAL SONGS

**Sayuri Inoue**
Osaka University, Japan

## Introduction

This paper clarifies the role of notation in transmitting Myanmar classical songs (*thachingyi*). While these songs have traditionally been passed down orally and memorized for performance, various forms of musical notation have been developed since the 1920s to aid in preserving and unifying different versions. Individuals and the government have engaged in efforts to notate these songs, publishing numerous instructional books and notations. However, the tradition of oral teaching remains strong, partly because performing classical songs inherently involves variations not only between different performers but also within the same performer's interpretation; therefore, fixing these variations in notation is difficult.

U Myint Maung (1937–2001), a leading harpist, addressed this challenge by creating notations that allowed the preservation and transmission of these variations. Influenced by his encounter with American ethnomusicologist Judith Becker in 1959, he began notating music and developed a teaching method based on these notations. U Myint Maung's notations often include multiple variations of the same piece, enabling learners to internalize these variations, which makes it increasingly difficult to perform in a fixed manner during actual performances.

This paper organizes the history of notation in Myanmar and examines how U Myint Maung's notations enable the transmission of variations.

## Preserving Music

Although the effort to unify different versions of classical songs' lyrics dates to the Konbaung period (1752–1885) (Inoue 2014: 21–50), musical notation fully emerged in the early 20th century. The earliest reference to notation can be found in the constitution of the Myoma Amateur Music Association, a prominent group in Mandalay established in 1925 by the renowned musician Myoma Nyein (1909–1955). The group's constitution, edited in 1928, outlined objectives that included "collecting and learning knowledge of instruments written in the musical notation" and "consulting with experts on old Myanmar *thachingyi* to learn how to notate it using international staff notation" (Shoon Myaing 2001: 16). This statement demonstrates an awareness of musical notation at the time and highlights the recognized importance of transcribing classical songs into staff notation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a national initiative aimed to standardize the performance of classical songs. The Ministry of Culture[1], a key institution in shaping the country's cultural heritage, played a critical role. The State School of Fine Arts[2] was established in Yangon in 1952, and from May 11 to 21, 1953, the Ministry of Culture organized meetings to standardize classical songs (Shoon Myaing 2001: 24–26). Shoon Myaing summarizes these efforts under the title "Creating the Correct Version of the Melody."

> When determining the correct version of a song's lyrics and melody, the following six elements were considered: (1) *than-ca* [final note in the reprise], (2) *si-wa* [timing of bell and clapper], (3) *ataw* [interlude between sections of the song], (4) *apaik-pyan* [reprise of a stanza], (5) *ti-gwek* [instrumental play], and (6) *ahso* [vocal performance]. (Shoon Myaing 2001: 24–26)

After the above meetings, on July 1, 1953, the State School of Fine Arts was also established in Mandalay (Shoon Myaing 2001: 27).

The earliest staff notation I have found is *Classical Burmese Music*, published by the

Ministry of Culture in 1952 (Ministry of Union Culture 1952). The preface describes it as follows:

> This is the preliminary attempt made by the Ministry of Union Culture to record and publish Classical Burmese Music in staff notation. The three are the elementary pieces rendered in a style considered the simplest and most suitable for beginners. It is the intention of the Ministry to cover in this way the whole range of the Burmese Classical Music trod by the traditional players. Equally simple and elementary pieces as well as the advanced ones in accomplished styles will follow seriatim in due course.
> Dated 31-10-52. Ministry of Union Culture. (Hpo Lat 1952: Preface)

In 1960, the Ministry of Culture published a three-volume collection of musical notations transcribed by U Ba Than (1906–1987), which included the basic 13 *kyo-thachin*[3] songs (Ministry of Union Culture 1960a, 1960b, 1960c). U Ba Than, a distinguished harpist, is notable for developing the 16-string *saung-gauk* (arched harp, hereafter referred to as harp), an advancement from the traditional 14-string harp. The preface notes that these songs are not solely for piano but are adaptable to other Myanmar instruments (Ministry of Union Culture 1960a). The repertoire of Myanmar classical music is not divided by instrument. The harp, *pat-waing* (drum-circle), *pattala* (bamboo xylophone), and *sandaya* (piano) share a common playing method using two parts of the body—either the index finger or thumb for the harp, or both the right and left hands for *pat-waing*, *pattala* and *sandaya*—to play. Daw Khin May, the harpist and wife of U Myint Maung, mentioned that the piano was traditionally played using only the left and right index fingers.

