

HEADLINE: Many strings to a bow

SUBHEADLINE: Taking up the violin can be an expensive hobby to maintain, but Khru Joompot Muangling has stretched his inventive mind to come up with an alternative _ the bamboolin: a made-in-Thailand violin

BYLINE: Story by WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA Pictures by SMITH SUTIBUT

The sight of khaolam _ glutinous rice baked in bamboo trunks _ being roasted on charcoal might inspire different reactions.

Either it makes your mouth water and you start digging in your pocket for a 10-baht coin in order to treat yourself to this popular Thai delicacy. Or, having just had an abundant and nutritious meal, it makes your stomach groan and you quickly walk past the little stall.

At the most, if you are a foreigner, you might bend over the bamboo trunk to take a closer look at the unusual-looking dessert, wondering what on earth Thai people come up with to delight their taste buds.

But I bet the probability that the sight of a khaolam giving rise to an exclamation such as ``what a good violin this bamboo would make!" would be rare, and let's say very close to zero. But never say never.

This highly improbable reasoning occurred to schoolteacher Joompot Muangling some eight months ago. ``I was looking for an alternative to the violin, which is an imported instrument, very fragile and expensive. I had already tried other materials such as tin cans but it was very difficult to make them stay together," explained the ingenious Khru Joompot, a musician and inventor who hence found salvation in a bamboo trunk.

No doubt the brain of this versatile teacher, who is also the vice-principal of Wat Ratniyomtham School in Si Racha, was the favourable matter for such an extravagant thought to arise. A brain trained over the years to search, make up, innovate, create, build, reproduce, improve and find out.

Born in Aranyaprathet, in the province of Sa Kaew next to the Cambodian border, the son of a teacher and a musician, Khru Joompot has been keeping alive the family tradition of playing a wide range of instruments, Thai as well as western.

When he was a little boy barely 10 years of age, kids were already queuing to play with one of his first inventions, a continuous strip of material on which a winding road and a simple landscape were drawn with a little car attached to it _ somewhat the remote ancestor of the coin-slot simulators which are all the rage at present.

Some 37 years or so later, the grown man's inventions still give rise to the same interest and wonder.

At the luxurious Captain's Table at the Ocean Marina Yacht Club, Jomtien Beach, for example, Khru Joompot's nth invention, a music instrument called a ``bamboolin", doesn't pass unnoticed.

`` I have been playing the violin for so many years without attracting anybody's interest. But as soon as I picked up my bamboolin, I started drawing people's attention; they want to find out more about it, they want to hear me playing," Khru Joompot explained.

Now 47 years old and married, besides his full-time job at Si Racha's municipal school he performs in the classy Ocean Marina hotel every evening, accompanied by Wichai Chalemsri.

`` I already received orders to produce around 100 bamboolins. Ten or so for the Philippines, 10 or so for China, around 50 for Australia [orders from the international clientele of the yacht club], plus a few more here and there in Thailand. If I advertised more, I could sell tens every day," comments Khru Joompot, reaching for his new brainchild.

A long way from the refined, velvet-smooth and sensual body of the traditional violin, the bamboolin is rough, porous and rather unfinished, with a plaque of Plexiglas used as chin rest and a raw piece of wood as bridge. Yet the sound which it sends off, when caressed by the bamboo bow, is high-pitched and vibrant in the same way as the violin.

For a new-born instrument full of good prospects, let's say it's already a perfect score.

The story of the bamboolin is indeed only beginning. It all started from a charcoal stove, on top of which some khaolam were being cooked.

But more precisely, the venture began a few months ago when Khru Joompot decided (after having already taken part a few weeks earlier in a contest for the invention of new educational tools in Rayong) to join a competition organised by the department of intellectual property at the Ministry of Commerce. It's a nationwide contest for both designers and inventors, intended to encourage imagination and creativity and held for the second time in Thailand.

Although the first prize was taken by a potato-planting truck, followed by a mangosteen peeler, Joompot is happy to have been able to take part in the competition.

`` I guess they could not grab the stake and significance of my invention," comments the musician, displaying no ill feelings about the competition outcome.

