

# INTRODUCTION TO VIETNAMESE MUSIC

by Nguyen Vinh Bao

*Dedicated to the traditional musicians of Vietnam:  
“May their Art flourish and their creativity be reborn”*

The Vietnamese have produced several worthwhile books about music but these have remained buried in the relative obscurity of the Vietnamese language.

## THE PAST HISTORY OF VIETNAMESE MUSIC

The music of Vietnam and its history are too complex to be described briefly. True, to a large extent, Vietnamese music was handed down from one generation to another. I am spending my life studying music of every corner of the country, and am fortunate, however, in having some various written and oral sources on my research.

It is hoped that the present information will prove both informative and entertaining to those who have been attracted to Vietnamese music. The exact ethnological origin of the Vietnamese music is not clearly known. In addition to the Chinese, Korean, Mongolian and Southeast Asian's influences found in archeological remnants, there seems to be something that can only be explained as indigenously Vietnamese.

Along with Chinese literature, architecture, government, and religion, Vietnam had adopted Chinese music models and developed music of her own. However, in the process of adaptation, the system was likely reshaped by the Vietnamese people according to their own well established habit.

Western music is easily understood by Westerners because it is part of their own heritage. A large part of Vietnamese music is either incomprehensible to them or greatly oversimplified for them by convenient stereotypes provided by only partially-informed writers, who sometimes confuse it with that of China. Therefore, before Westerners could understand Vietnamese music, they must first have an idea of its place in the general history of Vietnam.

Because of her geographical locations, Vietnam belongs as much to East-Asia as to South-Asia. Moreover, Vietnam was under Chinese domination for a thousand years (from the 1st to the 10th century). Besides, at the crossroads of peoples and civilization, Vietnam was also in touch with the people of the ancient Indianized Kingdom of Champa (The Cham still exist in greatly reduced number as one of the ethnic minorities in Viet Nam today).

Vietnamese music, like Vietnamese culture, is primarily East Asian rather than Southeast Asian. Its closest affinities are to China, Korea, Japan, and Mongolia. This combination of influences has produced a sophisticated and multifaceted musical culture, and it is not surprising that Vietnamese music shares many characteristics with that of China. Among the common items are the Pentatonic (five-tone) scale, and more than a dozen instruments, some of which are central to the music of both cultures.

Vietnam has many kinds of music, and many varieties of each musical form: The North, The Center and The South have their own kinds of music including:

- Court music – (which has eight subdivisions)
- Ceremonial and Religious music – The prayers of thanks and supplications of remembrance. (Religions include Buddhism, Confucianism, and Caodaiism)
- Music for Entertainment - (roughly comparable to Western Chamber music)
- Folk music and the ethnic minorities - provide even more variety with their own ceremonies, dances and songs.
- Musical Theater, long popular in Vietnam, divides clearly into three sections:
- ***The Folk Opera of the North*** - resembles the opera comic and the Renovated Theater of the South (Hat Cai luong).
- ***The Classical Theater of the Central*** - akin to grand opera called the “Hat Boi”. Legend claims that the “Hat Boi” was initially brought to Viet Nam from China by a Chinese invasion soldier who was captured by the Vietnamese army. **(1)**
- ***The Renovated Theater of the South (Hat Cai Luong)*** - a kind of operetta. It was born in the twentieth century as a mixture of Chamber music, French theater, and traditional element. **(2)**

## A FEW GENERAL NOTES ON THE LANGUAGE AND MUSIC

Vietnamese as spoken follows the cultural division of the country into three parts, but it is everywhere an inflected language. It has four, five, or six different tones depending on the speaker’s dialect respectively The North, The Central, or The South.

Vietnamese switched from the use of a form of Chinese characters to the use of a Western-style alphabet over the last century with diacritics indicating the tones:

Ma - level ghost  
 Má - high rising mother  
 Mà - low falling but  
 Ma.- low constricted young plant of rice  
 Mã - dipping rising horse  
 Ma?-low dipping tomb

Even more than Chinese, the Vietnamese language depends on tones for understanding. Speaking Vietnamese with a poor accent is preferable to speaking with a good accent but no tones, a fact that has created problems for Westerners learning the language.

