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Awakening the Soul with the Left Hand: Narration and Healing in Vietnam's Diasporic Traditional Music

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Abstract. Vietnamese musicians engage with the concept of *tâm hồn*, or “soul,” to express an inner experience for external understanding and community building. Following the traumas of the twentieth century, inner experiences of Vietnamese in diaspora became difficult to articulate. To overcome this, musicians have focused on the body as the primary mediator of the soul. They use the left hand in particular to rebuild the soul and make sense of the fractured narratives that tell the stories of Vietnamese survival in diaspora. This article suggests that two musicians, neither of whom are Vietnamese refugees but who bore witness to trauma, play leading roles in this work.

Bản tóm lược. Người nghệ sĩ Việt Nam sử dụng khái niệm “tâm hồn” để chia sẻ suy tư của mình và giúp cho người nghe rung cảm với những gì mà họ muốn thể hiện. Sau cuộc chiến tranh Việt Nam, với những thách thức trong cuộc sống tại quê hương mới cộng với những nỗi đau mất mát về cả thể chất và tâm hồn trong những chuyến vượt biển, nghệ sĩ Việt Nam tại hải ngoại không còn dễ dàng chia sẻ suy nghĩ và tình cảm của họ qua âm nhạc như trước. Đối với một số ít nghệ sĩ từ dòng âm nhạc cổ truyền Việt Nam, những khó khăn này không làm cho họ dừng việc dùng âm nhạc để chia sẻ cảm nghĩ. Với những nghệ sĩ này, khái niệm “tâm hồn” được biểu tả qua bàn tay trái của họ, dùng bàn tay này để rung, nhấn, vuốt ve những nốt nhạc và âm thanh của cây đàn để tạo cây cầu kết nối với người nghe của mình. Trong bài viết này, tôi muốn chia sẻ với bạn đọc hai nghệ sĩ của âm nhạc cổ truyền Việt Nam, nhạc sư Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo và nghệ sĩ Võ Văn Ánh, dùng bàn tay trái của mình không những để chia sẻ tâm hồn của họ mà còn kể lại những kinh nghiệm và câu chuyện sâu thẳm của người Việt tại hải ngoại qua âm nhạc.

I hear my computer “ding” and see a new email from Vietnamese musician Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo. It is one o'clock in the morning in Ho Chi Minh City, but

as he is most nights, he is awake following Skype lessons with students in North America and Europe. He usually sends teaching materials at this hour, but on this occasion, I receive a pensive and meandering poem titled “Remous du coeur” (Stirrings of the heart). Ellipses separate the three disjointed and impressionistic stanzas. One mentions heartache; another alludes to hate directed toward him. He concludes with resolve, however, to “sing the song that [he] has weaved” and connect with students in Vietnam and in diaspora who look to overcome similar forms of despair. These songs become sirens of solace as he seeks to “awaken their souls” (email to the author, 29 December 2010).¹

Music offers a tangible and stable platform to build new communities following trauma (Shelemay 2011; Wong 2004). For Rachel Harris, sound articulates a shared “grief and loss” that helps form a “structure of feeling” mediated virtually among disparate communities in diaspora (2012:468). These sounds connect to past practice in the homeland but also suggest new methods of mediating identities as alienated citizens in new locations facing institutionalized racism and discrimination. Music narrates, amplifies, and strengthens agency in these contexts; it provides “perceptual depth to the complicated lives and aspirational personhood of people seeking a better life in the face of constant death, poverty, and tragedy” (Bui 2016:118). As something requiring constant performance to survive, music creates a nexus of engagement shared by diasporic actors to overcome the conditions they encounter.

Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo and other musicians identify the soul as a concept of particular import in the healing process following traumatic experience. Similar to usage elsewhere in the world, the soul in Vietnamese music repairs the connections between past, present, and future. The soul repairs and sustains “legitimacy” and “cultural pride” through music education and performance following profound loss (Sam 2007:134). Individuals seek comfort in “the reality of the soul, the reality of lived experience and faith” (Lukács 2010:179). Often, reconstituting “faith” involves rebuilding particular rituals or myths so they have continued and meaningful use. The resulting comfort constitutes the life-sustaining force of the soul.

For Vietnamese in Vietnam and in diaspora, *tâm hồn* (soul) is a specific strategy to renarrate and rebuild community following war and forced migration. The concept of *tâm hồn* has a long history in Vietnam as one that mediates an internal experience outward to others. This work auralizes the unspoken, taking audiences on journeys between impressionistic memories of beauty, tragedy, and healing in ways not easily explained in everyday conversation. Musicians create a voice for themselves and others in this community by crafting new spaces of performance and suggesting tools for managing the passage of time.

The body and the left hand in particular play a significant but undertheorized role in this process. Instrumentalists of traditional Vietnamese music

frequently focus on the left hand in pedagogical materials, virtual lessons, and performance, since it properly ornaments melodies and gives voice to the modal and emotive qualities of specific works. Watching the musician's hand connects past memories to present contexts (Arpin 1996, 2003); moving the hand therefore proves that the soul lives.

This article examines the work of Vietnamese musicians to renarrate Vietnamese experience using the soul and the left hand following the traumas of the twentieth century. I interrogate various descriptions of the soul in ethnomusicology and socialist literature and suggest why Vietnamese musicians deploy the concept. I then focus on the performance practices of Cao Lãnh-based Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo and San Francisco-based Võ Văn Ánh, two knowledgeable and adept musicians or “cultural broker[s]” (Zheng 2010:273) who empower members of the diaspora by turning the trauma of the refugee experience into agency (Wong 2004:7). Neither is a refugee, but both craft music to heal wounds of traumatic experiences of both Vietnamese refugees living in diaspora and Vietnamese who did not flee Vietnam after the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) but still bore witness to tragedy. For their students and audiences, they use the body to craft soul out of their similar lived experiences and formulate visions to repair the damage affecting Vietnamese people around the world.

