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# (Re)orchestrating Histories: An Interview with Cambodian Composer Him Sophy

Gwyneth Bravo, NYU Abu Dhabi<sup>1</sup>

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Fig. 1. Him<sup>2</sup> Sophy's "Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia", view of the stage showing Taipei Philharmonic Chamber Choir with backdrop of Rithy Panh's film (rehearsal in Taipei, Taiwan, 2018): photo credit: Cambodian Living Arts.

## Gwyneth Bravo (GB) with Him Sophy (HS)<sup>3</sup>

**GB:** First of all, thank you for making time during your visit to Abu Dhabi for these interviews focused on your life and music. Your composition "Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia" has been recognized globally as the first major symphonic and choral work to address the traumatic legacy of the Civil War and Genocide in Cambodia. Following the 2017 world premiere in Melbourne, it was performed in New York, Boston and Paris, with the Cambodian premiere taking place in November 2019. Can you share more about the historical significance of the Phnom Penh premiere? Why was it important for you personally and how did Cambodians respond to your work?

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<sup>2</sup> The composer's name Him Sophy is rendered here in the traditional Cambodian order with surname (Him), followed by first name (Sophy), as this is how he is known worldwide.

<sup>3</sup> The material for this interview was drawn from 8.5 hours of interviews with Him Sophy over several days between 27 and 28 November, as well as on 6 December 2022. Him 2022a; Him 2022b. For further information on "Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia" see <https://bangsokol.cambodianlivingarts.org/about/>.

**HS:** Yes. The work was staged in Cambodia as part of the fortieth commemoration of the fall of the Khmer Rouge and the end of the genocide in 1979. Although each time my work was performed in a different place – whether it was staged in Melbourne, New York, Boston, Paris, or Phnom Penh – I feel that a similar feeling was experienced, which was a memory of the history of Cambodia and the genocide. This history is expressed through the music and the film. In Phnom Penh, we performed *Bangsokol* in Chaktomuk Hall three times over three days from 21 to the 23 November, so it's hard for me to say how Cambodians responded with three different performances, and with so many different kinds of people attending. On the third and final day of the performances, for example, we performed mostly for ordinary people and student groups. On Friday night, 22 November, it was a very different audience as we performed for His Majesty King [Norodom Sihamoni], as well as for other high-level people, government officials, ambassadors, and international guests like yourself. That night was very important night for me because our king was at the concert. I felt very proud, because he called *Bangsokol* “a masterpiece of Cambodia” for the way it merged different Khmer and Western musical genres and instruments with a chamber orchestra and choir, together with film, staging, and dance. In Cambodia, nobody had ever seen anything like my *Bangsokol*, which, as a multidisciplinary work, includes so many different kinds of art forms, artists, musicians, and singers on stage. The reaction in Phnom Penh for some people in the community was that they wanted to see more performances of *Bangsokol*, so that my work could be used in Cambodia as a wake up [call], so that we never forget about the past and the tragedy of the genocide.

My requiem has a message that we have to heal our life, so that we can create a better future. We want to educate Cambodians, as well as all people, about the horrible tragedy of the genocide and war – about the impact it has on everyone. People only need to look at Cambodia and *Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia* as an example to see the terrible suffering that war creates. This [lesson] is not only important for Cambodia but also for other countries as history continues to repeat [itself]. Every time war happens, or a country is invaded, the results are the same and people kill each other. Today, we can see the situation with the war in Ukraine. The Russians invaded the Ukraine and are killing innocent people every day. My requiem is an example that can teach people there as well. I don't only mean for Russians and Ukrainians but also for people in European countries and around the world who need to know how important it is to protect peace for the world [...] in order to save the world. We don't want the tragedy and suffering that happened in Cambodia to repeat itself. [...] You can imagine that I am very happy that his Majesty our King called my *Bangsokol* “a masterpiece of Cambodia”, but I hope also it will have an impact on people in countries around the world [...].

