

Reinterpreting Lao Duang Duen as Living Cultural Heritage: Musical Adaptation and Performance Practice in Thai Traditional Music

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Received: June 8, 2026 / Revised: June., 2026 /
Accepted: June, 2026:

Abstract

Lao Duang Duen (ลาวดวงเดือน) is widely regarded as one of the most significant compositions in Thai traditional music and represents an important element of Thailand's intangible cultural heritage. Since its creation during the late nineteenth century, the composition has been continuously performed, adapted, and reinterpreted across diverse musical contexts. This study investigates the historical significance, musical adaptations, and performance practices associated with *Lao Duang Duen* through a qualitative comparative analysis. Drawing upon perspectives from

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ethnomusicology, cultural heritage studies, and cultural sustainability, the research examines traditional Thai ensemble performances, modern orchestral arrangements, and cross-cultural adaptations. The findings reveal that while different versions exhibit variations in instrumentation, texture, tempo, and interpretative style, the core melodic identity and cultural symbolism of the composition remain remarkably consistent. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that musical adaptation serves not as a threat to authenticity but as an important mechanism for sustaining cultural relevance and facilitating intergenerational transmission. The continuing reinterpretation of *Lao Duang Duen* illustrates how traditional music can function as a form of living cultural heritage, balancing preservation with innovation in response to changing social and artistic environments. The study argues that the vitality of Thai traditional music depends not only on conserving historical forms but also on encouraging creative engagement and cultural renewal. The findings contribute to broader discussions on heritage preservation, cultural identity, and the sustainability of traditional performing arts in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Lao Duang Duen*; Thai Traditional Music; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Musical Adaptation; Performance Practice; Ethnomusicology; Cultural Sustainability; Living Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Traditional music plays a significant role in preserving cultural identity and transmitting collective memory across generations. In Thailand, traditional musical compositions are not only artistic expressions but also important representations of historical experience, social values, and cultural continuity. Among the many works that constitute Thailand's classical musical heritage, *Lao Duang Duen* (ลาวดวงเดือน) occupies a particularly prominent position.

Originally composed during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), *Lao Duang Duen* has become one of the most recognizable and frequently performed pieces in Thai traditional music. The song is widely appreciated for its lyrical melody, emotional depth, and strong cultural symbolism. Over time, it has been performed in numerous musical contexts, ranging from traditional Thai ensembles to modern orchestral arrangements and cross-cultural adaptations.

The continuing popularity of *Lao Duang Duen* demonstrates its ability to transcend historical boundaries and remain relevant to contemporary audiences. Unlike many traditional compositions that are preserved primarily as historical artifacts, *Lao Duang Duen* continues to evolve through reinterpretation, arrangement, and performance innovation. Such transformations provide an important opportunity to examine how cultural heritage can be preserved while simultaneously adapting to changing social and artistic environments.

1.2 Research Problem

Although *Lao Duang Duen* has been extensively performed and adapted, relatively few studies have systematically examined how different arrangements and performance practices influence the musical and cultural meanings of the work. Existing research often focuses on the historical background of the composition or on specific performance traditions, while comparative studies across multiple versions remain limited.

Furthermore, contemporary musical adaptations increasingly incorporate Western instruments, orchestral arrangements, and cross-cultural elements. These developments raise important questions concerning the relationship between authenticity, innovation, and cultural preservation within Thai traditional music.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Examine the historical and cultural significance of *Lao Duang Duen* within Thai traditional music.
2. Compare selected arrangements and performance practices of *Lao Duang*

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Duen.

3. Analyze how musical adaptation influences the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage.
4. Explore the role of performance innovation in sustaining traditional music within contemporary society.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the fields of ethnomusicology, cultural heritage studies, and performance research by demonstrating how a traditional musical composition can function as a living cultural heritage asset. The findings may provide insights into the preservation of traditional music in Southeast Asia and contribute to broader discussions regarding the relationship between tradition and modernization in cultural practice.

2. Historical Background and Literature Review

2.1 Historical Background of *Lao Duang Duen*

Lao Duang Duen (ลาวดวงเดือน) is one of the most beloved and enduring compositions in Thai traditional music. The piece is generally attributed to Prince Benbadhanabongse during the reign of Chulalongkorn and has occupied a significant place in Thailand's musical heritage for more than a century.