Soul Studies

Ethnomusicologists describe many musics as supporting the life-giving and “transcendent” force of the soul (Rice 1994:114; Shannon 2006:113–14). This work sustains connections between artists and audiences over space and time. Ali Jihad Racy describes soul in performances of the Takht ensemble as both an “innate quality” deployed by the musicians and “the emotional power and talent to musically affect or engage the listener” (1998:99). Regula Qureshi explores soul as “an essential emotional-spiritual nourishment that is inherent in music” (2000:823). Many, including Sam-Ang Sam, repeat the aphorism that music is “food for the soul” (2007:134). For some, this sustenance continues after death. During Hmong funerary ceremonies, dancers and the *qeej* (reed flute) protect the vulnerable wandering soul to a stable location housing the community's ancestors (Catlin 1997:78; Falk 2004).

The soul proves a powerful metaphor structuring both the interpretation and the aesthetics of music. Timothy Rice demonstrates this in his hermeneutic analysis of Bulgarian music (1994:113–15). To “fill the soul” involves performing appropriate and often very subtle ornamentation on the *gaida* (275–76) and creating a social and open atmosphere (290). For Racy, musicians express a sense of shared locality in performance to feel soul and interpret music properly (2003:126). In some instances, this extends to the solidification of national identity (Grant 2014:41; see also Berliner 1978).

Theories of the Vietnamese Soul

Scholars of Vietnam have long established *tâm hồn* as a source of shared identification. Historian Alexander Woodside (1971–72:489–90) notes that Vietnamese writers attempt to codify the essence of the national character or “soul” of the Vietnamese people often by invoking various premodern myths and character traits. In the immediate aftermath of the Second Indochina War (Vietnam War), *tâm hồn* became a point of reconciliation between the victorious North and conquered South. In 1976 Phạm Thiều published “Three Characters, One Soul” to describe how three literary figures from different regions of Vietnam all evoke a single soul of the nation in their works. The soul emerges out of an idealized past, connecting the “heroic genie Dóng,” a favorite figure of Marxist mythmaking based allegedly in the Red River Delta or the so-called cradle of Vietnamese civilization (Trần Quốc Vượng 1995:16), with the twentieth-century victories against France and the United States.

There it is! The soul of our forefathers is like this. This soul is the public capital of these three meritorious children of the north, center, and south. As the face of ideology, it raises the unified character of our people. This soul has a long life in space and in time. This soul is the result of a glorious and beautiful tradition with origins in the time of the heroic genie Dóng and has been promoted to a higher level with the victory at Điện Biên Phủ and with Hồ Chí Minh's historic campaign. (Phạm Thiều 1976:47)

The soul—even if mythologized—unifies the Vietnamese people regardless of origin.

Vietnamese musicians invoke *tâm hồn* as a concept built during their lives upon which they later draw like a spring to populate ideas concerning their identities.² The late composer and musician Phạm Duy invokes the term frequently in the first volume of his memoir: events of his formative years built his “soul” from something that was “innocent” and “clear” (1989a:23).³ In later volumes, he invokes the conditions that impacted his and others’ *tâm hồn*, suggesting that the national character emerged through shared musical experiences. He writes of the songs of the Vietnamese resistance against French colonization that he composed immediately after World War II and how these songs encouraged support for resistance: “The victory of the resistance was far away, but I still sang victorious songs . . . because the halo effect of the resistance had seized the souls of all the people” (Phạm Duy 1989b).⁴ In the process of building soul, music captures hearts and spurs others into action.

The term *tâm hồn* has two different parts: *tâm*, often translated as “heart-mind,” and *hồn*, often translated as “soul” or “spirit.” Musicians sometimes invoke both *hồn* and *tâm hồn* interchangeably; however, important differences reflect specific usages. *Hồn* designates an internal spirit—something “in the blood,” a friend of mine once argued, that enables musicians to perform traditional music

(personal communication with the author, Phạm Ngọc Lanh, 24 January 2009, Ho Chi Minh City). A musician has soul (*có hồn*) whether deemed a master musician or a beginner. I once observed Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo listen to another friend of mine play a short tune, remark that the playing had soul, and agree to take on my friend as a student (personal communication with the author, 22 July 2013, Ho Chi Minh City).

The term *tâm* designates a “heart-mind.” “Multifaceted and sometimes elusive,” historian David Marr writes, “*tâm* attempts to describe the inanimate, reflective, perceptive, sentient, sympathetic dimensions of human nature. . . . A person possessing a strong sense of *tâm* is capable of internalizing ideas and emotions, formulating a vision, taking action, and living (and dying) by the results” (2000:770). This concept forms an important part of *tự tâm*, a Confucian concept meaning a process of nurturing *tâm* through individual effort (Đỗ 2003:133). *Tâm* draws an individual to others; it ultimately helps generate connections through experience and emotion in the heart and encourages action to rebuild whatever was lost.

Both *hồn* and *tâm* are elusory, and the concept that brings them together also proves difficult to locate in precise spoken language. This imprecision, however, indexes a kind of efficacy when manifested in performance. In his evaluation of spirit possession during *lên đồng* ceremonies in northern Vietnam, Barley Norton translates *tâm hồn* as “heart-soul” to differentiate between to “‘have heart’ . . . for the spirits” and the experience a spirit medium has when her “heart-soul ‘floated up’ to the top of the sky” (2009:77). A medium’s sensory interaction with the music and visual cues of the ritual both transport and connect the heart, mind, and spirit to generate an effective conclusion to the spirit possession.⁵

In Vietnamese, therefore, *hồn* serves as a source of community and identity—not the identity itself but a spring from which one draws for expressive purposes—while *tâm hồn* mediates an internal experience of the musician for expression outward to listeners and connects artist and audience through the heart. This description aligns with the observations of political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who describes in a different context that the “life of the soul” serves as “an inner life that is expressed in outward appearance” ([1971] 1978:30). When societal conditions change, mediation through *tâm hồn* transforms musical practice and makes these conditions understood by audiences.

