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School of Music

**Traditional Vietnamese Music and Its Incorporation into Christian Worship**

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in Candidacy for the Degree of  
M.A. in Ethnomusicology

by

Elijah Khang Chau

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by Elijah Khang Chau

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Leon Neto, BCM, BM Ed, MM, DMA, Committee Advisor

Dr. Paul Rumrill, BA, MM, MA, DMA, Reader/Committee Member

Dr. Sean Beavers, BM, MM, DM, Online Dean of the School of Music

## **Abstract**

The thesis addresses the concern of incorporating traditional Vietnamese instruments into Christian worship. Most worship done in Vietnamese churches in the US is primarily westernized, and it lacks cultural elements to reflect the Vietnamese culture. Another concern is that the younger generation does not know much about Vietnamese culture; this is an issue because many Vietnamese descents do not know which culture they belong to. The idea behind traditional Vietnamese instruments incorporated into Christian worship will encourage Vietnamese churches to use Vietnamese traditions to further God's Kingdom so that the Vietnamese congregation can worship and glorify God in their native language. This idea also affects how Vietnamese descents will discover their cultural roots because most young people either do not know or appreciate their own culture since the diaspora in 1975. Vietnamese music is what brought its people together since they immigrated outside Vietnam. The songs and instrumentation draw the Vietnamese community because they remind them of home. With music, it can be possible for Vietnamese churches to incorporate traditional instruments because it can help its people to come to know God while embracing their cultural roots. As numerous Vietnamese churches are being planted in the US, the main concern is how Vietnamese music can be used in Christian worship. The answer is found in data that was gathered through online interviews, observations, and music research. All of the research materials enlighten ideas and possibilities that traditional Vietnamese instruments can be used in Vietnamese Christian churches, just as they were also used in numerous music performances.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Vietnamese music has undergone many changes throughout history, from the dynastic age to the present. Vietnam's traditions are still alive today, despite the hardships and changes the country has experienced. The Vietnamese diaspora, caused by the rise of communism, resulted in the scattering of numerous Vietnamese families worldwide. Vietnamese music has always been the lifeblood of the homeland because the people either play or listen to its music to celebrate their own culture. Vietnamese traditional music or folk music is "one major branch of Vietnamese music, truly reflecting the typical characteristics of people, culture, customs, geography, etc. of Vietnam, stretching throughout the history of the nation."<sup>1</sup> Over time, Vietnamese music has adapted to current genres or styles, while still celebrating the traditional style of music. Vietnamese music is still being used and appreciated by many Vietnamese people all over the world for many reasons. The research on traditional Vietnamese music started with the people's involvement with the music. Many concerts take place where the Vietnamese people gather to hear singers perform, and these songs powerfully portray the majestic beauty of Vietnam. Vietnamese music is an integral part of Vietnamese cultural identity.

During the dynastic age, Vietnamese music was originally used to entertain the royals. However, music became so widespread that everyone in Vietnam became passionate about it, as their music is an integral part of their lives. Since then, many inhabitants have created numerous musical instruments and genres that express their feelings and emotions regarding history, daily work, and other aspects of life. Music became an outlet for the Vietnamese people, serving as artistic expression and an outlet for stress relief. Many composers have written songs that illustrate the majesty and beauty of Vietnam by combining Vietnamese instrumentation with

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<sup>1</sup> "Vietnamese Traditional Music: Hundred Years of History & Culture," Go Vietnam Tours, last modified November 21, 2019, <https://www.govietnam.tours/vietnamese-traditional-music/>.

poetic lyrics. All of this richness was severely compromised under the communist regime. Two years after the Vietnam War, during which Communists took over the country, most of Vietnamese traditional music and folk music had been lost. Most music was banned, including South Vietnamese music. During that period, the Vietnamese diaspora started, with thousands of people trying to escape. Some of the people, who were not able to escape, were put into prison camps for their resistance to the communist regime. While others escaped to the countryside of Thailand or other bordering countries, most people escaped by boats. During the diaspora, many Vietnamese people were taken to safety by natives from different countries, and because of this, the Vietnamese adapted to a new way of life. The following generations of Vietnamese descent likely do not know much about the Vietnamese culture, either because the parents did not share their experiences or because they continue to adapt to the new culture. In this scenario, it is essential to encourage the new generations of Vietnamese descents to learn traditional Vietnamese music styles and preserve their heritage and culture.

While Vietnamese music continues to adapt to the contemporary style, the traditional style is still used by some who seek to cultivate its heritage, which connects back to their homeland. The traditional style of music consists of Vietnamese instruments that reflect the Vietnamese culture. The purpose of including the traditional style in modern performances is so that the people will remember it, recognize it, and easily distinguish it from the music of other Asian countries. Alan Merriam once proclaimed about the uses and functions of music and how it can create an effect on the environment. Merriam stated, “Music provides a rallying point around which members of society gather to engage in activities which require the cooperation and coordination of the group.”<sup>2</sup> Activities would include traditions that the Vietnamese people

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<sup>2</sup> Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 227.



celebrate as part of the Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese music can be heard almost anywhere in Vietnam, and it can still be heard in Vietnamese restaurants and markets all over the world. Traditional Vietnamese music brings the Vietnamese people together because the melodies and instruments remind them of their homeland.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Most Vietnamese churches in the US use a traditional worship style. English hymns, that were translated into Vietnamese, were commonly used among the Vietnamese churches in the US during the diaspora. In addition, traditional hymns represent the past Vietnamese generations. The problem is that most Vietnamese churches only focus on one type of music style, mostly traditional Western music. The reason behind this is that hymns were the only “access” to worship God since the majority of them were translated into Vietnamese. Most of these Vietnamese churches believe that worship has to be done in a Western style since a majority of American churches do their worship services this way. With contemporary worship becoming mainstream, Vietnamese churches can potentially start to incorporate translations of contemporary worship songs into their services. This incorporation may be able to promote inclusion among younger people of Vietnamese descent. The idea of bringing together traditional and modern worship music can serve as a gathering for people of all ages and create musical variety within worship services. Additionally, incorporating traditional Vietnamese instruments can cultivate its traditions so that people can understand and use them to give praise to God. These traditions can help to guide Vietnamese descents to their cultural roots to discover their cultural identity. Using traditional instruments in Christian churches could also encourage the Vietnamese people to embrace their cultural identity while praising God through worship music. Worship does not have to rely on only one specific style because God highly encourages for all

nations to worship and praise Him, including Vietnam. Vietnamese churches in the US can potentially adapt to both traditional and modern worship styles, while incorporating their traditions to help cultivate their roots.

Music is the cultural universe through which all countries, including Vietnam, cultivate their heritages; the country's beautiful, melodic sounds and songs reflect the beauty of the people's homeland. While this country has its religions and beliefs, the Great Commission from the Scripture makes it clear that Jesus wants His disciples to go and make more disciples from all nations. According to King, one of the purposes to use music for fulfilling the Great Commission is to "foster the communication of the gospel in culturally appropriate ways that reveal Jesus Christ as the Lord of all nations."<sup>3</sup> Vietnam is one of those nations that needs evangelism and worship. In the US, there are Vietnamese churches being planted in different states, but the problem is that their worship services are more westernized than cultural. The other concern is that most of these churches focus only on traditional worship and not on contemporary. Vietnamese music has always been a part of the country's cultural tradition that the natives admire the most because of the instruments, lyrical ballads, and poetic imagery that reflect the beauty of their homeland. The music represents the people's unique cultural identity that others recognize. Vietnamese churches may be able to incorporate their instruments into Christian worship because the instruments can serve as a beacon of hope to the Vietnamese culture, as most people are familiar with the uses and playing styles of these instruments. The traditional instruments help to cultivate the traditions that represent the Vietnamese culture for the Vietnamese people to recognize.

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<sup>3</sup> Roberta R. King, "Musical Bridges in Christian Communication: Lessons for the Church," *Worship and Mission for the Global Church*. ed. James R. Krabill (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2013), 118.

### **Significance of the Study**

Incorporating Vietnamese instrumentation into Christian worship services can serve two different purposes: to worship God and to celebrate the culture of the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese music can be used to help younger generations experience and learn more about their culture because many do not know much about it. From personal experience, Vietnamese music has always been a part of the people's culture, and it is used in many areas of the world to bring Vietnamese communities together. Every Vietnamese market or restaurant plays traditional Vietnamese music, which most Vietnamese people can recognize. Vietnamese music can also help younger generations hear and learn the Vietnamese language. Incorporating Vietnamese music and instruments within contemporary worship services in the US should positively impact the Vietnamese community because it would represent the Vietnamese culture. Another potential use for traditional Vietnamese music in Vietnamese churches is evangelism. Traditional Vietnamese instruments incorporated in Christian worship can encourage Vietnamese non-believers to trust God while embracing the Vietnamese culture altogether. The spiritual needs of the Vietnamese community are to be drawn to attention as the majority of the Vietnamese community practice Buddhism. Using the Vietnamese traditions will help to gather many of the Vietnamese people together, and using these same traditions within Vietnamese churches will facilitate evangelism to its people, for majority of them do not know about God. The thesis will uncover information that will enlighten the need for the incorporation of traditional Vietnamese music into Christian worship for Vietnamese churches in the US. The Vietnamese traditions encourage its people to embrace the culture that they have been given because they provide a cultural identity. This study was guided by two research questions (RQs), which are presented in the next section.

## **Research Questions**

RQ1: How can musicians incorporate traditional Vietnamese music into Christian worship?

Hypothesis: Traditional Vietnamese music can be incorporated into Christian worship successfully through the incorporation of ethnic musical instruments and musical styles into praise bands and choirs.

Traditional Vietnamese music can have a strong effect on the community. The people are quickly drawn into it by the instruments and lyrics, which they can understand, and the music itself draws the people in because they realize that it reflects their culture. The combination of instrumentation and poetic lyrics within Vietnamese music can help reconnect Vietnamese people with their cultural roots, which they were disconnected from when they were forced to flee from their homeland. In this sense, the traditional elements of Vietnamese music can be incorporated into Christian worship, as many Vietnamese people are familiar with their country's music style. Musicians can incorporate traditional Vietnamese music into Christian worship by understanding the styles of traditional Vietnamese music and analyzing how the instruments can be played and what sounds they produce. As Vietnamese music continues to adapt to contemporary styles, it is crucial for the traditional elements to still be used for cultural representation. Many Vietnamese people will use these traditions throughout generations, and many descents will never forget their culture. However, the danger of incorporating musical Vietnamese elements into Christian worship is that most Vietnamese music traditions have ties to Buddhism. Syncretism is the method of inappropriately blending different religions with Christianity, and the danger of syncretism is that it blurs the line between truth and error. As Buddhism worships the god, Buddha, the traditions do not reflect Christianity because they are

against God. Therefore, Vietnamese traditions must be carefully preserved while trying to avoid syncretism. Both Christian worship and traditional cultural elements of Vietnam can serve two purposes: to worship God and to celebrate and preserve the Vietnamese culture. Incorporating Vietnamese traditions with worship music can help communicate the Gospel and encourage the Vietnamese people to participate in worship.

RQ2: What traditional Vietnamese instruments can be more easily incorporated into Christian worship?

Hypothesis: The Vietnamese traditional instruments that can be more easily incorporated into Christian worship are the *đàn bầu* and the *đàn nhị*.

