

# Claiming Space: Structural aspects of heterophony in the Vietnamese tradition of *Vọng Cổ* Performance

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## Article abstract

This paper seeks to better understand the role of heterophony in a form of traditional Vietnamese music often referred to as *Đờn Ca Tài Tử*, as well as how such performance practices are grounded in interactions between performers. The performance of this genre is analyzed as ornamental heterophony and attention is given to the role of idiomatic patterns as well as small-scale ornamentation. Building on stimulated recall interviews with three master performers, the authors analyze an audio recording of *Vọng Cổ* by these three performers, in order to explore the role of conscious and subconscious processes in their performance.

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# CLAIMING SPACE: STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF HETEROPHONY IN THE VIETNAMESE TRADITION OF *VỌNG CỔ* PERFORMANCE

*Nguyễn Thanh Thủy & Stefan Östersjö*

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks a better understanding of what guides or drives the interaction between performers in a form of traditional Vietnamese music often referred to as *Đờn Ca Tài Tử*;<sup>1</sup> it also aims to define the role of heterophony in this music. In this article, we build on research carried out within the Musical Transformations project,<sup>2</sup> an international research undertaking concerned with how musical change can be related to processes of transculturation. This project has studied the dynamic history and contemporary performance practices of *Vọng Cổ*, a song that has its origins in the hybridized culture of the south of colonial Vietnam in the 1920s and has maintained a central role in *Đờn Ca Tài Tử* into the present day. A manifestation of the dynamics of this musical practice is how the piece evolved from a 4-bar structure in 1925 to a 32-bar structure thirty years later, a development fueled by the role of improvisation and the increasing virtuosity of the performers. While *Vọng Cổ* emerged as a piece of vocal music that became a center piece of a form of hybrid theatre called *Cải Lương*, it has become equally popular as instrumental music, performed in restaurants, TV-shows, and concert halls. Hence, although largely a form of vocal music (typically with new lyrics created for each performance context) with intricate instrumental accompaniment, the present paper studies the performance of *Vọng Cổ* in instrumental settings, which have become increasingly prominent ever since the creation of the 16-bar version of the piece, first recorded in 1938 (Hoàng 2003; Östersjö 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> Nhạc Tài Tử is often translated as “music of amateurs,” but it should be noted that “Tài Tử” is Sino-Vietnamese for “talented gentleman” or “talented person.” This music was—and continues to be—often performed by learned but non-professional performers, although the performers engaged in the Musical Transformations project are all professional musicians. This modal music builds on the improvisational skills of the performer(s) to give shape to a performance according to the melodic framework of a certain piece. *Đờn Ca Tài Tử* denotes a wider field of both vocal and instrumental music within the same tradition.

<sup>2</sup> The Musical Transformations project was funded by a grant from the Marcus and Amalia Wallenberg foundation. Both recordings featured in this article can be found at: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1301475/2015608>

Musical Transformations has not only sought to trace the development of this song through history (Nguyễn and Östersjö 2022; Östersjö 2022), but also through musical experimentation via intercultural collaboration with master performers of the tradition, in order to explore its potential for further development in the present-day music culture of Vietnam. The project has also explored how artistic research practices and ethnomusicological methods may inform one another. With these aims, Musical Transformations invited leading masters of *Vọng Cổ* to a recording project, together with the Vietnamese/Swedish intercultural group *The Six Tones*, of which the two authors are founding members.<sup>3</sup> The recording project had two objectives: first, to document current and historical styles of traditional performance of the song; and second, to involve these musicians in artistic collaboration that seeks novel approaches to the performance of this music. The two authors were engaged in Musical Transformations as artistic researchers, taking part in data collection, qualitative analysis, artistic experimentation, and as performers in the recording sessions.

Following initial fieldwork in the Mekong Delta, three musicians who were also the core members of a group and often perform as a trio (typically also with one or more singers) were selected to take part in the Musical Transformations recording project. There is an interesting generational spread in their group: Phạm Công Ty, who plays two versions of the two-stringed fiddle, the *đàn gáo*, and *đàn cò*,<sup>4</sup> is the oldest. Phạm Văn Môn is a leading performer of the Vietnamese guitar,<sup>5</sup> and he recorded with Phạm Công Ty for the first time on an album released in 1998. The first sessions in which *The Six Tones* first worked with these three musicians took place in October 2018 in the recording studio of the youngest member of their group, Huỳnh Tuấn, who plays the *đàn kim*.<sup>6</sup> Thereafter, the group would meet on several occasions to continue developing their interactions, aiming for studio recording sessions in October 2019. In the final section of the paper, we will briefly suggest how heterophony has also come to inform this experimental musical practice.

