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Manner of Speaking, Manners of Reciting, Manners of Singing

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PREFACE

Vietnamese traditional and popular music is a music with an oral tradition, and each of these types of music was born of a social function. By that we mean that kind of music which is practiced, properly speaking, by the people. We intend to practice it again, for certain ones from among them, up to the 1960s. Also, I limit the scope of this outline to the tradition of the northern Vietnam, in the delta of the Red River, and only among the Viet people, the ethnic majority of Vietnam.

In this tradition, one can distinguish between two tendencies, one called « professional » or, sometimes, « academic », and the other designated « popular » or « folkloric ».

The first tendency concerns some repertoires performed by professionals, such as ceremonial music and its variants, music of the court, and funeral music. Among the characteristics, one notes the presence of musical instruments as the principal element, and eventually the song or the recitation. The transmission remained completely oral up until the 1970s. But if one only considers the repertoires of « academic » music, sometimes one can be led to conclude that there is a great resemblance to Chinese music.

The second tendency concerns the everyday, and primarily [prai] vocal, musical practices of everyone. The social function of this music is its leading characteristic: the music is tied to an activity (a game, rite [rai], festival, etc.) as an indivisible whole, and each activity has its own music. Sometimes, the action can be achieved [chi] without music, but seldom--indeed never--is the music performed without the activity. The result is that the music vanishes if there is no longer any activity. The following musical types that we will cite [ait] have been chosen since they are almost no longer practiced in the villages.

In this same category, one can quote separately a type of musical practice, regarded as semi [ai]-traditional: quan họ (Bắc ninh), hát dặm Quyên Sơn (Thanh hoá)... These musics, always performed by “amateur” singers, are characterized [rai] by a rich and conventional repertoire. The rules are reinforced by competitions, generally held at the village festival, or at the music festival.

This second category, the music of everyday is practiced by more than ninety percent of the population; it seems obvious to me that one finds more authenticity there.

Therefore it is this category about which we are going to speak in the context of this presentation. We shall examine the various ways of singing popular Vietnamese poetry to observe the musical improvisation on a poetry based on a tonal language, in order to find certain mechanisms of this verbal communication.

I have selected the analysis of lullabies, one of the most expressive examples for observing the rules that have made it possible for these musical practices to endure until the era of urbanization, radio and, later, television. The recording of lullabies that I present to you was performed by me, in the capacity of a mother, and not in the capacity of an ethnomusicologist.

I wish to very quickly approach a new track concerning the intonation of the Vietnamese language, under the supervision of François Picard and the active cooperation of a colleague, Ryan Anderson. My recherche acts as a new beginning. In the research for a "decoding" of popular song of the Viet people, current resources do not make it possible to have a total understanding of its mechanisms.

First of all, let see very quickly how tones and pitch are organized in Vietnamese
1 - THE VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE, TONAL ACCENTS AND PITCH

Vietnamese is a monosyllabic tonal language. These tones are marked in writing, on the same syllable, by five signs. The sixth tone is this same syllable without a sign (thanh ngang, the « horizontal » or « neutral » tone.) The same word changes meaning according to the mark that is written (non-homographic homophones differentiated by tone).

→ Projection of Table 1 : Tones in Vietnamese

Table 1 : Tones in Vietnamese

ma (ghost)	
mà (but)	
má (cheek, or mamma)	má means « cheek » or « mamma » in the south
mả (tomb)	very familiar, old, sometimes insulting; otherwise one says "mộ"
mã (horse)	mã is a word of Chinese origin, for the Vietnamese name for « horse » is ngựa
mạ (rice shoot or mamma)	this word means « rice shoot » or « mamma » in Central Vietnam

→ read only the six tones.

The foundation, used up until now by all musicologists and linguists, specifies that Vietnamese has six tones. Tonal accent must be observed when one speaks, to respect the meaning of the words, as its meaning changes if its tone changes. Rules of tonal accent usage will be presented step by step during my analysis, so as not to get lost in the Vietnamese language rules, we admit this foundation to begin this talk.

We shall see how these rules are used (or rather circumvented) in the lullabies.