The instruments that Vietnamese musicians use serve many purposes besides temple worship. These instruments have been used in many types of performances. Psalms 150:1-6 exemplifies how different instruments can be used to praise God, including drums, timbres, strings, tambourines, and many more. However, different cultures use their instruments for purposes that conflict with Christianity, including their religious practices. Using such instruments in Christian worship could cause significant confusion about which religion the instruments are being used for. This idea could also cause religious syncretism, which is the practice of blending different beliefs or religious practices. Choosing cultural instruments should serve the dual purpose of worshipping God and celebrating the culture to which the instruments are connected. In Vietnamese churches, the *đàn bầu* is an example of one of these instruments used for Christian worship. The *đàn bầu* is a Vietnamese monochord; as the name suggests, it is a one-string instrument. The sound that the *đàn bầu* produces generates a sense of culture that many Vietnamese people would recognize immediately. The *đàn bầu* is commonly used for folk music, but in current generations, it has been used within a variety of music genres. In this sense,

the *đàn bầu* can be used for Christian worship in Vietnamese churches because the congregation would not only recognize the sound but also be encouraged to worship God in their native language and embrace their cultural roots. Another instrument that can be used potentially in Vietnamese churches is the *đàn nhị*. The *đàn nhị* is the erhu, which is a Chinese violin that is most popular in Southeast Asian countries. The sounds that the *đàn nhị* produces represents the Asian culture. While the *đàn nhị* can be used in Vietnamese churches, the *đàn bầu* is more suitable than the *đàn nhị* because the *đàn bầu* is more recognizable as a Vietnamese instrument, since the *đàn nhị* is used in other Asian countries. Other Vietnamese instruments can be used for Christian worship, and the *đàn bầu* is one of those instruments that is acceptable in the Christian church. Traditional Vietnamese instruments have been preserved for many generations as they provide a cultural identity for the Vietnamese people. For the Vietnamese community, having traditional instruments as part of Christian worship can help the people worship God and cultivate, celebrate, and appreciate Vietnamese traditions. God desires for all nations to worship together, and worship can be culturally expressive if it does not in conflict with Scripture.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the idea of incorporating Vietnamese music into Christian worship. Traditional Vietnamese music has transcended history because it has adapted to contemporary-style performances, while maintaining traditional Vietnamese elements. In this sense, it is possible that some Vietnamese musical instruments and music styles can be incorporated into modern Christian worship. While the Vietnamese people can worship God through song and music, they can also celebrate the culture that they grew up in and share it with their descendants.

The desire derived from this project is to help the current Vietnamese generation to stay true to their culture and explore how traditional Vietnamese music can be incorporated into Christian worship. Vietnamese music has attracted many Vietnamese people living in the US because the beautiful Vietnamese melody that represents the Vietnamese culture helps to reconnect the people with their homeland. While Vietnamese music helps to bring its people together, it can be applied in Christian churches as well. Buddhism is the predominant religion in Vietnam. Christianity represents only a small percentage of religions in Vietnam. Some Vietnamese pastors incorporate traditional Vietnamese music into worship songs in this situation. While worship music can help to evangelize, Vietnamese musical elements can be used to represent Vietnamese culture. While it is vital to spread the Gospel, it is also important for the Vietnamese people to remember the roots, which are tied to their identity. Within the Vietnamese culture, it is important to help younger generations connect with their cultural roots because most of them lack knowledge about their own culture and about who they are. From personal experience, there are many Vietnamese descendants, including young Christians, who do not know much about their own culture due to the diaspora. The other problem that Vietnamese churches in the US are facing is the lack of cultural elements in Christian worship; the reason why this is an issue is that most of these churches have westernized worship elements. The main concern is how to approach this idea without discriminating against Vietnamese culture and religion. This current project will help bring understanding to Vietnamese music, the reason for its importance, and the steps for incorporating it into Christian worship. As there will be many Vietnamese descendants for generations to come, it is crucial to help them understand both the benefits of following their cultural roots and incorporating traditional Vietnamese music into Christian worship for their people to praise God in the Vietnamese language.

### Definition of Terms

*Ca Trù*- North Vietnamese music that was performed by a female vocalist, along with lute player and a spectator, who is a connoisseur of Vietnamese folk art; it was performed for royalties during the dynastic age

*Chèo*- Central Vietnam's theatrical music that tells stories and legends that was portrayed by a hero, heroine, and a clown for comic relief

*Cải lương*- South Vietnamese opera that tells stories of either love or grief with an a cappella section in the middle of the performance

*Đàn bầu*- a Vietnamese monochord that is comprised with a guitar wire attached to a pitch rod and connected to the other end of the soundboard

*Đàn đờn*, a moon-shaped lute that is short-necked, which is a different type of banjo

*Đàn kìm*- a Vietnamese two-string banjo

*Đàn sến*, a Chinese lute that is primarily used for traditional music of South Vietnam

*Đàn tranh*, a Chinese zither that has a long soundbox with steel strings, movable bridges, and tuning pegs

*Đàn nhị*- an erhu, and another name for it would be *đàn cò*

*Nhạc vàng*- "golden age of Vietnamese music" that represents South Vietnam with traditional instrumentation with Latin rhythm, such as bolero; this music was used during the Vietnam War to oppose the Communist regime

*Quan Hô*- another traditional music form from North Vietnam that was used for entertainment in the royal courts



*Tân nhạc*- “new music” of Vietnam that refers to contemporary songs that were written in variety of styles, along with popular cultural songs that were translated to the Vietnamese language

*Trống châu*- a praise drum that is normally used in music performances in North Vietnam.

*T’rung*- a xylophone from the Central Highlands that is entirely made of bamboo tubes that were gathered by farmers

Syncretism- the method of inappropriately blending Christianity with different religions or beliefs

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

On the topic of Vietnamese music, much research exists that can help bring understanding and appreciation to Vietnamese culture. Many authors have found resources on traditional Vietnamese music by documenting the Vietnamese culture and interviewing different Vietnamese musicians who have significant experiences with its traditional forms. Many musicians have made their contributions to the Vietnamese community by composing songs that are very popular today, and these musicians have been invited to numerous musical variety shows as special guests. Many singers from these shows have sung their compositions for the audience to allow them to experience both traditional and modern Vietnamese music. Because traditional Vietnamese music is influential, it can be used as part of Christian worship in Vietnamese churches. Traditional Vietnamese music adapts to current styles of music while still keeping the traditional elements as part of the style; the instruments used in Christian worship can help to draw in the Vietnamese people as they are familiar with the style and instrumentation of Vietnamese music.

### **History of Traditional Vietnamese Music**

Traditional Vietnamese music goes back to the eleventh to twelfth centuries, and those were the first periods of Vietnamese dynasties. The first dynasty that reigned over Vietnam was the Đinh Dynasty. The country of Vietnam was influenced by India and China.<sup>4</sup> According to Deschênes, this influence was shown at the “base of the Van Phúc Pagoda, in the village of Phât Tich, in the province of Bac Ninh, which was built in the 10th century.”<sup>5</sup> No one really knows how the ancient Vietnamese people used or played music during the early ages, but historians

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<sup>4</sup> Bruno Deschênes, “The Music of Vietnam,” All Music Guide, 2001, accessed March 2, 2022, [http://www.musis.ca/matsu\\_take\\_eng/8\\_AMG\\_Vietnam.html](http://www.musis.ca/matsu_take_eng/8_AMG_Vietnam.html).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

may have a clue as to how the ancient Vietnamese people played music by examining the frescos that were painted either from or based on the ancient past. An example is how musicians would sit in a similar manner to Indian musicians while wearing Chinese gaiter. Later on, Vietnam began producing its cultural gowns and dresses that were worn on special occasions. These Vietnamese dresses are known as *áo dài*. The second period of Vietnamese influence came from China during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. In the middle of the fifteenth century, the first order of business by King Lý Thái Tông was to establish music of the Court, eventually known as court music. Vietnamese court music was used for performance in the palaces of many Vietnamese royal kingdoms. According to Holidify, the songs were “mainly about wishing the king and his kingdom longevity and prosperity.”<sup>6</sup> While Vietnam no longer has kingdoms, traditional music continues influence the country, preserving its cultural roots. Many early composers wrote music to portray their country’s beauty, but these composers were unable to continue to write music once the war took place in 1955 because music was banned by the Communists. After the war, the Communists invaded Vietnam, and its people were desperate to escape the communist rule. The Communists still banned Vietnamese music, especially music that was against the communist regime, which most songs have lyrics that communicated the opposition to the regime and support for South Vietnam; however, Vietnamese music was accessed in different countries through cassettes and vinyl records. Many composers fled Vietnam, and in response to their experiences and hardships, they wrote songs that talked about the war and its aftermath so that the Vietnamese people and their descendants would not forget what took place. Eventually, traditional Vietnamese music became legal in Vietnam once again. Vietnamese music has continued to make its impact on Vietnamese people of all generations all

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<sup>6</sup> Rutvi Saxena, “Vietnamese Culture Demystified!” Holidify, accessed May 5, 2022, <https://www.holidify.com/pages/vietnamese-culture-1318.html>.

over the world, often through musical variety shows, as a means for people to celebrate their culture. As traditional Vietnamese music continues to be influenced by modern-day music, its traditional elements will likely remain as a way for people to enjoy and celebrate their culture and to remember where they came from.

### Vietnamese Diaspora

In 1955, the conflict between North Vietnam and South Vietnam sparked the Vietnam War. North Vietnam was supported by Communist countries of the Soviet Union and China, while South Vietnam was supported by the American military forces. The cause of the Vietnam War can be traced back to 1954, when the French colonial rule in Vietnam came to an end. The country was divided into two parts, with North Vietnam being ruled by Communist leader Ho Chi Minh and South Vietnam that was supported by America and led by Ngô Đình Diệm, president of the Republic of Vietnam. American troops were sent to Vietnam in 1965 to support the South Vietnamese army, which escalated into a full-scale war. During the war, the South Vietnamese army would have songs that support the cause. The South Vietnamese music that was used during the war was called *nhạc vàng*. *Nhạc vàng* means “golden, or yellow, music”. The color refers to the original flag of South Vietnam, which is yellow with three red stripes; the three red stripes symbolize the three main regions of Vietnam: north, central, and south. *Nhạc vàng* music was used as propaganda against Communist forces because the songs portray the love and beauty of Vietnam that the Vietnamese people admire so much. Music was heard everywhere in Vietnam, and they reached out to soldiers in numerous forms that include the following: albums, cassettes, and tapes of radio shows. Music was used heavily as a weapon against the Communist forces as most songs contained themes that spoke out against the war and support the freedom that was being fought for by the South Vietnamese, and American

musicians, like the legendary Bob Dylan, would have songs that spoke out against the war. The US would have music in the war to stop the spread of Communism in Vietnam. Despite their efforts, the communist forces of North Vietnam were victorious in the war; North Vietnam was able to maintain a robust insurgency in the countryside by gradually gaining control of more and more Vietnamese territory. The American military forces were forced to withdraw from the war and return to the US. In 1975, North Vietnamese forces launched a major offensive against Saigon, the main city of South Vietnam, which is known as “The Fall of Saigon”. During the event, the North Vietnamese communists took over South Vietnam, and they banned all traditional Vietnamese music. The main city of South Vietnam, Saigon, was renamed into Ho Chi Minh City, after the Communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, himself. All of the traditional Vietnamese music, including *nhạc vàng*, was banned because the songs that were written opposed against the communist regime. All citizens of South Vietnam were desperate to escape from the communist rule. As the majority of the Vietnamese people escaped Vietnam, they suffered much pain and sadness as their homeland and traditional Vietnamese music were taken away from them. The country of Vietnam was completely fallen under Communist rule. The Fall of Saigon was a historical event that ended the freedom of Vietnam, and the event served as a reminder of the high human cost of war and the importance of diplomacy and conflict resolution to achieve peace in Vietnam.

