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# The Choreography of Gender in Traditional Vietnamese Music

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FACULTY OF FINE AND PERFORMING ARTS | LUND UNIVERSITY





## The Choreography of Gender in Traditional Vietnamese Music



# The Choreography of Gender in Traditional Vietnamese Music

Nguyễn, Thanh Thủy



**LUND**  
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

by due permission of the Faculty of Fine and Performing Arts,  
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<b>Title and subtitle</b> <b>The Choreography of Gender in Traditional Vietnamese Music</b>		
<b>Abstract</b>  <p>This Ph.D. project in artistic research is concerned with the function of gesture in traditional Vietnamese music. Building on gender analysis of musical performance in TV shows, and further on autoethnographic inquiry throughout the artistic projects, the artistic output articulates a critical understanding of these practices. The aims of the project are to investigate the <i>social function and meaning of musical gesture</i> in traditional Vietnamese music, and to develop <i>artistic responses that articulate an individual voice</i>. The research questions that emerge from these conceptual and artistic aims are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What gender conventions can gesture analysis of musical performance unveil?</li> <li>2. In what ways can music created through the choreographic structuring of movement reveal and question gender conventions in musical performance?</li> <li>3. How can my performance, in intercultural and interdisciplinary artistic collaborations, challenge current gender norms and instigate change in practices of traditional Vietnamese music?</li> </ol> <p>The method and design of this Ph.D. project builds on qualitative analysis of gesture in musical performance, with particular emphasis on employing a gender perspective in this analysis. In the artistic work, analysis of gesture has constituted a point of departure for the creation of a series of intermedia works that seek to develop methods that combine the practices of choreography and musical composition. Intercultural collaboration has provided particular challenges and possibilities in the development of each of these works. The results of the artistic work are published online in <i>The Research Catalogue</i>.</p> <p>The outcomes of the project outline how gendered gesture is taught in higher music education in Vietnam, and taken together with the historical overview of how nationalism and communism has shaped the country, that this teaching has an immediate relation to nation branding. The teaching of traditional music is equally related to the commercialised views of women as it is grounded in the preservation of tradition. Further, the development of a practice of composing music using gestural-sonorous objects as material became the central artistic method throughout this Ph.D. project. It has offered novel possibilities of approaching gestural materials and creating new choreographies and music based on a critical approach to the image of women in popular media. The results finally suggest that intercultural and interdisciplinary artistic practice can propose social change, and provide counter images of traditionally gendered behaviour.</p>		
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Nguyễn, Thanh Thủy



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## Preface

This Ph.D. thesis is structured in two main components: (1) the scholarly text (which you are now reading), and (2) a series of multi-media expositions published online in *The Research Catalogue* (Nguyễn, 2019). These expositions are based on video documentation of music workshops, rehearsals and performances, as well as analyses of these materials, much of which culminates in a documentary film called *The Culture Soldiers*. It is highly recommended that readers first view the artistic work presented in *The Research Catalogue* (RC), including the documentary film, and thereafter examine the more conceptually driven narrative in this scholarly text, since this component will become far more intelligible (in terms of essential contextual understanding) when combined with the multi-media presentation.



## Chapter 1.

# Introduction and historical background

## 1.1 The life of female musicians in Hà Nội and a personal background

In November 2016, I returned from my country of residence (Sweden) to visit my country of birth (Vietnam), where I had studied traditional Vietnamese music for many years before entering the music Ph.D. program at Lund University. This particular research trip was to visit Hà Nội—during the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Vietnam National Academy of Music (VNAM)—to record a short documentary film that was eventually titled *The Culture Soldiers*.<sup>1</sup> The Academy has played a central role in the development of traditional Vietnamese music, defining how it is perceived in recent memory, and for me this was a chance to rethink much of what I had experienced there as a student, as well as how the music is changing across time. My artistic research project would ultimately find its focus as an investigation of the *social function and meaning of musical gesture* in traditional Vietnamese music, and development of *artistic responses that articulate an individual voice*, but how did I reach that point?

During the aforementioned visit, I interviewed many musicians who were among the very first teachers and students at VNAM. Additionally, I met Lê Mai, a younger *đàn tranh*<sup>2</sup> teacher and performer. She was born in the 1970s and is therefore about my age, graduating from VNAM in 2001, just a few years after me (1998). I spent an entire day with her, from morning to evening. I followed Lê Mai through all sorts of tasks, from seven in the morning when she took her son to school, and on through the day, as she would cross the city centre on her motorbike between rehearsals and

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<sup>1</sup> Since the Resistance War Against America, Vietnamese women have often been depicted as soldiers. In 1991, the Vietnamese government introduced a prestigious award to artists called *Huy chương Chiến sỹ Văn hoá* (the *Culture Soldier Medal*). Upon interviewing these female musicians, I increasingly felt that they all deserved such a reward, but were very unlikely to ever receive one.

<sup>2</sup> The *đàn tranh*, also called *đàn thập lục*, is a plucked zither of Vietnam, similar to the Chinese *guzheng*, the Japanese *koto*, the Korean *kayagum* and the Mongolian *yatga*. It has a long soundbox with steel strings, movable bridges and tuning pegs positioned on its top.

teaching, ending the day with a recording session for a late-night TV show. I recorded conversations with Lê Mai over lunch and dinner, as well as sometimes in breaks between rehearsals. At other times, I followed her from a distance, carefully observing and filming her busy day. I was struck by the similarities between her present-day situation and my life in Hà Nội back when I had lived there ten years ago. Just like me, Lê Mai was a divorced mother, busy with a successful career as a performer and teacher but at the same time living a lonely life full of multiple obligations, to the family, to her employers and to society.

When I watched Lê Mai's performance in the Vietnamese Television studio one night (in November 2016) I was reminded of many similar recording sessions I had made throughout my professional career in Hà Nội, up to 2012 when I moved to Sweden to start my Ph.D. studies. In 1998, I had received the first prize in the national *đàn tranh* competition in Hồ Chí Minh City. By winning that competition, I became a public representative of traditional Vietnamese music, often appearing on TV shows—still a novelty at the time in Vietnam—and in public concerts.<sup>3</sup> In these TV shows, I would always be recorded in scenic outdoor settings with waterfalls, romantic parks and so on, never on a concert stage. Even the department for traditional music in VNAM adopted the same aesthetics, as described here in a book chapter from 2013:

In 2001 the head of department at the *Vietnam National Academy of Music* decided to make a promotional DVD with traditional music. In it, they made me pose for a performance of a three-minute piece, and the recording of it brought me to two different provinces with scenic landscapes and put me into a lot of suffering, for instance when performing in a stream balancing dangerously on a float.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that I did not know how to swim at this time. Also, on the float I was bitten by insects that, together with my fear of falling into the water, made this video recording session a truly horrific experience despite the pastoral appearance it may have in the photo. (Östersjö & Nguyễn, 2013a, p. 90)

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<sup>3</sup> A typical production is found on YouTube, it was recorded by HTV (Hồ Chí Minh Television) in 2000, shot by a waterfall and a bonsai garden in Hồ Chí Minh City. Two excerpts are found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNhgCUk0LEA> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-y8NV3KA9w>

<sup>4</sup> See the video V4.10 in *The Research Catalogue* (RC).



**Fig. 1**  
Nguyễn Thanh Thủy in an outdoor setting for a DVD recording in Vietnam, 2001. Photo by Ngô Trà My.

Although I had become a celebrated artist, I did not have the freedom to choose how I should meet my audience. The performance culture, centered around these TV shows, has also developed particular gestures, which female students today learn when studying a traditional Vietnamese instrument, like the *đàn tranh*. In the documentary some excerpts from TV shows give a brief representation of these choreographies.<sup>5</sup> Since these shows are always recorded with play-back, the gestures in performance can be directed by the producer. With reference to Spivak’s classic feminist and post-colonial analysis of Baudelaire’s poem “Le Cygne”, in such a situation the male producer may be understood as a “male-operating-as-controlling-subject” while the female musician is interpreted as a “woman-manipulated-as-sign” (see further Spivak, 1999, p. 147-153). I interviewed Thanh Tâm, the first woman to become a professional musician on the *đàn bầu*,<sup>6</sup> and she comments on how the concert culture of traditional music reflects a shift in how music is experienced in Vietnam: “Before, we only listened to music. Today we listen and watch music at the same time” (Thanh Tâm, personal communication,

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<sup>5</sup> See documentary film *The Culture Soldiers* in the RC at 17:44 for this discussion (Nguyễn, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> The *đàn bầu* is a Vietnamese monochord. Its basic playing technique is harmonics, the pitch of which is modulated by shifting the basic pitch of the string. It is an instrument that perfectly embodies the fundamental building blocks of traditional Vietnamese music and allows the performer a wide range of ornamental figurations and *vibrati*.



2016).<sup>7</sup> This is why women have taken over the stage in Vietnam since they are widely perceived as “more beautiful”. Thanh Tâm further claims that this is particularly true when they wear traditional dress. While women are certainly the main representatives of traditional Vietnamese in contemporary society, Thanh Tâm refers to how, when she started to learn the *đàn bầu* in 1966, she often had to hide the instrument when she went to school, since other kids might bully her for learning an instrument which (at that time) was regarded as unsuitable for women.

In 2018, there were about 50 students at VNAM learning the *đàn tranh*, all of them female. The situation is reportedly similar in other lesser-known schools of music in Vietnam. In fact, many people today would be surprised if a boy wanted to learn the *đàn tranh*, yet all of my masters were men. Just fifty years ago only men were allowed play an instrument or to become an actor in the theatre forms commonly associated with this music. The shift has been gradual, but now women in Vietnam are involved in any kind of profession. Of course, I am happy to see this change, which has provided many opportunities for women to develop an independent life and have an income. Nevertheless, in this evolution towards different forms of public performance—toward female rather than male performers—a problematic tendency toward objectification of women can also be identified. It follows that in the next section I will examine in detail how the mediation of Vietnamese traditional music in performance culture and television shows has evolved in a way that weaves communist ideals together with elements of nationalism, Confucianism, post-colonial reformation, and market-oriented commercialisation.

## 1.2 The emergence of a concert culture and the role of female musicians in traditional Vietnamese music

The history of Vietnam is to a large extent also the history of colonialism and occupation from neighbouring countries, and its cultural history is deeply connected to the transnational and intercultural exchanges created through this violent past. At the same time, Vietnam is in itself a country with many minority cultures, but with a majority population that has dominated the economic and cultural development, the *Kinh* people. What is commonly referred to as “traditional Vietnamese music” are the ancient traditions of the majority population, and largely a music which is deeply intertwined with traditional theatre, and to a large extent developed in the royal courts of the Nguyễn dynasty and its antecedents.<sup>8</sup> Although Chinese notation

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<sup>7</sup> See documentary film *The Culture Soldiers* at 18:32 for this discussion (Nguyễn, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> There are some examples of purely instrumental music, such as funeral music, the *Nhã Nhạc Cung Đình Huế* (Court Music of Huế), and *Nhạc Tài Tử* (a form of chamber music with its roots in the far south of Vietnam). While most instrumental music in Vietnam is drawn from theatre music, *Nhạc Tài Tử* is an example of the opposite. This music, which was initially played in groups in

was used for much of this music from the 18th century until the beginning of the 19th century (Thùy, 1993), it is essentially orally transmitted. Vietnamese cultural norms, up to the creation of the socialist republic in 1954, developed along with a Confucianist and patriarchal society in which women were regarded as inferior and excluded from much of public life. Hence, musical performance and acting in theatre was largely a male occupation. Lauren Littlejohn observes how Confucius, in his writings, “insisted that music must be proper and musicians must be virtuous; thus, men concluded they were more capable and assumed superiority in the realm of music” (Littlejohn, 2017, p. 4). However, over the past sixty years, women have not only entered the scene of traditional music and theatre in Vietnam, but today, most concert performances are entirely dominated by women.

The history of this music, and the role of women performers within it, is essential for understanding the artistic work discussed in this doctoral dissertation. A significant step in this development was in 1927, when European colonial powers opened *The French Conservatory of the Far East* in Hà Nội (*Conservatoire Français d’Extrême-Orient*). A typical expression of the “mission to civilize” (*mission civilatrice*) which guided the French colonial politics during this period, the short-lived institution was in essence a failure. However, a select few from the Vietnamese upper class could thereby study western instruments, western music theory and composition (McClellan, 2009). Although the school was only open for three years (soon closed due to economic problems in France) this, along with music training in the many Catholic churches across the country, led to the emergence of a first generation of Vietnamese musicians with some training in European music. This included composers, classical musicians, and songwriters,<sup>9</sup> who built on western music theory and used western notation to create a (modern) Vietnamese new music called *Tân Nhạc* or *Nhạc cải cách* (Renovated Music). In 1930, the shrinking budget for the colonial government forced the conservatory to close down and, for many years, music teaching retreated again to the private sphere, lacking formal institutional support beyond the limited forms supported by the Catholic church.

Traditional music, such as it continued to be performed in rural villages, remained largely unaffected by western music until the 1950s. Paradoxically, the strong

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private settings in villages, became the grounds for a new form of theatre when, starting in the 1920s, theatrical elements were added to the music in performance, the outcome being a new form of theatre, with colonial influences, called *Cải Lương* (Reformed Theatre).

<sup>9</sup> For a further discussion of the fate of the conservatory, its colonialist background and its impact on Vietnamese musical society, see McClellan who summarizes the response among Vietnamese musicians in the following way: “There is no doubt that the Conservatory held an attraction for musically talented Vietnamese. The result of the performance examinations from 1929 and 1930 show Vietnamese students receiving many of the highest honors, and one year later at the recitals organized by the Conservatory, Vietnamese students outnumbered the French students chosen to perform as string soloists. By 1930 over twice as many native students as French students were enrolled in the Conservatory (137 to 60)” (McClellan, 2009, p. 322).

impact that formal structures borrowed from the West ultimately had on traditional Vietnamese music in modern times has its origins in the politics of the communist government, a transformation of traditional culture in the name of nationalism. In 1954, upon attaining liberation from the French, the North of Vietnam embarked on a dual mission: to build a new socialist country from the ashes of war and to simultaneously continue in civil war with the help from the world's largest communist power, the Soviet Union, since Moscow hoped to consolidate and expand communism in the Asian hemisphere through Vietnam. The Soviet Union gave moral, logistic and military support to North Vietnam by sending aid and specialists to the North, but they also accepted many Vietnamese students in higher education. When *Trường Âm Nhạc Việt Nam* (Vietnam School of Music, which later became the Hanoi Conservatory of Music) was established in 1956, very few teachers in the classical music department could have been regarded as having the level of musicianship necessary to meet international standards for such a position.<sup>10</sup> Many teachers were self-taught or had studied privately, or for a short time in the conservatory. However, with the possibility of studying in the Soviet Union, the level of classical performance rose quickly in the 1960s. In the traditional music department, there was only a single teacher when the school first opened, the old master Vũ Tuấn Đức, who was proficient on many different string instruments.

In *The Culture Soldiers* the *đàn nhị*<sup>11</sup> player Thao Giang describes the paradoxical situation for traditional music performance in the 1960s. The government wished to reintroduce traditional music in the cities, where, in the colonial days, it had been largely absent. However, the means for this was to bring the traditions into academia, where pedagogy was based on the use of western notation, and, the reintroduction of traditional music to audiences in the city took place in concert halls, a site where this music had not been presented before:

People immediately laughed when they saw me bringing the *đàn nhị* on stage. People had no idea that the *đàn nhị* could be played solo on stage, be played as the violin or the piano, or other western instruments. It was so unusual. I was so serious, took my seat and therefore people laughed again. They laughed at everything I did. They found it so strange. Throughout the long period of the anti-French resistance and the Indochina war, people didn't get to see traditional instruments like that. Only then, when we had built the conservatory of music. When I played the first note, people applauded cheerfully. It happened the same with the *đàn bầu* or the *đàn tranh*. People had no idea that the traditional instruments could be presented that way (Thao Giang, personal communication, 2016).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Two pianists, Thái Thị Liên, who had studied in the Prague Conservatory, and Vũ Thị Hiền, who had studied in Paris with Cortot, were notable exceptions.

<sup>11</sup> Also called *đàn cò*, is a Vietnamese bowed string instrument with two strings. The word "*nhị*" means "two" in Vietnamese. Its sound box is generally covered on one end with snakeskin.

<sup>12</sup> For this citation see *The Culture Soldiers* in the RC at 9:13.

In 1962 *Đoàn Ca Nhạc Dân Tộc Trung Ương* (the Central Traditional Music and Song Ensemble) was created, and this became the spark for the development of a new type of staged musical performance (Dao, 1977). In 1964, the Ministry of Culture decided to establish an orchestra of about 60 players, in collaboration with the Hanoi Conservatory of Music (Bộ Văn Hoá, 1964). The leading composer in the development of a repertory of “Renovated music” was Nguyễn Xuân Khoát, educated in the *Conservatory of the Far East* and the first president of the Vietnam Composers Association. Here we can see how the colonial heritage became entangled with competing ideologies in creation of a new, post-colonial, nationalist identity. The broader aim was not the preservation of traditional music, but rather its transformation into an ideologically-molded socialist folk culture to serve state interests. Tô Ngọc Thanh, General-Secretary of the Vietnam Folklore Association, captured the governmental view of traditional music with the following statement in 2002: “*Nhã nhạc* is considered by many to be an academic art and as such is not popular among people nowadays. Very few people understand enough about it to enjoy it fully. It is for this reason that it has almost disappeared” (Salemink, 2007, p. 565-566). In the *Vietnam Courier*, Dao Trong Tu further claimed that

[t]he repertory also needs to be improved in the direction of a deeper national character and to include the musical treasures to be found in the different traditional sung theatre genres—*cheo*, *tuong*, and *cai luong*—and the instruments of mountain minorities such as the Meo tongued flute, the Tay Nung guitar, while being open to influence by great classical forms in western music—sonate, symphony, concerto. (Dao, 1977, p. 30)

Ever since the 1950s, music in the north of Vietnam has been used as a vehicle for political propaganda. Many competitions and festivals were organized by the government with the aim of establishing a new type of socialist musical culture, both during the war and especially in its aftermath. Lê notes how “in the arts, many concepts and practices were borrowed from the Soviet Union and China. The Leninist and Maoist concept of arts as politically functional tools was adopted as the fundamental guideline for Vietnamese revolutionary arts” (1988, p. 94). Just as in the Soviet Union, partyism and nationalism were deemed to be fundamental virtues to be instilled through artistic production. Ingrid Bertleff, in a study of how the *đàn bầu* has been constructed as a symbol for nationalism by the regime, concluded that “[t]hese attempts have resulted in what is now known as neo-traditional music: the fusion of regionally and ethnically diverse musical practices into a homogenous music of national representation” (2006, p. 72). Still, nationalism was not the only driving force behind the development of this music. As noted by Miranda Arana, composers who had been trained in Western tradition now “hungered for a sense of connection to their roots, and began to look for musical inspiration from their own less familiar traditions” (1999, p. 30). Soviet influence is also evident in the emphasis on staff notation that became systematically implemented in the teaching of folk music, a mode of transmission which

fundamentally differs from the oral basis on which a master and an apprentice had normally engaged in the teaching and learning of traditional Vietnamese music. This shift is discussed by Thao Giang (in *The Culture Soldiers*), who explains that he and his fellow students “were taught traditional music in accordance with western pedagogy and using western notation. We played what was in the score. This was in many ways the opposite to the traditional way of teaching music” (Thao Giang, personal communication, 2016).<sup>13</sup>

The creation of orchestras for neo-traditional music was one driving factor in the implementation of a new culture of public performances in concert halls. Ingrid Bertleff, observes how this politically driven development resulted in a music culture in which “the visual aspects of performances and verbal expressions of Vietnamese music have become more important than the music itself. Music has become a show for sightseers. The listening experience has become secondary” (2006, p. 72).



**Fig. 2**  
An outdoor setting of a TV show of traditional music in Vietnam 2016. Photo by Ngô Trà My.

This movement from private settings—in which male performers would entertain an aristocratic audience—to public concerts, has been accompanied by a shift from male to female musicians, but is this to be expected? In fact, a rather similar process was observed in South Korea (Mueller, 2013). In Korea, traditional music practice also has origins in Confucianist ideals, which created a music culture in which the presence of women was seen as improper outside of women-only gatherings.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For this citation, see *The Culture Soldiers* in RC at 11:00.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Lam (2003) discusses this history and its situatedness in Confucian norms in further detail in China in two distinct periods, the Han dynasty (140 BCE-220 C.E. and the late Ming-period (roughly 1368-1644).

Hence, traditional music, both in the court and in rituals, was only performed by men. The modern day shift to a female majority of performers developed simultaneously in the two countries. While this shift from male to female performers has been equally striking and occurring at around the same time in Korea, the forms of representation are sometimes different. Mueller gives several accounts of women cross-dressing in order to perform certain forms of music that are associated with male costume. In Vietnam, instead traditional music recently features (all female) performers presented in revealing clothing and normally posing with instruments rather than playing them.

When collecting material for my documentary, I contacted the management in the *Tuồng*<sup>15</sup> and *Chèo* theatres in Hà Nội and retrieved complete lists of musicians employed since the institutions were created.<sup>16</sup> Here we can see that the dominance of male musicians was constant in the first generation. Over the years, there are a few examples of female *đàn tranh* players employed in both theatres, but otherwise, theatre ensembles are the exception which could be said to confirm the rule that since public concerts and TV shows became a venue for the presentation of traditional Vietnamese music, women have taken center stage. The musicians in a theatre orchestra are not on stage but in a pit, just like in a western opera house. Also, it should be noted that these musicians are also educated in the theatres and not in the Vietnam National Academy of Music, where women have become dominant in recent decades.

In 1986, in response to a declining economy, the Sixth Party Congress decided to launch a series of national reforms in Vietnam with the aim to, like China, “introduce market forces without altering the foundations of its political system” (Spitäller & Lipworth, 1993, p. 4). This economic renovation, *Đổi Mới*, transformed the stagnant peasant economy of Vietnam into a vibrant, market-driven, capitalist system (Freeman, 1996). However, this economic liberation brought Vietnam straight into a new phase of rapid industrialization and globalization which in turn had both positive and negative effects on the Vietnamese society. Among other things, tourism played an important role in bringing about these changes, also in the reformation of the music of minority peoples throughout the country (Ó Briain, 2016). Eventually, this has affected the growth of a movement of traditional music revival, wherein for instance in Huế, “the preservation of court music has also been enhanced by tourist performances” (Norton, 2009, p. 53).

Nation branding is a term that has come of use, in particular with reference to phenomena observed globally since the 1990s. Nadia Kaneva argues that “in its most expansive articulations, nation branding refers to much more than slogans,

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<sup>15</sup> Also called *Hát Tuồng* or *Hát Bội*, is a form of Vietnamese theatre. *Tuồng* is often referred to as classical “Vietnamese opera” influenced by Chinese opera and became very popular in Vietnam during the Nguyễn dynasty in the 19th century.

<sup>16</sup> For this list, see *The Culture Soldiers* in RC.

logos, and colourful advertisements. Rather, it seeks to reconstitute nationhood at the levels of both ideology and praxis, whereby the meaning and experiential reality of national belonging and national governance are transformed in unprecedented ways” (Kaneva, 2012, p. 4). In developing countries, and in post-socialist economies, these tendencies have been very strong. In a recent study concerned with the role of media in such political undertakings, Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg found that “television and television channels and streamed video services such as YouTube also are used as platforms for the distribution of mediated information—that is, they are the cultural technologies used by various agents in the nation-branding process” (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015, p. 3076). Vietnam is no exception, and the role of women in the representation of traditional music has been deeply intertwined with the emergence of TV shows and other commercialised forms of propaganda. This development started slowly in the 1970s, with the first television broadcast by VOV (Voice of Vietnam) taking place on the 7th of September 1970. The popularity of television increased across the 1970s and 1980s, and in 1990, Samsung (a Korean technology company) negotiated with Vietnamese officials for the establishment of a local TV assembly plant, and marketing shifted from state stores to numerous small private shopfronts in every city and town within range of a TV transmitter (Marr, 1998). As of 2004, it was estimated that VOV programs reached more than 90% of all households in Vietnam. The impact of national branding, the rising economy and the sudden effects of globalization through the internet and tourism has radically altered the premises for traditional Vietnamese music, deeply impacting the working lives of musicians.

The “public persona” of a female Vietnamese performer is drawn very much from a collective identity as Vietnamese woman, based on both communism and nationalism, which constituted the basic ideology of Vietnamese society. In documents of the Third Party Congress in 1960, the government of the young Democratic Republic of Vietnam clearly stated the aim to build a culture on the basis of socialism and nationalism (Văn Kiện Đảng, 1960). Wendy Duong, in a comprehensive analysis of the current state of gender equality in Vietnam, noted how nationalist perspectives tend to blur questions of women’s rights:

In colonial or post-colonial societies, nationalist-strategists (who were mostly men) commonly advocated women’s liberation to instill unity and conscript the female labor in the fight for national independence and reconstruction. Third World gender equality, therefore, easily becomes intertwined with the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and patriotism. (Duong, 2001, p. 283)

In Vietnamese society today, collective identity is given much more emphasis than individual identity, and thereby it “swallows gender issues and stifles the attempts of women to achieve personal freedoms” (Duong, 2001, p. 289). Still, this “fallacy of the trio”—how Duong refers to this blurring of nationalism, socialism and women’s rights—is only part of the complexity of contemporary Vietnamese

society. The norms of Confucian ideologies are still highly present in society, and kept alive through traditional poetry. Thus, traditional poetry can at times be more influential than the rule of law (Duong, 2001; c.f. Jamieson, 2001).

Alexander Woodside, looking at the emergence of the three Confucian monarchies in China, Korea and Vietnam,<sup>17</sup> concludes that Confucianism, while laying the ground for an administrative universalism still was “putting family considerations before global ones, men before women” (Woodside, 1998, p. 210). In Vietnam, the co-existence of Confucianism and nationalism has deeply influenced the way the communist ideology was implemented in the country. Benedict Anderson identifies colonialism and the bureaucratic systems, or the infrastructure modeled on western societies, to be a strong factor in the rise of nationalism in Vietnam (Anderson, 2006, p. 113-119). However, the sense of a nation goes much further back in history, and Brantly Womack argues that the “patriotic resistance to foreign invaders, and common suffering under the heel of the conqueror’s boot” (p. 63) is to be understood as a stronger force, and a much more continuous source for national identity in the country throughout its history. Surely, nationalism played a significant role in Vietnam on the country’s path toward communism. Hồ Chí Minh himself admitted that “it was patriotism and not communism that originally inspired me” (quoted in Karnow, 1997, p. 134). Further, women’s participation in the Resistance War Against America constituted an important factor in the emancipation of women in Vietnam. In 1966, in response to the intensification of the war, the Central Committee issued a decree that suggested further responsibilities for women in the war. Nguyễn Thị Thập, President of the Vietnam Women’s Federation and one of four deputy chairmen of the National Assembly’s Standing Committee, motivated this by pointing to how women, “the most exploited element within that class, carried the greatest potential for commitment to revolutionary goals, establishment of a stable dictatorship of the proletariat could be achieved most rapidly and securely by making gains secured for women during the war irreversible” (Turley, 1972, p. 800).<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, this also has meant that governmental campaigns would instruct women to embrace both socialist and Confucian ideals, such as famously expressed in the so-called Three Criteria Campaign: (1) Study Actively, (2) Work Creatively, and (3) Raise Children Well and Build Happy Families. Post-1946 Socialist Vietnam brought about a kind of social emancipation for women. The ideal

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<sup>17</sup> Woodside (1998) notes how both Korea and Vietnam were colonies of early medieval China, from which they subsequently broke away, and both continued to be influenced by what one might call the Chinese Han dynasty’s imperial ideal.