**GB:** Your “*Bangsokol*” is known to combine traditional Khmer instruments and musical genres, including “*smot*” funereal chanting, with a Western chamber orchestra, chorus, and two Cambodian vocalists to create a work, which fuses aspects of the Latin requiem mass with the Khmer Buddhist “*bangsokol*” liturgy. Can you share more about the importance of the “*bangsokol* ceremony” in Cambodian culture and, specifically, the role it plays in the context of your requiem?

**HS:** Yes, the “*bangsokol*” ceremony is an important part of the Cambodian funeral when a white piece of cloth is placed on the body of the dead person by a Buddhist monk and then removed to help the soul pass into the afterlife.<sup>4</sup> It's important in my requiem, because in Cambodia's history during the time of the Civil War and under the Khmer Rouge [during the genocide from 1975–1979] many, many people were killed and there wasn't any time for a proper funeral for them – for their cremation that is part of the traditional Cambodian funeral ceremony. By using texts and music from the “*bangsokol*” ceremony

<sup>4</sup> The Khmer word “*bangsokol*” is from the Pali “*paṃsukūla*” and refers to the pieces of cloth recovered from corpses by Buddhist monastics to make their patchwork robes.

in my work, we are trying to remember and honour the victims of the Khmer Rouge. I think that almost every family in Cambodia had someone who was killed or who disappeared without ever knowing where the body was, like my eldest brother Him Reth and his entire family including his wife and four children, who were killed by the Khmer Rouge shortly after they came to power in 1975. My fifth eldest brother Him Sary was also killed. As Cambodians, we believe that without organizing a proper funeral ceremony for them, their souls will have to wander and they will not be able to go on to the next life – they will be forced to wander as if they are lost. Because of this, it is important to have the “bangsokol” ceremony as part of my requiem, so that their souls will be able to pass to the next life. This is why we called the first movement “Wandering Souls”. It depicts the souls of the Cambodians killed during the Civil War and under the Khmer Rouge who have been wandering for forty years since the end of the genocide.

**GB:** *Would you share more about the different kinds of Khmer instrument and music you used to represent the wandering souls of the dead in this first movement?*

**HS:** Yes. It was very important for me as composer to depict the idea of wandering souls in this first movement, where I use traditional Cambodian instruments, especially the ancient Khmer harp, as well as different kinds of clay flutes. These “khlöy” flutes are the simple kind I used to make out of clay when I was growing up. The specific harmony I used in this movement draws on the ancient Cambodian, or Khmer, modal systems, where I combined half and whole steps. In this movement, I use Khmer harp because it is considered to be a celestial instrument – one that is played in temples and the royal palace and was not for common people [...]. So, I used these instruments first to create a special celestial sound in my piece. Later, the choir enters and sings without words to create the crying sound of ghosts. This is heard as the forlorn sound of the wandering ghosts who were killed, but who cannot go to the next life. In this first movement, I also use a short musical quotation from Buddhist chant known as “sarapanh”, which is chanted in Cambodia during “bön phchüm bën” which is the period when Cambodians go to their local pagodas to offer food to the souls of the dead.

**GB:** *After the Phnom Penh performance in Chaktomouk Hall, I remember that a ceremony took place in front of the stage in which His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni was given a golden Khmer harp by the Executive Director of Cambodian Living Arts (Phloeun Prim) – the cultural organization that commissioned “Bangsokol”. What is the symbolic significance of your use of the Khmer harp in “Bangsokol” and as a gift to your King?*

**HS:** Although the Khmer harp disappeared in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, we can see the important role it played in surviving bas-reliefs on the walls of important temples like the ones in Angkor Wat, Bayon, Banteay Samre, Banteay Chmar, as well as in the group of temples in Sambo Preykuk from the 6<sup>th</sup> century [...]. Given the loss of this beautiful instrument, I felt it would be important to use it in my requiem as a symbol of reviving the legacy of khmer musical culture from the past after the genocide. Initially, I did research about the important role this instrument played in our history and looked at the work of scholars like George Coédès, Louis Finot, Bernard Philippe Groslier and Saveros Pou, which examines inscriptions about these harps in different historical moments in Cambodia’s history. The Western harp has also played an important role in my compositions since the time of my student days at Moscow Conservatory, so I wanted to use both western and Khmer harps in *Bangsokol*.

