For musicians, creativity plays a powerful role in understanding, confronting, and negotiating the crises of the present. Seeding the Tradition offers rich descriptions of Vietnamese sáng tạo (creativity) and explores the dynamic sáng tạo discourse in Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta. By examining how conflicting creativity models shape southern Vietnamese traditional music, Seeding the Tradition further suggests revised approaches to studying creativity in contemporary ethnomusicology.

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"Through the fascinating discussion and redefinition of the ethnographic concept of creativity, Alexander Cannon, an outsider armed with an insider’s understanding, portrays beautifully and compellingly the relevant vitality of đờn ca tài tử as a contemporary living soul in southern Vietnam."

P.Q. Phan / professor of music/composition, Indiana University, Jacobs School of Music

"This study effectively blends vivid ethnography, consideration of historical contexts, and detailed musical analysis. The attention paid to Vietnamese-language concepts deftly highlights how musicians think about their art."

Helen Rees / professor of ethnomusicology, UCLA
Seeding the Tradition
Alexander M. Cannon

SEEDING THE TRADITION
Musical Creativity
in Southern Vietnam

Wesleyan University Press  Middletown, Connecticut
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NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

Many ethnomusicological and anthropological ethnographies start with guides to the pronunciation of terms not found in English or other European languages. I do not find these useful, as one really needs to take language classes or speak with the authors to learn how to pronounce the words correctly. I also am not a linguist. Instead, I offer a brief introduction to the Vietnamese language and include three audio tracks of commonly used terms found in this monograph.

Vietnamese is a syllabic tonal language, and each term written includes an indication of one of six tones (and I include an example in parentheses following the tone): no tone (song lang, a wooden clapper played with the foot); rising tone (nhấn, a kind of gliding ornament); falling tone (thầy, male teacher); slight falling then rising tone (thủy, water); rising glottalized tone (Nguyễn, a common Vietnamese last name); and short falling glottalized tone (Việt, the Vietnamese people). Terms also feature combinations of tones: đờn ca tài tử, the music of talented amateurs under consideration in this study, features the falling tone on the first and third syllables; no tone on the second syllable; and the slight falling then rising tone on the final syllable. It should go without saying that different tones indicate different meanings: đoàn is “a music ensemble,” while đoán is “a guess”; cô means “female teacher” or “aunt,” while cổ means “ancient.”

The Vietnamese language also has dialect variety, often divided into the northern, central, and southern dialects. There also are distinctions within these regions. I speak a blend of the Saigon dialect of Ho Chi Minh City and the miền Tây Mekong Delta dialect. My friend, Diệp Tử Khôi, who graciously recorded the tracks listed here, speaks a blend of the Saigon dialect and the south-central dialect of his hometown.

To aid replication of some of the terms found in the text, please listen to the following tracks available on the accompanying website:
• On Track 24, please find the following nouns: (1) cò; (2) đàn bầu; (3) đàn cò; (4) đàn ghi ta phím lõm; (5) đàn kim; (6) đàn sén; (7) đàn tranh; (8) đàn tùy hứng; (9) điệu Bắc; (10) điệu Hạ; (11) điệu Nam; (12) điệu Oán; (13) đờn ca tài tử; (14) hạt giống; (15) hoa lá cảnh; (16) kỹ thuật; (17) long bán (lồng bán); (18) nhạc dân tộc; (19) phát triển; (20) rao; (21) sáng tạo; (22) song lang; (23) tâm hồn; (24) thầy; (25) Tiếng Hát Quê Hương; (26) tự nhiên; (27) xuất thần.

• On Track 25, please find the following proper names: (1) Nhạc sư Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo; (2) Nhà giáo ưu tú Phạm Thúy Hoan; (3) Nghệ nhân Trần Minh Đức; (4) Nghệ sĩ ưu tú Huỳnh Khải; (5) Giáo sư Tiến sĩ Trần Văn Khê; (6) Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh.

• On Track 26, please find the following tune names: (1) Dạ cổ hoài lang; (2) Lý con sáo; (3) Lưu thủy trường; (4) Nam Ai; (5) Nam Xuân; (6) Ngũ điểm – Bài tạ; (7) Nhạc Miên Nhạc Pháp; (8) Tây thi; (9) Trống cơm; (10) Vọng cổ.
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Seeding the Tradition
INTRODUCTION

