

CMA: Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ lights up Transformer Station (Oct. 26)

by Jarrett Hoffman



Some performers like to talk to the audience during a concert, providing insight into the program, inviting them to get up and dance, or maybe just shooting the breeze. Last Sunday night, October 26, on the Cleveland Museum of Art's Performing Arts Series at Transformer Station in Ohio City, Vietnamese traditional performer and composer Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ took audience participation a step further.

A few volunteers got to join in on clinking teacups and wooden blocks to play with her in a call-and-response, then add musical commentary in another piece. Charm was on full display in a highly impressive and varied concert by the virtuosic Võ, who performed on three traditional instruments as well as drum and voice.

Making her first visit to Cleveland, Võ started out the evening with a traditional piece from northern Vietnam played on the đàn tranh, a plucked zither. The piece was beautifully paced by Võ, who allowed sounds to reverberate with lovely vibrato into pauses, creating bridges from phrase to phrase.

Next, Võ moved to the theremin-like đàn Bầu, a single-stringed instrument with a pitch-bending buffalo horn, for music from central Vietnam. Long considered a beggar's instrument, the monochord sounded almost human, evoking cries from distant times. Võ's mastery was clear. It was fascinating to watch her control the horn, her every careful push and pull finding the right pitch, every gentle flick or shake inflecting it.

One of the highlights on đàn Bầu was a gorgeous rendition of Erik Satie's *Gnossiennes No. 3*. Knowing and reflective, the performance sounded like music that would accompany ending credits to a film. It retained Satie's melancholy, adding the sense of another world.

Võ's laptop, which provided accompaniment for the Satie, played a greater role in other pieces. Techno and hip-hop beats, as well as sampled sounds from daily life in Vietnam, like fire crackling, children playing, and rain falling, came together with the traditional instruments and Võ's singing. The interplay was compelling, but the pre-recorded electronics at times undermined the live performance, robbing it of its spontaneity.

Returning to the đàn tranh and đàn Bầu throughout the concert, Võ saved the awe-inspiring đàn T'rung for last — a bamboo xylophone laid out like a torso of bones. Armed with double-headed mallets, she performed the title track to her album *Three-Mountain Pass*, asking the audience once more to step in and participate, filling the role of Taiko drummer by clapping or stomping in accompaniment. Soon she had the whole room going like a family band, and if the group's rhythm faltered at times, you could blame her entrancing playing.

She capped off the piece with an energetic solo, her mallets dancing all over the instrument, making it rock and sway like a hammock in the wind. And then she graciously applauded — for us, the clappers and stompers of the world. Sure, we filled our role capably enough. And to have Võ come back to Cleveland, we'd happily do it again.

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