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Việt Nam News

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Theatre appreciation slow to take hold

The inaugural LA International New Music Festival in Los Angeles will take place from May 9 to May 26 and feature compositions from around the world, including Viet Nam. Two-time Grammy Award-winning conductor and artistic director of Southwest Chamber Music, which is presenting the event, Jeff von der Schmidt, talks with **Nguyen Phan Que Mai** about this year's festival.

Inner Sanctum: Mr Jeff von der Schmidt, congratulations on Southwest Chamber Music's celebration of its 25th season. You are organising the first LA International New Music Festival. Could you tell us about this new event?



Our festival will feature 25 compositions in four concerts on May 9, 12, 21, and 26. We have world premieres from Vu Nhat Tan, Unsuk Chin, Hyo-shin Na and Ton That Tiet. Composers in attendance include Vu Nhat Tan from Viet Nam, Unsuk Chin from South Korea/Berlin, Hyo-shin Na from South Korea/San Francisco, Gabriela Ortiz from Mexico City, Kurt Rohde from San Francisco, Alexandra du Bois from New York City and Anne LeBaron from Los Angeles. The six soloists include soprano Elissa Johnston and bass-baritone Evan Hughes (both of whom sang with Southwest Chamber Music in Ha Noi in 2006 and 2010, respectively); baritone Abdiel Gonzalez, Vo Van Anh (playing dan bau, dan tranh and t'rung); and poet Bruce Weigl and his Vietnamese daughter Hanh Weigl. The concerts take place in downtown Los Angeles on the Grand Avenue Arts Corridor at the Colburn School, a prestigious location for new music on the West Coast.

Inner Sanctum: What is the main purpose of this festival? And why did you decide to have your ensemble perform the works of two Vietnamese composers (Vu Nhat Tan's The Song of Napalm and Cracking Bamboo, and Ton That Tiet's Miroir, Memoire)?

I was looking for a way to integrate Southwest's experiences from Vienna to Viet Nam, Phnom Penh to Washington DC, Angkor Wat to UNAM in Mexico City or Guadalajara all connected by the reputation resulting from two Grammy Awards and seven nominations, three from the Latin Academy. In other words, we were no longer "one-hit wonders" getting started. Over time, our group biography has come to reflect the community of Los Angeles in all its complexity, a civic responsibility our colleagues on the East Coast or in Europe do not face.

In particular our ensemble has a deep relationship with Viet Nam. In 2008, we received a major grant from the US State Department to produce the Ascending Dragon Music Festival and Cultural Exchange, the largest cultural exchange in history between the United States and Viet Nam. Four composers-in-residence were appointed: Pham

Minh Thanh and Vu Nhat Tan from Ha Noi, Viet Nam, and Alexandra du Bois of New York City and Kurt Rohde of San Francisco in the United States. The Ascending Dragon Music Festival and Cultural Exchange consisted of six weeks of cultural exchange, three in Viet Nam and three in the United States. Nineteen Americans travelled to Viet Nam, and 19 Vietnamese travelled to the United States, participating in concerts, educational activities and cultural leadership workshops. Between February 27 and May 3, 2010 more than 4,500 audience members attended 12 festival concerts in both countries, and 700 Los Angeles County children participated in school concerts featuring the Vietnamese musicians. The Ascending Dragon Music Festival also celebrated the 1,000th anniversary of the City of Ha Noi.

Ascending Dragon opened a huge door for the musical lives of the United States and Viet Nam. And in many ways our invitation to Vu Nhat Tan to return to Los Angeles for our 2012 festival is the "next step" after Ascending Dragon. Ton That Tiet's new piece is a thank you present for Southwest's engagement with Viet Nam.

Inner Sanctum: Could you provide us with information about the works by two Vietnamese composers (Vu Nhat Tan's *The Song of Napalm*, *Cracking Bamboo* and Ton That Tiet's *Miroir*, *Memoire*)?

The Song of Napalm by Vu Nhat Tan is set to a poem by the noted poet and Viet Nam veteran Bruce Weigl. The searingly vivid text describes the "Napalm girl", Phan Thi Kim Phuc, immortalised in Nick Ut's 1972 photo of a young Vietnamese girl, clothes burnt off her body, holding her arms like wings and running toward the camera. It is sung by bass-baritone Evan Hughes and spoken by Weigl's adopted Vietnamese daughter Hanh. *The Song of Napalm* is composed for an eleven-piece chamber ensemble which includes the pre-eminent dan bau, t'rung and dan tranh master Van Anh Vanessa Vo. A second Tan commission is *Cracking Bamboo*, an improvisatory piece played from charts and conducted by the composer.



Building musical ties: Members of the Ascending Dragon Ensemble on the steps of Ha Noi Opera House in 2010. — Photo Courtesy of the Southwest Chamber Music

Ton That Tiet, now living in Paris, is a long-time friend of Southwest and presented them with *Miroir*, *Memoire* on their visit to the French capital. Composed for Southwest as a string quartet, the work is the continuation of a series of three works for string quartet and string trio. The series is about the Perfume River that flows through Hue, Viet Nam, where the composer was born. *Miroir*, *Memoire* was inspired by a poem of Li Po, which speaks of man and nature.