The strong tonality of the language has had a deep effect on Vietnamese music. A word with a high rising tone cannot be sung with a falling melody, and vice-versa. As a result, melodic forms were developed that could accommodate improvised changes of notes to fit the tones of the words used. In both Folk and Classical music, words and melody have an especially close and mutually interdependent relationship.

Now, let us first examine the Entertainment Music, a type of music popularly known as the “Nhac Tai Tu Nam Bo” which means “Music of the amateurs”. This term applied to a highly bourgeois evolved art form, a type of music that has many facets whose beauty lays in an extremely subtle and melodic style. Although comparable to Western Chamber music, this type

of music is of a strictly private nature to be heard by a small audience and practiced by professional or semi-professional people as hobby for their own enjoyment with a repertoire which includes mainly songs accompanied by one, two or three instruments. One can enjoy the beauty of the music and the mastery of the performers. The value of the ensemble is not in the instrumentation, but rather lies in its use.

The “Nhac Tai Tu” is a popular and virile music which that offers great pleasure to anyone who listens to it and who also learns what to listen for in it. By understanding some of the aesthetics and formal principles of such music, one can develop a true respect for those Vietnamese musicians who created it.

## THE INSTRUMENTS

- The Đàn Tranh - Zither

It is difficult to tell the original character of the Vietnamese Dan Tranh, which seems quite distinct from that of imported Chinese Zheng.

The standard length of the common Đàn Tranh is 95 centimeters. It has 16 brass or steel strings upheld by sixteen movable bridges (also called swallows or horses) and is tuned by means of sixteen wooden pegs. The musician adjusts the pitch of the notes by moving these bridges in both directions.

The said common 16-stringed Đàn Tranh had disappeared since the appearance of those with 17, 19 and 21 strings, which were Nguyen Vinh Bao’s innovation in 1950. Nguyen Vinh Bao has spent several years in trying to improve and perfect the Vietnamese Zither without deforming or denaturing it.

In Vietnam, the Zither is used sparingly in most traditional music, and is the ladies’ favorite lute. The crystal clear timbre of its metal strings, its delicate movements, and subtle execution give the instrument its feminine character.

Traditionally, the strings are plucked with the thumb and forefinger of the right hand. In recent years, many other techniques have been added.

- The Đàn Nguyệt or Đàn Kim - moon shaped-lute

The sound-body of this 2 nylon-stringed lute has the shape of a full moon. Its long handle bears 8 high keys in bamboo called “phím đàn”. The traditional musician can get as many as four notes from a single keyboard which requires a natural talent backed by at least ten years of practice

- The ãn BẦu or ãn Cầc huyển - the monochord

This one-stringed lute is of ancient origin. Similar ones can be found under the name Ichi-genkin in Japan, Gopiyatra in India and Sadiou in Cambodia. The manner of playing of the Vietnamese monochord differs completely from that of the Japanese, Indian, Cambodian musicians. The Vietnamese musician plays harmonic sound and alters its tautness by acting upon the buffalo horn rod with the left hand to obtain modulation far superior to that of a Hawaiian guitar.

- The Đàn Ty`Bà - a four nylon strings pearl-shaped lute

This lute bears the name Biwa in Japan and Pipa in China. The typical tuning of these four strings is usually:

Strings      4      3      2      1

DO	FA	SOL	DO
C	F	G	C

The frets themselves are more than an inch high. One may simply press the strings down on the top of each fret. This produces a definite pitch, but the number of pitches available is limited to the number of frets.

In the classic style, the strings are plucked with five fingers of the right hand; the percussion of the plectrum is not used. It is eminently suitable for the accompaniment of storytellers. A wide vibrato and a left hand pizzicato are also common.

