

Interview with HUCKY EICHELMANN, the well-known and popular German musician in Thailand

Colin Dürkop

Sawasdee khrap Khun Hucky!

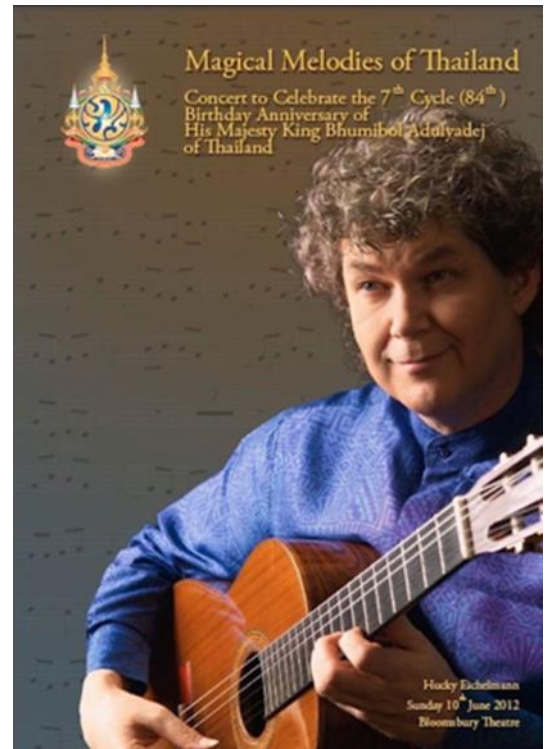
You are well known in Thailand for your multi-faceted musical work - primarily as a guitarist, but also as an arranger, composer and music producer. Tell us something about your musical career and your previous stations?

My musical career began during early childhood with the trumpet in the beautiful Black Forest, South Germany. But since my heart has always beaten for the more sensitive sounds, I soon decided to play the guitar and began my music studies at the State University for Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart with Prof. Dr. Mario Sicca, where I successfully completed my artistic maturity examination in 1979.

That same week I started my first job as a professor for classical guitar at the University of the Philippines in Manila. I was supposed to go back after two years to teach at the Stuttgart Music Academy, but I decided to take up a professorship at the St. Cecilia Academy of Music in Bangkok and later also at the Chulalongkorn University (Gurusart, then Silapagamasart) and also for various guest lectures at the Mahidol University; a step that I have never regretted, despite the many comforts a German university life would have offered.

In addition to my own compositions and arrangements, my acquaintances with many Asian composers, including the Indian sitar legend Ravi Shankar, have enabled me to create a completely new repertoire for the guitar and to concentrate fully on this type of music. For more than 25 years I have traveled the continents to present my Asian repertoire to a larger audience. This was a very inspiring time in my life, but also quite exhausting.

One of many career highlights was a concert at the Dag Hammarskjöld Library Auditorium at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. One of the highlights of my German-Thai activities was the presentation of a master guitar built by German master luthier Gerhard Schnabl to H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the 2012 Thailand tour on the occasion of the celebration of 150 years of Thai-German relations and the performance of the national and royal anthems on the occasion of the German National Day in Bangkok together with State Secretary Cornelia Pieper.



Other highlights included invitations from the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs to concerts celebrating the King of Thailand's 84th birthday in London, the open-air shows during the Taste of Thailand Festival at London's Regent Park, the opening concert 'A Musical Night in Celebration of the Establishment of the ASEAN Community' at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bangkok, and the ASEAN concerts by the Thai Embassy Phnom Penh for the entire diplomatic corps and high-ranking government representatives.

The work as a producer was necessary in order to be able to implement my projects according to my own ideas and to present well-known Thai musicians; including the Masters of I-sarn, Ranat virtuoso Khun-In To-sa-nga, the Lai Muang Ensemble, Kaen virtuoso Sombat Simlar and the Hucky & Harvey Band. Furthermore, I was able to organize the Thailand Festival of the Arts (Thailand's first ever Arts Festival), the Bangkok International Guitar Festival and Guitar Fiesta, the Bangkok International Showcase Series and the Markgräfler Guitar Days in Germany. Collaborations with Chico & the Gypsies (formerly Gipsy Kings), the Stuttgart Ballet, guitarists Paco Peña and David Russel, Grammy Award winner George Winston, jazz legends Pat Metheny and Martin Taylor, and Les Ballet Jazz de Montreal are also precious memories.



Of course, our readers are particularly interested in what made you decide to go to Thailand and stay there in the 90s - was that the intention from the start, or what inspired you to do so?

I initially had a two-year invitation to the University of the Philippines. After that, a teaching position at the music academy in Stuttgart was planned. However, after getting a taste of Asia and receiving attractive offers from Thailand, I changed my plans and followed a call to Bangkok, where I have now lived for 43 years. Of course, during all that time I also traveled a lot.

When one is out with you in Bangkok, it is noticeable how well known you are there, recognized by many passers-by or restaurant visitors, who often greet you as "Ajarn Hucky" or ask for an autograph. Is this perhaps also due to the fact that you arranged, performed and recorded many traditional Thai melodies and folk songs from different regions of the country for guitar - or how did this popularity come about?