*Vọng Cổ* emerged from *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*, another composition that was composed in 1920 by Cao Văn Lầu from Bạc Liêu in the Mekong Delta. In 1925, the composer Trịnh Thiên Tư created a version of *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* in which each *Câu* (phrase) was extended to four bars. This 4-bar version remained popular for a long time, but in 1937, a piece titled *Vọng Cổ* was recorded for

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<sup>3</sup> *The Six Tones* is a group created in 2006 by two performers of traditional Vietnamese music, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy and Ngô Trà My, and two Swedish musicians, Henrik Frisk and Stefan Östersjö—who have since engaged with contemporary Western and Vietnamese music as the basis for artistic projects, over time developing into a platform for interdisciplinary and intercultural projects across music theatre, dance, and installation art.

<sup>4</sup> Both are bowed string instruments and part of the larger family of two-stringed Asian fiddles.

<sup>5</sup> The Vietnamese guitar was developed in colonial Vietnam and is an instrument with deeply scalloped frets, played with tuning systems much lower than a normal guitar. Taken together, these features enable bending similar to that of Vietnamese zithers and lutes (see Östersjö 2022).

<sup>6</sup> The *đàn kim*, commonly referred to also as the *đàn nguyệt* (moon lute), is a two-stringed lute and a central instrument in *Đờn Ca Tài Tử* and *Cải Lương*.

the first time on the Asia label,<sup>7</sup> with the singer Năm Nghĩa. In this recording, the melodic framework of *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* had been expanded to 8 bars per *Câu* (this version will henceforth be referred to as *Vọng Cổ nhịp 8*). Through this extension of the structure the performers were given a greater window for improvisation, and the melody was transformed into a melodic framework for improvised performance. In 1938, the first recording of *Vọng Cổ nhịp 16* was released, again on the Asia label (Kiều 1997). It was not until the 1950s that an even more extended version was introduced: *Vọng Cổ nhịp 32*. Since the form had now been significantly stretched out, the twenty phrases of *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* were no longer used in their entirety and the number of phrases was reduced to no more than six.

The pitch structure in Vietnamese traditional music is not built around absolute pitch. Instead, the tonality in a performance is decided by the choice of a key. Traditional Vietnamese music is modal and, as observed by Trần Văn Khê (1992), each mode is defined not merely by its pitch structure but ultimately by the ornamentation, which also defines its basic expressive characteristics. The overarching characteristics of a certain mode, defined by the ornamentation, can be referred to as *Hơi*. It not only establishes each of the emotional characteristics, but also contains the rule systems for its ornamentation. The *Hơi Vọng Cổ* emerged in its present form in the 1930s. An important structural feature of *Vọng Cổ* performance is how ornamentation like *Rung*, a heavy vibrato that is only to be performed on *Xang*, gives these instances a central function in the expressive shaping of the music. This particular expression, which is achieved by mastering a singing performance style with rich ornamentation of the *Xang*, is referred to as *Mùi* (Östersjö 2022)—a term that is only used in the south of Vietnam in relation to the *Tài Tử Cải Lương* music. It refers to performative expression that is only associated with some modes, such as *Ai* and *Oán*, where the sentiment is melancholia, sadness, or grief. It is never used to characterize performances in more light-hearted modes like *Xuân* or *Bắc*.

Key to understanding Vietnamese traditional music is the concept of heterophony, which has been defined in many different ways since it was introduced by Carl Stumpf in 1901. We find Pärtlas' (2016) definition useful, which takes into account a series of aspects that are pertinent both for understanding heterophony in the modal music traditions of Vietnam, as well as in contemporary experimental approaches. She suggests that heterophony may be a relevant descriptor of music making that is “characterized by a multilinear texture and which come into being through the process of the simultaneous variation of the same melody when the performers do not control the quality of the vertical sonorities” (67). The role of variation has been further discussed by Sanders (2018), who identifies several types of variation techniques in heterophonic practices, where two major forms are variant heterophony and ornamental heterophony. The former is characterized by small deviations, deliberate or subconscious, from a basic melody

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7 The Asia label was very important in the music scene in Sài Gòn. It was the first label owned by a Vietnamese person, Ngô Văn Mạnh, a.k.a. Thấy Năm Mạnh (ca. 1908–1957). The label specialized in *Cải Lương*, and released records from 1936 or 1937 to the early 1950s (Gibbs et al 2013).

typically performed in unison. The latter type, Sanders divides in two categories: small scale (ornamentation added to a single note) and compound ornamentation, in which entire passages are created that may more or less disguise the original melodic line. In our analysis of *Vọng Cổ* performance, we will argue that both forms of ornamental heterophony are fundamental features.

