

Vietnamese Traditional Musical Instruments

Viet Nam is home to 54 ethnic groups. The Kinh, or Viet, account for 90% of the population. Each ethnic group has its own cultural identity evident in its musical. The Kinh and other ethnic minorities in Vietnam have time-honored traditions of music and dance. This is evidenced by the figures that are seen dancing to music, engraved on the bronze drums unearthed at Dong Son, Thanh Hoa province, and the lithophones discovered in the Tay Nguyen Highlands instruments.



There are more than 50 different minorities in Vietnam so our country have so many Vietnamese traditional musical instruments, which are divided into three main groups: Idiophone, Membranophone, Airophone and Chordophone.

Đàn Đá (Musical instrument made of stone)

It is a kind of percussive instrument belonging to the class of xylophone, metallophone. Each instrument comprises of bars of stone, whose shape's are different and the bars are simply processed. Materials for producing "Dan Da" are available stones in mountains in the Southern of the central Vietnam and in the eastern of the South, such as tupriodacid, riolite, pocfia etc.



The remains discovered by the archaeology in Binh Dao (Dong Nai) show that "Dan Da" could be produced about 3000 years ago.

Till the early 1990s, about 200 bars of stone (for producing "Dan Da") were discovered in DakLak, Khanh Hoa, Dong Nai, Ninh Thuan, Song Be, Lam Dong, Phu Yen. Each group of bars comprised 3-15 bars. The first "Dan Da" which was discovered in Ndut Lieng Krak (DakLak) in 1945 has been kept at "The people" museum in Paris. Another "Dan Da" was dispatched to Los Angeles. The rests have been kept in Vietnam.

Sound produced by "Dan Da" is resounding and solemn, therefore, it is usually played in large festival in Tay Nguyen.

Dan Bau (monocord)

If one sound had to be chosen to evoke Vietnam, for many it would be the sound of the Dan Bau, as it is one of only two traditional musical instruments of purely Vietnamese origin.

Having the literary name of monocord, Dan Bau is a plucked chordophone of the Viet majority. Two popular kinds of Dan Bau are bamboo-made Dan Bau and the wooden-sound board Dan Bau.



The bamboo-made Dan Bau is the instrument of Xam singers (blind singers). The body of bamboo Dan Bau is made from a bamboo tube of 120 cm length and 12 cm diameter. The surface is formed thanks to the splitting of an appropriate outer layer on a certain section of bamboo tube.

Wooden soundboard Dan Bau is a variant of bamboo Dan Bau and used by professional artists. There are a wide range of wooden Dan Bau in varying shapes and sizes. The most popular Dan Bau has a trapezium shape and is 105-115cm long. The big end is 12cm wide and 10cm high while the small end is 8cm wide and 7cm high. The convex surface is made of softwood like wootung-tree wood (Ngo Dong wood) or coral-tree wood (Vong wood). The soft-wooden bottom of the soundboard is flat and has a sound hole. Sides and frame of the Dan Bau are made of hard wood like rosewood or ebony.

Though the two kinds of Dan Bau differ from each other by shapes and materials of their soundboards, they are similar in construction.

Dan Bau in general consists of 4 components including soundboard (resonator), spout (Wammy bar), gourd, string and tuning peg.

The spout is a piece of bamboo or a buffalo horn that is square-framed at the root, while flat and gradually bent at the top. The spout plays an important role in producing sounds of different pitches beyond the fundamental overtones (Harmonics) of the instrument.

The string runs along the body of instrument. In the past silk string was used, now a steel string is preferred.

The gourd is made up from a half of a slender-necked gourd. The gourd covers the spout at the very point where the string is attached. The gourd contributes to increase the loudness of sound for the instrument. Nowadays, the gourd is usually replaced with a turned wooden “bell” and therefore is only an adornment.

The tuning peg is made from bamboo (if bamboo Dan Bau), or from wood (if wooden Dan Bau). The tuning peg is located at the inside frame towards the bottom of the soundboard. The string goes through a small hole at the end of the instrument's surface and then gets through the tuning peg. In front of such a hole is a bridge to support the string.

