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SOUTHEAST BY SOUTHWEST

Ascending Dragon Music Festival Creates U.S./Vietnam Cultural Exchange

Vietnam...a word evocative, for so many Americans, of conflict and sorrow. Regardless of one's politics, it is difficult to consider "Vietnam" without "the war," the first war, in fact, to be waged in living rooms across America via the evening news. Can we—or should we—forget the mud, the blood, the hellish images from a place unimaginably far away? And how are we to begin to understand that time, given the comparisons emanating regularly from Iraq and Afghanistan?

Jeff von der Schmidt believes that we can find mutual understanding after this long and complicated history. This spring, Southwest

Chamber Music, the Grammy Award-winning ensemble he co-founded and has led for the last 23 years, will present *Ascending Dragon Music Festival and Cultural Exchange*, an ambitious six-week project that will send 19



emotions for me about this Southeast Asian country. I was shaped, as were so many Americans of my generation, by the double crucible of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. I could never have dreamt in the '60s and '70s that I would be part of an ensemble representing the United States in Hanoi."

Ascending Dragon, a translation of the Vietnamese words *Thăng Long*, the first name of Hanoi, (which is celebrating its 1000th anniversary in 2010), is designed to encourage new artistic and creative leadership in Vietnam through people-to-people exchange with the United States. This music festival will feature parallel activities involving diplomatic, academic, corporate and community organizations in both countries, and will be the largest cultural exchange in history between the two countries. A significant grant from the U.S. State Department Bureau of Educational and

American musicians to Vietnam, and bring 19 Vietnamese musicians to the United States. "My goal is to demonstrate that Vietnam is a country and not a war," von der Schmidt states. "There are still strong and passionate

Left: Ha Long Bay, Vietnam UNESCO's World Heritage Site, photo provided by Southwest Chamber Music. Above: The ensemble, photo credit: Corina Gamma.

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Cultural Affairs is providing major support; the project will be the second such cultural exchange for Southwest Chamber Music after a highly successful series of concerts and master classes in Hanoi in December 2006.

"Ascending Dragon has been the most rewarding challenge I've had to program," von der Schmidt continues. "Any festival is a departure from normal concert life—in a festival all the pieces have to fit together, creating a larger narrative for the audience and musicians. This is even more appealing when you factor in the reality that *Ascending Dragon* is the most ambitious, probably the first, formal festival of contemporary music ever on the Vietnamese cultural scene. Our composers-in-residence, Alexandra du Bois and Kurt Rohde from the United States and Vũ Nhật Tân and Pham Minh Thành from Vietnam are a perfect fit. In selecting these four gifted individuals, I was looking for multiple talents: accomplished musical voices, accomplished instrumental talents, and a deep



moral character. I dream that these four composers represent the best national characteristics of their respective countries and will work together to bring my vision of new classical music, a world where the wisdom of tradition blends with the diversity of the 21st century, as a moving experience for audiences in Vietnam and the United States."

A key component of the project was designed to create cultural exchange opportunities for Vietnamese and American audiences generally, and for the musicians, composers, administrators and students involved directly with the festival. One of the State Department's goals in supporting Southwest Chamber Music with this highly competitive grant was to identify and encourage a new generation of emerging cultural leaders in Vietnam, and this will be accomplished through workshops on administration, leadership and creativity. Other community forums in both countries will encourage corporate and arts partnerships and will include events at the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi, the U.S. Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City, the Drucker Institute at Claremont Graduate University and the Riordan Volunteer Leadership Development Program. Jan Karlin, Founding Executive Director of Southwest Chamber Music, notes that "[the organization's] past experiences demonstrate the need for dialogue and the encouragement of emerging cultural leadership around the globe. The foreign perception of America needs to include serious artistic accomplishment and in-depth interaction with our global cultural colleagues."

Here in Southern California, Southwest Chamber Music's local partners will have numerous opportunities to be involved with *Ascending Dragon*. Educational activities and community outreach programs will reflect this historic cultural exchange with activities and dialogues at the Colburn School, Pacific Asia Museum, Caltech, and the Armory Center for the Arts. Pre-concert



talks and post-concert receptions will encourage audience members to meet the Vietnamese participants, and there will be visits by the Vietnamese participants to local area high schools, colleges and universities to meet students and peers, and provide learning opportunities about American arts education.

The project is demanding, purposeful and compelling, as befits the complicated past. A Vietnamese proverb says that "dragon meets clouds" shows favorable conditions. Southwest Chamber Music's *Dragon* is clearly ascending to meet the clouds and creating the conditions for artistic expression, mutual understanding and reconciliation.

The Ascending Dragon Music Festival runs February 26 through May 3. For a complete schedule of *Ascending Dragon* performances and related activities, visit www.swmusic.org.

Left: Southwest Chamber Music performing at the Vietnam National Academy of Music's Concert Hall, 2006 . Above: Double bassist Tom Peters of Southwest Chamber Music coached students at the Vietnam National Academy of Music, 2006