As all folksongs take sources from popular poetry, before passing to the musical analysis, we need to have just a short look on general rules of

2 - VIETNAMESE POPULAR POETRY

A sentence of the spoken language takes its poetic form when there are two rules which meet: the rhyme and the tone (vần et thanh). Once these two elements combine [bai], we see the birth of popular literature. Vietnamese society, until 1945, consisted of ninety percent peasants. Urbanization did not really begin until the end of the nineteenth century. The social context was such that there was very little writing. This tradition of "poetization" or, rather, "transformation of every spoken sentence into rhymed verses," was an integral part of the Viet peoples' lives [ai] and lasted up until the 1980s.

→ Pass out the books:

In the small book, we distinguish two kinds: up to page fifty, they are the tục ngữ, literally, "rhymed commonplace words," that we can translate by sayings. The rest of the book devotes itself to ca dao [read "Ka zao"], which we can try to translate as "sung *dao*." It seems that dao is the name of a type of anc(ch)ient popular poetry(or song).

It is the second form that interestes us.

2-A. Its contents: A true ency [ai]clopedia of life

Sayings, proverbs, and popular songs speak about everything: the education of children, the rules and conventions of society, reports about inequality, life, the family, the relations between husband and wife, between a daughter-in-law and her in-laws, between young people; between servants and employers; they speak about impossible love, about challenge, the agricultural calendar, humor, fables, tales, even about

receipes... one even finds popular poems praising the virtues of women remaining in the villages while their husbands set out for the front lines, while others speak about the sorrows of the farm laborers under French colonization, etc...

With regards to lullabies, their contents are also so varied. Certainly some subjects return often, like animals, the transformation of nursery rhymes, promises to a baby. But sung on the basis of lục bát (“specific form of poetry”) the mother improvises {ai] on the contents, selecting the word with which she wishes to express herself about the concept of life, her destiny, her wishes, (and) even of the implied messages to hand down to a third person, etc...

2-B. The major form, Thể thơ lục bát (six/eight couplet) and its rules

This constitutes the principal form of Vietnamese poetry. We need to observe three principal rules: number of words and verse in a couplet, the rhyme rules and the tone rules.

2-B-1. Number of words, sentences, verses

A couplet is made of two verses, each one having, respectively, six and eight syllables.

→ Projection of

Table 2 : the six eight couplet form, *Thể thơ lục bát*

(the text of two verses, one of the examples of the analysis)

Beautiful bamboo:

Trúc xinh trúc mọc bờ ao

Em xinh em đứng nơi nào cũng xinh

Trúc xinh trúc mọc đầu đình

Em xinh em đứng một mình cũng xinh

At least one couplet is required, but often, a piece, bài, consists of two couplets. There is no limit; one can add as many couplets as one wants, as was the case of Kim Vân Kiều de Nguyễn Du, THE reference work of Vietnamese literature. Composed entirely [ai] on this form of poetry, it has several thousand couplets. This form certainly contains some variations that we do not quote here due to lack of time.

Also, to facilitate the follow-up of the analysis, I number the syllables from 1 to 8 (syllable number 6 of the verse of six, for example). Having noted that a syllable corresponds to a word, also.

2-B-2. Rules of rhyming (rhymes of antecedent and consequence function)

This form of poetry should respect a principle of rhyme as follows:

→ Projection of Table 3, Example on the rhyme (1)

		gìeo vằn (antecedent)								
		bắtt vằn (consequence)								
		bắtt vằn AND gìeo vằn								
N° 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8			
Trúc	xinh	trúc	mọc	bờ	ao			→	gìeo vằn	
Em	xinh	em	đứng	nơi	nào	cũng	xinh	→	Bắtt vằn THEN	gìeo vằn
Trúc	xinh	trúc	mọc	đầu	đình			→	bắtt vằn AND gìeo vằn	
Em	xinh	em	đứng	một	mình	cũng	xinh	→	Bắtt vằn THEN	gìeo vằn

Translation:

Beautiful bamboo, so that you would be beautiful, (is it necessary that?) you grow beside a lake.

Me, I am beautiful, where that I would be, I am always beautiful.

Beautiful bamboo, so that you would be beautiful, (is it necessary that?) you grow beside a temple.

Me, I am beautiful; even if I am all alone, I am always (also) beautiful.

