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Special Issue
Postwar Music in Vietnam and the Diaspora

INTRODUCTION

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FIFTY YEARS SINCE NATIONAL REUNIFICATION
And the End of the Vietnam War

Twenty-seven years after the end of the Vietnam War, Trần Quang Hải (1944–2021), an ethnomusicologist and active performer of traditional music in the postwar diaspora, published an article in an Australian-Vietnamese publication about modern Vietnamese popular music. Focusing on Western-style popular music rather than traditional Vietnamese music that he was known for, the author divided the history of modern Vietnamese music into the following eras.

1. The beginning (1929–1937).
2. The formative era (1939–1945).
3. The anticolonial era (1946–1954).
4. The era of national division (1954–1975).

5. The post-1975 era in Vietnam and the diaspora.[1]

Besides periodization, the article names major musical categories in each era, especially in the last two. The era of national division was probably the most diverse. In North Vietnam, where musical productions were entirely controlled by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), there was a heavy emphasis on performing songs that praised Hồ Chí Minh and the VCP, promoted socialist nation building, and encouraged fighting against the United States and liberating the south from the Americans and their Vietnamese "puppets." But there were songs that evoked patriotic pride by highlighting particular localities. And then, there was music that featured or paid homage to ethnic minorities as members of the Vietnamese nation.

Even more diverse was the music in the south. During its twenty-year existence, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) saw the composition and performance of many patriotic songs encouraging the construction of a noncommunist state. Trần Quang Hải considered patriotic music to be particularly strong during the period 1954–1963. Musicians in South Vietnam also produced "romantic" music, *nhạc tình cảm lãng mạn*, that was completely forbidden in North Vietnam. Romantic music was especially diverse, and Hải wrote about it more than any other category. The spread of warfare after 1965 further led to antiwar songs, especially by Trịnh Công Sơn, who simultaneously wrote some of the best-known romantic songs. At the same time, a number of musicians involved with

[1] Trần Quang Hải, "Lịch sử Tân Nhạc Việt Nam" [History of Modern Vietnamese Music], *Đặc San Petrus Ký Úc Châu 2001–2001* [Special Issue of Petrus Ký High School [Alumni] in Australia, 2001-2002] (Sydney, 2004), 95–108. In Vietnamese, they are *giai đoạn tượng hình*, *giai đoạn thành lập*, *giai đoạn kháng Pháp*, *giai đoạn đất nước chia đôi*, and *giai đoạn di tản*. Although he named the last era as one of "refugees," he also included a discussion of postwar music in Vietnam.

social activism and governmental nation building programs formed a new movement called *du ca*, "roving music," that focused on songs of national empowerment. Exposure to Western music among South Vietnamese youths led to the creation of "youth music," *nhạc trẻ*, that was inspired by popular music, including rock, from the United States and Western Europe.

Trần Quang Hải did not single out the era of national division for praise; in fact, he was critical of youth music and considered it of little value in modern Vietnamese music. On the whole, however, he held the music in the RVN in high regard, suggesting that it was an outcome of freedom and competitiveness. Even if we were to accept Hải's debatable point regarding youth music, the sheer quantity of new songs, music sheets, vinyl records, and cassette tapes produced in South Vietnam indicate the far-reaching depths of popular music and its effect on ordinary Vietnamese following independence from colonialism.[2]

In 1975, however, the abrupt and chaotic demise of the RVN put an end to the remarkable expansion of the southern musical market. In the following year, the victorious VCP officially reunified the country as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). True to its new name, the government quickly and fiercely embarked on a series of radical economic, political, and cultural policies in the hope of speeding up socialism as the way to eventual communism. Coupled with mounting military expenditures for the Third Indochina War against China and the

[2] See Jason Gibbs, "Songs of Sentiment in Time of War: Commercial Songs in the Republic of Vietnam," in *Republican Vietnam 1963-1975: War, Society, Diaspora*, ed. Trinh M. Luu and Tuong Vu (Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), 168-188. Also, Nguyễn Phú Yên, *Nhìn Lại Âm Nhạc Miền Nam* [Looking Back the Music of South Vietnam], 2 vols. (Self-published, 2022). It largely collects lyrics of popular songs in different categories, occasionally with brief commentary on a song. Some websites have collected materials such as album covers and music sheets, e.g., Nhạc Xưa Việt Nam at www.nhacxua.top.YouTube, of course, contains many videos of recordings from the RVN.

occupation of Cambodia, those policies led to the bankruptcy of the economy and put the majority of the citizenry in poverty. Early postwar policies also put hundreds of thousands of former enemies in prison without trial, and drove many southerners, even some wartime allies in the National Liberation Front, to escape to noncommunist countries by boat or on foot. Anti-bourgeois cultural policies further prohibited performance and circulation of musical products from the RVN, especially "romantic music" in Trần Quang Hải's classification, now dubbed *nhạc vàng* or "yellow music" to mean decadent bourgeois sentiments contrary to the spirit of socialism. In the meantime, the bulk of the music in the early SRV functioned as propaganda for the government's policies in addition to the promotion of an abiding belief in the Party's leadership and gratitude for Uncle Hồ.

