

CMA's Transformer Station concerts begin with Vietnamese zither virtuoso

by Mike Telin



In his introduction to Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ's January of 2014 [tiny desk concert](#), NPR music producer, Tom Huizenga wrote: "Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ is a veteran when it comes to taking risks, and it pays off in her compelling music."

"As a young girl in Vietnam, she knew she wanted to be a traditional musician, even though it was a world dominated by men. It was risky, then, when she pestered a master teacher

for three years to give her lessons. He finally gave in, taking her on as an apprentice."

On Sunday, October 26 at 7:30 pm in the Transformer Station, The Cleveland Museum of Art's [Performing Arts Series](#) will present the masterful player of the 16-string "dan Tranh"—a zither with moveable bridges — and the pitch-bending monochord dan Bau. After listening to many of her recordings as well as having had a 20-minute telephone conversation with her, I want to thank that master-teacher for finally taking Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ on as a student.

"Because this is my first time in Cleveland, and because many concert/goers have had no experience with Vietnamese art and culture, of course I will include some traditional music," Võ said. "Traditional music in any country, but especially in Vietnam, is a reflection of our culture. It's like looking into a mirror and you see yourself staring back. Our folksongs speak to daily life throughout the various regions of our country. And I'd like to be able to include as much of this as possible during the 70 minutes."

Võ concert will highlight the different traditional instruments and musical genres that are specific to the different regions of Vietnam. She will also introduce her original works that are based in traditional music. "Composing new works is the best way for me to express my inner voice. I think this is something the audience will find interesting."

The concert will also include some re-imagined music. “I like performing music that a western audience will already know, but performed from the point of view of an artist from Vietnam. For example Erik Satie's *Gnossienne No. 3*, performed on the *dan Bau*, the traditional Vietnamese monocord. It has a single string, but by bending it with a kind of whammy bar made from buffalo horn you can change the pitch. The instrument was invented by the beggars, and in any society, beggars are considered to be on the lowest rung of the ladder. Because they didn't have anything, they invented an instrument that is so simple, but yet it has so many characteristics of the human voice.”

Võ went on to explain that at first that the *dan Bau* was not accepted as part of the Royal Court ensemble but eventually the King and Queen were forced to allow it because the instrument was loved by everyone. “I think it is important to walk the audience behind the scenes of the sounds of the instruments, because most likely these sounds will be new to the audience. I want the audience to go home having had a good experience with music that is new to them, as well as more information about Vietnamese culture. I want the audience to be able to make music with me, so there will be some audience participation. I hope this will be the first of many return visits to Cleveland. I want to be able to dig deeper into the music and culture of Vietnam.”

Now based in San Francisco, Võ said that her invitation to perform on the CMA Series is due in large part to a very kind recommendation from the Kronos Quartet, especially David Harrington. The Cleveland appearance also coincides with a three-day residency at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, and a solo concert at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. “It will be a nice, small tour of the Midwest.”

In fact it is the Kronos Quartet members who have been influential in bringing Võ's music to western audiences through collaborations such as *All Clear*, a work that addresses the suffering of women and children and of the many innocent people who were caught in the middle of the Vietnam War.

Have the Kronos collaborations informed her own compositions? “The first thing I need to say is that in a perfect world, I wish that all artists would have the opportunity to work with the Kronos Quartet. You learn a lot from them, but you can also share a lot with them. So it is a mutual working relationship,” Võ said. “They have been working with traditional artists for many years. But because of my training at the conservatory in Vietnam, I am able to read and write music, which makes it easier for me to work with western classical musicians. I am also well trained by the traditional artist masters, so my traditional side is also very strong. We could easily talk to one another and share ideas. It felt very natural.”

How did Van-Anh Vanessa Võ first meet the Kronos? Like so many, has been a longtime fan of the Quartet and after attending a performance of *911*, she was so moved she had to say hello. “They asked me what I do. I told them about myself and David Harrington invited me to their office the following day. It turned out they had been looking for the right traditional Vietnamese musician to collaborate with for some time.”

Võ said she went to the Kronos offices the following day and recalls how impressed she was with their musical collection of recordings of Vietnamese music, recordings she was not able to get herself. “We spent a lot of time together, then they asked me to write a five minute piece. I had never written for string quartet, but I did. They listened to the mock-up and looked at the music I sent them, then they asked me for a 30 minute piece.”

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