Very often, it is the case of vần chân (1), “litteral foot-rhyme,” as in this example. It acts as the obligatory rhyme between the two sixth syllables of the two verses. One also observes the vần lưng, “litterally back-rhyme,” (2) in which the rhyme is placed at the fourth syllable of the verse of eight:

→ Projection of

Table 4, example on the “back rhyme” (2), “Cashing fish”

Cái	ngủ	mày	ngủ	cho	lâu		
Mẹ	mày	đi	cấy	đồng	sâu	chưa	về
Bắt	được	con	chép	con	trê		
Cầm	cổ	lôi	về	cho	cái	ngủ	ăn

Translation:

Little sleeping one, sleep for a long time.

Your mamma hasn't yet returned, she's planting rice in the deep fields.

(If you are good), she will bring you carp and catfish that she finds in the fields.

She ties them up and takes them to you; you will eat them, little sleeping one.

We shall call all rhyme words « key words ».

2-B-3. Rules for tonal accent

Once these rhymes are respected, this form of poetry must especially take into account all the characteristics of a tonal language; in other words, the difference in pitch between spoken syllables of a verse.

(Reminder: word-meaning relates to tonal accent).

These rules of tonal use are called luật bằng trắc, that is to say rules of equal-tone and oblique-or, obstacle-tone. In fact, in poetry, these six tones in the Vietnamese language are only divided into two categories: the tones of the equal (bằng) category, and the tones of the oblique or obstacle (trắc) category, which are as follows:

→ Projection of

Table 5 : bằng and trắc or equal category and oblique-or obstacle-category rules

Vần* bằng ou bình (equal)	ma	mà			Neutral tone and huyền tone
Vần trắc** (oblique or obstacle)	má	Mả	mã	mạ	sắc, nặng, hỏi, ngã tones

- Vần means at the same time, “word,” “syllable,” or “rhyme.” In these cases, it is necessary to read a word of equal category and a word of oblique category (I still cannot even find even the French equivalent).
- Trắc is translated "oblique" by Trần Văn Khê, but trắc also means “obstacle” (in the words trúc trắc or trắc trở).

Its rules seem to be very complicated, but I think they are really necessary when one must compose a poem.

Otherwise, one can completely summarize them in following main rules, at least for the follow-up of my talk:

2-B-3-1. For the **bằng** (equal) tones (that is the **huyền** tone and the neutral tone (without sign)), we observe that

- the "key" words of the verse (rhyming words) are obliged [lai] to be “equal category” (**bằng**) tones. Never are these key words one of the **trắc** “oblique” or “obstacle” category tones. There are three key words per couplet: the sixth and final word of the first verse, and sixth and eighth words of the verse of eight (or fourth in case of “foot rhyme”)
- Certain researchers divide both equal (**bằng**) tones into two sub-categories: high equal and low equal, **bằng** (or **bình**) **thượng** and **bằng** (or **bình**) **hạ**. We do not pay particular importance to such division in the meter where, in any case, each tone and its relationship in the sentence changes endlessly.

2-B-3-2. Concerning the **trắc** tones (“oblique” or “obstacle”), it is obligatory:

- In the verse of six, one at the least and four at the maximum.
- In the verse of eight, two at the least and five at the maximum. The seventh word, must be of the **trắc** tone (except in the case of back-rhyme).

The four oblique tones don't have sub-categories; each case is different, as we will see a part in the analysis of these lullabies.

3 - ANALYSIS OF THE EXAMPLES OF THE LULLABY, *HÁT-RU*

They draw, as we have seen, their sources directly from this popular poetry. This music is one of nearest form to poetry form in its structure. In the quoted and analyzed examples, the titles are imagined for the purpose of following the development of this outline; there is no title on the lullabies.

→ Projection of Table 6, The song **Bắc cầu**, “The Bridge”.

We read	We sing
Bồng bồng mẹ bé con sang	Bồng bồng mẹ bê-ế con sang ơ
Đò dọc quan cấm đò ngang không chèo	Đò dọc-ư quan câ-âm ờ ó ơ ơ đò-ò ngang-(ạ) khỗ-ông chèo
Muốn sang thời bắc cầu kiều	Muốn sang thời (ou thời) bả-ắc câ-âu kiều
Muốn con hay chữ thời yêu lấy thầy	Muôn-ố con hay chư-ữ ờ ó ơ ơ thơ-ời yêu ờ lâ-ấy ờ thầy
À ơi	À a à ơi, à a à ời, à a à ời

Translation:

I carry you my child (upon my shoulder) to cross the river.