Most Dan Bau's now come with a geared tuning machine.

Today, the Dan Bau is mostly played with an electric pick up and small amplifier, so that it's faint tone is audible in the orchestral context.

The Dan Bau is always played with a wooden pick held in the right hand to pluck the string while the lower side of the hand stops the string at the appropriate node (Harmonic). The left hand moves the the spout (wammy bar) to bend the pitch downward by moving in the direction of the instrument, or upward by pushing the the spout away from the instrument. The left hand also produces a variety of vibratos, glissandos and grace notes. The instrument's virtuosity and expressiveness are found in its left hand technique, which should have a subtlety that mimics the sound of the Vietnamese singing voice or traditional poetry read with great expression.

With soft sounds, Dan Bau is suitably used in serene context. In the past, Dan Bau was the instrument of amateur singers of Xam genre. Later though, Dan Bau also became popular in the orchestra of Cheo genre, Tai tu style's orchestra, and in the orchestra serving poetry reading, in smaller ensemble or solo performance. There have been many musical pieces exclusively composed for Dan Bau solo, such as Vu Khuc Tay Nguyen (Dance of the Central Highland) by Duc Nhuan, Dong kenh trong (The clear channel) by Hoang Dam, Vi Mien Nam (for the South) by Huy Thuc, and so on.

There is a story about the Dan Bau. Long ago, farmers went to their fields with baskets strapped to their backs. After work, they would lie down and tie their baskets to stalks of bamboo. The wind would blow and the strings of the baskets would vibrate and make a sound. So people made stringed instruments with silk threads. First they used hollow bamboo and then later they used long dried gourds. At the start of the 20th century, gourds were replaced with wooden boxes.

Among many kinds of monocord of countries all over the world, there are the Tuntina of India, Cung of East Africa and the Tushuenkin (Xian Qin) of China. However, none of them can produce such a popular and highly artistic system of overtones as that of the Vietnamese Dan Bau.

Dan Nguyet (Moon-shaped lute)

Dan Nguyet or Dan Kim or Vong Nguyet Cam or Quan Tu Cam is a musical instrument of the chordophonic family of the Viet ethnic group. The surface of Nguyet, round-shape, is made of light, soft and non-decorated wood and 30 cm in diameter. Its surface (top) part, called the head of the instrument (Thu), is used as a sound board with a bridge for the two strings.

The side of the instrument is made of hard wood, 8 cm in height. The bottom (back) is covered with light, soft wood the same as the top, but without sound hole. The neck, 100 cm in length, fixed to 10 frets at pentatonic scale (7 are fixed to the neck and 3 are fixed on the soundboard). The head of Nguyet is has four tuning pegs but only two silk strings (nowadays, nylon string is used). The two strings are tuned at a perfect fifth Fa-Do1; Sol-Re1 or a perfect fourth G-C1; D1-G1. In the past, instrumentalist used his/her fingernails to play Nguyet. Nowadays, they play it with a plastic or tortoise-shell plectrum. Nguyet has range of more than two octaves.

Dan Nguyet is used to accompany Van singing, Hue singing, Tai tu singing, Bat am music, ceremonial music and traditional stage orchestra.

Today, masterpieces for Nguyet, have been composed by many musicians to perform solo, such as Que Ta (My homeland), Chung mot niem tin (the same faith) by Xuan Khai; Tinh Me (the affection of the mother) by Tran Luan and Tinh Quan Dan (soliders and people relationship) by Xuan Ba...



Dan Nguyet has an appearance similar to those of other East Asian Moon shaped lutes, the Yue qin of China, the Wul Kim of Korea, and the Gekkin of Japan. However the Vietnamese Dan nguyet can easily be distinguished from others by its long neck, the prominently raised frets and the performance style. This is an important plucked stringed instrument used in so many kinds of musical or theatrical performances, such as solo, song accompaniment, instrumental ensemble, chamber music, ritual music and royal court music... This instrument was placed on the first position of the five perfect instruments (Nhu tuyet: Tranh, Ty, Nhi, Nguyet, Sao) in chamber music.