Inner Sanctum: *Out of the many veteran poets who wrote about the Viet Nam War, you selected Bruce Weigl and proposed Vu Nhat Tan write music based on Weigl's poetry. Why did you choose Weigl?*

This is hard to believe but I did not know Bruce Weigl until after we completed *Ascending Dragon*! I was introduced to him by a friend in New York City who predicted we would get along famously. After our first conversations, I read the poems he sent me and thought that here was the material for an important collaboration with Vu Nhat Tan. And wouldn't you know it – the first email I received in Paris was from Vu Nhat Tan telling me he and Bruce were meeting in Ha Noi the very day my wife and I were meeting in Paris with Ton That Tiet for the first time! So I have yet to meet Bruce Weigl but Tan has worked with him since May of 2011.

Bruce Weigl's poetry is so moving – challenging, honest, direct. The American War, to us in the United States the Vietnam War, still shapes American ideas in both negative and positive ways. Weigl's poetry conveys a love of Viet Nam and bears witness to the human cost of war. His story Lost in Ha Noi brings tears to my eyes every time I read it.

Inner Sanctum: Bruce Weigl's poem Song of Napalm is very well-known in the US. Vu Nhat Tan's The Song of Napalm should breath new life into it. What effects do you expect this musical piece to have on American audiences?

Audiences are never uniform but a collection of individuals who decide to listen to music that interests them. So I can't speak for other people but I will make a prediction based on my first reading of the score. Tan's solution to the complexities of the American Vietnamese relationship is to have the poem read and or sung in both English and Vietnamese. Sometimes they are confusingly read and sung at the same time, sometimes in English only, sometimes in Vietnamese only. The moments where the English or Vietnamese become isolated are truly inspired. The final result after my first reading was devastating – all of my experiences building this new musical relationship with the United States with Viet Nam flashed before my eyes very quickly in an instant. I needed quite a while to come back to earth. So it is up to me to inspire that in our musicians so hopefully the audience will feel the same thing I felt at first sight of the score.

Viet Nam News readers might be interested to know that Michael Huynh, the son of the photographer of the Napalm girl (Nick Ut), is on Southwest's board of directors. We hope Nick Ut comes to the Vu Nhat Tan premiere, as he lives close to us in Monterey Park.

Inner Sanctum: You directed many performances in Viet Nam as part of the Ascending Dragon Music Festival and Cultural Exchange project. Could you share with us your special memories of those performances, as well as your impressions of Viet Nam?

There are so many! But I'll focus on the most powerful. I had the great privilege in 1980 of meeting and shaking Aaron Copland's hand while I was at Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony. The last piece we played in Ha Noi for Ascending Dragon was Copland's iconic Appalachian Spring, a work that is the unofficial national anthem of America for American musicians. I looked at my hand and tried to remember grasping Copland's in 1980, hoping his energy would come back to me when I needed it. And before starting the performance and turning my mind totally towards the music and musicians, I thought about all the lost lives of the Vietnam War, in particular the Americans who died so far away from home. It was a complete shock and totally unexpected. Dr Thanh, the rector of the Vietnam National Academy, met me back stage with his wife after the performance. He put his arm around my shoulder and said, "We've come so far from the bombs."

I find Viet Nam and all of Southeast Asia magical. For me the cultural legacy of Buddhism creates acceptance that gives people a vocabulary for forgiveness and next steps. "What you have is all you need" is a good motto. And make no mistake Viet Nam is on the move. And I believe that cultural leadership is a great barometer of a nation's determination.

Inner Sanctum: The poem Song of Napalm, written by Bruce Weigl, is already well-known in Viet Nam. I am sure Vu Nhat Tan's The Song of Napalm will be highly appreciated by Vietnamese audiences. When can we expect to see this work performed in Viet Nam?

Let's hope so!

Inner Sanctum: How much does the American public know about Vietnamese music and what are you doing to promote further understanding and friendship between the US and Viet Nam via music?

The American public won't know much if they don't come to our concerts – we've paid extra fees for US premiere rights to music for both Nguyen Thien Dao and Ton That Tiet. That's a very good and practical way to understand that Southwest is doing its part! But it is changing – I know my friend David Harrington of the Kronos Quartet is playing a new work of Vo Van Anh in May. I think Ascending Dragon was the beginning.

Inner Sanctum: Do you have future plans to perform in Viet Nam?

I certainly hope so and we'll see what develops after spending two months with Vu Nhat Tan! He is travelling from Ha Noi to be with us and his visit is supported by the Asia Cultural Council in New York City.

Inner Sanctum: Finally, you have selected the young Vietnamese composer Vu Nhat Tan twice to work with you on major productions. What can you say about Vu Nhat Tan? What makes him such an outstanding composer and how does the American audience react to his music?

Tan is a born leader, but with a quiet and humble personality. Bruce Weigl described his first response to a CD I sent him of Tan's Ascending Dragon as if he'd been waiting his whole life to hear these sounds. And that, as the great American jazz pianist Art Tatum said, "he uses the whole piano", meaning the ideas Tan has are broad. But American audiences responded to his Ky Uc (Memory) on the last Ascending Dragon concert in May of 2010 with a mid-concert standing ovation. I've never seen anything like it in my career – and so we will return to Ky Uc to conclude the opening concert of the first LA International New Music Festival! — VNS



Lakeside view: Jeff von der Schmidt stands by Hoan Kiem Lake in the heart of Ha Noi. — Photo Courtesy of the Southwest Chamber Music