### Diasporic Aftermath

After the Vietnamese population escaped Vietnam, they settled in different countries, with majority of them being in America. Back in Vietnam, traditional Vietnamese music was still banned due to the Communist takeover and fear that the songs would contain content that were against the regime. The people were allowed to only listen to music that was sponsored by the

Communist regime. Most of the Vietnamese people missed listening to their traditional music because those songs were about love. The Vietnamese Communist music was not as popular as traditional Vietnamese music used to be because it did not have the love that the Vietnamese people enjoyed listening to. Vietnamese immigrants, along with other people back in Vietnam, would secretly listen to most traditional Vietnamese songs because of the strong theme of love; that love varies, from personal love stories to love for the homeland. Because majority of the Vietnamese people love to listen to traditional Vietnamese music in Vietnam, the ban of traditional Vietnamese music was eventually lifted. While traditional Vietnamese music can be used again in Vietnam, “golden music” is still prohibited as it was used against the Communist regime; however, many of the Vietnamese people would still listen to them in secret. The majority of Vietnamese immigrants who came to America lived in California, and there was a community area where a variety of Vietnamese restaurants, malls, and stores were found there called “Little Saigon”. Traditional Vietnamese music can be heard everywhere in that area. According to Nguyễn Thanh Thuy, refugees from Vietnam brought “this music with them and created successful overseas Vietnamese music industries, first in France, and in the US.”<sup>7</sup> Driven by the desire to reconnect Vietnamese cultural roots, there are numerous music variety shows that were organized in the US. Most of these shows originated in California since most Vietnamese musicians also lived there. There was also a Vietnamese variety show that started in France because of the Vietnamese population in the area, but eventually, it was settled in California as well due to the Vietnamese population in the state. Eventually, Vietnamese music has also reached communities of Vietnamese immigrants all around the world. These shows would promote Vietnamese music, dance, and comedy. While these shows would adapt various

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<sup>7</sup> Nguyễn Thanh Thuy, “Vietnamese Diasporic Voices: Exploring Yellow Music in a Liminal Space,” last modified September 24, 2023, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1513023/1513024>.

styles of modern music, they would also promote traditional Vietnamese music as it was greatly loved by the Vietnamese people worldwide. The dance performances of these shows would have technique and precision that best illustrates the content and meaning of songs. These shows also include dances for modern Vietnamese music; unlike traditional performances, these dance routines would combine traditional elements with other contemporary styles of movement to create choreography that helps express the meaning behind Vietnamese songs. These dance routines were very much loved by Vietnamese audiences of today as they help to see a clear picture of what the songs portray, especially for those who do not understand the Vietnamese language. These shows would also include *nhạc vàng* as part of the program as these shows support South Vietnam before the country's reunification. On occasions, they would provide a short skit that tells the story of Vietnam before and after the war, which includes a variety of songs that use poetic imagery and choreography to illustrate the history of the diaspora. The audiences would be heavily emotional watching the skits as they were reminded of the hardships that they faced while escaping Vietnam, but when listening to other traditional Vietnamese songs that were not about the war, they would be overjoyed as those songs helped them to reminisce the beauty of Vietnam and guide the younger audience to their cultural roots. Many famous composers have attended such shows as either audience members or special guests within the show. If these composers were to make a special appearance, their songs are often implemented as part of the show, and interview sessions are also included to talk with these composers and to honor their musical contributions. This allows the audience to learn about the composers' personal lives, the ideas behind their songs, and more. These musical programs continue to be part of the Vietnamese culture, helping preserve the country's history and traditions. In today's generation, Vietnamese music constantly changes by following the current trends that other

cultural music has used; examples would include Vietnamese rock, pop, hip-hop, and rap. American musicians would even collaborate with Vietnamese musicians in Vietnamese music videos. Some Vietnamese artists have become well-known and famous both in the Vietnamese and American music industries. One of the artists was named Teresa Mai, who was a famous classical and opera singer. She recently made history as she became the first Vietnamese American to win a Grammy award for her astounding classical music. In the modern age, traditional Vietnamese music was still being used throughout the world as many of the Vietnamese people continue to listen and attend numerous music shows that showcase music. Vietnamese music was still as part of celebrating the Vietnamese culture. Numerous Vietnamese homes all over the world would have Vietnamese music in local gatherings to have fun and remember the history and beauty of Vietnam as many people would continue to sing traditional Vietnamese songs. As time passes, Vietnamese music will continue to be preserved in different formats, from CDs to live music variety shows. Diasporic music will also continue to live on as many Vietnamese people hoped that Vietnam will be a free from Communism one day.

### **Traditional Vietnamese Music**

Vietnamese music has connected Vietnamese people from different countries together. Vietnamese music has made a cultural impact since the diaspora, but their music was also influenced by different genres that have made it what it is. Mostly, China influenced Vietnamese music, as some instruments from China and Vietnam are similar to each other with different names; however, Vietnam has numerous instruments that were constructed in the country's homeland. These instruments were handcrafted by farmers who had many materials from their farm, and those instruments were used for many purposes. After the Fall of Saigon, the Vietnamese community experienced culture shock from relocating to different countries. Most



people, especially the younger generation, had lost their connection to their Vietnamese homeland and culture. While most Vietnamese music has been adapted to its contemporary form, traditional Vietnamese music is still being used today. Many shows and events showcase Vietnamese music, which the Vietnamese community from all over the world have access to. There are also numerous dance performances that best illustrate the beauty of Vietnam that would go well with traditional Vietnamese music. These dances would even have props that are beautifully crafted in Vietnam; the props include fans, bamboo hats, ribbons, and many more. Many Vietnamese people have attended these performances to enjoy Vietnamese music and to celebrate their own culture.

### Organology

Vietnam has a variety of instruments that help to enrich its culture; however, some of the instruments have been shared by other Asian countries. One of those instruments is the *đàn sến*, which is a Chinese lute, and another instrument that is shared with China is the *đàn nhị*, which is an erhu. Most Asian music has similarities because of the instruments shared among other Asian countries, but each country has its own unique instrument, allowing the music to be differentiated. One of Vietnam's unique instruments is the *T'rung*. This instrument originated from the Central Highlands of Vietnam, and it comes in different sizes. According to Tran, the creation of this special folk musical instrument is “a hymn of labor and spirit of the Vietnamese ethnic groups for living and developing.”<sup>8</sup> In the Central Highlands, a variety of fields can produce a harvest, and most farmers worked arduously to take care of their crops. Some farmers have injured their backs due to heavy lifting and other hard work. The instrument was constructed to be played after work and during evening gatherings while the natives would sing

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<sup>8</sup> Rachel Tran, “T'rung Musical Instrument,” Vietnam Discovery, December 25, 2019, <https://vietnamdiscovery.com/culture-arts/trung-traditional-folk-musical-instrument/>.

and dance around bonfires. The *T'rung* has brought joy and life to the people from the Central Highlands because of the beautiful sounds it makes that they consider them to be positive, and those sounds reflect the Vietnamese spirit that people from around the world would admire. Eventually, the *T'rung* became widespread through Vietnam, and it has since been used on multiple occasions. Those occasions would include gatherings, such as weddings or festivals. Over time, the *T'rung* has been greatly improved, as more bamboo tubes have been added to it to provide wider sound ranges. The *T'rung* has a total of forty-eight tubes, which are arranged “in three arrays capable of performing intricate piece of modern music while preserving the traditional sound scale.”<sup>9</sup> While the *T'rung* is very unique in Vietnam, another instrument is said to symbolize the Vietnam culture even more. The *đàn bầu* is a Vietnamese monochord, and it is the most popular instrument in Vietnam. The *đàn bầu* uses the pentatonic scale, which is a five-note scale, but it can produce a variety of pitches by bending the pitch rod. In the past, the music of the *đàn bầu* was not able to be amplified, but in today’s generation, the *đàn bầu* has been modified so that it can be plugged into speakers for volume increase. Of all the traditional Vietnamese instruments, the *đàn bầu* is the most popular in Vietnam. To Tuan stated that the *đàn bầu* produces “seductive sounds which represents [sic] the Vietnamese soul and feelings” and “is considered a special witness of Vietnam’s history and culture.”<sup>10</sup> The sounds from the *đàn bầu* is beautiful beyond words that best illustrates the Vietnamese culture. These Vietnamese instruments were mostly used for traditional performances, such as court music, *cải lương*, Vietnamese dance theatre, and many more. Since the Fall of Saigon, these instruments have been

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<sup>9</sup> “T'rung,” Vietnam Culture, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://www.vietnam-culture.com/articles-65-11/Trung-The-traditional-folk-musical-instrument.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> To Tuan, “Dan Bau (monochord) Embodies Vietnamese Culture,” The Voice of Vietnam – VoV World, November 11, 2016, <https://vovworld.vn/en-US/culture/dan-bau-monochord-embodies-vietnamese-culture-486474.vov>.

used in contemporary musical and worship performances in some churches. Modern-day musicians have used these instruments in their performances to preserve the Vietnamese culture and keep it more distinguishable from music of other Asian countries. The instruments discussed in this section are only a few that Vietnam has to offer, and they are still used in both traditional and contemporary performances. These instruments serve as part of the cultural identity of Vietnam, so incorporating the country's traditional musical elements into contemporary musical performances is important.

### Musical Forms

Music is the lifeblood of Vietnam because of how much it is admired by the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese music has had a variety of uses in the past and still does to this day. In the fifteenth century, Vietnamese music was first introduced as court music. The king demanded to have music in his court for entertainment. Centuries later, Vietnamese music has become widespread beyond Vietnam. Most of the songs that were written by early Vietnamese composers are about the beauty of Vietnam. These early composers wrote their music to reflect the joy and magnificence of Vietnamese culture. These songs were mostly written using poetic imagery that captures the essence of the Vietnamese beauty and captivates listeners. Since the Fall of Saigon, many younger Vietnamese people have lost touch with their roots because they live in different countries. Vietnamese music has continued to have its influence so that these young people will not forget where they came from. Some Vietnamese communities have hosted numerous events where Vietnamese people and others gather to experience the Vietnamese culture. These events often would include music concerts and celebrating Lunar New Year. The people of the Vietnamese community also gather within their homes to socialize and to sing Vietnamese songs, which gives them joy and reminds them of their homeland. According to

Cannon, music production “allows Vietnamese in Vietnam and overseas to bridge related gaps.”<sup>11</sup> “Related gaps” refers to factors about age, experience, and memories of Vietnamese music. Additionally, some Vietnamese musical variety shows not only promote Vietnamese music but also entertain and cultivate Vietnamese roots so the culture will remain for future generations. According to Simon, the Vietnamese culture is rich and diverse.<sup>12</sup> The Northern and Southern regions of Vietnam have different singing styles of music. The Northern regions has a variety of singing styles that were mainly used for court music early on, and those styles would include *Quan Họ* and *Ca Trù*. *Ca Trù* is a type of traditional Vietnamese folk art that involves three performers: a female vocalist, a lute player, and a spectator. The spectator is a connoisseur of Vietnamese folk art, whose role is in playing the *trống chầu*, a praise drum. The *trống chầu* is to be used only for praise or disapproval of the singer’s performance. This traditional form of Vietnamese music was most popular in North Vietnam before its influences spread beyond the country’s borders. In the Central Highlands, *Chèo* singing is Vietnam’s signature music style. According to Tran, stories of “legends, poetry, history or even daily life are the most important.”<sup>13</sup> Tran also stated that these stories are performed as “folk songs with pantomime, instrumental music and dances, combined with instructive or interpretative sketches.”<sup>14</sup> Almost similar to Cirque du Soleil, *Chèo* uses characters in these stories such as a hero, a heroine, and a clown. These stories can be either romantic or tragic, and the clown is often portrayed as the comic relief, telling the story from its own narrative perspective in a satirical way that audiences

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander M. Cannon, “Virtually Audible in Diaspora: The Transnational Negotiation of Vietnamese Traditional Music,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 3 (2012), 124.

<sup>12</sup> Simon Touprong, interviewed by Elijah Chau, Raleigh, NC, February 21, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Rachel Tran, “Cheo Singing – A Popular Traditional Music Performance in Vietnam,” Vietnam Discovery, February 3, 2020, <https://vietnamdiscovery.com/culture-arts/cheo-singing/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

would find amusing. Within Central Vietnam, the main city of Hue is very well-known for its court music. The setting for music performances in Central Vietnam would always feature a traditional kingdom or palace because it best illustrates the historical feeling since court music was only used for the Vietnamese king and queen of Hue during the dynastic age. Along with traditional music, dance performances are also a part of Central Vietnam. These dance performances would have props that include fans and bamboo hats, but the lotus flower is the most unique prop in Central Vietnam. The lotus flower dance normally symbolizes the birth of Buddha because the dance itself is a Buddhist tradition, but it can also symbolize beauty because the flower dance mimics the opening of the lotus flower as a metaphor that beauty can be found from within. These dance performances would have elaborate and colorful costumes that fits with the dance theme, and the dance routines are performed for special occasions, that includes, Lunar New Year. Finally, South Vietnam uses *cải lương* as its main music style. *Cải lương* is a form of opera that tells a story of either love or grief, but it would always have a happy ending. *Cải lương* reveals its unique functions and characteristics of melodramatic mode by negotiating between competing imaginaries and sensory perceptions of the nation.<sup>15</sup> *Cải lương* has been preserved for the older Vietnamese generation to remember and enjoy. What makes *cải lương* unique is that the actor sings his verse a cappella, and he finishes with a long musical note on the last word of the verse. As the music plays and moves the story forward, the audience applauds for the actor's strong singing ability. Another factor that makes *cải lương* unique among other styles of music is that it was not influenced by any other cultural; this makes *cải lương* a cultural staple of South Vietnam. Because *cải lương* has become very popular since its revival after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, its performance styles have been modified. According to Simon, *cải*

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<sup>15</sup> Khai Thu Nguyen, "A Personal Sorrow: Cai Luong and the Politics of North and South Vietnam," *Asian Theatre Journal* 29, iss. 1: 256.