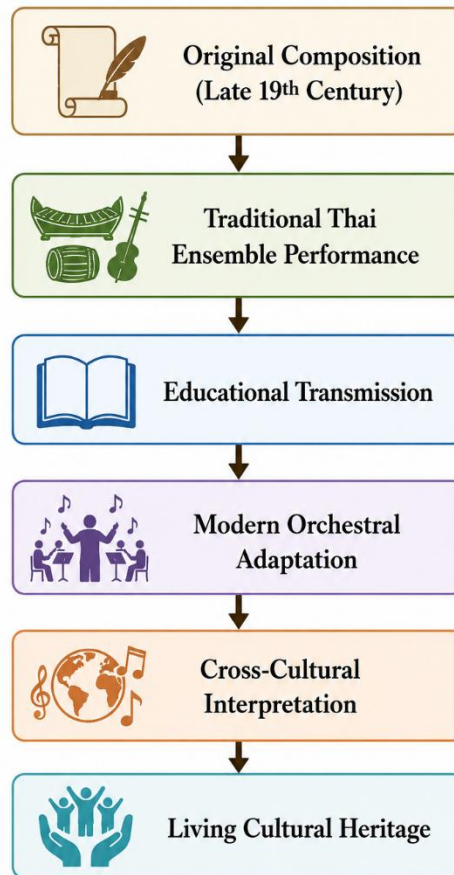
Historical accounts indicate that the song was originally known as *Lao Damnoen Kwian* (ลาวดำนินเกวียน). Over time, however, audiences became more familiar with the opening lyrics containing the phrase “Duang Duen” (the moon), leading to the widespread adoption of the title *Lao Duang Duen*. The song has since become one of the most recognizable works in the Thai classical repertoire.

The composition emerged during a period of significant social and cultural transformation in Siam. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed increasing interaction between Siam and neighboring regions, as well as growing exposure to Western cultural influences. During this period, music played an important role in expressing both royal patronage and cultural identity. As a result, *Lao Duang Duen* not only reflects artistic creativity but also embodies historical memories and cultural values associated with the era.

The song is particularly admired for its expressive melody and poetic character. Its lyrical quality has enabled it to remain relevant across generations and has contributed to its continued popularity among musicians, educators, and audiences alike.

The historical development of *Lao Duang Duen* reflects its transformation across different cultural and musical contexts, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Historical Development of Lao Duang Duen



Source: Developed by the author.

Figure 1. Historical Development of Lao Duang Duen

2.2 Lao Duang Duen in Thai Musical Culture

Within Thai traditional music, certain compositions function as more than musical works; they become symbols of collective cultural memory. *Lao Duang Duen* is widely regarded as such a work.

The piece is regularly performed in educational institutions, cultural festivals, traditional ensemble concerts, and ceremonial events. Through repeated performance and transmission, it has become embedded within Thailand's musical consciousness. Unlike compositions that remain fixed within a single performance tradition, *Lao Duang Duen* has demonstrated remarkable adaptability.

Its continued presence in contemporary musical life reflects what ethnomusicologists often describe as the dynamic nature of tradition. Tradition is not simply the preservation of the past but rather an ongoing process through which cultural expressions are continuously reinterpreted and renewed.

Consequently, the study of *Lao Duang Duen* provides an opportunity to examine how

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cultural heritage is maintained through active performance rather than passive preservation.

2.3 Musical Adaptation and Cultural Heritage

The concept of cultural heritage has evolved significantly in recent decades. Earlier approaches often emphasized the conservation of tangible artifacts such as monuments, buildings, and historical objects. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes the importance of intangible cultural heritage, including music, dance, oral traditions, rituals, and performing arts.

According to UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage consists of living cultural practices transmitted from generation to generation. Such heritage remains viable only when communities continue to perform, reinterpret, and adapt it within changing social contexts.

From this perspective, musical adaptation should not be viewed as a threat to authenticity. Instead, adaptation may serve as an essential mechanism for sustaining cultural traditions. When musicians create new arrangements, introduce different instruments, or reinterpret established repertoire, they contribute to the ongoing vitality of cultural heritage.

The continued evolution of *Lao Duang Duen* illustrates this process. While the core melody remains recognizable, different performers and arrangers introduce distinctive artistic choices that reflect contemporary musical environments.