The fact that these books include titles, prefaces, tables of contents, and piece readings in both Burmese and English suggests an effort to present Myanmar music to a global audience. The English preface states the following:

> The aim and object of the Ministry of Union Culture is to explore every possible avenue for the preservation of archaic or traditional Burmese Songs in their original essence both in tune and style and to standardize [sic] them as authenticated Burmese Classical Songs for the interest and benefit of the general public…
> The Ministry of Union Culture is endeavoring its level best to continue to publish all Burmese Classical Songs standardized under it [sic] authority and record them in the archives of the Union Government.
> Dated 8-12-59. Ministry of Union Culture. (Ministry of Union Culture 1960a)

An article in the November 1, 1968, issue of the Myanmar music magazine *Gita Padeitha* discusses the use of Western staff notation as follows:

> In today's music world, "musical symbols" are the foundation for every musician. For instrumentalists, this knowledge is essential.
> Moreover, it serves as a universal language—a standardized system without variations in editions or terminology…
> These musical symbols have been a part of the global music community for centuries. In Myanmar, however, their adoption came much later.
> If these symbols had been introduced earlier in Myanmar and used by musicians to record the traditional *thachingyi* according to established rules, the current issue of differing versions of *thachingyi* might have been avoided. (Gita Padeitha Magazine editorial group 1968: 57)

These articles highlight the importance of using musical notation to avoid variations in performances, suggesting that "variation" is regarded as undesirable in the transmission of music.

An interesting advertisement appeared in the October, 1975 issue (No. 85) of this magazine, asking, "Would you like to learn the do re mi symbols?" (Kei Thi Pan musical notation school 1975). The address for correspondence courses was also listed. The "do re mi symbol" here refers to notations representing the seven notes of the Myanmar scale using numbers rather than the Western staff notation of do re mi fa so la ti do. Figure 1 shows such number notation in the same magazine, with the lyrics written above the number notation.

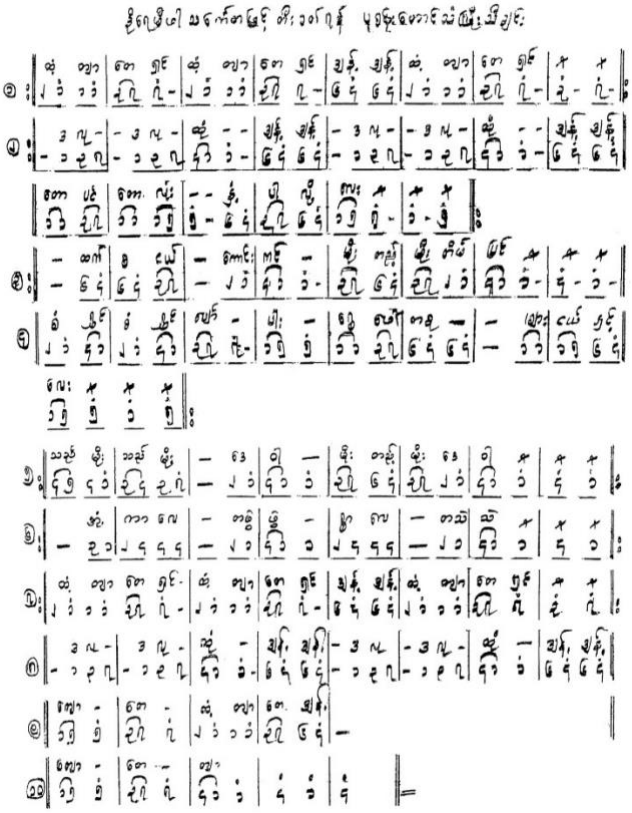


*Figure 1*. "The rendition of '*bazin-taung than kyo*' song using the do, re, mi, fa symbols" (Htei Aung 1987: 34–35)

The issues of *Gita Padeitha Magazine* that I was able to confirm at the Universities' Central Library at the University of Yangon ranged from the first issue in October 1968 to the 90th in August 1988. Among these, 21 staff notations were included between the 62nd issue in November 1973 and the 73rd issue in August 1974, 11 of which were for classical songs. This finding implies that staff notation had become familiar to those interested in music.