*lương* has been influenced by Western music so that its performance style is somewhat similar to the Broadway style, though it has still maintained its traditional Vietnamese uniqueness.<sup>16</sup> *Cải lương* is the most popular form of Vietnamese music that is still being used today. The Vietnamese audience enjoys the combination of music and poetry that makes *cải lương* loved throughout the world. This form of Vietnamese music can be heard mostly in musical variety shows that promote Vietnamese music and culture today. Just as *cải lương* is very popular, *nhạc vàng* is also a popular Vietnamese music form since most music variety shows would have it. During the war, *nhạc vàng* was heavily used by the South Vietnamese. The history of *nhạc vàng* is connected to the impact of colonization. As a result of the hybrid culture in colonial Vietnam, popular songs “with influence from Western music emerged in the late 19th century.”<sup>17</sup> *Nhạc vàng* would mostly have songs written in a Latin rhythmic style called bolero. Traditional Vietnamese instrument would be used very often for this type of music. Bolero is very popular in traditional Vietnamese music because the rhythm is simple yet upbeat, making the songs easy for the Vietnamese people to follow. The upbeat rhythmic combined with Vietnamese lyrical poetry are what makes *nhạc vàng* greatly loved among Vietnamese communities all over the world. Even after the Fall of Saigon, it would still be used in the US; however, this music is still banned in Vietnam because of the propaganda against the Communist government. Outside of Vietnam, the Vietnamese people enjoyed singing *nhạc vàng* in local gatherings as most songs remind them of their homeland. The lyrics of *nhạc vàng* were poetically beautiful, and it captivated many Vietnamese people all over the world in today’s generation as well. The popularity of *nhạc vàng* is said to be a wish to preserve a culture that was shattered during the Fall of Saigon. While *nhạc*

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<sup>16</sup> Simon Touprong, interviewed by Elijah Chau, Raleigh, NC, February 21, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyễn Thanh Thuy, “Vietnamese Diasporic Voices: Exploring Yellow Music in a Liminal Space,” last modified September 24, 2023, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1513023/1513024>.

*vàng* is secretly being used in Vietnam, Vietnamese people all over the world enjoy listening to this music freely. In 1928, *tân nhạc* became part of the music trend in Vietnam as composers wrote music based on Western or other worldly styles of music. According to Henry, *tân nhạc* is widely accessible “in live performances, CDs, audiotapes, videos, and printed scores.”<sup>18</sup> Similar to *cải lương* and *nhạc vàng*, it was later banned around the Vietnam War as it contained songs that were against the communist regime; however, people continued to cultivate new Vietnamese music in a private setting until it became completely legal again. It is said that *tân nhạc* consists “almost entirely of vocal music organized in the form of single, titled songs, or in the case of a few composers, as cycles of songs on particular themes.”<sup>19</sup> The creative process behind *tân nhạc* usually consists of four people: the tune composer, the lyricist, the arranger, and the singer. Most composers are also poets, and they wrote songs using poetic imagery to capture the beauty of Vietnam in their melodies. The most common theme behind *tân nhạc* is love, and composers wrote numerous songs that either portray the love of Vietnam or the sadness behind losing the things or people that they love. While Vietnamese music is unique on its own, it would be collaborated with other cultural music. An example would be Vietnamese Japanese music, where there would be a geisha, a professional Japanese entertainer, who would perform Vietnamese music with traditional Japanese dance and arts. The geisha would usually be a part of *ca trù* performances as the main female vocalist. In today’s generation, Korean music would be very popular that would even reach Vietnam. Because many Korean musicians would visit Vietnam, they would collaborate with Vietnamese musicians either to write songs with both cultural elements and to perform music together. There would be a mix of different people, along with

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<sup>18</sup> Eric Henry, “Tân Nhạc: Notes Toward a Social History of Vietnamese Music in the Twentieth Century,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 44, iss. 1 (2005), 135.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

the Vietnamese audience, that would come together to enjoy listening to their music being performed together. American musicians had also collaborated with Vietnamese musicians, even before the diaspora. Bob Dylan is a prime example as most of his songs had messages about anti-war movement, including his famous song, “Masters of War”. Vietnamese music has been collaborated by many different artists from different countries. Although court music is not as widely used as it was in the past, it is still being used in Vietnam to help preserve the country’s history and traditions outside of Vietnam, but most styles were uniquely influenced by the Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese music also is being influenced by other cultural music that traveled to Vietnam. The different styles of Vietnamese music illustrate the variety of elements that makes up its culture, and each one of them represents the three regions of Vietnam uniquely.

### Musical Context

By reading about the different Vietnamese musical artists, readers can better understand how these artists wrote their songs and how the songs were inspired by Vietnamese traditions. One such artist Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo. Vĩnh Bảo started taking music lessons in Vietnam when he was five years old, and his first instrument was the *đàn đoản*. Later, Vĩnh Bảo studied additional instruments, including the piano, guitar, violin, *đàn bầu*, and many others. Cannon stated that in 1927, his parents sent him “to study at a private institute in Saigon.”<sup>20</sup> At some point, Vĩnh Bảo taught himself to speak French, in which he proclaimed that he could express himself more articulately. Outside of music, Vĩnh Bảo studied Japanese during World War II and worked as an interpreter for Vietnamese merchants, who were selling goods to Japanese officials. After World War II, Vĩnh Bảo went back to the music field to hone his musical skills; since then, he developed a reputation as a skilled musician of traditional music. Outside of Vietnam, Vĩnh Bảo

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander M. Cannon, “Virtually Audible in Diaspora: The Transnational Negotiation of Vietnamese Traditional Music,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 3 (2012), 128.



was given opportunities to perform music in Singapore in 1963 and in Tokyo in 1969. Shortly after, Vĩnh Bảo traveled to America where he was served as a visiting professor of music at the Center for Vietnamese Studies at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. During his time at the university, he participated in research programs and taught himself how to play the *đàn tranh* and *đàn kìm*. Eventually, Vĩnh Bảo returned to Vietnam to continue teaching his private music class. After the Fall of Saigon, Vĩnh Bảo has performed his music only a few times and made few recordings. Because of the changes after the Fall of Saigon in Vietnam, he decided to not make a public appearance for a time; however, he eventually returned to his music career. In the 1990s, Vĩnh Bảo was able to teach more students, including those from Hà Nội, which is in North Vietnam. Years later, he earned recognition for his contribution to the field music. According to Cannon, the ability of Vietnamese living abroad “to travel to Vietnam to study in person enabled him to build a base of students.”<sup>21</sup> After the Vietnamese diaspora, many Vietnamese students from different countries returned to Vietnam to learn music from Vĩnh Bảo. Vĩnh Bảo was able to teach more students from the United States, France, and the Netherlands, and as the result, his students gave him a computer to better facilitate his teaching process. To further promote his music, his students organized a group called the Vĩnh Bảo Group, and they went even further by launching a website to promote his music school. Through their website, these students also sold his teaching materials, which included books that he wrote himself and compact discs. Thanks to his students, Vĩnh Bảo received many requests from people who wanted to learn Vietnamese music. Vĩnh Bảo was able to teach both in-person and virtually through telephone, email, video chat, and forum discussions. Cannon stated that Vĩnh Bảo has

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 131.

developed “a large network of disciples and admirers around the world.”<sup>22</sup> Vĩnh Bảo became a central diasporic figure in the Vietnamese music field through his interactions with his students and admirers. After working in music for years, Vĩnh Bảo passed away on January 7, 2021, at the age of 103. Even though Vĩnh Bảo passed on, the Vietnamese community will always remember him for his musical contributions.

Another famous Vietnamese composer who was well-known for his contribution to Vietnamese music was Phạm Duy. According to Schafer, Phạm Duy composed some of the first modern Vietnamese songs in the late 1930s and 1940s.”<sup>23</sup> During those early times, Phạm Duy was intrigued with *tân nhạc* because most *tân nhạc* songs were from foreign countries that were translated to Vietnamese words. Before the rise of new music, Vietnamese singers had the desire to sing modern French and American melodies in their native language, and Phạm Duy played “a significant role in popularizing this new style of music, particularly in South Vietnam.”<sup>24</sup> Phạm Duy met the love of his life, Thái Hằng, who was a singer and daughter of another famous composer, Phạm Đình Chương, and the two of them raised eight children. During the Fall of Saigon, Phạm Duy and his family fled to America where he stayed for thirty years; however, Phạm Duy returned to Vietnam in 2005 because he missed his homeland. While living in the US, Phạm Duy and his family started a music group called, The Dreamers, and they traveled all over the world to promote Duy’s songs and Vietnamese music in general for the community. Since then, Phạm Duy continued to make his contributions to music until his passing. Duy’s children have followed in his footsteps in promoting Vietnamese music by participated in music-variety

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>23</sup> John C. Schafer, “The Curious Memoirs of the Vietnamese Composer Phạm Duy,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2012), 77.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 79.

shows that showcase the Vietnamese culture. Phạm Duy wrote many popular songs including the following: “*Tình Hoài Hương*” (Nostalgic Love), “*Ngày Đó Chúng Mình*” (On That Day, the Two of Us), “*Nghìn Trùng Xa Cách*” (A Thousand Leagues Apart), “*Thà Như Giọt Mưa*” (Better Like a Raindrop), and many more, and most of them include the theme of love. These songs are moving “with beautiful melodies and lyrics and seem well-designed to survive the test of time.”<sup>25</sup> Aside from his own music, Phạm Duy translated songs into Vietnamese that were popular outside of Vietnam so that the Vietnamese people could understand them, which is why he is very well-known in the Vietnamese community. Phạm Duy was considered to be the “patriarch” of a musical dynasty, and Vietnamese singers continued to perform his music as a tribute to his successful work.

These are only a couple Vietnamese musicians who have impacted the community through their work. Both Vĩnh Bảo and Phạm Duy made a difference so that younger Vietnamese generations could both discover and experience their culture through music. Some of these younger people have been inspired to become musicians through Vĩnh Bảo and Phạm Duy’s music as well. Vĩnh Bảo and Phạm Duy’s songs continue to be played, as their music still inspires the Vietnamese community. Learning about Vietnamese musicians brings to light the inspiration behind their compositions and how their music has impacted the Vietnamese community all over the world.

### **Vietnamese Christian Worship**

God created humans, and He also created them to be unique. Jesus loves all His children, regardless of skin color or ethnicity. The practice of worship can take place in various ways, as different cultures have their own ways of praising God through music. Van Opstal stated that the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 109.

exploration of “music, worship, and culture is the discipline of ethnodoxology.”<sup>26</sup>

Ethnodoxology focuses on the ways people would worship God in different cultures. The main concern is that Vietnamese churches are strictly religious in their practices. The churches believed that worship has to be serious with no joyful singing most of the time and that they only need to sing hymns. There are only a few churches that were able to adapt to modern styles of music while keeping the traditional form of the service. Throughout the research, I experienced worship in that church. During the services, the congregation sang mostly Vietnamese hymns that were well-known in Vietnam, but the congregation also sang Western/American worship songs in both English and Vietnamese. After the pastor finished his sermon each week, the church would recite the Lord’s Prayer in Vietnamese, and then they sang “Hallelujah, Thine the Glory” to conclude the service. During the services, I noticed how Vietnamese music can be influential in spreading the Gospel within the community. Vietnamese music can be used not only for entertainment, but for worship, and because of that, worship songs have been translated into the country’s native language to give Vietnamese churches access to those songs. It is possible for the Vietnamese community to come together to worship God using both Vietnamese instruments and the Vietnamese language, just as God desires for all nations to come together to worship Him. Worship services do not have to keep only traditional forms as music continues to change. The whole idea about inputting traditional and modern styles of music together in worship services is to bring all people together in a congregation, from children to seniors. King pointed out that Christian ethnomusicology requires “careful, theological grounding in the

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<sup>26</sup> Sandra Maria Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Groves, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 33.