**Figure 1.** *Hồi Vọng Cổ* in Vietnamese solfège and the corresponding pitches in Western notation in C, with the two steps in the scale on which ornamentation is to be performed marked (*Xang* and *Phan*). It should also be noted that the intonation of the steps of *Xừ* and *Phan* in the Vietnamese solfège above are different to any Western scale, assuming a flexible microtonal inflection.

| Vietnamese solfège | Hò | Xừ   | Xang           | Xê | Cống | Phan              | Lúu |
|--------------------|----|------|----------------|----|------|-------------------|-----|
| Western scale      | C  | Eb-E | F <sup>~</sup> | G  | A    | Bb-B <sup>~</sup> | C   |

As noted by Pärtlas, “the multilinear music that ethnomusicologists name ‘heterophony’ is not always unconscious. In this context the question emerges as to how we should define the musical thinking of the singers/instrumentalists if they are themselves aware of the heterophonic divergences, if the variation is intentional, if the performers divide themselves into functionally different parts, but when they nevertheless still do not aim to coordinate the vertical aspect of the multilinear texture” (2016, 53). Further, she argues that this observation can be boiled down to the question of whether performers think “monophonically” or “polyphonically” and hence, whether they deliberately create the multilinear texture in the performance—a question we find highly pertinent for the performance traditions of the *Vọng Cổ*. In the next section, we outline how these perspectives on heterophony have contributed to the methodological design of the study.

## METHOD AND DESIGN

To address the question of how small-scale and compound ornaments shape the heterophony in *Vọng Cổ* performance, we decided to transcribe a trio performance of *Vọng Cổ* to Western notation. The performance was selected from the final studio recording sessions in the Musical Transformations project, carried out in October 2019 in Sài Gòn. Through analysis of the audio recording and the transcription, we explored how recurring patterns and performative strategies might be related to the basic structure of the song. To achieve such an analysis, five segments (all going from *Xê* (G) to *Xang* (F) in the structure) were selected for a comparative analysis (figure 2). When looking at the entire sequence, we could focus on the compound ornamentation. But when comparing only the bars with *Xang*, we could focus on the impact of small-scale ornamentation on the heterophonic structure of the performance.

In addition, although it would be beyond the project to make an exhaustive analysis of historical sources and capture different phases in the gradual development of this performance tradition, we decided to also transcribe what is believed to be the first recording of *Vọng Cổ*, from 1924. With this transcription

in hand, we could relate the present-day performance to a historical source and discuss some aspects of the development of the performance practice.

Further, with the aim of obtaining an understanding of the relation between conscious and subconscious processes of the performers in the recording, qualitative interviews were carried out with all three musicians in three stages. First, the performers were asked to listen back to their performance; second, they were asked to respond in writing to a series of questions; third, a semi-structured interview was carried out via voice or video chat with each informant. These interviews were transcribed and the entire material was subject to thematic analysis.

**Figure 2.** The structural framework in *Vọng Cổ nhịp 3/2*. The melodic framework defines each 4-bar phrase. Traditionally, a *Rao* (an idiomatically improvised introduction) is played first, and then the performers go straight to bar 16 at the beginning of *Câu 1*. The marked 4-bar phrases form the basic material in the analysis.

### Câu 1

♩ (Rao/Idiomatic improvisation) | Hò | | | Hò | | | Xê | | | Xang | | | Cống | | | Cống |

(16) (20) (24) (28) (32)

### Câu 2

♩ | | | Xê | | | Xang | | | Xang | | | Hò | | | Hò | | | Xê | | | Xê | | | Xang |

(4) (8) (12) (16) (20) (24) (28) (32)

### Câu 3

♩ | | | Xê | | | Xang | | | Xang | | | Xê | | | Xang | | | Cống | | | Xê | | | Hò |

(4) (8) (12) (16) (20) (24) (28) (32)

## ENSEMBLE INTERACTION IN TRADITIONAL *VỌNG CỔ* PERFORMANCE

In this section, we present our analysis of the recording of *Vọng Cổ nhịp 3/2* by Phạm Công Tỵ, Phạm Văn Môn and Huỳnh Tuấn made in November 2019 (audio example 1), as well as of the interviews with the three performers, carried out in December 2022. But before we address this study, we must consider the history of *Vọng Cổ* performance, which developed gradually, in constant interaction with the expansion the piece, which effectively transformed into a framework for idiomatic improvisation. What we believe to be the first audio recording of a performance of *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* was released on the American label Victor with the transitional title *Vọng Cổ Hoài Lang*. It retains the melody of the original song but has new lyrics and is incorporated into a *Cải Lương* play.<sup>8</sup> It is performed by members of the Văn Hí Ban Troupe in a recording made in Sài Gòn in December 1924. What is of interest to us here is how the song is performed by a singer (*Hát* in the score) with an instrumental group including lute and bamboo flute. Due to the relatively poor audio quality, we

<sup>8</sup> *Cải Lương* is a form of theatre that sought to revive traditional *Hát Bội* theatre, and at the same time incorporated many influences from Western culture that were ubiquitous in colonial Vietnam in the 1920s.

have excluded the traditional two-string fiddle, since it is generally inaudible. Figure 3 presents a transcription of the first four bars.