<sup>18</sup> There is a long history of Vietnamese women to taking up arms in defense of their country. Here, the Trưng sisters are the two most famous references (Ngô Sỹ Liên et al, *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*, 2013). In the activities of the Nationalist Party in the 1930s, the role of Nguyễn Thị Giang has been highlighted in a recent book chapter (Lessard, 2013), finding how the “Marxist interpretation and focus depicts Nguyen Thi Giang as an idealised Confucian widow rather than the fierce nationalist she happened to be” (p. 52). Hence, historiographers have turned her into a symbol in a love story by ignoring the politically active subject she once was.



of “women’s liberation” and participation in social and political life were important elements in the anti-colonial movement, even though the traditional Confucian role of women as caregivers was still very much emphasized. After liberation, women’s equal rights with men in both the public and private domains were legally recognized. In this new Socialist Vietnam, women became responsible for both family and nation or, in the words of one national slogan used in the 1960s and 1970s, “good at national tasks, good at household tasks” (Schuler et al, 2006, p. 386).

The focus on such a collective identity has had direct impact on the development of a concert culture for traditional Vietnamese music, in which women play a central role, symbolic representations of a society that maintains a paradoxical objectification of women in parallel with a politics of emancipation and “equal rights”. With the women in the first generations of such “culture soldiers” in mind, I made the documentary. The complexity of this social, cultural and political entanglement is discussed in Spivak’s essay<sup>19</sup> on the voice of the subaltern:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development. (Spivak, 1999, p. 304)

Although women performers in traditional Vietnamese music of today are indeed seen— and very much so, given the increasing focus on visual appearance in musical performance discussed above by Bertleff—they are only present as “women-manipulated-as-sign” (Spivak, 1999). The issue here, which Spivak reminds us of, is that they are not given a voice, and, as seems to be a typical trait of patriarchal societies, are not allowed control over their bodies, nor over body movement. In section 1.3 and section 1.4, the two final sections of this chapter, I will introduce a historical perspective on the role of transnational and intercultural exchange in Vietnamese music, a development through which I have identified new possibilities in my individual artistic practice to articulate an individual voice.

### 1.3 Transculturation and collaboration: experimental and intercultural music in Vietnam

Transnational and intercultural influence have been characteristic of music in Vietnam more or less throughout the history of the country, often also connected to

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<sup>19</sup> Cited here from the reworked version in her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999).

colonialisation and foreign rule. An emblematic example of such influence is the music theatre genre of *Cải Lương*, developed in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the Mekong delta. It is a “hybrid form of musical drama that integrated local and Western forms converging during colonialism, and within the South’s historical intersections with Chinese and Southeast Asian cultures. *Cải Lương* created a means of imagining a vision of a dynamic and syncretic Vietnamese identity out of contemplations about the performance of gender and identity” (Nguyễn, K.T. 2010, p. 20). With its roots in amateur music from the Mekong Delta, Trần Văn Khải describes the emergence of this music as the result of influence from Vietnamese musicians returning from France, as manifest in a renowned 1911 performance at a hotel near the Mỹ Tho train station (Trần, 1966). However, the hybridity of this form of music theatre is not essentially drawn from experience during their travels, although it appears that inspiration for the staging was found in France. Rather, the influence of French music was a constant in urban Vietnam under colonial rule. Additionally, the instrumentation in this music reflects western influence, wherein violin and mandolin were both used from 1927. With the mandolin, experiments were made to make deeply scalloped frets to allow for bending techniques found on Vietnamese string instruments. More successful in that respect was the creation of the Vietnamese guitar<sup>20</sup> in 1937, which had similarly scalloped frets. Gradually, the Vietnamese guitar has emerged as a leading instrument in *Cải Lương* (Kiều, 1992). Philip Taylor suggests that “considering the south’s supposedly long history of constant assimilation, the cultural traffic through Vietnam’s ‘open door’ does not necessarily pose a threat to its residents’ identity or traditions” (Taylor, 2003, p. 148). He refers to the folklorist Huynh Ngoc Trang, who characterizes southern Vietnam as having “a distinctive indigenous identity; that from the earliest days of Vietnamese settlement it has been a melting pot, a place of cultural exchanges and of constant transformation” (p. 147). Hence, the remarkable weaving together of different traditions from music and theatre is not merely the result of colonisation, and Taylor concludes that “in such a reading, the transformation, hybridisation and commercialisation of culture have been taking place for a very long time” (p. 148). But how can such processes be best described and analyzed? I will in the following attempt to trace analytical discourses along the lines of the notions of intercultural, multicultural and transcultural states and interactions, with the aim of allowing for a more detailed discussion.

Wolfgang Welsch (1999) defines interculturality as based on an essentialist understanding of cultures as “spheres or islands” while aiming to overcome the unavoidable clashes that are the result of such cultural difference. Multicultural

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<sup>20</sup> The Vietnamese guitar is an instrument which exists both as a steel string acoustic and as an electric guitar. It was adapted for the performance of traditional music—mainly within the instrumental music of *Tài Tử*—and therefore has very deeply scalloped frets and is typically tuned very low, in order to allow performing the bending ornaments typical of this music. Thus the Vietnamese guitar is a central example of how “the development of many types of Vietnamese music [can be] labelled as both a reaction to French colonization and enabled by it” (Cannon, 2016, p. 154).

he understands as a representation of a similar approach, specifically addressing the conflicts between cultures when they co-exist in the same society. Finally, he sees transculturality as “a consequence of the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures” which is characterized by entanglement and networking which has led to increasing hybridization (1999, p. 197). These processes, he argues, have led to a global spread of population, merchandise and information.

Henceforward there is no longer anything absolutely foreign. Everything is within reach. Accordingly, there is no longer anything exclusively “own” either. Authenticity has become folklore, it is ownness simulated for others—to whom the indigene himself belongs. To be sure, there is still a regional-culture rhetoric, but it is largely simulatory and aesthetic; in substance everything is transculturally determined. Today in a culture's internal relations—among its different ways of life—there exists as much foreignness as in its external relations with other cultures. (Welsch, 1999, p. 198)

He further points to how transculturality is equally important on the micro-level of the individual. The processes of transculturation shape the lives of individuals to varying degrees across the globe. He argues that “wherever an individual is cast by differing cultural interests, the linking of such transcultural components with one another becomes a specific task in identity-forming. Work on one’s identity is becoming more and more work on the integration of components of differing cultural origin” (Welsch, 1999, p. 199). Vince Marotta points to how the three perspectives of the intercultural, the multicultural and the transcultural are connected on the level of the cultural subject, sharing a notion of “*in-betweenness*”. Hence, the notion of the multicultural subject has been a part of the analytical framework in sociology and cultural studies since the 1960s. The assumption has been that, for instance, children who grow up in a society in which they were not born, so called “third culture kids”, develop a multicultural identity that allows them to adopt different perspectives on society. However, this view assumes an essentialist understanding of the cultures which the multicultural subject negotiates, presuming these to be self-evident and persistent entities. Critics have instead suggested that the multicultural subject rather could be understood as creating inter-subjective links “between the host self and minority Other, cultures, both dominant and ‘minority’, become retranslated and reconstructed” (Marotta, 2014, p. 92). With reference to the ethnomusicological study of African music, Kofi Agawu has argued for an ethnography which embraces *sameness* as the basis for a “theory of translation that aims to show how the materiality of culture constrains musical practice in specific ways. The idea would be to unearth the impulses that motivate acts of performance, and to seek to interpret them in terms of broader, even generic, cultural impulses” (Agawu, 2003, p. 235). Along similar lines, the philosopher Richard Bernstein proposes that intercultural hermeneutics demand a balance between universalizing and particularizing practices. Therefore, “we must cultivate the type of imagination where we are at once sensitive to the sameness of ‘the Other’

with ourselves and the radical alterity that defies and resists reduction of ‘the Other’ to ‘the Same’” (Bernstein, 1991, p. 74). The transcultural subject is similarly related to the notion of *in-betweenness*, but it takes some of its processes even further. Coined by Don Fernando Ortiz in 1940, with the aim of capturing the processes underlying the formation of Cuban culture, transculturation, referring to a significant conversion or transformation. Similarly, Marotta (2014) points to how Welsch can be said to over-emphasize the positive side of transculturation, and instead underlines the duality, and the violence, of such processes.

Contacts between different cultures is the source for many processes of musical change, either “creative transformation, which may be termed syncretism, synthesis or transculturation” which “may result in a greater level of individual or corporate creativity than before”, and further, in the process of making sense of the other culture’s music, give rise to new understandings and ways of teaching music. Eventually, “whole styles, repertoires, genres [...] may change as a result of convergences in contact situations” (Kartomi & Blum, 1994, ix). But the history of music also gives numerous examples of collisions between cultures, in which the dominant class instead suppresses indigenous musicians (Kartomi & Blum, 1994), issues which are also evident in Ortiz’ writings on Cuban music (Ortiz, 1947).

With reference to the hybridity theorist Marwan Kraidy, ethnomusicologist Sarah Weiss similarly argues for a perspective on hybridity as “communicative practices, processes rather than static states” (Weiss, 2014, p. 511). She moves on to observe how these processes may be best described as cyclical movements that are not specific to interaction across cultures, but are more generic to human creativity. She observes how oscillations between stability and change more generally can be understood as what she calls “hybridity cycles”, moving between states of homogeneity and heterogeneity: “As it trends toward a homogeneous phase, an art form becomes increasingly crystalized taking on a fixed identity. But that fixity is often temporary since change occurs gradually through time” (p. 512). The notion of hybridity cycles as a generic feature of human culture provides the possibility of a different analysis of the changes in *Cải Lương* such as discussed above. Nevertheless, the observation by Kartomi and Blum (1994) of how a source for musical change often lies in contacts between cultures demands a further understanding of hybridity cycles occurring in situations of intercultural contact. Kartomi (1981) suggests that transculturation—coined by Don Fernando Ortiz in 1940, with the aim of capturing the processes underlying the formation of Cuban culture—is the most relevant term for describing musical change through the process of cultural contact. Kartomi proposes that the term should be used specifically to analyze the processes of intercultural contact, and not to the material results, since music in general is always the outcome of acculturation. She provides the following further definition:

Transculturation occurs only when a group of people select for adoption whole new organizing and conceptual or ideological principles—musical and extramusical—as opposed to small, discrete alien traits. The motivation to adopt new, broad music principles, such as equal temperament or harmony, may be (1) the halo of dominant culture prestige in colonial situations; (2) the need for artistic communication among groups lacking a common culture; or (3) material or political advantage, or the forces of commercialism. The initial and sustaining impulse and impetus for musical transculturation is normally extramusical. The final stages of a complete process of transculturation are reached after the tensions between two or more musical cultures have interacted and been resolved into a new unity, through successive generations. Such musical interactions creatively unite and transcend the partly antithetical parent musics to create a new, independent style or genre that is accepted in its own right by the relevant group of people as being representative of their own musical identity, whereupon the processes of musical transculturation may begin all over again. (Kartomi, 1981, p. 244-245)

I will in this thesis discuss the forms of exchange across cultures as either intercultural or multicultural, bearing in mind the inherent risk of essentializing the practices which are analyzed when using these concepts. Further, I will follow Kartomi's suggestion to use the term transculturation for artistic process in which musicians engage in mutual exchange and musical transformation.

A more recent example of intercultural exchange is the development of experimental music practices in Vietnam. The country was largely isolated from external influence up to *Đổi Mới*, but even after 1986, the flow of information from the outside world increased only gradually. During the 1990s a number of artists residing abroad as part of the Vietnamese diaspora returned to visit the country for longer periods, bringing some of the first international impulses towards new directions in music and other arts. Still, in the 1990s, both the musical community and the visual arts scene in Hà Nội was conservative and had no interest in experimental work, as described by the artist Nguyễn Mạnh Đức. The few artists looking for new directions struggled with “the choking experience of oneself being unable to transcend the stereotyped and one-dimensional direction of the field” (Nguyễn, M. cited in Östersjö & Nguyễn, 2019). With the aim of “creating a space where concepts and ways of doing art could be challenged”, Nguyễn Mạnh Đức and his colleague Trần Lương founded the *Nhà Sàn Studio* which became the first non-profit experimental art space in Vietnam. The studio was housed in Nguyễn's family home, a *Mường* ethnic minority house on stilts which was moved from the mountains to a neighborhood in the outskirts of Hà Nội. Central figures were the composer Sơn X, the painter Nguyễn Văn Cường; Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng, a visual artist who also developed a practice of experimental music performance with electric guitar and analog pedals; Quách Đông Phương, working with voice, distortion pedals, and homemade drum-kits; and Đào Anh Khánh, who developed a central practice as a performance artist. This group of artists was joined by Trí Minh and Vũ Nhật Tân in the early 2000s and created many sound art events at the *Nhà*

*Sàn Studio*. Substantial impact was brought to Hà Nội from the composers Vũ Nhật Tân and Trần Thị Kim Ngọc, through their studies abroad, initially in Cologne, funded by the German Academic Exchange Service scholarships. Trần Thị Kim Ngọc studied composition with Johannes Frisch and improvisation with Paolo Alvarez, while developing a particular music theater practice during her years in Europe. Hereby, she became the first female composer to adopt a leading role on the experimental music scene. In 2009, Hà Nội saw the launch of two festivals that would host much of the further development in experimental music and sound art: the annual *Hanoi Sound Stuff* festival, initiated and curated by Trí Minh, and the *Hanoi New Music Meeting*. This laid the ground for the *Hanoi New Music Festival*, organized by *Đom Đóm*, an independent center for experimental music and art, headed by Trần Thị Kim Ngọc, who is also the curator of the festival. Two years later, the *Nhà Sàn Studio* was forced to close down its public activities as a response to a performance which was interpreted as critical of the governmental policies towards China. In 2013, the *Nhà Sàn Collective* was created, which since that time has been moving between different spaces in Hà Nội.

As discussed above, throughout *Đổi Mới*, an increasing influence from western culture was observed in Vietnam as the nation developed a modernized economy. This also concerns intercultural collaboration, often instigated through projects funded by European organisations. For instance, in 2003, the British Council funded a sound art project initiated by the British artist Robin Rimbaud, aka Scanner, involving Nguyễn Văn Cường, Trí Minh, Vũ Nhật Tân, and Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng. Titled *Street Cries Symphony*, this became the first substantial sound art work to be created from field recordings in the country. In the following year, Kim Ngọc created the music for *Venus in Hanoi*, a large scale international dance production, in collaboration with German choreographer Felix Ruckert, French light designer Isabelle Fuchs (Strasbourg), Romanian costume designer Daniela Wedhorn (Hamburg) and 25 dancers from des Vietnamese State Ballet. This innovative project was jointly funded by the Goethe Institute and the French Culture Center in Hà Nội. These were two important intercultural productions, and they certainly suggested new possibilities, but while the small community of composers and performers on the experimental music scene was eager to engage in new projects, it remained unclear what this new window for intercultural exchange could imply for the traditional music communities. As discussed above, transculturation is a process that has positive and indeed dark sides, and Vietnam has experienced a fair amount of both. I will in the final section of this chapter outline how I have been engaging with experimental and intercultural music since the 2000s. This has entailed collaboration with composers, performers and artists from other disciplines, and through this new collaborative practice, methods for intercultural work have been developed, which also form a foundation for the work discussed in this thesis.

## 1.4 The Six Tones—a platform for intercultural collaboration

In the early 2000s I was beginning to expand my professional practice as a traditional music performer by engaging in a few collaborations with Vietnamese composers of experimental music. This was an eye-opener for me, in particular my collaboration with the French-Vietnamese composer Nguyễn Thiện Đạo, and it also became a reference point for me in my thinking of the possible significance for the development of traditional music in Vietnam. Some years later, in 2006, I co-founded a Vietnamese/Swedish ensemble called *The Six Tones*, and since then I have been involved in long-term development of artistic methods for intercultural collaboration. *The Six Tones* comprises two Vietnamese performers—me (playing *đàn tranh*) and Ngô Trà My (who plays *đàn bầu*)—and the Swedish guitarist Stefan Östersjö (also playing many other stringed instruments). We started out as a group playing traditional Vietnamese music in hybrid settings for Western stringed instruments and traditional Vietnamese instruments. This entailed improvising in traditional and experimental Western idioms as well as commissioning new music by composers based in Asian and Western countries. The name of the group relates to the fact that Vietnamese is a tonal language using six tones or intonations. The group started out with the aim of engaging with the musical tradition that each individual member brought with them, but with an explicit aim of creating something different from “world music”. What was it about “world music” that we wanted to avoid?

Since the 1980s, world music has been an increasingly important part of contemporary culture, and ethnomusicologist Keith Howard suggests that the term is used to denote two distinct phenomena: On the one hand, what he refers to as “hybridized” and “commodified” products for the record industry, and on the other, ethnomusicological recordings of traditional music (Howard, 2010). The term has indeed been embraced by the music industry since the late 1980s. Forss describes how “a consensus was reached at a 1987 meeting in Britain of international record companies, broadcasters, concert promoters, and others involved with music from around the world” (Forss, 2014, n.p). The aim was to agree on a common term to encompass the “ethnic” music of the world as “world music”. Since then, “world music” has developed into an important domain in the music industry. Popular music artists like Paul Simon, in collaboration with traditional musicians from various continents, contributed to the gigantic growth of record sales in “world music” from the 1990s, and attention has since been drawn to performers from around the world. Steven Feld reflects on these achievements, but also analyzes the flip side of the coin, with the many issues of ownership and copyright in such projects, “showing layers and varieties of appropriation, circulation, and traffic in musical grooves, and concomitant embeddings, solidifications, and encrustings in the pop rock of musical ownership” (Feld, 1988, p. 36).

First, the ensemble was not at all aiming to document traditional music practices. Second, we wanted to avoid the typical search for common denominators often found in the “commodified” products to which Howard referred. At the same time, we were already convinced at the outset that hybridity does not have to be a negative aspect of intercultural exchange. For instance, Nadia Kiwan and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof (2011) point to the dynamic networks created through transnational exchange, through which individual musicians bring musical heritage from their country of origin to the country of settlement:

This “imported” cultural capital underpins the connection of migrant artists to their respective diasporas who in many cases constitute the artists’ primary social capital through extensive infrastructures of physical and virtual means of communication and dissemination, which very often take place on the margins or completely “under the surface” of mainstream society and its music industry. (Kiwan & Meinhof, 2011, p. 9)

Hence, beyond the commercial market of the world music industry, many forms of exchange are sources for musical transformation. Similarly, I was convinced that *intercultural collaboration*—at least when transcending the pitfalls typical of the music industry’s preferred forms of world music (frequently connected to popular music)—held great potential for change through transculturation, both in contemporary western art music and in traditional Vietnamese music. What is at stake in such artistic collaboration is not the preservation of an “authentic” culture but rather the negotiation of new musical meaning (Östersjö & Nguyễn, 2013b), through which the musical traditions embodied by the musicians in the group may develop and change. For me, these practices, and the transformative potential that they hold, also contained a dynamic through which to challenge my identity as a female Vietnamese musician, leading me to identify *gender* and *choreography* as central themes for this doctoral project. Formulated against the historical and political backdrop of the present chapter, I will now turn to an account of how these challenges to my artistic practice were explored through *artistic research* in music.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> I hereby refer to research *in* and *through* music as defined by Borgdorff (2012). As further discussed by Peter Mak (2017), “this kind of research can only be done by a musician (in this case a composer), because the research concerns the performance or the creating of the music itself. The same thing applies to, for example, research into how to perform music from a distant or more recent past. A musicologist studies and analyses especially written, and if available, audio-visual sources, such as scores and, based on these, provides (second-hand) guidelines for the performance of music (research for music). The musician-researcher can take this a step further by studying (firsthand) musical performances himself, and articulating the performance knowledge that is intrinsic in this” (Mak, 2017, p. 4).





## Chapter 2.

# Aims and research questions. Analytical perspectives and artistic methods

This chapter is divided in three parts, first presenting the aims, research questions and design of the study, then second, outlining methods for analysis of gesture and thirdly the artistic methods I have employed in the Ph.D. project. In section 2.2.1, I provide analytical perspectives on gendered gesture and the multi-layered body, and on how *habitus* and embodiment draws attention to the entrenched nature of gender identity. In section 2.2.2, I discuss analytical perspectives on musical gesture, and how the analysis of gesture can be approached from a gender perspective. In section 2.3, I propose that analysis of artistic practice can be an integrated part of artistic methods and I outline the use of analysis of gendered gesture in the central artistic projects. Further, I discuss the role of documentation in artistic research, but also as a component in my artistic practice.

## 2.1 Aims and research questions

Georgina Born discusses the processes of identity formation in musical practice as situated in four social planes, ranging from the more intimate relations between musicians in an ensemble, to the “imagined communities” which music creates, to a third plane, in which “music is traversed by wider social identity formations, from the most concrete and intimate to the most abstract of collectivities—music’s refraction of the hierarchical and stratified relations of class and age, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality” (Born, 2011, p. 378), and finally in the fourth plane, the arena of public and private institutions can be analyzed.

This thesis addresses the practices of traditional Vietnamese music across these four planes, and develops not only an analytical understanding of how musical identities are shaped in these contexts, but also to create artistic productions that respond to, and sometimes counter and critique, their social and political foundations. Through its artistic productions, this thesis aligns with other artistic Ph.D. theses addressing

gender in performance,<sup>22</sup> but the project also specifically wishes to contribute to gender studies on musical performance in Vietnam.

The aims of this Ph.D. project are to investigate the *social function and meaning of musical gesture* in traditional Vietnamese music, and to develop *artistic responses that articulate an individual voice*. The research questions that emerge from these conceptual and artistic aims are:

1. What gender conventions can gesture analysis of musical performance unveil?
2. In what ways can music created through the choreographic structuring of movement reveal and question gender conventions in musical performance?
3. How can my performance, in intercultural and interdisciplinary artistic collaborations, challenge current gender norms and instigate change in practices of traditional Vietnamese music?

This Ph.D. project has been carried out in relation to several research contexts. During the first four years, my work was a part of *Music in Movement* (2012-2015), an international research project on musical gesture—headed by Stefan Östersjö at the Malmö Academy of Music—in collaboration with choreographers, composers and researchers in Sweden, Norway, France, Austria, USA and Vietnam. The main objective of *Music in Movement* was to develop artistic methods that combine the practices of musical composition and choreography in the construction of intermedia works, with choreographed musicians performing music conceived from gesture.<sup>23</sup>

This thesis is centered around four intermedia works, which all bring the practices of musical composition and choreography together. The first three of these four works were developed as part of *Music in Movement*:

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<sup>22</sup> Some important examples of such theses are Petra Fransson's theatre project *Omförhandlingar. Kropp, replik, etik* (2018) and Imogen Newland's *The Piano and the Female Body: The Erotic, the Seductive and the Transgressive* (2011).

<sup>23</sup> When *Music in Movement* was brought to an end, some of my work became associated with a research cluster at the Orpheus Institute, headed by Catherine Laws. Looking at the formation of subjectivity in musical performance, the cluster has had four sub-projects, providing rather clearly differentiated perspectives, wherein my contribution has been a further analysis of two artistic projects with *The Six Tones*, which were produced as part of *Music in Movement: Inside/Outside* and *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*. The latter production (not presented in this thesis) was a piece of experimental music theatre with documentary film. I discuss it in a paper for the *Journal of Sonic Studies* (Östersjö & Nguyễn, 2016), but more importantly, the outcomes of the cluster work are channeled in two books, the first of which contains a chapter that discusses the making of *Arrival Cities: Hanoi* (Nguyễn & Östersjö, 2019). Additionally, a book chapter on *Inside/Outside* is forthcoming in the second book produced by the cluster.

- *Inside/Outside* (2012)
- *Nam Mái* (2014)
- *Vodou vibrations sounds of memories of fields and burdens living in translations and broken bows balancing on plateaus while speaking to one self and scratching the surface of the raft while drifting away* (abbreviated as *Vodou Vibrations*) (2014)
- *Thin as Skin* (2018)

*Inside/Outside* (2012) is a performance/installation which premiered in Hà Nội at the *Chèo Theatre* in November 2012. The choreography in the piece was developed in collaboration between the Swedish choreographer Marie Fahlin and the three musicians of *The Six Tones*. The music, developed by *The Six Tones* and British laptop improviser Matt Wright, situates elements from two traditional Vietnamese tunes in a surround sound setup with live electronics, in direct interaction with the movement of the three performers. A film version was shot by Maria Norrman at the *Inter Arts Center* in Malmo in December 2014. On March 6, 2015, a new video installation of *Inside/Outside*—using the same film, but adding new audio layers with three headphone tracks—was premiered as part of the *Playground* exhibition at the *Museum of World Cultures* in Gothenburg, and screened there for one and a half year. Eventually, the same exhibition moved to the *Ethnographic Museum* in Stockholm for another year-long presentation of a cross-cultural perspective on gender norms in societies around the world.

*Nam Mái* (2014) is a concerto for the three musicians of *The Six Tones*, with music by American composer Richard Karpen and *The Six Tones*, choreography by Marie Fahlin and video by Jörgen Dahlqvist. The title refers to a tune in *Tuồng*, and this form of Vietnamese theatre also informs the solo choreography which I perform in a central section in the piece. *Nam Mái* was premiered in March 2014 with the Seattle Symphony and was released on CD in January 2019. A film-version of the piece, using the same audio recording, was created by Jon Rudberg and Jörgen Dahlqvist, and premiered at the *Transistor Festival* in April 2017. This film will be released on DVD in 2020.

*Vodou vibrations sounds of memories of fields and burdens living in translations and broken bows balancing on plateaus while speaking to one self and scratching the surface of the raft while drifting away* (2014). I will henceforth refer to the piece by its abbreviated title, *Vodou Vibrations*. It is a choreographed piece for a single performer, but also a site-specific project, with video projections and pre-recorded sounds, performed by me and choreographed by Marie Fahlin. The choreography aims to challenge my habitual movements, into which I have been socialized as a Vietnamese woman and *đàn tranh* player, by introducing effort through choreographies that explore more forceful and aggressive movement qualities. The music is drawn from a number of sources, including an earlier composition of mine

for six *đàn tranh*. The piece premiered at Inter Arts Center, Malmö in 2014 and has since then been performed in many different venues in Sweden, the UK, and Vietnam.