2.4 Previous Research on *Lao Duang Duen*

Existing scholarship on *Lao Duang Duen* can be grouped into three major areas.

Historical Studies

Historical research has primarily focused on the origins of the composition, its association with Prince Benbadhanabongse, and its role within Thai classical music traditions. These studies provide valuable information concerning the song's historical development and cultural significance.

Arrangement and Orchestration Studies

A second body of literature examines the adaptation of Thai traditional music for larger ensembles and orchestral settings. Researchers have analyzed how traditional melodies can be preserved while being integrated into contemporary orchestral frameworks. Such studies highlight the balance between innovation and tradition in modern performance practice.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Studies

Recent studies have explored the incorporation of non-Thai instruments into performances of Thai traditional music. One notable example investigates the use of the Chinese guzheng in performances inspired by *Lao Duang Duen*. The research

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demonstrates how musical exchange between Thai and Chinese traditions can generate new artistic possibilities while maintaining respect for the original composition.

These studies collectively demonstrate the continuing relevance of *Lao Duang Duen* within contemporary musical culture. However, relatively few studies have systematically compared multiple arrangements and performance practices within a single analytical framework.

2.5 Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined the historical background, orchestral adaptation, and cross-cultural interpretation of *Lao Duang Duen*, a comprehensive comparative analysis of different arrangements and performance practices remains limited.

Most existing studies focus on a specific adaptation or performance context rather than examining how various interpretations collectively contribute to the preservation and transformation of cultural heritage. As a result, there is a need for research that considers *Lao Duang Duen* as a living cultural heritage work whose meaning is continuously shaped through performance.

This study addresses this gap by comparing selected arrangements and performance practices of *Lao Duang Duen* and exploring their implications for cultural continuity, artistic innovation, and heritage preservation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in ethnomusicological and comparative musicological approaches. The purpose of the research is to examine how different arrangements and performance practices of *Lao Duang Duen* contribute to the preservation, transformation, and reinterpretation of Thai traditional musical heritage.

Rather than focusing on quantitative measurement, this study emphasizes musical interpretation, cultural context, and performance practice. Through comparative analysis of selected performances and arrangements, the research investigates how musicians negotiate the relationship between tradition and innovation.

The study views *Lao Duang Duen* not merely as a musical composition but as a living cultural artifact whose meanings continue to evolve through performance.

3.2 Research Materials

The primary materials for analysis consist of selected performances and arrangements of *Lao Duang Duen* representing different musical contexts.

Three categories of performance were selected:

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Traditional Thai Ensemble Performance

This category includes performances using traditional Thai instruments such as:

- Ranat Ek
- Khim
- Saw Duang
- Saw U
- Pi Nai

These performances represent the conventional interpretation of the composition within Thai classical music traditions.

Modern Orchestral Arrangements

This category includes performances arranged for:

- Chamber ensembles
- Symphonic orchestras
- Educational concert ensembles

These versions illustrate how traditional melodies are adapted within contemporary musical settings.

Cross-Cultural and Fusion Adaptations

This category includes performances incorporating non-Thai musical traditions, including:

- Guzheng arrangements
- Piano arrangements
- Hybrid East-West ensembles

Such adaptations provide opportunities to examine cultural exchange and musical innovation.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The comparative analysis focuses on five musical dimensions.

Melody

The study examines:

- Melodic contour
- Ornamentation
- Phrase structure
- Preservation of thematic material

Particular attention is paid to how the principal melody is retained or modified across different arrangements.

Rhythm and Tempo

The analysis considers:

- Rhythmic variation

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- Tempo changes
- Flexibility of performance timing

These elements influence the emotional character of each interpretation.

Instrumentation

Instrumentation plays a significant role in shaping musical identity.

The study investigates how different instrumental combinations affect:

- Timbre
- Texture
- Cultural perception

Performance Practice

Performance practice includes:

- Interpretation
- Expressive techniques
- Ensemble interaction
- Stylistic conventions

The comparison highlights differences between traditional and contemporary performance approaches.

Cultural Expression

Beyond purely musical characteristics, the study explores how each arrangement communicates cultural meaning and heritage values.

3.4 Comparative Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted through four stages.

Stage 1: Selection of Representative Versions

Representative performances from traditional, modern, and cross-cultural contexts were identified.

Stage 2: Musical Observation

Each performance was examined according to the five analytical dimensions.

