

## ABOUT THE KAEN (also spelled “Khene” or “Khaen”)

The kaen is quintessentially Lao. Music of the kaen is to Lao culture what the Blues, Jazz, and Bluegrass are to American culture. Traditionally, the kaen is the instrument of choice in courtship rituals; it is common for a young man to serenade his love interest with kaen music. The kaen is often played at special events, such as *baci* ceremonies, births, funerals, homecoming, house-warming parties, and during festivals ('boon'). It is often performed as an accompaniment to *lum* or as part of an ensemble; in these settings, the kaen's complexity is overshadowed by the voices of the *maw lum* and other instruments. When played solo, however, it becomes obvious that this instrument is complex and requires many years of training to master. With increased global telecommunications, Lao traditional music has had to compete with Western music for the listener's ears. As a result, the kaen has had to compete with the electric guitar, bass, drums, and keyboards for the musician's interest. Interestingly, much of contemporary lum uses synthesized sounds of the kaen. LHF intends to play a role in reversing this trend by creating projects to promote and preserve the music of the kaen.

### Tuning

The notes on any given kaen can be found in (and are a subset of) Western music; The notes are tuned to exactly one scale -- the major (diatonic) scale. That is, it contains tones (whole step) and semitones (half-step), where the interval between every note is a whole step, except between the 3rd & 4th notes, and 7th & 8th notes. For example, if the kaen is tuned to the C Major scale, it would contain the notes C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, such that the interval between E & F and B & C is a half-step (semitone). In the F Major scale, it would contain the notes F, G, A, B flat, C, D, E, F. Again, the interval between the 3rd & 4th notes (A & B flat) and 7th & 8th notes (E & F) is a half-step. However each kaen is tuned, these relationships between the notes hold. It is, therefore, unnecessary for the kaen player to change fingerings when switching from one kaen to another differently-tuned kaen. The result would only be that the music is transposed from one key to another. This is equivalent to using a capo on the guitar, which allows the guitarist to play music in different keys without changing his fingering.

A note about whether the kaen is on a major or minor scale. This is a non-issue, since for every Major scale, there is a relative Minor scale which is based upon the 6th note of the Major scale. That is, the C Major scale is equivalent to the A Minor scale; F Major is equivalent to D Minor; G Major is equivalent to E Minor, etc.

It should also be noted that, for optimal results when learning the kaen, the instructor and student should use kaens that are tuned to the same scale.

### Styles of Play

While Lao classical music is similar to Cambodian and Thai classical music, what sets Lao classical music apart from the others is the kaen. In folk music, namely *lum*, the kaen plays to stylized rhythms with improvisation ('*luke soy*'). Each style or rhythm's origin can be traced to a region of Laos. For example, *lum siphandon*, *sarawun*, *kawn savan*, *putai*, and *tung wai* originated in the southern region; *lum mahaxai* and *bahn sawk* originated in the central region; *kup toom* originated in the north, namely Luang Prabang. The complexity of the '*luke soy*' speaks to the kaen player's mastery of the instrument.

In short, the kaen is performed in both classical and folk music (and, to some extent, contemporary music – *lum wong*).

### Layout of the Kaen

There are several types of kaen; each is named for the number of pairs of pipes that it has. The most common type is kaen 8 (kaen paed). The following is a layout of kaen paed in the key of C. Each note is usually played in pairs (or three's in the case of A and G). The exception is when playing *luke soy*, when notes are played as singles. Another exception is when complementary (different) notes are played together. These topics will be covered in future articles.

### Notation

Like notation for the saw, I have notated songs for the kaen on a grid system.