Scripture.”<sup>27</sup> While worship can be done in different ways, the content from the Scripture remains constant as it reflects why He desires worship from His people. The question that all churches should consider is this: What is the purpose of church leadership? Missiologist James Pleudemann stated that “the ultimate purpose of the leadership is to bring people into full relationship with their Creator. We are created to know, love, and glorify God.”<sup>28</sup> Because the Vietnamese community is drawn to music, incorporating Vietnamese instruments in worship can help both to spread both the gospel and to celebrate cultural traditions that the Vietnamese people recognize. Vietnamese instruments were created to represent the Vietnamese culture through music. Paul Cao, pastor of Vietnamese Baptist Church, said, “Oftentimes, we can forget about the treasure trove that is God’s Word, and so, I wanted these Vietnamese believers to be amazed at the beauty and simplicity of reading the Bible and responding in faith.”<sup>29</sup> While the quality of worship does not have to be extravagant, worship should focus on engaging the Vietnamese people to use their voices to praise God in the Vietnamese language. Greg Scheer stated, “The goal is not to have cutting-edge worship; it is to have engaging worship that gives people a voice in their praise of God.”<sup>30</sup> God desires for His people from all over the world to worship Him in their native languages. What is vital about worship is encouraging the congregation to sing and praise God with an open heart, and not merely focus on the musicians’ display of musical talents because the focus would be turned to them instead of God. Worship

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<sup>27</sup> Roberta King, “Towards a Discipline of Christian Ethnomusicology: A Missiological Paradigm,” *Missiological: An International Review* 32, no. 3 (2004), 299.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>29</sup> Makayla Riggs, “Vietnamese Celebration Brings Gospel to Many,” NC Baptist, March 15, 2022, <https://ncbaptist.org/article/vietnamese-celebration-brings-gospel-to-many/>.

<sup>30</sup> Greg Scheer, *The Art of Worship: A Musician’s Guide to Leading a Modern Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), 20.

leaders who have the desire to lead Vietnamese churches into worship must understand the culture and music of Vietnam very well and be able to incorporate the traditional elements of the music into modern Christian worship so praising God in the Vietnamese language is more powerful in many Vietnamese churches.

### Contextualization

Preserving gifts and exercising talents are mandates of God as doing so will enable to become faithful stewards in fulfilling God's will and actively participating in His creation. The main concern is how culture can be used without syncretism. The concern is how other countries would view Christianity. According to Hiebert, Christianity was perceived in other cultures as a foreign religion identified with Western culture."<sup>31</sup> This is a primary concern because different cultures have their religion and that most of them would not accept any Western ideologies, and this creates a barrier in spreading the Gospel. Van Opstal stated, "For a worship culture to be developed with integrity to the local expression, it is imperative to do the work of contextualization, which considers the context, place, or location."<sup>32</sup> Contextualization is the method of combining cultural traditions with worship practices. What is important for contextualization to succeed is to understand both the culture and theology immensely. The study of culture helps to better understand different people, and theology provides the means on Christian worship. Without both of them, Christian worship within different cultures will not possible because of many possibilities that would ruin both Christianity and cultures. Contextualization takes the Bible as a rule of faith and life very seriously. To use cultural

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<sup>31</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3, 1987, 106.

<sup>32</sup> Sandra Maria Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Groves, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 31.

traditions as tools for evangelism must be biblically based. In other words, these traditions must be chosen carefully that is appropriate with Christianity. These traditions help to guide people to discover their cultural roots, and by connecting with them, they can understand who they are and what culture they came from. Niles stated that increased awareness of one's own culture enables "the integration of native elements and idioms more naturally into compositions."<sup>33</sup>

Contextualization stresses the idea of utilizing traditional musical elements and sounds to communicate new ideas with new techniques and new styles. This also applies to writing original compositions that both portray God and using traditional cultural techniques. While applying the techniques of contextualization, the main idea is creativity because many people would share their experiences or stories through different cultural techniques so that other people would understand and appreciate the art behind it all. According to Farhadian, the relationship between Christianity and culture is "such an important one that assemblies worldwide are compelled to grapple with how their worship challenges, adopts, and adapts both local and distant cultural elements."<sup>34</sup> What is essential in contextualization is for the gospel message to be communicated in ways that people can understand. The idea is that cultural traditions can be used in many ways to illustrate the gospel message. Just as Jesus loves all His people, Christians should be encouraged to share that same love that other people will be able to accept. The rights of Christians in every country should be cognitively free from Western domination, and Christianity should not be viewed as a Western ideology. The concern for cultural churches in the US is that their worship is more westernized than cultural. The goal is to develop "biblically

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<sup>33</sup> D.T. Niles, "Revisiting Ways of Contextualization of Church Music in Asia," *Theology and the Church* 30, 2 (2005).

<sup>34</sup> Charles E. Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 5.

faithful expressions of Christianity while preserving as much of the traditional culture as possible.”<sup>35</sup> While worship in cultural churches can apply western instrumentation, it is crucial to provide more cultural traditions as part of worship as well because it helps the congregation to connect their cultural roots. This could also help Vietnamese descendants to discover their cultural identity because most of them in the US do not know much about their traditions. Cultural traditions must be chosen carefully to ensure they will honor God instead of promoting other religions. Van Opstal was very knowledgeable and optimistic about how different cultures can implement the traditions into a diverse worship. Van Opstal provided notes for worship leaders and pastors to enable multiethnic worship for all people to praise God in their native tongues. Using Van Opstal’s biblical foundations of multiethnic worship, Vietnamese churches can be inspired to use their cultural traditions to further God’s kingdom. The incorporation of Vietnamese instrumentations in Christian worship fosters an environment for the Vietnamese people to worship God in their native tongues. Ott stated, “Contextualization must all the more emphasize the transcendent dimension of Christian experience, whereby the Spirit creates the church in its particularity and gives it an identity as part of the universal family of God with Christ as its Head.”<sup>36</sup> The idea behind contextualization is to use cultural traditions to further God’s Kingdom without the risk of damaging both Christianity and culture. Therefore, contextualization is like “cultivation of Christian faith, sowing seeds in native soil, watering and letting them absorb the contemporary artistic ethos to grow strong, reaching the stage of maturity and bear fruit.”<sup>37</sup> The idea of contextualization is needed to be taken with caution for

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<sup>35</sup> Craig Ott, “Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century,” *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 1 (2015), 50.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>37</sup> D.T. Niles, “Revisiting Ways of Contextualization of Church Music in Asia,” *Theology and the Church* 30, 2 (2005).



incorporating traditional instruments into Christian worship in Vietnamese churches to succeed. Translation is also the key to a success contextualization because the Gospel must be understood in native languages depending on the country. It is best to have a structural framework for a missionary leader to be able to translate the biblical message into the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of different cultures. According to Hiebert, this is very crucial, for “if the people do not clearly grasp the biblical message as originally intended, they will have a distorted view of the gospel.”<sup>38</sup> From there, the pastor or missionary should be able to provide an understanding of the biblical truth to make the Gospel known in different culture by applying knowledge in theology, anthropology, and linguistics. With these factors, it can be possible for missionaries to offer an understanding of biblical truth and making it known in other cultures. Contextualization expands the interests and knowledge of Vietnamese Christians so that the Vietnamese people can accept the truths of God’s revelation in other world cultures. The Vietnamese people can be drawn into worship through the use of traditional instruments, as they enable them to praise God and appreciate the Vietnamese culture. As the Vietnamese people would be drawn in by worship, they would be interested in hearing the gospel message based on the songs that were sung. The idea is that worship in Vietnamese Christian churches can include traditional Vietnamese music elements to encourage the congregation to embrace their cultural identity and to praise God altogether. This idea can also be a tool for evangelism to the Vietnamese community. Contextualization helps different cultures to understand that Christianity is not a Western ideology; Christianity provides biblical truths that teaches about Jesus and the ultimate sacrifice that He had made for all of mankind. Since not every culture knows about the gospel message, contextualization encourage creativity in using cultural arts and traditions to

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<sup>38</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (1987), 109-10.

share and illustrate the biblical truth that everyone with different cultural backgrounds can understand completely. The gospel is more than just the message that needs to be communicated, it is also a message for the people to respond.

### **Conclusion**

During the Vietnam War, music was heavily used by both Vietnamese military forces. Vietnamese music played a vital role during the war and its aftermath, the Fall of Saigon. Vietnamese composers have greatly impacted music since the Fall of Saigon, as music was temporarily banned in Vietnam. Since this event, many composers have written songs about the war and its aftermath, based on their personal experiences, using beautiful poetry to illustrate both the tragedy and joy that came from it. Even though *nhạc vàng* was no longer legal in Vietnam, it is still being listened to in private by many Vietnamese people. The music of *nhạc vàng* was very influential that it was mainly showcased in most music variety shows today. These music shows continue to preserve this traditional Vietnamese music as it contains songs that best illustrate the beauty of Vietnam that was almost forgotten after the Fall of Saigon. Today, new composers are writing music with different themes while staying true to the culture of Vietnam, and every one of them is written beautifully. The many forms of Vietnamese music showcase how music is widely used within the community. Additionally, the Vietnamese people can quickly identify the similarities and differences from music forms, even outside of Vietnam. By understanding the history, instrumentation, forms, and uses of Vietnamese music, it is possible to engage in Vietnamese Christian worship by incorporating the traditional forms that are popular within the community, along with traditional Vietnamese instruments. Also, Vietnamese churches could see how music can be used in multiple ways, besides strictly focusing on only one form of music. Contextualization provides an understanding of how to

incorporate cultural traditions into Christian worship and evangelism. Christianity should be viewed as a Western ideology because it is all about the biblical truth of Jesus and the Scripture. The traditional forms of Vietnamese music can be used within the modern styles of music to keep the Vietnamese culture together. These traditional forms of music represent the Vietnamese culture. With contextualization, Vietnamese churches can use their cultural traditions as part of Christian worship. Using these traditional forms of music within Vietnamese churches is important because God desires all people to worship Him in their native languages, as both language and culture are blessings from Him.

### Chapter Three: Methodology

This project employed a qualitative research methodology to investigate the possibility of incorporating Vietnamese traditional instruments and music styles into modern Christian worship. The methodology included interviews and field observations. The interview process included semi-structured questions. The field observations took place in two locations where people from the Vietnamese community regularly gather.

To aid traditional Vietnamese musical elements to Christian worship, a series of questions were asked of the current study's participants, and documentation of cultural events that focused on global worship was included. One event that was analyzed for the study of Vietnamese Christian worship, *Đại Hội*. *Đại Hội* is a summer event that brings many Vietnamese people together from all over the US for fellowship, evangelism training, and worship services. Interviews discussing the ideas of incorporating Vietnamese music into Christian worship were conducted with Vietnamese people who have experienced cultural worship within different churches from all over the world. The interviews were conducted both in-person and via video conferences to determine how traditional Vietnamese music can be incorporated into Christian worship.

To incorporate traditional Vietnamese music into Christian worship, understanding Vietnamese culture is the first step. Traditional Vietnamese music has always been a part of the culture, and it continues to adapt to current genres while remaining true to its traditional elements. The combination of the instruments, rhythm, and lyrical poetry is what makes Vietnamese music well-known to its people. Learning the history of music is how one can see how changes were made as the ages passed and how the traditional elements are still used. While most countries have adapted to modern instruments that include keyboards, drums, guitars, and

many more, traditional instruments are used to represent their culture. The instruments that were used in Vietnam are what make their music unique among other countries, and it enables to choose what instruments are appropriate for Christian worship in Vietnamese churches. To understand how Vietnamese music was written and their different themes, the information composers will be discussed as they made their contributions to both the Vietnamese community and the world of music. After the discussion about Vietnamese music, there will be topics on cultural worship and how churches can be engaged in Christian worship while celebrating their cultural roots. Preserving cultural roots can help the Vietnamese community to remember where they came from, as the current generation hardly understands their culture. There will be a series of interviews with pastors and musicians within the Vietnamese community who have experienced the hardships of the diaspora, music events in different countries, and evangelism with its people through music and culture. These interviews will be semi-structured as a few questions were given beforehand to give the participants any thoughts and ideas on the research topic. One event that was analyzed for the study of Vietnamese Christian worship is called *Đại Hội*. *Đại Hội* is a summer event that gathers many Vietnamese from all over the US to come together to have fellowship, evangelism training, and worship services. At least three conferences were observed from the following years: 2017, 2022, and 2023. These three conferences were observed to analyze any changes and improvements that were done compared to previous conferences. All of these steps make the research plan ideal because it enables Vietnamese musicians to lead the community into Christian worship while still following their cultural roots. By exploring different traditions and events, new ideas can be discovered to make traditional Vietnamese music a part of Christian worship in churches.