In no way did this result deter him from carrying on with his ambition. For the inventor has big plans for his creation, including projects to develop his instrument into a double-sided bamboolin-bamboola (like viola) and bamboolo (closer to violoncello).

Bamboo is abundant in Thailand, easy to grow and very cheap (around 20 baht for a full trunk). Armed with the detailed instructions and measurements of a bamboolin, `` anyone can build his own bamboolin," he explains, dissecting the instrument and listing the ingredients needed to create one: An old and dry bamboo, well curved and not too thick and 60 centimetres long, four strings (guitar strings will do), four nuts, a bridge, a very thin bamboo stick for the bow, 50 nylon strings, and so on.

`` There is no way rural and underprivileged children can afford to buy a violin and let alone learn how to play on such an expensive instrument," says Khru Joompot, who hopes his invention will democratise access to this elitist instrument.

By keeping the exact fingerboard dimensions and all other characteristics identical to those of a violin, any practitioner can thus switch from one instrument to the other without any difficulty, or start with a bamboolin before getting a real violin.

The production cost of a bamboolin hardly exceeds 300 baht, while with a bit of practice, it should not take much more than four hours to build one. So far, the 10 specimen bamboolins

which exist in Thailand have all been lovingly hand-made by Khru Joompot himself, and have developed from some 10 or so draft versions.

``All this is still so new. I have not yet been able to think about producing them in larger quantities," he confesses. ``The bamboolin as you see it now is still an unfinished product.

``Many more things could be improved, the sound _ there are so many factors involved and so much more studying to be done _ the shape, the whole aesthetic of the instrument," he says, drawing curved and voluptuous lines in the air, imagining the ornamental extension of the instrument.

However in this haste, Khru Joompot didn't forget to secure a patent legacy over the bamboolin, which has just been approved by the department of intellectual property of the Ministry of Commerce, so no one can steal his idea and make good money out of it.

As for the advertising campaign part, it is all been taken care of, even faster than he had imagined. Public school holidays arrive just when needed to give Khru Joompot an opportunity to try out his latest invention.

In the deserted building of Ratniyomtham School in the centre of Si Racha town, the sound of pickaxes and hammers merge into the old melody of If I give my heart to you.

The school building is under reconstruction but in the covered playground a handful of children of all age groups have chosen to come back to the school benches despite holiday times.

They have come for the daily music classes provided free over three weeks by Khru Joompot and his assistant Chawalat Chantri. Age and size vary from Prathom 2 and knee-high to a grasshopper, to fully graduated and working adults who are interested in music. All of them can read music scores and play other music instruments as well. But for a few weeks, they try their hands at bamboolins and violins, and go for western pop melodies rather than Thai folk songs.

``Normally I play the melodium. But the bamboolin is cool too. I like it because it is not costly," comes the shy voice of Pam, enrolled in Prathom 6 level in this same school, creaking his bamboolin to the tune of Suzanna.

After 10 days of classes, the students have already learned five different songs, some playing on violins, other on bamboolins (all the property of Khru Joompot). In a few days, the students have to perform together for the television programme Phuying Yak Ru (Women Want to Know) on Channel 3.

In a little corner, two young girls are busy polishing and sanding down some bamboo trunks, already sculpted in the shape of a bamboolin.

``I wish we could create an orchestra, teaching music every day after school," confides Chawalat.

``Children are fond of this kind of activity. It gives them the opportunity to demonstrate their talents and perform in front of others. Besides, music helps them relax their minds," explained a very proud Pramoen Saroj, the school principal, mentioning that Ratniyomtham School has been doing very well for many years in international drawing contests. Music will surely be the school's next area of expertise.

From the border town of Aranyaprathet, to a bachelor's degree in Industrial Art in Bangkok, to a master's degree at Bang Saen's Burapha University, to the position of vice-principal

(besides his part-time job as musician in Asia Hotel, Royal Cliff and then Ocean Marina), Khru Joompot has come a long way.

But his long list of other fascinating inventions (the musical waterfall nam tok ting tong, the ungalung, the khaen with 12 notes, etc,) leads us to predict that Khru Joompot will again get himself talked about.

And so the moral is: One should never refuse oneself a little treat, not knowing what the future has in store for us and what ingenious idea could hit us while digesting!