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Laughter, Liquor, and Licentiousness: Preservation Through Play in Southern Vietnamese Traditional Music

Alexander M. Cannon

Musicians of southern Vietnamese traditional music go to great lengths to describe and understand the *cảm hứng*, or inspiration, that guides their musical practice and performance. One might be inspired by elements of one's sonic environment, such as a car horn or the sound of a piece of cutlery falling to the floor, or by the presence of another individual in the room. One hears these sounds and begins to play with them, perhaps by repeating one pitch in an invented rhythmic pattern and then using *nhấn*, or a technique of bending the string of the *dàn tranh* (zither) or *dàn kìm* (moon-shaped lute), to find the next note in the mode. This play generates new material on which the rest of the ensemble improvises.

Sometimes, the motive is accepted and becomes practice; other times, it simply passes out of memory. Playing is central to any ethnomusicological study: Musicians play instruments, they play with categories, and they play with others. There are an infinite number of ways to play; however, musicians craft finite methods to generate community and meaningful experience through sound. In one of the most poignant contemporary works on play, Kyra D. Gaunt (2006) points to the way that history, power, race, and music theory intersect in play. Musical play enables individuals to study and play with power structures of society—these are not only power structures of socioeconomic status but also race and gender. Among African American women and girls, play carries multiple types of music practice forward, including improvisation, timbre, methods of organizing time akin to *timeline*, and others (Gaunt 2006: 33). Rather than being frivolous, play is fundamental to sustaining practice, producing knowledge, and making community.

This article investigates the theoretical underpinnings of play for musicians of southern Vietnamese traditional music and the ways play brings together different forms of knowledge and understandings for negotiation in performance. I evaluate circulations of power through play and the ways that play sustains

and undermines gender, ethnicity, and national identity. The meanings behind these practices are often contradictory, simultaneously supporting and refuting past practice. Such messiness is necessary for sustainable music, however, as musicians attempt to preserve local methods in an increasingly cosmopolitan and global southern Vietnam.

The Playing Musician

Scholars credit Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga with bringing play into the study of cultural production. Many others, including Plato and Sigmund Freud, muse on the concept, but Huizinga produces a usable definition of *homo ludens*, which should be understood not as “Man the Player” but as humans who play or an existence of playing. Play is a voluntary and necessary activity that allows an individual or group to step outside of everyday life on a temporary basis, ultimately to improve one’s existence and interactions with others (Huizinga [1938] 1970: 27). Locality and community emerge from play through processes of re-evaluating pre-existing structures and imaging new operations for everyday life:

From the point of view of a world wholly determined by the operation of blind forces, play would be superfluous. Play only becomes possible, thinkable, and understandable when an influx of *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos.

(Huizinga [1938] 1970: 22)

This process of breaking down old methods to make way for new ones constitutes a professed interest in upholding and preserving culture. Although criticism of Huizinga’s concept is plentiful, it remains clear that play is necessary for sustaining cultural practice (Anchor 1978: 64; Steiner 1970: 13).

Huizinga also makes important observations about the place and practice of music in community. His initial description of play includes an aside on the production of beauty, which he defines in explicit musical terms: Play “is saturated with rhythm and harmony, the noblest gifts of aesthetic perception

known to man” (Huizinga [1938] 1970: 25). Play develops aesthetic parameters for local communities, thereby enabling one community to distinguish itself musically from another through specific structuring mechanisms. “Making music,” he argues later,

bears at the outset all the formal characteristics of play proper: the activity begins and ends within strict limits of time and place, is repeatable, consists essentially in order, rhythm, alteration, transports audience and performers alike out of “ordinary” life into a sphere of gladness and serenity, which makes even sad music a lofty pleasure.

(Ibid: 62)

Contemporary ethnomusicology will find significant fault with parts of this definition; however, Huizinga does suggest methods of studying musical play and fostering community and audience engagement.