On my first research trip to southern Vietnam in June 2007, I brought my copy of Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* for some “light reading” on the plane. I soon learned that this reading is not light at all, but between mindless action movies over the Pacific Ocean, I did manage to make my way through the chapter titled “Walking in the City.” The opening vignette about the 110th story of the World Trade Center brought back memories of my childhood visits to the buildings, and I found some important warnings for my first research trip to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. De Certeau writes of the dangerous allure of the perspective at the top—a position of power or a place “lifted out of the city’s grasp” and far removed from the everyday (1984, 92). Viewers become “voyeur[s]” and even a “god[s]” from his position, advancing a “fiction of knowledge . . . related to [a] lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” (92). As the 110th story no longer exists following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, viewers now are immortal gods, peering down on Manhattan from memory—erasing, supplanting, and rewriting whatever seen in the mind’s eye to advance their fictions and satiate their lust. As I put away the book before my arrival into Tân Sơn Nhất International Airport (previously Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base) in Ho Chi Minh City, I considered the many fictions that continued to shape Vietnam today.1

I spent the first few days on this trip at the Rex Hotel—a hotel with a rooftop bar known during the Vietnam War for the “Five O’Clock Follies” briefings given to journalists some three decades previous. My father told me of the Rex Hotel, and of the fictions American military officials invented on that rooftop in a desperate attempt to generate support for an unpopular and cruel war. Although my father had not served in the US military, he and my mother were of the generation that watched the war every day on their televisions, wondering
if their drafted schoolmates would return home. Many did not, leaving Vietnam permanently etched as a lost conflict in the minds of their generation.

It may seem an old and tired trope for an American writer to start a book about Vietnam with the Vietnam War. Ethnographic writing often starts with the author, however, and I cannot escape the collective memories—or, more accurately, the collective fictions—of Vietnam in the United States. The greatest fiction of American civil discourse—often uncritically exported around the world—propagates an understanding of Vietnam as a war and not a country. A long history of action films, documentaries, and literature advance an agenda to make Vietnam a story about America (Viet Thanh Nguyen 1997). “Vietnam” becomes an index of conflict of various sorts—Americans fighting a faceless enemy; Americans fighting themselves—and the Vietnamese people recede into the background, playing a bit role to American imperialism.

This fiction also overlooks the voices of Vietnamese refugees, including the so-called “boat people” who fled the Vietnamese coast at great personal risk to seek new lives outside of Vietnam after the Vietnam War. The fabric of American culture has permanently changed following their settlement in the United States, although this receives little recognition in multimillion-dollar action films. A flag with three red stripes on a yellow background of the former South Vietnam flies above Vietnamese supermarkets, bakeries, and karaoke parlors in San Jose and Orange County, and phở noodle soup is now go-to cold relief from Seattle to New Orleans, Grand Rapids to Newark. The fiction ignores that the United States has become more Vietnamese than Vietnam has become American.

Vietnam is made by its people—how they interact with one another; the sounds and music that they create together. To study this, I took a cue from de Certeau and made walking central to my ethnographic data collection on my research trips from 2007 to 2019. During my time in Ho Chi Minh City, I observed how Saigonese used, changed, and co-opted the spaces of their city. As new skyscrapers and apartment buildings went up, the residents went around. Despite all the changes to the landscape of the city, so much of it, especially the sounds, remained similarly vibrant. The same roosters awoke the city at half past three or four o’clock in the morning; the same vehicular traffic grew from a gentle hum to a roar by six o’clock; the same bread sellers cycled through alleyways with the same recorded greetings; rubbish collectors shouted out their services to residents. Traditional music in the city has also continued. Musicians adapt traditional music to new circumstances while also maintaining past practice to
structure future engagement. This constitutes the creativity of the musicians I describe in this book.

I begin with the Vietnam War fiction, then, because this is where most Americans (and others) start; but this is not the past through which one should understand Vietnam. “The War Against America to Save the Country” (chinh tranh chống Mỹ cứu nước)—as the “Vietnam War” is known in Vietnamese—devastated the landscape of Vietnam and deeply impacted its people, but it happened at a particular recent point in Vietnam’s long history. Only American voyeurs, tourists, and war enthusiasts seem to think the war is all that happened in Vietnam. The past brings about current conditions, certainly, but as my dear friend Phạm Ngọc Lanh told me with some frequency, “The past is behind us.” De Certeau’s description of New York could even be the same as that of Saigon: the city “has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future” (1984, 91). Saigonese focus on optimism and enthusiasm for change, as do the musicians of traditional music who described their dynamic craft to me.

