

EDITORIAL

A Focus on the Filipino *Rondalla* and the Plucked String Tradition*Ramon P. Santos*

The Filipino *rondalla* is a musical heritage that has survived through the years in different climes and circumstances. Its repertoire and functions have adapted to the different levels of society, so that it has become a natural yet inconspicuous artistic property of the whole nation. During its evolution, different waves of its popularity emerged. Since the 1990's however, a new surge in its development has taken place. It has been officially registered as a competition category of the National Music Competitions for Young Artists or the NAMCYA since 1996 and a new energy has been infused into the tradition with the holding of the International Rondalla Festival in 2004 in Naga City, 2007 in Dumaguete and 2011 in the city of Tagum. New compositions have been written and new transcriptions have been made in order to suit the different activities and undertakings that have been put in place. Today, there is a fresh interest not only in its revitalization but on the discovery of new possibilities in its musical provenance, that seems to augur a new era in enhancing its status as a truly artistic medium of expression among Filipino musicians.

Beginnings

How the *rondalla* started, took root and proliferated is hard to determine since no chronicle exists that marks the formal or informal introduction of the group into Philippine soil. It may have grown from the teaching of the instruments in convents, as the friars offered to give free instruction in music, not only in playing instruments but on music theory as well. It is common knowledge that groups such as *estudiantinas*, *murzas* or *murgas* and *comparzas* existed in the islands and therefore the concept itself of group playing was somehow implanted among the local people.

The term “*rondalla*” usually refers to a band of young musicians who go around during evening time to play and sing before people’s houses. *Estudiantinas* were groups consisting of university students and were invariably called “*tunas*” or “*tinas*”. A *murza* was a band of street musicians who played for alms, while *comparzas* were music groups that played rather formally on stage. *Rondalla* seems to be a later term that first distinguished itself from the other groups, as a serenading ensemble. To date, the term *comparsa* still exists among folk musicians who play their instruments in small groups of four to five persons, performing folksongs and love songs whatever the occasion calls for.

The Rise of Filipino Rondalla

In urban centers, the more formal groups began to be established in the late nineteenth century, playing entertainment music or concerts, and accompanying vocal and instrumental solos and choruses. There was a great demand for *rondalla* groups and players among the American shipping companies at the turn of the century, as they would play entertainment music for the luxury liners that were the popular means of transportation in the international waters.

Through the years, the Filipino *rondalla* has been playing more and more varied repertoires, from folksongs, folkdance accompaniment, short pieces like *danzas*, *chotis*, *polkas*, marches, waltzes, *balitaw*, *harana*, lullabies, and ballroom music to pieces that had been transcribed from classical and semi-classical compositions. *Rondalla* music also absorbed dance tunes that were introduced by the Americans such as the foxtrot, *cha-cha*, *mambo*, and rock and roll.

Radio began to feature the *rondalla* since 1935 and after the war, the broadcast of *rondalla* music increased. The 1960’s and 70’s saw more and more sponsorships of the *rondalla* by private as well as government agencies which put up their own *rondalla* groups. The coming of the television industry featured the *rondalla* as one of the early popular music attractions, with such program as the *Hamon sa Kampeon* as one of the venues for competition.

After the NAMCYA was established in 1973, one of the categories that was initiated was the family ensemble and some of these ensembles played *rondalla* instruments. In the meantime, the *rondalla* became part of the music education programs as well as extra-curricular activities in elementary

and high schools. In the 1970's many *rondallas* were organized but there was no outstanding group that emerged. In 1985, the Pambansang Samahan ng mga *Rondalla* (PASARON) was established with Celso Espejo elected as President, a position that he held for 8 years.

The upsurge of *rondallas* in the 90's and the first decade of the 21st century was boosted by the NAMCYA's official inclusion of the *rondalla* in its competition categories. The International *Rondalla* Festival which was an off-shoot of the ManyMusics Programme of the International Music Council of UNESCO that called for Musical Diversity created a demand not only for *rondallas* but also for high quality groups that could be presented in an international level. This tri-yearly project that began in 2004 in Naga City and followed in 2007 in Dumaguete City began to identify high-caliber *rondallas* and even talented players who showed artistic distinction from around the country. They also got exposed to the level of excellence exhibited by the foreign participants in the festival. Such exposure to a wider world of plucked strings music and plucked string tradition will hopefully bring about a new perspective to the Filipino *rondalla* and a new horizon in strengthening and expanding its musical possibilities and repertoires for the coming generations.

Today, the Filipino *rondalla* has not only spawned greater interest in its existence and repertoire but has also widened its scope of influence to other countries, such as the United States, Australia, Singapore as well as some European nations where Filipino expatriates abound. The international *rondalla* festival has aroused the interest not only on *rondalla* music or the *rondalla* tradition but also on the plucked string ensembles in general, covering the oral and indigenous, as well as written and classical performance traditions from the different parts of globe.


