

A film guide written by Alyson Hummer (2019) for:

Growing Rhythm

A film by Alyson Hummer and Lauren Meeker (2019)

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Abstract

The ethnographic film *Growing Rhythm* depicts the Burmese master percussionist, Kyaw Kyaw Naing, leading students, faculty, and community members of SUNY New Paltz in the first Hsaing ensemble in the United States. This ensemble provided an environment in which to learn the musical traditions of another culture while examining and challenging the norms which Western musicians have accepted. The students of Naing learned the music using the traditional instruments of the Hsaing ensemble: *chauk lon bat*, *kyi-waing*, *maung-hsaing*, *si do*, *hne*, *sandaya*, *pat-waing*, *si* and *wa*, and *lin quin*. The rehearsal technique and experience developed into a community with a shared mission to spread this music and educate the public.

Keywords: music, ethnography, film, Burmese, Hsaing ensemble, Myanmar

Film Link: <https://vimeo.com/377143740>

Background

Growing Rhythm is a film documenting the process and experience of building the first Burmese Hsaing-waing percussion ensemble in the United States. The Hsaing-waing ensemble is distinctive in its collection of instruments native to Myanmar (Burma) as well as its melodic flourishes and lively rhythms. The harmonic structures and instrument designs have a variety of foreign influences, but the historical documentation is sparse and poorly kept (Garfias 1985). This traditional ensemble of instruments grew out of the typical style used for court purposes in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was played in indoor and outdoor events, for dance and theater, and for spiritual or religious rituals.

The instruments described in this guide are those which our ensemble used, but this does not mean it is a complete list. The principal instrument played by the orchestra leader is the *pat-waing*, a set of 21 finger drums hung in a circular frame. The melodic instruments include the *kyi-waing* and *maung-hsaing*. The *kyi-waing* has a circular frame with suspended bronze gongs played with wooden mallets. The *maung-hsaing* also has bronze gongs but is set in a square frame and played with felt tip mallets. Additionally, the ensemble melody may include the *patala* (wooden xylophone), *sandaya* (piano), *saung gauk* (harp), or *hne* (double-reeded oboe). The *chauk lon bat*, which translates to six-sided drum, uses four to six drums like those found in the *pat-waing*, with two larger barrel drums, *pat-ma* and *shkun*, suspended or positioned on stands. The *si do* has three additional barrel drums played with felt tip mallets. The

lin-quin are crash cymbals played in parallel with the *chauk lon bat*. Finally, the *si* and *wa*, or bell and clapper, act as the metronome with the ensemble. The instrument consists of a wooden block struck by a wooden stick and two small cymbals.

The ensemble established in New Paltz, New York is named the Naing Ensemble after Kyaw Kyaw Naing, the instructor. Naing is an internationally acclaimed musician from Myanmar. He was raised in this musical tradition and followed in the footsteps of his father, U Sein Chit Tee, by becoming a master of the *pat-waing* and the leader of the Burmese National Orchestra. In an interview for the film, he explained to us the typical order for learning these instruments. In general, young children begin with the *patala* in order to experience and solidify the harmonies typical of the style. Next they move to the gongs (*maung-hsaing* and *kyi-waing*). The student may decide to continue learning one of these instruments or become more experienced on the *chauk lon bat* or other supporting instruments. For instruments like *sandaya*, *hne*, or *saung gauk*, it is typical for individuals to choose just one in which to specialize. However, the *pat-waing* player acts as the leader of the ensemble, who has an intricate understanding of each instrument and a refined ear for detail. Naing demonstrates his extensive knowledge of the musicality of each individual instrument in his teaching style which is seen in the film.

At a young age, Naing showed an exceptional ability to replicate music by ear and pick up on instruments quickly. He began playing the *patala* and *maung-hsaing*, performing and winning awards at numerous musical competitions. He had a formal education in music while growing up, and eventually joined the Burmese National

Orchestra while his father was the *pat-waing* player. Upon his father's passing, Naing took on the leadership role and enjoyed a busy life of recording and performing. He traveled widely around Asia, playing his own music and learning about others. In 1999, he traveled to California to perform at UCLA. During his visit, he noted the absence of Burmese music and culture in museums. Like his father, who was instrumental in spreading Burmese music outside of its native country, Naing wanted to make Burmese music well-known in the United States. Since his arrival in California, he has performed across the country at UCLA, MIT, Pomona, Brooklyn Academy, and Lincoln Center. He collaborated with Bang on a Can to record an album inspired by Burmese music. He now resides and works in the Hudson Valley where he has begun teaching the Naing Ensemble. Additionally, in the fall of 2019, Naing taught the first class in the United States on this style of music at SUNY New Paltz.

