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Thaweesak

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HEADLINE: In a glass of his own

SUBHEADLINE: It's unusual and unique _ a symphony of glass and one very dedicated player

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Fifty-eight cubic centimetres of water for a mi, 60 cc for a sharp re, 46 cc for a sharp do, 58 cc for a la.... No, it isn't the amount of water out-of-tune singers have to swallow on an empty stomach in order to be able to hit the right note.

This is just a reminder scribbled on a piece of paper of the amount of water necessary to tune Weeraphong Thaweesak's home-made glass harp and make sure the 30 stemmed glasses he has skilfully arranged and glued to a strong tray will reverberate to the right note.

If you happen to meet Weeraphong before any of his performances you will indeed see him methodically consulting this precious and crumpled piece of paper _ the outcome of extensive study and years of experience.

Then, roughly the same ceremony follows: Weeraphong fills up a calibrated beaker and pours the right quantity of water into different glasses. He then washes his hands _ cleanliness of the glass as well as the hands is a primordial component _ and fills up two bowls with water in order to regularly moisten his fingers. And then Weeraphong is ready to gently caress the glasses' edge, producing crystal-clear sounds and soon, enchanting melodies.

At this point, magic enters the scene and sees to the rest. Musical notes follow and hunt out one another, unfolding from the void they were secretly nestled in and rising, straight, sure, like proud snakes from charmers' reed baskets.

Spectators are perfectly entitled to be flabbergasted _ as most are _ when they first come across such an unexpected performance.

As Weeraphong's fingers slip along the rims, from one glass to another like the graceful movements of an ice skater, soothing, sweet, unearthly sounds arise forming classic scores as much as pop, Western melodies as readily as Thai traditional ones.

Sample scores are When a Child is Born, Johan Sebastian Bach's Ave Maria, the Eagles' Desperado, Celine Dion's My Heart Will Go On, and closer to home Khang Khao Kin Kluay (Bats Eat Bananas) and Hungry Man's Blues based on a composition by His Majesty the King.

As Weeraphong's activity increases or decreases in speed, the vibrato changes; as he presses softer or harder the tone changes, notes come in short, sharp bursts or are extended to fade in and out.

The performance is all the more enchanting because it is particularly rare. Aged 40, Weeraphong Thaweesak, a Christian, is one of only 10 or so glass harpists in the world, and the only Thai. His glass harp is truly unique, carefully developed after years of practice and much trial and error.

Firmly glued to the a tray _ actually the cover of a shockproof case used for transportation _ the 30 stemmed glasses are arranged in precise order, according to the sound they produce. From low sol to high do with both sharp and flat notes, Weeraphong's instrument covers a range of 2.5 chromatic octaves, which as he says is enough ``to play it all".

``This is really a wonderful instrument. To me, it is simply perfect. I can play either slow or fast songs, half notes, quarter notes or long notes _ it all depends on how long I maintain the pressure," says Weeraphong enthusiastically, adding that he graduated in Music Education from Chulalongkorn University and majored in classical guitar.

``The difficulty is not so much in playing but rather in being able to design the instrument, picking the right glasses and positioning them in the most suitable way," adds Weeraphong, who could talk at length about his torments trying to find the proper components and the most effective configuration for his glass harp.

``Actually I don't know what type of glass and arrangement other harpists are using. Personally I don't use crystal, but regular glasses made out of quartz mineral. It is easier to generate a sound with crystal but to me the sound is too thin," he says, comparing his instrument to something between a flute and a violin.

The production of a glass harp seems thus to be the core of this singular art form _ and surely the prime requirement for its future development.

``I am thinking about sharing this music with a wider public and teaching youngsters. It is a project I really have in mind, but my problem is that teaching implies the production of a set of glass harps. Yet glasses are rarely made perfect; their thickness cannot be controlled, and neither can they be ordered."

How Weeraphong designed his glass harp is a story in itself. The starting point takes us back to 1997, after Weeraphong had seen a short documentary on TV of glass harp music played by American musician Jamey Turner.

