WORD-MELODY RELATIONSHIP AND MODAL SYSTEM IN THAI COURT SINGING

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by

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Though some scholars have already referred to a word-melody relationship in Thai court singing, a study of Thai singing principles, especially in terms of melodic generation, has not yet been done in a comprehensive way. It is assumed that there are rules for realizing tonal inflections in the singing of Thai, a tonal language. Without the proper inflection of each tone in a given vocal melody, song texts rendered vocally might at least confusing, even if there might not be any change of the whol meaning of the text which could be usually understood in context.

From this point of view, I have been conducting research since 1974, on singing practice with teachers at the College of Dramatic Arts, Fine Arts Department, Bangkok. In my M.A. thesis, "A Preliminary study of Thai Traditional Music," 1979, I showed an amazing consistency in the relationships between tonal inflections of the text and the actual melodic formulae of Thai court singing. This was also true in Buddhist chanting and other recitations as well as in Village types of singing including children's game song. Since then, however, more first-hand material has become available, and it is thus possible to reinforce and expand the hypothesis. The purpose of this paper is to outline the expanded hypothesis.

Basic structure of the vocal melody of Thai court music

There are two different types of practice in Thai court singing, i.e., recitation and singing. Recitation has a closer relationship with song texts than does singing and also shows a strong tendency to reflect each tonal inflection in the melody. In other words, each tonal inflection tends to generate the recited-type melodies. Nonetheless, the

singing type, which is considered to be richer in melodic contour, will be dealt with in this paper because the relationships are more complex.

Thai court songs are accompanied by any of the ensembles variously called pìiphâad, Kkhrŷaŭsăaj, and mahŏorii. Vocal sections are usually performed in alternation with sections for the ensemble. Singing unaccompanied may stem from the need for clarity of text. Though each section, whether for singing or instruments, is structurally identical, the vocal melodic formulae may be somewhat different from the instrumental melodic formulae. But both are built on the same basic melody, though usually composed separately.

Both the basic instrumental and vocal melodies are composed based on a pentatonic scale, i.e., the first, second, third, fifth, and sixth pitches of the Thai tuning system consisting of seven approximately equidistant steps. It is also based on various rhythmic cycles played on drums and other percussion instruments, the cycles being called nâathá̀b. Nâathá̀b pròbkàj is twice as long as naathá̀b sŏoymáaj. The most important melodic pitch of each rhythmic cycle is that falling on the last beat of the cycle, which is the most accented beat. Each rhythmic cycle of either nâathá̀b pròbkàj or nâathá̀b sŏoymáaj consists of two unaccented beats called chìy (o) and two accented beats called chàb (+) played by a pair of small cymbals called chìy : o + o ⊕ (⊕ is the most accented beat.) Ex.1.

The pitches falling on both chìy and chàb, these being the fixed pitches, usually determine the structure of the basic melody played by melodic instruments and sung by vocalists. Each melodic instrument of an ensemble also incorporates these structurally important pitches into its own idiomatic realization of the basic melody. Therefore, the melodic formulae of each instrument as well as those of singers vary according to each style. Nonetheless, all these melodic formulae are based on the same basic melody determined by the pitches falling on the accented and sometimes also the unaccented beats of each rhythmic cycle. The important thing is that these fixed pitches are mostly from among the pitches in the pentatonic scale mentioned above, while the melodic realizations by each instrument and occasionally the vocalist too may use the fourth and seventh pitches in a passing function.

Vocal melodies can be structually divided into two parts, i.e., the parts with and without song texts. The part without song texts uses certain vocalized vowels and consonants called ân yan. Ex.2. Actual song texts tend to be placed towards the latter part of a rhythmic cycle (nâathâb); the structure of the vocal melody in the texted portion is thus most important in the analysis of a piece. An example of the first section of a song, Tôn phleeychìy, săam chán (the third tempo level of the nâathâb prôbkàj), is as follows: Ex.4.

Ex.5 shows each syllable of the text and its melodic formula in the example, Tôn phleeychìy, săam chán, section 1.