The Naing Ensemble began when Dr. Alex Peh, associate professor of piano at SUNY New Paltz, began taking lessons from Naing. Peh and three New Paltz students began learning to play the *pat-waing*, *sandaya*, *chauk lon bat*, *lin-quin*, *si do*, and *si and wa* to perform traditional *tilos* (folk songs) and a commissioned piece written by Naing entitled "Growing Rhythm." The small group debuted at Roulette Intermedium in Brooklyn, NY in March 2019. The positive feedback from this concert provided enough momentum to expand the ensemble to include more members, introduce the other instruments, and hold rehearsals throughout the summer of 2019.

Throughout the rehearsals, a number of difficulties in learning this style arose. There is no official written notation for the music; everything is taught orally. Because

the American ensemble members did not grow up hearing this music, Naing sings every part to us, demonstrates it on the instruments, and then has us repeat it until each part is correct. It is a lengthy process which requires many cognitive resources and a large time commitment. Although Naing enjoys spreading the music to many people, it can be draining to teach an entire part to a person who only comes to one or two rehearsals. Understandably, it is a difficult commitment for some people to make. Learning and performing an entirely new set of instruments, melodies, and harmonies is not an easy task. Additionally, it was the preference of Naing that we not take videos of the lessons because he wanted an authentic experience of learning from the master, practicing by memory between rehearsals, and then receiving feedback on the day of rehearsal. This, too, proved difficult for the musicians as we were not familiar with the melodies being played and had no exposure outside of the rehearsal space.

Throughout this experience, both the instructor and the students have learned what works and what does not. The students quickly learned the importance of regular attendance and dutiful attention during instruction. Likewise, it was vital to practice between rehearsals and with the other musicians. Naing also had to budge somewhat on his strict no-recording policy; he understood that to become more familiar, the students needed to hear the music in many ways. When the class began, rehearsal times were further truncated as each group met for one hour each week. Many students, with little or no musical training, recorded their parts on their phones or made their own notation patterns.

The Naing Ensemble performed on October 5, 2019 at the close of the New York Conference of Asian Studies (NYCAS) held at the SUNY New Paltz campus. The repertoire included: *tilos*, “Growing Rhythm,” solo piano, a *pat-waing* and *sandaya* duet, and a *saung gauk* and *pat-waing* duet with vocals. The concert was a success with stellar ticket sales and, more importantly, an energized and passionate reception from the audience. Many audience members walked onstage at the end of the concert to see the instruments up-close, talk to Naing, and express their gratitude for having something so unique and exciting in the area. A number of people told us how exciting it was to see the curtains open up to the ornate set and watch the ensemble perform such lively music. It is gratifying to hear from the audience that the message we are trying to portray through this music is heard and appreciated.

With our debut behind us, the Naing Ensemble continues to rehearse, learn a larger repertoire, and plan events to increase our public engagement.

Filming

Filming for the documentary began in July 2019. Dr. Lauren Meeker, associate professor of anthropology at SUNY New Paltz, kept the camera rolling for hours on end to capture the essence of our rehearsals. It was important to us as the filmmakers to have explicit permission and continuous feedback from Naing and the ensemble members with the intention to be collaborative. The narrative of the film was not determined from the beginning. Through conversations between Dr. Meeker, an

observer, and myself, a member of the ensemble, two overarching themes became clear: the unique learning style and the strong sense of community.

The learning style is an obvious feature of our rehearsals. While teaching, Naing sings the song, demonstrates it on each instrument, and teaches each student passage by passage. Observers of the rehearsals note how impressive it is that Naing has an entire repertoire of pieces memorized. In Burmese musical tradition, it is atypical for the *pat-waing* player to teach the ensemble; professional musicians know the songs from exposure and practice. Instead, the *pat-waing* player will join rehearsal shortly before the performance to listen and critique the ensemble. Naing mentioned that this hierarchy within the ensemble reduces strife among players; the *pat-waing* player is trusted to have a trained ear capable of locating wrong notes or wrong rhythms. His word is final. (Side note: historically, all players were male, but it is becoming commonplace to see women playing now.)