Engineering the Soul

Following the Fall of Saigon (Sài Gòn thất thủ) in April 1975, this older understanding of soul clashed with socialist theories of the soul imported into southern Vietnam. Returning to Phạm Thiều’s article cited above, the idealized past becomes ideological with a pronouncement that the reunified Vietnam needs to

embrace the Communist Party. "Cast aside the experiences of the ancients and look straight ahead," he writes. "We have decided to put our efforts into contributing to the work of building a Vietnam that is independent, peaceful, unified, and socialist" (Phạm Thiệu 1976:97). This reorientation interprets experience as one constructed from without rather than from within.

The socialist soul has a long history. In an 1891 essay titled "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Oscar Wilde ties the soul to socialist utopia. He argues that as collective inner peace and pure "Individualism" emerge through socialism, a population will not compel its artists to create specific forms and suit particular tastes (2018:10, 19–20); at this point, both the body and the soul become free (33–35). One finds the opposite in twentieth-century experiments. Josef Stalin evidently toasted writers as "the engineer of human souls" in October 1932 at the home of Maxim Gorky, who later established socialist realism as a movement (Gutkin 1999:51).⁶ This phrase also has usage in Vietnam. Hoàng Xuân Nhị, for instance, writes in a history of Communist Party influence on art that "we see clearly the expectation that revolutionary writers and artists must be the engineers of the soul of the masses" (1975:230, emphasis removed). It even appears in song titles, including "Xứng danh kỹ sư tâm hồn" (Worthy as an engineer of the soul) by Trương Công Định. Rather than Wilde's libertarian soul, the soul of the Soviet Union and Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a product of the state.

Artists in exile react against this kind of "top-down" socialist soul with a grassroots soul derived from lived experience. I offer a brief example from Josef Škvorecký's novel *The Engineer of Human Souls* (1977).⁷ Škvorecký rejects Stalin's infamous call for the writer to narrate the soul of the citizen by crafting this story with parallels to his own experiences as a Czech in exile. Rather than writing a clear socialist-realist narrative, Škvorecký crafted his story to move backward and forward in time, describing an episode in the present, then recalling a previous experience of one of several pasts before reemerging again in the present. The soul is not delivered with a clear beginning, middle, and end but in flashbacks and moments when the mind wanders. Only through a narrative delivered in increments do readers begin to understand the exile experience of the exiled titular character and the impact of the traumas experienced. Škvorecký moves out of the socialist context to discover his soul.

For those in exile, the soul collects experience following what Hungarian philosopher György Lukács calls "great moments" of history (2010:179). In the chaos of these moments, "events and details . . . become stray moments, unrelated to one another, finally meaningless in their idiosyncrasy" without something to anchor them (Butler 2010:4). Sociologist Ron Eyerman identifies a similar concern about the destruction of narrative and voice following what he terms "cultural trauma." Trauma for Eyerman is neither objectively "born" nor a "thing." Trauma is experienced repeatedly and requires continual action during "which

individuals and groups struggle to define a situation and to manage and control it" (2013:43). Groups work to repair the profound loss felt, or "a tear in the social fabric" that requires forms of "mediation and imaginative reconstruction" (3–4). This work, for Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, "is a means of bringing the past alive, and an imaginative way of dealing with loss" (2009:5).⁸

Put another way, reactions to cultural trauma involve the renarration of stories, rituals, ideals, and myths that sustain collective belonging (Eyerman 2013:49). Communities seek the "essence" and "true nature" of identity to escape the feeling of being outside of space and time as a result of trauma (Lukács 2010:179). Often, this involves the negotiation of what constitutes heritage, as Isabelle Maret and Thomas Cadoul (2008) argue occurred in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. These are experiences shared, "always" and "everywhere present," and ones that individuals continually revisit over the course of their lives (Lukács 2010:179–80).

The Sounds of Vietnamese Survival

Surviving is a form of living that demands respect. Those impacted by tragedy are alienated from familiar spaces, individuals, and even methods of organizing time. They have few narratives upon which they can rely. "Metaphorically," John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach note, "the sensation of voicelessness always means finding oneself in a space too expansive, distant and remote to feel or be touched by the vibration of sound" (2010:66, emphasis removed; see also Sheffield 2011). Losing oneself is not pleasant here. The additional traumas inflicted by the unfamiliar take specialized recoveries over long periods of time.

Joshua Pilzer has introduced the term "survivors' music" into the ethnomusicological lexicon to identify musics associated with experiences of trauma and narratives of surviving trauma (2015:482). He suggests carefully investigating memories of sound through documenting the narratives of survivors and promotes "looking beyond the aura of suspicion that surrounds beliefs in the transcendental or redemptive powers of music" (498). Ethnomusicologists must advocate for the authenticity of narratives of trauma, he argues, as they hold real meaning for practitioners as means of survival.

Ethnomusicologists have not ignored the therapeutic effects of music and the agency of survivors in forming therapeutic practice. Work by Marina Roseman (1991) and Judith Becker (2004) shape ethnomusicological discourse on dreaming and listening, respectively, as forms of healing and therapy. More importantly for Vietnamese music studies, the groundbreaking work of Adelaida Reyes (1999, 2014; Reyes Schramm 1986, 1990) on Vietnamese refugees identifies music as an imperative part of negotiating ongoing and shared trauma (Reyes Schramm 1989:26). As Harris (2012:454–55) indicates, traumas lived through

the refugee and migrant experience “trouble” linear narratives of development proposed by the nation-state and global neoliberal ideologies. Without Reyes’s initial work, ethnomusicologists would have a difficult time working through the complicated practices related to migration and tragedy.⁹

Traditional Music in Diaspora

Over the past four decades, the place of traditional music in Vietnamese diasporic communities has changed. Vietnamese refugees began making music on arrival in refugee centers, such as Palawan in the Philippines, where musicians produced folk songs, pre- and post-1975 popular songs, excerpts from *cải lương* (renovated opera) works in private spaces in the camp, and even full-length productions (Reyes Schramm 1989:29–31). They performed “Vọng cổ,” for example, a work of southern Vietnamese traditional music well known by Vietnamese around the world as one that evokes penetrating sadness and generates nostalgia for the past (Reyes 1999:37–39; see also Cannon 2012:145–48).¹⁰ After Vietnamese refugees settled in places like Orange County, California, these performances continued in small settings, festivals, and recorded media (Reyes 1999:137). “Traditional music” became a problematic term, however, as some in diaspora viewed it as co-opted by policymakers of the Communist Party and therefore representative of the post-1975 regime (137). Anthropologist Philip Taylor corroborates this usage of certain traditional musics: in post-1975 southern Vietnam, “Vọng cổ” briefly had a life as a happy work that espoused the socialist ideals of the revolution. Vietnamese audiences quickly rejected its usage in this way (2001:151–53).