*Over the years I produced many recordings (cassettes, CDs, DVDs, records) and sheet music, including the best-selling albums *Falling Rain*, *Gamgah Gamgah*, *Candlelight Blues*, *Sweet Words*, *Magical Melodies of Thailand*, *With Love from Asia*, *ASEAN GUITAR*, which greatly promoted the popularity of classical guitar. As a guest artist I have performed on popular albums by star musicians such as *Asani & Wasan Chotikul*, *Surasri Ithikul*, *Butterfly*, *Fong Nam*, *OUI Rawiwan Chinda* and *Richard Harvey's Suriyothai Soundtrack*. In addition, there were my two bestselling albums (*Huang Come Nueng 1 & 2*) with GRAMMY and numerous TV appearances associated with them, through which people easily remember a name or a face.*

Besides the unfortunately recently deceased Acharn Bruce Gaston from the legendary cross-

*over band *Fong Nam*, I was the only foreign musician in Thailand at the time and relatively easy to recognize at 188 cm.*

Your musical activities also include arranging King Bhumibol's compositions for guitar. You have often performed them and released them on CD. How was the reception in Thailand, how successful was this project? Were you able to talk to His Majesty about it at the time?

When I came to Thailand in 1979, I found only four people who played the classical guitar. Though my first concerts in Bangkok were well attended and successful, I felt it would be better if the audience understood a bit more what I was playing. On the advice of my Thai musician friends, I requested royal permission to record an album of His Majesty's compositions, which surprisingly I received within a few days. I then worked with some of the best musicians in the country to arrange those royal compositions which were most suitable for guitar. His Majesty provided helpful and creative comments on the project.

My first album "KUEN NUENG, the music H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej" sold millions of copies and changed the situation almost overnight. Ultimately, it was the well-loved melodies of King Bhumibol that made the sound of the classical guitar popular in Thailand. As a result, I was honored several times to perform so-called "Royal Command Performances" for H.M. King Bhumibol and H.M. Queen Sirikit as well as other members of the royal family.

During your work in Thailand you have worked and played with numerous musical greats, including the legendary sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar and numerous important Thai musicians. Please tell us a little more about these collaborations?

With my main focus of work on Asia and the variety of new musical impressions and possibilities, I felt the need to create a new, previously non-existent repertoire for the guitar. I tried to get the best composers of Thailand and the region interested in the guitar and tried to persuade them to compose something for the instrument. The result was many interesting new compositions from diverse cultural influences by composers such as Ravi Shankar, Dnu Huntrakul, Bruce Gaston, Asani Chotikul, Nop Sothibandhu, Sinapa Sarasas, Anuwat Suebsuwan, Ramon Pagayon Santos, Bayani de Leon, Simon Ngai, Mo Fan and more.

The opportunity to work on a concerto for guitar and orchestra with one of my greatest idols, Indian sitar legend and Beatles guru Ravi Shanker, was incredibly overwhelming and awe-inspiring for me. The long collaboration with the British musician and composer Richard Harvey (Hucky & Harvey Band), the flamenco star dancer Nina Corti and the multiple GRAMMY-Award winner KITARO were great experiences and shaped me a lot.

In addition, the collaborations with Thai artist friends such as Surasri Ithikul, Nop Sothibandhu, Asani Chotikul, O-larn Promchai, Lam Morrison, Kittii Guitar Gun, Dnu Huntrkul, Butterfly, Nga Carawan, Bruce Gaston, OUI Rawiwan Chinda, Jirapan Ansvananda, Koh Saxman, Pom Autobahn, Soontharee Vejanon, Phusaming Norsavan, NUVO, Billy Ogan, Maria Sukosol-Noonbhakdi, Masters of I-sarn, Supatra Inthrabhadi-Korat, just to name a few, enriched my musical experiences enormous.

Likewise, the friendship with prominent Thai artists Dhawan Duchanee, Chalermchai Kositpipat and Pratuang Emjaroen proved to be a most inspirational boon to me.

You are also involved in guitar teaching and have given national and international master classes. What was your experience?

Before Covid I conducted an annual Thailand tour with 10-12 concerts, but also workshops and master classes at the most important universities in Thailand. While I'm not particularly patient, I actually enjoy teaching, especially when it's about music in general rather than the guitar itself. Indeed, we can learn a great deal by teaching others.

In so-called master classes, you sometimes meet students who have already reached a fairly high level, but are still wondering what fingerings to use. To be honest, I'm not particularly interested in which fingers someone uses to achieve certain things on the instrument. Rather, I'm interested in what comes after that, what kind of music and expressions one realizes with it. It would be very nice and also about time that, beyond the purely technical aspects of the game, we finally got to the music, the heart of it all, and thought about that instead of endlessly discussing postures and fingerings.

And how has the guitar scene in Thailand developed over the last few decades?

40 years ago the classical guitar didn't actually exist in Thailand. In the workshops and master classes during my annual Thailand tours, I sometimes have over 100 guitar students majoring in guitar. Meanwhile, there are also some guitar associations that bring a whole new generation of students and aficionados with them. Overall, the instrument now enjoys enormous popularity in Thailand.

With AMI Records you founded a record label and have already produced around 20 CDs with your music. What projects are you currently planning and will you be appearing in Germany again in the near future?

Before founding AMI Records, I made various albums for WEA, EMI and some Thai labels like Pacific Corporation and MGA. AMI Records allowed me to do exactly what I enjoyed doing without having to listen to any company executives. At the moment I'm rehearsing Ravi Shankar's Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra with the aim to performing and hopefully also recording it. Since Covid prevented several touring projects, there are now plans for concerts in Europe again. Exact dates and up-to-date information can be found on my website

www.huckyeichelmann.com

and/or

www.amithailand.com



Dear Hucky Eichelmann, thank you very much for the interview and your interesting description of your work and life in Thailand. Khop khun maak khrap!

The interview was conducted by our member of the DTG Advisory Board