Word-melody relarionship in Tôn phleeychìy

One of the prominent features of Thai court singing is that a song can theoretically be sung to any poem which is in the same form, provided that the săməniaŋ -- national accents, e.g., Thai, Lao, Khmer, and Chinese -- of both texts and melody are the same. Each song has usually one or more popularly used song texts. It is also a very important procedure in performance practice to select and put various suitable song melodies to given texts especially for theatre performances.

Based on this principle, having singers perform an experimental text model to the above-mentioned melody, Tôn phleeychìy, in each tempo level, i.e., săam chán (the third tempo level), sɔ̌ɔŋ chán (the second tempo level), and chán diaw (the first tempo level), showed two distinctive features.

Firstly, the same basic melody can be sung realized with many different melodic formulae according to different song texts and tonal inflections. The variety of melodic formulae is sometimes so great that it is hard to believe that those actual melodic formulae are considered to have the same basic structure. Examples of actual melodic formulae considered to be the same melody taken from Tôn phleeychìy, săam chán, follow. Ex.6. The hyphens following song text syllables are actually sung with vocalized syllables called ân yan sɔ̀ɔdsɛɛ̂g (short inserted ân yan), while the hyphens in one syllable such as thú-g indicate a sliding tone.

Ex.6 shows surprising variety within the final phrase which can be reduced to f f d f g. And since d and f are used to sing ân yan sɔ̀ɔdsɛɛ̂g, the main or fixed pitches in this phrase are really only two, f and g.

The basic melodic structure is thus an ascent from the fixed pitch f to the fixed pitch g.

Secondly, there is consistency in the relationships between each tonal inflection and its realization as melodic formulae. Ex.7. The actual melodic formulae reflecting each tonal inflection have stereotyped patterns, and any word having a given tonal inflection will be sung to the same melodic pattern. Exceptions are the falling and rising tonal inflections which use a few melodic variants in order to enrich the melody. Ex.9A shows the word-melody relationship for the fixed pitches, f, g, and c, in the piece, Tôn phleeychìy , sǎam chán, section 1. Ex.9.

Taking the entire piece into consideration, i.e., both sections, there is a total of four fixed pitches in the basic melody: f, g, c, and d. All of these pitches, however, do not belong to the same pitch level or key, that called thaay phiay ɔɔlâay , the pentatonic scale starting with the pitch f: f g a c d. This is because this piece includes a shift of pitch levels, called metabole, from thaay phiay ɔɔlâay (f. pitch level) to thaay krùad (c pitch level, i.e., the scale starting with the pitch c: c d e g a). Metabole is frequently observed in Thai traditional music and singing; but it is sometimes hard to say whether metabole has taken place because the transition from one pitch level to another is so smooth. In the process of transition from the f pitch level to the c pitch level, or vice versa, the fixed pitch c can be understood either as the fifth of the f pitch level or as the first of the c pitch level. But the important thing is that the melodic formulae of each tonal inflection on the fixed pitch c in either f or c pitch level, are exactly the same. Thus, the transition happens so smoothly.

Consequently:

1. Fixed pitches f, g, and c belong to the f pitch level.
2. Fixed pitches c and d belong to the c pitch level.
3. C functions as the fifthe pitch of the f pitch level and the first pitch of the c pitch level, and constitutes a pivot tone.
4. Because the c and d result from metabole, they are structurally the same as f and g (except that c and d are at the c pitch level and f and g at the f pitch level).

It is also important to note that the realization of the rising tone on the first fixed pitch of any pitch level, involves a pitch outside the pentatonic scale, the fourth. (If on f in f pitch level, the fourth is approximately b flat.) A possible justification for this pitch is that f is here also functioning as the fixed pitch five of the pitch level a fifth below -- b flat --, and is thus acting as a pivot from one pitch level to the other, as seen earlier going from f to c. Fig.1.

Following is a summary of rules for realizing a song melody according to each tonal inflection of the text syllables.

1. middle tone -- the fixed pitch of basic melody alone.
2. low tone -- combination of the pitch below and the fixed pitch according to the pentatonic scheme, e.g., d to f in the f pitch level. The fixed pitch can also be sometimes eliminated.
3. falling tone -- combination of the fixed pitch and the pitch below in the pentatonic scheme.
4. high tone -- the pitch above according to the pentatonic scheme. Sometimes, the fixed pitch is first added, and those two pitches are combined as a short slide.
5. rising tone -- combination of the fixed pitch, the next higher pitch, and the pitch a fourth above. Usually, this melodic formula then returns to the fixed pitch.