At the same time, the Fall of Saigon led to the emergence of the postwar diaspora as creators of various types of music. Centered in Paris (until the early 1980s) and especially southern California, diasporic musicians in the 1970s and 1980s produced albums and videos of new music alongside new recordings of songs from the antebellum and RVN eras. Musical production in the diaspora saw a rapid rise in popularity while music in the postwar state remained an instrument of government propaganda. Similar to the contest over nation building between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, postwar music became an arena of contestation between reunified Vietnam and the diaspora. Thanks to Vietnamese-language broadcasts over the BBC and the Voice of America, people in Vietnam could clandestinely listen to some of the new songs recorded in the diaspora. Pirated cassette and video tapes of diasporic production made their way to the homeland via Thailand or another route. During the 1990s, an influx of Vietnamese immigrants to the United States provided the diasporic marketplace with new consumers,

introduced new singers (mostly born in the 1970s), and led to more recordings and larger stage productions. More generally, it began a new and massive revival of music from the RVN. Arguably, then, it was not Vietnam but the diaspora that created the most popular music between approximately the mid-1970s and the mid-2000s. By the 1990s, many more pirated copies of CDs and video discs were illegally sold and circulated in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and other urban centers. Of particular interest were video tapes of the series *Paris by Night*, leading to illegal sales of pirated copies in Vietnam *and* even diasporic centers such as San Jose and Westminster in California.

Trần Quang Hải's article lists the following categories from postwar music in the diaspora:

- Music about missing the homeland, especially Saigon.
- Music about fighting for homeland liberation.
- Music about the experience of incarceration.
- Revival of antebellum music and pre-1975 music.
- Music of nationalism (*Hưng ca*), youth foreign music, and bilingual music.[3]

There is value to this classification, and the first three categories are indeed subjects of analysis by two articles in this special issue. Somewhat surprisingly, however, Hải noted re-recordings of songs produced before 1975 but did not elaborate at all on their significance. Focusing on albums, he further missed out on video programs, especially the very popular series *Paris by Night*, that increasingly programmed romantic music from the RVN era. During the 1990s this music, including bolero songs, grew even more popular in CD recordings and

[3] Trần Quang Hải, "Lịch sử Tân Nhạc Việt Nam," 104–107. The author calls this categorization "five periods of historical developments of diasporic modern music" (*năm giai đoạn thể hiện lịch sử tiến triển của tân nhạc hải ngoại*).

variety video shows. This development subsequently contributed to a revival of RVN romantic music in Vietnam, including bolero music that is the subject of the last article in this issue.[4]

To put it another way, Trần Quang Hải's classification is a good start to think about the complexities of diasporic music, but there were many more complexities in this history that researchers have barely scratched the surface. Turning to the domestic scene, he thoughtfully noted a shift during the 1990s in new songs by composers born in the late 1940s and thereafter. Their compositions were about romantic love rather than revolutionary or patriotic zeal. All the same, Hải could not have foreseen the transnational dynamics between the diaspora and Vietnam after 2000. Even as the musical situation in Vietnam began to turn away from socialist music, diasporic companies produced new performances and re-recordings of romantic music and soldier music (*nhạc lính*) from the RVN. Video programs singled out a number of RVN composers for commemoration and celebration. This development reflected the new migration of Vietnamese to the United States during the 1990s. It was also a response to the fact that the majority of new immigrants had been RVN officials and military officers and their family members. The new migration also contributed to a new generation of singers, mostly born in the 1970s, who injected new enthusiasm and fresh interpretations of old songs.

Coincidentally, a new wave of singers also began to emerge in Vietnam during the late-1990s and early-2000s. The popularity of those singers was determined by popular taste and the marketplace rather than governmental sponsorship and promotion. Having initially performed

[4] It is worth noting that the section on RVN music in Hải'sarticle does not mention bolero even though it names a number of bolero songs, usually under the name *nhạc lính* (soldier music).

and recorded songs written by the aforementioned contemporary composers in Vietnam, they later sang and recorded many old songs from the era of the RVN.[5] Some of these albums made their way to the diaspora, eventually leading to tours of the United States and other countries by Vietnamese singers. Conversely, diasporic singers have returned to Vietnam for live performances and even judging duties at singing contests on television. These trans-Pacific movements indicate a new era of music that has essentially altered longstanding structures of postwar Vietnamese diasporic music.

