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Vietnamese Music in America

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On April 29, 1975, the last Americans fled Saigon, marking the end of decades of U.S. military and political involvement in South Vietnam, and beginning the influx of the first waves of Vietnamese refugees to the North American continent. At the beginning of the evacuation, the first planeload of U.S. officials, their Vietnamese wives, and their Vietnamese collaborators landed at California's Travis Air Force Base on April 20, 1975.¹ The tragic exodus from Vietnam by sea began on April 30 and continued for a decade. In response, the United States and other major Western countries generously agreed to resettle within their borders the majority of Vietnamese remaining in Southeast Asian refugee camps. The U.S., which accepted the largest numbers of refugees, distributed them throughout all fifty states, although California and Texas were the two areas of greatest concentration. Large populations were also settled in New Orleans, Seattle, Minneapolis-Saint Paul, and the Washington, D.C. area. In these new environments, the refugees began the process of adjusting to their new lives.

A Vietnamese population had, in fact, been established in the United States beginning in the late 1950s, although on a smaller scale; diplomatic relations with the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) led to a number of Vietnamese students and officials being trained in U.S. institutions.² Some Vietnamese had also relocated to the United States from various European countries.

Currently, Vietnamese immigrants are integrated into American society, and most of them have become U.S. citizens or are in the process of being naturalized. According to *the New York Times*, the Vietnamese American population is over one million (March 16, 1995). Among them is a significant number of

musicians, singers, actors, actresses, and ritualists who embody a musical culture quite distinct from those of earlier immigrant groups. These performers possess knowledge and skills in many forms of Vietnamese traditional and folk music, which are characterized by specific repertoires, instruments, singing styles, ideals of sound, and secrets of performance practice.

A great variety of Vietnamese musical genres is performed in the United States today; these include *dan ca* (folk songs), *cai luong* (southern Vietnamese “reformed” theater), *don ca tai tu* (or *tai tu*, a genre of southern chamber music), Buddhist chant, Chau Van ritual music, and *tan nhac* (popular music). Because most Vietnamese in the United States came from southern Vietnam, most of this music has a southern Vietnamese origin. Other religious music includes music of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects, as well as music for Roman Catholic ceremonies.

Two fundamental traits of Vietnamese musical culture, which is attempting to survive in America, are 1) the importance of the tonal nature of the Vietnamese language as it applies to vocal music, and 2) the modal nature of Vietnamese instrumental music. Together, these characteristics produce a music that is highly melismatic and ornamented. Regional dialects result in distinct singing styles and song repertoires from northern, central, and southern Vietnam. Vietnamese music’s unique sonic qualities, in combination with its cultural context, make it a complex tradition consisting of numerous genres, which are presented for both rural and urban society.

Concerts organized by local communities in the early years after the refugees’ arrival in the United States aimed at expressing both their homesickness and pride in their culture. These performances frequently featured both traditional and modernized forms of Vietnamese music, and attracted audiences of all ages; the traditional genres (*dan ca*, *cai luong*, *tai tu*, etc.) seemed to be the most favored.

Among the most popular of Vietnamese traditional musical genres in America is *dan ca*, which was originally a genre of peasants’ songs, but which moved into urban communal settings, colleges, and onto the stage in Vietnam several decades ago. *Dan ca* pieces are short occupational or entertainment songs which still thrive among the public because of their

vernacular language and sweet tunes, making them accessible to everybody. The best known sub-styles are *ho* (non-metrical songs) and *ly* (songs of comparison). *Dan ca* is now sung in many concerts of popular music and is comparable to the Japanese popular music form *enka*.

Traditional Music Genres

Today, groups of musicians and singers in California, Minnesota, Texas, and Virginia continue to perform *tai tu* (southern Vietnamese chamber music) in a family context. A weekend get-together often becomes an opportunity for an amateur performance of *tai tu* instrumental pieces and songs. The music performed expresses a deep sense of nostalgia, and the topics of the songs center around love of country, thinking about one's mother and family, or the feeling of homesickness.