Musicians in the 1990s rewrote this association but struggled to sustain private and public performances of traditional music. When Reyes conducted fieldwork research in Orange County during that time, she found one private performance of southern Vietnamese amateur instrumental and vocal music (*đờn ca tài tử*). She also found a dearth of the more popular tradition of *cải lương* due to financial, personnel, time, and space constraints (Reyes 1999:137–38). Furthermore, *cải lương* was separated from the contexts on which actors drew source material for stories: “Everyone [Reyes] spoke to, *cải lương* lover or not, contended that *cải lương* can only be properly appreciated where a sense of Vietnamese history and communal life—the wellsprings of *cải lương* inspiration—is part of daily existence. For many in Orange County, particularly the young, transplantation and the trauma of forced migration, created a rupture between what is continuous with their past and what securely belongs to their present” (139).

Young people turned away from *cải lương* since they had had little exposure to the southern Vietnamese everyday life with which these stories resonated; they instead consumed variety shows such as *Paris by Night*.¹¹ Live traditional music performances suffered, but a number of musicians in diaspora, including Trần

Văn Khê and Phương Oanh in France and Nguyễn Thuyết Phong in the United States, have produced scholarship and records to encourage more traditional music practice.¹²

Constructing Nonknowing

Several types of trauma pervade Vietnamese diasporic lives. These include experiences during and after the war, various forms of subjugation to the Communist victors, and harrowing departures from Vietnam. Resettlement, too, goes well beyond “culture shock.” In *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* (2007), Bích Minh Nguyễn describes the racist taunts she faced in school and the ubiquitous condescension of neighbors in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Nonrefugee populations—specifically of white America—often view themselves as saviors and impose ways of behaving on refugees. Le Ly Hayslip’s memoirs *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1993) point to the ways “American values” and rituals discipline lived experience (Fielding 2009:57). White America enforces doctrines of forgetting the past (Bui 2016:114), and the “American love affair” with guns places deadly weapons in the public sphere more often than in wartime Vietnam (Fielding 2009:69). The United States remains dangerous for newly arrived immigrants.

Vietnamese refugees bear an excessive burden in the praxis of assimilation. Immigration, especially following rapid and traumatic departure, “forces the refugee to become culture-bearer and culture-maker” on arrival, with very few resources in the new location (Wong 2004:24). This labor further intersects with the American imagination, which is peppered with recollections of television footage of the Vietnam War and sustained by documentary and Hollywood films; indeed, one such depiction is Oliver Stone’s adaptation of Le Ly Hayslip’s first memoir into the 1993 film *Heaven & Earth*. Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that the Vietnamese American body represented in the film must somehow “speak within American discourse to provide a resolution to the unfinished U.S. debate over the war” (1997:608, emphasis removed; see also Viet Thanh Nguyen 2016; Wong 2000). More popular Hollywood films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) compound this trauma. How can one realistically resolve violence and terror? At the time of this writing, Viet Thanh Nguyen leads this work in literature and as a public intellectual. Alongside short stories, novels, and memoirs, his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Sympathizer* (2015) undertakes a “dialectical but unresolvable movement between representation and reconciliation”—a description he made of Hayslip’s work (1997:609)—that typifies artistic output on the diasporic experience.¹³

Artists writing and composing for victims of trauma weave stories that embrace movement and oscillate between moments of representation and

moments of reconciliation. Unlike the film adaptations of the Vietnam War described above, performance narratives need not be coherent or linear. Artists embrace a sense of unknowing and avoid climactic gestures and admit through performance what they do not—and cannot—know. This is a common theme in the creation of trauma narrative, where power and agency emerge from “non-knowing” and uncertainty (Jackson 2013:153). Wong, for example, describes how Laotian musician Khamvong Insixiangmai’s “poems celebrate and mourn the past, but their poignancy stems from an uncertainty about the placement of this past in time” (2004:34). Khamvong engages this uncertainty with his audiences in performance, remaining committed to “recalling a past that is painful but necessary to remember” (35). Khmer musician Daran Kravanh frequently considers what he does not know in his memoir of surviving the displacement and unimaginable loss of the Khmer Rouge era. While reflecting on the national anthem of Democratic Kampuchea—an anthem that mentions blood five times, including the splattering of blood—he offers: “When the Khmer Rouge ruled, blood did run in Cambodia, not in a trickle, not in a stream, but in a violent torrent. Why blood was always on the lips and hands of the Khmer Rouge I do not know” (Lafreniere and Kravanh 2000:114). Trauma cannot be understood away, and unknowing sustains memory.

As a result of uncertainty, narratives of the survivor do not build toward climactic moments but serve as a series of impressions. Kravanh’s memoir and Škvorecký’s novel emerge as a series of episodes connected by characters and themes that move backward and forward in time. Like songs that float in and out of our minds as we walk to school or drive to work, these authors take listeners on a journey of memory. In performance, too, survival narratives do not need to be complete and may be more effective if they are not. In Jacques Arpin’s study of therapeutic intercultural performance, he suggests that actors work in “increments,” particularly when trauma involving migration is involved: “Incremental steps . . . take the spectator from one cultural frame to another through various tools of narrative transformation” (2008:364). This step-by-step process enables the strategic erection of boundaries to allow individuals—including the patients with whom Arpin works—to explore the meaning of each incremental step. Performing, then, helps actors grow comfortable with boundaries and find ways to build passageways or “doors” through these boundaries. This work ultimately generates new understandings of oneself and cultural difference, as well as “a common language [to] remove . . . boundaries [and] open . . . doors” (365).

