



(LAS 7396)

### **Traditional Music of Vietnam**

Instrumental ~ Art Songs ~ Poetry

By Phong Nguyen

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Vietnamese music must be understood as a part of a Vietnamese culture, a product of a society in which artistic expressions naturally parallel the historic-demographical revolution. There is no easy, definable way to classify music heard in this recording as either “classical” or “contemporary.” It links the past with the present by a unique concept of *Diêu* (mode) that exists not only in “art” music but also in much “folk” music.

The *Diêu*, a terms analogous to the Chinese *Diao*, the Korean *Jo* and the Japanese *Cho*, may be interpreted in an improvised prelude or in a written piece by old or young, male or female musicians of Northern, Central or Southern Vietnam. The variety of ages, sexes, geographical regions and moments of execution all influence the remarkably rich elaboration which are based on a schematic notation.

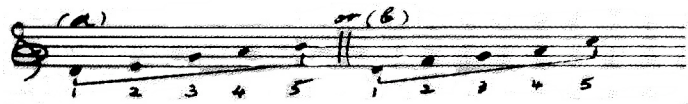
Improvisation and elaboration may be considered as characteristic of Vietnamese music, in contrast to Chinese, Korean and Japanese music. The Vietnamese traditional method of musical training orients students from playing in the manner called *Chan-Phuong* (“standards”) to that called *Hoa-La* (“Flowering”). This tells us to what extent

creative elements are required for improvisation and elaboration. The non-metrical improvised prelude presents a panoramic view of modal elements comprising scale(s), emphasized notes and melodic motifs. Further elaboration is made within a written place.

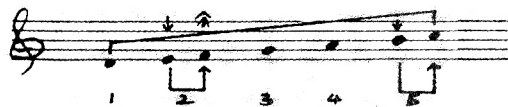
There exist 2 principle modal systems called *Diêu Bac* (Northern mode) and *Diêu Nam* (Southern mode). These terms do not refer to geographical regions of Vietnam, but designate 2 types of modal sentiments. The former may generally be used for the expression of liveliness, gaiety or solemnity, the latter for that of melancholy, sadness, nostalgia or lamentation. With several distinctive nuances within each modal system, the concept of *Diêu* becomes complex and dynamic.

In general Vietnamese music employs numerous scales ranging from di-, tri-, and tetra-, to pentatonic. But in art music as heard on this record, anhemitonic pentatonic scales are used exclusively. Each scale comprises a particular set of intervals. The 2 systems, *Bac*, and *Nam*, may be approximately notated, if D is taken as fundamental pitch, as follows:

Ex. 1: The *Bac* system



Ex. 2: The *Nam* system



The ascending and descending intervals of the fourth and fifth often pivot around the fundamental note. The first, third and fourth notes of the pentatonic scale are usually emphasized. Let us remark that the fundamental note of any Vietnamese scale may be realized by any pitch suitable for the voice of the instrument, but they must always respect the pre-determination intervals of the system.

The *Bac* scale system is also that commonly used in Chinese, Mongolian, Korean and Japanese music. The above-mentioned *Bac* scale (Ex, 1-a) corresponds to the Chinese scale called *Zhi* (in Vietnamese: *Chuy*).

In contrast to the *Bac* system, the *Nam* system is independent of any scales existing in other East Asian countries. The notes of this rather complex system fall into 3 categories: Stable, less stable, and unstable. The first and the fourth notes of the scale are considered stable; the third, less stable; the second and the fifth, unstable. This fact may suggest the appearance of either 2 “passing” notes or notes which make a change from one scale to another. The latter phenomenon is known today as “metabole”.

Ornamentation plays an important role in the traditional music of Vietnam. Conventional melismatic formulae are applied to vocal and instrumental music as appropriate to each genre such as Buddhist chant, theatre (*Hat Cheo, Hat Bôi, Hat Bai-Choi, Hai Cai-Luong*), chamber music (*Ca Tru, Ca Huế, Nhạc Tai-Tu*) and shamanist music (*Châu Van, Rôi Bong*). In fact, ornamentation is a constituent of *Diêu*. A real connoisseur may recognize the experienced musician after hearing a single note embellished in a skillful manner.

This recording presents various aspects of the Vietnamese modes in instrumental music (solo, duo or ensemble), art songs and poetry declamation.

The instruments play together in a complementary manner: the decorative features of melodic lines are superimposed on each other creating a heterophonic texture.

According to the Vietnamese notion of timbre, the tone qualities of different instruments must be balanced. This recording makes use of the *Dàn-Tranh* (16 stringed board zither), *Dan-Ty Ba* (pear shaped lute), *Dan-Bau* (Vietnamese monochord), *Dàn Nguyệt* (moon shaped, long necked lute) and *Dan-Nhi* (2 stringed fiddle).