The fourth production, *Thin as Skin* (2018), was created as a duo collaboration between the Japanese choreographer/dancer/visual artist Hiromi Miyakita and myself. The piece approaches choreography through an interest in everyday movement, which led Hiromi Miyakita to develop a novel artistic practice that combines drawing with choreography. The first version was performed in 2018 in Kobe, Japan, at the Arts Theatre dB, and the second version was performed in 2019 in Malmö, Sweden at the Palladium theatre.

## 2.2 Analytical perspectives

In this section I will outline a theoretical perspective on gesture analysis drawing on gender theory as well as theories that link embodiment and social perspectives, hereby creating an analytical framework built on the notion of gender as a “process of becoming” (Butler, 1990) while also drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) influential theories of *habitus* and field. Susan Leigh Foster (1998) proposes a comprehensive analytical perspective on the performance of gender, through an understanding of these processes as “choreographies of gender”, an embodied understanding which informs the method and design of the present project. The discussion of musical gesture in section 2.2.2 is centered around the work of Rolf-Inge Godøy and Marc Leman, and presents Godøy’s concept of the gestural-sonorous object (2006) as a point of departure for the artistic methods further discussed in section 2.3.

### 2.2.1 Gendered gesture, the multi-layered body, *habitus* and embodiment

The study of music in historical musicology and ethnomusicology has, unintentionally, come to reveal an emphasis on male musical practice, and only gradually have methods been developed for the collection and analysis of data that allows for an understanding beyond the default domination of male musical practice (Koskoff, 1989, p. 1-9). For this project, a perspective from gender theory is essential, to develop an understanding which is equally grounded in the role of society—and the embodied process of being socialized into a specific environment—as well as in an understanding of the agency of each individual in such contexts. Such an analysis will be carried out with the aim of providing “a deeper analysis of the relationship between a society’s gender structure, what ideologies surround gender, the nature of inter-gender relations, and how all of these

affect music behavior. Further, we must invert this question and ask how music behavior itself reflects and symbolizes gender behavior” (Koskoff, 1989, p. 4). But such questions have also been raised with regard to the analytical framework of gender studies itself, asserting that the agenda of western feminism cannot be immediately applied in developing countries.<sup>24</sup> Wendy Duong (2001) notes how the woman of colour has become an “exotic female other” whose voice must be recognized in the discourses of feminism and gender studies. In this process “her point of view should not be homogenized or essentialized.<sup>25</sup> This necessitates reflection on the exotic female’s cultural roots” (p. 200).<sup>26</sup> Some aspects of the cultural roots in which Vietnamese women are situated are presented in chapter one, but further examples are given in the discussion in later chapters. While much of the following outline of theoretical perspectives that have driven my analysis of gesture in traditional Vietnamese music builds on foundational theory in Western gender studies, the analysis will continuously be related to the specific historical and cultural context of Vietnamese traditional music.

Gender is a socially defined behaviour, something that we *do*.<sup>27</sup> As Simone de Beauvoir famously stated, “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (1949/2011, p. 330). Judith Butler (1990) continues from this distinction between sex and gender to say that “it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end” (p. 33). Still, these processes are situated within broader sociocultural frameworks and thereby shaped by an array of societal factors:

Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and

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<sup>24</sup> Kumari Jayawardena takes this claim even further in her seminal book, which researches early feminist movements in developing countries and argues that in many respects they were not imported from the West. Importantly, the definition of feminism is thereby expanded and she argues that “Feminism, in this definition, goes beyond movements for equality and emancipation which agitate for equal rights and legal reforms to redress the discrimination against women. While such movements often advance the struggle for equality, they do not tackle such basic issues as women’s subordination within the family or challenge the existing framework of men-women relations in which the subordination of women is located” (Jayawardena, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Trinh Minh-ha (1991, p. 65-78) discusses the problem of essentializing and homogenizing approaches in anthropology and counters this approach with the notion of the “Inappropriate Other”, a self which oscillates between insider and outsider, between subjectivity and objectivity, as a necessary factor in documentary filmmaking. I discuss this perspective further in section 2.3.2.

<sup>26</sup> Duong provides convincing examples of how the agenda of Western feminism fails to translate to Vietnamese conditions, which, although the two central illustrations do not have an immediate bearing on my project suggests that caution is necessary when applying gender theory to phenomena in Vietnamese society (Duong, 2001, p. 203-206).

<sup>27</sup> The origins of an understanding of the social construction of gender can be traced to Margaret Mead’s classic study *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935/1963), in which she claims that presumed natural sexual behaviours vary across cultures and are ideologically and culturally situated.

feminine ‘natures’. When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional arenas. (West & Zimmermann, 1987, p. 126)

Bourdieu’s theory of the *habitus* and its role in the social fields may allow for a detailed understanding of such processes of embodiment, through which the social is written into the body (McNay, 1999). This social memory is gradually obtained, through the repetition of everyday actions, and creates a second nature through which we act in a given society with familiarity and confidence. However, Bourdieu has not been referenced extensively in the discussion of gender as performance and much of the critique may be summarized by Judith Butler, who argues that in Bourdieu’s theory, the scope of for social change and for individual action is lacking:

the *habitus* must be adjusted by the field and an external relation between them will be traversed through the action by which a *habitus* submits to the rules of the field, thus becoming refashioned in order to become “congruent” or “compatible”. Hence the ideal of adaptation governs the relation between *habitus* and field, such that the field, often figured as preexisting or as social given, does not alter by virtue of the *habitus*, but the *habitus* always and only alters by virtue of the demands put upon it by the “objectivity” of the field. (Butler, 1999, p. 117)

Already in 1992, Bourdieu addressed this discussion by explaining that “[h]abitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). It is essential to Bourdieu’s theories of *habitus* and field that there is a mutually formative relation between the individual embodiment of the social through the *habitus* and to the social field. For the theory to capture this dynamic, emphasis needs to be placed on the possibility for change. As argued by Lois McNay: “While *habitus* draws attention to the entrenched nature of gender identity, it is important to consider the extent to which its effects may be attenuated by the movement of individuals across fields” (1999, p. 106–107). Such movement constitutes the main grounds for a definition of the relation between *habitus* and field which would embrace the dynamics of performativity and gender. Herein lies the key to an understanding of musical performance also as “a context for behavior that challenges and/or threatens the established social/sexual order” (Koskoff, 1989, p. 12). Or, as put by Kenneth George:

the questions raised have to do with the role music-making plays in producing or subverting gender-based hierarchies of prestige and authority: Does music support or threaten predominant ideas about gender? How does it shape the way in which women and men experience sexual hierarchy? Can music-making itself be a form of sexual politics? (George, 1993, p. 2-3)

Such socio-political perspectives will inform the analysis in chapters three and five in particular, first by suggesting that musical practice can provide a space in which gendered power structures and behaviours can be temporarily suspended or even inverted. Secondly, there are many examples from the 20<sup>th</sup> century of how social change has led to the development of novel musical practices among women,<sup>28</sup> but also conversely how novel musical practices have been developed in order to instigate social change.

Building largely on the writings of Judith Butler, the notion of “doing gender” has often been discussed in terms of performance. This performance of gender is primarily constituted through the repetition of actions (often verbal ones) that are “naturalized” in the body (Butler, 1990: xv). In her discussion of the foundations of gender construction based on theories of performativity, Susan Leigh Foster (1998) observes how perspectives of embodiment, such as action and bodily articulation (1998, p. 3) tend to be lacking. Foster identifies the source of performativity’s preoccupation with the linguistic domain in how theorists like Butler build their arguments on Austin’s speech-act theory,<sup>29</sup> claiming moreover that “for Butler it is difficult to envision how either performance or performativity extends beyond the verbal realm” (ibid, p. 4). Foster argues that a comprehensive understanding can only be obtained by adopting an embodied perspective, and through a grasp of “the articulateness of bodies’ motions”, which employ “tradition of codes and conventions through which meaning is constructed in dance” (ibid, p.5). While performativity theory focuses on discussion of the individual execution of such codes, analysis of the *choreography* of gender allows for a more overarching perspective:

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<sup>28</sup> A central example of a possible negative effect on musical practice through the improvement of the independence of women is discussed by Jennifer Post with regard to the disappearance of the hereditary professional class of female musicians in Indian music, which is rooted in the emergence of non-professional singers in a music culture increasingly dominated by commercial forces. She argues that “developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which provided women a short period of freedom and respect, in fact ultimately destroyed these traditions in the twentieth century. The momentum with which professional women denied and attacked their earlier lives was responsible as well for the destruction of social institutions that housed them and simultaneously for the destruction of their musical traditions” (Post, 1989, p. 107).

<sup>29</sup> The British philosopher John Longshaw Austin proposed his speech act theory in 1955, building on the observation that certain types of utterances are not merely “constative” but instead do something in the world. It is this quality of action in certain statements, like in the famous example “I do” which Austin characterizes as a performative utterance.



Choreography, the tradition of codes and conventions through which meaning is constructed in dance, offers a social and historical analytic framework for the study of gender, whereas performance concentrates on the individual execution of such codes. Choreography resonates with cultural values concerning bodily, individual, and social identities, whereas performance focuses on the skill necessary to represent those identities. Choreography presents a structuring of deep and enduring cultural values that replicates similar sets of values elaborated in other cultural practices, whereas performance emphasizes the idiosyncratic interpretation of those values. Like performativity, choreography consists in sets of norms and conventions; yet unlike performativity, or at least its general usage thus far, choreography encompasses corporeal as well as verbal articulateness. Choreography therefore serves as a useful intervention into discussions of materiality and body by focusing on the unspoken, on the bodily gestures and movements that, along with speech, construct gendered identity. (Foster, 1998, p. 5)

An understanding of such choreographies of gender, as situated in the relations between social fields and the *habitus*, constitutes the analytical framework on which this Ph.D. project was developed. But in order to address the complexity of such choreographies of gender, across the four social planes in Born's analysis (2011), a further discussion of the detail of our embodiment is necessary. Namely, I argue that it is essential to acknowledge how the human body is multi-layered. Our experience of the body can be understood from the perspectives of the body image and body schema, where the former is related to our perception of the body and the latter to action (Pitron & de Vignemont, 2017, p. 115). While the body schema is referred to as "a system of preconscious, subpersonal processes" (Gallagher & Cole, 1995, p. 370), the body image on the other hand is "conscious and personal" (De Preester, 2007, p. 605). The way the body is layered is not only related to our perception, but just as much to the social impact on our bodies, ever since we were born. By approaching the body as an instrument for performance, particular layers, and how they may be shaped through social interaction, can be brought to awareness. As observed by Helena De Preester, "a gesture or a bodily posture could not be turned into a political gesture or into a posture with political implications without manipulating or summoning in some way our tacit (bodily) knowledge of movement and motor behavior (i.e. the body schematic aspect)" (De Preester, 2007, p. 380). This also has a bearing on the study of musical performance, as argued by Jill Halstead (2007) in a study of the practice of female conductors in which she claims that a gender perspective is essential for "understanding any performance practice that involves human bodies; nowhere is gender more directly created, perceived, enacted or challenged than through the display of the body and the dynamic of its gestures" (p. 222). Hence, a study of gendered gesture in musical performance or—as phrased by Foster—its choreography of gender, can be a central tool for understanding its social meaning. I will in the next section outline a theoretical backdrop to the qualitative study of musical gesture, which has laid the ground for much of this Ph.D. project.

## 2.2.2 Analysis of musical gesture

Musical gesture, understood not only as an acoustic phenomenon but also as bodily movement, has emerged as an important subject of study in music psychology, musicology and semiotics since the early 1990s. Much study has been devoted to the way an audience experiences musical performance, pointing to the multimodal nature of human perception: rather than focussing on the pure audio signal, the senses interact and amalgamate the visual and sonic information. In a seminal study, Jane Davidson (1993) claimed that the visual aspect of a performance carries information about expressive intention most accurately and with even greater resolution than the auditory component. The relation between a musician's gesture in performance, musical structure in the score, and perceived expression in audiences has since then received substantial attention, confirming Davidson's early findings (Davidson, 2005, 2007; MacRitchie et al. 2013). Over the past twenty years, research on musical gesture has built on a multimodal conception of human perception (Berthoz, 2000; Hatten, 2006), such as expressed in the theory of embodied music cognition, which claims that gestural images are integral to the perception of music (Godøy & Leman, 2010; Gritten & King, 2006). The sensorimotor system makes the motor action of sound production and the perceptual interpretation of it into interchangeable entities (Hatten, 2006, p. 2).

The research on musical gesture of Rolf-Inge Godøy and Alexander Refsum Jensenius has constituted a theoretical basis for the analysis in my project. I find useful the classification they suggest of musical gesture into four analytical categories (Jensenius et al, 2010, p. 23-24):

- Sound-producing gesture; actions that are responsible for the sounding result.
- Communicative gesture; movement intended for communication with others: audience, other players and so on.
- Sound-facilitating gesture; a category of actions that is linked to both sound-producing and communicative gesture. Although they do not produce sound, they aid the action in various ways, for instance in the way musicians keep common time through rocking movements
- Sound-accompanying gesture; movement that is made in response to the sound, like dancing and marching.

Sound-producing gestures can, following Godøy and Leman (2010) be further divided into a prefix (an upbeat motion trajectory), the sound-producing action (schematically understood as a downbeat), and a suffix (the further motion towards the next “downbeat”).<sup>30</sup> However, as with all analytical frameworks, these four

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<sup>30</sup> This model can also be compared to Kendon's discussion of the “gesture unit” (2004), which he describes as a goal directed movement excursion which starts and ends in the “home position”. It

categories are a simplification of the experience of musical performance. Jane Davidson (2005) discusses the complexity of what she calls “this integrated movement stream” (p. 216), stressing also the socio-cultural situatedness of both musician and audience:

This means that measuring the movements in order to see how and where the different characteristics occur offers only very partial data. To understand the movement components, the onlooker’s perception of the performance, alongside an analysis of the musical content, needs to be taken into account in establishing whether or not the movements are being used for expressive effect. In fact, it is demonstrated that the onlooker (audience and/or co-performers) not only identifies these movements, but is also involved in a social communication with the performer. Therefore, it seems that the generation and subsequent meaning of the movement behaviours of the performer are more or less consciously created for the onlooker (audience/ co-performer), for social and musical ends. The onlooker’s reception of the movement behaviours will depend on stylistic knowledge and familiarity. (Davidson, 2005, 216)

I have discussed socio-cultural perspectives on musical performance above, in section 2.2.1, and in the analysis of gesture in my Ph.D., an understanding of the social function of movement from the perspectives of both performer and onlooker (who may be a TV producer, a co-performer or an audience member) are complementary and can only be understood taken together.

With reference to the typology and morphology of sound-objects by Pierre Schaeffer (Schaeffer, 1966), Godøy observes a paradoxical parallel between this seminal work on the analysis of sound objects and the nature of human perception of sound and movement. For instance, if we consider three of Schaeffer’s basic envelope categories (the dynamic shape) of sound objects—Impulsive, Sustained and Iterative—Godøy makes the observation that these sound objects also have corresponding gesture types in the action of the performer. Understood as compound units of gesture and sound, he identifies the corresponding gestural-sonorous objects: discontinuous gesture, continuous gesture and iterative gesture, arguing that “there is a gesture component embedded in Schaeffer’s conceptual apparatus which is on a more general and basic level than that of everyday causal listening” (Godøy, 2006, p. 154). In musical performance, these visual gesture-types and the sounding result of the actions create compound units; from an ecological understanding of human perception, Godøy calls them gestural-sonorous objects (Godøy, 2006).

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can be further divided into “preparation-stroke-post stroke-recovery”, and he further observes how such phrases may also contain further phrases. Such a weaving together of musical gestures is a key analytical in the analysis of body movement, and is often referred to as coarticulation. Gendered gesture in Vietnamese traditional music performance has tended to expand the prefix and suffix, enhancing their communicative movement qualities. For a discussion of such phenomena between the three members of *The Six Tones* see V2.7a in the RC.

Methods for the analysis of gesture in musical performance have often emphasized the quantitative measurement of movement in both the data-collection and subsequent calculation of quantifiable characteristics in the analysis of the data. The limitations to such approaches have been discussed by Marc Leman (2009), who in response to these observations has developed procedures for data-collection and analysis that take first-, second- and third person perspectives into account, with particular attention also to the development of methods that include the first person perspective of the performer(s). In my understanding, the latter perspective is still a field which is in need of further methodological development. This thesis is built on qualitative analysis of video, carried out from first and third person perspectives, through which the artists involved have been engaged in an analysis which oscillates between reflection (through the use of “stimulated recall” methods)<sup>31</sup> and observation. In both of these perspectives, inter-subjective understanding, created through collaborative analysis involving all participating artists, has been central.

I have taken the concept of the gestural-sonorous object as an artistic quest that demands further artistic exploration.<sup>32</sup> An understanding of musical perception as multi-modal situates the experience of music in the body. Through our embodiment, the socio-cultural perspective on musical experience receives further emphasis. A gender analysis of a musician’s movement in performance can provide further understanding of its socio-cultural signification. However, I also find relevant the Schaefferian division of sound and source, and developed an approach to the gestural-sonorous object that also involves experimenting with a decoupling of visual and sonic gesture, for instance in the choreography for *Inside/Outside*. I will now turn to a further discussion of the artistic application of gesture analysis, the role of documentation in the artistic productions, and the artistic methods which I have been engaged in developing for intercultural music collaboration.

## 2.3 Artistic method development and documentation

### 2.3.1 Composing from gesture

In this Ph.D. project I have examined the social significance of the movement and appearance of female performers of Vietnamese traditional music, drawing on an analysis of the different gesture types identified in videos of such performances in

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<sup>31</sup> For a further discussion of this method see section 2.3.2 below.

<sup>32</sup> Across the past twenty years, research into the function of gesture in musical performance has confirmed the development of the understanding of human perception as fundamentally multi modal—for instance with the discovery of the mirror neurons—(Gallese & Goldman, 1998). Hence, human perception of music is not acousmatic but is stored as motor-mimetic images of movement, action and sound (Godøy, 2003, 2006).

TV shows from a gender perspective. As argued above, building on a multi-modal understanding of musical perception, gesture in musical performance can be reflective of societal constructions of gender, but also holds the potential to create a platform for critique and the proposition of social change. It has been my ambition in each of the artistic projects in my Ph.D. studies to take gender analysis of musical performance as a starting point for the development of a practice for composing music conceived as performed gesture. Such a practice would imply a combination of the traditional frameworks of choreography and musical composition. As mentioned above, the analytical concept of the gestural-sonorous object (Godøy, 2006) has been a fundamental point of reference in this artistic work, since it allows for an understanding of musical composition as fundamentally also as a structuring of movement. I will in the following section provide a brief outline of the approach to gesture, and the analysis of gesture, in each of these projects.

In *Inside/Outside* individual choreographies were created for each of the three performers through a collaborative process, starting out with a joint qualitative analysis of gendered gesture in videos from TV shows in Vietnam. We identified a series of movement-types that were drawn from a gender analysis of the performance gestures, and selected a number of these which were deemed useful as basic materials for the choreography. These gesture types were then developed by the choreographer Marie Fahlin in dialogue with each musician. The music, although also drawing on sources from traditional music, was to a great extent created directly from the choreography, by “transcribing” a certain movement to performance on each instrument.

The triple concerto *Nam Mái* was the offspring of another subproject in *Music in Movement*, a dance film entitled *Seven Stories*,<sup>33</sup> and uses video and choreography from one particular scene in that film as its core material. The conceptual point of departure in *Seven Stories* was the notion that *Tuồng* could be seen as a kind of proto-feminist expression in Vietnamese culture, and hence could function as a contrasting reference in my analysis of gendered gesture in the performance of traditional music. The music in the piece uses *Nam Mái*, which is instrumental music in *Tuồng*, as compositional material. *Nam Mái* is centered around a character in a

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<sup>33</sup> *Seven Stories* is developed in collaboration between playwright and director Jörgen Dahlqvist, composer Richard Karpen, choreographer Marie Fahlin, and *The Six Tones*. The title refers to how the film is built on material taken from scenes from seven plays in traditional Vietnamese *Tuồng*. The choreography was created by Marie Fahlin from choreographic materials taken from scenes in each of these *Tuồng* plays. The music was created after the choreographies were filmed, sometimes using gesture as the compositional source, and sometimes composed as more independently conceived music. The material we recorded with the actors was very rich and full of gesture (both hand gestures and more complex body movements) and choreographic material. Sometimes the actors would complain that it was hard to perform their parts without the music that should accompany it. This somehow underlined the nature of the venture we had started on, to take elements of gesture in traditional theatre out of their original context to become material for new choreographies and for the making of new music.

scene in *Seven Stories*, the female general *Đào Tam Xuân*. In *Nam Mái*, I play her role, and the choreography from this scene is worked into the triple concerto as a central narrative. Hence, while there is an articulated gender perspective in the creation of the choreography, the relation between choreography and musical composition in this project is more distant.

*Vodou Vibrations* is a choreographed piece for solo performer, a site-specific project, which has been worked out and performed in many different venues in Sweden, UK, and Vietnam, drawing new identities and materials out of these encounters with different spaces. In my collaboration with Marie Fahlin on the making of this piece, many layers of my identity as a Vietnamese woman and musician were challenged through an extended workshop period in which the performance of gendered gesture was a central method.

In *Thin As Skin*, the music was consistently created from movement in a series of different ways. Some layers of the music are electronic compositions that use source material recorded by performing some of the choreographies, for instance a duo choreography using paper in ways that also generated sound. The live performance on the *đàn tranh* also used movement in the space as a structuring component, since I walk and play the instrument, following a graphic score drawn by Hiromi as part of the performance. The gestures drawn from *đàn tranh* playing, used in the duo choreography mentioned above, are eventually applied on the instrument when Hiromi plays a solo on the *đàn tranh*.

### 2.3.2 From video analysis to documentary

Since 2009, I have been involved in the development of methods for qualitative analysis of video documentation from rehearsal and performance through the use of stimulated recall.<sup>34</sup> With a foundational reference to grounded theory, the analysis has been developed from the procedure of open coding (Benaquisto, 2008). In grounded theory methodology, open coding is the initial stage of analysis, in which the aim is to draw an analytical understanding from the data, rather than applying a pre-conceived grid on the material. I have not seen the need to continue developing the analysis using the later stages proposed in grounded theory, since the open coding, combined with the inter-subjective creation of an understanding of the

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<sup>34</sup> Stimulated recall is a qualitative research method built on the procedure of presenting informants with audio or video documentation and recording their responses as they again experience the situation via media. The term was coined by Benjamin Bloom in 1953, in a study using audio recordings of classroom teaching as stimuli, aiming to allow the student to relive the original experience and give an account of their original thought processes. While Bloom made a selection of clips from the teaching situation, Kagan & Krathwohl (1967) developed the method further by asking each subject to view the entire documentation and to pause to identify moments that require comment. This method developed by Kagan & Krathwohl has been the fundamental approach in the qualitative analysis of video documentation in my thesis.

material, has already revealed satisfactory analytical outcomes. Again, the coding of videos has always been carried out as a negotiation between two or more participants from the artistic project in question. By building such negotiations into the coding process, we wished to avoid cultural bias, by making it explicit and negotiated as part of the conversation, and thereby we have approached qualitative video analysis with the aim of decolonizing research methods (Smith, 2012).

Already at the outset, the work in *The Six Tones* was characterized by an oscillation within the group between insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives,<sup>35</sup> since the music we played would either be drawn from Vietnamese traditions or would often be a score by a western composer. For instance, in a reflected discussion when the group worked on transcribing the piece *Viken* (by Love Mangs, originally for guitar and electronics) for the trio of the group and electronics in 2006, I described the friction could happen when we negotiate the collaborative work:

I was conscious of that, so that is why I sometimes experienced this friction. When I played *Viken* with you, I often asked myself, should I put something Vietnamese in here or not? I wondered whether this glissando was too Vietnamese? Should I play something strange, not Vietnamese here? Is it good if the audience could feel that there was something Vietnamese in *Viken*... (Nguyễn, 2009).

An awareness of these shifting perspectives constituted an important building block for the design of the analytical methods in the study *The Six Tones* carried out within the *(re)thinking Improvisation* project. In this project, we designed a long-term study of video material collected between 2006 and 2011 of performer-performer interaction in rehearsals and concerts. The qualitative analyses through stimulated recall focussed on how our interaction has changed over time. Upon analysis, a shift can be seen in both an apparent increase in the number of initiatives taken as well as in the quality of the interaction itself, which we evaluate as different modalities of listening. We identified a number of distinct ways in which musicians can approach listening, whereby the most prominent types discussed were attentive, structural, integrated, searching, and failed listening (Östersjö & Nguyễn, 2013b).

Human gesture, and how it is perceived, is complex matter, and in order to approach an analytical understanding, not only do we need extensive documentation and data, but analytical frameworks also need to be developed. Marc Leman (2010) proposes a three-layered analytical perspective on musical gesture, whereby the third person perspective allows for observations and measurements made in order to establish replicable data about a certain gesture type. He further discusses the social interactions typical of a second person perspective and ways of approaching different layers of subjective understandings in a first person perspective. In the joint analysis carried out with the members of *The Six Tones* on the work for

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<sup>35</sup> As outlined above, this oscillation between insider and outsider perspectives can also happen within a single individual. Hence, the design does not essentialize emic and etic perspectives.

*Inside/Outside*, I have attempted to embrace these multiple perspectives in order to capture some of the complexity of gesture and its cultural meanings. Specifically, I have considered first and third person perspectives in analyzing the choreography of gender (Foster, 1998) in traditional music performance for my interpretation of *Inside/Outside*. The possibility for the participating artists to oscillate between first and third person perspectives in the qualitative analysis has been important in order to unpack the process of creating the piece. Third person-perspective observation has indeed laid the ground for the basic understanding of gendered gesture in these TV shows, but without the first person reflections from the participating artists, the final stages of the analysis, and of the artistic work itself, would not have been possible. The latter perspective will be further unpacked in the following section.

While the methods for qualitative analysis of artistic processes and of performers' gestures have laid the grounds for much of the artistic work, further approaches to the use of documentary have also been necessary. Ethnomusicology has long made use of recorded audio-visual materials as a way of accessing the music of other cultures, and this has primarily taken the form of observational documentation (e.g. Baily, 2009; Zemp, 1988). The audio-visual work in this project does not merely employ digital video as a form of documentation, but the aim has been to develop methods to both generate and theorize the research process in ways that move beyond classic observational modes of representation. These include interactive, reflexive and performative modes of ethnographic filmmaking, which are increasingly explored in visual anthropology and in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Schneider and Pasqualino, 2014; Schneider and Wright, 2013, 2010; Ingold, 2011). In order to create a comprehensive understanding of the development of the present day concert culture for traditional music in Vietnam, I had to undertake an ethnological study, in the form of a documentary, eventually entitled *The Culture Soldiers*, and premiered in 2017 at Panora in Malmö. The first chapter of the thesis builds on this piece of research. But also, in order to access the embodied layers of signification in the artistic approaches to gender and gesture, the use of documentary as a form for further developing an analysis of the documentation ultimately became part of my methods.