The knowledge transcribed and evaluated in this ethnography emerges from interactions with musicians, friends, and strangers who guided me through the richness of Vietnamese cultural life. “Văn hóa Việt Nam phong phú lắm” (Vietnamese culture is extraordinarily rich), as more than one stranger has told me upon hearing of my interest in Vietnamese music. The music in this ethnography emerges from what Dylan Robinson has described as “palimpsestous listening,” or listening “oriented toward aural traces of history: echoes, whispers, and voices that become audible momentarily, ones that may productively haunt our listening as significantly as ghosts that linger” (2020, 62). These moments of audibility generate recognition, activate memory, and propel the fingers (or voice) in improvised music performance. Indeed, the improvisations I evaluate might be described as chains of these moments: musicians saturate the space with “traces” upon which others draw to congeal sound that communicates knowledge and maintains memory. The conclusions of this ethnography then, too, are cocurated by many voices over time and space. Although I focus on four musicians, many others guide and help me contextualize the creative sounds of southern Vietnam.
My research focuses on the manifestations and uses of creativity in southern Vietnam as understood through improvised practice associated with a genre of music known by two names: nhạc tài tử Nam bộ (sometimes nhạc tài tử) and đờn ca tài tử. Nhạc means “music,” and tài tử has multiple meanings. Translated literally, it means “a talented (tài) gentleman (tử).” The term is borrowed from the Chinese caizi (才子), meaning a scholarly gentleman who composed poetry and had status (Cannon 2016, 148). Some musicians therefore adopt the ethos of the “amateur” figure who has ample free time to play music. Two musicians even described nhạc tài tử to me as high art played in the houses of the wealthy in Saigon and Chợ Lớn (a “Chinatown” area next to Saigon) before 1975 (157). This ultimately leads to translations of the genre name as la musique dit “des amateurs” in French (Trần Văn Khê 1962, 98), and “the music of talented amateurs” in English (Nguyễn T. Phong 1998, 483).

The term tài tử also has a widely understood figurative and humorous meaning in southern Vietnam. Other musicians understand diversion not as a pastime of the scholarly gentleman but as the habitual practice of the indolent or apathetic. In the Mekong Delta, tài tử in spoken language suggests laziness. “That’s really tài tử” means to do something in a haphazard fashion or without much thought. One friend of mine suggested that not wanting to complete one’s homework in favor of sleeping or playing video games is called “tài tử” among close friends (Cannon 2016, 142). Adopting the term for music practice suggests a playful performance atmosphere of joking and ribbing among friends. They played “for their amusement only.” In their pursuit of camaraderie, they “diverted” their attention from other matters, leading to a translation of the genre name by Phạm Duy as “music for diversion,” or something done as a simple pastime (Pham and Whiteside 1975, 108–9).

Đờn ca tài tử as a term endows the music with a clear sense of southern Vietnamese locality. To đờn means “to play an instrument”; its spelling reflects the southern Vietnamese pronunciation of the term đàn, which is used in central and northern Vietnam to express the same meaning. To ca means “to sing,” and vocalists improvise new melodies with new lyrical content or draw on precomposed lyrics either with precomposed or quasi-precomposed melodies. The term as a whole therefore exhibits a southern Vietnamese interest in improvisation, locality, and play.
As I developed an understanding of đờn ca tài tử musicianship over twelve years, I came to recognize how musicians increasingly understood their improvisations as embodying creativity or sáng tạo. Creativity is not an uninhibited free-for-all, but a discursive practice in southern Vietnam influenced by Daoism (and to a certain degree Buddhism and Confucianism as part of the tam giáo, or three philosophical practices supporting Vietnamese culture). Musicians make subtle changes to past practice by drawing on their emotional states and reflections on everyday life to augment pitch content and add or eliminate ornamentation within certain melodic and rhythmic structures. Musicians refer to this creativity of improvisation in metaphorical terms. These metaphors join the historical with the contemporary and the philosophical with the lived to enable performance conditions negotiated between individual musicians. As Thomas Csordas argues in a different context, “Creativity is to be found not only in one instance or moment but also in the dialectical relations between ritual and social life, between a system of genres and a vocabulary of motives, and between motives and the metaphors generated from them” (1997, 263). Metaphor therefore becomes a structuring mechanism for this fraught navigation in changes in practice (252–55; see also Cook 2006). Đờn ca tài tử musicians draw from their learned knowledge, or the frame (chân phương) of practice, and produce melody as the aural equivalent of flowers, leaves, and branches (hoa lá cành) in nature. Musicians should not aim to create fast melodies that fill spaces with sound, but should instead use common understandings of modal structures, including vibrato (rung), bending (nhấn), and other methods of ornamentation, to bring out appropriate emotional sentiment. Musicians can go too far with ornamentation, however, to the point that a song loses its soul (tâm hồn) and identity. What are the rules, therefore, that govern creativity and improvisation? With an increasing engagement with global flows of idea, capital, and people in southern Vietnam, have these rules themselves changed to sustain practice?

