

From the Laotian khaen to South Korea's gong myoung, there's a spectacular array of instruments carved out of bamboo

THE BIG BAMBOO

As anyone who has travelled in Asia will know, bamboo is a major resource – used for food (bamboo shoots), furniture, construction, even for bullet-proof jackets, which they've recently been testing in India. Bamboo, notoriously fast-growing, might seem ideal as a sustainable resource, but a UN report has drawn attention to the dwindling forests and says 20 varieties are threatened. More than half of the bamboo forests in China inhabited by pandas have disappeared since 1974.

Bamboo, particularly in Asia, is used extensively for music. In China, the country with the largest number of varieties of bamboo, the *dizi* flute is the principal bamboo instrument followed by the *sheng* mouth organ (although it often has a metal wind-chamber these days). In Japan, the *shakuhachi* flute, beloved by Zen Buddhists, literally means 'one foot eight', the length of bamboo required to make it. In India, the *bansuri*, a transverse bamboo flute, is played by Krishna in Hindu mythology and, despite its pastoral origins, is one of India's great

classical instruments in the hands of Hariprasad Chaurasia. In North-East Thailand and Laos, the *khaen*, a bamboo mouth organ, is the prevailing folk instrument and there are many varieties amongst the hill-tribes of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and southern China, particularly amongst the Kmhmu highlanders. In Indonesia there are several types of *gamelan* made from bamboo rather than the normal iron or bronze – with a sound all of their own. Originally from Indonesia, the *angklung*, a bamboo shaker, is used in ensembles in schools throughout South-East Asia, making it one of the most popular instruments in the region. In the Philippines, Pangkat Kawayan (also known as The Singing Bamboos), are an extraordinary orchestra playing a whole variety of bamboo instruments. Although most musical instruments are found in Asia, bamboo is also found in Africa and the Americas. The national instrument in Madagascar, the *valiha*, is made from a tube of bamboo, as are the *quena* flutes and panpipes of the Andes.

Simon Broughton



PHOTO: BOB KIM

LAOS Khaen

The Laotians have a saying to describe themselves: they are the people who live in stilt houses, eat raw fish and sticky rice, and blow the *khaen*, the Laotian bamboo mouth organ. The *khaen* is at the heart of the folk music of Laos (where it is the national instrument) and North-East Thailand. Swirling around the epic tales performed by the *mor lam* (singer), the *mor khaen* (master of the *khaen*) creates a pulsing, rhythmically hypnotic sound full of organ-like chords by vamping into a set of bamboo pipes. Many tribal people in South-East Asia have their own bamboo mouth organs, but the Laotian *khaen*, which can feature 16 pipes and be taller than a man, is the most sophisticated of them all.

John Clewley



Various Artists, Laos: Molams and Mokhenes (Inédit, 2009)



PHOTO: PETER WILSON

BALI Gamelan Jegog

While most Balinese *gamelans* are cast in bronze, in the west of the island around Negara where the bamboo reaches monstrous proportions, there's the phenomenon of *gamelan jegog*. The bamboo tubes of the largest instruments can reach three metres in length and musicians have to sit astride the instruments to play them. They are hit with thick rubber beaters. There may be a dozen or more instruments of different sizes and sometimes they are played competitively, with two bands sitting side by side, trying to outdo each other. The sound of these bamboo gamelans is one of the most extraordinary in Asia.

Simon Broughton



Suar Agung, Jegog of Nagara (King Records, 1992)



JASON WILHE

MADAGASCAR Valiha

The bamboo *valiha* is Madagascar's national instrument and belongs to the family of tube zithers. The original form of the instrument is made from a length of straight bamboo with strings cut from the outer skin. The highest quality bamboo for *valiha* construction comes from Madagascar's eastern rainforest, from a species belonging to the *Gigantochloa* genus which gives a longer string length than other varieties from the Highlands. Amazingly, this bamboo is thought have been introduced to Madagascar from Java some 2,000 years ago by the Malagasy ancestors. Modern *valiha* use steel strings made from individual filaments of bicycle brake-cable, tuned by tiny moveable bridges made from dried calabash gourd. Justin Vali, who takes his name from the instrument, is Madagascar's most famous *valiha* player.

Paddy Bush



Justin Vali, Valiha (Cinq Planètes, 2005)



SOUTH KOREA Gong Myoung

The South Korean group might resemble a boy band, with their clean-cut, youthful looks, well-polished smiles and catchy stage routine, but the talented quartet play up to 30 instruments between them during a performance – probably 30 more than the average boy band. In addition to the variety of traditional Korean instruments they play, they have also created their own instrument – the *gong myoung*. On first sight, the instrument looks like a sawn-off section of drainpipe, but it comes in varying lengths of bamboo, ranging from 30cm to one metre long. The ingenious instrument has a range of three octaves and is pounded on the stage by the quartet with amazing speed and synchronicity – a welcome, new addition to the eclectic collection of bamboo instruments.

Jo Frost



Gong Myoung, 10th Anniversary Live (Gong Myoung, 2009)

DATES Gong Myoung tour the UK in October. See dates in the Gig Guide



From left to right: the Kmhmu highlanders from South-East Asia; bansuri maestro Hariprasad Chaurasia; Filipino group The Singing Bamboos