The scrap-boats are prohibited, the crossing boats do not work.

If someone wants to cross it, he must build a bridge.

If someone wants his child to be a scholar, he must respect his teachers

(or, if you want to become a scholar my child, you must respect your teachers)

→ Projection of the transcription



The bridge

The song Trúc xinh, “Beautiful Bamboo”

→ Table 7

We read	We sing
Trúc xinh trúc <u>m</u> ọc bờ ao (<u>đ</u> ứng)	Tru-úc xinh trúc mọ-óc bờ-ơ ao (<u>ơ</u> : đư-úng)
Em xinh em <u>đ</u> ứng nơi nào cũng xinh	Em xinh em đư-úng ở ở ở ở nơi nào cù-ung ở ở xinh
Trúc xinh trúc <u>m</u> ọc đầu đình (<u>đ</u> ứng)	Tru-úc xinh trúc mọ-óc đầu-(ầu) đình (<u>ơ</u> : đư-úng)
Em xinh em <u>đ</u> ứng một mình cũng xinh	Em xinh em đư-úng ở ở ở ở một-ột mình cù-ung ở ở xinh
À a à ơi, à a à ời, à a à ơi	

Translation:

Beautiful bamboo, so that you would be beautiful, (is it necessary that?) you grow beside a lake.

Me, I am beautiful, where that I would be, I am always beautiful.

Beautiful bamboo, so that you would be beautiful, (is it necessary that?) you grow beside a temple.

Me, I am beautiful; even if I am all alone, I am always (also) beautiful.

→ Transcription



Beautiful Bamboo

→ Table 8: The song Con kiến, “The Ant”

We read	We sing
Con kiến mảy leo cành đa	Con kiê-én mảy-ay leo-o cà-anh đa
Leo phải cành cộc leo ra leo vào	Leo phải-ãi cánh cô-ốc ---- leo ra leo ---- vào
Con kiến mảy leo cành đào	Con kiến mảy leo cành đào
Leo phải cành cộc leo vào leo ra	Leo phải cành cộc ---- leo vào --- leo ----- ra
À a à oi, à a à òi, à a à ời	



The Ant

Translation:

*The ant that climbs a banyan branch
The branch is a dead end; it turns, it turns
The ant that climbs a peach-tree branch
It turns, it turns; the branch is a dead end*

Well, now you have a general view on the structure of a lullaby, let verify them in details. Surely due to the lack of time, I can not go through every points, but just to quote some remarks.

3-A. Remarks concerning the rhythm and the structure

If we take a 6/8 couplet as a unit, we observe that this one is composed of two parts and that the musical cut doesn't correspond completely to the poetic cut.

→ Projection of Table 8: Three transcriptions in superimposition

1 st part	Bồng	bồng	mẹ	bé	con	sang	Đò	dọc	quan
2 nd part				cắm	đò	ngang	không	chèo	
	Muốn	sang	thời	bác	cầu	kiều	Muốn	con	hay
				chữ	thời	yêu	lấy	thầy	
	Trúc	xinh	trúc	mọc	bờ	ao	Em	xinh	em
				đứng	nơi	nào	cũng	xinh	
	Trúc	xinh	trúc	mọc	đầu	đình	Em	xinh	em
				đứng	một	mình	cũng	xinh	

Con	kiến	mày	leo	cành	Đa	Leo	phải	cành
			cộc	leo	ra	leo	vào	
Con	kiến	mày	leo	cành	Đào	Leo	phải	cành
			cộc	leo	vào	leo	ra	

→ Sing till word 9 of one song.

The first part goes to the ninth syllable (on 14 of them forming the couplet), despite the cutting of the poetic sentence that is usually indicated at the sixth syllable. This part is sung at a fairly regular rhythm.

In fact, the song is rhythmical enough (relatively, compared to its Rubato style) until the fourth word of sentence eight, transforming the poetic sentence thus nine-five.