Tai tu music is an art form that was born in southern Vietnam during the second decade of the twentieth century. *Tai tu*'s repertoire includes short songs, long songs with multiple sections, and *vong co* songs (which are the best known). The latter rocked the entire country of Vietnam in the 1950s with their newer style, from which emerged a rich and famous class of successful traditional singers, actors, and actresses of *cai luong* theater. In the United States, *vong co* songs are not only sung on the stage, or in people's homes, but are also found on numerous commercially released cassette and video recordings.

Cai luong theater has also played an important role in Vietnamese American artistic life. With a limited number of professional *cai luong* performers in the United States, however, it has not been easy to mount companies that travel from community to community, as they do in Vietnam. It is of interest that new *cai luong* plays have been written and produced in the United States by Vietnamese immigrants, and the training of actors and actresses continues. Because of the difficulty of importing instruments for use in *cai luong* ensembles, some Vietnamese traditional instruments have been built in the United States from available materials. Most popular among these is the *luc huyen cam* (or *ghi-ta*), a modified guitar with raised frets and a scalloped fretboard, which allows the player to produce



Photo 1 (above): *Cai luong* musical theater performance in California with Huong Lan (left) and Phuong Mai (Anaheim, California, 1989; photo by Phong Nguyen)

Photo 2 (right): Thu Van (left) and Thu Hong, singers of *tai tu* music and *cai luong* theater. Traditions transmitted from mother to daughter in the United States (Seattle, Washington, 1987; photo by Ana Photo)



the bending ornamentation integral to the performance of Vietnamese traditional music. Some musicians use violin (called *vi cam* or *vio-long* in Vietnamese), an instrument easily found in music stores. This instrument was introduced to *tai tu* ensembles in southern Vietnam in the 1920s.

In the late 1970s, organizers of *cai luong* performances finally succeeded in sponsoring *cai luong* companies (featuring both professional and amateur performers) in the United States. Theatrical pieces were gradually completed with more professional performers coming from Vietnam through the Orderly Departure Program.³ In the early 1980s, many performers of popular music and celebrated movie actors and actresses from Vietnam also joined these touring *cai luong* performances, where they encountered their largest audiences outside Vietnam. Some concerts have even involved performers from France or Germany. The staging was completed by the addition of an electric sound system, scenery and lighting effects similar to those commonly found in Western opera. To achieve greater financial benefits, these performances have also included popular music and ballroom dance. These developments have motivated greater audience attendance. However, due to their complex setup and cost, *cai luong* performances only take place in major cities with the largest Vietnamese communities.

Over time, the social significance of *cai luong* to Vietnamese Americans has changed. In the early years following 1975, *cai luong* was the ultimate expression of the anxiety, despair, suffering, loneliness, and homesickness of those who had departed from home. As pointed out by Viet Hung, a senior *cai luong* actor, in an interview with the author, "it is the deepest voice of the Vietnamese. *Cai luong* uses a rich metaphor of mountains and rivers to express the love of the country" (1988). Now that Vietnamese immigrants are quite settled, however, these tragic sentiments are no longer a prominent aspect of *cai luong* theater. As mentioned earlier, audiences enjoy both stage performances and video and CD recordings of *cai luong* that feature fancy popular music and even ballroom dances.

Another aspect of traditional Vietnamese music is that associated with religious ceremonies. Mahayana Buddhism is

the most widely practiced religion in Vietnam. Since 1975, there has been a remarkable growth in the number of Buddhist temples within Vietnamese American communities. Over one hundred Vietnamese temples and prayer halls have been built around the country, and serve as cultural centers as well as places of worship. In these temples, Buddhist chant is heard on a daily basis. In California, some large Buddhist ritual festivals have been held. These ceremonies, which may last for several days at newly built temples, are accompanied by a *nhac le* (ceremonial music) ensemble. The anniversary of Buddha's birth, called Le Phat Dan, is the most important time of the year for Vietnamese Buddhists to visit temples. Fund-raising concerts are often organized in conjunction with this holiday

Other religions of Vietnam, which are less well known but bear traditional and folk backgrounds, have also been transplanted to the United States. These religions, all related to Buddhism, include Cao Dai and Hoa Hao (religious sects founded in southern Vietnam in the early twentieth century), and Chau Van (a ritual practice that originated in northern Vietnam in the fifteenth century or earlier).