Ethnomusicologists employ *homo ludens* and play to advance methods of constructing and sustaining community.¹ Catherine Falk, for example, describes how a kind of “play language” among the Hmong called *lus rov* (“turned speech”) generates social groups only among those who understand the phrases generated (Falk 2003: 15). Martin Stokes (2008: 21) concludes a theorization of cosmopolitanism with a brief reference to the way that “pleasure and play” allow local musicians to engage with and take part in the increasing circulation of music around the world. Ioannis Tsioulakis extends Stokes’ conclusion, tying play of the cosmopolitan musician to imagination and flow. “Playing” necessarily is political, “enhanced by the negation of the structures of authority that traverse the ‘work’ setting” (Tsioulakis 2011: 187). For members of a musical subculture, playing with authority solidifies the scene.

Vietnamese musicians undertake extensive play and reference different kinds of play in verbal and written descriptions of music. The physical act of producing sound from an instrument, for example, uses different verbs: *Đàn* in the northern Vietnamese dialect or *đòn* in the southern Vietnamese dialect indicates playing a string instrument, while *thổi* indicates playing or blowing into a woodwind instrument. Musicians also discuss different “ways of playing.” *Nghệ sĩ ưu tú* (Meritorious Artist) Huỳnh Khải uses

the terms *cách* (way) or *cách đàn* (way of playing) to designate differences in an artist's style of generating pitch content for a performance (Huỳnh Khải 2011); northern Vietnamese musicians use the term *kiểu* to designate style (Norton 2009: 134). In an interview with me, Huỳnh Khải also invoked *lối* (way) and *lối chơi* (way of playing) to indicate a slightly different process of generating this pitch content (interview with the author, August 14, 2013). Barley Norton observes that northern Vietnamese musicians of *chầu văn* (a genre of ritual music) describe *lối* as a kind of “backbone” melody that guides accurate and appropriate performance; this is not an individual style but something fundamental to the identity of composition generated by a specific *lối* (2009: 134–136). A similar conceptualization holds true among southern Vietnamese musicians, although they employ a different metaphor; importantly, however, the *lối* can change over time as certain pitches become less important and others take on greater importance (Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, interview with the author, December 18, 2008). The same seems to be true in other parts of Vietnam. In Lauren Meeker's evaluation of the *lối chơi quan họ* or the way of practicing *quan họ* (a genre of folk music from northern Vietnam), she points specifically to the negotiation between singers that makes effective performance possible. This method, called *lối lối*, simultaneously designates a category of songs and “the set of social conventions and relationships of exchange fundamental to village practice more generally” (2013: 52–53).

The play of Vietnamese music and culture also connects to *homo ludens* although along a circuitous path. Robert Anchor advances that “Huizinga repeatedly insisted that play does not exclude seriousness” while being “equally insistent on maintaining play and seriousness as two separate categories” (1978: 87). Such apparent contradictions often appear in cultural and philosophical concepts that have circulated in Asia for centuries. The Confucian concept of *hè* (和) means harmony or “harmonization” and, in general terms, refers to bringing two disparate concepts together to understand both better (Li 2006).² In Vietnamese, this term is *hoà*, which is found in *hoà bình* (peace), *cộng hoà* (republic), and *hoà âm* (homophony or musical accompaniment).

Hoàng Nguyên Nhuận argues that the contradictory nature of *homo ludens* exhibits similarities with *công án* (typically *koan* in English-language literature) used in Zen Buddhist practice. *Koan* exist as stories, maxims, or colloquy taken from biographies or other records of important individuals or masters who have conflicting life experiences (Foult 2000: 16). Contemplating these stories during meditation yields an understanding of the complicated nature of existence and, ultimately, achieves balance and concentration (Ibid: 23).³ In modern interpretations, events and circumstances from everyday life serve as conditions on which one might meditate (Ibid: 26). Hoàng argues further that a music album titled *Thiền Ca* (Meditation) by the well-known composer Phạm Duy serves as musical *koan* to be interpreted and evaluated for the purposes of meditation.⁴

Because Vietnamese readers would not have necessarily been familiar with Huizinga's work, Hoàng suggests that *homo ludens* might be understood through the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre would have been known to some Vietnamese audiences who read his 1938 novel *La nausée* (*Nausea*) in French or in Vietnamese as *Buồn nôn*. The main character of the novel, Antoine Roquentin, cannot escape a feeling of nausea as he makes his way through his everyday life; he actually first encounters his nausea in Vietnam (or what was then known as Indochina). Leslie Barnes argues that

Faced with its pure materiality, Roquentin is no longer able to structure the root [of a tree] consciously according to its usefulness or its potentiality and can only access its obscene, naked, overflowing fleshiness. Existence, for Sartre, is this contingent, weighty mass, this excess that resists conscious mediation or ordering.