These rules, which operate in the example, Tôn phleeŋ chiy , sǎam chán, apply to any of the three tempo levels (chán).

Word-melody relationship in other pieces

In the analysis of Tôn phlee chiy , only the word-melody formulae of fixed pitches one, two, and five of the basic melody were shown. The formulae associated with pitches three and six function similarly as stated above except in the case of the falling tone and rising tone. Ex.8. When the rising tone is used on pitches three and six, the intervals of the third above rather than the fourth is used. Ex.9B. This may be because in the pentatonic scheme the step

above both pitches three and six is a third. Thus this formula does not conform to the melodic formula seen earlier associated with fixed pitches one, two, and five which use the intervals of the second and fourth above. In the case of falling tone on pitches three and six a distinctive melodic formula which has several melodic variants is used. Ex.10. These differences in the actual melodic formulae between fixed pitches one, two, and five on the one hand and fixed pitches three and six on the other are thus very distinctive.

Through this study, the following points have become clear.

1. Vocal form of a melody, as distinct form the instrumental from, has its own melodic formulae, though the structurally important fixed pitches, i.e., those falling on the last beat of each rhythmic cycle, are the same in both.

2. Regardless of the individuality of the words, it is the five tonal inflections that are realized with certain melodic patterns to create the vocal melody.

3. The relationship between each tonal inflection and the melodic pattern or patterns reflecting it is quite consistent and predictable.

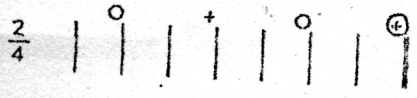
4. The melodic pattern or patterns reflecting each tonal inflection are based on a pentatonic scale, i.e., pitches one, two, three, five, and six.

5. The melodic patterns for all tones except falling and rising for all five pitches are similar. The falling tone and rising tone behave differently if on pitches one, two, and five or three and six.

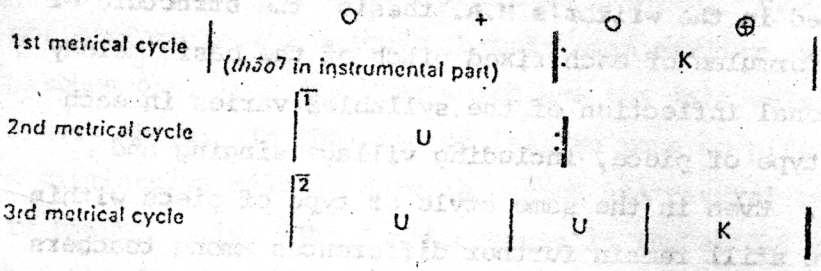
Analysis of the word-melody relationship in Thai court singing has shown these principles to be valid in understanding the structure of the vocal melody as distinct from the instrumental melody. It is also useful in differenciating the various national accents called sămniaŋ, since some structural differences among pieces of different accents are clearly seen when they are analyzed following these principles.

As already stated in the writer's M.A. thesis, the structure of the actual melodic formulae of each fixed pitch of the basic melody according to each tonal inflection of the syllables varies in each different style or type of piece, including village singing and Buddhist recitation. Even in the same style or type of piece within court singing, there still remain further differences among teachers or schools outside of the College of Dramatic Arts. I therefore hope to examine the word-melody relationship and its melodic structure not only in court singing, but also in many other different kinds of singing in the future.