Popular Music Culture

Tet, the Vietnamese New Year (which usually falls in early February) is the most important occasion for Vietnamese cultural and musical activities. In the United States, Tet festivities generally include both traditional and modern music. Performances featuring music, dance, and fashion shows are often held at local school auditoriums, which are rented as a cost-effective way to ensure the participation of a maximum number of community members.

In larger communities, *tan nhac* (popular music) predominates the entire production market, and is virtually the only form of Vietnamese music found in Vietnamese bookstores, music stores, nightclubs, and cafés. This music, which originated in the late 1930s, was based on European romantic genres, first sung in French, but later adapted with Vietnamese lyrics. Since the middle of the 1980s, popular concerts called *da vu* ("night dance") have become very popular among both older

Vietnamese American ballroom dancers and young people. Rock bands are contracted with local promoters to perform late into the night on weekends and are also hired for wedding parties. Curiously, traditional music ensembles do not perform for Vietnamese weddings in the United States.

Similarly, political events often involve popular music; songs of protest aim at criticizing the current regime in Vietnam, praising the refugees who fled the communists, promoting new political figures in the community, or raising funds for refugees in concentration camps in Southeast Asia. Some political groups even have their own song books and traveling singers.

Finding a New Niche

The integration of Vietnamese music into the artistic fabric of the United States has been a sensitive matter. For most Americans, Vietnamese culture is still invisible: "Vietnam" is a war, not a country. Further, bringing musicians to perform at mainstream American festivals can be a challenge; traditional musicians who are unfamiliar with stage technology often find difficulty in adjusting themselves to the timing, programming, and presentation.

However, the situation is changing. The Vietnamese performing arts are slowly gaining recognition as a new and significant element of United States immigrant tradition, particularly within the American academic and performance milieus. While most Vietnamese traditional musicians in the United States are unknown to the wider American public, neither are they well known or well supported in their own communities (at least in comparison to performers of Vietnamese popular music).

Within academia, numerous books, articles, theses, conference papers, and at least one doctoral dissertation on the subject of Vietnamese music have been written or published (Trainor 1977). In 1989, the International Association for Research in Vietnamese Music was founded, offering an opportunity for discussions, publications, research, and scholarly exchange. In conjunction with academic teaching, university ensembles have also been created by the author of

this article to give students an opportunity to practice traditional Vietnamese music.



Photo 3: Bringing Vietnamese traditional music to colleges; Phong Nguyen playing the *dan nyuyet* lute at Kent State University, Ohio (Photo by Terry Miller)

Capitalizing on increasing interest in Vietnamese culture over the past decade, a few U.S.-based world music labels (World Music Institute, Music of the World, Lyrichord, Silver

Burdett Ginn's Music Connections, and others) have begun to show an interest in Vietnamese music, releasing audio recordings and publishing them for both academic and general uses.



Photo 4: Tradition found in the new home: A Vietnamese chamber music performance at the home of Margaret Baxstresser, with Tuyen Tonnu (*dan tranh* zither, left), Phong Nguyen (*dan nguyet* lute) and Sara Stone Miller (*sao* flute) (Akron, Ohio, 1994; photo by Terry Miller)

In a 1997 ceremony at the White House, the author was honored with a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship, together with nine other American artists and performers. This was the first time that a Vietnamese musician received the United States government's highest honor in the traditional arts (similar to Japan's honor of "Living Treasure"). Vietnamese music, thus, has officially been acknowledged as one of the constituents that, according to the National Endowment for the Arts statement, has "contributed to the shaping of our artistic traditions and to preserving the cultural diversity of the United States."

Notes

¹ *Refugees: A World Report* (1979:14).

² The first president of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, was himself educated in the United States.

³ The Orderly Departure Program was based on a humanitarian agreement between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments (through the United Nations), and allowed those who had worked for the U.S. government (and their immediate family members) to leave Vietnam to resettle in the U.S.

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