This scholarship suggests how artists generate soul in diaspora following trauma. The narratives of a single performance propose several increments of lived experience, some fragmentary and others fleeting. Studying with these musicians and listening to many performances over several years, one understands which doors are opened and how boundaries are removed between

individuals through musical language. Musicians use the body as one such door here to break down barriers to narration and expression.

The Body in Trauma

Musicians use the body to regenerate history and reinscribe the depiction of lived experience in performance. In her discussion of Khmer dance, Judith Hamera discusses the movements of the body as “a technology of subjectivity, a template organizing sociality, and an archive that links subjectivities and socialities to history” (2002:65). Arpin’s research points to the ways that traumas expressed during migration “inhabit the body” (1996:87) and, in particular, the hands. In therapeutic performance, the hands reveal the history of travel and “tremor as if in another time” (86; see also Arpin 2003).

Through the body, art and music bear witness to trauma, build an archive of traumatic experience, and propose methods of recovery (Araújo 2010; Bui 2016; Cizmic 2012). In some instances, performers enact particular corporeal conditions to experience trauma and re-present this trauma to audiences. Inner experience here relies not on spoken language but on “a glance, a sound, a gesture” (Arendt [1971] 1978:31).¹⁴ As Maria Cizmic argues, Soviet composer Galina Ustvolskaya uses extensive tone clusters and the “hammering” of the keyboard with the fingertips and forearm in her glasnost-era Sixth Piano Sonata to depict the cultural trauma of living in the Soviet Union (Cizmic 2012:67–69). The performer becomes a vessel through which audiences experience the falsification of history and pain caused by Stalin’s policies, collectivization, and other atrocities. By uncovering and regenerating history, the composer and the musician bring previously off-limits history into public discourse for those who lived through trauma but could never express this history publicly, share strategies of survival, and preserve these narratives for future generations.

The body and hands therefore serve as ultimate arbiter of the soul. Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, Võ Văn Ánh, and their students make this point in private lessons and public pronouncements. Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo and his students describe *tâm hồn* as a visceral experience. On one occasion, a student wrote by email to indicate how a lesson and receipt of notation and written documents opened the soul in ways that affected the body: “You do not simply teach me to play interestingly [and] correctly, you also convey to me an open soul, free and serene of those who play. . . . You say that playing music is like meditation, so when playing, the sound of the music and the soul of the player will blend together, like when I sit to meditate, my body also is in tune with my breathing so I feel this very clearly” (student of Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, email, 9 September 2010). Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo forwarded the message to a large group of students, indicating how the exchange helped to “grow life in oneself and outside of oneself,” another characteristic of *tâm hồn* described above (Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, email, 9 September 2010).

Võ Văn Ánh locates the soul of Vietnamese music in the left hand and encourages audiences to observe the gestures of the hand and the sounds they produce.¹⁵ Whether playing the *đàn tranh* (zither), *đàn kim* (moon-shaped lute), or *đàn bầu* (monochord), musicians ornament pitches with the left hand by pressing the strings on the left side of the movable bridges of the zither, moving their fingers up and down the fretted fingerboard of the lute, or bending the horn of the monochord to raise and lower the pitch of the string. These moves evoke the appropriate emotion or mood associated with the mode of the work. Võ describes the left hand as producing “color and [an] emotive quality”; the movements made are “liquid” and “nimble,” and they “echo the contours of the Vietnamese language” (Vo 2013). Vibrato, bending from one pitch to another, and tapping ornamentation properly express a particular mode rather than being mere embellishments of pitch. In Võ’s words, the work of the left hand “recreates the sound and the vibrancy of the Vietnamese *tâm hồn*” (Lê and Võ 2017). This knowledge cannot be notated and serves to indicate the musician’s closeness to traditional music.

Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo and Võ Văn Ánh seek to domesticate the diasporic experience in the body to generate the soul of traditional music. The lived experience of southern Vietnam so essential to traditional music, therefore, becomes the lived experience of the diasporic body. The body sustains what Lukács called “faith” and keeps the structures of traditional music viable for future performance. Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo does this work through virtual interaction with students, and Võ Văn Ánh navigates the soul in live performance.

The Virtual Mediation of Soul

Musicians use the virtual body to effectively make music and connection. Internet-based communication circulates Vietnamese traditional music between populations in Vietnam and the diaspora. Video cameras enable members of the diaspora to study with Vietnam-based musicians, and electronic forms of communication facilitate the scheduling of lessons during family visits to Vietnam. Video sharing platforms increase the number of participants and types of performances available, including informal live performances of musicians in the Mekong Delta or in an Orange County garage. These “transnational networks” built through virtual means serve as sites for working out identity, authenticity, and tradition (Harris 2012:460).

Transnational networks build understandings of shared experience. Born in 1918, Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo has seen the restructuring of everyday life in French Cochinchina under colonial rule, Japanese occupation during the Second World War, and the horrors of the Vietnam War. Friends, acquaintances, and colleagues died during these conflicts, in reeducation camps following the collapse of South Vietnam, and on rickety boats seeking new lives abroad. He draws connections

between his memories and those of his students as he teaches the *đờn ca tài tử* tradition by Skype, hosts videos of public appearances on his YouTube channel, shares content on Facebook, and sends recordings by email.

Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo and his students surround themselves with music to remember those lost and remonstrate with those who facilitate this loss. In May 2013 he sent a five-and-a-half-minute recording of an improvisation followed by a lullaby (*ru con*) played on the nineteen-stringed *đàn tranh*. Titled “Improvised prelude and Ru con,” he begins the track with a mention of the date, time, and location—in this case, indicating Saigon, a term still often used for Ho Chi Minh City by local residents and in diaspora. As he starts playing, listeners hear the coughs of his wife, Nguyễn Thị Trâm Anh, in the background, and they have the sense that the recording reflects a sadness inspired by her poor health. A response to the email made by one student in Europe picks up on this sadness and extends it to the sadness felt by Vietnamese in diaspora. The student writes: “The sound of the zither cuts an inconsolable agony into the soul of people far from their motherland. Our motherland still is poor and unjust but nothing has happened to relieve the things we hear that cause our heartache” (student of Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, email, 11 May 2013). Besides a sadness, this student identifies sounds that disseminate information about the homeland to the diaspora; a shared experience emerges through sound.

These connections become manifest through the body. Although students do not see bodily movements in sound recordings, they hear the movements of the hand in ways similar to those described by Matthew Rahaim (2012). From the start of Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo’s recording, his hand ornaments the strings to evoke sadness. He presses with some force on occasion to raise the pitch by roughly a fifth and follows this with a quick release of tension to evoke the sound of a sigh or cry. As his students listen, they recall previous lessons with him (see figure 1) and the hours of practice in his small studio developing the muscle memory to produce a pitch immediately, then release the tension of the string and allow the sound of the pitch to slowly die away.

The recording begins with the instrumental prelude (*rao*). Performed as an unmetered introduction to a named work, the *rao* serves as the first point of entry to both the structures of mode (*điệu*) of the work and the idiosyncratic style of the performer. Audiences listen for and understand the *tâm hồn* of the performer through the mode used and the individual style of the *rao* (Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, interview with the author, Ho Chi Minh City, 26 March 2009). In this case, listeners recognize the sad Nam (southern) mode of *đờn ca tài tử*; he uses all seven pitches of the Vietnamese scale *hò xự xử xang xê cồng phan*, including some occasionally flattened and sharpened versions of these notes, which are known as *non* and *giã*, respectively.

The idiosyncrasies of this particular *rao* involve duration and form. His long prelude leads to a relatively short *ru con* rather than the more typical short *rao*



Figure 1. Lesson on techniques of the left hand with Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo. Still from video by the author, 18 July 2007, Ho Chi Minh City.

followed by a longer work in the same mode. The prelude appears directionless over five sections, separated by pauses of several seconds. Musical elements of one section help build elements of the next, so he suggests incremental development, even though each section is distinct. Some increments seem wistful and dissipate into barely plucked notes on the đàn tranh, while others end conclusively on one or another important pitch.

Like Viet Thanh Nguyen's description of literature on the Vietnamese diasporic experience, Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo's prelude alternates between two sections involving different ways of producing melody: one features extensive bending of a single string with the left hand; the other features stepwise motion using the right hand. He begins the prelude with nearly thirty-five seconds of the former: he starts the melody on the pitch *phan*, the lower neighbor of the tonic pitch *hò* (see music example 1). He adds slight vibrato (*rung* ♫), then bends upward to the tonic before striking the string again and adding a tapping (*mổ* ∇) ornament. Here, he bends the string with two fingers of the left hand and then taps the string with a third finger so that the pitch jumps slightly and then returns to the previously held position.

The section continues with a miniphase featuring more significant bending from *cổng* (B) to *xự* (E), with the latter pitch appearing particularly strained and forlorn, given the tension needed to produce it. With the quick movements between pitches and the tension depicted through timbre, listeners appreciate a pain that does not dissipate with ease. The final miniphase of the first section



Music example 1. Excerpt from the first section of the prelude.

features a favorite cadential pattern of his, *cống-phan-hò-phan-xang*, indicating that he is preparing to move to the next section.

The coughing of his wife interrupts the prelude, an episode that seems to temporarily change the nature of his performance. He waits for several seconds before beginning again with stepwise motion starting on the pitch *xự* (E). He follows this with a new pitch *xê* (A) and its octave equivalent (see music example 2). The subsequent stepwise motion involves very little ornamentation and sounds out of place: the relationship of *xự* and *xê* momentarily suggests *metabole*—moving to a new mode within a work occasionally occurs in this tradition. The next several pitches further suggest a heptatonic scale that emerges from the E–A relationship and centers on E as a new *hò*. When he lands on D, however, this uncertainty dissipates somewhat, and he introduces a short fragment B–C with *rung*–D–E–D to reestablish D as *hò*. He works to continue eradicating this feeling of uncertainty: as the passage continues, the melody appears more pentatonic, and he ornaments with greater frequency. As he concludes the section, the listener analyzes in retrospect: his wife’s coughing distracts him, but he works through it to craft melody. The melody still meanders, however, and does not involve significant use of the left hand.

The prelude therefore sustains a sense of unknowing. Taking the analytical framework suggested by his student and the action of sending the recording to students in diaspora, the prelude depicts Vietnamese persons not knowing how to alleviate the trauma inflicted on them. The melodic trajectory is elusive: he embraces modal ambiguity, and he shifts perspective from fluid melodic contours to stepwise motion. Pain and heartache emerge through perceptions of the body; indeed, one might argue that moving away from the use of the left hand allows a perception of absence and a looking forward to the return of the left hand. Even in trauma, moments of comfort coalesce to enable survival.

Unknowing sustains community, and it helps to have some glimmer of optimism. As he does in “*Remous du coeur*,” he finishes this recording with resolve. The *ru con* in the *Nam* mode maintains a sense of sadness, but it exudes a sense of stability not found in the prelude: a typical version of the *Nam* mode, a sense of pulse, and repetition organized into binary form appear (see music example 3). He takes elements of the unstable passages of the prelude and gives them form in the lullaby. Despite the uncertainty of the future, he provides music that expresses and stabilizes the inner experience of Vietnamese around the world.





Music example 3. *Ru con* performed by Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo.

