

FOREWORD

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For the publication of the doctoral thesis titled,

Music Ministry: The Inculturation of Liturgical Vocal Music in Vietnam

by Dr. Joseph Nguyễn Xuân Thảo, OFM

In my life of teaching musicology at many universities in Europe and America, I have not yet had the opportunity to read such a thesis about which I feel as satisfied in regard to its musicological excellence as this thesis.

First of all, I was surprised at the abundance of the sources Rev. Xuân Thảo researched to accomplish his doctoral thesis.

He got in touch with choirmasters through his survey questionnaire, as well as with many data sources concerning Catholic communities, and presented his research with precise facts and figures through statistical tables.

The author read a huge number of books and articles in English, French, and Vietnamese concerning “Vietnamese Folksongs and Traditional Music.” He fully understood the content of the sources he used. This is evident when he used citations of my own books and articles.

Moreover, he thoroughly investigated many Vietnamese traditional folksongs from the Three Regions of Vietnam, with accurate musical transcriptions in modern notation, relating to Language (pitch/tones and plain/inflective tone rule in poetic structure), to Literature (content of poems, interesting characteristics in poems in standard and varied 6-8 meter), and to Music (sound pitches, scales including the formation of pentatonic scale, even the “Tam phân tởn ích” (the Chinese minus 1/3, plus 1/3 rule) modal systems together with all the professional terminology used by traditional specialists such as “giọng, điệu (modal system), hơi (modal nuance), dạng (aspect/formation),” poetry rhythm, and music rhythm). The author accurately points out the relationships between language pitch/tones and melodic contour.

When summing up his own observations, Rev. Xuân Thảo is very cautious, modest, regarding with respect the viewpoints of precedent researchers and remaining objective in his data analysis through scientific method.

Especially, his musical notation is very exact according to ethnomusicologists’ style.

For example: After the Sol clef, he puts constitutive accidentals in key signature to indicate the tonality, say a B flat for F key. In reality, the accidental Bb is there only for the purpose of convenience, reminding us of F key/position, but it does not flatten all the B’s of the song to a semi tone. From the view of a Vietnamese traditional musician, note Re is Hò; note Sol is Xang; note Xi is sharpened Cồng. That is why he puts in parentheses the accidental B flat in the key signature: (b).

He transcribed âm già (sharpened sounds) and âm non (flattened sounds) in traditional folksongs by adding, respectively, a little upward or downward arrow to indicate the real pitch of those sounds.

In addition, his translation of Vietnamese texts into English is very faithful and often preserves the poetic quality of Vietnamese folksongs. The terminology is very accurate, the style very simple, the content very concise.

Following are, at least, three especial points I would like to mention:

1. No scholar has yet grasped professor Hải Linh’s thoughts, aesthetic viewpoints, sound knowledge, and the value of Hải Linh’s compositions as well as Rev Xuân Thảo.

2. For the first time, the author presents in the whole a satisfactory view about the diversity of ‘cung kinh’ [prayer cantillation formulas] and ‘cung sách’ [book-reading chanting formulas] in Catholic Vietnam, and especially of the folk-based religious hymns, which so far have rarely been mentioned anywhere.
3. Regarding the linguistics, for many decades, I have seen the richness of the ‘tiếng đệm’ [added vocables/morphemes] in Vietnamese folksongs and have desired that some Vietnamese researcher would take the trouble to analyze and classify them and define their functions, but nobody has paid attention to doing that work until now. But now in his thesis, Rev. Xuân Thảo, for the first time, has classified different “tiếng đệm.”

A. Vocables without semantic meaning:

+ Tiếng đưa hơi (vocalizing vocable): *í a, ối a...*

+ Tiếng đệm lót (inserted vocable): *là, mà, rằng, này, thời, ấy, chứ, chứ mấy, ấy mấy ...*

B. Morphemes with semantic meaning:

+ Tiếng phụ nghĩa (enhancing morpheme): There are 4 categories:

a. Nối kết (conjunctive morpheme) : *rồi lại, cho bằng, mà này ...*

b. Than gọi (apostrophic morpheme) : *oi người oi, oi chàng oi, oi bậu oi, oi nường oi ...*

c. Tiếng âm nhạc (musical morpheme) : *tình tình tang, tang non tang tính, tang tích tịch, buong buong cắc cắc, tung tung, hò, xự, xang, xê, cồng, liu...*

d. Tiếng ru hò (Lulling/calling morpheme) : *ầu ơi, à ơi, ta ru hò, dô dô hò, hò khoan, dô ta, a li hò lờ, bớ hò bớ hụi, là hụi là khoan ...*

+ Tiếng lặp lại (repeated morpheme) :

a. Repetition simple : *Con cò (cò) bay lả (lả) bay la ...*

b. More complex:

- *Chồng chài (là chài) vợ lưới ...* preceded by the inserted vocable ‘là’

- *Mấy khi (a là khi) khách đến ...* preceded by the inserted vocable ‘a là’

c. Reversed repetition of a single morpheme:

- *Ở giữa mây trắng chung quanh (vàng) mây vàng...* the morpheme (*vàng*) is repeated and placed, not in the normal order ‘mây vàng vàng’, but in the reversed order ‘vàng mây vàng’

- *Là đồ i a đồ năng, (bông rồi lại) mấy bông ...* followed by the conjunctive morphem ‘rồi lại’ instead of ‘(bông) mấy bông.’

He also mentions the reversed repetition of a phrase (group of morphemes), such as placing the last four morphemes in poem line 6 at the beginning of the poem line as it is usually sung by Vietnamese folk people: (*Có đám mây xanh*), *trên trời (thời) có đám mây xanh*, whereas the original poem line 6 is *Trên trời có đám mây xanh*. This technique of textual variation is usually found not only in Hát Trống Quân (Alternating tune with a ‘military drum’), but also in Hát Châu Văn (Incantation ritual chant), Ca Trù (Northern Chamber music singing). Folk people usually name the technique “Vay trả tự thân” (literally, borrowing and return by itself), which is different from the technique “Vay trả thường” (lit., ordinary borrowing and return) that is, to ‘borrow’ poem line 6 of the following couplet to make it the ending phrase for the precedent couplet, and when one sings the next couplet, one returns the poem line 6 that one has just borrowed.

Rev. Nguyen Xuan Thao covers many other very interesting features, such as the classification of Hò chants (call songs), the presentation of different formations/aspects of the pentatonic scale, discussion on the method of “chuyển điệu” (modal modulation), “chuyển vị” (metabole) (tonale modulation, transposition in French), which we usually translate as “chuyển hệ” (because ‘metabole’ is from the German term ‘Systemwechsel,’ meaning change of system, ‘chuyển hệ thống’). So far, few scholars have mentioned these subjects.

In my judgment, this is an outstanding work that contains very valuable scientific research on “Tìm hiểu, phân tích Dân ca và Thánh ca Việt Nam” (information on and analysis of Vietnamese folksongs and Liturgical songs). I completely support the publication of this thesis as a book on Ethnomusicology.

Written in the District of Bình Thạnh on April 18, 2008

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