Figure 3. *Vọng Cổ Hoài Lang*, bars 1–4, recorded in 1924.

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Tam (lute), Sáo (flute), and Hát (vocal). The score is in 4/4 time and consists of four bars, each labeled with a phrase: 'Câu 1', 'Câu 2', 'Câu 3', and 'Câu 4'. The vocal line (Hát) shows ornamental deviations, including slides and ornaments, particularly on the note 'Xang' (F). The lute (Tam) and flute (Sáo) parts provide accompaniment, with the lute part being relatively simple and the flute part showing some ornamentation.

Our immediate impression is that, overall, the performance is carried out in unison with the melody. The amount of ornamental deviation from the melody is limited to filling out the gaps in the long notes in the vocal part (as found in the first two bars), as well as the ornamented notes in the middle of the third bar. Bar 4 is a different matter since the melody arrives at *Xang* (F), the note at which ornamentation is an expressive feature of the musical structure. It should be pointed out that the *đàn tam*, the particular lute used in this performance does not allow much left-hand alteration of pitch, and accordingly no ornamentation is found in the lute part. The most expressive ornament is found in the vocal part, which characteristically slides to the *Xang* slowly across the first beat. If the first two bars may serve as an example of early compound ornamentation, the single beat ornaments, as here on the *Xang*, are a good example of small-scale ornamentation. As we will see in the analysis of the *Vọng Cổ* trio recording below, the extent to which compound ornamentation has become a central feature of the performance practice goes way beyond this early example.

When planning the first working sessions with Phạm Công Tỵ, Phạm Văn Môn, and Huỳnh Tuấn in October 2018, we asked them to also prepare historical versions of *Vọng Cổ*. We worked in Huỳnh Tuấn's studio, and on the second day we made recordings of their playing in these different versions, starting with *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*, and moving to *Vọng Cổ nhịp 8*, 16, and 32.

In their regular concert performances, they would only play the *nhịp 32*, and they described their preparations of the versions of *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* and *Vọng Cổ nhịp 8* as archival reconstructions of performance practice. In their performance of *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* we hear a similar degree of ornamentation, and a solid foundation in unison playing aligning in the melodic line, just as found in the 1924 recording. When reflecting on their experience of performing this version and the *Vọng Cổ nhịp 8*, they all described it as challenging and sometimes frustrating since the space for ornamentation is so much more limited. A recording of their performance of *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* is found in audio example 2, a longer piece that is described in further detail in the next section.



Figure 4. Five examples of bars leading up to *Hò* (C) in *Vọng Cổ nhịp 3/2* recorded in 2019.

**Câu 1** 16

**Câu 1** 20

**Câu 2** 16

**Câu 2** 20

**Câu 3** 32



Figure 5. Xê (G) to Xang (F) in *Vọng Cổ nhịp 3/2* recorded in 2019.

**Câu 1**

**Câu 2**

**Câu 2**

**Câu 3**

**Câu 3**

Today, a typical feature of a performance of *Vọng Cổ* is that the extent to which actual playing in unison is restricted to the structural downbeats of the melodic framework, and this in turn leads to a tendency for performers to align in similar patterns when approaching a structural unit in the song (Hoàng 2023). To study this perspective in further detail, we now turn to the

main material in our study: the recording of *Vọng Cổ nhịp 32* from October 2019. Comparison of similar bars in the overall structure of the piece has been a central method. In figure 4, we see examples of how each bar leading up to *Hò (C)* and that bar itself, were performed in the recording.

In *Câu 1* bars 15–16, although there is no example of unison pitch, there is rhythmic unison in the bar leading up to *Hò*, and the entire bar of the structural downbeat is played in unison. This is less the case in bars 19–20. In *Câu 2*, bar 15, we find a typical example of small-scale ornamentation on the final beat leading up to the *Hò*, and hence no actual unison. Also, already on the second beat of bar 16 (and even more on the third) the performers have already split up again. In bars 19–20, there are similarly only a few notes played in unison, only the fourth beat leading up to the *Hò*, and the downbeat of bar 20. The final example is the end of the piece, which is quite similar, with a small-scale ornamentation on the fourth beat of the semi-final bar and the final downbeat in bar 32. Apart from the unisons that characterize each structural downbeat, also the downbeat of other bars in the 4-bar phrase may be played in unison. However, when mapping all other occurrences of unison pitches on the first beat of other bars, there are few examples. Sometimes, on the first beat of other bars outside of the melodic framework, a unison may occur, but it clearly not as a rule. In total there are 35 bars out of 82 in which a unison pitch occurs on the first beat of the bar.