Inner Experience Takes the Stage

Innovative musicians based outside of Vietnam also contribute to the creation of *tâm hồn*. Võ Văn Ánh collaborates with musicians in Vietnam, in the Vietnamese diaspora, and in other locations to narrate, make visible, and make tangible a shared sense of loss felt by Vietnamese inside and outside of Vietnam. From her home in the San Francisco Bay Area, she has built networks of students and admirers in the diaspora to support educational programs and performances on themes of the Vietnamese refugee experience. She conducts this work through physical movement, traveling from the United States to Vietnam to Europe and back, as well as by moving and interacting with others onstage.

Võ Văn Ánh draws on her training to build bridges to sources of traditional music in Vietnam. She studied at the Hanoi Conservatory (now the Vietnam National Academy of Music [Học viện âm nhạc quốc gia Việt Nam]) and won the 1995 National Zither Competition for Young Talent (Cuộc thi tài năng trẻ đàn tranh toàn quốc năm 1995), which jump-started her career in Vietnam (Quỳnh and Võ 2017). She relocated to the United States in 2001 and now performs solo concerts across North America, participates in world music festivals such as WOMAD, and collaborates on film, performance art, and other projects.

Many of Võ Văn Ánh's collaborative works narrate stories of the Vietnamese refugee experience. In 2014 she participated in a chamber opera titled *Bound*, commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera. In performances at the Asia Society Texas for audiences comprised primarily of members of Vietnamese and other Asian diasporas, *Bound* explores the true story of seventeen-year-old Diane Tran, a Vietnamese American woman working two jobs who was jailed in 2012 for missing too many days of school. Composer Huang Ruo scores the work for

the đàn tranh, đàn bầu, and an ensemble of Western art music instruments. Võ works as part of the ensemble to provide accompaniment to the singers onstage, including some dissonant sounds during traumatic episodes in the story, and also improvises alone with highly ornamented lines created by the left hand to indicate when characters onstage imagine being in Vietnam.¹⁶

In her own compositions, Võ continues to use traditional music to make lived experience tangible. On her 2013 album, *Three Mountain Pass*, she expresses the “loss” and “grief” following war by incorporating “Vietnamese funeral music” in one work titled “Mourning” (Vo 2013). She overlays three separate đàn bầu tracks to give the impression of wandering ghosts in stereo: one highly ornamented line moves upward and another moves downward, allowing each to explore a different tessitura of the instrument; in the third, Võ runs a violin bow over the instrument’s one string, generating many overtones and a stilted, whistling-like quality. The work is haunting; as the three distinct lines interact, she generates a sense that these souls do not rest easily.

In her large-scale compositions, Võ references traditional music strategically but departs from typical practice to indicate how lived experience changes during and after trauma. A forty-five-minute work she premiered in 2016 titled *The Odyssey—from Vietnam to America* at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco reflects this.¹⁷ Collaborating with other Bay Area musicians, she shapes sound and visual media to depict departure, voyage, and arrival of the Vietnamese “boat people.” The work begins with the voices of young adults telling the stories of their parents’ voyages across the Pacific Ocean. She continues with folk songs played on the đàn tranh, đàn bầu, and *T’rưng* (upright bamboo xylophone) and vocal music. She quickly distorts these songs, indicating sonically what occurs to one’s connection to one’s homeland when encountering violence in the form of being attacked by pirates, losing family members, and feeling constantly alienated in a new country. In one scene, for example, she walks back and forth across the stage singing a ru con from southern Vietnam (figure 2). This performance features some similarities to the tune performed by Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, but it is much more diffuse and haunting. With spasmodic images of rough seas in the background, Võ’s performance is halting and anxious. She portrays a mother consoling a child; her voice shaking—an effect accentuated by added reverb—she initially sings vocables on indefinite pitches. When her voice settles, she introduces a repeating motive—a descent of a fifth and a rise of an approximate tritone—before introducing text to which she incrementally adds new words during the segment. Faced with the uncertainty of the ocean and the future, the character builds melodic content and text from a paralyzing fear as she also tries to console herself. She draws the listeners close to the experience of trauma as it emerged in fits and starts and reminds them that these traumas still occur to members of the diaspora.



Figure 2. Screenshot from the video of a Houston performance of *The Odyssey—from Vietnam to America*. From the collection of Võ Văn Ánh; used with permission.

Võ makes it clear in interviews and conversation that she is not a refugee (Lam and Vo 2016). She does not aim to speak for refugees but advocates the use of music to connect to homeland, articulate trauma, and solidify diasporic communities. At times, the work overpowers the senses: fitful images projected on screens intersect with the sounds of multiple drums, accordion, cello, and voices. The audience interprets these in different ways—the violence of the voyage or the fear felt trying to make a new life in the United States—but no one present can escape the scene. This is precisely the message of the performance: experiences of boat people are traumatic precisely because refugees cannot escape what they saw and heard on the Pacific, in refugee processing centers in Palawan or Hong Kong, or when navigating American bureaucracy in a new language. At the same time, the experiences bind the community together. At the conclusion of the premiere of *The Odyssey*, a member of the audience noted in public remarks that the work articulated the collective experiences of the refugee populations for themselves and for the wider American public. With tears in his eyes and voice shaking, he said the work made him finally feel heard. The soul of the refugee, in other words, had taken form.

Conclusion

Vietnamese in diaspora maintain memory through *tâm hồn* or soul. An old concept in Vietnamese art, literature, and historical discourse, *tâm hồn* is used

by musicians of traditional music to express an inner experience for external consumption and community building. Following the traumas of the twentieth century, however, inner experiences became difficult to articulate and narrate coherently, especially when traditional music assumed new political meanings after the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975. Even when traditional music became more prevalent, those who left Vietnam no longer had access to the ways of everyday living on the soil of southern Vietnam. Following decades of negotiating new everyday experiences and the rise of global forms of communication and travel, the fractured narratives of the survivor of trauma emerge in fits and starts. Those heard today often are difficult to follow: they meander and are discontinuous and circuitous. This is necessary for their efficacy, however, as these narratives detail the motion between representation of and reconciliation concerning the traumatic events afflicting survivors. The resulting performances sustain memory and generate a soul linking diasporic communities to themselves and their homeland.