**GB:** *From what you are sharing, it seems that “Bangsokol” is not only about commemorating the victims of the Khmer Rouge but also became a project focused on the restoration and preservation of a lost*

*cultural heritage in the form of these beautiful instruments. Can you share more about how you rebuilt these harps and, ultimately, included them in your composition?*

**HS:** Yes. The story of my Khmer harp project actually began in 2001 – many years before my commission to write *Bangsokol* – when I received a grant from the Asian Cultural Council to rebuild the Khmer harp, but, instead, I ended up starting to compose my rock opera *Where Elephants Weep*. I didn't come back to my harp project until 2013 when I began working on *Bangsokol*. Starting in 2013, I worked closely on the development of the Khmer harp project with the support of Cambodian instrument maker and musician Keo Sonankavei and the French ethnomusicologist Patrick Kersalé who – specializing in rare instrument reconstruction – had been doing extensive research on rebuilding the Khmer harps. As part of my work, I also studied how to play the Khmer harp and eventually began teaching the instrument to a group of five students at my music school in Phnom Penh in 2014. A grant I received from “Cambodian Living Arts” allowed me to teach them for a period of two years leading up to the *Bangsokol* premiere in Melbourne in 2017. To answer your other question, the golden Khmer harp that was given to His Majesty our King was made in Keo Sonankavei's workshop and was given to him after the performance by Phloeun Prim who is the Executive Director of Cambodian Living Arts – the cultural organization that commissioned my *Bangsokol*. The Khmer harp was given to our king to honor him with a symbol of continuing the important Khmer musical culture from the past to the present. His Majesty our King became a patron of Cambodian Living Arts at that time, which was very important for us.



*Fig. 2. Him Sophy with Khmer harp students, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, personal archive of the composer.*

**GB:** *What about the libretto for your requiem? Would you share more about your collaboration with the scholar Trent Walker who created the libretto for “Bangsokol”?*

**HS:** Yes, Trent Walker is an American scholar of Southeast Asian Buddhism. He spent many years studying in Cambodia and in Thailand and received his doctorate in Buddhist Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. He speaks Khmer and also understands how to read the sacred “Pali” texts

that are used in my requiem.<sup>5</sup> He is the person who compiled the libretto for my *Bangsokol* from Khmer and Pali sacred texts that he gathered from the many different Buddhist manuscripts he has studied. My requiem also includes other kinds of texts such as slogans from Pol Pot used in the Fourth Movement of my work – these are completely different.

**GB:** *Can you talk more about the fourth movement given that it is so different? How did you use these slogans and the musical references in the movement to express the violence of the Khmer Rouge?*

**HS:** In this movement called “Keeping you is no gain, losing you no loss” I wanted to contrast the music of the previous movements to represent the Khmer Rouge in music. To do this, I used military marches and patriotic sounding music, including a distorted and dissonant setting of the national anthem of the Communist Party of Kampuchea “Victorious April 17<sup>th</sup>”. After the instrumental opening of the movement you can hear the cry of the chorus and the male voices are heard chanting in unison, in Khmer, the first slogan I used: “The wheel of history always moves forward. If anyone opposes and raises their fist or foot, they will be chopped off!” Other slogans that I used were “Don’t believe the enemy, don’t hide the enemy, don’t listen to the enemy,” as well as “the Khmer Rouge has eyes everywhere, like a pineapple!” and “to dig up the grass, we must dig up the roots!”<sup>6</sup>

**GB:** *Why did you choose those particular slogans?*

**HS:** We were forced to chant and shout these slogans all the time under the Khmer Rouge – at times for example when someone was being beaten. I tried to capture the inflection and feeling in my composition in the fourth movement – the feeling of terror and fear at hearing them. I also did research about the slogans before choosing these. My goal with this movement was to create a big contrast with the other movements in the work.