But how then is the interaction between players organized when they do not play in unison? One important aspect of the ornamentation in *Vọng Cổ* performance is the characteristic figures that are the result of compound ornaments. These may be characteristic of a single performer, which we then characterize as “signature patterns,”—more or less shared patterns—such as those that make players align when moving towards a structural downbeat as discussed briefly above. As pointed out by Tỵ in the interview, “Repeating is inevitable. When we play several *Câu* in *Vọng Cổ*, repeating is inevitable and everyone does that” (Phạm Công Tỵ, stimulated recall interview by Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, 1 December 2022). Tỵ continues, explaining that it is an important feature of a successful performance that repeated patterns do not occur too close to one another. Further, variation does not have to be extensive. As can be seen in the repeated patterns in figure 5, there are tiny variations in the rendering on almost every beat, although the general shapes are highly recognizable. In the repeated bars in the *đàn kìm* in the same segments (bars 27–28 of *Câu 1* and bars 7–8 of *Câu 2*) the repetition is literal, apart from two notes on the beat leading to the next downbeat. But while such patterns are indeed essential for the identity of a performance of *Vọng Cổ*, they are only one component in the interaction between performers.

In order to better understand how variation and identity is created, we decided to make a comparative analysis of the five instances of the sequence from *Xê* to *Xang* in the performance (figure 5). Although each of these sequences of four bars share many similar traits, they are also significantly different. Starting with the first two lines (which we already have been looking at), they obviously share the materials that are repeated on the guitar (*Câu 1*, bars 24–26; *Câu 2*, bars 4–6) and the *đàn kìm* (*Câu 1*, bar 27; *Câu 2*, bar 7). Also, *Câu 1* bar

24 and *Câu 2* bar 4 both start with long notes in *đàn kim* and *đàn cò*, and a solo line in the guitar, wherein the last two beats are identical, leading to the repeated segment.

In the third line and fifth lines of figure 5, we see the general principle as aiming to differentiate each part, perhaps the most characteristic feature of a performance of *Vọng Cổ*—a feature we think could be seen as a call for each performer to claim their own space in the musical structure. Sometimes there is rhythmic unison between two or even all three instruments on one beat, but then the next beat will have at least one instrument moving to a new pattern. We asked Tỵ whether any of the interaction between players is pre-planned ahead of the performance, but he explained that he “cannot plan in advance. I listen to your playing, for instance, I hear you play something really good, then my hand simultaneously just moves accordingly” (Phạm Công Tỵ, stimulated recall interview by Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, 1 December 2022). This statement seems to suggest a state of attentive listening directed towards the co-performers, coupled with an almost sub-conscious engagement with his instrument. Môn, reflecting on how he would respond to the playing of the other performers, first notes how he would “normally play contrasting so that the harmony sounds full and rich.” But then he corrects himself and continues:

But this is just analytical thinking, in actual fact, my playing could be sudden, unexpected. I have no time to think. If I were playing and thinking at the same time, I would not be aligned with the music, I could miss the downbeat, I could run behind in the melodic framework. The impulse was organic and spontaneous. It didn't come from my thinking ... it enabled a spontaneously flowing outburst, in the moment. (Phạm Văn Môn, stimulated recall interview by Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, 7 December 2022)

It is conceivable that the reliance on idiomatic patterns may facilitate such experiences, as when Tỵ describes how his hand is “just moving.” Môn takes that reflection further when he argues that “the listening here ... I use the word *listen* but it is more like *percept*, from my immediate direct perception. This is different to the *listen-respond* type which could also happen, but less often” (Phạm Văn Môn, stimulated recall interview by Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, 7 December 2022). We find that these accounts suggest a parallel experience of conscious and subconscious processes. Tỵ describes this attentive listening, aligned with immediate performative response, as the core of how the interaction between players work: “We must listen to each other when we play. Without listening we cannot play well. For example, If I played with other musicians who are not as good as Môn and Tuấn, my playing would be less good” (Phạm Công Tỵ, stimulated recall interview by Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, 1 December 2022). In such interaction, choosing not to play can also be an important initiative. An example of this can be seen in line 4 of figure 4, in which Môn stops playing in *Câu 2* bar 5, after having just played a long note on the structural downbeat of bar 4, effectively leaving the other two to play a duet for the next three bars. Môn's re-entry in bar 8 is even more dramatized by him moving to the lowest register of his instrument, claiming space by creating a