Ex.1



Ex.2



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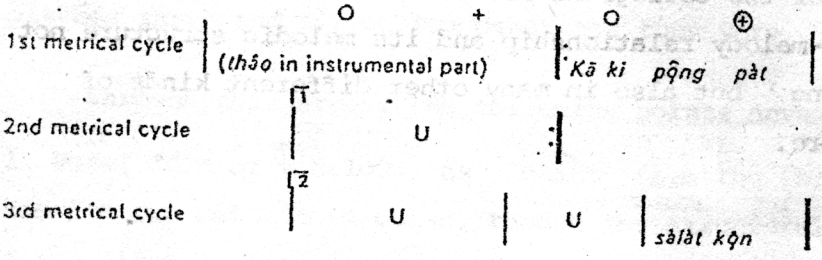
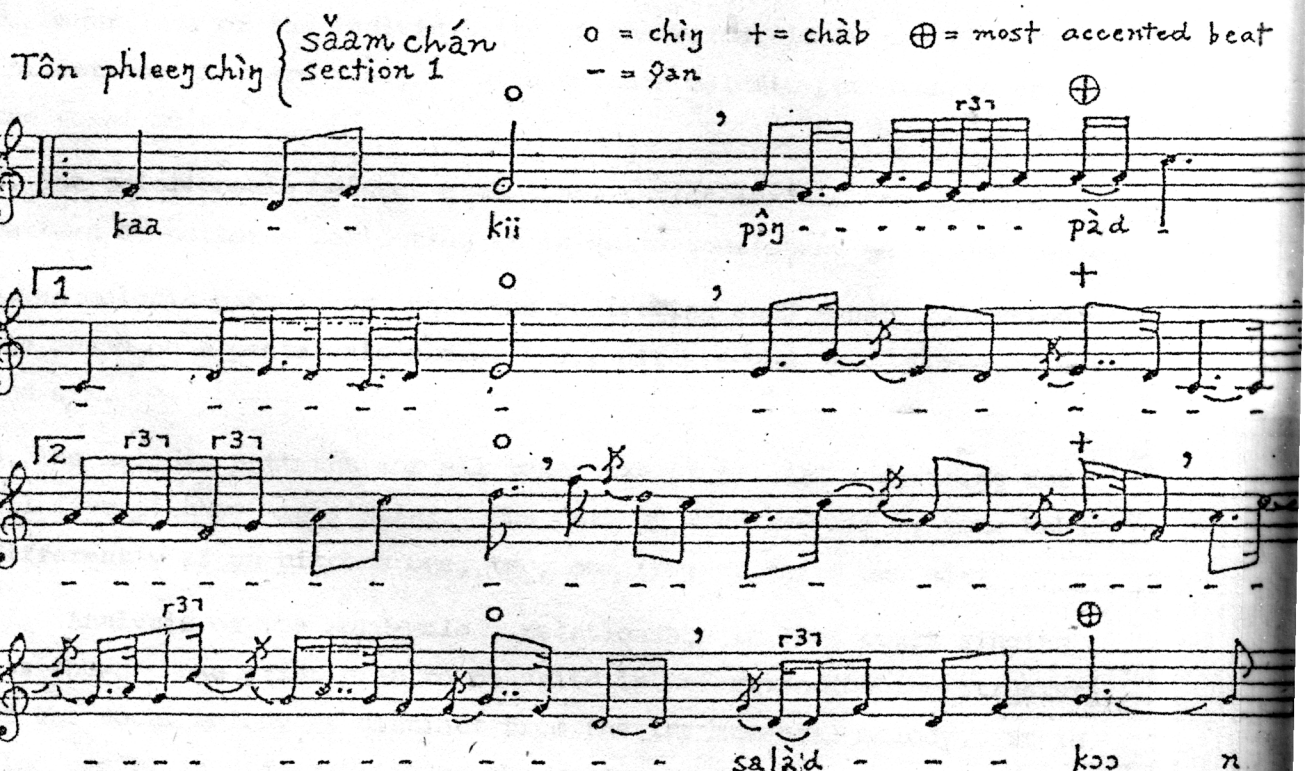
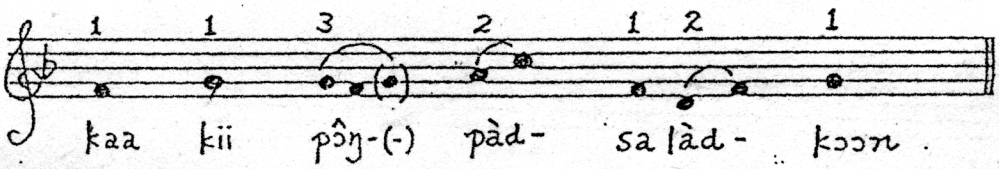


