

### 2.1.5. The Music and Musical Instruments

The origin of music is attributed to Lhamo Yangchenma or goddess Sarasvati, according to the Buddhist texts. There is both spontaneous music and music created by external conditions. Spontaneous music refers to that created by one's own voice without having to depend on any other external condition, while the music created by external conditions refers to instrumental music. There are two different styles of music, namely *yangring* (music with longer melody) and *yangthung* (music with shorter melody).

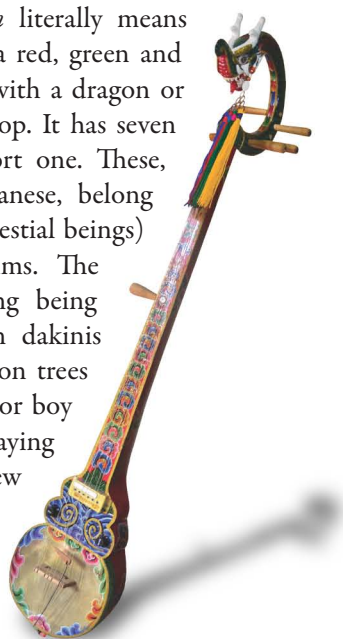
Yangring is used for singing spiritual and classical Bhutanese songs, and the musical instrument is tuned according to the song. The bodily movements that accompany such songs are usually slow with facial expressions depicting devotion and respect.

Yangthung is used for singing court songs (boedra). The bodily movement is more rapid, more instruments accompany the song, and facial expressions reflect the lyrics.

#### 2.1.5.1. Musical Instruments

Musical instruments in Bhutan consist of folk instruments and religious instruments. Folk instruments are played during festivals and for entertainment. Bhutanese songs are predominantly lyrics-based. The quality of the voice and clarity of the singing are considered more important than the musical accompaniment. The traditional instruments used to accompany singers are therefore quite rudimentary, and in most songs they are rendered somewhat redundant.

**Dram-nyen:** *Dram-nyen* literally means melodious sound. It is a red, green and blue painted long lute with a dragon or crocodile head on the top. It has seven strings, including a short one. These, according to the Bhutanese, belong to the seven *dakinis* (celestial beings) from the celestial realms. The story behind one string being short is that the seven dakinis left their lutes hanging on trees while taking bath. A poor boy found one and started playing it. When the dakinis flew away the youngest was left behind to get her dram-nyen from the boy. But the boy



refused to return the dram-nyen. So the dakini had to leave it with him under two conditions: he was to play the instrument only at midnight and never to let other humans play it. The boy promised to do so.

Every midnight he played the instrument and the dakini visited him. The poor boy became richer day by day. The villagers became curious and tried to find out the secret behind his success. A few girls found out about the dram-nyen and played it greedily. The dakini appeared when she heard the melody but was disheartened to see that it was not the boy playing her dram-nyen. Out of anger she broke one string. The poor boy realised that he had broken the oath due to his carelessness, and went to beg for forgiveness. He succeeded in persuading her, but the instrument became public. The seven strings represent the seven dakini sisters. The short string represents the youngest sister, symbolizing the broken pledge.

The dram-nyen is one of the most sacred musical instruments used for non-religious purposes in Bhutan. It is the instrument of the goddess Sarasvati (Lhamo Yangchenma) who appears holding a dram-nyen to fulfill the wishes of mankind. The dram-nyen has to be handled with care and respect since it is the instrument used for offering melodies to Buddha. It is believed that one gains merit if playing the dram-nyen with devotion. If one happens to play carelessly or with disrespect, one will meet with misfortune as the melody causes emotional crisis among other beings. If handled and played with respect, the dram-nyen is believed to help one gain wealth, glory, and great merit. However, apart from the above spiritual use, the instrument is also used for other entertainment nowadays.

**Yangchen:** The yangchen or dulcimer is a stringed board instrument painted in green, red and blue colours. Although the instrument is commonly used in the presentation of boedra songs and dances, it is not an indigenous Bhutanese instrument. Today, the performers at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts use an assortment of dram-nyen, yangchen and lingm in the presentation of their *boedra* songs and dances.

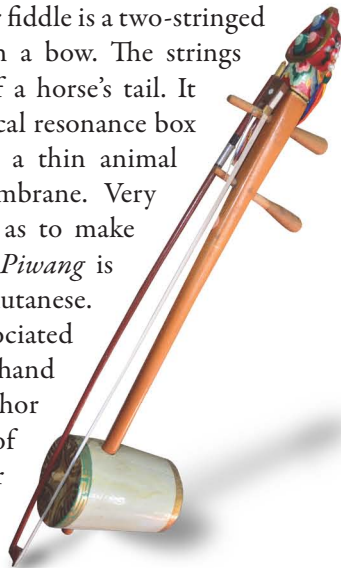




**Lingm:** The lingm is a six-holed bamboo flute indigenous to Bhutan. It is the most popular musical instrument as it is easily accessible to all. The lingm is a favourite instrument of herders, who play it to pass the long and tedious hours they must spend in the pastures. There are two varieties of lingm: the one blown from the front is called *dong lingm* and the one blown from the side is called *zurlingm*. It is the musical instrument of Choepai Lhamo, the dakini who makes the music offering to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who is depicted holding a lingm.

