

Bangkok Post

music

Royal songs transcend frontiers

Sharing some of Thailand's treasures with the world

BERNIE COOPER

People were amazed when they first heard them. They couldn't believe that these beautiful songs were written by a King!

That was Hucky Eichelman some years ago, when he first played some of His Majesty's compositions at a classical guitar recital in his home country of Germany. Now, to honour HM the King's sixth cycle birthday, Hucky is launching a charitable project to make them available all over the world, as well as in every high school in Thailand.

As a concert guitarist much in demand around the world, Hucky invariably finds himself drawn to the music of the countries he visits, but this has been especially true of Thailand as it has been his home base for nearly 20 years. He has made many arrangements of Thai songs for the guitar, so that wherever he's playing, the audience will catch a flavour of Thailand in his performance.

The most memorable of these have been the songs written by HM the King, which have won so much admiration for their musical qualities: The haunting pastel shades of "Falling Rain" (*Sai Fon*) and "Love at Sundown" (*Yam Yen*); the jaunty exuberance of "Oh, I Say!" the soulful, jazz-inflected "HM Blues" (*Chata Cheevit*), these are part of the world in which Thai people have grown up, but to a stranger, they are a delightful discovery.

On my first visit here, I can remember racking my brains to try to remember the name of the composer of the swing-style ballad playing on Radio Thailand. Was it Jerome Kern? Harold Arlen? It was a long time before I discovered I'd been listening to "Magic Beams" (*Saeng Duang*).

"I think I was the first to arrange His Majesty's songs for solo guitar," said Hucky on a recent break in his touring schedule.

"At that time, the classical guitar wasn't very well known in Thailand. I was teaching and giving occasional concerts and gradually I began to see that the instrument was becoming more and more popular."

So much so that he was able to found the National Guitar Festival which continued successfully for eight years.

"The guitar is an intimate, sensitive instrument and to my mind ideally suited to the King's songs," says Hucky. "I was given permission to arrange and



Hucky Eichelman accompanies Marisa Sakosol Nohbhakdi at their recent concert in Bangkok.

record some of them in 1982, and had the honour of giving them their first concert performance in the presence of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn."

And since then, the songs have accompanied him round the world on every one of his tours.

"But I really wanted to make some new arrangements in honour of His Majesty's birthday this year, and not just record them, but give them a broader purpose," he said.

He decided that this broader purpose would take three forms.

"First, education. I thought, 'Let's get the schools involved, too'. I could publish the songs in a book, as well as recording a CD, and this package

would be delivered free to every high school and college in Thailand.

"It would be an encouragement to young people thinking about taking up music. An interest in the King's music would be a great introduction to studying music generally.

"Secondly, since the songs are so popular with audiences overseas, I wanted to see them more widely available by arranging international distribution of the book-and-CD package. All the proceeds from sales would be donated to royal charities. That will include sales in Thailand, too, where the set will be available at 499 baht.

The third element came from Bayer, the German-based pharmaceuticals giant which has been

sponsoring cultural events for many years. When Bayer-Thai studied Hucky's project, they made the decision to sponsor it as one of Bayer's contributions to His Majesty's birthday.

With advice from M.L. Usni Pramoj, a composer as well as a distinguished arranger of His Majesty's music in classical style, Hucky wrote arrangements for 13 numbers from the royal songbook composed between 1946 and 1965, with the assistance of Kate-Arun Lertpipattana, Samran Thongtan, Sophon Chantamitri and Iiraded Setabhandu. They're printed in a handsome 12-inch by 10-inch book with the title, "Falling Rain" illustrated with photographs of His Majesty playing trumpet, saxophone and guitar as well as at the piano.

Once it was approved by the Palace, Hucky proposed it to the world's largest music publisher, Doblinger in Vienna, whose response was immediate. "We're holding up the printing of our new catalogue so we can include your book of the King's songs," he was told.

With Doblinger's distribution network, this will mean that major music stores all over the world will be able to carry the songbook, and guitarists of every nationality will have the opportunity of playing the King's songs.

With the help of the Ministries of Education and University Affairs, 5,000 songbooks and 7,500 CDs have been presented to more than 3,000 schools and colleges in all regions of Thailand.

And, of course, Hucky has been featuring the songs on his recent concert tour of Europe, and his current visit to New York, where he is giving a recital at the auditorium of the United Nations Building.

He has been described by M.L. Usni Pramoj, for many years a musical adviser to and musical associate of His Majesty, as "an indefatigable champion of the King's music", an epithet which Hucky is very proud to bear. He is also the proud possessor of a letter from the King's Principle Private Secretary confirming His Majesty's approval of this birthday tribute with its far-reaching, educational purpose.

"You know, I had to rush to Geneva to see an expert on musical notation to check every detail with him," said Hucky. "I didn't want to trust it to fax or e-mail. I had to get it absolutely right!"