But the notion of a clear cut division between insider (first person subjective experience) and outsider (third person objective observation) must also be questioned. The essentializing view of the other as a homogenous representation of otherness must arguably be understood as a Eurocentric myth. As put by Trinh Minh-ha, in a discussion of subjectivity and objectivity in filmmaking, "there can hardly be such a thing as an essential inside that can be homogeneously represented by all insiders: an authentic insider in there, an absolute reality out there, or an incorrupted representative who cannot be questioned by another incorrupted representative" (Trinh, 1991, p. 75). Across a series examples of essentializing statements and methods taken from anthropology, she instead proposes the perspective of the "Inappropriate Other", for whom questions of authenticity (how



objective is the account in the film) and the degree to which the filmmaker is representative of the context described (is this a true insider's account) become irrelevant:

This is not to say that the historical “I” can be obscured or ignored, and that differentiation cannot be made; but that “I” is not unitary, culture has never been monolithic, and more or less is always more or less in relation to a judging subject. Differences do not only exist between outsider and insider—two entities—, they are also at work within the outsider or the insider—a single entity. This leads us to the second question in which the filmmaker is an outsider. As long as the filmmaker takes up a positivistic attitude and chooses to bypass the inter-subjectivities and realities involved, factual truth remains the dominant criterion for evaluation and the question as to whether his/her work successfully represents the reality it claims would to exert its power. The more the representation leans on verisimilitude, the more it is subject to normative verification.

For the Inappropriate Other, however, the questions mentioned above seems inadequate; the criterion of authenticity no longer proves pertinent. [...] She who knows she cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also knows that she cannot make a gesture without activating the to-and-fro movement of life (Trinh, 1991, p.76).

I see the notion of the “Inappropriate Other” as an important concept for artistic research. Rather than making discrete transitions between first and third person perspectives, the making of the documentation, and of a documentary, is better understood as performance.

Before making *The Culture Soldiers* I was already involved in the creation of *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*,<sup>36</sup> an experimental music theatre production with documentary film. This was my first experience of documentary film making, and also a project in which the aim was to explore a performative approach to documentary. In this piece, the basic structural element is the sharing of memories as a way of building a narrative on empathy and the creation of an understanding that cuts across cultures and art forms. A central concept for the dramaturgy was to create situations that would evoke the lived experience of the performers. The experience of sharing was brought from the interview situations and up on the theatre stage. Authenticity became a performative quality, and each performance an exploration of this “Inappropriate Other”, recreating memory on stage.

Performativity has also been one of the methods in the development of the audio paper as an academic format for publication, such as initiated by the musicological journal *Seismograf*. In 2016, the two editors of the journal published a manifesto for this novel format, which they see as “an extension of the written paper through its specific use of media, a sonic awareness of aesthetics and materiality, and creative

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<sup>36</sup> For more information about this piece, see Nguyễn & Östersjö, 2019.

approach towards communication” (Groth & Sansom, 2016, n.p.). Through a series of seminars at the Inter Arts Center, the Ph.D. program at Malmö Academy of Music in collaboration with the musicological department in Lund has continued to develop ideas around both the audio and the video paper.<sup>37</sup>

In the work with Hiromi Miyakita on the making of *Thin as Skin*, all the workshops, stimulated recall sessions and performances were documented. I also conducted several interviews with her for an in-depth discussion of the work. With this documentary material I created an exposition in the RC which presents my collaboration with Hiromi Miyakita on the making of *Thin As Skin* which is structured as a video essay. This I see as an opportunity to create an analytical understanding of the artistic practice, the embodied knowledge of the artists involved, and the artistic results, within the same format in which the art work is documented and represented.

### **2.3.3 Mutual learning, listening and openness**

Ever since I first became engaged in intercultural collaboration, largely through my work with *The Six Tones*, I have been interested in better understanding the challenges to such artistry, and the need for developing artistic methods that not only help to address these challenges, but also have potential to generate novel artistic outcomes and contribute to enhancing the socio-political power inherent to artistic practice. In the artistic work within my Ph.D. project, intercultural collaboration has become a method for addressing several gender perspectives within these musical practices.

An initial challenge in all intercultural work is to identify colonialist power structures and develop approaches that can counter such historical forms of domination. In the work of *The Six Tones*, the notion of mutual learning was a central concept and it was intended as a way of approaching the collaboration by creating a flat structure, wherein the otherwise typical domination of western art music, embodied by composers and scores, has been the norm to which other forms of music have been compared. Out of this wish to engage in mutual learning emerged an interest in better understanding the function of listening. Specifically, we wanted to develop a form of listening which is radically open to the other, an analysis that grew out of an inter-subjective understanding of our collaborative work, created through stimulated recall sessions with all members of the group. These ideas draw on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s idea that openness to the other is a prerequisite for all true listening. However, while Gadamer’s hermeneutics is built on the assumption that language constitutes the basis for human thought, Lakoff and Johnson argue that “the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our

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<sup>37</sup> See further Groth & Sansom (2019) and the forthcoming issue in *Seismograf* which includes audio papers from a conference held at Inter Arts Center in 2018.

embodiment” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 4). The theory of embodied cognition provides a systematic argument for why an understanding of interactions in the domain of music cannot be reduced to the verbalizable, as much inevitably remains ineffable. Similarly, I would argue that musical knowledge is situated in the embodied,<sup>38</sup> performative and material knowledge which is drawn from the artistic practice. Hence, true listening in intercultural collaboration is less dependent on language than on the embodied interactions through music. But how do these forms of listening function in a situation in which aesthetic paradigms are questioned through the very nature of the intercultural exchange? In a joint paper with Stefan Östersjö I discuss the creative possibilities in such contexts<sup>39</sup> through the polarity of musical and *musicianly* listening, two concepts introduced by Pierre Schaeffer. While the former is characterised by structuring sonic material by reference to tradition, *musicianly* listening and creation operates with a curiosity, which bends the ear towards the unexpected (Chion, 2009).<sup>40</sup> In the paper, we argue that *musicianly* listening has a central role in intercultural collaboration, and constitutes the ground from which new ways of listening can be established, beyond the current aesthetic regimes. In essence, the pair of musical and *musicianly* listening can be a way of understanding how a musician can actively engage and disengage with musical traditions, and thereby challenge and resist the cultural capital that defines the *habitus* in a particular social field.

It can be deduced from the perspective of musical and *musicianly* listening, that the concept of mutual learning, which was seen as an essential building block for the work of the ensemble, is not an unproblematic concept. The first question is what “learning” might imply in an intercultural context? Does it presume that the other’s culture becomes transparent and that each musician can replicate the other’s performance? At the heart of this problem is the question of listening. Drawing on my experience of teaching traditional music, both to Vietnamese students in the *Vietnam National Academy of Music* and to Swedish students in the *Malmö Academy of Music*, I discuss how my Swedish students, during a series of guest teacher residencies at the *Malmö Academy of Music*, shifted from being curious listeners from outside a musical culture into participants “perhaps somewhere in between two worlds”. One of my students says in a diary note: “I would not say that I am learning to listen like a Vietnamese [...] rather, maybe, I am learning to listen in a more genre specific manner” (Nguyễn, 2014, p. 265). This possibility of

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<sup>38</sup> The embodied knowledge of a musician is deeply embedded in a socio-cultural context, and can, as suggested by Born (2011), be analyzed in four planes. As further theorized by Bourdieu, this situatedness is embodied, and can be analyzed through his theory of *habitus*.

<sup>39</sup> Östersjö & Nguyễn (2017).

<sup>40</sup> This pair is defined by Chion (2009) in the following way: “Generally speaking *musical* listening or invention refers back to traditional heritage, to established and accepted structures and values, which it attempts to rediscover or recreate; whilst *musicianly* hearing or invention seeks rather to locate interesting new phenomena or to innovate in the facture of sound objects. The musical attitude rests on old values; the *musicianly* attitude actively seeks new ones” (p. 39).

developing a different kind of listening for specific contexts seems like an important observation, but the limitations of such learning processes remains the central issue here. Mutual learning is limited by the extent to which our musical listening is socio-culturally framed. *Musicianly* listening then, is an approach which can allow a musician engaged in experimentation to seek new ways, beyond the workings of one's *habitus*. Intercultural collaboration demands of each participant a commitment to openness and a willingness to change. In my Ph.D. project, such artistic processes, instigated by intercultural collaboration, have been an artistic method for also instigating change in the choreography of gender in traditional Vietnamese music.

## 2.4 Summary

The method and design of this Ph.D. project builds on qualitative analysis of gesture in musical performance, with particular emphasis on employing a gender perspective in this analysis. In the artistic work, analysis of gesture has constituted a point of departure for the creation of a series of intermedia works that seek to develop methods that combine the practices of choreography and musical composition. Intercultural collaboration has provided particular challenges and possibilities in the development of each of these works. The results of the artistic work are presented in the RC. The role of documentary in the creation of these outputs has been an important artistic method in my representation of the research outcomes. In the following three chapters (3-5), the artistic and analytical outcomes are discussed, responding to one research question per chapter, while with the dissertation's concluding chapter (6) the narrative turns to broader reflections through an auto-ethnographic approach.



## Chapter 3.

# Choreographies of gender

This chapter discusses the role of gender analysis in the artistic projects, largely created from qualitative coding of gesture in musical performance. The qualitative analysis is built on the use of stimulated recall as a method for drawing out an intersubjective understanding of artistic processes through an analytical process involving all participating artists. An analysis based on socio-cultural perspectives, across the four social planes proposed by Born (2011), is equally important for development of a gesture analysis that addresses movement from a gender perspective. The analysis in this chapter aims to respond to the first research question: What gender conventions can gesture analysis of musical performance unveil? In the chapter, not only are analytical findings in the study of source material presented, but also findings from the artistic work.

## 3.1 Images of women in TV shows of traditional Vietnamese music

### 3.1.1 Vietnamese women in contemporary media and the body image

This chapter starts out in the fourth plane in Born's framework, looking at the role of institutions in the construction of gender in the Vietnamese society since *Đổi Mới*, and then dives quickly to the first plane, discussing the role of gesture in the teaching and performance of traditional Vietnamese music in VNAM. The complexity in how nation branding has affected traditional music performance, and brought this cultural heritage into TV shows, often combined with the "improvement" of the musical material through western style arrangement in neo-traditional music, is thoroughly discussed above. But the emergence of a particular choreography for the performance of traditional instruments, such as taught today in VNAM, demands further reflection.

Christina Nualart (2018) observes how, in modern Vietnam "representations of women in the media are rarely expected to be disruptive of traditional values. Images of a certain type of Vietnamese woman, seductive yet docile, have been used

officially and commercially to promote national identity and to operate as a sensual bait” (p.29). In parallel with the emergence of a new TV-oriented culture in the 1990s, also new and locally produced women’s magazines appeared in Vietnamese cities “based on the consumption activities of an urban middle class” (Drummond, 2004, p. 168). But even if these magazines address questions of identity for women in the new urban society, they advocate a conservative type of femininity which constantly refers to the male gaze, the “absent”, or omnipresent, masculine reference. With reference to the front cover of the *M magazine*, Lisa Drummond summarizes the typical message: “To be considered attractive today, you need this aura of paraded sexuality, come-hither seductiveness, like me, you need to learn these secrets, and this magazine will sell them to you” (p. 158). But these magazines relate to the same domestic chores of Vietnamese women, as were discussed in Chapter 1, and are full of advice on how to “perform the various woman’s roles ‘more perfectly’, for example telling the reader how to cook to please her family, how to instruct her family in enjoying Western or other commercial food products, and how to shop for the ‘right’ foods” (Drummond, 2004, p. 171-173). Women performers in TV shows are presented aiming at the same assumed male viewer. In the RC the following conclusions of the joint analysis of gesture in TV shows:

The different gestures that caught our interest we analyzed as communicative gesture, that emerged from extended and modified sound-producing or sound-facilitating gesture. We believe that the modification of these gestures is partially related to the fact that all the videos from TV shows that we analyzed were recorded playback. Hence, the movement was already decoupled from the sound production. The gendered aspects of these modifications are related to the decorative function of these extended movements. It was striking for all of us how strongly gendered the gesture was in the performances and how these movement types would extend the playing related actions in ways that had no relation to sound production, or would even be contradictory to the intended sound. The gender analysis was also built on observation of the few male performers in the TV shows, whose behavior was strikingly different, and bore no traces of the gestures found in female performers. This observation gave at hand that the gesture types found in the coding sessions were inherently related to gender. (*Inside/Outside* exposition in RC)

Some of the performances we analyzed included students from VNAM, but in all videos, teachers were participating. The academy has had a prominent role in the development of this performance culture, and the gesture which characterizes female performance of this music has been created and transmitted by its teachers. Naturally, this development has been carried out with the best of intentions, but the ways in which such performance distorts tradition and objectifies women demands a further discussion.

In video example V2.1 in the RC, we see a typical example of how a teacher may be performing together with a group of students. Here, the teacher is placed in the middle of the group, and each component of the teacher’s sound-producing gesture

is mirrored more or less identically by each student. This video example also indicates clearly how the prefixes and suffixes have become central to the gesture unit, here with an extraordinary suffix at the end of the phrase. But what is the purpose of these gestures?<sup>41</sup> It can be assumed that such movements have an origin in gesture aimed at synchronizing performance. But, in the same piece, the teacher also plays a solo part, in which exactly these gestures are even further exaggerated. Hence, it seems that even if these gestures may have had a different origin, they have developed into expressive gestures, with no particular function for the sound-production. In a stimulated recall session with *The Six Tones* looking at Trà My's performance gesture in her own group for traditional music, we first discussed the difficulty in even deciding what is a prefix and what is a suffix, since both tend to be so extended. She further observed how she tends to make more of the suffix, and that the aim of these gestures are not related to synchronisation or communication within the group, but rather that they are performed only to "make the action more beautiful" (Ngô, personal communication, May 2013).<sup>42</sup>

But the social meaning of gesture in TV shows is most clearly expressed in the practice of smiling to the camera. Since these TV shows are most often recorded playback, the producer and the camera men can instruct the performers as the play back goes along. In video examples V2.5 and V2.6, we see students performing a piece for *tỳ bà*<sup>43</sup> ensemble who very clearly are instructed, in the midst of sometimes technically demanding passages (which they are simulating to play) to suddenly look into the camera and smile, with relatively unsatisfactory outcome. A further perspective on the practice of smiling to the camera is found in video example V2.7a, in which the three members of *The Six Tones* have a conversation about how Trà My and I have been socialised into this behaviour. Following Lisa Drummond (2004) I argue that in this performance culture, the gesture of female performers is shaped to address the "absent men", who are the implied viewers, but also, the camera men and producers in the moment of recording. Men are typically not displayed in these performances, but they are the implied viewers, and this gendered relation may constitute the strongest reason for why, as suggested by Ingrid Bertleff (2006), "the visual aspects of performances and verbal expressions of Vietnamese music have become more important than the music itself. Music has become a show for sightseers. The listening experience has become secondary" (p. 72). But how might such a shift be experienced by the musicians in this context?

From my individual experiences of being a traditional music performer in Hà Nội, my initial inspiration for *Inside/Outside* came from a deeply felt frustration over the working situation for female performers of traditional music. I developed the concept for the piece before I started my Ph.D. project, but the way the piece took

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<sup>41</sup> For a further discussion of the mnemonic function of gesture, see Chapter 4.

<sup>42</sup> An excerpt from this coding session is found in V2.7a in the RC.

<sup>43</sup> Vietnamese four stringed lute.



shape was very much the outcome of the artistic collaboration during my studies. Through the qualitative analysis of video and in particular, through the joint coding process, and the discussions with Marie Fahlin and *The Six Tones*, a more articulated critique began to take shape. In the next part I will argue that the interaction between such analytical understanding and the creation of the choreographies in *Inside/Outside* was very immediate. Here, Marie had an important role in challenging my embodied practice and urging me to find new movement qualities in my performance. I was challenged to negate some of my habits as a *đàn tranh* player, especially related to the hand and arm movements. The control and grace which would constitute the norm in traditional music performance were here replaced by wider and more aggressive movement sets, directed all around my position in the glass-box, and not always towards the instrument. At the same time, while performing in the glass-box in queen costume, makeup and hairdo, I was also aware of embodying the role of a female traditional music performer, and the public persona that this assumes. This reflects an experience of a multi-layered body. While the *habitus* of a performer must largely be referred to the level of the body schema, since this is how habitual behaviours are embedded in the sub-conscious, I believe that this experience relates to the body image; the “public persona” that I refer to as experienced on the level of the body image.<sup>44</sup> When consciously disrupting the socio-culturally defined behaviour of *đàn tranh* playing, the choreography of hand and arm gestures brings these subconscious layers to awareness. In the next section we will look more specifically at how an analysis of such behaviours can be employed for artistic purposes.

### 3.1.2 From gender analysis to performance

When *The Six Tones* and Marie Fahlin got together to start creating the piece, qualitative analysis of gesture in TV shows was a fundamental building block. With a catalogue of performance related movements—identified in the video analysis<sup>45</sup>—as point of departure, the three performers of the group and the choreographer continued the development of the piece in working sessions at the Inter Arts Center in Malmö. Here, Marie would engage in a dialogue with each performer on their individual response to the gestures which could be seen in the Vietnamese TV shows. Hence, the choreographies were not taught to the performers but rather drawn out of their bodily response to these materials. Among the extended sound-producing gestures were, for instance, elbow movements particular to the plucking action on the *đàn tranh*.<sup>46</sup> We had studied a video in which a group of *đàn tranh* players, led by their teacher at the academy, performing the same gesture—an

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<sup>44</sup> See also section 2.2.1.

<sup>45</sup> See V2.1, V2.2, V2.3, V2.4, V2.5 and V2.6 in RC.

<sup>46</sup> See V2.8 in RC.

extensive suffix following the plucking action—in precise synchronisation. These elbow movements became fundamental material in sections two and four of the piece. In the third section, the choreography followed more closely the actual behaviours one can find in traditional music performance shown in TV shows. Here, the performance of a traditional song, *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*, was synchronized through extensive rocking movements.

For me and Trà My, this process also became a vehicle to intentionally address how we had been socialised into these gendered behaviours and to explore ways in which our bodies could also “perform differently”. The critical dimension of the work is discussed in the headphone track in the installation, which in turn used the annotations, made as part of the analysis in the stimulated recall sessions, as a source:<sup>47</sup>

At this moment, I was trying to depict the difficulty facing a traditional performer, here by standing and turning around the instrument in ways that make it hard or even impossible to play. This in contrast to the otherwise typical expression of ease in traditional music performance. What you most of all learn in conservatory training is a series of movements that all express controlled elegance and how to smile when you perform in public. (Annotation by Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, Nov 2012)<sup>48</sup>

A similar approach can be seen in several other parts of the choreography. In the coding of the video from the premiere, I made a comment on a transitional section in the piece, where, again, an intentional critique of the performance conventions in the TV shows is expressed, here with a direct reference to the cameras:

I felt here like I turned my back to the camera (even if the room doesn't really have a back and front...) and when I performed these gestures I explicitly tried to expose my back to the camera through exaggerated sound-producing gestures and rocking. (Annotation by Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, Nov 2012)

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<sup>47</sup> For this citation, see V2.13 in RC.

<sup>48</sup> This and the following examples of annotations from the stimulated recall that eventually was used also in the new headphone tracks can be heard in *Inside/Outside* exposition in RC.



**Fig. 3**

Image from *Inside/Outside* at the *Chèo* theatre, Vietnam 2012. Photo by Ngô Tuấn Anh.



**Fig. 4**

Image from *Inside/Outside* at Inter Arts Center, Sweden 2014. Photo by Gunnar Menander.

Perhaps these statements can suggest that in many instances, I was performing the choreography with the direct intentions of “subverting gender-based hierarchies of prestige and authority” (George, 1993). As will be discussed below, further examples of a similar kind are found in accounts from Trà My, again drawn from the stimulated recall sessions.

Indeed, the qualitative analysis eventually shaped much of the content of the piece, as can be seen in the development of the audio tracks, distributed in the headphones which were presented by each of the glass boxes. For the premiere in 2012 we created a first version of audio tracks to be monitored over headphones with music played on the instrument inside the box. It was a central musical idea that the acoustic sound of the instrument inside the boxes should not be heard by the audience. Instead, processed and spatialised representations of the audio signal from the instrument in each glass box should be mixed live by Matt Wright to the quadrophonic sound system. Hence, an audience member could walk up to a specific glass box, put the headphones on and hear more clearly, instrumental playing on the instrument performed inside. After the premiere of the piece *The Six Tones* made a further analysis of the work, looking at the choreographies working mainly from a

first person perspective.<sup>49</sup> We had no intention for this analysis to inform further artistic work, since we felt that the process was finished with the premiere in November 2012. However, this analysis carried out in 2013 and 2014 created a more articulated understanding of the working process and also of the individual experiences of all three performers, both of the cultural context for traditional music in Vietnam as well as of the individual identity of each performer. This analysis gave us the idea of creating headphone tracks that would be based on the individual coding of video carried out by the three performers. The three performers made recordings where we gave personal accounts of how we had been socialised into male Swedish or female Vietnamese performers respectively and further, of our experiences of performing the piece. These recordings were eventually edited and processed into individual tape parts, also containing some elements of instrumental playing from “inside” the box. The headphone tracks were presented for the first time in the video installation version of the piece commissioned by the museum of world cultures in Gothenburg in 2015 world cultures in Gothenburg in 2015.



**Fig. 5**  
Image from *Inside/Outside* at Inter Arts Center, Sweden 2014. Photo by Gunnar Menander.

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<sup>49</sup> See further Chapter 2 above.

The making of the headphone tracks summarized much of the individual experiences of the entire working process. The headphone tracks were not only constitute a window for the audience onto the inside of the piece's choreography but also the making of these recordings constituted an endpoint in an inwards journey for the participating artists. This inward journey started with the analysis of videos of television shows and an emerging understanding of the body image of a female Vietnamese musician. The headphone tracks constitute an artistic translation of the embodied knowledge of the three performers, a knowledge which has taken shape through the play instigated by the making of *Inside/Outside*. In the headphone tracks, embodied knowledge is translated to an artistic format but simultaneously also into the discursive domain. But the multi-layered and bilingual design of the tape compositions in the headphone tracks provide no "expression of a single subjectivity of the performer" but rather give a display of the "many fictive subjectivities that have been activated in the making of *Inside/Outside*" (Östersjö, 2017, p. 101). In particular, these layers were drawn out of the qualitative analysis, but also experienced in the process of creating the choreography. Here, the performer's experience would oscillate between reflection, that could go far back in time, to the ways in which they had been socialised into male or female performers respectively, and returning to an immediate experience in the new choreography, as in this excerpt from my recordings:

My mother was a *Tuồng* actress. In traditional theatre, there are stereotypes for male and female behaviour, just as for good and bad; virtuous and immoral; hero and villain and so on. Since I was a child, I have seen my mother embodying different characters on stage. But in Vietnamese society, there was no possibility for a girl to choose to perform differently. I was taught to always be a good girl according to the norms I learnt from my mother. (Annotation by Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, Nov 2012)

Accounts like these which constitute a central conceptual layer in *Inside/Outside*, suggesting that the process of first creating the analysis of gesture in TV shows, the shaping of individual choreographies using gesture identified in the analysis, and the experience of creating the final performance, has had impact on all three musicians with regard to their understanding of the role of gendered gesture in musical performance. We will in the next section look at a counter example from a tradition in Vietnamese theatre, in which the role of women is fundamentally different.

### 3.2 Images of women in Vietnamese *Tuồng* theatre

Wendy Duong (2001) observes how in ancient Vietnam, literature played a central role in introducing feminist ideas. She uses the metaphor of the glass bottle as a way of understanding how poetry could become a vehicle for subtle protest and critique,

despite the oppressive and conservative nature of Confucian society. “When an author uses fictional literature to express controversial ideas, it is as if the idea is in a glass bottle. The reader is able to see and understand the controversial idea, but the author is more or less insulated from government interference because the idea is only ‘fiction’” (p. 298).

Duong (2001) continues to claim the influence on Vietnamese women by the heritage of female warriors, a category which reappeared with the Vietnamese-American War. But she notes how, from a historical perspective, “despite the heavy influence of Confucianism, virtually every dynasty produced at least one woman who took part in politics and state affairs, served as a military leader, or distinguished herself nationally in public office” (p. 255). Hence there appear to be two parallel phenomena in Vietnamese history that predate modern feminism,<sup>50</sup> first the expression of feminist ideas in some of the most central Vietnamese literary heritage, second, in the occurrence of a form of traditional theatre which, just as the aforementioned “glass bottles” of poetry and other non-fiction materials holds a potential to reach a wider audience. As put by Duong,

In summary, because Vietnamese Confucian society was oppressive and did not value social justice, the literati created for themselves “glass bottles” in which to plant their “controversial” ideas about individual freedom. Thus, the three Vietnamese classics—Royal Concubine, Warrior’s Wife, and the Tale of Lady Kieu—all contain feminist ideas hidden as fictional literature. Because literature lies at the heart of Vietnamese culture, it can be a tool of advocacy for social justice. Vietnamese women’s advocates recognize that “social justice and gender equality will not be realized only by good intentions, nor by lip service,” and that “social justice... should be the core of social policy and economic development” at the highest level. Hopefully, the strong social justice-oriented concepts presented in Vietnamese creative literature can be used as a starting point for strengthening individual rights under a true “rule of law”. (Duong, 2001, p. 305)

I will in this section outline a perspective on women in Vietnamese society, which has used traditional theatre as the “glass bottle” through which it has become possible to formulate and embody female roles and habits that counter the Confucian model and propose ways in which can take on roles traditionally expressive of maleness. Đinh Thị Kim Thương (2017) discusses the contrast between the governing Confucian ideology and many female characters in *Tuồng*,<sup>51</sup> who are

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<sup>50</sup> For a further discussion of how poetry, and its inherent multiple meanings in the Vietnamese language, has played a central role in the instigation of social change in Vietnam see Jamieson (2001).

<sup>51</sup> Developed from models found in Chinese Beijing opera, which are believed to have been brought to Vietnam through the war with China in the late 1200s, the Vietnamese counterpart is often called *Hát Bội*, a name which also captures some of its typical characteristics, since *Hát* means to sing, and *Bội* means gesture or pose (Brandon, 1967). Many of the central plays were written by one of the most famous Vietnamese authors, *Đào Tấn*. The forms for recitation and singing and the stylized

outspokenly driven by their desires, express independence and engage in heroic sacrifice, three traits that would normally have been conceivable only for male protagonists. The traditions of *Tuồng* theatre formed the cornerstone of the dance film project *Seven Stories*,<sup>52</sup> mentioned above. *Seven Stories* constituted the origin of the triple concerto *Nam Mái*, created in collaboration between the composer Richard Karpen, *The Six Tones*, the choreographer Marie Fahlin and playwright Jörgen Dahlgqvist. Already at the outset, we discussed the *Tuồng* plays we wanted to explore as profeminist ancient theatre. The strong female characters—not only the heroine but also the antagonist, the queen—the way they act out their feelings, desires and especially in the way they put their desire into action (action always means war in *Tuồng*) can in my understanding as a counter-image to the values of Confucian ideology.

