

ABOUT THE SOR (pronounced “saw”)

The sor is a two-string fiddle. As a matter of convenience, we refer to this instrument as the Lao violin or sor, although it is not unique to Laos; the sor is commonly played in Asia. In Lao traditional music, the sor is only one part of an orchestra, which comprises several types of percussions (gong and kawng wohng), mouth organs made from bamboo (kaen), wooden xylophones (ranahd), cymbals (sing), hammered dulcimer (kim), flutes, and vocals.

The bow is played between the two strings. In a typical sor ensemble, there are four sors, each tuned an octave higher than the next to cover a range of pitches. From the lowest pitch to the highest are: Oh, Ou, E, Leow. When played together, the sor ensemble is capable of evoking a wide range of emotions.

Tuning

As in all musical instruments, tuning is absolutely important. The low string of one sor is the same note as the the high string of the next sor below it, although the they are 1 octave apart. That is, Leow's low string is the same note as E's high string; E's low is the same as Ou's high; Ou's low is Oh's high.

On each sor, the high string is tuned 3 and 1/2 steps higher than the low string. For example, if the low string is tuned to B, then the high string is tuned to F. In an ensemble, it is common practice to let E be the anchor; once E is tuned to itself, everyone else tunes to it directly or indirectly.

As a result of this tuning arrangement, each sor is played differently to produce the same note as other sors.

Notation

We applied the tablature system for guitars to the sor. Tablature shows the placement of fingers (left hand). Therefore, it does not does not require the sor player to know how to read music.

Where to Get a Sor

The sor is very difficult to find outside Asia. You can order sors from instrument makers in Luang Prabang through us. This is a great way to support the local Laotian craftsmen. If you're interested, please email us at info@laoheritagefoundation.org.