Stage 3: Comparative Interpretation

Similarities and differences among performances were identified and interpreted.

Stage 4: Cultural Analysis

The findings were evaluated within broader discussions concerning cultural heritage preservation, adaptation, and musical continuity.

3.5 Conceptual Framework

This study proposes that the relationship between musical adaptation and cultural heritage can be understood through a dynamic process.

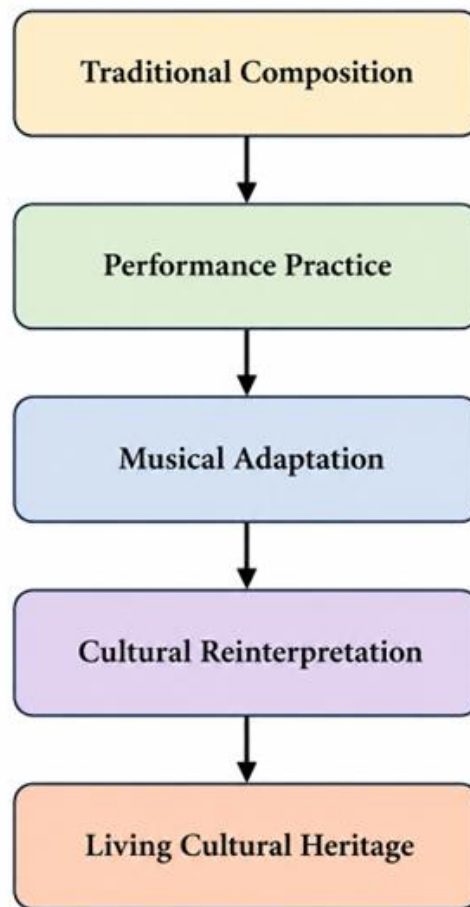


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Source: Developed by the author.

The framework suggests that adaptation does not necessarily weaken cultural authenticity. Instead, reinterpretation may contribute to the continued vitality of traditional music by allowing cultural heritage to remain meaningful within changing social contexts.

4. Comparative Analysis of Lao Duang Duen Arrangements and Performance Practices

Table 1 Comparative Characteristics of Lao Duang Duen Arrangements

Dimension	Traditional Ensemble	Orchestral Arrangement	Cross-Cultural Adaptation
Melody	Highly preserved	Preserved with harmonic support	Preserved with stylistic modification
Rhythm	Flexible and expressive	Structured and coordinated	Variable
Instrumentation	Thai traditional instruments	Western orchestral instruments	Mixed cultural instruments
Performance Style	Traditional interpretation	Formal concert presentation	Experimental interpretation
Cultural Function	Heritage transmission	Public cultural education	Cultural dialogue
Audience	Traditional music audiences	General public	International and intercultural audiences

Source: Developed by the author.

4.1 Traditional Thai Ensemble Performance

Traditional performances of *Lao Duang Duen* emphasize melodic elegance, subtle ornamentation, and expressive phrasing. The piece is typically performed within established Thai classical ensemble traditions, where the melody serves as the central organizing element.

In these performances, musicians prioritize refinement, balance, and emotional restraint. The resulting sound reflects long-standing aesthetic values associated with Thai classical music, including gracefulness, continuity, and lyrical beauty. The use of traditional instruments creates a distinctive timbral environment that reinforces the cultural identity of the composition. Instruments such as the *saw duang*, *ranat ek*, and *khim* contribute unique tonal colors that are immediately recognizable within Thai musical culture.

Furthermore, traditional performances often preserve characteristic ornamentations that cannot be fully represented in written notation. These performance practices are transmitted through oral tradition and remain essential components of musical authenticity.

4.2 Modern Orchestral Arrangements

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, *Lao Duang Duen* has increasingly been adapted for orchestral and educational performance settings.

Unlike traditional ensemble versions, orchestral arrangements frequently employ harmonic accompaniment, expanded textures, and dynamic contrasts. These elements create a broader sonic landscape while maintaining the recognizable melodic identity of the original composition.

The introduction of Western orchestral techniques demonstrates how Thai traditional music can engage with global musical practices without losing its cultural foundations.

In many cases, orchestral arrangements serve educational and cultural purposes by introducing traditional repertoire to audiences who may be less familiar with classical Thai music.