To begin this ensemble, we relied entirely on Naing's ability and willingness to teach every part to the members. As we gain experience, our ears are adapting to and recognizing the melodies and harmonies characteristic of Burmese music. Naing is hoping to train his new community of musicians to be proficient on the instruments and to teach others someday. In passing his internal knowledge onto us, he is able to allow this tradition to outlive him and to grow in the United States.

The second theme of our film is community. When rehearsals began, there were only a few of us attending; however, it was evident that in collaborating to create something so rare and unique, there was a special bond between the players. In

creating the ensemble, it was never an explicit goal to create a community of musicians. To be successful, though, it was necessary to hold a few hours of rehearsal each week as full groups or small groups. We have to remember the songs together, practice the difficult rhythms, and support one another. When asked about this, Naing told us the community is vital to the functioning of a Hsaing ensemble. When he was a performer in Myanmar, the other musicians would often come to his house, eat meals together, and maintain close relationships. The simple act of spending time together allowed for more cohesion in their playing. As all the members of our ensemble have busy schedules, including Naing, it has proven difficult to replicate this type of environment; nonetheless, the rehearsals have been sufficient in forging bonds and establishing the foundation for a worthwhile project.

Implications

Comparing Naing's accounts of learning the music to the process we have experienced has proven helpful in providing context for our mission. Most importantly, the information portrayed in the film and this guide is based primarily on the perceptions of the western musicians playing a southeast Asian music tradition. That is to say, we are not claiming this music to be ours, and we are not claiming to be masters or experts in the field. Yet, considering this outward perspective is still important. It has revealed (1) Western-centric conceptions of pedagogy and rhythm, (2) the unifying power of music, (3) the importance of working with immigrant communities to enrich the cultural landscape, and (4) the possibility to enhance or alter perceptions through exposure to

culture. Moreover, establishing interdisciplinary connections and making history was possible by creating the space for this ensemble to grow.

Personal Reflection

My participation in the ensemble and the project began when I asked Dr. Peh, my piano instructor, to be the advisor to my Honors program thesis project. He invited me to join the Saturday rehearsals with Naing. From the beginning, we found documenting the rehearsals important, but did not know the extent to which the footage would be used. When Dr. Meeker became an advisor, her knowledge of ethnographic film and Asian music cultures was invaluable.

With the scope of the project more defined, I took on four roles: a student, a performer, a filmmaker, and a project manager. As a student and a performer, I generally shared experiences with the other ensemble members. It is an immense pleasure and privilege to study with Naing and play on his inherited instruments. Being a member of the first ensemble of its kind in the United States and having the opportunity to learn from Naing and spread the music is an immeasurable honor.

My position as a filmmaker and a project manager emerged from the ensemble as the focus of my thesis. Working as a filmmaker with Dr. Meeker forced me to consider the implications aforementioned and allowed me to consider the involvement and perspectives of everyone involved. In an ensemble involving over a dozen people, the musical and cultural backgrounds are abundant. Through formal interviews,

conversations, learning, and performing, I have had the chance to consider the magnitude of this project.

The role of project manager was not assigned intentionally - it was a responsibility I took on partly because of my thesis project - but more so because of my interest and passion for the mission. At first it meant organizing the summer rehearsals, but as we began to produce the October concert and the film, I took on more leadership roles. I am partly responsible for the transportation and assembly of the instruments for rehearsals and performances, I took on an assistant position for Naing's class, and I am active in the fundraising efforts for the ensemble. I am grateful to have the opportunity to fulfill these responsibilities as it has fostered closer relationships with Naing and each ensemble member.

Conclusion

The remarkable experience of building this ensemble has grown a like-minded community of musicians aiming to educate the public and share this musical tradition widely. There are plans in the works to continue learning from Naing, to perform nationally, and to offer demonstrations in local schools and arts centers. We plan to produce a longer film incorporating themes from this film and new ones.

Bibliography

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