In 2004, more than 50 years after publishing its first staff notation in 1952, the Ministry of Culture released the *National Version of 13 Kyo-songs' Notations* (Musical notation committee 2004). According to the preface of this book, on March 14, 1995, the State Law and Order Restoration Council of the Union of Myanmar established the Committee for the Examination and Notation of the *Mahagita-Thachingyi*[4] of Myanmar. One of the committee's tasks was to preserve the traditional version of *mahagita* songs by recording them in international staff notation to ensure their longevity (Musical notation committee 2004: preface).

The preface notably emphasizes that this notation system was not meant to constrain performers' creativity but to enable them to produce variations within the rhythmic framework of *si* (bell) and *wa* (clapper), which are central to the uniqueness and grace of Myanmar music (Musical notation committee 2004: preface). Unlike previous musical notations published by

the Ministry of Culture, which aimed to standardize different interpretations, this book highlights variation as a fundamental feature of Myanmar music.

One of the most prominent contributors in this field is Shoon Myaing (1943[5]–2022), son of Myoma Nyein. Between 2001 and 2022, he actively engaged in transcribing and publishing traditional music and published nine books of staff notations, five of which focused on classical songs. In 2017, he produced *Mahagita Myanmar Classics Piano & Orchestra Volume (1)* (Shoon Myaing 2017), which includes a full orchestra score. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only full score of its kind.

**Instructional books and notations**

Instructional books and notations for self-study have been published, many of which are designed for beginners and self-taught players. These books often include instructions on how to play the instrument and provide relatively simple notations. Some also offer guidance on reading staff notations.

The earliest instructional book with notation I have found is *How to Learn Pattala (Bamboo Xylophone) and Sandaya (Piano) Techniques* by San Win, published in 1939 (San Win 1939). This rare notation features a grid pattern. In the preface, the author expresses the hope that this book will help not only his contemporaries but also future generations of Myanmar people to learn the "correct version" (San Win 1939: 3). It offers guidance on reading music, enabling even complete beginners to quickly and easily start playing (San Win 1939: 8–9). The expression "correct version" here suggests a negative attitude toward variations in performance depending on the performer.

Another book titled *The Playing Technique of the Traditional Myanmar Style and Method without a Teacher* (Han Sein n.d.), likely written in the late 1950s or later (although the publication date is not provided). The preface notes that "with the opening of the State School of Fine Arts, the number of people learning and playing the harp has significantly increased. However, I have not found any Myanmar symbols that describe how to play or write music for the harp" (Han Sein n.d.: 1). This book contains an illustration of a 13-string harp, with each string labeled to correspond to the numbers in the number notation. However, as it does not explain how to hold the instrument or where to place the fingers, learning how to play the harp using this book alone is challenging.

The next oldest dated classical song notation is *The Traditional Repertoire and Basic Playing Techniques of the Bamboo Xylophone and Piano*, published in 1967 (Han Sein 1967). The preface notes that the book is intended for those who have not had the opportunity to learn from a teacher. It further explains that the symbols used are not international notes but are unique to Myanmar; thus, no knowledge of a foreign language is required to play. Myanmar music experts memorize songs solely by ear. It states that the *ti-gwek ti-jet* (instrument playing part) learned in this manner cannot be preserved for long and must be recorded using symbols if it is to be preserved for a long time (Han Sein 1967: preface).

The book *Burmese Music Notes* by U Ba Than explains staff notation (Ba Than n.d.). It includes an advertisement where U Ba Than offers a four-month course at his music school, teaching harp, *pattala*, and *sandaya* using "global notation systems." He also mentions that he teaches traditional Myanmar *thachingyi* and authentic Myanmar music, *kalabaw* songs, through international notation. While the book is not dated, it is likely from the 1960s.