## Participants

This current study employed at least three participants who have helped to research Vietnamese Christian worship and explore Vietnamese cultural heritage. Simon Touprong is the church pastor of New Hope Baptist Church. Pastor Simon grew up listening to Vietnamese music before coming to America. When he was eighteen years old, he attended a music college in Saigon, where he learned about the *t'rung* and *đàn bầu*. While attending school, Pastor Simon participated in numerous music events in Vietnam. In 1999, he played the keyboard for a Lunar New Year festival. He came to America around 2003, and since then, he has made his contribution to Vietnamese worship music. In 2012, Pastor Simon graduated with a pastoral leadership degree from Liberty University. Since then, he has continued to write many Vietnamese worship songs, while also translating popular worship songs from English into Vietnamese. Pastor Simon has traveled to Greensboro, North Carolina, to assist his father's church with worship music and to preach as a guest speaker. Pastor Simon often spent time arranging worship music, writing new songs, and broadcasting virtual worship services through his YouTube channel, "Fresh Home Music." Pastor Simon has traveled to different places where he has ministered and trained young Vietnamese men who are called to become pastors. He is well-known for his knowledge of theology and his talent in music.

Another research participant is someone who is well-known in both the Vietnamese music community and the Vietnamese church community. Bich-Van Nguyen is a professional vocalist, who was trained at the National Conservatory in Vietnam and the Bob Cole Conservatory of Music in Long Beach, California. Bich-Van graduated from New York University with a master's degree in musical theater and an advanced certificate in vocal pedagogy. Bich-Van has performed in numerous Vietnamese variety shows, including Asia

Entertainment, the Vietnamese-American Philharmonic, and many more. She has also done opera, musical theater, and stage productions. Recently, Bich-Van and her husband, Sean Buhr, started their own music studio that educates students in music and provides opportunities for them to participate in music events, including talent competitions; the music studio is called VSMS (Van & Sean Music Studios). Aside from teaching, Bich-Van and her husband travel to different churches to lead worship, write new songs, and record their albums and music videos. Outside of music, she would also provide her own jewelry line and fashion products in Los Angeles called LUA Jewelry; the term *lụa* means “silk”, which is what traditional Vietnamese dresses were made of. Whenever she performs at numerous concerts and events, she provided her jewelry collection to sell. Her designs were original with various beautiful gemstones, and some of her collection includes gemstones and crafts that were originally from Vietnam. Pastor Simon had the pleasure of assisting Bich-Van’s music by recording and producing her albums. Bich-Van’s knowledge of music and cultural background served the current study well, as she was called to reach out to the Vietnamese community through her music.

The third research participant is Sammy Joo. Sammy is part of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention, and he works with Asian churches in the US. He graduated from Handong Global University in Pohang, South Korea. He also obtained theology degrees in the US at both Southern Baptist Theology Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Before joining the North Carolina Baptist Convention, Sammy served at Korean churches in South Korea and multiethnic churches in the US as a worship leader, youth pastor, and college pastor. Sammy has the heart to serve and equip the next generation of leaders in the Asian community, and he desires to connect with Asian American churches to fulfill the Great Commission. His knowledge of multiethnicity in churches

will be beneficial to the current study, as he has served in Vietnamese churches. He is well-associated with Pastor Simon. Sammy and Pastor Simon have served together in both Vietnamese and Korean churches as well as at other multiethnic events in the US. Sammy's family are musically talented, and they would occasionally lead worship in Korean churches. Sammy has had the pleasure of visiting New Hope Baptist Church as an occasional guest speaker; Sammy preaches in English, while Pastor Simon translates the message into Vietnamese. Sammy's experience in multiethnicity is sufficient to discover ideas that Vietnamese churches can use to incorporate traditional music elements into modern Christian worship.

### ***Đại Hội***

*Đại Hội* is an event that takes every summer that gathers Vietnamese Christians from all over the US for worship and fellowship. Pastor Linh, the chairman and host of the Vietnamese Baptist Fellowship Conference, stated, "Our strength comes when we come together in the name of Jesus. We come together to face a huge challenge in this time and age."<sup>39</sup> Every year, the Baptist Convention would host this event in different cities, including Washington, DC; Charlotte, North Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; Los Angeles, California; and many others. The estimated number of attendees for each conference ranges from 800 to 1,100 people. The conference lasted for about four days, from Thursday to Sunday. The conference's mission is to gather Vietnamese Christians, both young and old, to celebrate God through worship. While attending the conference in person, observations were noted about every session of each age group, and there were worship sessions that all people would gather together. The conference also has training sessions and fun activities to help attendees evangelize to the Vietnamese

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<sup>39</sup> "Video Giới Thiệu Đại Hội Baptist 2022," God's Servants Church – Phuc Vu Church, 0:51, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Y6yXZxYy1A>.



people because most of the community either does not believe in God or are Buddhists. It is very difficult to communicate the Gospel to Buddhists because of their strong belief in their religion, which they learned from childhood. Event gatherings, such as this conference, can strengthen younger generations' knowledge of the Gospel and their skills in evangelism. The worship setting for the event is both traditional and contemporary. Having both of these settings can bring people together of all ages and backgrounds. While the setting is mostly westernized, the worship band also incorporates traditional Vietnamese instruments into the worship. What makes the event fruitful is that it provides an opportunity for attendees to meet new people, to have fellowship with one another, and to receive training in evangelism. Different sessions at the conference are organized by age and divided into three groups: children, youth, and seniors. For the children, a session is presented that is similar to Vacation Bible School (VBS), which is offered in many US churches. Using VBS-like activities, the children not only have fun, but also learn more about God in a kid-friendly environment. The youth session is comprised of middle school, high school, and college students and includes a ministry in English in which the students listen to the Gospel message, as most of them do not speak their native language. Similar to the children's session, the youth session also provides fun games and activities to foster teamwork and to allow the students to get to know each other, but sometimes, there can be individual workshops instead. These workshops have different topics from biblical lessons to worldviews. The senior session mostly includes Bible studies, in which the adults spend time communicating and praying together in small groups. After these sessions, all attendees would gather together for a worship service. Depending on the city in which *Đại Hội* is hosted, special tours of famous landmarks and museums are offered as part of the conference. An example would be that on Saturday of *Đại Hội* 2017, there was a tour of the Billy Graham Library, as the conference and

the museum are both in Charlotte, and for the 2023 conference in Washington DC, a tour of the Museum of the Bible was featured. Many attendees participate in these tours to explore the host city, which they may never have visited before. Fun and formal events are typically part of the conference each year, like talent shows or worship nights. The formal events can include either Vietnamese music, worship nights, or short skits. Everyone can participate in these events if they wish, or they could continue to participate in their main conference sessions. Overall, the conference is full of activities, fellowship, and hospitality that most attendees enjoy. Every year's *Dại Hội* is memorable, as many Vietnamese people come together to create new friendships and gain experience and confidence in evangelism. The conference events are well organized and age-appropriate. Everyone who is a part of the conference displays excellent teamwork and cooperation with each other. Regardless of where the conference is hosted, the hosts are able to make the venue suitable to the events and sessions offered. A live stream of the worship service is also provided for those who cannot attend the conference, but the individual sessions are private, as multiple live streams are not possible. The worship services are broadcasted to include those who are far away from the conference. This conference will continue throughout generations as it has opened doors to Christianity for its people. The Gospel will continue to be shared throughout the generations and will continue to open the doors of Christianity for God's people. All people who have attended the event will remember the messages that were shared and memories of meeting and having fellowship with others. Attending and analyzing the event will help further research on how Vietnamese traditions, including Vietnamese music, can be used to further God's Kingdom to the Vietnamese community.

## **Chapter Four: Research Findings**

Vietnamese people all over the world need salvation, as for most, their main religion is Buddhism. The research materials gathered from the current study provided findings on the topic of the incorporation of traditional Vietnamese music into modern Christian worship. The interviews were conducted with three interviewees: Bich-Van Nguyen, Pastor Simon Touprong, and Sammy Joo. The field observation of *Đại Hội* was done to document any possibilities of incorporating traditional Vietnamese instruments into Christian worship. Adding traditional Vietnamese elements to worship music will serve two purposes: to foster an environment for Vietnamese people to worship God in their native language and to preserve the people's cultural roots.

### **Observation**

Attending *Đại Hội* conferences provides information on the number of attendees who participated each year. The first time I attended the conference in person was in 2017, as the conference was held in Charlotte, North Carolina, which is far from where I live. While observing the conference, I also had the opportunity to be a keyboardist for the worship team. On the first day, everyone came in with excitement through greetings, fellowships, and conversations that took place quickly. During the first session of the conference, everyone gathered together in the main conference hall for worship before dismissal to the different age group sessions and activities. As the band and worship team led the worship service, everyone praised God passionately both in English and Vietnamese. I mostly observed mostly the youth session, which is conducted primarily in English. During this session, a pastor spoke, and then the group activities began. These activities consist of a variety of games to facilitate fun and teamwork. The children's session includes VBS programming, and the themes vary each year.

While the focus is on the Christian message, this programming mostly uses games and activities to incorporate Bible lessons and encourage teamwork among the groups. After the sessions, a time of fellowship follows so that attendees can socialize with each other. The worship sessions happen every morning and night. On Saturday, a special tour of the Billy Graham Library was offered for attendees, as the conference and the museum were both in Charlotte. Later that night, a music night was held at the main conference hall, where everyone would have had the chance to perform either in English or Vietnamese, and most attendees had participated. My friend and I had the opportunity to sing “How Great Thou Art” in Vietnamese with an attendee as part of music night. The attendees enjoyed watching all the music performances and skits. On Sunday, a closing worship service was held where the attendees heard the last part of the message before concluding the entire event. Afterward, everyone gathered their belongings and departed for home. The conference was loved greatly from many attendees for the environment, musicality, and sermons from guest speakers.

In 2022, the conference was held in Los Angeles, CA, where most of the Vietnamese population was settled after the Fall of Saigon in 1975. The observation was conducted via live stream. The conference hosted 1,011 people, including children and youth combined. I attended the event virtually through the conference’s live stream services that were recorded. Even though the conference was held at a far location, the event is almost the same. The message for this year’s conference was about “passing the torch”. This message was inspired by the Scripture passage of 2 Timothy 2:2, which states, “and the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be able to teach others.” The overall theme of the message was about passing down the current generation’s knowledge to the younger generation. Worship leaders were also encouraged to pass down the teachings of

worship to the next generation. While worship music constantly evolves, the general message of this music should remain the same because the message of the Bible does not change. Just as Jesus and His disciples passed down their knowledge of the Gospel to their followers, the Gospel will continue to be passed down by God's people throughout the generations. Many people do not know who God is, and the Word of God encourages all believers to share the Gospel so unbelievers will come to know Christ as their Savior. Because most Vietnamese community followed Buddhist teachings, as it is their main religion, Vietnamese Christians should overcome their fear of Buddhism and its teachings to follow God's will of spreading the Gospel. Compared to overserving in person, online observation does not include other group activities since they are private, but regardless, the main service was sufficient to analyze the environment and the main worship services.