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choreographies are still today the heart of the art form, which was maintained and developed at the court in Huế and eventually spread both to the south and the north of the country.

<sup>52</sup> *Hồ Nguyệt Cô Hóa Cáo* (Hồ Nguyệt Cô Turns into a Fox) tells the story of a fox who turned into a woman. Werefoxes and similar tales of old foxes that have the ability to take the shape of a beautiful woman exist in both Asian and Western traditions. The old fox Hồ Nguyệt Cô eventually managed to turn into a human being and in a process of purifying her soul a precious pearl appeared. With this pearl she became undefeatable. She encounters the young general Tiết Giao, and his talent conquered her and drew her into a passionate love. However, he was never in love with her but was only after the pearl. In the most passionate minute of her life she falls into his trap and hands the pearl over to him. When she gives him the pearl he runs off and she again starts turning into a fox, leading the life of an animal for the remains of her life. That was the prize she had to pay for her passion.

Kim Loan is a princess in the play *Bách Dao Diệm Thiên Hùng* (The hundred swords of Diệm Thiên Hùng). When her royal was in danger by the traitor Diệm Thiên Hùng, the princess Kim Loan herself fights him and was killed. The fighting scene holds some famous choreographic material in which Kim Loan uses her long hair as a sword.

*Mộc Quế Anh Dâng Cây* (Mộc Quế Anh Offers the Tree) tells the story of Mộc Quế Anh—a female chief of Mộc Cát village. When a general and his troupes came to her village to obtain a tree which was worshiped as the Mother Magic Tree, he was defeated by her. The troupes were reinforced with the appearance of his son, Tôn Bảo. Mộc Quế Anh was struck by Tôn Bảo's good looks and ability, and she fell in love. She defeated him too, captured him and convinced him to marry her.

*Tam Nữ Đồ Vương* (Three Women Made the Reign) tells the story of three women, Xuân Hương, Bích Hà, Phương Cơ, who in different ways helped to save the throne.

Lưu Kim Đỉnh was a name of an angel (and also the name of the play)—who was sent down to earth to pacify the war caused by a devil.

*Đào Tam Xuân*, is the name of a female general *Tuồng* play with the same title. The scene in which Đào Tam Xuân receives the news of the death of her husband and son is the material for one scene in *Seven Stories*. At the frontier command headquarters, Đào Tam Xuân learned of the unjust killing of her husband and her son. Overcome with grief she immediately marched the troops towards the capital and took command of the situation in the court. She demanded that the queen be properly punished for the murder, and since the emperor followed her request, the queen was arrested and eventually beheaded.



### 3.2.1 Performing *Đào Tam Xuân* in *Nam Mái*

In the exposition in the RC, I discuss the scene in *Seven Stories* taken from *Đào Tam Xuân*—a female general in the play with the same title, which was a central reference in the making of *Nam Mái*. This scene, and the content of the whole story, holds some of the strongest examples of a female character who acts with the decisiveness, authority, power of initiative and emotional complexity as is often afforded only to male characters. It is a tale of a female general whose husband was executed due to the ill doings of the queen, and whose son was killed when attempting to prevent the execution. In the scene, the audience finds her waiting for news from the court, and her choreography signals a sense of a bad omen. Then eventually she is given the message that both her husband and son have been murdered. She falls to the ground devastated by grief, but rises again, with the aim of summoning her army to ride to the court and to do justice. This turn to anger is often understood as exclusively male behaviour (Hess, Adams & Kleck, 2004). But also the grief and anguish that she experiences is expressed in the same manner as a male general actor would have done. Hence, she was not reduced to just being beautiful but could show a wide array of different emotions.



**Fig. 6**  
Nguyễn Thanh Thủy performing *Đào Tam Xuân* in *Nam Mái* 2014. Photo by Ngô Trà My.

Another motivation for the group of artists to create *Seven Stories* as a project around *Tuồng* was the extensive use of choreography and gesture in this ancient tradition. We were also interested in the apparent close links between acting, gesture and music in these plays. The gesture in *Tuồng* is deeply embodied by each actor, since, when you study to be an actor, you learn the movements and vocal repertory of one single type, which will appear in different guise in each play but still using the same modes of expression. Janys Hayes (2013) describes how “the movement sequences in *Tuồng* were strictly adhered to, passing from generation to generation. Neither movements nor the spoken language are naturalistic, even the facial makeup is symbolic” (Hayes, 2013, p. 101). Among these movement sets are basic movements that can be used in any play, while others are specific for a certain role or character. Gesture in *Tuồng* is used in three ways: Battle scenes may be staged as choreographed dances; by actors during dialogue or song passages as a kind of conventionalized gesture language; or segments of the story may be told through dance scenes. The battle scenes are often long and choreographed as dance movement to the accompaniment of music, and accordingly, the characters who often act in battle scenes use gesture more often than others (Brandon, 1967, p.142). For instance, a character like Đào Tam Xuân, everything in her gesture; the way she walks; the way she directs her gaze; the way she deals with her sleeves (the sleeves are the most important part of the costume); and then of course, how she handles her two swords, all serves the purpose of displaying her power. And the characterizing movements of the female general are shared with the male characters of these plays, many of which are also in turn shared between *Tuồng* and Chinese opera: “the upright index finger moved forcibly for emphasis; the intricately choreographed battle scenes (including Chinese tumbling in hat boi); the suddenly clenched fist of the warrior; and the staff held horizontally behind the back during the exit of a masculine character” (Brandon, 1967, p. 141). But what was the meaning of this female embodiment of gesture, traditionally associated with male characters?



**Fig. 7**  
Nguyễn Thanh Thủy performing *Đào Tam Xuân* in *Nam Mái* 2014. Photo by Ngô Trà My.

In a study of how gender identity is expressed in myth and ritual among the Kalapalo Indians<sup>53</sup> of central Brazil, Ellen Basso (1989) provides an example of how music can constitute a platform for a symbolic reversal of gender roles. Here, musical performance plays a central role, since it is at each instance “associated symbolically with gender identity” (p. 163). In the ritual the male performers experience femaleness, and the women performers enact maleness. She describes how music has a paradoxical role of first emphasizing difference and antagonism, but at the same time also providing a mode of communication across these enacted differences, and hereby constituting a “communicative control over those dangerous powers” (p. 174):

This is done not so much by establishing a mood of sympathy as by entrancing the listeners through explicit reference to their own power, using the powers of the listeners to temporarily disarm them. Such control cannot be affected through language, which is regarded by the Kalapalo as a means for deception. It is true that their music—like their speech—can emphasize boundaries and create antagonisms [...] But music has as well the paradoxical effect of simultaneously transcending boundaries, allowing people to communicate across the formidable divisions they create among themselves and the rest of their concerned existence. What is most successfully expressed in the environment of music paradoxically emphasizes formally opposed classes of being by bridging the chasms that separate them. (Basso, 1989, p. 174)

Seen from this perspective, perhaps the “maleness” expressed through the choreography of gender in the female general can be better understood as an example of temporary symbolic reversal of gender norms in the Confucian society in which it was created. My initial interest was sparked by the notion of *Tuồng* as proto-feminist theatre, and the function of the choreography as a temporary, symbolic manipulation of gendered behaviour opened a door for further artistic experimentation.

For the artistic development within my project, the experience of working with the choreographies in *Đào Tam Xuân* was important as a step in the search for ways of challenging the choreography of gender in traditional Vietnamese music performance today. Through these choreographies a wider range of bodily practices could be activated in my performance. In *Nam Mái*, the choreography developed from the scene in which I played the role of the female general *Đào Tam Xuân* became the centerpiece. I discuss the making of the music in *Nam Mái*, and the impact of the intercultural collaboration in this project, in Chapter 5. Here, it may suffice to conclude that this encounter with the female characters in *Tuồng*

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<sup>53</sup> The Kalapalo Indians are one of four Carib-speaking groups belonging to a Brazilian society around the Xingu River in northern Mato Grosso do Norte. When visited by Basso, they were a tiny population of 210 individuals, living in a settlement consisting of thirteen households (Basso, 1989, pp. 163-164).

constituted an important step in my development of ways of “performing differently”.

### 3.3 Play, gender and costume

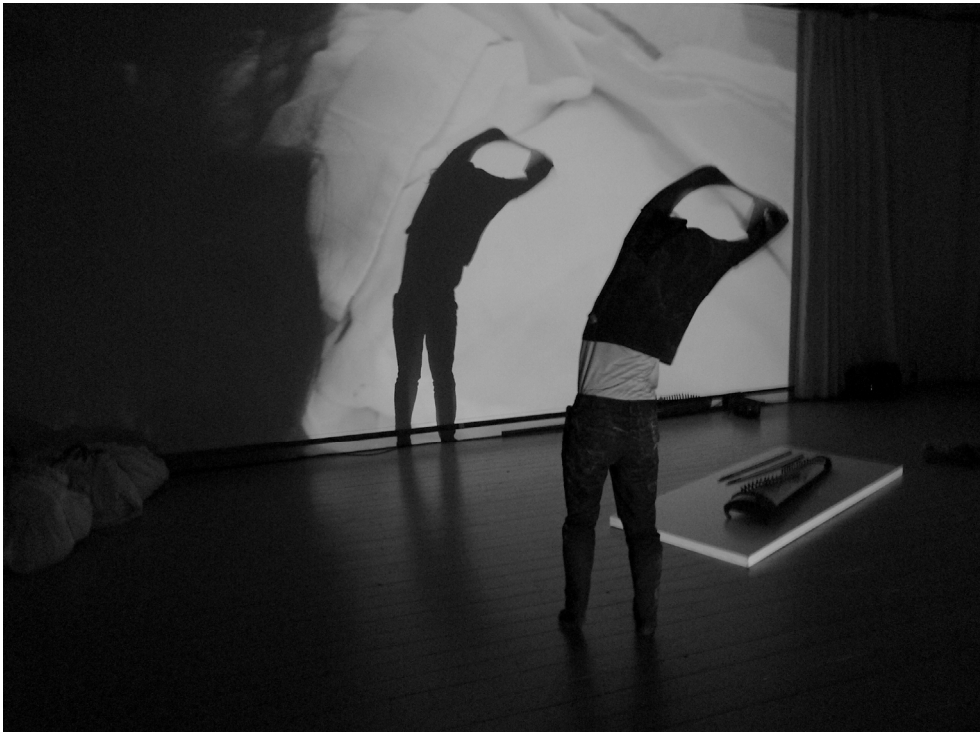
Gendered identity has always been performed, often subconsciously, through the choice of clothing. In modern society, fashion allows for a more dynamic relation to the expression of individual identity (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2011). Since *Đổi Mới*, women’s dress and appearance in Vietnam is increasingly influenced by fashion presented in mass media (see also the discussion of women’s magazines with reference to Drummond (2004) above). In Vietnam, the relation between traditional and modern society can be understood for instance from the Party Central Committee’s statement in Resolution No. V of 1998, expressing the intention to “build a progressive culture imbued with national identity” and how these ambitions have shaped the design and content of fashion shows in the country (Salemink, 2007, p. 563). This aim can be seen as one of the fundamental grounds on which the development of a modern concert culture for traditional music, displayed in TV shows rather than in its traditional settings, has been created. Salemink discusses a number of similar manifestations of the same politics, perhaps most clearly expressed in the creation of a fashion show in the *Huế Festival* in 2002. By far the most important cultural event in Vietnam, this festival receives substantial attention from the government. While traditional forms of expression constitute the point of departure for most events, the creation of a “national identity” ultimately serves to “present the political regime as the natural successor to the Nguyen, thus representing the government as ‘authentic’ and hence legitimate” (Salemink, 2007, p. 564-565). The biggest audiences in the 2000 and 2002 festivals were attracted to fashion shows by the couturier Minh Hạnh. Both of these shows built on her practice of creating fashion from the traditional female dress, the *áo dài*, the tight long tunic worn over a pair of long pants that became fashionable in the 1920s, which has a particularly iconic function in the identity of the city of Huế.<sup>54</sup> This identity was expressed differently in the two shows, where the first one would draw strongly on the traditional violet silk famously worn by women in Huế, while the second was developed specifically on models from the ancient Royal Court.

If the *áo dài* is representative of a female “national identity”, the costume used in *Vodou Vibrations* has the opposite function as a refusal to conform to the collective identity with which the *áo dài* is associated. During the course of the piece, I appear in six different costumes, all in normal-looking “Western style”, except for one

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<sup>54</sup> For instance, in the various editions of *Huế Festival* since 2002, a *lễ hội áo dài* (*áo dài festival*) consisting of a parade of hundreds of women and girls wearing *áo dài* was part of the public “Off” programme.

black traditional *áo dài*. In the premiere of the piece in 2014, I put on the *áo dài* at the very end of the piece when the room was very dark. And I did not wear it in a proper way instead just put it on without buttoning it, and on top of the other costume I was wearing, so it didn't look as if I was wearing a traditional *áo dài* at all. In May 2019 when I performed the piece in Palladium, again, Marie and I wanted to further develop the play with this iconic dress and after a number of different tests, we decided to place it on a hanger in the middle of the room. Hence, in the second version of the piece I did not wear the *áo dài* at all. The costume had a function of disconnecting me from traditional Vietnamese culture. Since I shifted costume between most scenes, these moments were also choreographed and had an important function as transitions. Perhaps the costume was at most in focus in the transition between the scene where I try to draw an image of myself on the floor with a chalk, as well as in the scene with the raft discussed below. Here, I slowly pull off a pull-over in front of the projection of the video with the large bundle, creating a shadow play with deformed figurations of my body.



**Fig. 8**

Image from *Vodou Vibrations* at Inter Arts Center, Sweden 2014. Photo by Marie Fahlin.

A contrasting use of costume is found in *Inside/Outside*. In Vietnamese TV shows, the *áo dài* has always been a symbol of tradition. But the way the *áo dài* is presented here, the traditional origin of the dress, as well as of the music, is complemented with other visual, choreographic and musical components, “improving” the historical dress to give it a sense of contemporaneity. A similar observation is made by Salemink (2007), in a further discussion of the fashion shows at the *Huế Festival*, arguing that the models represent an aesthetic image of modernity, albeit in Vietnamese style, and constitute a reason for pride in the physical shape of the female half of the country’s population. The quintessential female embodiment symbolising the nation is clothed in the *áo dài*, and this gendered and embodied vision of the nation is considered attractive because it is simultaneously modern and uniquely Vietnamese. Clearly, the *Eyes of the Moon* fashion show hosted by the *Huế Festival* was contextualised by an aesthetic politics that featured women’s bodies in a quasi-traditional national dress, and this partly explains the popularity of the fashion show in comparison with other artistic performances at the *Huế Festival* (Salemink, 2007, p. 568).



**Fig. 9**  
Image from *Inside/Outside* at the *Chèo* theatre, Vietnam 2012. Photo by Ngô Tuấn Anh.

In *Inside/Outside*, we wished to address exactly this kind of cultural politics and we wanted the costume to be reminiscent of the *áo dài*. We also wanted to create a reference to the costume of royal characters in traditional theatre. Our costume maker, Nguyễn Xuân Sơn, made the further suggestion to also draw on models from

the ancient Royal court in Huế, and all this eventually led us to the decision to use the costume of *Nam Phương Hoàng Hậu*, the last queen of Vietnam, as the primary reference. This gave at hand that the colour would be gold, and this in turn motivated the golden frames we used for the set of glass boxes in the first production of the piece in Hà Nội. The golden coloured dress was only worn by the royal family, and the punishment would be severe for anyone who would challenge this rule. Further, this “queen costume” would suggest to a Vietnamese viewer, that, just like the queens would reside in one of the castles within the “forbidden city”,<sup>55</sup> these individuals in the glass-boxes are permanently kept as objects in the “museum” for traditional music performance which the installation evokes.

But what was the function of the costume from the performer’s perspective? Trà My reflects on the role of the costume in the following way:

Because of the specifics of the outfit, initially, as it was too large for me, I had to find a way to move in it so that it would work in the narrow space inside the glass box, with the *đàn bầu* inside which in itself is not easy to shift around. Then, when performing the choreography, I noticed how the dress would fold and unfold as I moved in ways that would add new qualities to the gesture. The costume became almost like an instrument with which I could perform the choreography, aiming to move smoothly in the box, but also to always create a beautiful imagery with the dress (Ngô, personal communication, 2018).<sup>56</sup>

Just like a musical instrument, the costume has particular affordances and resistances,<sup>57</sup> and therefore it has agency in the artistic process and in the moment of performance. Elizabeth McMahon finds how, in Shakespeare, “cross-dressing functions to destabilize categories of sex, gender and sexuality, and their conventional alliances” (McMahon, 2000, p. 112). She further observes how this practice is manifest in many different forms in contemporary society, and continues to provide a “temporary freedom from the constraints of gendered identity” (ibid). While the only performer who was actually cross-dressing in the piece was Stefan,

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<sup>55</sup> Although the situation for women in the royal court in Huế was, relatively speaking, less severe than in China, there was little or no freedom for a queen or concubine. Wendy Duong claims that “oppression of women was portrayed by early French colonists as they came into contact with life of the Huế imperial court: forty-three women serviced the emperor’s quarters, thirty women functioned as his guards, thirteen others took care of his hygiene, clothes, nails, hair, cigarettes, and ink. At night, the women slept around his bed, prepared to serve as shields in case of an assassination attempt. Description of the twenty-five-year-old Emperor Dong Khanh, who reportedly had 100 royal concubines, was as follows: Every day a group of women took turns servicing him. At least five women were around all the time, taking care of his hygiene, preparing his turban, manicure, perfumed oil, with the goal that every detail be perfect” (Duong, 2001, footnote iv, p. 215).

<sup>56</sup> For this choreography, see V2.14 in RC.

<sup>57</sup> See further Clarke (1995).



Trà My also describes the experience of performing in the installation as a play with identity:

Actually, I have the feeling of being “someone else”, of playing a role, when I get the dress on and perform in this *áo dài*. It makes me feel like a princess in the king’s palace, but the dress itself, with its qualities, also “creates” choreography which matches the character (Ngô, personal communication, 2018).

Although gendered identity is performative, I argue that we must consider it is not fully possible to alter one’s body image at will during the short period of an artistic production. Still, in what way does the making of a piece like *Inside/Outside* allow the participating artists to address the choreography of gender in their respective cultures?

Gadamer’s discussion of the ontological nature of the artwork might be helpful here, and in particular how it is drawn from the human activity of “play”. Gadamer (2004) builds an understanding of the relation between art and truth starting from an analogy between the player and the play and artistic creation. Play creates a space where the participator must embrace the rules of the game with a particular seriousness: “Play fulfils its purpose only when the player loses himself in play” (p. 103). It is essential in play, as well as in artistic creation, that the subjectivity of the individual artist is in a sense bracketed by the rules of the emerging artwork itself. Gadamer continues to observe that “in cases where human subjectivity is what is playing, the primacy of the game over the players engaged in it is experienced by the player’s in a special way” (p. 106). Similarly, in any artistic encounter with an audience through performance, some rules may be decided by conventions regarding the concert culture at large, while other factors may typically be decided by the composition which is to be performed. Gadamer concludes that “all playing is a being played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players” (p. 107).

In the situation described by Trà My above, the agency of the costume is part of the game, and she describes a sense of “being played” when performing the piece. My point is that this experience also creates the possibility of bypassing the cultural codes guiding the performance of traditional music by performing differently. Hence, when the artists engage with the body images at play in the choreography of gender in a specific culture, moving in-between different layers of collective and individual identity becomes possible through the rules of the game at play. New possibilities for challenging current gender norms become available in a performance of *Inside/Outside*, through the rules created by the performance situation and the choreography. In the making of *Inside/Outside*, the artistic methods that we agreed on were central. By taking body movement identified in TV shows as basic material from which we improvised new movements in dialogue with the choreographer, a different experience in which a particular distance to these body

images could allow for articulating a more critical understanding and a movement between the inside and the outside of a particular choreography of gender.

### 3.4 Summary

How then do the results of the project unveil gender conventions in musical performance? We have seen in section 3.1 how gendered gesture is taught in the academy, and taken together with the historical overview of how nationalism and communism has shaped the country, that this teaching has an immediate relation to nation branding. The teaching of traditional music is equally related to the commercialised views of women as it is grounded in the preservation of tradition. In the creation of *Inside/Outside*, gesture analysis was central, not only when looking at videos from TV shows, but equally important when we approached the analysis of documentation from rehearsals and concerts. Through these layers of analytical engagement with documentation, the conceptual layers of the project were further considered.

Further, we have seen in section 3.1.2, and also in section 3.3, how the performance of choreographies that counter the choreography of gender in these context has had substantial impact on the participating performers. In section 3.3, the perspective is again that of mass media— indeed a central player in the implementation of new fashion in Vietnam—and the role of costume in the creation of identity among women in Vietnam of today. Further, we see how the costume, in *Inside/Outside* but also in *Vodou Vibrations*, have had a further function as a trigger of a play (following Gadamer) which allows for a bracketing of tradition along the same lines as in Wendy Duong’s discussion of Vietnamese literature and early expressions of feminism. In section 3.2 we see how also *Tuồng* has functioned as a site where a symbolic reversal of the traditional gender roles of male and female. The choreography of gender in central plays of the *Tuồng* tradition is of a radically different nature than the gesture sets that are applied in Vietnamese TV shows.



## Chapter 4.

# Musical gesture in composition and choreography

In this chapter, I discuss the development of artistic strategies for merging choreography and musical composition in the artistic collaboration with composer and improviser Matt Wright, choreographers Marie Fahlin and Hiromi Miyakita and the members of *The Six Tones*. The concept of the gestural-sonorous object, proposed by Rolf-Inge Godøy (2006) constitutes a fundamental building block for the analysis of the artistic work, but it was also fundamental for the development of artistic methods. I will look at how the close relation between sound and movement in the compositional process had a direct impact on the articulation of a politically informed critique through the piece and also on the embodied experience of creating the performance. The analysis in this chapter responds to the second research question: In what ways can music created through the choreographic structuring of movement reveal and question gender conventions in musical performance?

## 4.1 Choreographies towards new sounds

*Inside/Outside* was the first production in my Ph.D. project. The artistic methods for composing music, not merely by organizing sonorous objects, but by composing gesture and sound as compound units, as gestural-sonorous objects, were a new and experimental undertaking for all participating artists. The proposal that this approach to artistry may be conceivable was implicitly suggested by Rolf Godøy, who claimed that there “is a mental simulation of sound-producing gestures going on when we perceive and/or imagine music” (Godøy, 2006, p.155). This phenomenon can also be observed with amateur subjects playing “air” instruments (e.g. “air guitar”). Fundamental understanding of the source of the sound, and the physical nature of the sound production is an essential component in our embodied interaction with music. Moreover, Godøy advances the proposition that this is a bi-directional process and hence, that “motor imagery<sup>58</sup> may actually be considered a

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<sup>58</sup> Motor imagery is a factor in mental simulation of action, claiming that imitation is “based on directly matching the observed action onto an internal simulation of that action” (Jeannerod, 2001, p. 108).

component of musical imagery” (Godøy, 2006, p. 155). He produces no example of how this might have already been done, nor any further reflections on how this might be actually realized as a compositional practice, and exactly for this reason, this brief (and perhaps unintended) suggestion of a re-conceptualisation of musical composition posed a very attractive challenge. It thus offered an opportunity for *artistic* researchers to design a study to provide answers to *empirical* researchers. In 2012, the international artistic research project *Music in Movement* was launched. At the outset, we had a theoretical foundation and the objective of exploring how compositional practice drawn from the structuring of musician’s movements could be created. We had also observed that one of the constraints in the project was the lack of a notation system which could capture the dimensions of body movement and sound. The initial response to this constraint was to approach the compositional procedures without the use of standard notation. Just as in works developed in collaboration between the American composer Richard Karpen and *The Six Tones*,<sup>59</sup> the compositions were to be created through a collaborative process and documented on video, replacing symbolic notation as a mnemonic tool. *Music in Movement* was based on artistic experimentation, the nature of which is perhaps captured best in how the American composer James Tenney defined experimentation in his own work (here, in the words of Bob Gilmore): “the composer would write a piece of music, try certain things out, then judge whether they worked, didn’t work, or only partially worked, then in the next piece that work could be followed up: like a scientist one could go further down the same line” (Gilmore, 2014, p. 26). But in order to decide what “works” and “does not work”, a community of practice must also develop, in which such aesthetic judgement is validated. In the early phases of the experimental work within our project, the artistic evaluation was carried out by the small group of musicians, choreographers and artists representing other disciplines in the first productions.

Already in the very first workshops with *The Six Tones* and Marie Fahlin, we made one important initial finding, which was encouraging for all artists involved: our first tests with performing a scored piece without our instruments were deemed by Marie to immediately produce choreographic material that was original and possible to develop further. Hereby, we began to see how the staged presence of the three musicians of the ensemble could be composed as a dance piece.<sup>60</sup> Although this was

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<sup>59</sup> See further Chapter 2 and Chapter 5.

<sup>60</sup> Such an approach was not in itself new or unknown to us. A famous example, is the choreographer Xavier Le Roy’s choreographed performance *Mouvements für Lachenmann* (2005), a project which is described in a programme note as follows: “The piece extend some aspects of works from Lachenmann and proposes a dramaturgy of relationships between the visible and the audible in order to reveal some already existing theatrical aspects of Lachenmann’s compositions and to transform the concert event in a choreography. The perceivable gap between the sound producing movement as performative action and the resultant sound as starting point, is continued by Le Roy in *Mouvements für Lachenmann* with Lachenmann’s approach, by dissolving the mimetic relationship between note, action and sound into movement. [...] The potentialities to listen, not-listen, hear, not-hear, see, not-see, in all combinations, empower one’s senses with a passion: the

not unexpected, and also, did not fulfil the central aims of the artistic experimentation, it was an important factor when we started developing the first two productions in the framework of *Music and Movement*, eventually entitled *Inside/Outside* and *Go To Hell*.<sup>61</sup> The notion of making transcriptions<sup>62</sup> from movement to sound, as a method for generating new musical materials, became the central compositional strategy in the latter piece, a procedure which has an immediate connection to the idea of a bi-directional connection between motor imagery and musical imagery. Here, the transcriptions were treated as gestural-sonorous objects, compound units of gesture and sound, which constituted the material with which movement and sound was composed. It is important to again emphasize that this work was a highly collaborative and interdisciplinary process. When we set out to start creating *Inside/Outside*, we already had some experience of testing these methods for multimodal transcription. As described above, we wanted to use qualitative analysis of gesture in TV shows as the choreographic material. Our experience of transcribing gesture in the workshops for creating *Go To Hell* was then a reference that suggested how such gestural-sonorous objects (or, sometimes, merely gestural objects) could be used as compositional material.

Before looking at some examples from the working process, we need to return to the problem of notation, and further, to consider the relation between gesture and

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radical experience of possibility which is a capacity of both presence and withdrawal” (Le Roy, 2005, n.p.). In artistic research, a parallel research was a Ph.D. project by the composer Falk Hübner (2013), who composed a series of works for solo performers, in which the playing action in each composition was to be studied and performed with air instrument performance, in sync with a fixed tape part.