A methodical account of the musical creativity practiced by musicians of traditional music in southern Vietnam requires two lines of intersecting argumentation. The first focuses on what đờn ca tài tử musicians do in their practice, and the second spotlights discourses of creativity that intersect in southern Vietnamese music. In this monograph, I identify and describe the different forms of creativity in circulation in southern Vietnam and then examine how they impact and are impacted by the practice of đờn ca tài tử. The musicians with whom I interact maintain a primarily Daoist conceptualization of creation long practiced
and theorized in Vietnam while adopting strategically from and also reacting to a Western neoliberal model of creativity focused primarily—although not exclusively—on the individual genius.

One of the primary interlocutors of this book, master musician (nghạc sư) Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, guided me through these understandings, often using subtle changes in terminology to teach me the creativity of his own practice. Beginning in 2007, I studied the đàn tranh (a sixteen- or seventeen-stringed zither) and, later, the đàn kìm (a moon-shaped lute) with him. He taught me the typical performance practices of what he termed “nḥạc tài tử” and explained in great detail the history of nhạc tài tử performance in southern Vietnam, methods of emotional expression on various instruments, and theories of modality. He occasionally referred to the genre as “đờn ca tài tử,” especially when speaking with government officials and journalists. (The term became more recognizable in public discourse around 2011 for reasons I describe in Chapter 7.) He appeared more comfortable with “nḥạc tài tử,” but also started to argue in 2013 that the terms đờn ca tài tử and nhạc tài tử have little meaning and perhaps “did not exist.” To reflect its historical significance, he argued, the music should be called cổ nhạc or nhạc cổ, meaning “ancient music.” A term that has been in circulation since at least the 1960s, cổ nhạc indexes a kind of prestige and age—things he believed should be attached to the genre.

Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo revised his approach in 2014, however, when he told me that đờn ca tài tử originally was “a music without a name.” This was a new argument I had not heard advocated by any other musician. When the genre first emerged in the late nineteenth century, he argued, musicians simply riffed in informal settings among friends on older opera and court tunes. They did not put a name to their improvisations, and he sought to return to foregrounding the “play” (vui chơi) central to the identification of the music. The appearance of the nhạc tài tử or đờn ca tài tử monikers, he continued, actually said very little about the genre itself. Musicians played, sung, and improvised to communicate something deeper and more consequential than the genre name designated. They drew on memories of past practice and combined them with the sounds of everyday life to capture the significance of a meeting among friends at a unique time and place. Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo explained how musicians improvise using the sounds of everyday objects, such as a clock or a spoon falling to the ground, to make the performance more intimate and connect the people in the performance setting. The “playing and singing of cutlery” therefore does not describe this music accurately, as more is happening in the space. A name has a
tendency to fix practice when that practice is actually quite fluid. By advocating that the music initially did not have a name—or that it has multiple names—he recaptures an understanding of processes occasionally forgotten.

More than a commentary on genre designation, however, he suggests that the process of creating music is itself without a name. Musicians do, and then later find language to describe this action. In a 2019 conversation in his new home in Cao Lãnh, Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo observed that “when something is no longer interesting to musicians, they change it.” He used the term đồ qua to indicate both a change (đổi) and a passing over or a passing by (qua) of the previous practice. As an example, he cited the tune “Đạ cổ hoài lang” (“Listening to the Sound of the Drum at Night, I Think of You”) to explain this. The musicians who originally crafted this tune borrowed the happy central Vietnamese song “Hành vần” (“Flying Cloud”) and made strategic changes to transform it into a sad tune. Instead of a tune that indexed the landscape and conjured images of clouds passing alongside the mountaintops of the central Vietnamese coastline, “Đạ cổ hoài lang” embodied a sadness typical of other melancholy tunes in the southern Vietnamese tradition.

His example challenges typical narratives about this tune to align it with the genesis narratives of many other traditional tunes. Standard histories of “Đạ cổ hoài lang” suggest that musician Cao Văn Lầu (alias Sáu Lầu) composed the tune sometime between 1918 and 1920 and captured the quintessential southern Vietnamese way of life in this work (Cannon 2012, 146). For this reason, scholars view Sáu Lầu as a kind of founding father of đờn ca tài tử. Rather than invoke the genius trope, Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo maintains that musicians simply did as they had done for centuries—add ornamentation to certain pitches, add pitches to a melody, and strategically change pitches to make the song more interesting. The tune ultimately became popular when musicians continued to perform and mold it. Crafting a tune evocative of southern Vietnam is typical in his story as creativity without a name.

Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo’s alternative history further asserts difference, specifically between European art music and southern Vietnamese traditional music. During this conversation, Nguyễn Thuyết Phong (with whom I had traveled on this trip to Cao Lãnh in 2019) pressed Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo to provide evidence of these changes. Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo responded that “Vietnamese music is different than Western music. Western music has compositions . . . [and] the creation of new works. It does not involve the revision of old works. Our ancestors had creations but they did not keep a record of the creation of the works. . . . Nobody knows

Introduction 7
who created them.” The process of creating the “work” (sáng tác), he indicated, is different than the model imported from Euro-American spheres of musical creation. The “soul” (tâm hồn) of Vietnamese music and identity emerge from this creative process, and any attempt to impose an individual genius genesis model ultimately undermines the Vietnamese soul. In addition, he encourages musicians and his students to embrace the inexactitude of the past and imagine reasons why the tune changed. One might surmise that musicians in the 1910s saw the rapid modernization and reshaping of southern Vietnam (known then as Cochinchina) under French colonial rule and mourned the loss of agency; or it could be that musicians who moved from central to southern Vietnam at the turn of the twentieth century were nostalgic for their home provinces and wanted a tune that embodied both the predecessor and their sadness; or it could be that someone misremembered the “Hành vân” melody and a fellow performer thought the new tune sounded worth replicating. “Nobody knows” encourages improvisation and creativity; this unknowing propels the genre into the future.

The emergence of a name requires explanation, and the meanings of particular terms, such as tài tử, introduce a regimentation in opposition to the flexibility and richness of practice. Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo equated this with a westernization of music practice, where musicians ceased speaking of Vietnamese music in local ways but began to impose foreign understandings. At the same time, musicians continued to teach and perform Vietnamese traditional music in Ho Chi Minh City and throughout the Mekong Delta. Changes occurred and disagreements emerged, but the tradition remained strong. What enables a sustained tradition given the incursions into practice? How do musicians protect the tradition and the meanings that emerge from it? How do musicians talk about or reference this practice? What kinds of new experiments has this practice generated in the twenty-first century?

My encounters and discussions with musicians in Ho Chi Minh City, Cần Thơ, and elsewhere in the Mekong Delta suggest that creativity in southern Vietnam does not necessarily “make new” or revolutionize. Creativity is not always the work of the omnipotent, charismatic individual. Creativity may be extraordinary and shift paradigms, but such conclusions often emerge long after the fact and inaccurately attribute a wide range of creations to one or a few individuals. This has the effect of crowding out important voices. Creativity serves as a weapon of the weak or voiceless. Creativity imbues power; it also overpowers and empowers. The discriminatory and objectifying nature of creativity requires new approaches to ethnomusicology’s engagement with the concept and a questioning of what
ethnomusicologists have borrowed from antecedent disciplines. Creativity and mastery in the West are both imbued with bias and inflict trauma; continuing to evoke the terms uncritically replicates this discourse. These characterizations may seem radical—or potentially perverse—to some, but I embrace the questioning of long-standing assumptions offered by this line of inquiry.

Previous literature does not have the theoretical nuance to describe these scenes of musical creativity. In ethnomusicology, one finds literature on westernization, modernity, and colonization in rewriting the rules of music performance and practice (Sutton 1991, 174; 2001/2002, 82; 2006, 1; Witzleben 1995, 138). Simplistic characterizations of modernity fracturing traditional practice typically yield a conclusion that change is introduced into an unchanging environment, even when the strict structure of modernization is actually what paralyzed a diverse and dynamic tradition. Vietnamese musicians (and people more generally) are instead empowered social agents capable of maintaining traditional practices alongside effective alliances with international collaborators. Much more can be offered by ethnomusicologists today to combat the ills and delights of creativity.

**APPROACHES TO VIETNAMESE PRACTICE**

The richness of southern Vietnamese traditional music does not have a significant place in Euro-American ethnomusicology. Recent ethnographies on music in Vietnam by Barley Norton (2009), Lauren Meeker (2013), and Lonán Ó Briain (2018) focus on folk and traditional music in northern Vietnam. Northern Vietnam has a very different cultural makeup compared to southern Vietnam, so the texts provide little insight on other parts of the country, save for descriptions of the implementation of state policy on sound. Details on southern Vietnamese traditional music have appeared in older scholarship by the ethnomusicologists and performers Trần Văn Khê (1962), Phạm Duy (1975), and especially Nguyễn T. Phong (1998). Works by Adelaida Reyes (1999) and Long Bui (2016) impart valuable understandings of southern Vietnamese among Vietnamese refugee communities and those in the Vietnamese diaspora. These descriptions provide snapshots alongside practices originating in other parts of Vietnam.

