

Teaching Vietnamese Music Through Linguistic and Folklore Context

by

Phan Gia Anh Thu, *Teachers College, Columbia University* &
Ngô Thanh Nhân, *New York University, Temple University & Folk Arts–Cultural Treasures Charter School*

for

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This report is a case study of a community music program which incorporates folk songs, folklore, linguistic analysis, and technology to teach Vietnamese music on Vietnamese 16-string zithers, *đàn tranh*, to community members in the Bronx of New York City. This free program serves members of the Vietnamese diaspora in New York City as well as non-Vietnamese beginner music learners, organized by Mekong NYC and NYC Parks. Based on a universal platform—strings of sounds, of language and music entwined in folk songs, a theoretical framework is found where Western music theories, Vietnamese music theories, phonology, and Vietnamese linguistics can interoperate. First, using an automated *notated pitch/intensity contour* (in millisecond, Hertz, and Decibel) graph of a sung folk song, from a peak frequency spectrogram, onsets of sung syllables are identified, the authors then identify the melodic patterns of each sung words. These individual sung words' contour graph then serves as data for deeper analysis. The results suggest the co-relation of six Vietnamese linguistic tones to the musical ornamentations (i.e., vibrato, glide, bending, etc.) which explains many characteristics of Vietnamese music. Finally, the program's curriculum is contextualized by folklores associated with each song's content. This has proved to be likely to facilitate learners' memory and comprehension of unfamiliar musical traditions.

The presentation includes demonstrations of musical excerpts, folk tales, music *notated pitch/intensity contour* graph, music tablatures, and result highlights of the automated computer program.

Keywords: community music, folklore, folk songs, pitch/intensity contour graphs, Vietnamese linguistic tones.

Short biographies:

- **Phan Gia Anh Thu**, Ph.D. candidate, received her M.A. in music education, and Ed.M. from Teachers College, Columbia University. She plays the piano, Vietnamese *đàn bầu* (monochord), *đàn nhị* (two-string fiddle), and *đàn kìm* (moon lute). Her research interests focus on improving life quality of underserved communities, especially Southeast Asian and cancer children, through music, visualization, and traditional games. She is an Artist-in-Residence at Mekong NYC and a fellow at the *Center for Vietnamese Philosophy, Culture & Society* of Temple University. Her goal is to create a curriculum which could minimize the cost, time, and effort of teachers and students without sacrificing the quality of musical experiences.
Email: agp2132@tc.columbia.edu and tuj67921@temple.edu
- **Ngô Thanh Nhân**, Ph.D. Linguistics, a scholar of New York University *Linguistic String Project* (1984-present), a fellow and Adjunct Associate Director of *Temple University Center for Vietnamese Philosophy, Culture & Society* (Philadelphia, 2006-present), and a teacher of *Đàn tranh Ensemble* (16-string zither) at the *Folk Arts – Cultural Treasures Charter School*, Grades 3-8 (Philadelphia, 2009-present), and the *Mekong Arts & Music* (New York, 2013-present).
Email: nhan@cs.nyu.edu or nhan@temple.edu