(2014: 251n67)

Barnes raises several themes here to which Hoàng alludes in his description of *homo ludens*—specifically, the way that existence cannot be ordered, involves contradictory concepts, and must be interrogated in its raw naked form. “[M]ore subtly” than Sartre, Hoàng proposes,

Huizinga ... indicated that the nature of existence is labor—*homo faber*; reflection—*homo sapiens*; the nature of existence is *hí lộng*—*homo ludens*. Nothing is often taken seriously in the meaning of this term. But we do not typically find it “stripped down naked.” *Hí lộng* only appears following a harsh and intense bodily [or world] existence. *Hí lộng* also primarily is tenet of a Buddhist life—that of impermanence and non-being. If the beginning of the road is harsh and intense, then consciousness suffers and if the end of the road is harsh and intense, then consciousness is ephemeral; therefore, the strong on the highway develop incrementally if it occurs as a matter of course.⁵

The verb *hí lộng* indicates a kind of play although not the *chơi* or *cách đàn* described above. Nguyễn Phúc An, a scholar of Chinese literature and Vietnamese music, indicates that the Chinese antecedent *xì nòng* (戲弄) has wide contemporary usage in spoken Chinese as “to tease” or “to poke fun,” but its usage in Vietnamese is relegated to literature (personal communication with the author, May 3, 2017). The Vietnamese term “is understood as a verb ... to craft a story or to enlarge/widen something in the story—something happy, something sad, or something disturbing” (Ibid). The meaning of the *homo ludens* character, as understood by Hoàng, appears to be a combination of both. *Hí lộng* bridges Vietnamese, Chinese, and European understandings of existence; it is used to better articulate the nature of existence in its raw, bodily, and spiritual forms. Play is beautiful, but it also necessarily is ugly; these seeming contradictions ultimately give life to local music communities in southern Vietnam.

Music of Talented Players

The southern Vietnamese traditional music genre *đờn ca tài tử*, known as “music for diversion” or the “music of talented amateurs,” has its origins in play and humor. In the late nineteenth century, musicians gathered after ritual or theatre performances to improvise on the tunes they just had performed or had learned in their hometowns in central or southern Vietnam. One musician once summarized this as *lúc rảnh lúc đàn* or “whenever you are free, you play” (Lộc [pseudonym], interview with the author, January

1, 2015). This approach to performance ultimately led musicians to attach the term *tài tử* to this practice of *đờn ca* (playing and singing). The term *tài tử* means, literally, “talented gentleman,” but it has a more pervasive colloquial meaning in southern Vietnam as “whenever one feels like doing something.” One might finish one’s homework or go to work whenever one wishes; such an individual, here, would be called “tài tử” (Cannon 2016: 142). Importantly, those who spoke to me about this term do not describe *tài tử* as *lười* (lazy): They believe that one simply does not have the *cảm hứng* (inspiration) yet to complete the task.

Inspiration, therefore, is important in the creation of *đờn ca tài tử* and led to the experimentation that ultimately developed the genre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Musicians brought instruments from other parts of Vietnam and southern Vietnamese ritual traditions to generate early scenes of performance. A written description of a performance setting in 1910 indicates that an ensemble includes a *đàn kìm* (moon-shaped lute with two strings and a relative of the Chinese *yueqin*); a *đàn tỳ bà* (pear-shaped lute with four strings and a close relative of the Chinese *pipa*); a *đàn độc huyền* (monochord known as *đàn bầu* in southern Vietnam after 1975 [Nguyễn Thuyết Phong, interview with the author, January 9, 2015]); an *ông tiêu* (or *động tiêu* end-blown flute and a close relative of the Chinese *xiao*); a *đàn cò* (spiked fiddle with two strings known as the *đàn nhị* elsewhere in Vietnam and a relative of the Chinese *erhu*); a *đàn tranh* (sixteen-stringed zither [at that time] and a relative of the Chinese *guzheng*); and a singer (Trần Văn Khải 1970: 81–82). During the late French colonial period, musicians incorporated imported instruments, such as the mandolin, violin, guitar, and *hạ uy cầm* (Hawaiian lap steel guitar), as well as modified foreign instruments, including the *ghi ta phím lõm* (also *ghi ta lõm phím* or guitar with a scooped fingerboard) (Cannon 2016: 155–156) (Figure 24.1).