I argue that the musician's body is the primary mediator of the soul and offers a significant way of healing for Vietnamese in diaspora. The body builds the Vietnamese soul and makes sense of the fractured narratives that tell the stories of Vietnamese survival in diaspora. This article suggests that two musicians, neither of whom is a Vietnamese refugee but both of whom bore witness to these traumas, play leading roles in this work. Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo works through virtual platforms to make traditional music expressive of the diasporic experience—an experience that aligns with the changes in everyday life in Vietnam following the dissolution of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975. Võ Văn Ánh places these negotiations on stages in the United States and Europe and builds a sense of community for those in diaspora. These musicians and their audiences draw on Vietnamese understandings of *tâm hồn* based on diasporic subjectivities concerning narratives of trauma and tragedy. Ultimately, they enable the cogent articulation of lived experience through movement and sound.

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Notes

1. All translations from French and Vietnamese are my own unless otherwise indicated.
2. Vietnamese musicians proficient in the French language often translate *tâm hồn* as *état d'âme*. Because *état d'âme* literally means “state of soul,” Trần Văn Khê understands the French term as the

"emotional approach" to music performance. The goal of improvised music, he argues, is "to put [the] audience in a mood suitable for communication between musicians and listener" (1960:128). Võ Văn Ánh also notes how she uses "state of mind" (*tinh thần*) to "transform everything based on that mind state" and generate appropriate affect in an audience (Phạm and Võ 2010). Leonard Lewisohn (1997:18) makes a similar observation for Sufi practice.

3. For more detail about Phạm Duy's life in the United States, see Wong (2004:89–113).

4. Martina T. Nguyen (2012) reveals numerous debates concerning the nature of the "national soul" and "national essence" that played out in newspapers in Vietnam in the 1930s and 1940s.

5. Norton (2009:78) connects *tâm hồn* to a similar Temiar concept called "heart soul," described by Marina Roseman (1991:30). Music stirs the "heart soul" to generate experiences of feeling, thinking, and memory. In another work, Norton notes that invoking the "soul" helps reshape the *lên đồng* ritual away from something considered superstitious and something that strengthens the "cultural life . . . of the Vietnamese people" (2002:87).

6. Stalin said this evidently in preparation for the first meeting (ultimately in 1934) of the Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, where "socialist realism" first emerged as policy. Irina Gutkin argues that such "aesthetic engineering" predates Stalin's phrase by more than ten years in writings by Left Art theorists in the Soviet Union (1999:51–52). As a side note, Timothy Rice suggests Stalin appointed himself the "engineer of human souls" (1994:28). I have found no evidence of such a declaration, although Stalin may have thought this, given that he recognized himself as the "Genius of All Times and Peoples and the Coriphaeus of Total Knowledge" (Gutkin 1999:51).

7. In the novel, readers explore the life of the titular character, Danny Smiricky, during a childhood under Nazi occupation, a middle age in Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia, and a later life as a professor in exile in Canada.

8. Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen examines the histories and memories of Vietnamese women in diaspora, including one who developed a "creative urge," sometimes through performing songs, to "form . . . the central trope of her life" (2009:32).

9. To my great surprise, Reyes's contributions to refugee studies do not appear in the proceedings of the 2016 and 2017 Society for Ethnomusicology President's Roundtables on refugees and migrants (Rasmussen et al. 2019). One runs the risk of silencing narratives of the refugee experience when one constantly reinvents the discursive wheel with each refugee and migrant crisis.

10. Khai Thu Nguyen notes that the improvisation of "*Vọng cổ*" offers "a central means of expressing the 'souls' both of performers and of characters" in *cải lương* performance (2012:259).

11. *Paris by Night* is a live variety show produced by Thúy Nga Productions in California and sold around the world to Vietnamese-speaking audiences (Lieu 2011:79–114; Valverde 2012:35–36). It features a mix of comedy, folk songs, popular music, and songs associated with the Republic of Vietnam.

12. See Trần Văn Khê (1962, 2000) for examples of his scholarly output. Nguyễn Thuyết Phong has taught many North American students, amassed an archive housed at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and published scholarship (i.e., Nguyen Th. Phong 1986; Nguyễn T. Phong 1998; Nguyen T. Phong 2007; Nguyen, Reyes Schramm, and Campbell 1995). For one album he recorded with his ensemble, see Phong Nguyen ([1985] 2011).

13. The work of narrating trauma oscillates on another axis between what Judith Hamera describes as potency and impotency. Hamera's account of a family of Khmer dancers in California points to the difficulties in recrafting and re-presenting everything from family history to traditional art forms following the four-year Khmer Rouge regime, which imposed a culture of forgetting—one forgot how to survive. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "answerability," Hamera argues that in life and performance, survivors of the Khmer Rouge try to "answer" for their survival by sustaining tradition (2002:74).

14. Hannah Arendt writes a great deal on the body in soul, stating that "somatic experience" and "physical sensation" correspond to the life of the soul ([1971] 1978:33).

15. Võ made this remark during a preconcert talk at the University of Michigan on 27 October 2014 and in my class at Western Michigan University on 29 October 2014.

16. Cannon (2014) provides more significant description and commentary on the work. Võ Văn Anh also has collaborated with the Kronos Quartet in 2016 and 2017 performances of Jonathan Berger's *My Lai*, which tells the story of a helicopter pilot who attempted to stop US soldiers shooting on unarmed civilians during the 1968 Mỹ Lai massacre.

17. The work also had performances at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, and the Miller Outdoor Theatre in Houston. For images from these performances, please see the Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/theodysseyfromvietnamtoamerica/>. Lisa Beebe's doctoral dissertation has a longer evaluation of *The Odyssey* with specific focus on Võ's use of the đàn bầu (2017:192–98).

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