<sup>61</sup> *Go To Hell* is an installation and performance with *The Six Tones*. Choreography by Marie Fahlin. Video by Anders Elberling and Jörgen Dahlqvist. Sound and light installation by Gerhard Eckel. Music by Rolf Riehm, Henrik Frisk, Richard Karpen and *The Six Tones*. Light design by Sutoda. *Go To Hell* was a demanding project for everyone involved. For Ngô Trà My and myself, it entailed creating transcriptions of the gesture in a complex score for guitar solo for performance on our Vietnamese instruments. The notion of making transcriptions from movement to sound, as a method for generating new musical materials, became the central compositional strategy in this piece, a procedure which has an immediate connection to the idea of a bi-directional connection between motor imagery and musical imagery. Here, we approached transcription as a procedure that could be applied in several steps: 1) Transcription through applying performance gesture from one instrument on another. 2) Transcription from music to movement by performing gesture without an instrument. 3) Transcription as a compositional means in the creation of multi-media installations with the use of motion-capture data from performance on a musical instrument. But the transcriptions in step one and two also served as compositional material when creating new music for the piece. This then was the stage when we fully tested the notion of a gesture-based approach to musical composition for the first time. For a further discussion of how this usage of transcription can be conceptualized, and also a more detailed analysis of the compositional process, see Östersjö (2016).

<sup>62</sup> The term transcription is used here in a wider sense, and does not refer to the creation of a symbolic representation in any form of notation, what is intended is the transformation of movement to sound, or from sound-producing gesture to dance movement, or from motion capture data to sound or visuals.

traditional music notation in Southeast Asian music. A fundamental problem whenever Western staff notation is used for traditional Vietnamese music is the lack of a standardized system for how to notate the ornamentation. In Chinese teaching, the role of gesture is central, and the traditional notation system defines only the quality of the gesture and not the resulting pitch. Li & Leman (2007) summarize the given information in this way:

In ancient times, the composition of *guqin* music was basically meant for personal self-satisfaction and therefore the fingering notation was initially invented as a memo for complex fingering series, while information on timing or even melodic lines was not registered because these were comparatively easy to memorize once the music was known. As a fingering memo, the *jianzi pu* tablature provides accurate information on how a tone should be produced, by specifying the tone texture, the playing position, the fingering, and the detailed ornamentations (p. 66).

In Vietnam, the traditional notation system only defined a modal structure, a melodic framework, around which the ornamentation and variation was created through the performance practice, but approaches to the notation of the left hand control gesture<sup>63</sup> in performance on the *đàn tranh* has been attempted both in publications from VNAM as well as in the teaching of Vĩnh Bảo, a master in the south who also has been a driving force in the preservation of traditional music and the development of documentation and notation systems.

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<sup>63</sup> It should be noted that even though the *guqin* and the *đàn tranh* are related instruments, the left-hand techniques are very different. The *guqin* has no bridges, like the *đàn tranh*, and therefore the left hand movement required to modify the pitch is a sideways gesture along the string (like in bottle-neck playing on a guitar) while the gesture on a *đàn tranh* is bending the string between two bridges vertically (see further Li & Leman, 2007, p. 64).





music, composed through gesture, would be the key feature. For these purposes, I developed a large scale musical form prior to the first workshop. It consisted of improvisations on two traditional Vietnamese songs, *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* and *Vọng Cổ*. These improvisations on the *đàn tranh* were multi-tracked to generate a shifting set of sonorities from these two pieces, which were selected because of their intrinsic musical connections as well as their iconic status in traditional Vietnamese music.<sup>64</sup> This acoustic track was then sent to Matt Wright who created a series of electronic files in response. Using Matt’s improvisations as electronic layers in the piece, clearly defined sections were created. This draft form was further developed in the workshop and became the basic framework within which the finer details of the composition emerged. While the initial structure was defined by its musical materials and shaped in four sections, a more complex form emerged from the interaction between movement and sound. Parts one and three are most closely linked to *Vọng Cổ* and *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*, and to some of the methods employed by the three musicians of the group when improvising or composing music with materials from traditional music. In the first section, short and often very fast fragments of *Vọng Cổ* create a dense web. The choreography is created by expanding the sound-producing movements to playing “in the air”. In the third section, the music is created by a simple looping of phrases from *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*, and the choreography mimics and exaggerates the typical “rocking” movements that one might see in TV shows.<sup>65</sup> The three solo choreographies, discussed in more detail below, may serve as an example of the further interactions between music and movement, but also of how a further analytical understanding of gendered gesture emerged from the process of creating these choreographies.

As mentioned also in Chapter 2, I created one solo choreography in collaboration with Marie Fahlin.<sup>66</sup> It became one of the most intricate sections of the piece, taking the exaggerated gesture typical of the performance in TV shows into a more explicit critique. Here, I would move between performing gesture on the instrument and “in the air”. The method of decoupling gesture from the instrument was used in several parts of the piece. As cited in the RC, Marie expressed in a rehearsal in Hà Nội how she found that what is “interesting with this is that it becomes confusing, it’s very clear what you do, but confusing to look at, because we don’t know, ‘what is it

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<sup>64</sup> *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* (The midnight drum reminds me of you) and *Vọng Cổ* (Longing for the past) are deeply interlinked, and the later piece is in fact a development of the former. *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* was composed in 1918 by Cao Văn Lầu (1892–1976), also known as Sáu Lầu. In this transformational process, Nguyễn K.T. (2012) notes how *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* “transformed from a two-beat version, to four-, eight-, sixteen-, thirty-two-, and sixty-four-beat versions, with the thirty-two-beat version being most commonly used today” (ibid, p. 259).

<sup>65</sup> See further video V2.8 in RC.

<sup>66</sup> For this solo choreography see V2.15 in RC.

about' when you're just doing gesture. Is it about your emotional state, or is it about hearing the music through playing it or doing the gestures".<sup>67</sup>

The interaction with the electronics, performed by Matt Wright, was an important part of this decoupling from my instrument. Through interaction with electronics, the gesture became integrated with another sonic layer in the space. Overall, we would tend towards a call-and-response-like structure, where the choreography would at times excite sound on the instrument, followed by movements "in the air" where the electronics would respond to and sonically enhance the ongoing choreography. In this choreography, Matt's performative skills were an essential factor, and as the piece has toured, the extent to which the sections could be expanded and contracted, in response to the evolving choreography, but also to the response from the audience, has been striking.<sup>68</sup> A general aim with the electronics in the piece was to explore interactive qualities by working with live performance of electronics, in order for the electronic layers to be responsive to the choreography and for the form to allow for a certain malleability in performance. This is how Matt describes his approach to the making of the electronic music:

Crucially the structural elements of the electronics (by this I mean the clear sonic cues built into the ongoing compositional progress of the music) were performed/triggered in response to the musical "tempi" of the musicians. Conversely, the live processing followed the choreography, based on the notion of "turning movements": little cycles/loops of delay and spatialisation that overlap in asymmetric patterns to create a dense web of sound from simple, often single notes on the instruments. Those simple sounds from the instruments were themselves often the result of a choreographic gesture, rather than the sole reason for it. Therefore, I tend to think *chronologically* when following the structural narrative of the music, but *spatially* when responding to the choreography and any resultant sounds this might suggest. This dialectical tension between chronological/spatial is analogous for me to the tension inherent in notions of "inside" and "outside", as if our agreed musical structure is an agreed inside, whilst the live processing is something deliberately outside our compositional agreement, something potentially risky (Wright, personal communication, February 2018).

The solo choreographies performed by Stefan and myself display a close link between bodily movement and resulting sound. Stefan's solo was a choreography performed while holding the *tỳ bà* upright. This is visually significant, since holding the lute in this way alludes to traditional paintings of women playing the lute, but it

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<sup>67</sup> For this citation, see V2.12 in RC.

<sup>68</sup> Put simply, we have experienced many times how, in performances in which the space has been packed, each section needs to progress much more slowly, for the audience to be allowed to gradually move around and capture the choreographies in each of the boxes. In other situations, including a show when many schoolchildren were in the gallery, we made our way through the entire piece in twenty minutes (instead of the average 30) without losing any of the compositional structure.

is difficult in terms of playing the instrument, since the instrument has a constant tendency to fall out of one's hands. But most of all, the solo involved a constant turning movement, like a ballerina in a music box, and the musical material was shaped according to the speed and direction of the turns. Here, the footwork came to shape the musical form of the entire solo, underlining the interdependence of movement and music. In a book chapter by Coessens and Östersjö (2014) they note how

“winding up” and “releasing” the ballerina shaped the music in accordance with these movements and vice versa. Imperfections in the turning movement and the timing of when to start “unwinding” the mechanism immediately affected the ongoing music (Coessens & Östersjö, 2014, p. 340).

A specific musical idea for the electronics was to follow the turning movements around the room through the four-channel speaker setup. Matt designed a software patch in *Ableton Live*,<sup>69</sup> built on the idea that the most effective physical gestures would be those resulting in clear, short attacks on the instrument(s), such as a plucked string. These short sounds were then processed through asymmetric delay patterns and spatialised so that each of the four speakers had its own rhythmic identity. This meant that one short sound from the instrument—recorded *inside* the glass box—could cascade out of the box and fill the performance space with constant “turning movements” as described above.<sup>70</sup>

For Trà My and myself, the making of these solo choreographies became one of the clearest expressions in the piece of an actual critique of the current state of affairs in the business of nation branding through traditional music. As I phrased this experience in the headphone track:<sup>71</sup>

In this solo choreography gestures from *đàn tranh* playing are even more disconnected from normal playing. In my mind I imagined this to be like going crazy over the situation in the glass box. [...] I first thought of this as just pretending to play, like in the opening. But then I felt that the critical stance was so much stronger here. I am not just "pretending to play" like in the playback recording for a TV show but here I am mocking the whole situation with the disconnected hands and only one of them actually playing. The viewer's attention is drawn (I believe) to the hand that is not playing and, just as with TV shows with traditional music, they are watching the wrong thing.

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<sup>69</sup> Ableton Live is a software music sequencer and digital audio workstation. In contrast to many other software sequencers, Ableton Live is designed to be an instrument for live performances as well as a tool for composing, recording, arranging, mixing, and mastering.

<sup>70</sup> See the *Inside/Outside* installation in the RC at 19.30.

<sup>71</sup> For this citation and the choreography, see V2.15 in RC.



**Fig. 11**  
Image from *Inside/Outside* at Inter Arts Center, Sweden 2014. Photo by Gunnar Menander.



**Fig. 12**  
Image from *Inside/Outside* at Inter Arts Center, Sweden 2014. Photo by Gunnar Menander.

Trà My's solo choreography can be related to the discussion of prefix and suffix in sound-producing gesture in traditional music, found in section 3.1.1 above. The extended suffix that she identifies as typical of her playing is lengthened and transformed in this choreography, ultimately creating a composition of gestural sonorous objects with a seemingly violent nature.

After the premiere and the first performances, all artists gathered for a joint conversation which was recorded on video. Marie posed the question to Trà My of how she would describe the change that Marie observed in her performance from the early workshop stages to the premiere. Trà My's response again expresses the complexity of her experience, and how the process of making the piece has laid the ground for a different approach to her body image as a performer. In the qualitative analysis of video from the premiere, Trà My described how she, at times, would think of the situation in the glass box as a metaphor for the traditional performer's context in contemporary society. This could then result in more aggressive movement types, like attempts at what she calls "breaking out":

Actually, I feel very upset about the situation of traditional music of today in Vietnam, where all aesthetic values are turned upside down, and there's no way to escape or change it. I want to find a different path, by breaking with it, to get out of the box, but I can't. That's why I make these aggressive movements in the choreography, like breaking out through the glass (Ngô, personal communication, 2012).<sup>72</sup>



**Fig. 13**

Image from *Inside/Outside* at the *Chèo theatre*, Vietnam 2012. Photo by Ngô Tuấn Anh.

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<sup>72</sup> For this choreography, see V2.16 in RC.

As discussed in Chapter 3, *Inside/Outside* created a situation that allowed Trà My and myself to play with the choreography of gender in the performance of Vietnamese music. The window opened by this situation is perhaps best expressed in our individual headphone tracks.<sup>73</sup> The making of *Inside/Outside* pointed to several ways in which music and gesture can be fused to create several overlapping layers of signification, ranging from a more explicit critique of gender norms in Vietnamese society to explorations of new sonorities in the instruments we play.

## 4.2 Duo choreography on the *đàn tranh*

*Thin as Skin* became the final bigger production in my Ph.D. project. Through the collaboration with the Japanese choreographer Hiromi Miyakita, the project contributed several new perspectives also on gesture-based composition of music. It is the only piece in my project in which the choreographies also are relational, and in that sense *Thin As Skin* is a very different project compared to *Vodou Vibrations*, in which I am the only performer. In contrast, Hiromi and I are equally engaged in the choreographies, both creating sound through movement. In *Thin as Skin* the *đàn tranh* is always present on stage. Most of the music explores immediate relations between the choreographies and performance on the *đàn tranh*. The instrument is sometimes played by me, by Hiromi, or by the two of us together.

Hiromi was interested in how *đàn tranh* playing movements could be further exaggerated, and we developed a method for creating choreography by Hiromi mirroring my performing gestures. The first outcome of this was a duo choreography in which we both performed these gestures, without an instrument. She subsequently applied this gesture on my instrument, creating a *đàn tranh* solo which she performed on her own. I then eventually joined Hiromi and we played an extensive duo on the instrument. In an interview, she commented on this part of the piece, and suggested that “I play the *đàn tranh* in the performance. But again I don’t think I play music. I moved, and the sound happened. That is all. No more than that” (Hiromi interview, 2019).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> See further section 3.1.2 and the exposition in the RC.

<sup>74</sup> For this citation, see *Thin as Skin a video essay* in RC at 25:53



**Fig. 14**

Image from *Thin As Skin* at ArtTheatre dB Kobe, Japan 2018. Photo by Junpei Iwamoto.

In both versions of the piece (in Japan and in Sweden), choreography applied on the *đàn tranh* was the source for long independent parts, in which the sound of the instrument was the only sonic layer. Still, overall we more frequently interact with combined acoustic and electronic sounds. For instance, when we worked out the music for the duo with the copying of *đàn tranh* gestures, I came up with the idea of improvising layers of *đàn tranh* music, using video of this choreography as a score. Again, this allowed for synchronizing independent musical parts, while also inviting the invention of new materials and ideas. These recordings were again processed and mixed to a tape part, which sometimes would constitute the only sonic component, while we performed the choreography, but it was also at other times integrated with live *đàn tranh* playing, created through movement in the space. For instance, I played the instrument when moving in circular motion, or standing upright and letting the movement of the instrument, also held upright, guide the musical shaping. The electronic music weaves longer lines, which sometimes enhance sound generated by the choreography, and sometimes create further layers that accompany my performance on the *đàn tranh*. In the former case, source material—recorded by performing some of the choreographies—is used, for instance a duo in choreography using paper in ways that generate sound. A more intricate chain of transcriptions resulted in another tape part. Here, Hiromi and I created a duo choreography in which I would perform *đàn tranh* playing gestures in

the air which she would imitate. This choreography was filmed and in the next step I watched this recording of choreography and then recorded a series of improvisations on the *đàn tranh* which directly responded to gestures in the choreography. These recordings were composed and mixed into a tape part, which eventually was used as an independent layer in a scene with a different choreography. This process resembled the preparatory stages of making *Inside/Outside*, but an important difference was the use of a choreographed performance as a score for the recording session.



**Fig. 15**

Image from *Thin as Skin* at ArtTheatre dB Kobe, Japan 2018. Photo by Junpei Iwamoto.



### 4.3 Creating the *Vodou-đàn tranh*

In the workshops for *Vodou Vibrations*, Marie and I kept experimenting with ways of countering common habits in my relation to my instrument, in the search for new approaches. The point of departure was the creation of choreography that would challenge my habitual movement, but also to counter the conventional image of a female Vietnamese traditional music performer, such as identified in the qualitative analysis of video at the outset of the Ph.D. project. Among these exercises were numerous examples of placing the instrument in different uncommon positions. One idea was to place the instrument so that it would visually “replace” my body. We first tried out this idea by placing the instrument on two chairs while I laid on the floor beneath and raised my arms in order to play it. On the second day, we came up with the idea of placing the instrument in a standing position on a table, which would then allow it to cover my body if I were to stand behind it. This image, which eventually was reinforced by the idea of presenting the instrument in front of a black screen, eventually became the first scene of *Vodou Vibrations*. The audience could only see my hands, not my face, nor my body. Moreover, they could hear the instrument, and sometimes my voice, spoken into the sound hole on the back of the instrument. The *đàn tranh* and I merged; the *đàn tranh* became my body and my face. Or, to describe it differently, the *đàn tranh* now had human hands and a human voice. The scene disconnected from all behaviours I had learnt in *đàn tranh* playing. By placing the instrument in this position, the communicative gestures typical of traditional *đàn tranh* playing were altered. In traditional music, the *đàn tranh* is normally presented as a symbol of softness, tenderness, and peace. In this scenario, from a distance, the viewer could only see two hands moving across the instrument, playing with dangerous-looking tools and producing peculiar sounds.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> For this choreography, see V4.3 in RC.



**Fig. 16**  
The Vodou-đàn tranh. Photo by Marie Fahlin.

When I worked with Marie, we created choreographies of hand and arm gestures performed behind the *đàn tranh*. When we had identified a series of gestures, Marie composed a sequence, which was conceived not for its sound producing qualities, but only as movement. The next step in the process was for me to work on the preparations I used on the *đàn tranh* and how the design of the extended instrument, and the given movement sets, could also create gestural-sonorous objects, with which I could compose the sounding music. Just as in the choreographies we created with Marie for *Inside/Outside*, the final composed music was strongly dependent on how the individual performer would shape the gesture on the instrument.

The prepared *vodou-đàn tranh* was like a new instrument, and the hand gestures I used were devised to be violent and threatening. For the preparations, I used a nail, a paper-cutting knife, two bolts, a long metal knitting needle and three plastic fasteners. We found these tools to be sonically and visually effective, but perhaps their most important function was to disconnect me from my encultured behaviours as a traditional music performer.

## 4.4 Summary

The challenge of composing music using gestural-sonorous objects as material became the central artistic method throughout my Ph.D. project. It has offered novel possibilities of approaching gestural materials, for instance taken from TV shows, and creating new choreographies and music based on a critical approach to such popular media. Through this artistic process, not only have we created intermedia works that aim to draw the audience attention to questions related to gender identity, but also, the creative process has facilitated situations in which I have been able to challenge my *habitus* as a Vietnamese female musician, and thereby, to develop new modes of expression.

## Chapter 5.

# Resistance and Voice in intercultural collaboration

This chapter discusses the outcomes of my Ph.D. studies from a wider social and political perspective, wherein the intercultural collaboration in the artistic practice constitutes one important point of departure. Here, the notion of a performer's individual voice is a recurring metaphor, applied on different levels of analysis. In section 5.1, I discuss voice as the outcome of embodied interactions with instruments and musical traditions, but importantly, also as the result of negotiation with other musicians. In section 5.2, this embodied perspective is further explored, but the performer's voice is discussed from a more overarching political and philosophical perspective. A central reference is the Vietnamese gender theorist Trịnh T. Minh-ha, whose work suggests ways in which a search for the essence of performance is defined from a non-Western perspective, beyond the dichotomies of True and False as juxtaposed by humanism. Instead, she proposes an understanding of essence as a "mutual challenge between change and permanence" (Trịnh, 2011, p. 86). The analysis in this chapter responds to the third research question: How can one's own performance in intercultural and inter-disciplinary artistic collaborations challenge current gender norms and instigate change in practices of traditional Vietnamese music?

## 5.1 The Voice of the other in intercultural collaboration

This section addresses a series of embodied perspectives on the interaction between musicians in intercultural collaboration. Specifically, I refer to projects carried out in 2010-11, and 2014-15, both involving *The Six Tones* and composer Richard Karpen. Ever since its establishment in 2006, *The Six Tones* has engaged in collaborations with composers that take mutual learning as their starting point. My first encounter with Richard was in 2010, when we gathered at The Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media (DXARTS) in the University of Washington, Seattle, to start making the music for a music theatre piece eventually entitled

*Idioms*,<sup>76</sup> with the outspoken aim of developing methods for collaborative composing without the use of a score.<sup>77</sup> Obviously, bringing together musicians and actors from three continents posed several new challenges compared to earlier projects in which Richard had been developing these methods. This was the first time I entered a collaboration with a composer in which there was no aim of producing a score. Since in traditional Vietnamese music, notation is merely a framework within which a performer creates their individual versions or variations on a piece, for me, the idea of creating a composition which defines only frameworks, processes and materials seemed like a natural artistic direction for the group and, importantly, also a way to give voice to each participant.

Marcel Cobussen (2014), drawing on Spivak's classic discussion of the subaltern, considers the ethics of intercultural exchange, looking at the early practice of *The Six Tones*. The initial challenge, he argues, is whether a collaboration can give voice to "the other as other, the other who is customarily speechless and neglected" and thereby allowing the other "a voice that is not predetermined by already existing discourses and paradigms" (Cobussen, 2014, p. 84). In Western music, the strongest hierarchical paradigm is the agency given to composers and scores, often discussed through the concept of *Werktreue*.<sup>78</sup> Hence, one initial motivation for embarking on this music theatre project was to explore the possibilities for disrupting these hierarchies, and to actively seek other modes of interaction between composer and the performers.

The Gadamerian concept of an openness to listening grounded through which all "genuine human relationship" is built (Gadamer, 2004, p. 355) constituted the

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<sup>76</sup> *Idioms* is a piece of experimental music theatre. It was produced in 2010-11, and the first production was performed by three actors: Pia Öljansdotter (Sweden), Nguyễn Đức Mạnh (Vietnam), Valerie Curtis-Newton (USA), and *The Six Tones*. The text in the piece (written by the director Jörgen Dahlqvist) is in English, Swedish and Vietnamese and can be understood as a deconstruction of three classic stories of impossible love across cultures and social barriers: Marguerite Duras: *L'Amant*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and the Vietnamese tale of *My Châu and Trọng Thủy*. The different traditions that the actors represent provides a range of expression in a wide span between spoken theatre and opera. The music, which in a similar way weaves traditional Vietnamese music together with experimental Western music, is produced by Richard Karpen in dialogue with the three musicians and the computer programmer Josh Parmenter from DXARTS, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>77</sup> This method was tested in the collaboration between Stefan Östersjö and Richard Karpen when making *Strandlines* (2008), a piece for guitar and electronics.

<sup>78</sup> A historical understanding of what Goehr (1994) calls the regulative work concept, which entails the hegemony of musical works, such as defined by the score, and the belief in the performance of such works to be dependent on the representation of the intentions of the composer is essential for understanding also the history of contemporary Western music. She further observes how "the view of the musical world the romantic aesthetic originally provided has continued, since 1800, to be the dominant view. This view is so entrenched in contemporary thought that its constitutive concepts are taken for granted. We have before us in fact a clear case of *conceptual imperialism*" (Goehr, 1994, p. 245). This conceptual imperialism has been countered by many musicians and composers in the West, but also increasingly in Southeast Asia.

grounds for both the mutual learning and artistic practice of *The Six Tones*. Yet, in such moments of listening, do we not need to take into account irreducible entities that remain in a sense closed to us? Is not transparency and a complete sharing through listening a flawed Eurocentric concept? Edouard Glissant described what he called the “right to opacity” which I find useful as a response to the Western notion of transparency: “Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components” (Glissant, 1989, p. 190).

Here, Glissant introduces an ethics of listening which not only has a strong bearing on intercultural exchange in music but also on cultural politics in Europe at large. The ethics of the work in our ensemble is built upon an acknowledgement of each individual’s right to opacity. In other words, while openness is a prerequisite for true listening, this openness must also embrace the opaque corners of the other. This observation, initially drawn from a study of interaction between the musicians of *The Six Tones* also has further political implications.<sup>79</sup> The notion of the “right to opacity” suggests that, rather than the predominant focus on assimilation in immigration politics, a more ethically grounded politics should be built on *coexistence*. Following Glissant, I would argue that such coexistence constitutes the key to how a weave of opaque elements in a musical discourse between cultures can begin to emerge. Such a politics of listening goes beyond logocentric conceptions of learning, beyond the polarities of sameness and difference. In my understanding, when processes of transculturation are built on true listening in the Gadamerian sense, new possibilities for musical change arise. The development of modes of attentive and integrated listening are particularly connected to the Gadamerian notion of openness.

Openness in the interaction between musicians does not happen automatically. Anthony Gritten argues that trust is “found in all kinds of interactions between performers, and underpins their activities as both an assumption and a goal. Trust enables and facilitates interaction, collaboration, risk taking, experimentation, interpretative leaps” (2017, p. 253). He further reminds us of how “without trust, interaction between performers has no pragmatic means to get itself beyond microscopic, atomistic, local interactions and begin developing its own self-sustaining ecology” (Gritten, 2017, p. 307). Indeed, trust is central to all chamber music playing, which became more evident through both the empirical and artistic aspects of this dissertation research. Mine Doğantan-Dack noted the following in a paper discussing chamber music performance in Western art music:

the social dynamics among the co-performers in an ensemble are as important as the musical dynamics for a successful performance, and each live performance is in fact

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<sup>79</sup> This study was carried out within the international artistic research project *(re)thinking Improvisation*, in which *The Six Tones* were involved in one of the sub-projects. It is also discussed in a joint chapter by myself and Stefan Östersjö (2013b).

an opportunity to further develop and strengthen the social bonds between the co-performers. Psychological research provides abundant evidence that for any collaborating group of people to work well, there needs to be a sense of trust and support between them, as well as a sense of belonging in the group (Doğantan-Dack, 2012, p. 43).

Gritten and Doğantan-Dack discuss the function of trust in ensemble performance in classical Western art music. In intercultural work, such a “self-sustaining ecology” built on trust may stretch even further and allow for an openness that operates in ways that enable musicians to embrace the opacity of the other.

I will now discuss two examples from the collaboration with Richard Karpen in *Idioms* (2010-11) and *Nam Mái* (2014). In *Idioms*, as the work developed, Richard would typically suggest structural frameworks within which the performers would develop concrete musical materials, in close dialogue with the composer. The structures he proposed were in this piece drawn from music by other Western composers. This was a method which Richard adapted for this particular project. Over the first few days of the initial workshop, we would listen to a certain composition and discuss the structural content and how certain structural features could be used in the new piece. The outcome of this initial workshop was very rich, and we created approximately forty minutes of music, through this dialogue between structural frameworks in Western music, which were mostly filled with content drawing on the Vietnamese traditions that the group provided.



**Fig. 17**  
Image from performance of *Nam Mái* with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, USA 2014. Photo by Jörgen Dahlqvist.