Figure 24.1 A *đờn ca tài tử* performance featuring the *đàn cò*, *đàn kìm*, *ghi ta phím lõm*, and *đàn tranh* (photo by the author, January 6, 2015).

New melodies and expansions of older melodies from other genres generate a very rich repertoire of pieces performed as *đờn ca tài tử*. Although some musicians argue that twenty foundational pieces known as *bản tổ gồm* comprise the core *đờn ca tài tử* repertoire, these are lengthy works. Performances of “Xàng xê” (Do Re), for example, last as long as twenty minutes, and recordings of “Giang Nam cửu khúc” (Nine Branches of the Southern River) last for over thirty-five minutes. For this reason, musicians play either excerpts of the longer works in more informal performance settings or one of the vast array of shorter pieces incorporated into the *đờn ca tài tử* repertoire.

Music scholars organize various systems for classifying the wide variety of works included in *đờn ca tài tử*. These systems indicate the diverse array of musical resources incorporated into the genre as a result of play. Huỳnh Thúc Kháng’s system places pieces into ten categories where each category is listed in order from *nhứt* (one) to *thập* (ten):

Nhứt Lý (folksongs from all over Vietnam)

Nhì Ngâm (tunes that accompany declaimed poetry)

Tam Nam (the Nam [southern and melancholy] mode pieces)

Tứ Oán (the Oán [powerfully sad] mode pieces)

Ngũ Điểm (the Bắc [northern and happy] mode pieces)

Lục Xuất (old and new pieces from central and southern Vietnam, including those from *cải lương* [renovated theatre])

Thất Chánh (the seven *nhạc lễ* [southern ritual music] pieces)

Bát Ngự (pieces from southern Vietnam)

Cửu Nhĩ (pieces from southern Vietnam)

Thập Thủ Liên Hườn (pieces drawn from the central Vietnamese *ca nhạc Huế* [amateur music] and *nhạc cung đình* [court music] traditions).

(adopted from Kiều Tấn 2002: 278–285)

Kiều Tấn later proposes a simplified system that includes (1) *bản rời* (lit. fallen pieces) or pieces augmented significantly, such as works adopted from older genres of music, and (2) *bản sáng tác mới* or newly composed pieces. The second category includes two of the most famous works of *đờn ca tài tử*, titled “Dạ cổ hoài lang” (“Listening to the Sound of the Night Drum, I Think of My Husband”) and “Vọng cổ” (“Nostalgia for the Past”) (2002: 285–286). The latter composition developed from the former, although musicians continue to perform both today. Musicians first experimented around 1930 with expanding the first work; they doubled its length, taking the twenty-two-beat phrases of “Dạ cổ hoài lang” and making a work of twenty-four-beat phrases called “Vọng cổ hoài lang.” By the late 1930s, the work had doubled in size again and became “Vọng cổ”; expansion continued after that (Cannon 2012: 145–148).⁶

This culture of play through experimentation continues into the early twenty-first century. I evaluate two cases here, both of which involve the seemingly contradictory—but still necessary—nature of play. The first example summarizes the long-term research and musical experimentation of Trung, a pseudonym for a flute player in Hồ Chí Minh City who I have known since 2012. The second example examines an afternoon of performing *đờn ca tài tử*, which I attended in Cần Thơ, the largest city in the Mekong Delta, in January 2015.