I found several mandolin instructional books as well, including *Musical symbols and the Knowledge of the Mandolin* (Thaung Tin Htei 1969), *Knowledge of Mandolin* (Htei Aung 1975), and *Compilation of Knowledge about the Mandolin* (Htei Aung 1976).

The instructional books examined thus far either omit or limit explanations of how to play the instruments to the most basic descriptions, focusing primarily on how to read notations. Nevertheless, publishing instructional books indicates a demand for self-study resources, and numerous documents explain musical notation.

Since around 2014, smartphones have rapidly gained popularity in Myanmar, and Facebook

has emerged as a prominent platform for communication and the sharing of notations. Numerous groups on Facebook are dedicated to sharing notations, with a particularly active exchange of handwritten number notations for recent popular songs, though classical musical notations are also frequently shared. Additionally, many videos explaining how to play musical instruments are uploaded to both Facebook and YouTube. The impact of notations on the transmission of music is expected to continue growing and evolving.

**Variations in U Myint Maung's Notations**

The notations and instructional books examined thus far are limited either to simple pieces or to preservation-focused examples, such as Shoon Myaing's notations, and do not serve the traditional function of enabling the performance of variations. However, in 1960, the renowned harpist U Myint Maung began creating a more sophisticated system of musical notation, incorporating complex notes and improvisational techniques with his unique approach. His handwritten notations are extensive, often featuring multiple variations of the same piece. He also developed a teaching method based on these notations.

He created a new notation each time a writing request was made, resulting in several variations of the same piece. According to his wife, Daw Khin May, during a time when copying was not widespread, U Myint Maung personally handwrote individual notations for each of his students. He taught them how to read staff notation and provided them with notebooks printed with staff lines. In these notebooks, he began by writing simple instructions on reading basic notes, followed by finger exercises, and specific notations for the pieces they needed to practice. His teaching method integrated both reading notation and playing the instrument, using staff notation. While students were ultimately required to memorize the pieces, as in traditional oral learning, even the most complex compositions were provided in handwritten form. Furthermore, he tailored the notations' difficulty to match each student's skill level, even for the same piece, resulting in a vast array of variations in his notations.

According to Daw Khin May, he often left her with a handwritten notation in the morning, instructing her to memorize it by evening, before he returned home from his job at the State School of Fine Arts in Mandalay. This task was particularly challenging for her, as she had to learn the notation and practice the harp while managing household responsibilities. This episode underscores the significant role that notation plays in the transmission of music.

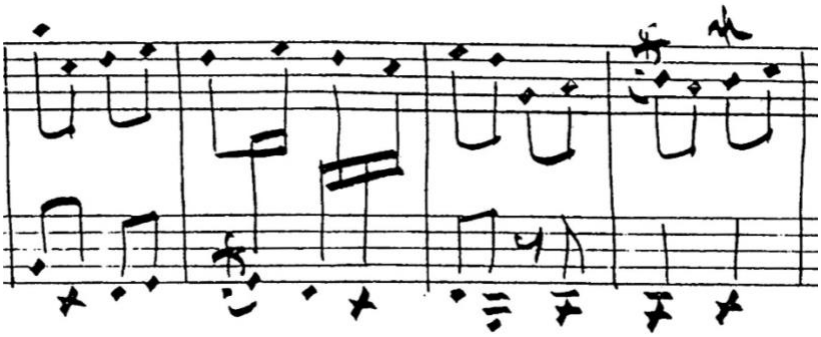
U Myint Maung handwrote new notations as needed, resulting in several variations of the same piece being preserved in different notations. According to Daw Khin May, "he would write different notations each time." Figure 2 presents excerpts from two versions of U Myint Maung's notations of the "*pan hei wun*" *yodaya* song. Variation 1 represents a relatively simple pattern, while Variation 2 features a more complex pattern with a greater number of notes.