- The Đàn Tam - *a fretless instrument with 3 nylon strings, similar to the Japanese Shamisen.*

The body is made of one piece of wood, carved inside to improve the tone greatly. The top is covered with boa or cat skin. The three nylon strings are attached to a rope tail piece at the lower end and to three large pegs above. The tone is its most unique aspect. The basic tuning is:

Strings:	3	2	1
	DO	FA	DO

which consists of a perfect fourth and a perfect fifth. The Dan Tam is ideal for narrating a story.

- The Đàn Cò or Đàn Nhi. - *horse-hair bow instrument*

It has a cylindrical sound box with one side closed by a piece of snake skin which forms the tympanums. The bow is made with bamboo and horse-hair and is engaged between two ropes. Its two strings are divided in their median by a kind of movable crochet called a “khuyê't đàn”. The musician can move the crochet either directions in order to modify the length of its vibrating strings instead of using its wooden pegs. Its tone is similar to that of the Western violin. One finds its sounds moving, infinitely sad, especially in funeral processions.

- The Đàn Gáo - *coconut viola*

Its sound box is made with a plain coconut. It differs a little from the “Đàn Cò” or “Đàn Nhi.” because its timbre is soft.

In the past, the “Đàn Nguyê.t” or “Đàn Kim” as well as the “Đàn Ty`Bà”, the “Đàn Tam”, the “Đàn Cò” and the “Đàn Gáo” were equipped with twisted silk strings; however, nylon strings are now being used.

Since 1936, with the integration of the Western violin, the “Đàn Cò” and the “Đàn Gáo” have lost a little bit of their popularity.

- The ô'ng Tiêu - *straight flute*

It is usually a simple bamboo pipe with five holes.

Western music centers on harmonic sequences whereas Vietnamese music is built on melodic construction and single note colorations. Its beauty lies not so much in the succession of notes as in each separate note itself. Each note is an entity in itself, calculated to evoke in the mind of the listener a special reaction. Thus, the Vietnamese musician adorns his sound with ornamentations which we might call “bent” notes. The tension of each string can be greatly increased by downward finger pressure. The musician bends almost every note. There are very great possibilities for modifying the coloring of one and the same tone. The timbre is thus of the utmost importance.

In order to understand and appreciate Vietnamese music, the ear must learn to distinguish subtle nuances.

## I. MODAL MUSIC

Each mode is characterized by:

1. a modal scale
2. intervals of this scale
3. specific ornamentations
4. determined mood
5. tempo

## II. REPERTOIRE

In the Music for Diversion of the South (Nhạc Tài Tử? Nam Bộ.) there are four modes:

1. BAC MODE - cheerfulness and happiness music.

There are 6 pieces:

1. Lưu thủy trường
2. Phú lục chan
3. Bình bán chan
4. Xuân tình chan
5. Tây Thi vn
6. Cô ban van

2. BAC NHAC LE MODE - ceremonial, religious music.

There are 7 pieces:

1. Xàng xê
2. Ngũ doi thương
3. Ngũ doi ha
4. Long ngâm
5. Long dang
6. Vạn giá
7. Tiểu khúc

3. NAM MODE - includes 3 pieces of three characters

1. Nam xuân - (serenity and tranquility)
2. Nam ai - (grievances)
3. Đạo ngũ cung - (solemnity)

4. OÁN MODE – expresses profound pain.

There are 4 pieces:

1. Tu đại oán
2. Phụng cau hoàng

3. Phung hoàng cầu
4. Giang nam cầu khúc

### III. THE NAMES OF NOTES

In Western music, one octave contains 7 main notes.

DO	RE	MI	FA	SOL	LA	SI
C	D	E	F	G	A	B

Which approximately correspond to Vietnamese words:

HỒ	XU.	XU	XANG	XÊ	CÔNG	CÔNG
L	U	U#	S	X	C	C#

But only five notes

HỒ	XU.	XANG	XÊ	CÔNG
L	U	S	X	C

Do	ré	fa	sol	la
C	D	F	G	A

are considered as vital.

Vietnamese music is the music of the Far-East countries and the pentatonic scale is most frequently used.