An effective ethnography of southern Vietnamese music must emerge from the vibrant lived experiences of southern Vietnamese musicians. My study of traditional music started under the stewardship of Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo in Ho Chi Minh City. Concurrently, I attended rehearsals and performances of the Tiếng Hát Quê Hương (Sounds of the Homeland) music club (câu lạc bộ) led by Phạm...
Thúy Hoan. I further met and interviewed individuals who consumed and performed traditional music as a hobby, and their insights permeate the pages of this book. I ultimately expanded my work to Cần Thơ, where I studied how to play the three-stringed đàn sến (a plum blossom flower lute) with Trần Minh Đức and visited music cafés to sing songs, play music, and observe musical interactions between old friends. During later trips from 2009 to 2019 of anywhere between two and six weeks, I attended performances directed and adjudicated by Huỳnh Khải, who currently serves as Director of the Traditional Music Department at the Ho Chi Minh City Conservatory of Music. I also made visits to Bạc Liêu, Cao Lãnh, and Long Xuyên in the Mekong Delta (see Map 1) to make contact with local musicians—some of whom I met first on Facebook before visiting them—and learn about regional practices of đờn ca tài tử.

I focus on conversations with these individuals and evaluate the tension generated when musicians position themselves vis-à-vis their communities. I lend significant credence to their words, but also interpret the performances I attended and evaluate the positioning of one musician’s language against another. One musician is rarely hostile to another, but they find a multitude of ways to critique the practice of others. Indeed, as Thomas Turino (1990) and Kofi Agawu (1992) indicate, one must occasionally listen beyond language to understand practice.

FOUR MUSICIANS

The conclusions drawn in this ethnography emerge primarily from my interactions with four musicians. Each holds a different title that designates a specific niche of practice. All perform đờn ca tài tử and other genres, including the music of cải lương—a theatrical genre that emerged in the second and third decades of the twentieth century and told Chinese, Vietnamese, and French stories to the accompaniment of augmented versions of đờn ca tài tử tunes—and nhạc dân tộc—a kind of music I translate as “national music” that often involves large ensembles of musicians playing precomposed versions of traditional tunes.

Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo

Nhạc sư Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, who passed away in January 2021, lived in Cao Lãnh in Đồng Tháp Province south of Ho Chi Minh City. Born in 1918 in Mỹ Trà on the northern outskirts of Cao Lãnh, he spent his early years moving between his
hometown, Cambodia (then part of French Indochina), and Saigon, ultimately spending most of his life living and working in Saigon. In addition to his renown as a performer and one of the original professors at the National School of Music (Trường Quốc gia Âm nhạc) in Saigon, Thầy (male teacher) Vĩnh Bảo worked for many years as a luthier and teacher, including for a short period in 1971 and 1972 at Southern Illinois University–Carbondale. He also has held various odd-jobs throughout this life, including as a taxi driver in Saigon.

Nguyễn Thuyết Phong (2006) describes Thầy Vĩnh Bảo as the “last guardian” of the đờn ca tài tử tradition. Thầy Vĩnh Bảo amassed an extensive written and audio archive of đờn ca tài tử, including notation dating from the 1930s, commercial recordings not easily found today, and private recordings of long-dead musicians. He watched đờn ca tài tử expand and contract for much of its life and recalled how musicians molded and shaped works for their own purposes. Even at an advanced age, he continued to communicate with his students and admirers in Vietnamese, French, and English; wrote oftentimes devastatingly sad poetry in French; granted interviews; told jokes on his Facebook page; and
performed music with those who visited him. Although he played all of the string instruments of the southern Vietnamese tradition, he most often played the đàn tranh, đàn kìm, and đàn gáo (coconut fiddle).9

Phạm Thúy Hoan

Nhà giáo ưu tú (Teacher of Merit) Phạm Thúy Hoan lives in Ho Chi Minh City. Born in 1942 in Nam Định Province in northern Vietnam, Cô (female teacher) Hoan moved with her family to southern Vietnam at about age ten (HTV 2007). When one of her friends started studying at the newly established National School of Music in Saigon, she visited the school, wandering from room to room. She stopped at the room where instructors taught the đàn tranh, and she felt compelled to listen. The experience was “accidental” but “profound” (HTV 2007). As she pursued her studies at the school, she studied with master musicians Nguyễn Hữu Ba and Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, as well as with flutist (of both the tiêu and sáo) Trần Việt Vấn. In 1962, she met and began studying Vietnamese music history and theory with Trần Văn Khê, who at that time had just completed his doctoral studies in France. Until his death in 2015, the two remained close collaborators.

Phạm Thúy Hoan is an accomplished performer, having received a number of awards for her abilities before 1975, and she also led the Hoa Sim National Folk Music Ensemble.10 She has dedicated much of her career to teaching. From 1962 to 1975, she served as a professor (giáo sư) at the National School of Music and Theatrical Arts (Trường Quốc gia Âm nhạc và Kịch nghệ). In 1968, she also taught at the National School of Music in Huế (Trường Quốc gia Âm nhạc Huế). After 1975, she served as a lecturer (giảng viên) at the renamed Ho Chi Minh City Conservatory of Music (Nhạc viện Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh) until her retirement in 1997. In 1994, the Ministry of Education and Training bestowed her the honorific title “Teacher of Merit” to recognize her work as a teacher at the Conservatory of Music and director of the ensemble and teaching program Tiếng Hát Quê Hương. Today, she continues to direct the ensemble and compose.