Ex.4

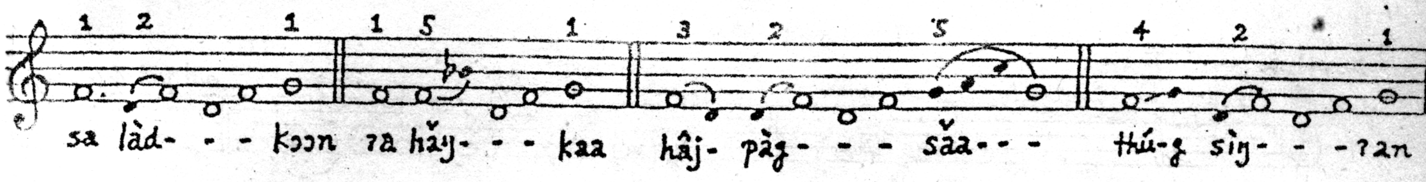


Ex.5

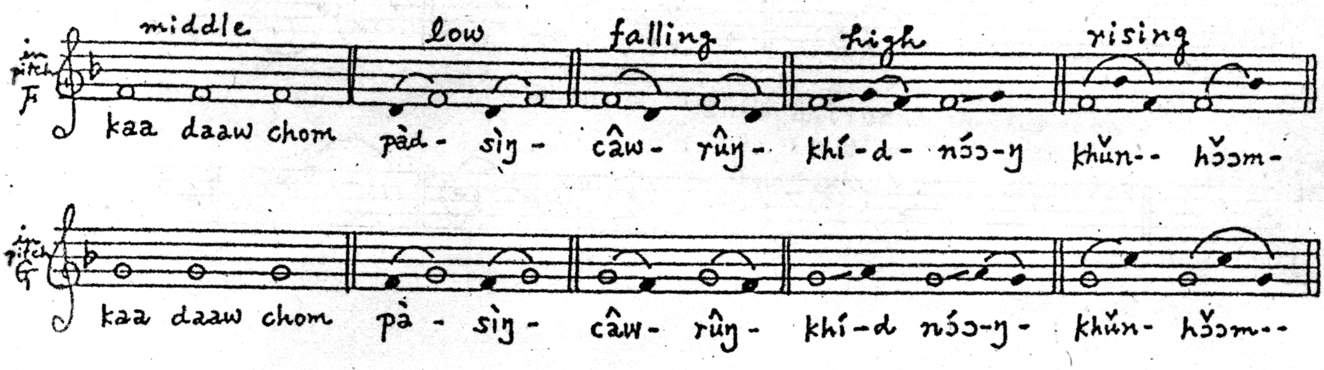
1 (middle) 2 (low) 3 (falling) 4 (high) 5 (rising)