HO	XU.	XANG	XÊ	CÔNG
L	U	S	X	C

Do	ré	fa	sol	la
C	D	F	G	A

Notice that this scale has three fixed notes:

HO	XU.	XANG
L	U	S
Do	ré	fa
C	D	F

and two auxiliary notes collectively known as “changing tones”.

XU.	CÔNG
U	C
Ré	la
D	A

In Vietnamese music, there is, however a concept of “happy” and “sad” tunings or scales which is found in major-minor concept in the West. For the instruments, there are several tunings and scales. There is no fixed basic pitch to which the instruments are tuned. The pitch of the HỒ fundamental tone of the scale can take any pitch. If the HỒ takes the pitch of the DO (C), the Vietnamese pentatonic basic scale will be as follows:

HỒ	XU	XANG	XE	CÔNG
L	U	S	X	C

Do	re	fa	sol	la
C	D	F	G	A

1 tone 1 ½ tone 1 tone

In these five notes, the fixed notes are:

HO	XANG	XE
L	S	X

Do	fa	sol
C	F	G

XU(U) (ré) (D) and CONG (C) are auxiliary notes – literally “changing tones”

These two notes are to be regulated by the requirements of the Mode, specific composition and play.

The XU (U) (ré) (D) can be raised to the pitch of the Mi (E) and the CONG (C) to that of the Si (B).

It should be noted that the pitch of the XU (U#) (y) and CÔNG (C#) (oan) is slightly lower – about 1 coma – than that of the Mi (E) and the Si (B).

The pitch of the XU (U) (y) varies between the Re # (D sharp) and Mi (E) while CÔNG (C#) (oan) varies between the Sib (B flat) and the Si (B)...

#### IV. THE SCALES

There are several scales depending on the specific composition, genre, and tradition.

BAC MODE SCALE - Scale used for playing happy melodies.

HÒ	XU	XANG	XÊ	CONG
L	U	S	X	C

Do	re	fa	sol	la
C	D	F	G	A

This scale has the same aspect as the black keys Do ré fa sol la (C D F G A) on a piano keyboard but different in pitches.

Except for peculiar cases, instruments are tuned as desired. The idea of absolute pitch is not taken into considerations, a fact that gives a certain impression of false notes to Westerner's ears which are accustomed to the absolute pitch of the tempered scale notes.

- **SCALES USED FOR PLAYING SAD MELODIES EG.**

1. The Vong co (longing for the past), Ly con sao (Lament of the Blackbird) .....

HÒ	XU(y)	XANG	XÊ	CÔNG
L	U#	S	X	C
Do	mi	fa	sol	si
C	E	F	G	B

2. Nam xuân (serenity), Đạo ngu cung (solemnity)

HÒ	XU	XANG	XÊ	CÔNG (oan)
L	U	S	X	C#

Do	ré	fa	sol	si
C	D	F	G	B

### 3. Nam ai and Oan Mode (profound sadness)

HO	XU (y)	XANG	XE	CONG (oan)
L	U#	S	X	C#
Do	mi	fa	sol	si
C	E	F	G	B

As said, remember that the pitch of the Vietnamese Mi (E) and Si (B) corresponds approximately to that of the Western Mi (E) and Si (B).

As a matter of taste, if the Vietnamese HỒ (L) of the scale takes the pitch of Ré (D), the dan Tranh (Zither) must be tuned as follows:

### 4. BA('C MODE- happy melodies

HỒ	XU	XANG	XÊ	CÔNG
L	U	S	X	C
Ré	mi	sol	la	si
D	E	G	A	B

### 5. VONG CÔ, LÝ CON SÁO

HỒ	XU (y)	XANG	XÊ	CÔNG
L	U#	S	X	C
Ré	Fa#	sol	la	si
D	F#	G	A	B

### 6. NAM XUÂN, ĐẠO NGU CUNG

HỒ	XU	XANG	XÊ	CÔNG (oan)
L	U	S	X	C#
Ré	mi	sol	la	do
D	E	G	A	C

### 7. NAM AI and OÁN mode

HỒ	XU (y)	XANG	XÊ	CÔNG (oan)
L	U#	S	X	C#
Ré	Fa#	sol	la	do
D	F#	G	A	C

### 8. NORTHERN SA MAC SCALE

HỒ	XU(y) (-)	XANG	XÊ	CÔNG (oan) (-)
L	U# (-)	S	X	C# (-)

Ré	fa	sol	la	do
D	F	G	A	C

## V. THE ORNAMENTATIONS

Ornamentations determine the Mode. They are the predominant feature of Vietnamese music. In speaking of Vietnamese traditional music, one must differentiate between many other styles from the South, the Center and the North and has a correct mastery of the meaning of the note pitches and their ornamentations.