We have just a remark about the structure of words. Even being a monosyllabic, in Vietnamese language we observe often, thus always two-syllable words. Naturally, in poetry, this element is very important. I just show some examples of these child game songs, *Đồng dao*:

We may understand now why on our six-eight form, the principle of two-syllables words is dominant, the number of words in every sentence is a multiple of 2, and all key words are on pair position.

Can one explain it by an imitation of the rhythm of the nursery rhymes, which is dominated by groups of two syllables? Many researchers agree that the first basis of Vietnamese popular poetry is that of the nursery rhymes. Without going so far as to say that the first sung poems were lullabies, we think that this probable connection is interesting to point out.

→ Projection of Table 11: the nursery-rhyme words rhythm.

→ Read

□□□ ...Xúc xắc

xúc xê

Nhà nào

Còn đèn

Còn lửa

Mở cửa

Tôi vào

Bước lên

Giường cao

Có con

Ròng ập

Bước xuống

Giường thấp...

Or in this example of a game of counting legs; one recites it in pairs of two words, even if they are sentences of four words:

→ Projection of Table 12: the words of counting legs game

→ CD, counting legs

Nu na nu nóng

Cái cống nằm trong

Cái ong nằm ngoài

Even the counting in a game of hide-and-seek is done so in groups of two:

→ Projection of Table 13: the words of hide-and-seek game

→ CD,

5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 35 50 55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100

Năm

Mười

Mười lăm....

Mở mắt

đi tìm

Ừ à ù ập.

The first part only has a few syllables with ornaments; the second part is very rich in added or specific embellishments.

3-B. Remarks on the embellishments

I distinguish two types of embellishments: the embellishment of each syllable which begins when a syllable opens and closes itself, and specific embellishment of the couplet, that I call identifying embellishment. This latter doesn't belong to a syllable meaning of the independent, poetic sentence; its unique role is musical (to finish a sentence, to repeat it, and, above all, it helps us to identify the musical genre to which the song in question belongs, in addition to the other elements). It materializes either through the vowels (ơ, u, i, à oi...in the lullabies), or through the no-signification words (hừ, ối a, tình rằng, thời, etc....in the other practices).

We observe that for the first part we have some word's embellishments only (reminding a [coherence with](#) the regular rhythm in this part). In the second part, with only four syllables, we find two sequences of specific and identifying embellishments. One begins immediately at this same fourth syllable of the sentence of eight, and the second is at the end of this same sentence, before tackling the following verse.

→ Projection of Table 14: transcription of the two identifying embellishments in the sentence:



----Đò ngang -- không chèo



----- à à oi ----- à à oi -----

The bridge



đứng ở một mình cũng ơ xinh



----- à à ơi ----- à à ơi -----

Bamboo



cành cộc ơ----- leo ra leo vào

The ant

→ If possible, sing again, one by one.

And how about the embellishment of the syllables ? We can assimilate this question into remarks on the tones and the manner of singing them in the lullabies:

It is often said that:

- in most cases, the melody follows the pitch of the tones,
- if the pitch of the tones were not respected, one couldn't understand the meaning of the sentence,
- each tone can (or should, depending on the case) correspond to one note of music.

Let us see what these rules represent in the embellishment of the syllables of our lullabies.

One can observe that in the first part, the way of singing them (notes on tone) is relatively similar, I mean:

- The sắc tone is sung on a sliding of a minimum of two notes (la do ou sol do):

→ Projection of Table 15: an excerpt of transcription of tone sắc sung

Sing

Cái ngủ

Trúc xinh

Con kiến

Bồng bồng mẹ bé

An exception: trúc đứng : the word trúc tends to be only one note (could be sung on only one note), leaving the embellishment at the second word, which logically carries the same “sắc” tone.

- The huyền tone and the neutral tone are always sung on only one note each, except if there is a succession of some of them (The equal category, vắn bằng, neutral tone and huyền tone); at this time then it becomes a sliding of the two notes on one of both:

→ Projection of Table 16: an excerpt of transcription of equal category tones sung

Sing :

Rubato



(Con kiến) mày leo cành đa ----Leo (phải) (Five tones of equal category that follow one another)

- The hỏi tone in “ngủ” is sung by one note and transforms itself into the nặng (ngụ) or huyền-ngang (ngù-u) tone according to the singer.