Trần Minh Đức

Nghệ nhân (revered musician) Trần Minh Đức, who goes by the name Hai Đức, lives outside of Cần Thơ City in the Mekong Delta. Born in 1938 in Đồng Phước Village,11 just south of the city limits in what is now Hậu Giang Province, Hai Đức grew up in a poor household during a period of Vietnamese history defined by
occupation and violence. During his youth, he had difficulty finding teachers of traditional music, although he persisted and eventually studied the *ghi ta phím lõm* (a guitar with a scooped fingerboard), đàn kim, đàn sên, and singing. He did not provide monetary payments for the lessons, but instead worked in some capacity for the teacher. He typically worked in the teacher’s home, although in one case, he worked as an oarsman, ferrying the teacher to various appointments. He sometimes studied with the teacher as he rowed, but only, he noted with a smile, if the teacher was sober; for another teacher, he looked after the children of his teacher’s female companion during their evening rendezvous. Despite the difficulties of the period, he had opportunities to study with five musicians, including danh sư (famous teacher) Sáu Hóa, who gave him voice lessons but was known for his abilities as a performer of the đàn tranh, and Hai Duyên, who taught him the two-stringed đàn sên but was best known for his abilities as a guitar player.

As a musician, Hai Đức defines himself as an amateur—a characterization of which he is very proud—meaning that his primary means of making a living did not involve musical performance. His various occupations took him throughout southern Vietnam and enabled him to not only acquire a knowledge of localized đờn ca tài tử and cải lương traditions but also amass “hundreds” of students. In 2009, he described his primary occupation as “buôn bán đồ lạ,” literally meaning “selling things by yelling.” This characterization immediately brings to mind sellers of knickknacks and cigarettes found in Cần Thơ and elsewhere in Vietnam; however, his work has been more successful and lucrative than this. The slightly tongue-in-cheek description simply indicates that he is a self-made entrepreneur and that he has moved around. Nowadays, he largely is retired, but frequently meets his friends for ad hoc performances, accompanies cải lương performances, and occasionally plays for groups of foreign students and academics visiting the local university.

**Huỳnh Khải**

*Nghệ sĩ ưu tú* (Artist of Merit) Huỳnh Văn Khải is based in Ho Chi Minh City, although he travels quite frequently across the Mekong Delta and occasionally abroad to teach. Born in 1957, Huỳnh Khải grew up in the Thủ Thừa District of Long An Province, south of present-day Ho Chi Minh City, and started studying the đàn kim with his father at age eight. He later studied with Võ Văn Khuede and Nguyễn Văn Đời, and ultimately picked up the guitar, đàn sên, đàn cò (a two-stringed fiddle), đàn tỳ bà (a pear-shaped lute), and *ghi ta Hạ uy* (a Hawaiian lap
steel guitar), which is one of his favorite instruments. In 1993, he started teaching at the Ho Chi Minh City Conservatory. He is well known as a pedagogue and a composer; indeed, his compositions are discussed on television programs and are featured in festival performances throughout southern Vietnam. He received a master’s degree in 2003 and continues research on methods of studying the đàn kìm for đờn ca tài tử, cải lương, and new composition performance (Sơn Nghĩa 2016). In 2015, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism bestowed on him the honorific title of “Artist of Merit.” Occasionally, he is given the double-barreled title of “Composer and Artist of Merit” (nhạc sĩ—nghệ sĩ ưu tú).

Huỳnh Khải is especially adept at generating interest in his craft through performance and social media. He organizes performances across southern Vietnam to continue promoting compatibility between urban structures and rural practices (Cannon 2016, 157–58). Some of his most public performances take place in front of the opera house in Ho Chi Minh City on Saturday mornings throughout the year. He serves as an adjudicator at a weekly radio program for competing đờn ca tài tử musicians from Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding provinces, and is an invited guest to many festival performances throughout the Mekong Delta.