While the start of the project seemed to suggest a very smooth and efficient working process, we eventually encountered instances of friction between the musical traditions we operated in.<sup>80</sup> A characteristic instance was the work on the opening scene. At that point we had just made auditions in Hanoi, in search of an actor for the piece. When we appointed Nguyễn Đức Mạnh, an actor from the *National Tuồng Theatre* in Hà Nội, we carried out a workshop with the group and this first actor in the piece.

Richard wanted to build the musical structure from the three types of vocal presentation of text in *Tuồng*: normal speech, recitation and singing. This worked beautifully in the rendering of our actor, Nguyễn Đức Mạnh, but the problems occurred when Richard wanted to create music that would accompany the gradual development in the vocal part. Here, I felt that Richard's ideas came *too close* to what would actually have been played in a traditional performance, but as I will explain, it was ironically *too distant* at the same time, and thereby sounded “wrong” to my ears. Returning to the Schaefferian terminology discussed above, when applying my musical listening, the music did not quite match the traditional framework. From this way of listening, the traditional music which was the reference for my “musical listening” became a musical Other to me, because of the distancing from tradition which occurred through the proposed accompaniment. But when instead activating *musicianly* listening,<sup>81</sup> thereby seeking the unknown in the sound object, the musical structure that Richard suggested instead appeared too conventional. We were unable to resolve this conflict. Each time we reached this sequence in the rehearsals, I was less able to play than the previous time. Eventually, we had to give up on this section, and agreed to find a solution later on. The negotiation, which was mainly carried out by sending sound files of further editing and test recordings, became an extended process, stretching over half a year, creating quite a bit of tension and frustration within the ensemble. What eventually became the resolution of this musical problem was found in the next series of sessions in Seattle, summarized and discussed as follows by Coessens and Östersjö (2014):

Karpen [...] asked how chords plucked simultaneously on both sides of the bridges would sound, a playing technique that does not exist in traditional music—a proper “compositional” approach in the sense of embracing a denial of habit. The sound of these chords was strikingly novel and dramatic. For Thùy, this playing technique, and the novel sonorities, allowed a way out of the resistance of culture, not by conforming with but by denying expectations from tradition—and was therefore an expression of *hexis* that led her playing toward a more experimental approach to her practice. It must also be understood as a shift in her relation to cultural capital, because this

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<sup>80</sup> Coessens and Östersjö (2014) refer to this phenomenon as *resistance* of musical materials, traditions, and culture. They provide several examples, looking at the work on *Idioms* as well as in the making of *Inside/Outside*.

<sup>81</sup> For this pair of modalities of listening, see further section 2.3.3.



experimental approach to instrumental performance is not part of the cultural capital of traditional Vietnamese music but part of Western experimental practice (Coessens & Östersjö, 2014, p. 345).

What Coessens and Östersjö observed here could also be described as a manifestation of the forces at play in transculturation. It was indeed not the first time I experienced such conflicting musical impulses in my work with *The Six Tones*. I have discussed elsewhere how improvising in a liminal space between the traditions of Vietnamese traditional music and “free improvisation” has sometimes made it necessary to even avoid making aesthetic decisions (since they may at times not be conceivable).<sup>82</sup> The *in-betweenness* of the intercultural situation sometimes demands of the artist to focus on the interaction, and the coexistence, with a musical Other in a shared space. As Henrik Frisk (2008) concludes in his thesis, “The Self is not first and foremost given up to discover something within, but to become more resonant to that by which it is surrounded” (p. 102). The design of my Ph.D. project has aimed towards creating new relations to other artists, through intercultural collaboration, but also to cultural objects like my instrument, and importantly also between my body and a particular space. Frisk (2008) discusses human-machine interactions in musical performance from the two poles of “control” and “difference”, and I find the concept of interaction-as-difference to be a way of understanding the relational complexity in the artistic projects. He suggests that “unless the Self allows for interaction-as-difference, allows for the Other to play an active part in the interaction, the Self will cease to produce difference as well as cease to apprehend difference and will be trapped in its own identity” (p. 102). Encouraging the production of difference, as a positive quality in the interaction, has been one of the central methodological aims for the intercultural practice within my Ph.D. project.

In processes of transculturation, we sometimes encounter a musical Other, whose radical alterity must be accepted, and as a musician, it may need to be accommodated in a way that, in the words of Richard Bernstein, “defies and resists reduction of ‘the Other’ to ‘the Same’” (Bernstein, 1991, p. 74). In order to embrace such a musical Other, new practices need to become embodied through processes that, in my experience, may take several years. An example of this is found in my early encounters with the music of Kent Olofsson—a Swedish composer with whom I also have had a long term collaboration since 2009—through which I, in the early stages, experienced a very specific resistance between compositional structures in Western and Vietnamese music. In Olofsson’s first études for *The Six Tones*, this musical Other was the rhythmical structuring of the music, and in particular, the use of shifting meter. The process of gradually beginning to embody such conceptions

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<sup>82</sup> For a further discussion see Östersjö & Nguyễn (2013b; 2017).

of musical time in this case required several years. In a recent book chapter, I discuss this working process, with reference also to this earlier reflection:

Kent's music was a challenge for both Trå My and I. There were some years in between the first trio for the group and the duo for Trå My and I. In the trio, the fast tempo, together with the changing metre, [which] included 5/8 and 7/8 in the middle of 3/4 or 4/4, were a nightmare for us. When I worked in the Malmö Academy of Music, I had some Swedish folk music students who introduced me to this kind of metre. My student could play the fiddle while his feet were bouncing the rhythm on the floor, changing his weight between the right and the left foot according to the shifting metre in the music. Even without my instrument, I was completely unable to follow the dance. I had never embodied this kind of swing. Vietnamese traditional music for my instrument uses only 2/4 or 4/4 metre, and we don't have a tradition of folk dance! Perhaps that was part of the reasons why it took so long for Trå My and me to practise that shifting metre in Kent's first trio. For only one line with five bars we could spend a lot of time, playing the instrument while nodding, singing the notes, swinging our bodies, tapping our feet loudly on the floor at the same time, and very often found that at least one or two parts of the body did not go together. This kind of basic rehearsing went on without much progress, and still, when we went on tour, we kept worrying only about this one piece in the entire programme (Nguyễn & Östersjö, 2019, p. 244).

This form of musical transculturation has a long learning curve, but is also very clearly an opportunity for artistic development. It is not merely a matter of learning and embodying new playing techniques, but is also a matter of grounding in the body, a different way of listening, and of conceptualizing music. *Musicianly* listening is, in my understanding, often the source for musical innovation. This may often be on a smaller scale, like the moment described above, when Richard came up with the idea of the chords plucked on both sides of the bridges. I can see how my role in the search for an instrumental part that would work in this opening scene was rather passive, and much more constrained than in other work on the piece. I believe, in retrospect, that this may have had to do with the initially negative experience of music transculturation in this instance. The negotiation of cultural capital did not end there, but rather, was a gradual process extending throughout the project, including for Richard, whose "voice" as a composer was blended with elements from Vietnamese music:

The identity of the music no longer rested purely on the composer's style of writing but relied just as much on the idioms of traditional Vietnamese music and the individual modes of expression of the players. Interestingly, at the premiere in Malmö, Sweden, a group of Vietnamese immigrants came to the performance. In conversations after the show, several of them said they thought the music was Vietnamese! (Coessens & Östersjö, 2014, p. 345).

For a western composer, for whom the compositional process typically aims toward the creation of a musical work defined by the authority of the score, such a comment would be devastating. For Richard, it rather expressed successful innovation in the creation of a collaborative process that would give voice not only to a single (Western and male) composer, but to all participants. Richard thereby expressed an ethics of intercultural exchange, which acknowledges the imperative to move outside the aesthetics of a single culture. In an article for the World New Music Days in 2009, I made the observation regarding the status of our work in the ensemble that “one could say that now we were to create a space for interaction where the codes creating musical meaning would have to be negotiated by us” (Nguyễn, 2009, p. 14). Such negotiations are the result of the *in-betweenness* characteristic of intercultural identity (Marotta, 2014), and my statement in this paper signalled an increasing awareness of such processes.

In 2014, we set out to create the new piece *Nam Mái*, a triple concerto for *The Six Tones*, to be premiered with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra in spring of that year. In many ways, the making of this piece constituted a culmination of the intense, transformative and rewarding collaboration between Richard and the group. His role as a composer was different from the earlier projects since, in *Nam Mái*, he also worked more traditionally with scored materials. Richard composed a score for the orchestra, but when we met in Seattle to start the collaborative work on our solo parts—just a few weeks before the premiere—our solo parts were still blank. The empty staff lines for the soloists contrasting with the detailed writing of the orchestral parts represented a new dynamic in the collaboration between Richard and *The Six Tones*. While the agency of a composer in the European art music idiom is traditionally stronger, typically represented by the through-composed score, the intention in this case was to create solo parts through the same kind of collaborative process that had driven the making of *Idioms*.

The title of the concerto refers to a piece of instrumental music from *Tuông*, which we had used in a scene for a dance film created the year before, entitled *Seven Stories*. The idea of a concerto emerged in the working sessions for the film, and eventually this piece of traditional music became the source for all sections in the orchestral score. Often, the melodic structure would be used to generate dense clouds of sound, rather than overtly depicting the tune. Through various procedures, the source material would be transformed and sometimes concealed.

An example of this transformation is the music that Richard composed for the part in which I would perform the choreography from *Đào Tam Xuân* (see further section 3.2.1). The music was to have two soloists, *đàn bầu* and Vietnamese electric guitar. Here, Richard imagined that the *đàn bầu* would draw out slow melodic lines from the cloud of pitches in the orchestra, and the electric guitar would weave faster figurations around it. The melodic shapes that he imagined were rather non-Vietnamese, with long legato phrases devoid of any bending or vibrato. Although this was technically feasible, Trà My initially found this music hard to grasp, and

Richard spent extensive time in every rehearsal to find the character of the melodic phrases. Again, this music, although abstractly drawn out of a Vietnamese tune, become a musical Other for Trà My. But what I find really intriguing is how, when interviewed by Stefan for an article discussing this piece, Trà My described how, once she grasped the melodic shaping, this music had become a vehicle for personal expression:

The way that Richard set the piece up, I can float freely in the material from *Nam Mái*, operating the playing techniques and the sonority of the *đàn bầu*. I know that I cannot fully understand the intentions that Richard had with the piece but I can still draw out my own story from my subjective experience of the music, so that my sound is brought together with the sonority of the entire piece, as if we were telling the same story (Ngô, personal communication, March 1, 2017).

In the *Tuồng* theatre tradition, *Nam Mái* is typically played during recitation, and hence, the source material for the concerto was similar to the music traditions used as a basis for the opening scene in *Idioms*, as discussed above, but the work unfolded very differently this time. The musical ideas we had engaged with in 2010 became resistant objects, but four years later, I experienced the working situation as a resonant space in which I could explore performative possibilities. Richard provided a framework through the composed score for the string orchestra, which defined both the duration and the tonal material. I conceived of this *đàn tranh* solo as an aria, as a response to the dramatic scene in the choreography: how Đào Tam Xuân is notified of the death of her husband and son, then her collapse in grief, and how she rises again to demand justice. In this solo part, I wished to articulate my playing outside of the traditional framework, so although the material was drawn from music that could have been the accompaniment to a recitativo, here I sought out a melodic language which I embodied as my own, but which was not intended to resemble Vietnamese theatre music. When creating this music, I experienced this piece as if situated in a play, and characterized by the dramatic situation. The music is thus carried by the narrative in Đào Tam Xuân, and has, for me, become expressive of the sadness, rage and power that this feminist heroine represents in Vietnamese culture.

Perhaps the most important quality in *Nam Mái* is how it gives voice to each of the soloists. As discussed above, it is essential in any intercultural collaboration that hierarchical and oppressive patterns are deconstructed, avoided or made apparent. In *Nam Mái* the orchestral part sets scenarios within which the three soloists can contribute material, and also make detailed negotiations of how this material can be developed within the particular scene, in dialogue with the composer. In the examples above, Trà My engages in a process of listening for something unknown—which can be analyzed as an example of *musicianly* listening—something unexpected in her instrument and in the weave of materials displayed by the orchestra. Interestingly, when she reflects on performing the music, Trà My

acknowledges that she cannot fully understand the intentions of the composer but still she could draw out her own story from her subjective experience of the music, so that her sound is brought together with the sonority of the entire piece. Thus, giving voice to the subaltern does not necessarily imply making space for an expression of “tradition”, of an essential and exotic “otherness”, but rather, to make space for each artist to develop in ways which are sometimes unexpected, and an expression of the fluid identity and hybridity of contemporary culture. But this is on the other hand not to say that the subaltern should adopt to western ways of knowing. Rather, intercultural collaboration, in a liminal space between traditions, is a way of inventing a third space, wherein the voice of the subaltern may have a new significance, also beyond its traditional context.



**Fig. 18**

Image from performance of *Nam Mái* with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, USA 2014. Photo by Jörgen Dahlqvist.

## 5.2 Resistance and Change

In section 5.1 we have seen examples of how a musical Other can emerge as a resistant object in processes of musical transculturation. Further, we have also seen how such resistance can be overcome and result in the emergence of a different voice, a shared voice which is the outcome of the collaboration. In section 5.2 I will adopt an even closer perspective on the embodiment of the performer, through a

study of two duo collaborations with choreographers Marie Fahlin and Hiromi Miyakita.

### 5.2.1 The body as archive

When Marie and I got together to start creating *Vodou Vibrations* in 2014 we had already been working together for two years on several big productions. While those had involved many more performers and artists, we now were entering the first project with just the two of us. Our previous shared experience constituted a platform of knowledge which most importantly entailed extensive work in which the choreography would inform the making of new music, but also an exploration of how the movements of performers could constitute material for new choreographies. Also in this new piece, which we envisioned as a solo for one Vietnamese musician, the aim was to further develop these methods, but also to further explore a gender perspective which had been prominent in several of the earlier productions.

We met in February 2014 at Weld studio in Stockholm, a huge concrete space, much bigger than any other venue we would work on in this production. Prior to this initial meeting, I had sent some images of women from Vietnam, some of them actual propaganda posters. Also, I had outlined the conceptual ideas behind my Ph.D. project. However, Marie responded by saying that she would prefer to start out without any references to gender issues in Vietnam, and rather connect to other aspects of the collaborative work we had already done, to go further “and provoke new things that we haven’t seen yet” (Fahlin, personal communication, Jan 2014). The empty dance studio at Weld felt very much like a blank slate, when I brought my instrument there. Marie initially asked me to “do something with your instrument which you have never done before” (Fahlin, personal communication, Jan 2014). That was the first challenge I faced, an attempt at achieving something which “we have not yet seen”. For a performer who has been trained to play their instrument since childhood, it is hard to think of something which goes outside the embodied knowledge.

I started learning the *đàn tranh* when I was eight. I can see how my experience of being in the world is deeply rooted in a perspective seen with, and through, my instrument. My body has been socialized into behaviours typical of a traditional music performer, and in many ways into behaviours very specific to performing the *đàn tranh*. Importantly, this also immediately assumes that the performer is female. That is one of my body layers which I can identify most and feel most confident about. Now, when Marie asked me to do something with my instrument that I had never done before, and later, when she asked me to move without the instrument, I felt so clumsy, so disabled. In the first workshop, I experienced the extent to which my skills as a performer are situated in particular contexts, like a concert hall, and bound to particular tools, like my *đàn tranh*. In the end of this exercise, which was

part of the workshop, I had totally forgotten what I was supposed to do—finding new movements and not to be playing—but instead, I immediately fell into the habit of normal playing. I believe that the difficulty I experienced in expressing myself through movement alone may be understood through a reflexive analysis of my *habitus* as a female musician. This was exactly what Marie wanted to work with in the piece—my *habitus* as a female musician—and she saw it as my body archive. She wrote in one email to me:

I think a lot about a many-layered body, and that they exist within oneself, not hierarchically, but as an archive where one can move back and forth between experiences of how one has been, that which is contained within who we are now. Within this archive there are deformations of the body, and maybe that is the only thing that exists. The “what we do” deforms us, or forms us, and through, and in, that body we meet new phases in life which in turn deforms us, so in the end we’re a walking archive (Fahlin, 2014, personal conversation).

The possibility of “moving back and forth” within this archive seems to be an important starting point for this work, but also how these continual “deformations” in the archive are recorded. The choreographer André Lepecki refers to the Foucauldian notion of the archive,<sup>83</sup> as a “*general system of formation and transformation of statements*” (1972, p. 130). Lepecki argues that, similarly, “choreography is also a dynamic system of transmission and of transformation, an archival-corporeal system that also turns statements into corporeal events and kinetic things” (Lepecki, 2010, p. 37). To Lepecki, the performer’s body is not a closed archive, but rather as site for transformation, a site for rewriting experience, through performance. Zones of temporality are the defining quality of the body as archive, as of human existence, and Lepecki argues that through movement,

these zones, or regions, or dimensions form and transform not only our notions but our very experiences of time, presence, identity, alterity, body, memory, past, future, subjectivity. The archive as border becomes the vertiginous skin where all sorts of onto-political “re-writings” (Foucault, 1972, p. 140) take place, including the re-writing of movement, including the re-writing of the archive itself (Lepecki, 2010, p. 38).

To me, working on this Ph.D. project for almost eight years—in which I have grappled with many different kinds of choreography as a way for me to re-write my

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<sup>83</sup> The notion of the body as archive is also found in a recent documentary film. *The Body as Archive* by the dancer/choreographer and filmmaker Michael Maurissens (2016) which aims at better ways of understanding the knowledge constructed through contemporary dance, and in particular with regard to the legacy from the choreographer William Forsythe. Drawing on interviews with dancers from Forsythe’s company, the documentary builds on accounts from neurologists and anthropologists, as well as other choreographers. Maurissens’s research shows that everything we are is an archive. The body can remember what the head cannot. Hence, it is possible to locate kinetic knowledge, write about it, and transmit it.

“body archive”—has provided methods for creating a transfer of all the knowledge into my performer’s body, and thereby creating tools for me to perform differently.

### 5.2.2 Producing difference

At the heart of the inquiry in *Vodou Vibrations* lies the question of how a female performer can challenge her *habitus* and aim for a bodily identity which draws on other conventions and possibilities. Helena De Preester suggests that performance art can activate new ways of seeing through choreographies of everyday movement: “one might say that the mechanism consists in making body schematic activities explicit and visible, such that the body-schematic activity is no longer unconscious and residing at the side of the subject (as a source of motor activity), but becomes conscious and object-like” (De Preester, 2007, p. 369). Already in 2012 when working on creating the choreographies for *Inside/Outside* did I experience such conscious-making processes, but perhaps more often approaching the level of the body-image. In *Vodou Vibrations* the performance of simple motor activities, such as when I am combing my hair in one scene, or when carrying a bundle, with the aim of experiencing the everyday effort of Vietnamese street vendors, were incorporated in the choreography with the aim of bringing out new perspectives on my *habitus* as a female musician.



**Fig. 19**  
Image from workshop with Marie Fahlin 2014. Photo by Marie Fahlin.





**Fig. 20**

Image from workshop with Marie Fahlin 2014. Photo by Marie Fahlin.

What are the constraints that I, as a female Vietnamese musician, had to overcome in order to create new choreographies? We have already concluded that performance gesture in traditional Vietnamese music is strongly shaped by gender conventions. Iris Young (1980) discusses the characteristic features of “throwing like a girl” with reference to Erwin Straus’ classic observations of what he thought to be a biological, rather than acquired, characteristic feature. Young takes this example as point of departure for an inquiry which is built largely on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, and from this perspective Young suggests that

it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole toward things and its environment which initially defines the relation of a subject to its world. Thus focus upon ways in which the feminine body frequently or typically conducts itself in such comportment or movement may be particularly revelatory of the structures of feminine existence (Young, 1980, p. 140).

A core observation in Young’s paper is how “feminine existence” is negatively defined by the socially transmitted imperatives not to take up space, not to engage

the whole body in physical activity and not to fully project physical intention in the moment of action. She refers to Merleau-Ponty, and observes how

[...] for the body to exist as a transcendent presence to the world and the immediate enactment of intentions, it cannot exist as an object. As subject, the body is referred not onto itself, but onto the world's possibilities. [...] The three contradictory modalities of feminine bodily existence—ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity—have their root, however, in the fact that for feminine existence the body frequently is both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act. Feminine bodily existence is frequently not a pure presence to the world because it is referred onto itself as well as onto possibilities in the world. (Young, 1980, p. 148)

In Vietnam, it is essential for a musician, learning to play the *đàn tranh*, that each component of the sound production is practiced in a manner which results in a gracious and beautiful performance. It is also a matter of shaping the body of the performer to fit a certain set of gendered norms and ideals. Hence, if the musician is female, the grace and beauty implied is of a different nature than if the student had been male. However, in *Vodou Vibrations* we were looking for movements that were conceived outside of that cultural framework. We sought out movement that demanded effort in performance, and which also clearly projected this effort, like in the choreography when I am crawling on the floor like an insect, only allowing elbows and toes to touch the ground.



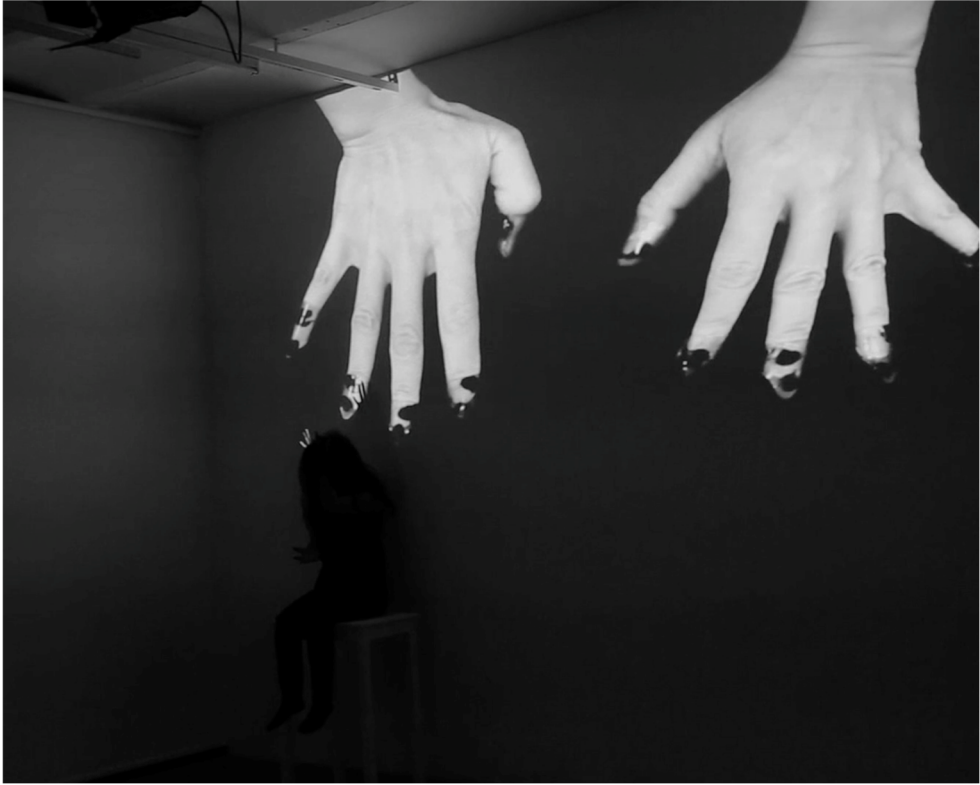
**Fig. 21**

Image from *Vodou Vibrations* at Inter Arts Center, Sweden 2014. Photo by Marie Fahlin.

Sometimes Marie's gaze adopted an outsider perspective, when looking at my performance on the *đàn tranh*. This gaze, uninformed by tradition, also created material for the piece. She saw my *đàn tranh* fingers with plectrums as what she called "the deformed *đàn tranh* fingers" and she imagined them as a "symbolic threat", with a potential for violence. Viewed from inside this performance culture, the plectrums are understood as tonally necessary and integrated into the pleasant image of the female performer. Still, the conceivably threatening and aggressive quality of the plucking hand equipped with sharp-looking plectrums, was something we wished to explore. We decided to make a film with close-ups of finger movement: Giant fingers with plectrums, now independently "experiencing other ways of being in the world" (Marie Fahlin, personal communication, 2017). We also recorded the sound of the finger plectrums scratching different surfaces, which became the material for electronic music in this scene. The video was designed to be projected onto two walls in a corner of the room, making specific use of the possibility of the hands entering on either side. In the piece, this video of giant hands was shown as a contrasting layer to my live ritual performance of female everyday movement (she looks so small compared to the giant hands), combing her hair, serving the sole purpose of "beauty". For making this video, in the workshops, I spent a lot of time working differently with my hands, observing my own hands, my fingers and their movements (often performing without an instrument) from a new perspective. This allow me to see my hands as external objects, and not as the core representation of my identity as a *đàn tranh* player. In the process of making this video, we also aimed to find hand movements that were more violent and threatening, rather than graceful and light.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> For this choreography see V4.7 in RC.



**Fig. 22**

Image from *Vodou Vibrations* at Inter Arts Center, Sweden 2014. Photo by Marie Fahlin.

The discussions I had with Marie about *Vodou Vibrations* often addressed memories connected to my identity as a Vietnamese woman. I once referred to a childhood event from my life in Mai Dịch at the outskirts of Hà Nội, which captures this experience of being both subject and object in a certain action, and how this can be the root cause for a girl to lose her sense of how to even walk properly. I told Marie a story, from when I was living in Vietnam as a teenager, of a “game” which only boys enjoyed even if it also required a girl to make the game work. When a girl walked past a group of boys by chance, sometimes the boys would stop talking, look at the girl, wait until she came closer, and then start counting in sync with her steps: “one-two-one-two-one-two”. The girl might not notice it at first, but then, sooner or later, she would recognize their attention. Then, the girl, very often, would blush, reacting either by walking faster, running, or trying to walk out of sync with the counting. That could make her right foot step on her left foot sometimes, or vice versa. I have been thinking of this reaction cycle and the awareness of being watched (as a woman, by the male gaze) while working on this piece. Here, by noticing that she is “being looked at” a woman forgets that she has a “real” body, not just an

image body. As Sobchack noted, “the more aware we are of ourselves as the ‘cultural artifacts’, ‘symbolic fragments’ and ‘made things’ that are images, the less we seem to sense the intentional complexity and richness of the corporeal existence that substantiates them” (Sobchack, quoted in Warr & Jones, 2000, p.41).

