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***A Musical Homecoming in Hanoi "Ascending Dragon," a two-week chamber music festival in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, is just one example of how contemporary music is gaining ground in Vietnam.***

**By CORINNA DA FONSECA-WOLLHEIM**

Vu Nhat Tan leads a double life. By night, he is an underground sound artist in his native Hanoi. His open-air concerts of electronically manipulated sounds draw crowds of thousands; last week the city's French Cultural Institute hosted a performance in which he mixed computer-generated noise with the sounds of the one-stringed Vietnamese Dan Bau and the chanting of a village shaman.

By day, Mr. Tan is a classically trained composer but he rarely gets to hear his own music. Abroad he is considered one of Vietnam's rising stars, the winner of a number of international grants and prizes for his chamber music which mixes Western and traditional Vietnamese instruments. But until last week, few of his countrymen had ever heard his music. For two reasons, as Mr. Tan explains: "Firstly, the local musicians' technique was not enough to play those pieces, and secondly they didn't like it. They didn't know enough about contemporary music."



Mr. Tan is at the center of "Ascending Dragon," a two-week chamber music festival currently under way in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City which sets out to bring Vietnamese classical music back home after half a century during which composers became disconnected from their audiences due to war and politics. Led by the California-based Southwest Chamber Music ensemble and funded by a generous U.S. State Department grant, the festival, which coincides with the 1,000th anniversary of the founding of Hanoi, brings together American and Vietnamese composers

and musicians in concerts and workshops in Vietnam and, later this spring, in California. It is the biggest cultural exchange ever held between the two countries.

Historically, Vietnam had one of the most flourishing musical scenes in Asia. The French built opera houses in Hanoi and Saigon, each a miniature model of the Palais Garnier in Paris. By the end of the 1950s, there were conservatories and regular concert series in both cities. For Vietnamese composers, however, independence marked the beginning of a long spiritual exile. The two best-known Vietnamese composers, Ton That Tiet and Nguyen Thien Dao moved to Paris where they studied modern music; Mr. Dao as a disciple of Olivier Messiaen, Mr. Tiet gaining notoriety as the composer of highly original scores for films such as "Cyclo" and "The Scent of Green Papaya."

In Vietnam, however, their music remained unperformed until the 1990s. The Vietnam War brought a new cultural sponsor in the form of the Soviet Union. Vietnamese musicians traveled to Moscow, where the musical education emphasized faithful interpretation of the 19th-century canon and left them ill-equipped to play contemporary Western music.

"At first, after the war, the system was tough," says Mr. Tiet, who lives in Paris. "There was not much freedom to express yourself. There were two paths: composers who used traditional music in order to give their music an oriental character and others who were influenced by Soviet music. When I first traveled to Vietnam in 1992, I encouraged the young composers to create more advanced music." On that trip he brought recordings of 20th-century music with him—even Stravinsky and Debussy were virtually unknown—and returned to Paris with compositions by young Vietnamese composers, Mr. Tan among them. It was only in 2007, through a Norwegian initiative, that Mr. Tiet's own music was finally performed in Vietnam.

"There's a fragmentation of their own experience," says Jeff von der Schmidt, director of Southwest Chamber Music and the driving force behind "Ascending Dragon." In devising the program, he drew on aspects of Buddhist and Vietnamese culture to present contemporary music in a meaningful context. Today, his ensemble will give the Asian premiere of "Conversing with Paradise" by Elliott Carter, a work the American composer wrote last year at the age of 100.

For Mr. Tan, the experience has been encouraging. At a concert of Southwest Chamber Music in the Hanoi Academy last week, he watched as 400 young students "listened to contemporary music from beginning to end in silence. I remember 15 years ago when we played experimental music here in Hanoi the whole audience refused it. They walked out."

One of the festival's highlights for Mr. von der Schmidt has been the performance of John Cage's "Atlas Eclipticalis," a work incorporating elements of chance. "One of the things that we wanted to do was to perform an I Ching chance operation (an ancient Chinese system of divination by casting sticks of different lengths and interpreting the resulting patterns) to determine which of the four pages we would play. So it would demonstrate how Cage arrived at the musical decisions, but also to show that we were aware of the profound importance the I Ching has in Asia for determining auspicious dates. The audience really connected at that point."

The learning experience thus extends to all participants. In rehearsals, says Mr. von der Schmidt, the American and Vietnamese players discussed Buddhist issues of silence and space, both qualities relevant to much of contemporary music. Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu's "Archipelago," a meditation on the subject of universal harmony, took on a new character. "To play this with a Buddhist ensemble joined by Americans, there is this sense of space floating through it."

On April 16 the festival will resume in California with mirror performances of the concerts given in Vietnam, many featuring American premieres of specially commissioned works.

The participants hope that "Ascending Dragon" will inject a new note of confidence into Vietnamese musical culture. Many of the challenges facing Vietnamese music are practical and easily addressed. Financial grants could pay for the rental fees of contemporary sheet music. Last week, a new set of strings made Hanoi's only harp playable again for the first time in years—an essential instrument particularly in French 20th-century music. Mr. von der Schmidt is raising money to commission a new work from Mr. Tan, which would incorporate electronic sound mixing with his compositional style, bringing together the two halves of his creative life. "There is a lot of reality that we are addressing here," says Mr. von der Schmidt. "And there is a lot of dreaming."

*Ms. da Fonseca-Wollheim writes about classical music for the Wall Street Journal.*