This year, the conference was held in Washington DC, and there was a total of 1,166 people who attended, including children, much more than the previous year. The conference in DC was similar to the one in Charlotte, but the only difference was that at the DC conference, English and Vietnamese ministries held separate worship services and conference sessions; however, both ministries had a worship service altogether on the last day of the conference. The Vietnamese ministry includes mostly traditional music, with some contemporary elements, while the English ministry includes contemporary music only. The children attend the VBS program during the sessions. Two worship services were held each day, and in between them, there were different conference sessions/workshops for all age groups. The English ministry workshop covered different topics like worship, worship team building, worldviews, marriage, the Bible, and apologetics. The Vietnamese ministry workshops cover topics like marriage, ministry building, family, and counseling, and on Saturday of the conference, business meetings were

held with pastors and missionaries. The VBS theme for this year was entitled “Stellar: Shine Jesus’ Light”. The theme uses astronauts and everything space-related to demonstrate how Jesus shines His light, just as He created light on the first day of Creation. The sun, moon, and stars are also part of Christ’s light as they light up the darkness of space. Like any VBS program, they would have numerous activities that include the following: dance and music, study time, arts and crafts, and fun games that encourage children to not only learn but also to have fun. All of these activities were closely related to both space and Jesus’ light. The idea behind this theme is to teach children that the light of Christ will always shine in the midst of the darkness that they walk upon their daily lives. The services that were provided for the attendees were improved much better because the workers were able to organize many attendees without causing confusion, as the conference in Charlotte did not have much organization. Since this year’s conference was hosted in Washington DC, attendees had the opportunity to take a tour of the Museum of the Bible on Saturday. Similar to the conference in Charlotte in 2017, a talent show was hosted for all attendees at the main conference hall, but the English ministry had their own worship service that happened at the same time. For attendees from the English ministry, they can choose whichever session they would like to attend, either the worship service or the talent show. On the last day, there was a worship service with all ministries combined together. After the service was completed, attendees packed their belongings and checked out of the hotel before departing for home, and for the people who had to fly, they would leave early depending on their flight schedules. There had been many differences compared to the previous events that were done over the past years. The organization has immensely improved from guidance to service for all attendees.

Participating in *Đại Hội*, both online and in-person, brings the Vietnamese people together and reminds them that they are not alone, and the conference has inspired many of them to evangelize other Vietnamese people who have not heard about the Gospel. Every year, the conference improves its worship services and event sessions for optimal organization, function, and service. Getting to meet and talk with other people was what I enjoyed about the event. While observing the conference, there were many positive outlooks from other attendees. What is commonly said about the conference is that it is a new experience to meet with different people who have the same desire to worship God. The entire event was truly memorable each year, as new friendships were formed. *Đại Hội* is a recommended event for learning more about God's Word and having fellowship with other people in the Vietnamese community. Most attendees said that they enjoyed participating in the conference, both for learning more about God and making new friendships that will last for a lifetime.

### **Interview Results**

The first person that was interviewed was Bich-Van Nguyen. Our interview was conducted through a video conference, as she was teaching music in California, and she happily agreed to be a participant in the research. Bich-Van's heart for ministry was to train and equip the next generation for both music and ministry. Bich-Van's inspiration behind her career and ministry was music since it was a big part of her family for years. Through music, Bich-Van came to know Christ and loved music passionately. In the Vietnamese community, Bich-Van believed that it is important to connect to the roots, and by doing so, the Vietnamese people can remember their cultural roots. As a Vietnamese Christian, it is best to remember and connect with cultural roots because they provide a cultural identity that God created. According to Bich-Van, the Vietnamese community can reconnect "their roots, not by adapting but by connecting

their culture to reach its people.”<sup>40</sup> To do so, the Vietnamese people honored the traditions that were celebrated among the Vietnamese community. An example would be *Tết*, a Vietnamese name for Lunar New Year, as it is celebrated with Vietnamese families from all over the world. By celebrating the Vietnamese traditions, Christians can understand more about the culture to reach out to the Vietnamese people who are not Christians. Vietnamese music was valued by the Vietnamese people highly, thanks to variety shows that promote the Vietnamese culture. Bich-Van believed that Vietnam is a musical nation as different regions have their own way of using music. Bich-Van stated, “The Vietnamese people valued music highly, so music is such a big part of the Vietnamese lifestyle.”<sup>41</sup> Everywhere the Vietnamese people go, they can hear Vietnamese music in places where the Vietnamese community gathered. The songs illustrated the war, diaspora, and hardships. These songs were used to reminisce about the past, and these songs help to encourage the younger generation to honor history because these songs are connected to the past. After discussing the importance of Vietnamese worship, the topic transitions to how Vietnamese Christians can be involved in worship service, including the incorporation of traditional instruments. One thing that Bich-Van suggested is to teach them a variety of songs and to remind them that the songs are vessels of worship for the Vietnamese people. Bich-Van believed that using traditional instruments that were used in folk songs, like the *đàn bầu*, can be part of Vietnamese Christian worship as the sounds it produces generate a cultural sense, and it enables to catch the attention of other Vietnamese people who have grown listening to traditional music before and after the Fall of Saigon. The interviewed concluded with a discussion of how the younger Vietnamese generation can appreciate their culture, and Bich-

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<sup>40</sup> Bich-Van Nguyen, interviewed by Elijah Chau, Raleigh, NC, March 22, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



Van said that families are the most important as their forefathers endured hardships to be where they are today. By participating in cultural events, the Vietnamese people can see and learn how much value their culture holds. Music is very powerful in the Vietnamese community, and it is possible to incorporate traditional Vietnamese instruments into modern Christian worship, as the instruments were also used in different musical performances.

The second participant that was interviewed was Pastor Simon Touprong. Pastor Simon happily agreed to assist the current study of traditional Vietnamese music and the incorporation in Christian worship, as he has knowledge in music. Pastor Simon's heart for ministry was inspired by the Great Commission in the book of Matthews, and he was inspired to work in music ministry with his gratitude toward God. Pastor Simon mentioned that he would express his gratitude by writing and playing music. Pastor Simon would translate English worship songs into Vietnamese for the Vietnamese people to understand the contents, and he made his music contribution to the Vietnamese community by writing original Christian songs. Pastor Simon claimed that the Vietnamese community can reconnect their roots by the Vietnamese culture, which is a vehicle to reach certain people group. This also applies to Vietnamese Christians as well, but Pastor Simon warned that Christ must be put first before culture as it may have traditions that are against Him. In his opinion, the Vietnamese community gathered together in places where music was held as it connects the Vietnamese culture and the people together. In variety shows, traditional music was incorporated with modern techniques to blend the old and the new generations together. With that same idea being used in variety shows, that same music method can be used in Vietnamese churches. When Pastor Simon played for the orchestra that focused on traditional music in Vietnam, he was impressed by how musicians can play the traditional instruments. Pastor Simon stated that the arrangements of the instruments in popular

Vietnamese songs will either succeed or fail. Pastor Simon also stated, “Creativity will make the songs work as musical instruments in Vietnam have different scales.”<sup>42</sup> If the arranger does not know the instruments carefully and proficiently, the music will not work very well. Basic instruments that included the *đàn bầu*, *T’rung*, *đàn nhị*, and *đàn tranh*, can be used for Christian worship, but each instrument was needed to be precisely arranged to match the songs, since most of these instruments use the pentatonic scale. Pastor Simon shared about how Vietnamese Christians can promote the culture without losing the priority for the Gospel for Christ. Pastor Simon said that the way to do it is “through standard line of music, to professionally produce song and material that have value in there.”<sup>43</sup> The last message that Pastor Simon shared is about what the Lord taught him throughout his life that he would like to share with others. Pastor Simon mentioned about being true in worship; in other words, worship leaders need to make sure that their motives for worship are genuine and meaningful. Worship can be based on the passage of Psalm 139:22-23, which talks about God knowing the hearts and anxious thoughts of people. There may be younger Vietnamese people who have the desire to lead worship within Vietnamese churches. What can be advised for the younger generation is to understand theology, Vietnamese culture, and instrumentation to spread the Gospel within the Vietnamese community through traditional Vietnamese Christian worship. Without all of these factors, Vietnamese Christian worship will not be possible.

The third interviewee was Brother Sammy Joo. Sammy provided much insight on cultural worship. Sammy’s heart for ministry was to glorify God through faithful obedience. Sammy followed the Great Commission in regard to spread the Gospel throughout all nations.

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<sup>42</sup> Simon Touprong, interviewed by Elijah Chau, Raleigh, NC, March 23, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Sammy was inspired to pursue preaching the Gospel to reach out to all people based on the passage of Acts 19:10, which portrays the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. Sammy's philosophy in worship is about equipping people to be leaders in the church. Sammy shared mostly about his experiences with worship in different countries, that includes Pakistan. From Sammy's experience, the Pakistan church had five gatherings of music and preaching; their worship consisted of traditional instrumentation with original songs used to glorify God. The church's styles can be compared with the styles of Muslim singing or chanting, but the church's words were actually Christian that were based on the passage of Psalm 139. The church would recite the Bible verse in the form of songs. All of the church members worshipped together and sang the songs by memory, since the church does not have PowerPoint. Sammy shared that Asian instruments can be used for worship, and he mentioned how important they are in cultural churches. Sammy stated, "They bring the people together using our national or cultural identity to connect with people within the same culture."<sup>44</sup> Sammy recommended that one of the ways to encourage the younger generation to appreciate culture is to go to mission trips to visit different homelands, enjoy local cuisine, and if possible, attend worship. Sammy also mentioned about visiting different countries besides their homeland to experience other cultures. When Sammy came back from Pakistan, he wondered about how his church can incorporate Korean instruments into their worship, just as the Pakistan church did. The same idea can apply in Vietnamese churches as well because Vietnamese instruments helps to connect the culture with people. God uses His people who they are to help connect with their cultural group for connection to be easily made.

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<sup>44</sup> Sammy Joo, interviewed by Elijah Chau, Raleigh, NC, April 4, 2023.

The common idea that all participants claimed is that using traditional instruments is highly recommended to cultural churches, including Vietnamese churches. The connection behind the instruments is that they enable the cultural community to discover their roots. By discovering their roots, cultural churches can articulate their native languages to praise God while appreciating the culture they are in. From all their experiences, the participants helped Vietnamese churches and communities to encourage authentic Vietnamese worship while embracing their cultural roots. With the data gathered from all the interviewees, it can be possible to incorporate traditional Vietnamese instruments for Christian worship in Vietnamese churches.

### **Instrument Recommendations**

The data that was gathered from participants, observations, and more, suggests that it is possible to incorporate traditional Vietnamese instruments into Christian worship. These instruments were used both in traditional and contemporary music performances. In order to incorporate traditional music into Christian worship, there are instruments that are needed to be chosen. The instruments should represent the Vietnamese culture while it is appropriate for Christian worship. This would mean that certain instruments should not if they are used for specific purposes that are against Christianity. An example would be the Buddhist bell because, even though the sound is tranquil, the bell is only used for Buddhist ceremonies. One of the Vietnamese instruments that could be for in Vietnamese churches is the *đàn bầu* since it is widely used in Vietnamese music performances. It is the most common instrument in Vietnam that its people would recognize it immediately. Even though it is a pentatonic instrument, the *đàn bầu* can produce a wide range of tonal sounds by bending the pitch rod while plucking the string. The sounds that it produces reminds them of their homeland. This instrument is very well-known

in Vietnam since it has been used in both traditional and contemporary music performances. It can be heard in almost every Vietnamese song, with traditional songs being most common.