## VI. THE EXECUTION

Vietnamese music, quite sophisticated and dense in ideas presents a real opportunity for interpretation by a range of fine musicians. The rhythm and temp may vary, but the music always remains within the melody. In order to bring new vitality to the melody, the traditional musician remains free to introduce different types of variations on it according to his inspiration at the moment. The success of his performance depends on how effectively he builds up the desired mood. Thus, each performance of a known piece so carried out takes on a different aspect, and this counter-balances the limitation of the repertoire. This difference is similar to that found between Jazz music as it is written and as it is performed. Very often, Vietnamese listeners are not listening to a composition, but to the rendering of music by such or such musician.

## VII. THE IMPROVISED PRELUDE

Before interpreting a piece of music, the musician has the habit to play some improvisation phrases of his own invention, in free rhythm, following an original and an unpredicted design in the Mode of the piece.

There are no definite rules governing the prelude. The prelude allows the musician to check again the tension of the strings, finding the inspiration for him, and creates a good atmosphere for the listeners.

## VIII. THE MUSIC TEACHING

The teacher's home is usually his studio. Here, on certain days of the week, and for specified number of hours, he is available for lesson. The problems of lesson scheduling do not bother the traditional teacher. It is a matter of first come, first served. This has an advantage in that the students are never late for a lesson. Usually, the students wait in an adjoining room where they may talk or follow the course of the piece in progress.

The lesson itself consists from twenty to thirty minutes playing the particular composition under study that week. Neither notation systems have a definite majority. The repertoire is maintained entirely by memory and passed down through practice. Usually, the teacher also plays, or sings as he plays, or illustrates each note of the melody on the edge of his closed fan. When all notes have been learned in order, the rhythm is added. The entire melody is never played beforehand so that one does not have any idea of the overall the piece.

There are some students who do not read the notation and learn the entire piece by imitating the teacher. The exact notation system used and the resultant melody vary from teacher to

teacher as well in different pieces. The rote teaching method sometimes is constantly in danger of producing automatons.

The teacher has the right to expect loyalty from his student, and the student, instinctively feels veneration towards him, and calls him "Su Phu" The word "Su Phu" in Vietnamese has far greater implication than the term teacher does in English.

In 1956 a National School of Music was set up in Saigon. This school chiefly teaches Western music, but does include a traditional section where pupils are taught to play Vietnamese musical instruments; classes of Western music are far more popular than that in which traditional music is taught. Applications for admission to the piano courses are numerous. Applicants who fall short of the required marks are transferred to the study of the traditional section.

In recent years, however, the influence of Western music is very strong, and is usurping the importance role of Vietnamese traditional music.

In Vietnam as in all colonial countries, the power of the conqueror leads the colonized people to imitate the way of living, the outlook, the artistic, and literary style introduced by the conqueror. Vietnam is called the most Westernized country in the Orient because of legitimate contacts with the West, some traditions are dropped, and others will change their shapes. In recent years, however, the influence of Western music is very strong and has displaced Vietnamese music.

The West displays to the Vietnamese young people its flawless instruments, its accurate notation, its varied repertoire, its orchestration, and its disciplined orchestras. In contrast, in the traditional section young people find archaic instruments, a primitive system of notation, a restricted repertoire, no orchestration, and a complete lack of discipline within the orchestra. Thus, Vietnamese music often takes on the figure of a clumsy old woman for whom one can have a certain respect, but whose company is rather boring. This inferiority complex makes it impossible for the traditional teachers to instill a high opinion of their art into a younger generation which is attracted for the most part by the bravura, and the scientific aspect of Western music. It is therefore not surprising that part of young generation, through carelessness, is neglecting their own art, an art which should be the pride of their nation. Such a state of things is to be sorely regretted.