While musical notation may contribute to fixation, classical songs typically involve a shared set of melodies (*alaik*) across multiple works, embellished by the instrumental parts known as "*akwek*." Unlike the fixed *alaik*, *akwek* has many variations, mastery of these variations results in performances that are not rigidly fixed but feature ongoing improvisation. Performers often unintentionally "improvise" these variations during actual performances.

A characteristic of classical songs is that the same *alaik* appears not only in multiple songs but also many times within a single song. In U Myint Maung's notations, a different *akwek* variation is often notated for the same *alaik* each time. Therefore, by using his notations to master a single song, we can learn multiple variations.

Instrumentation aims to enhance the singer's performance, sometimes subtly and sometimes brilliantly. The complexity of *akwek* depends on the lyrics and *alaik* of the song, with the player's interpretation guiding the choice of variation. This interpretative freedom is especially evident in sections where instrumental music is played without *alaik* or where the tempo fluctuates.

Variation 1



Variation 2

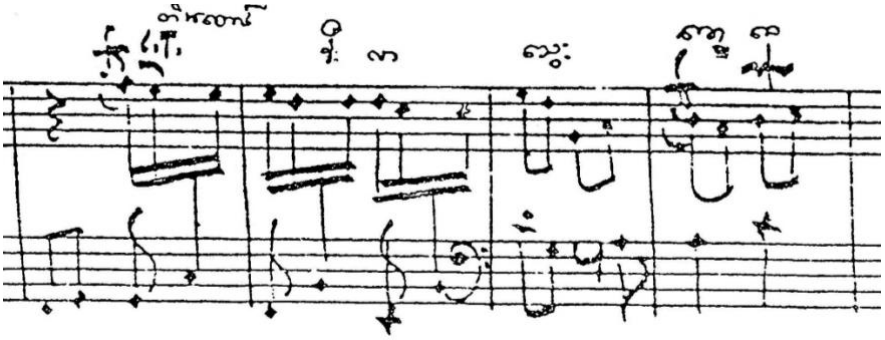


*Figure 2*. "*Pan hei wun*" *yodaya* song
(U Myint Maung' notations, Variation 1: January 12, 2001, Variation 2: February 3, 1982)

The notation for the *patpyo* song "*hmain pya hmoun wei*," notated by U Myint Maung on September 22, 1985, includes a note stating that it was "notated according to the *ti-gwek* learned from May May." According to Daw Khin May, this note refers to the *akwek* taught by their teacher, also named Daw Khin May—whom they called "May May"—, from whom both she and U Myint Maung learned the harp at the State School of Fine Arts in Mandalay. This reflects the tradition of carefully learning and memorizing the *akwek* passed down from teachers.

However, upon listening to U Myint Maung's recording of this piece, one may notice that while his performance largely follows the notation, he plays different *akwek* in numerous instances. As he did not perform the piece while reading the notation, it seems more natural to conclude that adhering strictly to a fixed *akwek* would be unnatural in actual performance. The tempo of a piece stretches according to its genre. For instance, in the prelude of a *patpyo* song, which is not accompanied by singing, the tempo is highly variable, making this section prone to variation. Even after the song begins, *patpyo* works often exhibit a pattern where the sung phrase starts slowly, progresses at a steady pace, and then slows down again. In these slower sections, the harpist can play with considerable freedom in response to the melody, leading to significant variation.

## Conclusion

This paper explores the development of musical notation in Myanmar and its role in the transmission of classical songs. Since the 1920s, the focus has been on musical notation, supported by both individual and state efforts to record and standardize music. Many

instructional books and notations have been published, reflecting a broader movement to document and unify variations. However, the notations and instructional books examined are either limited to simple pieces or focused on preservation, lacking the traditional function of facilitating the performance of variations.

U Myint Maung, in his extensive work on notating music, consistently wrote different *akwek* for the same song or *alaik* each time, thereby preserving and transmitting variations within the framework of written notation. For example, when I am outside of Myanmar and cannot be taught orally by Daw Khin May, I use U Myint Maung's notations to memorize the songs. However, when I play them, I often improvise and unintentionally create variations. This is also common among other performers and can even occur at the beginner level. This fluidity is inherent in the structure of classical music, and U Myint Maung's notation effectively captures and conveys this "non-fixed form."