Sometimes the instrument of a good flute-player was thought to have been blessed by the deity, and in that case it would be kept in a temple because it was considered sacred.

**Piwang:** The piwang, or fiddle is a two-stringed instrument played with a bow. The strings are made from hairs of a horse's tail. It has a rounded, cylindrical resonance box which is covered with a thin animal skin as resonance membrane. Very thin skins are used so as to make the sound better. The *Piwang* is considered typically Bhutanese. *Piwang* is mostly associated with *Boedra*. It is the hand instrument of Yuelkhor Sung (Dhritarashtra of the East), one of the four Guardian Deities of the four directions.



**Kongtha:** The kongtha, or mouth harp is a thin and short piece of bamboo attached to a string. It is common among the village youth since it can be easily made. The skill to cut and shape bamboo pieces comes naturally to rural folk, who spend a lot of time in the forests. It is a three inch long piece of bamboo with two

narrow slits cut lengthwise along it to make a tongue. One end of this is held by the thumb and hook of the index finger and placed between the lips while the other thumb and index finger of the other hand holds the string which is attached to the other end. The latter end is then pulled repeatedly to produce sound which can be regulated by breathing. Young women have been known to play this instrument. To be able to play this instrument well, one needs to master the breathing technique.

### 2.1.5.2 Religious Orchestral Instruments

Religious orchestral instruments are played during religious ceremonies and rituals. During rituals, reciting, chanting mantras and playing musical instruments are fundamental. Religious orchestral instruments are in pairs signifying skilful means or method and wisdom (*thab dang she rab*).

The most commonly used religious orchestral instruments are: Dung, Jaling, Nga, Drilbu, Trangtri, Choedram, Rolmo, Sil-nyen, Kangdung, Dungkar and Tingshag. A brief description of each of them is as given below:

**Dung:** The dung is a long, telescopic trumpet made of copper or brass, measuring three to four metres in length when extended. The instrument is collapsible to make it easier to carry around. These trumpets are always played in pairs, and can be played both seated and standing. Monks play dung indoors as an accompaniment to temple rituals, and also outdoors on the ceremonial ground during *tshechu* as well as during formal processions (sometimes playing from rooftops).



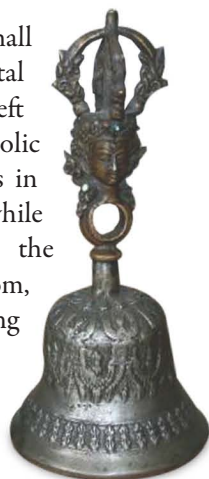
**Jaling:** Oboe-like in sound, the jaling is a highly decorated, gilded copper reed instrument, which is trumpet shaped. It has six to seven holes with an upper back-hole for the thumb. It is played with the left hand fingering the lower notes and the right hand the upper. Jaling are always played in pairs and can be played both seated and standing.



**Nga:** This is a double-membrane large drum supported on a wooden carved base, which can be beaten on either side. A curved stick with a handle and padded skin tip is used to beat the drum. The nga can be played in pairs or singly, in accordance with the rhythm of the chanted verses.



**Drilbu and dorji:** Traditionally used as a set, these comprise a small bell made from a traditional metal alloy, which a monk holds in his left hand, and a dorji (vajra), a symbolic metal thunderbolt, which he holds in his right hand. Ringing the bell while brandishing the dorji symbolises the perfect union of method and wisdom, or skilful means and discriminating awareness.



**Trangtri:** The trangtri is a decorated hand drum made from wood or bones. Hour-glass shaped, it tapers to a narrow waist for holding purposes. When the holder twists it back and forth, two weighted strings attached to the waist of the trangtri swing from one side to the other, making a beating sound. Choedram is the bigger version of Trangtri. It has the same appearance and is played in the same way.



**Rolmo:** The rolmo is a large cymbal, shaped rather like a shallow hat, with a flat rim and central boss (or shallow dome), to which is fixed a cloth handle.



Gripping a cymbal in either hand by the cloth handles, the player holds the pair horizontally and clashes them together. Rolmo are used in the rites for wrathful deities.

**Si-nyen:** Medium-sized and small-sized cymbals, respectively. These are held vertically and used in the rites for peaceful deities.



**Kangdung:** The kangdung, or thigh bone trumpet is traditionally made by hollowing out a human thighbone and drilling a hole in each of the two sides of the knee protuberances. The drilled holes are hollowed out to a bell-like shape, creating a double-headed trumpet. The blowing end may be shaped slightly to form a conical mouthpiece. As a monastic instrument, the trumpet may be fashioned from metal in imitation of a human thighbone (femur).



Also known by the name *kangling*, the instrument is played according to the chanting of religious scripts. The sound made by the trumpet is said to be pleasing to the wrathful deities and terrifying to the evil spirits.

**Dungkar:** Dungkar literally means 'white conch'. The conch is one of the eight auspicious objects of Buddhism and symbolizes Buddha's mighty proclamation of the Dharma. It is a sacred symbol of peace and good energy. The dungkar, or conch-shell trumpet, is used both in religious ceremonies and to summon the public to certain ceremonies.



**Tingsha:** Small hand cymbals attached to each other with a cord. When struck together, they produce a clear, high pitched tone. They are traditionally used in specific rituals.