The fact may be explained by a number of reasons, mostly psychological, social, and political difficulties. The study of Western music offers young people a prospect of being able to continue their training abroad, considerable esteem and a top rung of the social ladder. In the traditional music, musicians have difficulty in earning their living, and must have a second job if they are to make both ends meet. They never attend an international meeting to make cultural exchanges between East and West, to establish reciprocal relations with the traditional forms of music in the East and the Far East. A small number of young Vietnamese remain faithful to the tradition, but been won by Western music richness in the domain of harmony and have tried to build it in a new orientation. This evolution takes away from traditional music its character, its originality, and leads it towards the path of hybridizing. For example there have been traditional instruments concerto with Western orchestra.

Vietnamese music is the most independent form. The thematic and the developmental techniques of the Western composition are no commonly found in Vietnamese music. One must distinguish between a superficial understanding of both Vietnamese and Western music and learn how to apply such principles to Vietnamese music in order to produce significant composition. In both Vietnamese and Western music, scales are expendable and compositional principles. To the extent that Vietnamese music attempts to imitate the Western music ideal, it will lose its own most vital elements. In such a situation, it is doomed to eventual failure.

## CONCLUSION

As a partisan of progress, and conscious of the necessity for the traditional music to evolve, I sincerely hope that the Vietnamese traditional music can adapt itself to the new condition of modern life without affecting its essence. Every innovation in a tradition must be brought about willingly, and by crafted masters of the traditional music. It is indispensable and in my opinion, that the qualified authorities must shoulder their cultural responsibility, takes steps to perpetuate the tradition. They must also review the position of the traditional musicians, foster musical research, encourage the study of traditional music, and reorganize the school of music. If Vietnamese music can maintain the interest of society, it can eventually take its rightful place in World culture. When this happens, it could provide a better living for Vietnamese musicians, and the young generation will no longer hesitate to devote themselves to the study of their own art. But if the music cannot survive, it is safe to say that Vietnam, and indeed the World will have lost one of the Greatest Musical Forms.

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## NOTES:

**(1) The *Hat Boi*** is a conventionalized and symbolic art form, not at all a realistic one. The Vietnamese *Hat Boi* borrowed from Chinese opera the symbolic use of scenery, the costumes, makeup, and the gestures. Its stories remain mostly Chinese or translations of Chinese historical tales which have a Confucian moral. Musically, in *Hat Boi* the percussion is the most important element. The largest drum is the “trô' ng chiên” (battle drum), which punctuates declamations and accompanies songs and dances, and also leads the orchestra. The second most important musician plays the “Kèn” (oboe or sona). The “Kèn” in Vietnamese ears “rips the heart from your intestines”, and it is therefore also used in funeral music. The “*dan Co* or *dan Nhi* and the *dan Gao*” (2 stringed-fiddle) is especially used to accompany declamations. Percussion instruments include Gongs and Cliquettes, and sometimes also the buffalo horn and Cymbals. Today, the *Hat Boi* is in a period of decline

**(2) The *Hat Cai luong*** - The growth of the *Hat Cai luong* made it necessary to have a great deal of additional music. The *Nhac Tai Tu* music was not enough; so many new pieces were written, particularly shorter selections to fit particular kinds of action. Singing is the most important feature, as 70 % to 80 % of a performance may be devoted to songs, accompanied by instruments such as the “*dan Kim*” or “*dan Nguyet*” (moon shaped-lute), the “*dan Tranh*” (Zither), the “*dan Co*” or “*dan Nhi*” and the “*dan Gao*” (2 stringed-fiddle), the “*dan Tam*” (3 nylon strings fretless lute), the “*dan Doc huyen*” or “*dan Bau*” (monochord). The *Hat Cai luong* has increased its popularity over the years compared with the *Hat Boi*.