In chamber music of South Vietnam , the musician who plays this instrument also conducts the ensemble by keeping the Song Loan (the percussion instrument which looks like castanets, is used to keep the beat for the song playing), the Dan Nguyet has been widely appreciated by the Vietnamese for centuries.

Dan Ty ba (PiPa)

Ty ba is a plucking stringed instrument of the Viet majority. Some sources proved that Ty ba has long appeared in China under the name Pipa, and Japan under Biwa.

Ty ba is made from wood of wootung tree. Its neck connects with a sound box forming a shape of cut-half pear. The undecorated surface is made from light and soft wood (wootung wood- Ngo Dong wood). A bridge located at one end the body is for the strings to cross. The head of Ty ba is sophisticatedly carved with a longevity character, or bat figure at times. There are 4 wooden tuning pegs on the neck of Ty ba. The whole length of the lute body varies from 94 to 100cm. On the neck of Ty ba, there are 4 curved ivory pieces called the Four Heaven Kings. however, it has four frets in addition to eight others made from bamboo or wood that are located on the soundboard of Ty ba, and give

different pitches. The frets stand low and close to each other following the heptatonic scale. In the past, people used to utilize silk to make strings and smoothed them with beeswax. Nowadays, nylon strings are used instead. The 4 strings are tuned in sequence of a fourth - a second - a fourth i.e. Do - Fa - Sol - Do¹ or Sol - Do¹ - Re¹ - Sol¹. Instrumentalist usually plays the Ty ba with a tortoise-shell or plastic plectrum.



The player uses a plectrum which she holds in her right hand and plucks either upward or downward in a quick run. The technique for the left hand, which presses the strings, includes glissando, staccato, arpeggio and tremolo.

In Vietnam, Ty ba is usually performed in orchestras such as Royal orchestras including Nha Nhạc (Elegant music) and Thi Nhạc (Poem music), Thien Nhạc orchestra of Buddhism, Tai Tu orchestra, Bat Am orchestra (orchestra consists of eight musical instruments), and integrated traditional orchestra.

Although Ty ba took its root so early in other countries, it has been localized as time went by, and has today become an instrument of Vietnam, which can profoundly present musical pieces of Vietnamese style in the realm of instrumental music.

Dan Tranh (Sixteen-stringed zither similar to the Japanese Koto)

The Dan Tranh is a musical instrument of chordophonic family, a plucked branch of the Viet ethnic group. Because Dan Tranh has 16 strings, it is also called Dan Thap luc.

Dan Tranh has a long-parallelepiped shape. The frame of the instrument has trapezium-shape, 110-120 cm in length. The sides are made of hard wood decorated with various designs, either lacquered and, or inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The large end is 25-30 cm

in width with holes or hooks to attach the strings. The narrow end is 15-20 cm in width with 16 tuning keys on the surface of the instrument. Its surface is made of wootung tree (Ngo Dong wood), 0.05 cm thick and arched and its bottom is made of light wood with sound holes.



The bridges of instrument or chevalet are placed diagonally across the middle of the sound board. They are movable to fine tune each string to pitch. The strings are made of steel with different gauges. When playing, the artist usually wears finger plectrums (Finger picks) on the thumb, forefinger and middle finger. The finger plectrum is made of different materials, such as metal, horn or tortoise-shell.

Its timbre is bright and clear and it expresses jubilant and pure melodies. Dan Tranh is rarely suitable with strong and moving characteristics. The range of Dan Tranh includes three octaves, from Do up Do₃, as in do re mi so.

The Dan Tranh sits flat like an autoharp and is plucked using all fingers. Players will usually wear picks (finger plectrums) on their fingers to facilitate plucking. The sound reverberates through the hollow wooden box below the strings. Sounds can be altered through cupping, pressing or stroking the strings instead of simply plucking.

Dan Tranh is used to perform as a solo or ensemble instrument, accompany poetry, singing and take part in Tai Tu orchestra, Bat Am company, Nha nhac orchestra and general traditional orchestras.