Play in the Twenty-First Century

Trung is a self-professed amateur musician who teaches Vietnamese and Western flute practice. He also works to change the method of constructing the Vietnamese *động tiêu* (end-blown flute) so musicians are able to perform an expanded repertoire of works. His sense of locality emerges in similar ways to those described by Stokes (2008) where Trung assimilates the global to craft a more engaged local community. He works in a multilingual and globally connected business office during the day, and while dedicating time during the evening and on weekends to music teaching and performance, he considers the ways that traditional music might survive through strategic adoption of non-Vietnamese musical models.

Trung has a deep interest in southern Vietnamese traditional music but worries for its survival. During a conversation in December 2014, he diagnosed the lack of interest in *đờn ca tài tử* as stemming from its extensive repertoire of “sad music”; indeed, he relayed two stories to me that exemplified the standard understanding of *đờn ca tài tử* among many urban Vietnamese. When he was fifteen, he started learning a few *đờn ca tài tử* melodies; one day, while practicing, his mother walked into his room and joked, “mày thất tình hả?” (“are you lovesick?”). The construction of this question is revealing. Rather than invoking the mother/son relationship with the pronouns *mẹ/con*, she used the *mày/tạo* pronoun set more often found between close friends who make fun of one another. Although this music often indexes lovesick and forlorn feelings, the question is playful and dismissive, indicated here with an impertinent *hả* (lit. huh?) at the end. The second story occurred when he was in his early twenties, following the purchase of a *đàn cò*, which musicians perform both in *đờn ca tài tử* settings and at early-morning Buddhist funerals. While practicing in the house, his father once asked him to stop, arguing that no one was about to die, and he therefore did not need the sound in the house.

To enable the survival of *đờn ca tài tử*, Trung argues that musicians must add new melodies to the repertoire. These melodies should be engaging to young performers and listeners in ways that connect global sounds circulating in contemporary Vietnam to the structures of tradition. This genre would be a more sustainable music if it included “heroic, angry, and comedic” melodies in his opinion (interview

with the author, December 17, 2014). The melodies of *đờn ca tài tử* suffer from “smoothness” or serenity, while Chinese works for the *xiao* (end-blown flute), *dizi* (transverse flute), and *guzheng* (zither) are more adventurous, exciting, and even “violent” (interview with the author, August 18, 2013).

Contemporary experimentation takes place in an information-rich environment where amateur and professional scholars alike look for connections to non-Vietnamese musical forms to serve as inspiration. Trung investigates the many historical connections between various forms of Chinese and Vietnamese musics. The source of the *động tiêu* is the Chinese *xiao*, and many Vietnamese tunes in *đờn ca tài tử* developed from Chinese models. The Vietnamese versions have changed considerably over the generations, he mentions quickly in conversation, but he does spend significant time looking for readily available media items and texts that might serve as additional inspiration for the Vietnamese flute (interview with the author, July 30, 2013). He scours YouTube videos of *kunqu* and other Chinese opera forms, listening for melodies that appear similar to Vietnamese tunes, and even takes Chinese language lessons to understand these materials better. Lastly, he looks for ways to draw from Western transverse flute performance practice; he once asked me to bring books on and compact discs of the Western transverse flute, including the complete series of preparation guides for the Royal Conservatory (Canada), so he could study the method of teaching the flute to Canadian students.

To add to the search for an expanded repertoire, Trung has worked over the past several years to develop ways for Vietnamese *động tiêu* players to accurately produce the pitch content of Chinese and Western pieces. In the process, he developed a new *hệ bấm* (finger system) for the *động tiêu*. This system added finger holes to the pre-existing bamboo flute to allow players access to a greater number of pitches. This has involved significant trial and error, but he has succeeded in producing a number of beautiful instruments that are, in his words, “hài hoà phối hợp” (reflective of a “harmonious combination”) and “hài hoà cả hai tính chất” (“harmonize the properties of both”); note here that he invokes the term *hoà* (harmony) to describe the bridging of Vietnamese and Western musical aesthetics. With his improvements, musicians are able to play Vietnamese, Western, and even Chinese music with equal effectiveness (interview with the author, July 30, 2013).