Seduced at once, Weeraphong decided to find out more about this specific and mostly unknown musical style, which actually has a history of about 500 years (see sidebar).

``I went to a shopping mall straight away to buy different types of glasses. When I asked for a bottle of water to make some sound tests, the sales assistant stared wide-eyed at me. I bought 30 glasses on the spot," Weeraphong remembers with a laugh.

Following long hours of laborious experiments and attentive listening, comparing the sound produced by glasses to notes of a piano and developing four different versions of a glass harp, he finally settled on the present configuration.

``I started with five glasses and five notes: do, re, mi, fa, sol. With these notes I could play scores such as Beethoven's 9th symphony and some parts of Ode to Joy," explained Weeraphong, who within four months of practice was able to entertain his friends with a few melodies.

Weeraphong gave his first performance in Thailand in April 1998 for Channel 3's Twilight Show programme, having just polished and perfected his first instrument of 18 glasses. His first live performance took place in May 1998, at Central City Bangna Department Store.

Weeraphong very recently launched his own CD entitled A Wonderful Touch of Glass with songs ranging from Let It Be Me, Unchained Melody, to She and Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.

By now, the self-taught glass harpist, whose 10-year-old daughter is a promising pianist, has also travelled the world with his highly breakable and irreplaceable instrument, giving performances in the streets of Lyon, France, as well as among Thai communities such as Santi Asoke.

He has given up his previous occupation as slide presentation producer, following the drop of activity in the sector caused by the 1997 financial crisis and the rising interest in his newly-found skill.

Yet there is one of Weeraphong's former passions and pastimes that he hasn't given up, in fact one he has embraced with even greater ardour: religion and inter-religious communication.

Trained as a "communicator" in the Catholic Church, Weeraphong aims at reaching out on the different and perhaps higher level of music, "not only entertaining but also able to bring about values", he explains with conviction.

"Music can somehow create a feeling of communion and generate happiness. It can be very good for relaxation and meditation," Weeraphong explains, recalling tender moments of shared bliss with children in France or ardent Buddhists in Thailand.

"Religions are like a jigsaw puzzle, they can actually work closely together." Weeraphong will soon attend an international Catholic congress in Rome and travel to the Philippines – equipped both with his musical and "communicator" skills.

But the thing Weeraphong seems to look forward to the most is a gathering in Paris, in two years' time, of the world's various glass musicians, at the initiative of the American-based president of the Glass Music Association. "The sound of a glass harp is just so beautiful and the glass so delicate. Touching it is very special and inspiring," he says.

"The glass harp fascinates because it derives from two very ordinary things used in our daily life: water and glass."

To which one needs to add in generous amount at least two other essential components: patience and creativity.

A 500-year-old instrument

According to Weeraphong Thaweesak, Thailand's only glass harpist, the glass harp was introduced as a musical instrument in China and Persia as early as the 14th century.

Initially, the musician tapped a glass bowl with sticks to produce music. But in 1492, Irishman Richard Pockrich was the first musician to make classical music by using a wide range of glasses as instruments, as well as water to adjust the tune.

Pockrich made music by running his wet fingers around the rim of the glasses. The instrument's melodious and impressive sound earned him fame all over Great Britain at that time.

Later on, Christoph Willibald Gluck in 1746 helped popularise the glass harp by making music using 26 glasses and giving a performance at London's Haymarket Theatre.

A few decades later, after seeing a glass harp music show by Edmund Delaval in 1761 in the UK, Benjamin Franklin, American statesman, inventor and philosopher, was very much impressed and tried to improve the musical instrument.

Franklin finally invented a new musical instrument called a ``Glass Armonica" which was made out of glass bowls permanently adjusted, no water needed.

As it grew in renown, the instrument now referred to as the glass harp _ because of the harp-like shape of the glasses on a tray _ or ``musical glasses" had a host of names: ``Seraphim" (perhaps a reference to the ethereal sound), ``Grand Harmonicon", ``Verillon", even ``Angelic Organ".