Other Interlocutors

In addition to these four musicians, several friends and connoisseurs appear in these pages: Lê Đình Bình, a university lecturer and musician in Cần Thơ who is close friends with Trần Minh Đức; Lê Hồng Sơn, a flutist and luthier in Ho Chi Minh City; Nguyễn Thuyết Phong, an ethnomusicologist and musician who has published widely on Vietnamese traditional music; friends of Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, including Võ Trường Kỳ, a scholar, musician, and government official in Long An Province, and Thầy Phước Cường, a Buddhist monk and musician in Ho Chi Minh City; Phạm Ngọc Lanh, a dearly missed friend who introduced me to Phạm Thy Hoan and guided many of my early engagements with traditional music in Ho Chi Minh City; and Việt, a pseudonym for a teacher and musician friend of mine in Ho Chi Minh City. Other interlocutors include those with whom I interacted at institutions, and members of student groups. These institutions include media outlets, which propagate certain kinds of knowledge concerning authentic performance practice, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). These institutions shape public perception and certainly promote traditional music, even if some promulgate
inaccurate information. The students of music quoted are predominantly working professionals in other fields, including marketing, finance, education, and medicine, who live in the Mekong Delta, Ho Chi Minh City, and in the diaspora. They all interact with some institutional structures and with at least one teacher discussed in this text. All seek interactions with other students through face-to-face contact and through online means, including email and online forums. These meetings generate knowledge based upon that provided by their instructors, and often serve to make that knowledge more flexible and versatile in everchanging supralocal contexts.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The monograph begins with examinations of creativity in musicological and ethnomusicological literature, and becomes more ethnographic when I introduce descriptions of contemporary practice. If I were to instead mix historical details with contemporary conditions, I would present creativity and đờn ca tài tử as somehow static. Both creativity and traditional music are mutable and very messy (Taruskin 1992, 323). Furthermore, different musicians have different ideas concerning appropriate practice and how that practice relates to history. I therefore frontload background information and history to depict đờn ca tài tử in later chapters as vibrant and alive.

The first two chapters situate creativity in southern Vietnam and in ethnomusicology. Chapter 1 suggests that creativity surfaced in public discourse over the past decade or more in response to particular social and economic events in Vietnam. Imported understandings of a global creativity based on entrepreneurial prowess clashed with local understandings of creation. “Creativity” (sáng tạo) became a common descriptor of musical and artistic excellence, but it did not replicate those imported global models. Creativity became something uniquely Vietnamese as a form of effective mediation between the local and global. Chapter 2 identifies several questionable ways that ethnomusicology has engaged with creativity, and suggests ways in which ethnomusicologists might shift their approach to creativity discourse to reject mastery, engage historical understandings of creativity, and describe creativity as reparative or recuperative. Chapter 3 provides the groundwork for applying these three approaches. I focus on the history of migration to and through southern Vietnam and describe important Daoist concepts that continue to orient creation and creativity in southern Vietnam today.
The next several chapters describe musical practice associated with đờn ca tài tử. Chapter 4 extends a discussion of the concepts explored in the previous chapter to depict how đờn ca tài tử musicians engage with everyday life through improvised music practice. I offer descriptions of the instruments, sounds, emotions, and works found in đờn ca tài tử. Chapter 5 proposes that đờn ca tài tử creativity emerges at the intersection of two primary metaphors: the frame (chân phương) or structures of musical knowledge, and the flower embellishment (hoa lá cành) or spontaneous improvised sound emergent from this frame. Some musicians take these practices further, arguing that the best improvisations generate ecstatic (xuất thần) musical practice. Chapter 6 explores the emergence of a competing “development” (phát triển) metaphor as a kind of cultural policy that increasingly steers approaches to performance. Chapter 7 examines the visceral reactions some musicians have to the so-called development of traditional music. The metaphor of the “ruin” plays a substantive part of this argument, where musicians label certain performances as corrupted and try to repair the damage done by development. Chapter 8 describes ways in which technology has increasingly played a role in the mediation of creativity experiments practiced by đờn ca tài tử musicians. I describe experiments in various festivals and several television programs that have showcased đờn ca tài tử over the past several years. Although not universally lauded, these performances offer fertile ground for evaluating the approaches to creativity described in the previous chapters. A conclusion then summarizes several findings.

*Seeding the Tradition* is by no means an exhaustive ethnography on southern Vietnamese traditional music. Although such a book has not yet been written in English, I would risk perpetuating neocolonial representations of the Global South that are still present in ethnomusicology. Invoking authenticity and purity of tradition, these texts fix descriptions of instruments, genres, and other performance practices. Music is much more fluid. Instead, I try to craft an ethnography of musical creativity in southern Vietnam and describe the transformation of a genre of southern Vietnamese traditional music as I have experienced it alongside musicians, consumers, and other observers of cultural practice in Vietnam. I focus on the emergence of forms of creativity discourse about traditional music, and on how ethnomusicologists interact with our discipline—the scholars we cite, the narratives we privilege, and the disciplinary baggage that we desperately need to shed. Ethnomusicology is a discipline in perpetual transition and in flux. I critique previous scholars and know full well that I will be critiqued in time. Transformation needs a starting place, however, and I offer mine to begin.