**GB:** *Although there have been extensive reviews about your “Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia” in the international press very little has been written about your early life, though a New York Times article did draw attention to the fact that you and the stage director – Oscar-nominated filmmaker – Rithy Panh are survivors of the genocide.<sup>7</sup> Can you share more about your family and the different influences that shaped your development as a musician and composer?*

**HS:** Yes. I come from a musical family and was born in Cambodia on 9 January 1963 in a village called Kooksandaek. The village where I was born is located in the commune of Reakchey and is part of the District of Baphnom in the Province of Prey Veng. This place is of historic significance in Cambodian history and is located about 100 kilometers from the capital of Phnom Penh. Later, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, I attended music high school in the capital – the preparatory division of the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. Both my paternal grandfather and father were professional musicians. My grandfather played two traditional Khmer instruments – a bowed instrument known as the “tro khmae”, a three-stringed fiddle and the “chapey dang vaeng” – a kind of long-necked lute. He performed these instruments in two different kinds of traditional ensembles – in a “pleng arëak” and in a “pleng ka” ensemble. My father, Him Jim, on the other hand was both a farmer and a musician who played sacred music in what is known as a “pin peat” ensemble, where his two instruments were

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5 WALKER 2017.

6 HIM 2017.

7 BARONE 2017.

the “roneat ek,” a xylophone, and the “kong vŭng thŭm”, a kind of gong.<sup>8</sup> My mother, whose name was Nouk Yean, worked at home to raise me and my six, older siblings while also supporting my father’s work on our family-owned farm.

**GB:** *In different contexts you have mentioned the destructive impact that the Civil War in Cambodia had on your family and life during the years before the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975. This is the focus of the second movement of “Bangsokol” (“Please come listen/the roots of wars”) where Rithy Panh uses archival footage in his accompanying film to document the US led bombing campaign on Cambodia, which set the historical stage for the rise of the Khmer Rouge. I don’t think many people know much about the Civil War. Can you briefly talk about your experience during this period?*

**HS:** Yes. During the Civil War, as well as later under the Khmer Rouge, ordinary Cambodians – particularly people like my family in the rural region where I come from – were caught in the crossfire between the US, South Vietnamese, and Khmer Republican forces [on one side] and the Khmer Rouge and North Vietnamese forces on the other. As a child, it was a very frightening time when everyone lived in fear. If the Khmer Rouge and North Vietnam soldier suspected that someone in a village was collaborating with either side, they would kill them. This is what happened to one of my relatives during the Civil War [...] During this time, my parents were afraid that I would be killed or recruited as a child soldier by the Khmer Rouge, so they arranged for me to secretly leave our village and go and live with my sixth eldest brother in Phnom Penh in 1970. At some point after I had moved to the capital, our family home in Kooksandaek was bombed and partially destroyed. Fortunately no one was killed. While living with my brother, who was a talented musician who could play many different kinds of Khmer instruments, I attended primary school from 1970 to 1972. I then began my musical education at the Music School of the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 1972, where I learned piano and theory. Interestingly, I was the only person in my family to not study Khmer music. I lived with my brother in Phnom Penh until the Khmer Rouge took control in 1975. When that happened, the entire population of the capital was forced to evacuate to the countryside. They even evacuated all of the hospitals, so that on the roads leading out of the city, I saw people being pushed in hospital beds and wheel chairs... Some had even died along the way and their bodies were just lying there by the road [...].

**GB:** *What happened to your parents and siblings after the Khmer Rouge came to power?*

**HS:** After leaving Phnom Penh, I was fortunate to eventually find my parents. Unlike many other families who were completely wiped out by the Khmer Rouge during the genocide, my parents and four of my siblings survived the years under the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979 – a time when it was like hell on earth. Tragically, as I mentioned before, two of my brothers were killed – my eldest along with his family.

**GB:** *Based on the extensive interviews we have done so far during the last week, I know that there are many important experiences and stories about your survival during the time of the Civil War and under the Khmer Rouge to be documented fully at a later time. For now, would you share more about what happened to you after the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979?*

**HS:** After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, I returned to the countryside, to my village Kooksandaek, where I played Cambodian popular music for weddings and other celebrations. This all came about because I found a broken harmonium in the garbage – one that must have been thrown away by the Khmer Rouge

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Khmer traditional ensembles and instruments SAM and CAMPBELL 1991 and SAM 1994.