Writings on the Rondalla and the Plucked String Tradition

One of the main components of the festival is a conference where experts have been invited to present aspects of the plucked string tradition, whether historical, musical, archeological, or organological, as a contribution to the broadening of knowledge of the plucked instruments that come from the different musical practices and cultures of the world. During the first festival in 2004, the seminar-workshop was conducted under the theme: "The *Rondalla*: Diversity Within a Shared Heritage", while the second in

2007 adopted the theme of “History and Diffusion of Plucked String Music Tradition”. The third which was held in 2011 in Tagum City received the most number of papers with the theme: “Plucked String Music Tradition, Change, and New Direction”, partly discussing how practitioners have responded to the forces of change sweeping through their different societies. Some of the objectives of these conferences are to contribute to the development of theory on tradition, development, change and present state of plucked string music, as well as to build networks for future collaboration in academic exchange, research and performance.

The present issue of *Musika Jornal* has selected some of the papers from the second and third conference, which gives out a fairly substantive picture of the plucked string tradition in the Philippines from its indigenous forms to the adopted *guitarra-viguela* types, to the present ensemble of different sizes of plectrum instruments, and to its contemporary state in both the Philippines and abroad. The articles themselves are quite varied in their approaches and subject matter which show the multi-dimensionality of the Philippine plucked string tradition. The very first writing is a monographic account of the boat lutes in the Visayas and Luzon, a tradition that has been lost at the impact of the Spanish colonization of these two large island groups. Written by the scholar Hans Brandeis, the account is a comprehensive treatise that not only discusses the presence of the indigenous lutes in Luzon and the Visayas through a painstaking review of literary sources by Spanish chroniclers as well as early Filipino and other foreign writers, but also traces the localization of the string instruments introduced by the Spaniards and the eventual evolution of the present-day plucked strings of the Philippines. The article, which represents one chapter of a book on the boat lutes in the Philippines, also covers the description and present distribution of the indigenous string instruments in the archipelago today which abound in Mindanao as well as in the islands of Palawan and Mindoro.

In the field of conservation, transmission and propagation, three articles present two case studies on the Philippine *rondalla*, one in the Philippines and the other in the Australasian region. The first article, authored by Rolando V. Mascuñana, Enrique G. Oracion, and Malcolm C. Hiponia, relates the story of two *rondalla* groups in the municipality of Dauin in Oriental Negros, which became the emblem of the musical life and the source of pride of the people of Dauin. It discusses how the two *rondallas*



came into being under two different but related circumstances and how they have now blossomed into younger groups of *rondalla* players. The story is heartwarming in that the spontaneous and enduring love for music is the main motivation for the preservation of the tradition that has become one of Dauin's principal cultural heritage. On another scale, the essay of Kim Rockell reports on the recent development of the *rondalla* in Australia as well as in New Zealand as now becoming a symbol of diversity in the dynamics of multiculturalism. It results from the creation of an identity, the preservation and promotion of traditional Filipino music in migrant Filipino communities as part of the variety of cultures that are now permeating the Australian landscape. The third article, written by the *domra* virtuoso Inessa Gareyev of Ekaterinburg, Russia, and translated into Filipino by Herman Bognot, deals with the highly interesting spread of the *domra* and *balalaika* as heritage instruments of the Russian people. The historical account takes the reader back to 17th century when the plucked instruments began their journey to prominence until the present time. Today, the *domra* is taught in elementary and high schools, vocational schools, conservatories and academies of music, and even in post-graduate education.

Another contribution to the literature on Philippine indigenous chordophone is the essay of Fredeliza Z. Campos on looking towards the potential of archaeomusicological studies on Philippine traditional music by a preliminary discussion on the Ifugao chordophone tradition. Studying specimens from the Banaue Museum and the Philippine Museum, the UP Center for Ethnomusicology, the Library of Congress and the Field Museum of Natural History, Ms. Campos has alluded to cultural idiosyncrasies such as individualistic attitudes that is shown by the different sizes and artwork on the body of the instruments, as well as musical preferences that can be discerned from the materials used in making the different chordophones.

The pedagogical aspect of the *rondalla* tradition is tackled by the essay of Jocelyn Timbol-Guadalupe who researched on the methodology of master artist Celso Espejo, the premier practitioner and pedagogue in the classical and highly refined *rondalla* performance technique. While the teaching skills and expertise came about as a result of some forty years of practice, as well as a highly disciplined sense of musicianship and artistic judgement, it is now starting to be documented with the present writing. The report stems from interviews and observations on a series of rehearsals with student groups.

The final article is a new approach to the classification and compilation of plucked string instruments, but this time in Brazil. Authored by Adriana Olinto Ballesté, it explores the conceptual organization of nineteenth century plucked instruments, offering a more comprehensive taxonomization of the instruments, based on historical accounts, organology, and language.

These essays are a mere start to look into the world of plucked strings, starting with the *rondalla*, from different points of view: from history, practice, archeology, pedagogy, and taxonomy, short of a more thorough discussion of the music, the theoretical constructs, as well as the musical languages that each cultural tradition has created. It is hoped that the knowledge and information gathered from the following pages will induce more research and probing into the phenomenon of the *rondalla* and a more cosmic dimension of plucked string music.