Conflicts emerged, however, from this experimentation and play. He introduced his developments of the finger system to faculty and friends at the Hồ Chí Minh Conservatory and the Huế Music Institute in central Vietnam, but most dismissed his efforts. In addition, members of an online forum for music practitioners, which he helped to create and for which he served as an administrator, attacked him recently for his attempts to bridge Vietnamese, Chinese, and Western traditions of music performance; in their view, he should have worked instead to preserve the essence of Vietnamese traditional music. Even when people disagreed with him, he tried to learn from their perspectives:

My way of approaching this is like this.... Between the chronicles of history, between the things that I have heard and following discussions with people I have met during my study of the market and of nature, etc., I try to understand them and their selfish mentalities about the product that I have made.

(interview with the author, July 30, 2013)

He ultimately resigned as administrator but found his departure refreshing when he realized he could spend more time working on his improvements to the *động tiêu* (interview with the author, December 17, 2014).

Trung does not cast aside so easily the nationalist overtones of the criticisms leveled against him. These criticisms seemed to turn especially vitriolic when the legality of Chinese claims over islands in the South China Sea (or Eastern Sea) started appearing frequently in Vietnamese media. In the online forum, individuals began to question his identity as a Vietnamese musician because he took such an interest in Chinese musical models. He also relayed a story of a mutual friend who had, until 2014, studied music as a secondary school student at a conservatory in China. The individual had been planning to enter the collegiate program at one of the top conservatories in China when his family demanded that he return home. The performance style of this individual, including the fingerings used to craft pitch content, was criticized severely for being “too Chinese” (interview with the author, December 17, 2014). Trung and

our mutual friend did not aim to become “more Chinese”; however, they still were found at fault for seeking inspiration from a Chinese state that many Vietnamese perceive as seeking products over which it can claim ownership.

Genre in the Mekong Delta

The long history of interaction between Vietnamese and Chinese people remains embraced in southern Vietnam, an area that features a diverse population of Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer Krom, and Chăms populations. Much of what is now southern Vietnam was part of the Khmer Empire through the early seventeenth century, but saw an influx of new populations following various waves of Chinese migrants and the arrival of Vietnamese populations during the *Nam tiến*—a kind of manifest destiny that encouraged Vietnamese to leave the Red River Delta in northern Vietnam, conquer and occupy lands of the Champa (Chăm) Empire in present-day central Vietnam, settle Khmer lands, and ultimately reach the Gulf of Thailand (Cannon 2016: 151). Museums and local academics often tout the narrative that Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer Krom, and Chăms coexist in harmony and work together to create cultural practices that distinguish the region from other parts of Vietnam. The genres, modes, and pieces certainly characterize a different cultural sphere. Mainstream musical practice in southern Vietnam, however, remains under the control of Vietnamese participants with a sense of Vietnamese nationalism; indeed, Philip Taylor points to the ways that Vietnamese populations relegate Khmer Krom and Chăms populations to the periphery, compounding the discrimination and the lack of upward mobility felt by this population for several generations (Taylor 2007, 2008). Like other parts of Vietnam, television programs, public concerts, and even private get-togethers primarily feature music on Vietnamese instruments and in the Vietnamese language; when Khmer or Chinese music appears, it appears framed as part of the Vietnamese nation.

This framing occurs as the result of play; here, I expand observations published elsewhere on *đờn ca tài tử*-as-genre (Cannon 2016: 150). I focus on my interactions and observations of Lộc, a friend and local

academic, who has introduced me to a number of *đòn ca tài tử* musicians and performance locations in Cần Thơ. Wherever we go in Cần Thơ, he always knows a few people in the room, introduces them to me, and encourages them to sing a song or two with us. He embodies, in many ways, the ideal participant in *đòn ca tài tử* circles: effusive, knowledgeable about a wide variety of Vietnamese music, able to recall the pieces known by friends and acquaintances met by happenstance, and a willing consumer of beer.