While this little story never became part of the piece, it certainly does reflect some of my gendered *habitus*, and the constraints put on the potential for movement of a Vietnamese woman. Another personal memory, which became the source for one of the scenes in *Vodou Vibrations* was immediately related to my professional identity as a performer. I told the story of when I was asked to perform on a float for a DVD production to Marie already early on in our collaboration, and it was a reference for her to my history as a Vietnamese musician. It was not surprising that we decided to refer to it in *Vodou Vibrations*. In the scene that we created, I was sitting on a raft playing my instrument in front of a video projection depicting a woman carrying a big bundle in slow motion. We projected the video so that my shadow would be displayed on the screen, a visual layer to connect the choreography with the projection. In this scene I attempted to expand the potential of my body movement and I used hand movements specific to *Tuông*, called *Loan*,<sup>85</sup> in order to obtain movement qualities that were not restricted by the “feminine existence” in Vietnamese traditional music. *Loan* is often used to manage two swords, and I adapted these movement sets to a performance with two bows. I also created a musical development by using the bows for more percussive playing. Towards the end, this music was transformed into a long sustained sound. We imagined this final part as played while “floating under the water”, with the *đàn tranh* lifted by hands and feet while I was still bowing it.<sup>86</sup> When reflecting on this scene, Marie made the following comment:

When we talked about the experience of sitting on the raft playing your instrument, you said it was a very scary situation, you had to be completely still in order not to tip the raft and fall into the water, knowing that you couldn’t swim at that time. It must have been a horrible situation. In a way it seems to me that we’ve been creating this memory of a thing that never happened, you didn’t fall off, you didn’t drown, a memory of your thoughts embodied in the way your moving/playing, or being moved by the idea of the water that you never drowned in (Fahlin, 2014, personal communication).

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<sup>85</sup> For this choreography see V4.11 in RC.

<sup>86</sup> For this choreography see V4.12 in RC.



**Fig. 23**

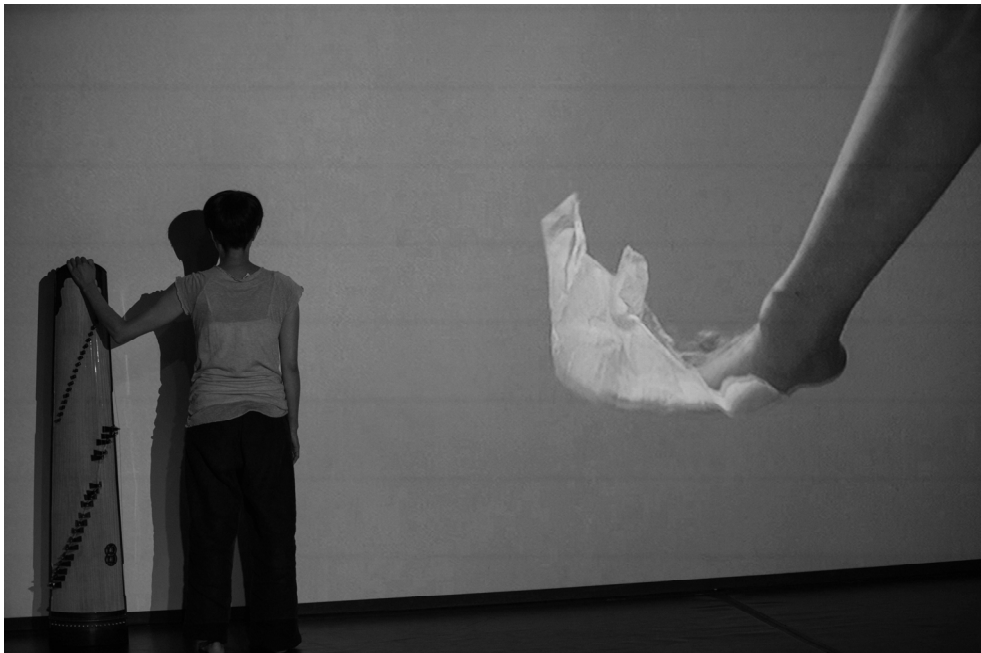
Image from *Vodou Vibrations* at Inter Arts Center, Sweden 2014. Photo by Marie Fahlin.

It is indeed true that I did not drown on that day. I was, however, badly bitten by leeches. Most of all, the symbolic violence directed toward me, as a female musician, was embedded in the social and institutional structure that underlies the production of that particular DVD as well as the concert and TV culture within which Vietnamese traditional music is presented today. If the final part of this scene can be seen as a representation of my fear of falling in the water, and how my fears have now turned to actually trying to stay afloat and still holding the instrument in the stream, then what is the role of my body in this choreography? Through this active resistance of my *habitus*, and the attempt to engage my body in a choreography which deforms the “feminine existence”, *Vodou Vibrations* becomes a critique of the traditional musical culture in my home country. The process of making *Vodou Vibrations* could perhaps constitute an example of how conceptually driven performance art and choreography, “can consciously engage in a physical training that seeks to resist oppressive ideologies concerning women and their body in performance, effectively challenging the terms of their own representation” (Albright, 1997, p. 94). If carried out with repeated and relentless energy, such actions might eventually “deform the archive” and result in new hybrid identities. Following Butler, “if the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts

through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Butler, 1988, p. 520).

### 5.2.3 Everyday gesture in performance

Already in our initial project discussions over e-mail, Hiromi introduced the idea of approaching my performing body as an object, as a way of seeking deeper levels of identity. She wrote to me: “A body as an object. I could never be able to reach this point, and I cannot well explain but if you take out all the elements that construct your identity, the last element would be shown” (Miyakita, personal communication, 2018).



**Fig. 24**  
Image from *Thin As Skin* at ArtTheatre dB Kobe, Japan 2018. Photo by Junpei Iwamoto.

Our discussions of the multi-layered body, and of gendered movement in musical performance led to a shared interest in using everyday movement, as an immediate connection to Hiromi’s choreographic practice. In one of my interviews with her, Hiromi described the connection between her work with everyday objects and her current choreographic practice:

I decided to get rid of all the dance techniques and things. I tried to just stand, walk, sit...it is everyday movement that you can do, everyone can do without training. Besides my artistic concept of everyday movement, Thuy also has another topic as her background. She explained her background and the history of gender gesture in her musical playing. And I learnt, or I watched what it is, tried to grasp the essence of that (Miyakita, interview, 2019).<sup>87</sup>

Our interest in the everyday movements of a musician was further emphasized in the second version of the piece. Here, in the first section, my performance was constructed as a scene where I would assemble my instrument by putting the bridges in, one by one. This is a rather elaborate action, but it also produces rich sounding results.

You don't need to play. You just need to show what was the setup. The same quality way as you prepare before a performance. Because normally maybe a musician doesn't want to show, doesn't need to show the practice of setting up. This is simple. Everyday practice is beauty. (Miyakita, interview, 2019).<sup>88</sup>

In *Vodou Vibrations*, my duo project with Marie, bodily effort was an important quality in the choreography, in ways that are also central for the communication with audiences. Effort and empathy are immediately connected in the theories of Rudolf von Laban, who finds effort to be a fundamental component in our perception of movement. He claims that

every human movement is indissolubly linked with an effort, which is, indeed, its origin and inner aspect. Effort and its resulting action may be both unconscious and involuntary, but they are always present in any bodily movement; otherwise they could not be perceived by others, or become effectual in the external surroundings of the moving person" (Laban, 1971, p. 21).

I grew up seeing thin little women carry enormous weights in the streets of Hà Nội. When I carry the bundles in the performance, I also experienced something of the empathy that Laban discusses. I cannot pick up and move these bundles without empathizing with the women of my country.<sup>89</sup> The political dimension of such transformation of the everyday through performance is pointed out by De Preester, who claims that "when the gesture of the artist is itself a work of art and if very daily

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<sup>87</sup> For this citation, see *Thin as Skin a video essay* in RC at 14:42.

<sup>88</sup> For this citation, see *Thin as Skin a video essay* in RC at 23:47.

<sup>89</sup> An even stronger experience of empathy through performance was the choreography which is performed in the opening and closing scenes of *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*. Here, the three members of *The Six Tones* repeat (and modify, distorted by their inability to fully recall the exact performance of this scene from *Tuông*, which, in the end of the film is shown on screen. Here, we see Lư Ngọc Nam, an aging actor, perform his memory of an art form he had to give up on as the result of the difficulties he experienced as a foreigner, a migrant, in his own home country. See further Nguyễn & Östersjö (2016; 2019).



activities are elevated to the status of art, everyday actions and ordinary activities lose their obviousness and gain a sometimes unbearable meaning—something well used in turning a gesture into a political gesture” (2007, p.368).

Marie and I often talked about the body as an archive. The effort put into disconnecting from this archive became a method for challenging my *habitus* as a Vietnamese traditional music performer. As mentioned above, effort also became an artistic method and a quality in the choreographies. When I look back at the process of making *Thin As Skin*, instead, effortlessness appears to be a guiding principle. Through Hiromi’s practice, based on everyday movement and everyday objects, the multi-layered body is addressed differently. In the video essay, she describes the basic concepts for a choreographic practice based on everyday movement with a glass in her hand:

This is the glass. This is something for drinking. But this object is a piece of glass material before being something for drinking. And I always apply this sense into my dance. And I always explore what is the phenomenon...And I want to get rid of everything, all information. I try to get rid of all information of myself. (Miyakita, interview, 2019)<sup>90</sup>

In the video essay on *Thin As Skin* I refer to Trĩnh Minh-ha’s discussion of the essence of movement, a figure of thought that she builds on the ancient writings of Noh theatre master Zeami (1363-1443). Effortlessness, for him, is the only path to reach what he calls the essence of performance. Minh-ha (2011) reminds us that “since each language carries with it a certain mental context and a locatable history of thought, to read ‘essence’ across contextual borders, one must necessarily displace it from the central position it occupies within Western metaphysics” (p. 86). Rather than a set of dichotomies—True/False, Same/Different, Good/Evil—we need to be open to the multiplicities of human existence. The essence of performance then lies in how it challenges the relation between change and permanence, and through its rejection of imitation, understood as a method which locks the performance on a surface level. For a performer working within a musical tradition, participation and preservation both demand transformation. But what does this entail for the search for essence in performance, beyond the simple dichotomy of Same/Different? I see the choreographies we created, through an exploration of the body as object using everyday movement as material, as a vehicle for a performance situated at the intersection between change and permanence. Speaking with Trĩnh Minh-ha, such performance “denaturalizes the body by disengaging itself from the quest for a so-called organic choreographic process, which often dwells on a narrow concept of the discursive, hence remaining blind as to how subject and object come into being” (Trĩnh, 2011, p. 88). Further, this subconscious search for

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<sup>90</sup> For this citation, see *Thin as Skin a video essay* in RC at 25:01.

the essence of movement also at times becomes a revelation of the musicality of dance:

When dance is no more and no less than “a moving image of life,” the performance of movement in space is also much less a display of the spectacular, virtuoso perfected body, than it is a full and evenly passionate execution of pedestrian activities, in which the articulate body can be said to be at best, musically accurate (Trinh, 2011, p. 88).

While effort and effortlessness may appear to be opposed principles, the work I carried out with Marie and Hiromi shares many common perspectives. Everyday movement is a shared interest, as is the search for a choreography that goes deeper than the surface level of the body image. Through these explorations of a female performer’s embodied knowledge, and how this knowledge is culturally constructed, one may see how conventional gender norms for musical performance can be challenged and even recomposed.



**Fig. 25**  
Image from *Thin as Skin* at ArtTheatre dB Kobe, Japan 2018. Photo by Junpei Iwamoto.

## 5.3 Summary

The processes of transculturation are found in this chapter to be not only a vehicle for positive change, but also a possible threat to musical tradition. It is argued that intercultural collaboration must rest on a foundation of trust, empathy and what Gadamer would call “true listening”. Only then can strategies for approaching a musical Other, without the aim of controlling difference, be fully achieved.

Further, processes of intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration are found to afford transformative artistic results, which in themselves suggest that a “different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Butler, 1988, p. 520) may be possible in different layers of the bodily archive.

Finally, the chapter proposes that such transformative processes can be instigated through performance, both through operations built on effort, as well as a through a search for the essence of performance seeking the effortlessness that Trinh Minh-ha (2011) identifies in the aesthetics of ancient Japanese Noh theatre. Hence, intercultural and interdisciplinary artistic practice can indeed propose social change, and provide counter images to traditionally gendered behaviour.

## Chapter 6.

# An auto-ethnographic discussion

## 6.1 From childhood soundscapes to experimental aesthetics

When I was twenty years old, I lived in Mai Dịch, at my parent's house, in an area on the outskirts of Hà Nội where many actors and musicians in traditional music and theatre live. At this time, Mai Dịch was surrounded by rice fields and the most common means of transportation was the bicycle. I got my first bicycle when I was twelve, and then I started biking on my own through Hà Nội to the Hanoi Conservatory of Music. Motorbikes started to commonly appear only after *Đổi Mới* (1986), as an immediate effect of the rising economy. The soundscape in Mai Dịch throughout my childhood was that of a rural village. It was a tiny village, and very poor, filled with many little ponds. As a child I would not only play by the ponds but in the summertime we would often bring a bamboo carpet and sleep beside the nearest pond, tucked to sleep by the immersive sound of the cicadas and the manifold little noises of frogs. But the soundscape of Mai Dịch was also characterized by practicing musicians: the sound of the *đàn nhị*, *sáo*<sup>91</sup>, the *sona*<sup>92</sup> as well as singers practicing vocal parts in *Tuồng* and *Chèo*.

I grew up in a society very different from the Vietnam of today. It really could be described as a mono-culture of traditional theatre and music. Both of my parents were actors: my father coming from the *Chèo* tradition, while my mother was a *Tuồng* actress. Music is deeply integrated into these forms of theatre, and both my elder brother and I were guided into a professional identity as musicians. I started playing the *đàn tranh* when I was eight years old, and was accepted into the academy when I was only nine. From then on, my childhood was characterized by daily bicycling between Mai Dịch and the Hanoi Conservatory of Music, as it was called at the time.

If we return to the distinction between musical and *musicianly* listening, I believe that my ears at that time were tuned into a musical listening which was completely embedded in the traditions of music and theatre found in Mai Dịch. We did have a

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<sup>91</sup> *Sáo* (bamboo flute)

<sup>92</sup> A reed instrument played in *Tuồng*, but also typically at funerals.

radio, and I would never miss the two shows with traditional music, at 11AM and 9PM. The nightly program was broadcasted every evening, but the one in the daytime was only twice a week. Apart from all my encounters with live music making in my surroundings, these two radio shows were very much my entire musical frame of reference at this time.

When I was sixteen, I commenced studies with Trần Đại, a master *đàn tranh* performer who worked in the *Vietnam Chèo theatre*. I would study with him in the evenings, and often my mother would come and remind me that I needed to go to bed. This was part of my desire at that time to broaden my horizons beyond the academic framework in which traditional music was taught in the conservatory. At the same time, I also studied with the legendary moon-lute player and guitarist Kim Sinh, the *đàn tranh* player Thế Thiệp and other master performers. I formed a group with some like-minded students at the academy. Our aim was to preserve traditional music at a time when the neo-traditionalist movement was the officially-supported mainstream approach. We were opposed to the use of Western notation as a means of transmission of traditional music, since it deprived the music of its naturally integrated component of improvisation. The spirit of that group was indeed what shaped my listening back then, which turned out to be a threshold to different ways of relating to the broader world of diverse musical expressions.

In 1995, I travelled outside of Northern Vietnam for the first time to attend the *National Đàn Tranh Competition* in Hồ Chí Minh city. The train ride across the country took around 38 hours, and I arrived in an urban environment of a kind I could not have imagined. The diversity and intensity of the city soundscape and the nightlife made a big impression on me. But even more important, this was the first time I began to grasp the division of my country which was the result of the civil war. I immediately realized that many of the “war heroes” of the north were regarded as war criminals and terrorists in the south. Suddenly the life I had lived so far, completely embedded in a traditional music environment, also emerged as a similarly cocooned perspective of the world, completely defined by the propaganda of my government. However, the competitions I entered in 1995 and in 1998 furthered my career as a traditional music performer, and my connections to master performers in the south became an important source for my playing in those years. As discussed extensively above, winning these competitions brought me into a professional life that was very much defined by the emerging nation branding through traditional music. I increasingly appeared in TV shows and public concerts designed as entertainment, each tending to feature a conservative and superficial view of both the music itself and women performers.

A radical shift in my listening was stimulated by encounters with the choreographer Ea Sola and the composer Nguyễn Thiện Đạo. They had both made their career in France and in the West, and had returned to Vietnam when the country gradually opened up to contacts with the West in the 1990s. While I spent time discussing art, music and politics with Ea Sola, the ground-breaking moment for me as a musician

was the collaboration with Nguyễn Thiện Đạo, who came to me with the wish to create a piece for the *đàn tranh*. This would form part of a series of solo works for traditional Vietnamese instruments, which was a new direction for him as a composer.

His composition for the *đàn tranh* was created through a series of workshops in Hà Nội in 2004, with the completion of the score in January 2005. This collaboration demanded a constant re-thinking of my instrument, and indeed also of how a musical material can be heard and defined. I showed the basic playing techniques and a standard tuning, and he immediately started asking for ways in which these could be modified and extended. I remember when we discovered the inherent possibilities for playing arpeggios with micro-tonal clusters (a term I was not familiar with at the time). Additionally, I recall how the fourth movement of the piece included the nearly impossible structure of a slowly descending glissando on tremolo strings with two separate layers in the bottom and top registers inserted. In these sessions, I was invited to a kind of listening which, in the words of Pierre Schaeffer, could be called “*musicianly* invention”. Through this piece, my ways of relating to the *đàn tranh* expanded beyond the scope of the traditions in which I was raised and trained. As mentioned in section 1.4, this experience was formative when I later began to engage with intercultural collaboration in *The Six Tones* in 2006.

## 6.2 Intercultural collaboration toward hybrid identities

In 2006, as part of a larger exchange project between Sweden and Vietnam, I was sent by VNAM as a guest teacher to the Malmö Academy of Music. I stayed in a student apartment through winter and spring, with Ngô Trà My, who became the *đàn bầu* player of *The Six Tones* that year, as my room-mate. Since then, my experience of the world has become increasingly defined by a multicultural view. While I have kept my teaching position in VNAM, and most of the artistic projects I have been engaged in have been grounded in explorations of traditional music and theatre from Vietnam, much of my artistic work has been carried out in Europe as well as the USA.

The experience of teaching traditional music to Swedish students was mind opening, for I became increasingly aware of how musical traditions were becoming accessible to a much broader audience while the general appreciation of music was simultaneously becoming more superficial. What struck me when teaching the Swedish students was that their listening was not so different from that of the average Vietnamese student in the academy. The relative isolation which characterized my childhood in Hanoi has been replaced by an increasingly globalized culture, in which the musical references of the younger generation have nothing to do with traditional theatre and music, but are deeply impacted by Asian

pop music. An important turning point during my stay in Sweden was the encounter with the other members of what became *The Six Tones*. This became the platform from which methods for intercultural and interdisciplinary work began to take shape in my musical development. Apart from *The Six Tones*, Marie Fahlin, Richard Karpen, Jörgen Dahlqvist and Hiromi Myiakita are the artists who had the most formative influence in my work. What seems important with all of these collaborations is how they, each in their individual ways, work through methods built on a wish to draw on each participants' individual experience and knowledge, which also has been essential as the conceptual basis of my scholarship.

Clearly, I have been engaging with these artists in rather different ways. My collaboration with Richard has become a long-term exploration of an emerging voice which, I believe, I find to be less and less defined by tradition, and more by the collaboration itself. I have discussed above some instances in which Richard has challenged my *habitus* as a traditional performer, starting with the very first working sessions on *Idioms* in 2010 (see section 6.1). What emerges in the work we have carried out over the last few years, exemplified in this thesis by the collaboration on *Nam Máí*, is how the growth of trust and empathy has resulted in an increasing sense of freedom, creating space for each performer's individual voice.

Working with Marie has allowed me to understand the role of my embodiment in intercultural collaboration. Furthermore, it has entailed an increasing challenge to my *habitus* as a Vietnamese woman and musician. Between 2012 and 2014, we worked intensively on a series of pieces (not all of them discussed in detail in this thesis), a process exploring what Marie refers to as the "many-layered body". Here, and in particular in the work *Vodou Vibrations*, I aimed at disconnecting with the archive of the choreography of gender in traditional music performance. It was a laborious process, and sometimes a rather awkward one, in which I experienced my body—when deprived of the framework of producing sound on my instrument—as clumsy and disabled. But the many-layered body that we wished to activate through the choreography allowed me to start developing an identity which, again, was less defined by tradition than by the situation in which I choose to act.

My understanding of a performer's voice in intercultural collaboration is informed by the definition of political space proposed by Rebecca Adami (2014), as articulated through her reading of Adriana Cavarero's philosophical reflections on voice. Adami develops a critique of ontologies that define human rights in relation to citizenship. In her view, the failure of such perspectives is found in their inability to articulate a political space for the stateless, immigrants and cultural minorities, and Adami argues for the "acknowledgement of political agency that is neither bound to legal space, nor to an understanding of political action as possible only for individuals within the boundaries of nation-states" (Adami, 2014, p. 169). Here, she turns to Cavarero's notion of a relational understanding of political space, constructed through the individuality of "voice" enabling the political sphere to be articulated as "the reciprocal communication of voices who raise their uniqueness

in relations that can take place anywhere” (Adami, 2014, p. 176). Cavarero (2005) argues for an ontology of political space articulated beyond logos, through the unique sonic engagement through which any humans can interact “in the voice both uniqueness and relation—indeed, uniqueness as relation—manifest themselves acoustically without even taking account of what is said. The voice, which is embodied in the plurality of voices, always puts forward first of all the *who* of saying” (p. 30). Cavarero suggests an understanding of political space that emphasizes egalitarianism, interpersonal relationships, and individual autonomy. Adami concludes that

Relatedness in this sense does not occur between a social utopia of equals who are seen as equal in rights and dignity, or through a kind of sameness, where people belong to the same nationality or are citizens in the same polis. Rather, relatedness comes in this sense through voicing what is urgent for “you” and “me” that we can act upon politically (Adami, 2014, p. 177).

Given the emphasis on collective identity as constitutive of Vietnamese culture as discussed in Chapter 1, I argue that the voices of female performers of traditional Vietnamese music are disregarded and indeed suppressed by the institutional/governmental “other”. Throughout the various artistic projects and research documented in this Ph.D. dissertation, a constant theme across my work has been the use of intercultural artistic practice to develop “a voice that is not predetermined by already existing discourses and paradigms” (Cobussen, 2014, p. 84).

A parallel to the movement beyond logos proposed by Cavarero is found in Foster’s (1998) proposal of an analytical perspective on the choreography of gender. Perhaps “voice”, in the political perspective discussed here, can be even more clearly represented by a multimodal understanding of choreography and gesture. As discussed above, with reference to the examples from *Inside/Outside*, *Vodou Vibrations*, and *Thin as Skin*, the possibility of “performing differently” may constitute a method for rewriting a performer’s embodied archive, and thereby, allowing for the articulation of a singular voice.

*Inside/Outside* sought to create a space in which the individual voice could be articulated through body movement, initially for the two Vietnamese performers of the group. But also the piece seeks to draw the viewer into a situation that dissolves the binary of public and private, through its visual play with inside and outside in the multiple reflections in the space, but also by allowing the viewer to enter into the private space, articulated in the headphone tracks. Perhaps the reasons why audience members sometimes have described the performance situation as awkward, despite the visual attractiveness of the imagery, can be understood through the shift of the audience’s role described by Ann Cooper Albright as “when the act of watching transforms in the act of witnessing” (1997, xxii).



In the first performances in Hà Nội in 2012, and in subsequent performances in other cities in the country, when *Inside/Outside* has been presented to an audience familiar with TV shows in Vietnam, the piece invites the viewer to a reconsideration of the Vietnamese female body in traditional music performance. We have experienced the dynamic of this attempt at a dissolution of the binary of “us and them” as significantly different when the piece is performed to audiences in Europe. When performed in Europe, the piece appears to open up for a wider perspective which includes, but is not limited to, the male gaze and the objectification of female musicians. Through the four productions directly addressed in this thesis, and additional projects over the last eight years, I have sought to create an original voice which is distinctly my own but that emerges out of a constant engagement with resistance to habits, and the creation of art which is located in a liminal space between traditions.

Christina Nualart (2018) discusses the emergence of feminist art in Vietnam in a recent paper. Her research was triggered by an article by Bùi Thị Thanh Mai—a lecturer of Art History at the Fine Arts University in Hanoi and deputy-director of the Vietnam Museum of Fine Arts—who in 2011 claimed that no feminist art has been created in the country. Nualart identifies and discusses the work of a handful of artists, admitting that they do not collectively constitute a major voice in Vietnamese society, nevertheless concluding as follows:

feminist art is being made in Vietnam, on the understanding that the choice of this word has not been made explicit by the artists, and that several of them have expressed that gender inequality in contemporary society is not a concern that troubles them. It may be that gender inequality is not worrying them because the agency of creating feminist artworks is in itself playing a part in cancelling detrimental beliefs in the minds of the artists, and ultimately contributing to eradicate insidious social pressures (Nualart, 2018, p. 36).

It is my hope that the artistic practice I have developed, in collaboration with many artists from different countries and with very different artistic and personal backgrounds, may constitute a building block for the emergence of more feminist music and intermedia art in Vietnam. Further, it is also my hope that through performance, further knowledge of gender conventions in Vietnamese society can be unveiled, and that thereby, the broader field of gender studies can also benefit from this work. Images of the strong women that Duong identifies as messages in “glass bottles” underline the political potential also through performance. As Duong explained, there exists in the Vietnamese heritage evidence of a positive collective identity urging Vietnamese women to take the lead in society and to resist gender and social injustice. At various times and to a more limited extent, the rule of law may reflect this cultural identity and aspiration. To advocate gender equality in Vietnam, it is necessary to revitalize and capitalize on this cultural identity (Duong, 2001, p. 196). Through creative transformation of these ancient traditions, and the

creation of new ways of negotiating the multiplicities of contemporary society—through empathy, trust and true listening—art and life, old and new will no longer be dichotomies, merely facets of our interactions with the other as Other.



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# The Choreography of Gender in Traditional Vietnamese Music



**Nguyễn, Thanh Thủy** is a leading đàn tranh player and improviser in both traditional and experimental music. She was born into a theatre family and was raised with traditional Vietnamese music from an early age in Hà Nội. She studied at the Hanoi Conservatory of Music and has received many distinctions included the

First Prize and the Outstanding Traditional Music Performer Prize in the National Competition of Zither Talents in 1998. Nguyễn Thanh Thủy has recorded several CD's as soloist with orchestra and solo CDs released by Phương Nam Film (VN); dB Productions (SWE); Setola di Maiale (IT) and by NEUMA Records & Publications (US). She collaborates with composers such as Richard Karpen (US), Kent Olofsson (SE), Nguyễn Thiện Đạo (FR/VN) and Trần Thị Kim Ngọc (VN).

The last eight years she has been collaborating extensively with choreographers and theatre directors on many interdisciplinary projects. Between 2009 and 2011, she was involved as an artistic researcher in the international research project (re)thinking improvisation, a collaboration between the Vietnam National Academy of Music and the Malmö Academy of Music. Since 2012 she has carried out this artistic doctoral project at the Malmö Academy of Music concerned with the function of gesture in traditional Vietnamese music. The aims are to expand the expressive scope of her performance, through cross-disciplinary and intercultural collaboration and to question current gender norms that shape the present-day performance culture of traditional Vietnamese music.