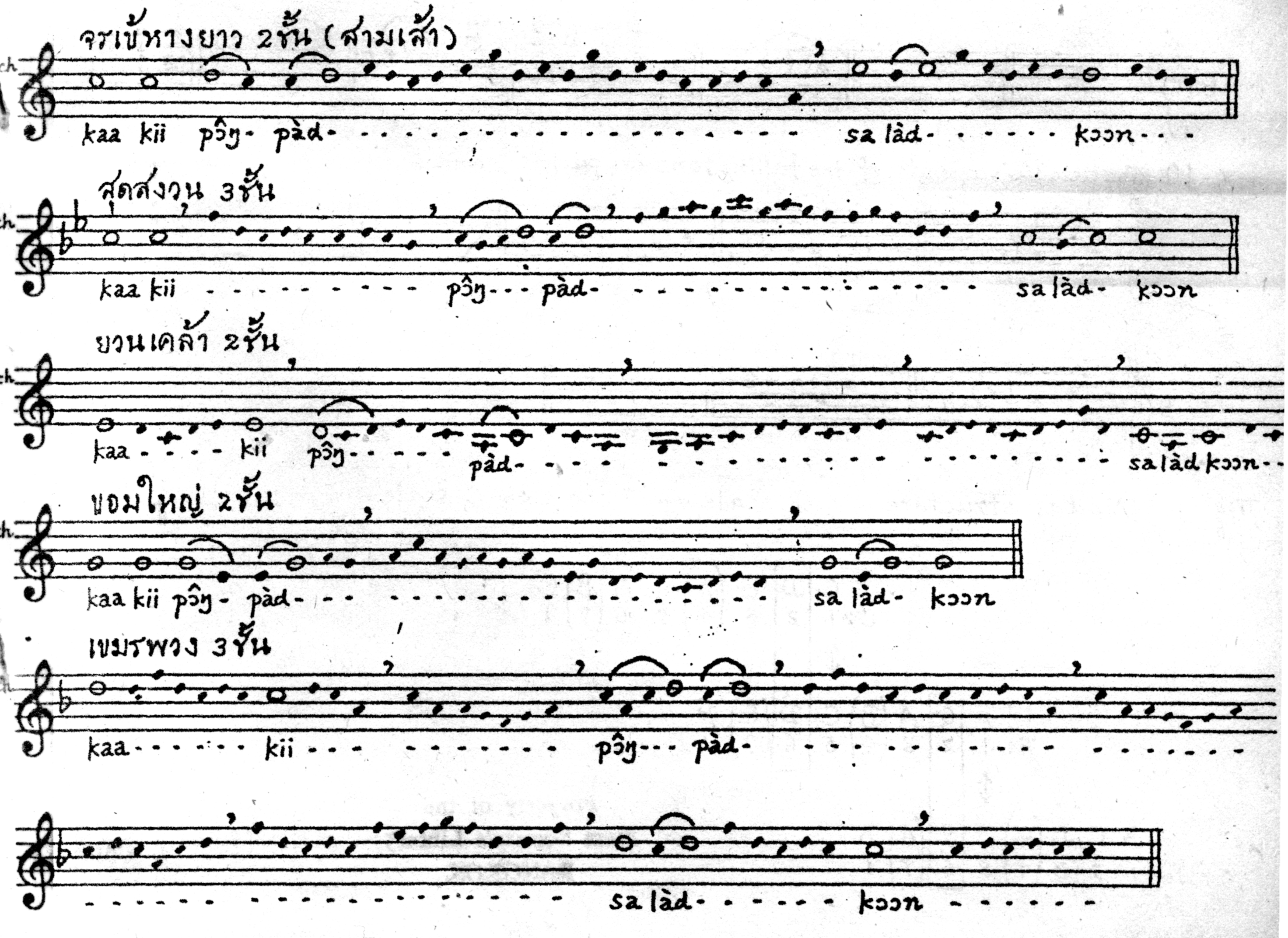
Ex. 6


1 2 1 1 5 1 3 2 5 4 2 1
sa làd- - - kɔɔn ʔa hǎy- - - kaa hâj- pàg- - - sǎa- - - thú-g siŋ- - - ʔan