**Acknowledgements**
This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Numbers JP 18K01191 and JP 21K01081

## Endnotes

[1] In 2016, the Ministry of Culture was merged with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, forming the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture.
[2] After 2006, this school became available to students who had completed the seventh grade, and its name was changed to the State High School of Arts.
[3] *Kyo-thachin* is a genre of classical music.
[4] *Mahagita* is a Pali loanword for *thachingyi*, and both terms mean "great song."
[5] Shoon Myaing passed away at the age of 79 on December 18, 2022. In Myanmar, people traditionally use the East Asian age-reckoning system, which includes the time spent in the womb. Therefore, his birth year would likely be either 1943 or 1944.

## References

Ba Than, U. n.d. *Burmese Music Notes*. n.p.
Gita Padeitha Magazine editorial group. (1968). "Tei thinkeita [Musical symbols]." *Gita Padeitha Magazine*, no. 2 (November 1968): 57.
Han Sein. (1967). *Pattala thin-yo acheigan ti-ni pattala hnin sandaya* [The traditional repertoire and basic playing techniques of the bamboo xylophone and piano]. Hanthawadi.
—. n.d. *Myanma ni myanma han hsaya lut saun ti-ni* [The playing technique of the traditional Myanmar style and method without a teacher]. Hata Sapei-taik.
Hpo Lat, Atwin Wun ed. (1952). *Shei-yo myanma pantya, Classical Burmese Music*. Ministry of Union Culture.
Htei Aung. (1975). *Medalin pyinnya* [Knowledge of Mandolin]. Shumawa Pounhneik-taik.
—. (1976). *Medalin pyinnya paun jouk* [Compilation of knowledge about the mandolin]. n.p.
—. (1987). "Myanma gita acheigan thin-yo thachingyi-mya gita hsaun-ba ahmat-sin 1 [Curriculum of basic classical songs in Myanmar music: music article series 1]." *Gita Padeitha Magazine*, no. 78 (May 1987): 31–37.
Inoue, Sayuri. (2014). *The Formation of Genre in Burmese Classical Songs*. Osaka University Press.
Kei Thi Pan musical notation school. (1975). "Do re mi thinkeitha tat-myauk lo dha-la [Would you like to learn the do re mi symbolos?]" *Gita Padeitha Magazine*, no. 85 (October 1975): 12.

Ministry of Union Culture. (1952). *Shei-yo myanma pantya, Classical Burmese Music*. Ministry of Union Culture.
—. (1960a). *Pantya mu-hman sanpya shei-yo myanma thachingyi-mya thinkeita saouk, Standardized Classical Burmese Music, Volume 1, No. 1.* Ministry of Union Culture.
—. (1960b). *Pantya mu-hman sanpya shei-yo Myanma thachingyi-mya thinkeita saouk, Standardized Classical Burmese Music, Volume 1, No. 2.* Ministry of Union Culture.
—. (1960c). *Pantya mu-hman sanpya shei-yo Myanma thachingyi-mya thinkeita saouk, Standardized Classical BurmeseMusic, Volume 1, No. 3.* Ministry of Union Culture.
Musical notation committee. (2004). *Naingan-daw mu kyo thachin (13) pouk i gita thinkeita mya* [National version of 13 *kyo*-songs' notations]. Ministry of Culture.
San Win. (1939). *Pattala hnin sandaya ati thin-ni nithi* [How to learn *pattala* (bamboo Xylophone) and *sandaya* (piano) techniques]. n.p.
Shoon Myaing (Myoma) (2001). *Gaba gita thinkeita ni-pyinya hnin myanma mahagita myanma thachin* [International notation and Myanmar classical songs]. Taing Lin Saouk-taik.
—. (2017). *Myanma mahagita thachin-mya sandaya hnin than-zoun tiwain ahmat thit*, *Mahagita Myanmar Classics Piano & Orchestra Volume (1)*. Tamapwint sapei.
Thaung Tin Htei. (1969). *Gita tinkeita hnin medalin pyinnya* [Musical symbols and the knowledge of the mandolin]. Zanboun Alin Saouk-taik.