

PASADENA STAR-NEWS

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Exchange artists



Members of Pasadena's Southwest Chamber Music are getting ready for the upcoming Ascending Dragon Music Festival and Cultural Exchange in Vietnam, coinciding with the 1,000th anniversary of the founding of Hanoi. The group was one of just three nationwide to receive a State Department grant for cultural exchange programs.

Pasadena, Viet groups plan music tours

By **Janette Williams**
Staff Writer

PASADENA — Hard work, persistence and maybe a little bit of luck have paid off for Pasadena's 22-member Southwest Chamber Music, which in March will embark on the largest-ever cultural exchange between the United States and Vietnam.

In its third attempt, the Grammy-winning group was awarded a highly competitive \$300,000 U.S. State Department grant for its six-week Ascending Dragon Music Festival and Cultural Exchange. For three weeks in March, 19 members of Southwest Chamber Music will travel to Vietnam, while 19 Vietnamese will come to Pasadena for three weeks in April and May.

"It's a big deal," Artistic Director Jeff von der Schmidt said. "Playing in Vietnam — Vietnamese and Southwest Chamber Music playing side-by-side — that's really how we demonstrate a new generation and era in relations between our countries."

Being able to "dig in" together for six weeks is an important part of the exchange, Von der Schmidt said.

"It's not by accident we're doing

this in Vietnam," he said. "We are two countries permanently linked by a very complicated history, and I think this is a wonderful opportunity to open up and have a people-to-people exchange. ... We want Vietnam to be (seen as) a country, not a war."

The State Department grant is one of only three awarded in the nation, Executive Director Jan Karlin said. The other recipients are the University of Iowa and Carnegie Hall in New York City.

"It must be matched by \$250,000 from donors, grants — all sources," Karlin said. "It's not completed yet, but we're on our way...We're definitely out of the planning stages — I just bought 40 airline tickets."

Writing the application was hard work, but having done it twice before was helpful, Karlin said.

"One copy of the grant was 100 pages — it was grant-writing on steroids," she joked. "It was definitely not something for beginners."

Southwest Chamber Music's track record of touring, performing and conducting music education in Cambodia and Vietnam, plus a recommendation from U.S. Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena, helped secure the grant, Karlin said.

Organizing a six-week music fes-

tival in two countries, and being part of the 1,000th anniversary of the founding of Hanoi, is quite a challenge, she said.

"The Olympics are only three weeks — you can imagine the amount of planning, which is why the grant is over two years," she said.

Some Southwest Music officials went on a planning trip to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in March last year, Karlin said, and that's where a little of the luck came in.

Unknown to anyone on the staff, the intern they'd hired on the recommendation of her USC Annenberg School for Communication professor was a member of Vietnam's most prominent musical family.

"We had no idea," Karlin said of Thu-Nga Dan, now the group's communications director.

"We're just so lucky she came to us. Her grandmother founded the Hanoi National Conservatory of Music (in 1956) and her uncle Dang Thai Sonwon first prize at the (10th) Chopin Competition" in Warsaw.

And Dan was the one who came up with the "Ascending Dragon" title for the festival, Von der Schmidt said.

"That was the original name of

Hanoi," he said. "Thu-Nga suggested it and said it would bring us luck. And boy, was she right about that."

Choosing the pieces American and Vietnamese musicians will play side-by-side was "frankly, the biggest challenge I've ever had," Von der Schmidt said.

"It's impossible to deal with Vietnam and pretend the French don't exist" in its history, Von der Schmidt said, and works by such composers as Debussy and Ravel will be included along with the American "Three Cs" — Aaron Copland, John Cage and Elliott Carter, who is still composing at age 101.

A festival highlight, he said, will be the world premieres of newly commissioned works by four young composers, Alexandra du Bois and Kurt Robde from the U.S., and Pham Minh Thanh and Vu Nhat Tan from Vietnam, at the Hanoi Opera House on March 19.

Festival events, including 17 U.S. premieres, will start here Feb. 27 though May 3. Performances will be at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena and the Colburn School in Los Angeles.

For a full events calendar and information on special donor trips to Vietnam, go to swmusic.org.

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