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Culture Vulture (May, 23 2012)

Composer Vu Nhat Tan plans to debut his work at the inaugural LA International New Music Festival in Los Angeles from May 9 to 26. Tan spoke about his work.

You said that your latest piece for the orchestra was inspired by and adapted from the book of poetry The Song of Napalm by the American poet Bruce Weigl. How was the collaboration set up?

I met the Southwest Chamber Music orchestra in 2008 when they first co-operated with Viet Nam. In 2010, I was a guest artist in another programme of cultural exchange between the orchestra and the Viet Nam Academy of Music (VNAM). The programme was successful in Viet Nam and the US.

In early 2011, I was introduced to poet Bruce Weigl by Jeff von der Schmidt, the conductor and artistic director of Southwest Chamber Music. The idea of composing music for the orchestra based on the poetry was born then.

What made you to choose the poetry?

I met Weigl in Ha Noi and read some of his work including the book After the Rain Stopped Pounding through the Vietnamese translations of poet Phan Que Mai. In this book, we selected some poems which would be put to music.

The composition time was not long enough so I decided to choose The Song of Napalm after reading both English and Vietnamese versions many times. I was moved by its truthfulness. The poetry features fierce war as well as the later consequences.

Could you introduce the new piece? How do you want the piece to be played?

The piece was composed for small orchestra of three Vietnamese instruments bau (monochord); tranh (16-chord zither) and t'rung (bamboo xylophone). Under conductor Schmidt's baton, the orchestra will rehearse and perform with these instruments.

The instruments will be played by the Vietnamese musician Van Anh, one of the leading tranh artists, who is living and performing in San Francisco.

I also invited Hanh Weigl, the poet Weigl's adopted daughter to recite the Vietnamese version with basso Evan Hughes from New York City.

The theme of war is never old as long as there is war in this world. The piece does not focus on war only, it tells of human psychology and post-war life. The piece comprises many musical materials and Vietnamese instruments. It blends new and old.

When will the piece be introduced to Vietnamese audiences ?

I hope the piece will be set up and performed in Viet Nam soon. Both poet Weigl and conductor Schmidt also wish for that. I will be happy if Weigl introduces The Song of Napalm with his adopted daughter Hanh Weigl to the Vietnamese public.