On a trip in January 2015, I met Lộc and a friend of his at a restaurant serving *bánh xèo* (a kind of large shared pancake) on a dirt road adjacent to one of the many concrete bridges that cross tributaries of the Hậu River that flows through Cần Thơ. As the taxi navigated through a sea of beeping motorbikes, I noticed a number of smaller establishments with advertisements for various types of beer and musical instruments hanging on the back walls. A number of these areas exist in Cần Thơ, where one goes with friends to drink beer, play music, and sing songs. Each area has a different character; compared to others that sat on the Hậu River or its main tributary, this area struck me as drab and uninspiring. The *bánh xèo* was excellent, however, and these areas provided respite from the midday sun. After eating, we relocated to one of the small drinking establishments, and Lộc quickly started making telephone calls. He often did this before a performance to invite friends and former students to meet us. When he finished, we ordered beer and waited. His friend found a broken *ghi ta phím lõm* and started to work the two remaining strings to determine if he could produce any melody. It was possible, but after a few beers, the instrument only served a percussive purpose.

An hour passed and a young woman arrived. She referred to Lộc as *thầy* (male teacher); however, they never made clear what she had studied from him. She worked as a gymnastics instructor and also taught the Khmer language. She identified as Khmer Krom, originally from Kiên Giang, an adjacent province that borders the Gulf of Thailand to the south and Cambodia to the west. “Tell him who your grandfather was!” an increasingly intoxicated Lộc yelled, so she responded that her maternal grandfather was French; she quickly added that she only spoke Khmer and Vietnamese.

Lộc then poured her a beer and encouraged her to sing a song in the Khmer language. She started, and he immediately asked her to stop so he could pull out his mobile phone to record the performance. He

fiddled with his phone, looking for the recording application; “okay, I found it,” he said and then gestured to her that she could start. She began with a passage of heightened speech, much like those found in performances of *yike* (Khmer theatre) or *cải lương* (southern Vietnamese theatre).⁷ Without a knowledge of Khmer, we understood the text only generally as a description of the performance scene. We focused instead on her movements, which appeared idiomatic of certain genres of Khmer court and theatre dance. She pivoted her head to the side, pushed her thumb and index finger together, and flared out the rest of her fingers; she held this position for a moment before turning her head or her hands slightly to indicate the start of a new phrase. When she finished, my companions erupted into applause; she thanked them, took a sip of beer, and started the song.

The song elicited greater participation from my companions as it enabled them to play along. The broken guitar player initially swayed back and forth, and my friend provided rhythmic accompaniment by tapping his foot and cracking his knuckles. At a certain point, both men determined a rhythmic pattern from the melodic material. They played a *dat-dat-dum* pattern, emphasizing the first, second, and third beats of what they heard as a four-beat cycle. The singer immediately followed this, de-emphasizing the fourth beat to align with the pattern crafted by the two men. Once they realized that they were in sync, their movements became more enthusiastic, and the tempo increased slightly.

The three performers did not agree on all performance parameters, which I found true especially for melodic content. At the start of the song, Lộc recognized parts of the melody and occasionally joined the singer at the start of the chorus. Importantly, she sang a mode not found in Vietnamese music, so he had difficulty matching pitch. When he tried to leap from one pitch to another, he sang too large or too small an interval but seemed to try to fit the Khmer melody into a Vietnamese structure. On this point, she did not relent, holding to her pitch and forcing my friend to laugh and stop singing.

As the afternoon continued, a general pattern of behavior emerged: A group of male musicians performed with one woman singer, whom the men asked to sing particular songs. Following the conclusion of a song, they encouraged her to drink more beer and show us pictures of her and her friends on her mobile telephone. As they became more and more intoxicated, I ultimately determined that I could no longer

remain complicit in the exotification of the Khmer identity and the relegation of the women participants to puppets of male desire. I left my friend some money to cover the liquor bill and took a taxi back to my hotel.