4.3 Cross-Cultural Adaptations and Musical Innovation

In recent decades, *Lao Duang Duen* has increasingly been adapted beyond traditional Thai musical contexts. These adaptations include performances involving Chinese instruments, Western classical instruments, and hybrid ensembles that combine elements from multiple musical traditions.

One notable example is the incorporation of the Chinese *guzheng* into performances based on *Lao Duang Duen*. Previous research has demonstrated how musicians creatively integrate guzheng techniques into Thai musical structures while maintaining the melodic identity of the original composition. Such adaptations reveal a process of cultural exchange rather than cultural replacement.

Cross-cultural adaptations often introduce new timbral possibilities and performance aesthetics. The guzheng, for example, contributes a distinctive tonal quality that differs from traditional Thai string instruments while remaining compatible with the expressive character of the composition.

Similarly, piano arrangements of *Lao Duang Duen* have become increasingly common in educational and concert settings. The piano allows performers to explore harmonic textures and dynamic contrasts that are not typically present in traditional Thai ensemble performances.

These adaptations demonstrate that cultural heritage is not static. Rather, it is continually reshaped through interaction with new artistic environments, technologies, and audiences.

Importantly, the success of these adaptations depends on maintaining a balance between innovation and cultural respect. When performed thoughtfully, cross-cultural arrangements can expand the reach of traditional music while preserving its essential identity.

4.4 Comparative Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals both continuity and transformation across different

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versions of *Lao Duang Duen*.

Melody

Among all versions examined, the melody remains the most stable musical element. Whether performed by a traditional Thai ensemble, a symphony orchestra, or a guzheng performer, the fundamental melodic structure remains recognizable. This melodic continuity serves as an anchor of cultural identity and enables listeners to recognize the composition across diverse musical settings.

Rhythm and Tempo

Greater variation is observed in rhythm and tempo. Traditional performances often employ flexible timing and expressive rubato, whereas orchestral arrangements tend to emphasize structural consistency and ensemble precision. These differences reflect distinct performance traditions rather than conflicting interpretations.

Instrumentation

Instrumentation represents the area of greatest diversity. Traditional ensembles prioritize indigenous timbres associated with Thai musical heritage. Modern arrangements expand the sonic palette through orchestral instruments, while fusion performances introduce cross-cultural influences. Rather than diminishing authenticity, these changes illustrate the adaptability of the composition.

Cultural Meaning

Although musical details vary, all versions continue to communicate themes of beauty, longing, memory, and emotional reflection. This suggests that cultural meaning is not determined solely by instrumentation or performance style. Instead, it emerges through the interaction between music, performers, and audiences. The persistence of these meanings across different interpretations contributes to the enduring cultural significance of *Lao Duang Duen*.

5. Lao Duang Duen as Living Cultural Heritage

5.1 From Preservation to Revitalization

Traditional approaches to heritage preservation often focus on maintaining historical authenticity by minimizing change. However, contemporary heritage studies increasingly emphasize the concept of living heritage. Living heritage recognizes that cultural traditions survive because they continue to be practiced, adapted, and transmitted within changing social environments. In this context, *Lao Duang Duen* represents a particularly valuable example.

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The composition has remained culturally relevant not because it has remained unchanged, but because musicians have continually found new ways to interpret and perform it.

Each generation contributes its own artistic perspective while maintaining connections to earlier traditions.

This process transforms preservation from a passive act of conservation into an active process of cultural revitalization.

5.2 Cultural Identity and Collective Memory

Music serves as a powerful medium through which communities remember their past and express collective identity.

For many Thai listeners, *Lao Duang Duen* evokes emotional associations that extend beyond the musical composition itself.

The song is connected to:

- Historical memory
- National cultural identity
- Educational traditions
- Family and community experiences

As a result, performances of *Lao Duang Duen* function as acts of cultural remembrance.

Through repeated performance, the composition continues to reinforce shared cultural values and historical awareness.

This role becomes particularly important in an era of globalization, where traditional cultural expressions face increasing competition from global popular culture.

5.3 Implications for Cultural Sustainability

The findings of this study have broader implications for cultural sustainability.

Many traditional musical forms throughout Southeast Asia face challenges associated with modernization, changing audience preferences, and declining numbers of practitioners.

The experience of *Lao Duang Duen* suggests that sustainability does not necessarily require strict preservation of a single historical form.