Dan Tranh is a relative of the Guzheng in China and Koto of Japan but through seven or eight centuries using it, Vietnamese people created a specific characteristic in fingering techniques, pressing and releasing, and scale. Dan Tranh has become a musical instrument bringing characteristics of Vietnam. . People used it under 9 strings, 15 strings, and 16 strings. Now , Dan Tranh's usually have 16 strings ,but it may have 17strings, 19strings , 21strings 23 strings or 24 strings.

T'rung

T'rung is an instrument of Giarai minority that mainly live in the provinces of Gialai, Kontum, Daklak (The central highlands of Viet Nam) as well as in some other provinces of central Vietnam.

T'rung is categorized into knocking branch of idiophonic family. It consists of strong bamboo tubes of various sizes, of which, each bamboo tube comprises two components, namely air sub-tube and sympathetic slab. The air cylinder closely cooperates with sympathetic slab in providing tubes with standard pitches, and sonorous sounds.

In the past, when playing, instrumentalist linked tubes together with 2 strings, then tied string ends on the side of high tones section around his belly while binding the other end of the strings to a tree or a rock. He then would play the instrument by knocking on the tubes with 2 short sticks. The range therefore usually consisted of 6 or 7 tones in sequence of unequal pentatonic either Si - Re#1 - Fa#1 - Sol#1 - La1 - Si1 or Do1 - Re1 - Fa1 - Sol1 - La1 - Do2. Musician would use respective set of tubes pursuant to each musical piece. Nowadays, the range of T'rung is extended up to 3 octaves, and there even exists T'rung with chromatic scale.



T'rung used to be played on the milpa land or during festival and strictly forbidden to play in houses since the Central Highland's people believed that each tube was home to a God. Those Gods would help them to protect their milpa lands and drive wild animals and birds away. Therefore, if they played T'rung in their houses, the poultry would not be able to grow up.

Today, however, T'rung is no longer a forbidden instrument, but widely played in solo performance, or in ensemble with other instruments, as well as accompanying singing.

Klon-Put

Klon-Put is a musical instrument of wind family, slapping branch of the Xe Dang ethnic group. It consists of many hornless bamboo sections, each section is a tone. The sections of the instrument are placed on a bamboo stand from low to high.

When performing it, girls bend down their body. They beat their bowed hands together to make the air in the section move to create sounds.

Klon-Put is a musical instrument for women only. According to the legend, in each hornless bamboo or bamboo section, the spirit of "Rice-Mother" exists. If Klon-Put is



played during the planting time, the "Rice-Mother" will come and sponsor the rice storage. Therefore, if a male plays it, the Rice-Mother will be afraid and go away.

On bright moon nights and festival days, the sound of Klon-Put vibrates lively in all hamlets of the villages thanks to the talent of the girls of the Xe Dang ethnic group.

K'ny

K'ny is the only fiddle of Giarai people. It is a chordophone of bow branch.

The body of K'ny is made from a bamboo tube of from 3 cm diameter to a maximum of 66cm in length. A tuning peg is found at the upper part of the body, while at the other end of body, there is a wooden pins for attaching the strings. The steel strings are attached to tuning pegs and go straight to the attachment pins. One end of the sympathetic string is closely tied to the main string near the hanging pins, while its other end is fixed after being put through the membrane which is either made of pangolin's scab or flattened buffalo horn. The bow is a hornless bamboo slab of 40 or 45 cm length and made thin at one end.



When playing, instrumentalist holds the membrane in his mouth, and stretches the sympathetic string to an appropriate length, and plays the instrument with bow that is

already rubbed with Kochik's resin. The sounds of the metal string impacts on the sympathetic string consequently making membrane vibrated. Palate of the musicians mouth thus would become a resonator.



The most important reason for the magic timbres of K'ny is the simultaneous combination of instrument's sounds and musician's singing voice. K'ny therefore is called among Giarai people the singing instrument.

Changes in musician's mouth shape create overtones and stable acoustic waves, and thus results in mystical timbres. Folk artists usually use pentatonic scales. One of pentatonic scales of Giarai is Do1 - Re1 - Fa#1 - Sol1 - La1.