This performance setting is typical in the Mekong Delta, where musicians negotiate *đờn ca tài tử* as a series of thematic loops negotiated in performance. These loops help maintain *hí lộng*, or a structure of play, in southern Vietnam; through play, musicians articulate particular ideas in performance concerning urban/rural dichotomies, gender, and Vietnamese nationalism (Cannon 2016). First, a group of musicians meet in a performance space on the periphery of an urban space in Cần Thơ—a location where rice fields meet the city center. The exchange or conflict between urban and rural dispositions was not as present here as in other performance settings, but I simply note that those in attendance brought a different style to the space where cohesive middle ground is found. Second, a group of men invite a woman to attend a performance; indeed, the performance could not start until her arrival. She then is encouraged to drink beer and sing at the urgent requests of the male participants in order to solidify the space as appropriate for the creation of *đờn ca tài tử*. Lastly, the men ask the woman to perform her Khmer identity through the performance of a Khmer song; in addition to this song, she later sang “Lý Chiều Chiều” (Song of a Distant Afternoon), a song with multiple versions in central and southern Vietnam that some attribute to the Chăm people, who once ruled over present-day central Vietnam but who were defeated during the *Nam tiến* migration of ethnic Vietnamese southward (Lê Ngọc Canh and Tô Đông Hải 1995: 113). She performed ethnicity, then, under the observation and guidance of the Vietnamese participants, to create a sense of conviviality for them.

Conclusion

Ethnomusicologists have a long-standing practice of invoking the first person in scholarship. This remains a significant way for ethnomusicologists to place themselves into ethnography and articulate the close interpersonal relationships built with music-makers. In a discussion of local musicking, we become

part of the community, serving as inspiration for certain musicians and possibly preventing inspiration for others. Deborah Wong cogently articulates the goals of this method:

I work within an expectation of cultural construction amidst the free flow of power, but I believe that the best way to get at its workings is through close, sustained interaction with the people doing it and an obligation to address their chosen self-representations.

(2003: 125)

Like Gaunt (2006)'s work, cited in the introduction, Wong incorporates herself into ethnography to understand power and representation through sound.

This article adopts this trajectory and focuses on the work of local musicians in southern Vietnam who play in contradictory but sustainable ways. I investigate the way that *hí lộng*, or play, enables musicians to explore their existence within a crowded field of sound. Play generates structure, proposing new instruments and tunes for use in *đờn ca tài tử* performance spaces. Play encourages experimentation where musicians adopt non-Vietnamese models and apply them to Vietnamese music. Play solidifies the thematic loops of genre, which stimulates inventive music and disagreeable representations of gender, ethnicity, and nation. In keeping the vein of contradiction, then, local musical practice through play brings the distant near and makes the near distant. The circulation enabled through play sustains southern Vietnamese traditional music for continued future use.

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¹ I extend sincere thanks to Pak Sumarsam (2015) for first introducing me to the significant possibilities of using *homo ludens* to evaluate musical practice.

² The most widely known example of this in the Western imagination is *ying* and *yang*.

³ Contrary to the Wikipedia and other common definitions of *koan*, T. Griffith Foulk advocates that these phrases should not be understood as a “‘riddle’ or a ‘nonsensical question’ posed to a student with a demand for an answer” (2000: 26). Such understandings fundamentally misunderstand both the history and purposes of *koan*.

⁴ Originally published in 1993, the article appears more permanently in a collection on the music of composer Phạm Duy. Phạm Duy (1921–2013) is arguably the most famous composer of Vietnamese music. He first composed works for the resistance movement against French colonization in northern Vietnam but left in the 1950s and moved to Sài Gòn where he lived during the Second Indochina War (also known as the Vietnam War). At the end of the war, he moved to the United States, where he lived until 2005 when he returned to Vietnam until his death. His most well-known work is the song cycle *Con đường cái quan* (Voyage through the Motherland) (Wong 2003).

⁵ All translations from Vietnamese are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ The piece looms large in southern Vietnamese traditional music, and extensive scholarship has been published in Vietnamese and English on the composition, its development, and its regulation (Dujunco 1991; Trainor 1977; Trần Kiệt Tường 1957; Trần Phước Thuận 2002; for its regulation, see P. Taylor 2001).

⁷ Lư Nhất Vũ and Lê Giang (1981: 113) contend that *yike* (known in Vietnamese as *dù kê*) influenced the development of southern Vietnamese *cải lương* renovated opera in the early twentieth century.