Instead, sustainability may depend upon a tradition's capacity for adaptation.

Successful cultural sustainability involves:

1. Respecting historical foundations.
2. Encouraging artistic creativity.
3. Supporting intergenerational transmission.
4. Engaging contemporary audiences.
5. Promoting cross-cultural dialogue.

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Through these processes, traditional music can remain meaningful within contemporary society while retaining its cultural significance.

5.4 Educational Implications and Future Development

The continuing popularity of *Lao Duang Duen* offers important implications for music education and cultural transmission in contemporary Thailand. As younger generations are increasingly exposed to globalized musical influences, traditional musical heritage faces challenges related to relevance, accessibility, and audience engagement.

The findings of this study suggest that adaptation and reinterpretation can play a constructive role in music education. By presenting *Lao Duang Duen* through multiple performance formats, educators may create opportunities for students to appreciate both traditional and contemporary approaches to musical expression. In higher education, the piece can serve as an effective case study for courses in ethnomusicology, cultural heritage studies, Southeast Asian music, and performance practice. Comparative examination of different arrangements encourages students to develop critical perspectives regarding authenticity, innovation, and cultural continuity.

Furthermore, digital technologies provide new possibilities for preserving and disseminating Thai traditional music. Online archives, multimedia learning resources, and virtual performance platforms can enhance public access to cultural heritage and facilitate intergenerational learning.

Future research may explore how digital media, artificial intelligence, and interactive learning environments influence the transmission of Thai traditional music. Such studies may contribute to broader discussions concerning cultural sustainability in the twenty-first century.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study focuses primarily on selected representative arrangements of *Lao Duang Duen* and does not attempt to examine every existing version of the composition.

Second, the analysis emphasizes qualitative interpretation rather than quantitative measurement of audience perception. Future studies may incorporate surveys, interviews, or reception analysis to investigate how different audiences respond to various adaptations.

Third, the research concentrates on musical and cultural dimensions within the Thai context. Comparative studies involving other Southeast Asian musical traditions may provide additional perspectives on the processes of cultural adaptation and heritage

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preservation.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a useful framework for understanding how traditional musical works can function as living cultural heritage within contemporary society.

Table 2 Summary of Musical Characteristics in Different Versions of Lao Duang Duen

Musical Element	Traditional Version	Orchestral Version	Fusion Version
Melody	Original melodic contour	Original melody with harmonic support	Modified melodic ornamentation
Tempo	Flexible	Stable	Variable
Rhythm	Traditional patterns	Formalized structure	Hybrid patterns
Instrumentation	Thai classical instruments	Western orchestra	Mixed instruments
Texture	Monophonic/Heterophonic	Polyphonic	Hybrid
Audience	Traditional listeners	General audiences	International audiences
Heritage Function	Preservation	Dissemination	Innovation

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the historical significance, musical adaptations, and performance practices associated with *Lao Duang Duen*, one of Thailand's most iconic traditional compositions.

Through comparative analysis, the research demonstrates that the composition exists in multiple musical forms while maintaining a recognizable cultural identity. Variations in instrumentation, performance style, tempo, and arrangement reveal the dynamic relationship between tradition and innovation.

The findings suggest that musical adaptation should not be viewed as a threat to cultural authenticity. Rather, adaptation may serve as a vital mechanism through which cultural heritage remains relevant and accessible to new generations.

The study further argues that *Lao Duang Duen* should be understood as a form of living cultural heritage. Its continued performance across traditional, orchestral, and cross-cultural contexts illustrates how heritage survives through active engagement rather than static preservation.

As Thailand continues to navigate the challenges of cultural preservation in a rapidly changing world, *Lao Duang Duen* offers an important example of how traditional music can sustain cultural identity while embracing artistic transformation.

Ultimately, the enduring popularity of *Lao Duang Duen* reflects its unique ability to connect past and present, tradition and innovation, and local cultural values with

broader global artistic exchanges.

Final Reflection

Ultimately, the significance of *Lao Duang Duen* extends beyond its musical structure. The composition represents a cultural journey that connects generations, communities, and historical memories. Through continuous reinterpretation and performance, the work demonstrates that cultural heritage is not merely preserved in archives or museums but lives through human creativity and participation. In this sense, *Lao Duang Duen* remains not only a treasured musical composition but also a symbol of Thailand's enduring cultural vitality.

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