greater contrast between the guitar and the other two instruments. Furthermore, his entrance is on a structural downbeat on *Xang* (*Câu 3*, bar 8). These bars constitute the expressive core of the music since *Xang* is the step in the scale where ornamentation is performed, and therefore, in turn, constitutes the goal point for a performer to achieve an expression of *Mùi*. Here, *Môn* enters with a figure starting out in the bass register and moving up the register of the instrument aimed at the *Xang* (F) in the middle register, which is, as observed by Östersjö (2022) “for *Môn*, the sweet spot for achieving *Mùi*, in particular in solo performance” (184). A clear and highly expressive dramaturgy, which appears to be anything but subconscious, and is at the same time immediately responsive to the affordances of the instrument. We would argue that the way ornamentation is performed in *Xang* is very closely related to the affordances of each instrument, and thereby, the parts are clearly differentiated in these sections, since the instruments afford quite different possibilities for the expression of *Mùi*.

Returning again to *Ty*’s claim that listening to the other performers is what decides the interaction, and also considering how he describes it as necessary to deliberately distribute repeated patterns in different *Câu*, we would argue that the way he structures his playing is not subconscious, but rather deliberately polyphonic. This can also be further evidenced in his use of a particular signature pattern, a rhythmic motif that creates an interrupted 4:3 figure in relation to the basic beat, and which therefore makes slower melodic lines stand out more in the texture. These appear several times in the sequences found in figure 4, in *Câu 1*, bar 27; *Câu 3*, bars 17–18, and then in a version with a rhythmical variation, found in *Câu 1*, bar 26; *Câu 2*, bar 29; and *Câu 3*, bar 19. In these figures, the pitch is normally quite differently organized: it is the rhythmic pattern that characterizes it, which is also the recurring factor. However, outside of these examples, there is a fuller version of the pattern, which is repeated twice with consistent pitch material in the trio performance (figure 6).

**Figure 6.** *Ty*’s signature pattern, from bar 17 and 21 *Câu 1* in *Vọng Cổ nhịp 32* recorded in 2019.



In *Câu 1* bars 17 and 21, this figure is found in literally the same form, with a variation of the pitch material on the second beat. Here the basic figure is extended with a particular ornamental figuration in what is estimated to

sixteenth notes in the score, although his rendering has a lot of plasticity to the shaping.

Figure 7. *Xang* bars in *Vọng Cổ nhịp 32* recorded in 2019.

**Câu 1**

28

Kim

Gtr.

Cò

**Câu 2**

8 32

Kim

Gtr.

Cò

**Câu 3**

8 20

Kim

Gtr.

Cò

This observation brings us back to the role of small-scale ornament in the expression of *Mùi*. The most dramatically shaped *Xang* (F) in this piece is perhaps *Câu 3*, bar 8, and Môn's entry after a longer pause, discussed above. But how might the ornamentation on *Xang* create heterophony in the recording? If we again turn to the five examples of *Xang* in figure 7, an initial observation may be that there are three bars (*Câu 1*, bar 28; *Câu 2*, bar 32 and *Câu 3*, bar 20) that display typical small-scale ornaments, always including the heavy type of vibrato, and often a glissando between *Xang* and *Xê*, or vice versa.

As we also pointed out above in the *Vọng Cổ Hoài Lang* example, the step below the *Xang* (F) can be included here. Overall, the *Rung-vibrato* is most prominent in the *đàn cò* part, although all three performers are consistently expressive in these bars. The outcome of these small-scale ornaments is a contrapuntal distribution of the instruments across the bar, as can be heard in particular in *Câu 2*, bar 32 and *Câu 3*, bar 20. In *Câu 2*, bar 8, we find the only example of someone (in this case, the guitar) moving from *Xang* (F) to *Phan* (B), the other step in the scale on which ornamentation is performed. With these examples of small-scale ornamentation, and the compound ornaments as represented by the guitar part, we may conclude the analysis by referring again to the core expression of *Mùi* in *Vọng Cổ* performance: it is essentially related to how the performer obtains a singing quality and shapes the phrase to bring out the ornaments performed on *Xang*.

We have identified some characteristic features of *Vọng Cổ* performance: the central role of the melodic framework and the many idiomatic phrases that go along with it and guide the performance, as also discussed extensively in a previous study by Hoàng Đạm (2003); the importance of ornamentation as a basic defining feature of each mode; the role of attentive listening and interaction between performers, and indeed between performer and instrument. In the next section we will contrast these practices of ornamental heterophony in traditional Vietnamese music with contemporary experimental and intercultural music, with the aim of seeking a further understanding of the role of heterophony in musical practices in Vietnam.