Using this instrument can draw people in as Vietnamese music can be used for Christian worship in churches. Another instrument that is potential for Christian worship is the *đàn nhị*, or the erhu. Just as other Southeast Asian countries used this instrument in a variety of music performances, Vietnam have also used this instrument in their music performances. The *đàn nhị* produces sounds that best represents the Asian culture. There are many performances both in music stages and the streets that would showcase this instrument. While the instrument can be used as part of worship along with other instruments, it can also be used for solo performances. While the instrument can be used for contemporary solos, it works even better in traditional solos, particularly hymns, for a more tonal and smooth sound quality that can be heard clearly. While the *đàn nhị* can be used for Christian worship in Vietnamese churches, the *đàn bầu* is more suitable than the *đàn nhị* because the *đàn bầu* is a very unique instrument in Vietnam. These are only a few instruments that can be used for Vietnamese Christian worship; there are many others that can be used to represent the Vietnamese culture. The traditional instruments are most often used in Vietnamese music performances, and with that idea, these instruments can be used in Christian worship for the Vietnamese people to come together to praise God while celebrating the culture traditions that they grew up with all together. The idea behind this is that worship does not have to be westernized because all people come from different cultural backgrounds, and God desires worship from all people, including the Vietnamese culture. The passage of Psalm 86:9 says that all nations that God had made will come together to worship Him and honor His name. The idea to incorporate traditional Vietnamese instruments into Christian worship is also inspired by the passage of Psalms 150, where the verses describe how all instruments were

used to worship and praise God. In the same way how the instruments derived from the verse were used to worship God, the Vietnamese people can also use their traditional instruments to worship and praise God as well. These traditional instruments can be used to worship God and celebrate the Vietnamese culture as they provide a sense of cultural identity. This will help future Vietnamese generations to discover their cultural roots as many of the Vietnamese people have scattered throughout the world.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

One lesson that can be learned from this study is to always remember our roots because they help to realize who we are and where we came from. Culture is part of identity that helps define who people are and what background they are from. The main concern is how traditional Vietnamese instruments can be incorporated in modern Christian worship, as the worship in Vietnamese churches in the US are westernized. The idea to incorporate Vietnamese music into Christian worship helps the Vietnamese people to realize that worship can be cultural and not just western. This study helps to understand music and how it can be used to spread the Gospel throughout the Vietnamese community. The Vietnamese culture has always been impactful as it continues to spread out after the Fall of Saigon. Because of the diaspora, many Vietnamese people have been spread out to different countries outside of Vietnam. There has been Vietnamese church-planting throughout the world, and there are needs for authentic cultural worship. Brother Sammy Joo shared that worship does not have to be all about Chris Tomlin or other Christian artists' songs in worship because worship can be done in different ways, including language. Just as God desires all nations to worship Him, Vietnamese Christian worship is possible by incorporating traditional instruments and language in those churches. Vietnamese worship in the US does not have to be limited to either just traditional or contemporary; worship styles can be done in many different ways that will benefit both the culture and God, not one over the other. Vietnamese Christian worship must be executed carefully with the right instruments to be used and that all of it is done in truth. Theology and cultural studies are the most crucial components for a successful Vietnamese Christian worship in churches within the Vietnamese community. God can hear the voices of all people through music and worship, and the Vietnamese people can worship God in their own language and

instruments that they are familiar with. With Vietnamese worship being a part of churches, the younger generation will be able to experience both the glory of God and the beauty of their culture.

### **Summary of Findings**

Throughout the research, music is a powerful tool in Vietnamese churches, as music has always been a big part of Vietnamese culture. Since the diaspora, Vietnamese music was banned in Vietnam, including *nhạc vàng*, since it was used against the Communist regime. The Vietnamese people were only allowed to listen to music that is approved by the Communists; however, they did not like it very much since their music did not have the beauty and love, compared to traditional Vietnamese music. The Vietnamese people would secretly listen to traditional music because the songs have more beauty, love, and historical meaning. Because of the uprising of traditional Vietnamese music, the ban was lifted. Despite the ban being lifted, *nhạc vàng* was still illegal to be used in Vietnam; however, it would be used outside of Vietnam in numerous music performances because the population of South Vietnam was widespread throughout the world. Since then, Vietnamese music has been widespread, just as the Vietnamese population had as well. As Bich-Van mentioned, everywhere in Vietnam or in Vietnamese markets and restaurants in the US, there was Vietnamese music being played all the time. The instruments that were used in Vietnamese music performances help to draw people in, as the instruments provide a cultural identity because many Vietnamese people would recognize them immediately. In the same way, traditional music can be applied in Vietnamese Christian churches. Just as Pakistan churches have their own traditional style or instruments for their worship, Vietnamese Christian churches can have their instruments as part of their worship as well. Because cultural instruments are different from western instruments, much analysis of them



is needed to have cultural worship impactful. From personal experiences, there have been many personal Vietnamese gatherings where friends and families get together to socialize and to have fun. These gatherings would always have karaoke, and most of the people would sing traditional songs because they help to reconnect and reminiscence their homeland. The traditional songs help the Vietnamese people recuperate the cultural roots that were once lost since the Fall of Saigon, and this also applies to the younger Vietnamese generation. Vietnamese Christian churches have also celebrated the traditions and events that are most popular in the Vietnamese community, one of which that is most popular would be the Lunar New Year. Churches would celebrate those events for the Vietnamese people to never forget and to appreciate the Vietnamese culture. This would be best for those who do not know much about the culture, despite being Vietnamese. In this fieldwork of the current study, worship in Vietnamese churches were explored as the current study considered ideas on how to incorporate the traditions in Christian worship. As part of the research, Pastor Simon Touprong, shared his experiences and knowledge on Vietnamese music. Pastor Simon emphasized that worship leaders must put Christ first before other things because worship goes to God. Vietnamese music can be a part of Christian worship as music is most celebrated in Vietnam. The whole purpose for worship is to glorify God, and worship can be done in many languages. Worship in Vietnamese churches were mostly Western, as these churches do not use traditional instruments. While traditional Vietnamese music can be used in Christian worship, traditional music can also be used from evangelism. Contextualization is the key to incorporate traditional Vietnamese instruments and arts for effective Christian worship. What is important for contextualization is understanding culture and theology. Culture is for understanding different people and their traditions from different countries, and theology is for knowledge of the Gospel and how it can be spread to

majority of people who are non-Christian. Using traditional Vietnamese instruments for Christian worship can help evangelize to the Vietnamese people who do not believe in God because it provides the idea that the Vietnamese people can come to know Him while embracing their Vietnamese cultural roots. These ideas are potential to have traditional Vietnamese music as part of Christian worship in Vietnamese churches.

### **Limitations**

Although Vietnamese instruments can be used for Christian worship, there are factors that are needed to be addressed. There may be instruments that were mainly used for Buddhist ceremonies. If those instruments were to be used in churches, it would cause great confusion between different religions. An example would be the Buddhist bell that would be used for Buddhist traditions. Mainly, the bell would be used as a signal or metronome for the monks to chant in unison. Another factor to be taken into consideration is finding a Christian musician who is knowledgeable on arranging traditional instrumental parts in Christian songs. There are not many Vietnamese Christians including Christian musicians. Dance performances are also needed to be taken to consideration since they are part of the Vietnamese culture. The most specific dance would be the lotus flower dance because the dance symbolizes Buddha's birth with the dance mimicking the opening of the lotus flower. If Vietnamese churches were to use this dance performance as part of worship, it could cause confusion as Christianity and Buddhism are contrasting. Outside the music factor, there may be Vietnamese people who would not trust God immediately since the dominant Vietnamese religion is Buddhism. It may be difficult to communicate the Gospel to the Vietnamese community because, sometimes, most people would turn away or does not want to listen. What is important for Christian outreach within the Vietnamese community is patience; what most people need to realize is to never

expect immediate results. While it is possible to have Vietnamese instrument as part Christian worship, these factors are needed up be taken into consideration as there are risks can could happen without knowing them. There are also limitations behind the methodology that was used throughout the research. Having only three participants is a small sample size limitation. Because of this limitation, it was very difficult to generalize the results. Throughout the interview process, it was very difficult to communicate with the participants since they were far away. These are the limitations that are best to analyze before incorporating traditional Vietnamese instruments and music into Christian worship. They help to understand the possible consequences and challenges that may be brought up within the Vietnamese community.

### **Recommendations**

The information that is presented in the thesis has the potential to include traditional Vietnamese music as part of Christian worship in churches. There are steps needed to be taken for future ministry. The most important step is to learn much more about the Vietnamese culture. Because music is part of the Vietnamese culture, learning to play the traditional instrument can be most essential when it comes to Christian worship in Vietnamese churches. One of the best ways to learn these traditional instruments is from musicians who have much knowledge in music to understand better on how they are played and how they can be arranged for majority of songs. Along with that, it is best to listen to a few Vietnamese music songs on the traditional side, along with the more contemporary side, to understand how Vietnamese music has continue to adapt to the modern style while still remaining true to the traditional elements. In order to understand the culture better than the locals is to have mission trips in Vietnam. By traveling to their homeland, people can understand the culture better and listen to authentic Vietnamese music as it can be heard almost everywhere in the country. While listening to Vietnamese music,

it is best to implement the traditional styles and instrumentation into worship music to see how Vietnamese music can be used for Christian worship. When choosing the right instruments, it is best to listen and experiment how they sound and how to play each of them. The instruments have to be ideal for Vietnamese Christian worship without the risk of syncretism because there are a few Vietnamese instruments that are used only for Buddhist practices. The traditional instruments provide a cultural identity for the Vietnamese people, and by using them in Christian worship, the Vietnamese people can come together to worship God while embracing their cultural roots.

Pastor Simon Touprong suggested that the best way to have Vietnamese Christians engage in cultural worship is to cooperate with the worship leader and pastor who have much knowledge in theology, culture, and music, for Vietnamese Christian worship to be done in truth within churches. The important factors for younger Vietnamese Christians who are interested in leading worship are cooperation and communication. Without both of them, worship will be torn apart. What is important for traditional Vietnamese music in Christian churches is to encourage and equip musicians and artists to use their gifts and talents to further God's Kingdom. The data that was covered from Bich-Van also suggests connecting to culture to reach out to the Vietnamese people. Connecting cultural roots helps to understand the Vietnamese culture better to reach out to Vietnamese non-believers. Vietnamese Christian worship can be most effective when traditional instruments are incorporated as part of the music. Events that gather many Vietnamese Christians together, with *Đại Hội* as an example, are needed to be continued as it helps to teach and encourage Vietnamese Christians to spread the Gospel to their people. The event has worship, special tours, music performances, kid programs, and many more that features much about both the Vietnamese culture and the Gospel. This event also encourages

Vietnamese Christians to use the traditions as communication tools to talk about the Gospel. These traditions are part of the Vietnamese culture that every Vietnamese people from all over the world would recognize, and to use them would serve the purposes to both evangelize the Vietnamese people and celebrate the Vietnamese culture. God encourages “new song” as mentioned in the book of Psalms, to praise and honor Him. There are many ways to express that joyful feeling in worship, and it does not have to be done only one way. Because Vietnam has its own traditions, it is best to use them to encourage the Vietnamese people to worship Him and to celebrate the culture that they have been given. Contextualization continues to be an ongoing process as the world constantly changes, just as Vietnamese music continues to change. New questions will be raised by many cultural people who have not heard of the Gospel. If that were to happen, Christians must be able to provide biblical answers. As many people constantly raise questions about the Gospel, Christians can come to a new understanding of the Gospel through continued study and spiritual growth. Vietnam will continue to face many changes as time progresses, but the traditional elements of music will be preserved as beacons of the Vietnamese culture. By analyzing the history and cultural elements behind Vietnamese music, Vietnamese Christians will be able to use the traditions to communicate the biblical message to their people. Music being used in worship is vital for Christian evangelism within the Vietnamese community.

### **Considerations for Future Study**

While doing the research, there are at least two topics that can be studied further for future research into the Vietnamese culture and worship in Vietnamese churches. The first topic for future study is how the Vietnamese people felt during the diaspora, including how living in Vietnam is compared to living in the US or any other country outside of Vietnam. This can provide insight on how Vietnam used to be before the war and the interdiction of traditional

Vietnamese music. While the thesis uncovered the history of Vietnam and its music, it did not address how the people felt about music before and after the Vietnam War. It would also be intriguing to understand how traditional Vietnamese music became more influential after the diaspora in greater detail from the people that were part of the diaspora. The second topic for future study is an updated report of Vietnamese theology as it relates to ideas on incorporating music, tradition, and culture within Vietnamese churches. The thesis provided information on the potential for Vietnamese churches in the US to engage in music, tradition, and culture; however, it did not address the theology that guides the musical, traditional, and cultural engagement for churches in Vietnam. This topic can be insightful for any future mission trips that can occur in Vietnam, especially to encourage evangelism to the Vietnamese community. Mission trips can also provide opportunities for people to experience the Vietnamese culture firsthand and to spread the Gospel to the Vietnamese natives. While exploring Vietnam, the people can learn more about traditional Vietnamese music and a variety of musical instruments to incorporate them into Christian worship and cultural engagement for the Vietnamese natives to worship God and celebrate the culture that they have been given. Just as God encourages music as part of worship, Vietnamese churches can do the same with the traditions that they can use to spread the Gospel to Vietnamese communities all over the world.

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