Cái ngữ mà ngữ cho ngoan

It's interesting to notice here an excellent example of the babytalk phenomenon, mothers exaggerate this tone, and may be it's the most representative example of this phenomenon in Vietnam. When mother speaks to the baby, rarely we pronounce this tone correctly, baby will learn to speak correctly this tone later, I have an example of my son, I brought him to France when he was 3, even now, he still pronounce this tone in babytalk.

In the second part, that is, from the fourth word of the verse of eight (first identifying embellishment) up to end of a couplet (second identifying embellishment), in addition with these rules, we can see other elements:

Often we observe a tendency to bring back these syllables on the air of this embellishment, from which come certain rather curious reports and we can find many cases:

- the nặng tone can be sung like the sắc tone (leo phải cành cộc) in sentence 8 of Con kiến,
- the ngã tone would be sung like the sắc tone, that is, by a sliding rising of the two notes: Hay chử ở ở
- the ngang tone became hỏi (chưa became chưa at the end of sentence eight (number two, word seven). These words have the same meaning, despite two different tones (chửa về) as in Catching fish Bắt cá

- sometimes one can sing the sắc tone (cái) and the hỏi tone (ngủ) with the same notes, at least for the beginning before arriving at their identifying embellishment in sentence eight (number four, words six and seven, cái ngữ ở ở ăn). Or too (but this is explained in part by the cutting of vần lưng (back rhyme), the consequence rhyme at syllable number four): of the same written tone, the hỏi tone, in "cô" and in "ngủ," in the last sentence are sung differently.

→ Projection of Table 20 transcription Bắt cá



Cầm cổ lôi về -----cho -- cái --ngủ ăn à à ơi

Small summary and illustration on the importance of the embellishments

We notice that certain syllables completely lose their pronunciation, their meaning, and their tone in some examples which we have just looked at together. In a type of song where the rules are rather "simple" (between the quotation marks), such as that of lullabies, we observe already so many ways "to sacrifice" the meaning and the structure of the words to the rules of the melody.

We see clearly that the discussion thread, mạch, of the intonation is located in the whole sentence, even in the whole of the structure of two couplets and not on each word. Also, these examples confirm the first importance of this identifying embellishment: the rules of the tone pass above all. Even, we have a modern lullaby which uses only this identifying embellishment (and still, not of the same rhythm); the author doesn't even use the 6/8 form poetry, but that of four words form (thể thơ bốn chữ). And yet, it is not shocking for us, mothers.

CD: An expt in Hát ru trong đêm pháo hoa, Trố 1.

--> Projection of the transcription

Projection of the words

In the example,
Hát ru trong đêm pháo hoa, Trố 1.
Bồng bồng bồng bồng
Bồng bồng à à ơi
Bồng bồng bồng bồng
Bồng bồng mẹ ru
Trời cao tung bùng
Muôn hồng ngàn tía
Mẹ ru con ngủ
Giữa đêm hoa đặng
Bồng bồng bồng bồng
Bồng bồng à à ơi
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Bồng bồng mẹ ru

SMALL SUMMARY

Without being able to make a picture of the synthesis of the utilized techniques of improvisation, we can already see, through these examples, the essential ingredients forming a lullaby: the words taking as a foundation a form of poetry, a pentatonic scale with some specific intervals using, a well-regarded rhythm and rhythmic structure, the way of singing certain tones according to their position in the sentence and, especially, the specific and identifying embellishments.

Once these few rules are mastered, one can sing this a lullaby on all the couplets of 6/8 form. In addition, we observe that is THE principle of improvisation used by performers of many types of songs: major part of the songs of the ritual of possession, conventional songs, hát lễ lồi, of the songs of quan họ, or still, in other types of songs alternated between boys and girls, such as hát ví, hát trống quân.

I think it would be very interesting to continue exploring in this direction, making analyses by putting the same samples of the same category of songs, for example, to understand how the singers treat certain tones, in order to find the core of each type: the elements that often, and sometimes always, come back. It would undoubtedly be necessary to dig much more than the eternal ma, mà, má, mạ, mả, mã and all the other ideas done all around.

Thank you for your attention.
Kuching, 30 mai 2004