## HETEROPHONY IN EXPERIMENTATION WITH THE *VỌNG CỔ*.

In the intercultural practice of *The Six Tones*, free improvisation has been a fundamental artistic method: first as a means for finding a space for the members of the group to weave their respective musical traditions together, and second, as a means of generating other collaborative projects with guest performers, composers, and other artists. Clearly, the differences between the ornamental heterophony of *Vọng Cổ* performance and the idioms of free improvisation are more apparent than the possible similarities. Nonetheless, in this section, we are interested in exploring to what extent the interactive modalities that were described by Ty—the attentive listening and immediate (and seemingly subconsciously shaped) response through performance—may in fact be closely related to free improvisation, such as it took shape in our joint performances.



On the last day of our working sessions in Tuấn's recording studio in October 2018, we started negotiating ideas for how to design a joint concert performance at the Hanoi New Music Festival in December the same year. At this point, we had been testing different experimental approaches to performance, often in smaller constellations, as well as making recordings of traditional performances of *Vọng Cổ* in solo and trio settings. A fundamental idea with this concert was to design it as a double trio event, with the trio of Ty, Môn, and Tuấn and *The Six Tones* not only playing on their own in substantial parts of the performance, but also with overlapping sections. One recurrent concern in the first workshops days was that of tonality and the pitch hierarchy in the Hoi *Vọng Cổ*. One artistic approach we decided to try was to design polytonal relations between the two trios, thereby composing with the dissonance that Ty, Môn, and Tuấn had otherwise found disturbing. Through this approach, we would also secure moments in the concert during which the audience could experience *Vọng Cổ* in its traditional form, and build moments of friction between our respective practices—a performative move through which we sought to challenge the structural framework of the piece.

Such friction was vividly experienced in the early sessions, in which we created the form for the concert piece. But in an interview a year later, Tuấn expressed how his experience of free improvisation had shifted, claiming that he felt “deep inside” that it makes his “playing very free. Since your playing is so free, I can also play anything. There is no constraining composition or timeframe, it is free. Therefore, I feel very free and comfortable” (Huỳnh Tuấn, Interview by Nguyễn Thanh Thủy and Stefan Östersjö, 16 October 2019).

Free improvisation not only offers great opportunities to explore instrumental affordances, but also demands immediate interaction with other performers in a manner that we find akin to performer–performer interaction in *Vọng Cổ* performance. We believe that, in the piece we developed for the Hanoi performance, the forms of heterophony found in *Vọng Cổ* were expanded through improvised interaction between the two trios. In the following, we will briefly describe the different stages of this interaction.

As mentioned above, the performance opened with a trio version of Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang. Towards the end of the piece, *The Six Tones* entered with a distinct (but distantly related) texture, and at the end of the trio, this texture is what remains. In the *đàn bầu* and *tỳ bà* parts, fast rhythmic variations on a high-pitched material, shifting between unison and micro-tonal oscillations, are a central heterophonic feature. In the *tỳ bà*, on which the high-pitched texture is played with a slide in the top register, slow figures are also sometimes played on the left-hand side of the pitches fingered with the slide. These figures align with the slow lines played in the *đàn tranh*, which distantly echo the melody of *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*. The live electronic part, performed by Henrik Frisk, gradually aligns these two layers. As agreed, this texture is immediately interrupted by the start of a trio version of *Vọng Cổ nhịp 8*. At 6:51 in audio example 2, *The Six Tones* enter a new texture during the final minute of the trio, this time slower arpeggiated material, which first sits inside the phrase of *Vọng Cổ*; but when the piece ends, it immediately develops into an expanding harmonic structure.



At 11:38, the *Rao* (a typical Introduction) in *Vọng Cổ nhịp 16* starts out with the *đàn kim* entering the arpeggio texture. Polyrhythm is the guiding principle here, and the *tỳ bà*<sup>9</sup> and *đàn kim* seek different interrelations between their respective materials. At 12:55, *The Six Tones* have all faded out, bringing forward the ongoing *Vọng Cổ* on its own. But a minute later, at 14:10, the *tỳ bà* again enters, claiming space and signaling a new form of interaction during which *The Six Tones* enter with more repetitive phrases. This texture gradually thickens and eventually the rhythmic drive is transformed into arpeggios and a *quodlibet* section, which in turn fades out in a slow melodic duo between *đàn tranh*<sup>10</sup> and *tỳ bà*. Joined by electronics and the *đàn bầu*, this coda moves into tremolandi and eventually dies out. From the silence, the *đàn gáo* starts a solo, a slow idiomatic improvisation leading eventually to the trio starting a *Vọng Cổ nhịp 32*—but now, all players join in, not only adding to the rhythmic and tonal complexity of this final piece, but also mirroring the final section of the *Vọng Cổ nhịp 16*.