In some respects, this special issue reflects an exploration of Trần Quang Hải's classification of postwar music but also complicates this history. In the first article, Jason Gibbs examines music that was clandestinely composed by prisoners held in "reeducation camps" in the reunified country. Although the experiences of reeducation camps had been studied, if to a limited degree, Gibbs' article is the first to study Vietnamese music created vis-à-vis the violent experiences of incarceration. Their experience saw disruptions as well as continuities to the past, musically and otherwise. Gibbs observes, for example, that the songs by reeducation camp inmates were typically written in the same style as popular songs in the antebellum era (*nhạc tiền chiến*) and Trịnh Công Sơn's songs in the divisional era: e.g., strophic form, slow tempos, and diatonic melodies. Most of all, Gibbs gathers a sizable set of information about musicians in reeducation camps that may very well form a foundation for future research into the larger subject of incarceration and musical creation in modern Vietnamese history.

[5] To give two examples, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng and Lệ Quyên were among the most popular singers in Vietnam during the 2000s and 2010s, if not *the* most popular. Đàm Vĩnh Hưng's first album was released in 2001, and his first major album of RVN music five years later. Lệ Quyên's first album was released in 2004, and her first album of RVN music six years later.

While shifting from Vietnam to the diaspora, my own article also analyzes some of the songs about reeducation camps. I interpret them alongside other songs by refugees in the context of loss and grief, especially the grief over the abrupt loss of the noncommunist state and the suffering of loved ones, including the incarcerated still in Vietnam. Taking a cue from the late scholar Svetlana Boym, who made a distinction between "restorative nostalgia" and "reflective nostalgia," I interpret the early music of Vietnamese refugees to have reflected the former kind of nostalgia. On the surface, restorative nostalgia may appear to be about the past. The refugees, however, did not completely accept the bitter past but dreamed that one day they might return to a Vietnam free of communism. That the dream was illusory merely deepened the experience of shock over loss and separation.

The first pair of articles focus on the first decade of the postwar era. In comparison, the second pair address their subject over a longer chronology. The subject of Vinh Phu Pham's article is the video series *Paris by Night* whose popularity has been widely noted in the scholarship on diasporic culture. Perhaps more than others, Pham contends that diasporic music should not be viewed only as a replication or duplication of RVN music because entertainment companies such as Thúy Nga Productions aimed at the diasporic audience rather the people in Vietnam. Building upon insights from scholars, Pham argues that diasporic productions, even *Paris by Night* whose headquarters was in Paris until 1995, could not be understood apart from growing American ideals of social entertainment among refugees and immigrants. Or, for that matter, could they be separated from the ethnic making of the Little Saigon community in Orange County, California.

While focusing on Vietnamese Americans, Pham's article notes the VCP's hostile reception of *Paris by Night* before the 2010s. In comparison,

Minh X. Nguyen's article shifts more evenly between Vietnam and the diaspora while discussing bolero music in both places. Nguyen first describes the growth of bolero music in the RVN during the era of national division. Banned in the unified country after the war, this music found new life in diasporic productions, especially during the 1990s and 2000s, only to have traveled back to Vietnam during the last two decades. Due to the blossoming of bolero during the 1960s and 1970s, there had been close association between bolero music and soldiers in the military of the RVN. Nguyen argues that bolero performers and promoters in Vietnam have maneuvered to disassociate and depoliticize this association, legitimize a once-illegal music, and help remake a major type of romantic music from the RVN era into a national category under post-socialist Vietnam.

The subtitle of this Introduction names the end of warfare *and* national reunification, but it must be recognized that reunification did not mean the end of contestation among Vietnamese. Rather, the end of warfare and national reunification opened up new venues of contestation, and music became a highly contested arena for the next three or four decades. Among other things, this contestation led to a long ban of RVN music in Vietnam and occasional protests in the diaspora against musical performers from Vietnam. This special issue explores some aspects of this contestation, analyzes the effect of RVN music in the postwar era, and highlights transnational links that have led to a new era of postwar music. As this music continues to evolve and change, the scholarship on postwar music also evolves and changes. It is to this scholarship that the special issue seeks to make a modest but not insubstantial contribution.

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