Khèn

Khen is a local ancient musical instrument which was invented in BC time. The remains left by Dong Son culture depicted pictures of Khen players. Today many ethnics in Vietnam still use this instrument.

There are lots of types of Khen with different number of bamboo pipes and their sizes. The uvula of Khen is, made of brass or bamboo, the sound box is made of flexible wood or dried shell of a gourd. The number of bamboo pipes of Khen is normally even: 6 or 12 or 14 but Khen produced by Xa Pho, know as Ma Nhi, consists of 5 pipes. Each pipes has a hole on it to create a tone.

Being a multi tone musical instrument, Khen can be used as an orchestral part to support a singer, a dance, a concert, or used as a solo instrument. It is played in different occasions and in various places, according to custom of each ethnic community.

Tay Nguyen people normally play Khen when they want to have lamentable music and accompanying the singing of "ayray" in funerals. Sometimes, Khen is played as



accompaniment for dancers in festivals. Sometime it is whistled to create romantic music for leisure. In the North, Khen is widely used. With H'Mong people Khen (Khen) is a "daily musical instrument". It goes with the people to every where fields, markets, festivals etc.

With young men of H'Mong people, Khen is used as both instrument and tool. While they are playing on it, they show their talent on using it to young ladies. Khen, according to them, can express everything "Listening to Khen, we can know a person is crying or smiling".

Dàn Đáy

Dan Day is a string musical instrument which is only used for accompanying the singing of folk songs which the Vietnamese call "Hat A Dao" (or Ca Tru). Only men play this instrument. It may have been produced since century XV when such folk songs were composed.



Bass, warm and short sound produced by Dan Day makes a contrast which helps the sound produced by other instruments in a concert becomes prominent. Dan Day is today also used for accompanying the chanting. Thankx to its submissive and light sounds, Dan Day is deemed a "secluded philosopher".

Cồng Chiêng (Gong)

Cong chieng are musical instruments made of alloy copper (sometimes alloyed with gold or silver or black brass). They are of medium or large size, round shaped surface, and high edge. Cong is the one which has a knob while Chieng is without a knob.



The instruments are in various size with diameter ranging from 20 to 60 cm, even 90 - 120 cm. Cong chieng can be used as a single instrument or as a set of 2 - 13 pieces even 18 - 20 pieces. Every set of Cong chieng can act as a solo instrument or as a symphony orchestra.

Each set comprises several groups which are different in number and play particular roles in a concert.

Cong chieng are a type of percussion instruments and played by cudgels or hands. The tone can be created by hand or through another Cong or Chieng. With some ethnic groups, only men are allowed to play Cong chieng, but Cong Sac Bua system of Muong people is performed by women. With some other ethnic groups, both women and men are allowed to play Cong Chieng. The taboo on playing Cong Chieng stipulated by different ethnic groups is also different.



With Muong people and many ethnic groups in Tay Nguyen Cong Chieng are highly significant and valuable. Cong Chieng can be found in every household. Cong Chieng are familiar with people in Tay Nguyen people. In general, Cong Chieng are sacred musical instruments.

They are used on occasion of worship, mourning, wedding, welcoming a new year, a new house, a new crop, a victory, soldiers, praying for luck and health etc. In Truong Son - Tay Nguyen, the sound of Cong Chieng is a catalyst to attract the youth to exciting dance

styles of a community in festival, which have been an integral part of the life style of the Vietnamese for years.

Sáo H'Mông (Flute)

"Sao" called by the Vietnamese is wind instrument which is a long pipe of bamboo with hole for 6 keys and mouth hole at side. However, other types of wind instrument invented by ethnic minorities are deemed "Sao". It is played in vertical or horizontal direction. The name "Sao H'mong" (or "Sao Meo") is therefor termed.



Sound produced by "Sao" is very exceptional. We can hear both crude, cracked sound, and sweet sound as if perdon is whispering.

Therefore, it soon wins the heart of listeners since it has been put onto stage. Meanwhile so that it can play various kinds of music.

Sao H'mong is traditionally played by young men. It goes with them every where, and helps them win the heart of young girls. Sound produced by "Sao" expresses the feeling of young men to young girls in the moon light.