Ex. 7

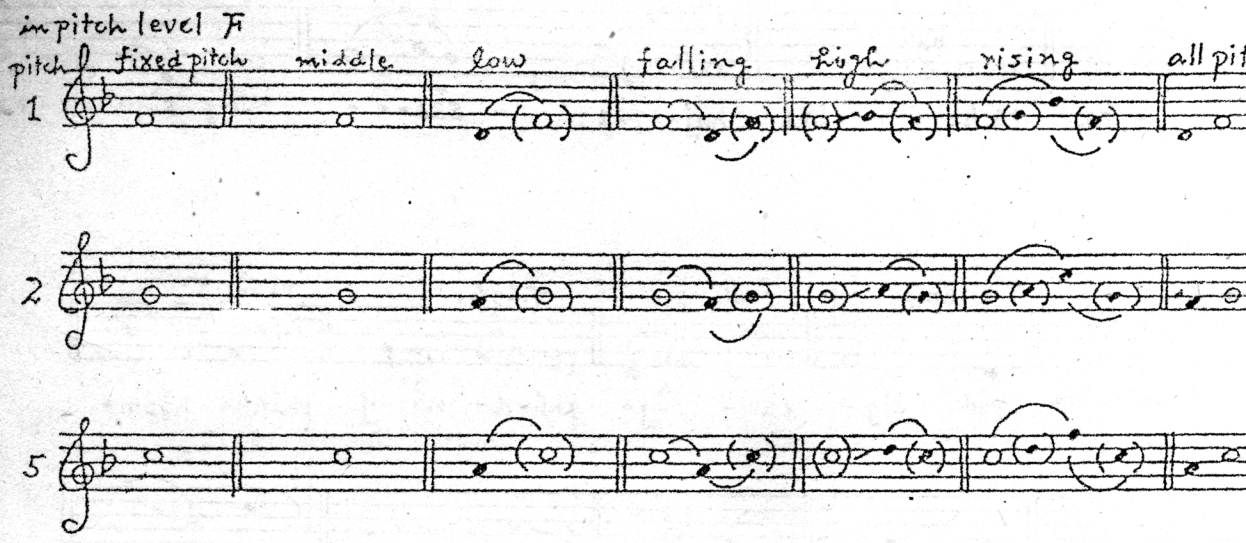

middle low falling high rising
in pitch F
kaa daaw chom pàd- siŋ- câw- rûŋ- khí-d- nɔ́ɔ-ŋ khǔn-- hɔ̌ɔm-
pitch G
kaa daaw chom pà- siŋ- câw- rûŋ- khí-d nɔ́ɔ-ŋ- khǔn- hɔ̌ɔm--

Ex. 8

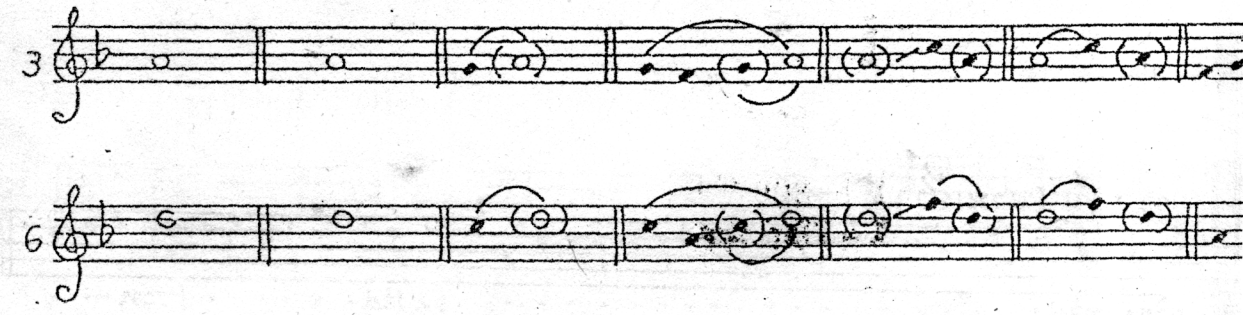

จรเข้หางยาว 2ชั้น (สามเส้า)
kaa kii pɔ̂ŋ- pàd- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - sa làd- - - - - - kɔɔn- - -
สุดสงวน 3ชั้น
kaa kii - - - - - - - - - - pɔ̂ŋ- - - pàd- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - sa làd- kɔɔn
ยวนเคล้า 2ชั้น
kaa- - - - kii pɔ̂ŋ- - - - - pàd- sa làd kɔɔn- -
ขอมใหญ่ 2ชั้น
kaa kii pɔ̂ŋ- pàd- sa làd- kɔɔn
เขมรพวง 3ชั้น
kaa- - - - - - kii - - - - - - - - - - pɔ̂ŋ- - - pàd- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
- sa làd- - - - - - - kɔɔn - - - - - -

Ex. 9A

( ) sometimes omitted



Ex. 9B



Ex. 10 The Melodic variants of the falling tone on pitches 3 and 6.

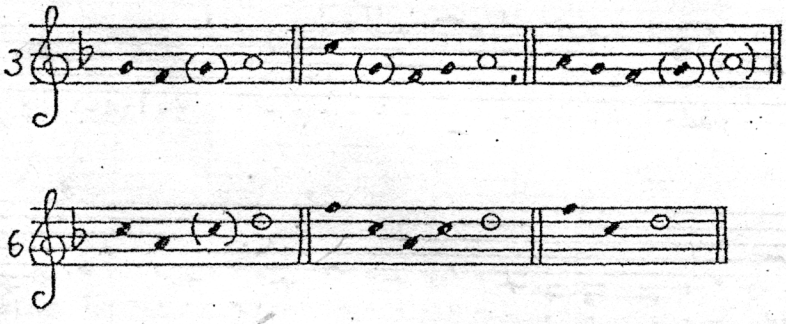


Fig. 1 Modal structure B scale ↔ F scale ↔ C scale