

## **The Gong Song – an ode to gong history and glory**

There are few instruments that can rival the rich and dignified history of the gong. The gong has is deeply interwoven with our most important rituals – spiritual, ceremonial, musical, even war mongering. It has spread across the world, morphing and evolving to fit the needs and demands of different cultures, uses and times.

The origins of the gong, like their deep resonant tones, are mysterious and complex. The precise timeline of gongs is disputed. Archeologists have discovered gongs as old as four thousands years old, yet most sources don't officially credit gongs appearance until written evidence of them discovered around 600 AD. These were records kept during the reign of Emperor Husuan Wu in what is now Western China. Yet even prior to those records, a chau gong was found in the tomb of a Han Dynasty monarch (207 BC). This is a clear indication of the significance of the instrument, and its likely that gongs had been around long prior to their inclusion in the tomb. The gong was found in the county of Hsi Yu, sandwiched between modern day Myanmar and Tibet. It is safe to say that at a minimum the gong is 2200 years old and much older. The favorite but unverifiable origin story encountered in this research claims that gongs were created 6,000 years ago, during the Bronze age. An Emperor had his priests collect the arms of an army he had vanquished and converted them into symbols of peace and positive vibration in the form of gongs.

The depth, beauty and power of gongs made them an ideal instrument for important occasions in Chinese culture. They became intertwined with spiritual life and were used in ceremonies, both political and religious. They were often sounded to signify the arrival of Emperors or important and powerful figures. They were also sounded at the departure of these same figures from the Earthly realm as they deceased. The military often used it as a call to arms and to organize troops.

The gong's appeal spread inexorably across Asia – it was embraced in Java, Burma, Amman and Malaysia, countries who all went on to become large producers. The word "gong" actually comes from Java, and the north coast of Java held a reputation for creating the finest gongs. The city of Semarang was particularly renowned for its production quality, and much like today, the process of creating gongs was kept secret and passed down in apprenticeship and through family lines. The Javanese made their gongs distinct from the Chinese, using deep rims with a raised nob in the center, a contrast to the flat Chinese gongs. Different countries and cultures imparted their personal preferences and styles into both the use, sound and function of the gong. For example, Indonesia invented the Gamelan, an arrangement of gongs of various sizes and tunings, that are played in a percussive style. Gong makers cultivated relationships with higher powers to infuse into their gongs. Many cultures believed that touching a gong could

bring strength and good fortune, and not surprisingly gongs become a symbol of status and wealth in many households.

Gongs had practical uses as well – as alarms and as communications devices, their echoes could travel at the speed of sound, far faster than any communication in ancient times. Rhythms could give important clarity to messages and gongs would be situated in places that could take advantage of natural terrain in order to help the message travel far.

Gongs eventually spread to Europe, after a long incubation period in Rome, where they were used for war, communication and ceremonies. Gongs first appeared in recorded use in western music in Gossec's Funeral March for Mirabeau in 1791. Gongs began being used not just in orchestration but in theaters and plays as well, including Romeo and Juliet. The tam-tam was featured prominently in the funeral procession of Napoleon, when his remains were brought back to France. Gongs now portended the comings and goings of leaders the world over.

As European wealth continued to grow, so did demand for gongs. They were admired for their "exotic" sound and sought after for display in private residences, art collections and intuitions. Since they were often displayed, an emphasis was placed on their aesthetic appearance with ornate carvings and paintings becoming the fashion of the day. Sadly in the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion, many gongs were looted from temples and brought back to Europe. Gongs also found their way to the dinner table in Edwardian and Victorian society, in the form of "dinner gongs" used to announce the commencement of a meal.

The gong has proven to be an ingenious instrument, flexible and multifaceted. It occupies a rare niche in instrumental history, one where it has both maintained its historic integrity yet also evolved. It can be still be found in use in areas ranging from the mystical to the mundane. Some of the contemporary uses it is found in today include in sports, such as in boxing, where an electronically controlled gong is sounded to start and end each round. Gongs are employed in transportation across various industries. They can be found mounted on rail vehicles and utilized at rail crossings and also found in shipping, where vessels over 330 ft in length must carry a gong, whose size and volume is determined by international regulations. They continue to be used in orchestras and concert settings, ceremonial settings and ritual. They are both mass manufactured and made laboriously by hand. There are still many traditions shrouded in secrecy and apprenticeship, that carry on the tradition of making gongs and spread their knowledge only through their direct lineage.

What is it about the gong that has captivated so many cultures across so many ages? Is it the intensity and depth of its sound? The power of its vibration? Its physical beauty? I would say yes to all of these but I don't think it goes deep enough. In my opinion, a gong's appeal lies in its embrace, its embodiment, of all the elements. It is made of metal (Earth) forged by fire and its vibration travels through air. Its resting space is usually floating in mid air, in fact it can't be played if it has too much contact with the Earth element. Handmade gongs are literally beaten by metal hammers to be tuned, yet despite its sturdiness, they can take on the qualities of water. A gong clears, it expands, it flows, it adapts. It can activate and purify like fire, or ground

and calm like the Earth. Gongs are interwoven into the elements, and inseparable from them. A gong is truly a mirror of the cosmos, or perhaps a portal into it.