– near a bombed out building there. Although I didn't have any tools, I managed to fix it and played it for people in that community almost every night – sometimes I even played until the sun would come up the next day. I played a lot of popular songs for them such as “Mango Chanti,” “Flowers of Papaya,” “Popecheap,” “Holiday Celebration,” “Thunder,” and “All Night Long.” Eventually, after approximately six months, I returned to the capital in June 1979, where I resumed my studies at the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 1982.

**GB:** *What about your scholarship to Moscow Conservatory of Music?*

**HS:** Three years later, in 1985, I was awarded a scholarship to study at Moscow Conservatory where I studied for fourteen years, earning the equivalent of a Masters of Fine Arts in Music Composition in 1993 and a PhD Musicology in 1998. At the conservatory, I studied piano with Professors Igor Bogomolov and Rima Khananina. In composition, I worked with Professor Konstantin Batashov and, later, with Professor Roman Ledeniev. As my main professor of composition, Ledeniev reminded me of how important it was to find my own voice and to draw on Cambodian traditional music music, with its unique modes and instruments in my compositions. Because of his important advice, I have drawn on Cambodian traditional music as a basis for developing my compositions [...]. In terms of my dissertation in musicology, I also developed a theoretical framework for understanding the Cambodian modal system.



*Fig. 3. Him Sophy composing at the piano, Dormitory of the Preparory Division of Moscow conservatory 1987, personal archive of the composer.*

**GB:** *What are some of the works you created during your student years while in Moscow?*

**HS:** I wrote a symphony, string quartets, piano works, and a concerto for flute and orchestra – among many kinds of works for different genres. Related to my experience and memories of the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge, I composed my piano trio *Memory from Darkness* in 1990. A recording of this trio was made recently by The New York New Music Ensemble and with the support of Cambodian

Living Arts. This recording is actually heard on the audio guide for visitors at the Choeung Ek Genocide Museum.

**GB:** Yes, I remember hearing it when I visited the Choeung Ek Genocide Museum in November 2019 – at the time when I was in Cambodia to hear the Phnom Penh premiere of your “Bangsokol”, and when I had the opportunity to be introduced to you for the first time. As a basis for concluding this interview, I want to return to “Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia” and ask you to talk about the meaning and symbolism of the final, ninth movement. Unlike other requiems, “Bangsokol” ends as a joyful celebration in its ninth movement: “Wandering souls / coming back to life.”

**HS:** Yes, the final movement of *Bangsokol* is very different than other requiems, because we decided to end with a celebration. This decision was a collective decision – not just one made by one person. It was a group decision, even though several important people [involved in the project] disagreed with our ending. I agree with the decision we made to end with a celebration. Why? Because as Cambodians we suffered a lot under the Khmer Rouge and then to just go and listen to a requiem and softly end with sadness [didn't seem right]. We wanted to present and give something different – to give hope and happiness to the human being. This is [the hope] that even if we have suffered and experienced so much violence in the world, we can still continue our lives. The words that lead into the final movement show how important this hope is for us: “Alas, my souls, stop your wandering! Let go of this sadness and strife. Walk forward, come here, follow the sounds, the sounds of music, to take rebirth [...]”<sup>9</sup> That is also why we decided to bring the two children on stage at the very end of *Bangsokol*, where they receive a music and dance lesson from the performers. The reason for this is to symbolize the continuity of life and the importance of education in continuing the Khmer musical and cultural traditions despite the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge and the killing. Because of this, I used the traditional Khmer “chayam” drums to end the work, which are used in celebratory festivals in Cambodia. This ending is meant, above all, to give hope to the audience, to my fellow Cambodians, and also, to the world.

**GB:** Dr. Him, I want to thank you so much for sharing your life and music with me during the course of these interviews over the last days.

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