On a more general level of reflection, we find that this experimental performance seeks out ways to further explore the already highly complex heterophonic distribution of polyphony. Whether such experimentation may be understood as still operating within the aesthetic framework of *Vọng Cổ* performance is not a given. Even when our co-performers were happy with the outcomes of the more experimental pieces, they still did not feel that they were performing in a context that would allow for the expression of *Mùi*—the central quality in a successful performance of *Vọng Cổ*.

## CONCLUSIONS

A study of the performance practices of *Vọng Cổ*, a piece which holds such a long and dynamic history, deserves a thoroughly historical perspective. However, such an undertaking would demand a complete monograph. It also remains a fact that historical research in Vietnam is challenging, since many sources have been lost due to the many decades of civil war. Despite its limitations, the present study shows how *Vọng Cổ* has provided a framework for complex ensemble interaction, building largely on ornamental heterophony. We also suggest that the long history of these practices is deeply intertwined with the gradual expansion of the framework itself. From the three master performers we worked with, it is also clear that they find the later versions of the *Vọng Cổ* very liberating to work with compared to the historical structures. At the same time, we have always felt that their historical “reconstructions” resulted in rather exciting music, and on the album recorded with *The Six Tones*, Phạm Công Ty, Phạm Văn Môn, and Huỳnh Tuấn, the interpretations of earlier performance practices provide a sense of vitality to this history.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, we

<sup>9</sup> A Vietnamese four-stringed lute.

<sup>10</sup> A Vietnamese zither, typically with 16–19 strings. The *đàn tranh* is played with three-finger arpeggio techniques in the right hand, and, as with all Vietnamese string instruments, with a strong emphasis on the potential for bending with the left hand.

<sup>11</sup> This album is forthcoming on *Footprint Records* in 2024: <https://footprintrecords.com/>.

would like to emphasize that the intercultural experimentation carried out in collaboration with these three master performers of *Vọng Cổ* has been a promising example of how traditional and contemporary modes of expression may intertwine, right at the heart of the transmission and preservation of musical traditions.

It is not a trivial task to research a performance practice that dates back to the early twentieth century, particularly not when the setting is southern Vietnam, given the impact of colonialism and civil war on the preservation of tradition through systematic documentation or commercial publications. Indeed, this has been a challenge throughout the Musical Transformations project but is also a factor when approaching a perspective that is at once historical and alive, such as the development of performance practice and how it shapes aspects of heterophony. Musical Transformations has sought to provide a rich documentation of present-day practices in order to allow future researchers to draw more overarching conclusions than have been possible thus far. This has not merely entailed a rich set of rehearsal recordings and outtakes, in addition to actual released versions, but it has also included interviews with each performer. Still, the central contribution we see in the collection of video-stimulated recall analysis, carried out jointly by all performers, is its application to ethnomusicological research that seeks intersubjective understanding rather than top-down analysis. In the final analysis, we believe that the history of *Vọng Cổ* could indeed be described as performers claiming space, expanding a musical framework for the purposes of chamber music interaction of great complexity, as well as a shaping of each phrase with the deepest sentiment, as expressed in the concept of *Mùi*.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to better understand the role of heterophony in a form of traditional Vietnamese music often referred to as *Đờn Ca Tài Tử*, as well as how such performance practices are grounded in interactions between performers. The performance of this genre is analyzed as ornamental heterophony and attention is given to the role of idiomatic patterns as well as small-scale ornamentation. Building on stimulated recall interviews with three master performers, the authors analyze an audio recording of *Vọng Cổ* by these three performers, in order to explore the role of conscious and subconscious processes in their performance.

*Keywords:* Ornamental heterophony; Vietnamese traditional music; ensemble interaction; listening; intercultural collaboration

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article cherche à mieux comprendre le rôle de l'hétérophonie dans une forme de musique traditionnelle vietnamienne souvent appelée *Đờn Ca Tài Tử*, ainsi que la façon dont ces pratiques d'exécution sont fondées sur les interactions entre les interprètes. L'interprétation de ce genre est analysée en tant qu'hétérophonie ornementale et une attention particulière est accordée au rôle des modèles idiomatiques ainsi qu'à l'ornementation à petite échelle. S'appuyant sur des entretiens de rappel stimulé avec trois maîtres interprètes, les auteurs analysent un enregistrement audio de *Vọng Cổ* par ces trois interprètes, afin d'explorer le rôle des processus conscients et subconscients dans leur interprétation.

*Mot-clés:* Hétérophonie ornementale ; musique traditionnelle vietnamienne ; interaction d'ensemble ; écoute ; collaboration interculturelle

## BIOGRAPHIES

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**Nguyễn Thanh Thủy** was born into a theatre family and was raised with traditional Vietnamese music from an early age in Hà Nội, Vietnam. She studied at the Hanoi Conservatory of Music where she received her diploma in 1998. She has received many distinctions including the First Prize and the Outstanding Traditional Music

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