In non-theatrical songs and poetry declamation, a natural voice is preferred over the falsetto or western-like techniques. Two songs (Tracks 8-9), typical of Southern Vietnamese chamber music called *Nhac Tai-Tu* (Amateur's Music) are closely related to the Vietnamese linguistic intonation, specific ornaments and quasi-narrative style. The poetry declamation (*Ngâm-Tho*) is presented in 3 particular styles called *Sa-Mac* (Track 6), *Tao Dan* (Track 12) and a regional style of Central Vietnam (Track 4). The speech is highly stylized.

Vietnamese melodies – vocal or instrumental – are an embodiment of the principle that produces an abundance of tonal subtleties with cadenzas, melismas and graces. A considerable amount of freedom for self-expression is made possible for those who have mastered the art of ornamentation.

-Phong Th. Nguyen

#### The Artists

Phong Nguyen Ph.D., Sobonne University (Paris), is not only a scholar but a highly skilled and communicative musician. Born in a family of musicians, he studies the traditional music with the late Trâm Van-Kiên (Muoi-Kien) of South Vietnam. With this great master, Phong Nyugen received a complete musical education beginning with songs and percussions at 5, stringed instruments (*Dàn-Tranh and Dàn Nguyệt*) at 10, theatrical and tirual music at 15. He has performed extensively in Vietnam, Jpana, and Europe. In 1980 he mounted his group in Paris which features Chi-Tam, a talented musician, singer and actor of the Cai-Luong theatre, Ngan Doai, poetry singer, and Le-Thi Huong-Lan, *Dàn-Tranh* player. His group has been figured in important concerts in Europe.

Tracks:

1. LUU-THUY, BINH-BAN and KIM-TIEN – 4'36"  
(Stream of Water, Equal Measures and Golden Sapeke)  
Ensemble/*Bac* mode, *Bac* nuance.
2. HANH-VAN- 3'19"  
(Wandering Cloud)  
Solo of *Dàn-Tranh/Nam* mode, *Hue* nuance.
3. PHU-LUC-CHAN – 3'02"  
(Composition on a Rhythmic Prose, New Version)  
Duo of *Dàn-Tranh* and *Tỳ-Bà/Bac* mode, *Bac* nuance.
4. THON VI-DA – 3'26"  
(Vi-Da Village) – poem by Han Mac-Tu  
Poetry declamation by Ngan Doai/*Nam* mode, Central Vietnamese style.
5. NAM AI – 2'42"  
(Southern Lamentation) – Duo of *Dàn-Tranh* and *Dàn Nguyệt/Nam* mode, *Ai* nuance.
6. DEM BUON – 3'43"  
(Nostalgic Evening) – Anonymous popular poem  
Poetry declamation by Ngan Doai/*Nam* mode, *Sa-Mac* nuance.
7. QUA CAU GIO BAY – 1'15"  
(The wind on the bridge) – Duo of 16 and 17-stringed *Dàn-Tranh-s*/Popular theme of northern Vietnam – Inspiration of the *Bac* mode, *Dung* nuance.
8. BA-NHA TU-KY – 5'35"  
(Story of Ba-Nha and Tu-Ky) composed by Cao Hoai San  
Song of Southern tradition sung by Chi Tam. Title of the melodic theme: *Luu Thuy-Truong* (Stream of Water, long version) *Bac* mode, *Bac* nuance.
9. TRI-AM TUONG-NGO – 4'40"  
(Friendly Meeting) composed by Cao Hoai San Song of Southern tradition sung by Chi Tam. Title of melodic theme; *Phu-Luc* (Composition on a Rhythmic Prose)/*Bac* mode, *Bac* nuance.
10. VAN-THIEN-TUONG Lop Dung – 4'15"  
(The “Impressive” Session of the piece *Van-Thiên-Tuong*) Trio of *Dàn-Tranh*, *Dàn Nhi* et *Tỳ-Bà/Nam* mode, *Oan* nuance.
11. NGU DOI HA – 2'54"  
(Five Antithetical Couples, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Section)  
Ensemble/*Bac* mode, *Nhac* nuance.

12. NGAM-NGUI – 3’23”

(Melancholy) poem by Huy-Can. Poetry declamation by Ngan Doai/*Nam* mode, *Tao-Dàn* nuance.

13. LY CHIM QUYEN – 1’20”

(Song of Nightingale) – Duo of 16 and 17-stringed *Dàn-Tranh-s*/Popular theme of Southern Vietnam – Inspiration of the *Nam* mode, *Ai-Oan* nuance.



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