THE SYNCRETIC ART AND HISTORY OF VIETNAMESE VỌNG CỔ MUSIC

Clair Hoang Khuong Nguyen

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THE SYNCRETIC ART AND HISTORY OF VIETNAMESE VỌNG CỔ MUSIC

by

Clair Hoang Khuong Nguyen

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Music Theory, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2018

Thesis Sponsor:

May 5, 2018
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Poundie Burstein

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Ya-Hui Cheng
Abstract

The syncretic Vietnamese vọng cổ music has much potential as an area of academic and theoretical research. Roughly translated to “longing for the old traditions,” vọng cổ is a modern 20th-century genre that combines traditional Eastern instrumentation and modal practices with Westernized concepts of cadence, meter, intervals, and form. It is all at once a composition, singing melody, instrumental improvisatory practice, and patterned cyclic structure. Vọng cổ is orally transmitted and leaves much to be documented and analyzed in terms of its modal scale system and musical practices. The increasing lack of instrumental performers and teachers, compounded by the rapidly Westernizing and modernizing youth of both Vietnam and the post-Vietnam War diaspora, contributes to the fading preservation of vọng cổ music.

Previous research on Vietnamese music have individually focused on Vietnamese modal scales, tuning and pitch systems, traditional instrumentation, and cultural implications. While there are English and Vietnamese online entries regarding basic concepts of vọng cổ, there are few in-depth studies or comprehensive guidelines on this topic.

This study illustrates the origins and concept of vọng cổ, its associated scalar modes, and the basics of its form. It will touch upon musical features such as cadences, rhythm, and modulation related to vọng cổ music. Altogether, these aspects contribute to practical performance that defines stylistic tendencies specific to vọng cổ musicians of Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora.
Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my deepest gratitude and heartfelt love to my teachers, friends, and family who have made my life’s journey so beautiful—today and evermore. I would not change a thing.

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Introduction

1.1 Opening Remarks

*Vọng cổ* is a traditional southern Vietnamese music form that fuses traditional Eastern instrumentation and modal practices with Westernized concepts of cadence, meter, intervals, and form. It is all at once a composition, singing melody, instrumental improvisatory practice, and patterned cyclic structure. A *vọng cổ* performance comprises of two musical components: the singer and the improvisatory instrumental accompaniment. This oral tradition is preserved mostly by the transmission of the vocal component, and modern-day *vọng cổ* communities more often recognize and encourage singers than they do instrumentalists. This mentality is best summarized by McLeod and Nguyen in their entry on Vietnamese music and performing arts: “Vietnamese music is...in a society in which amateur and professional singing (*ca hat*) are highly appreciated in festive gatherings, it stresses the voice rather than the instrument.”¹

The increasing lack of instrumental performers and teachers, compounded by the rapidly Westernizing and modernizing youth of both Vietnam and the post-Vietnam War diaspora, contributes to the fading preservation of *vọng cổ* music, especially the instrumental component. *Vọng cổ* lessons are limited to specialized schools or private lessons with practitioners wherever willing and available; this is most possible in Vietnam or concentrated diasporic Vietnamese communities. Online resources such as YouTube serve as a source for how-to videos on performing *vọng cổ*. However, the videos differ in their concepts of pitch, word or number notation, and stylistic practices. Oral instruction and learning of riffs, note-by-note, is the consistent pedagogical method. This method is aimed towards amateur musicians, especially

those who do not read western pitch notation. However, I believe that vọng cổ music, especially the instrumental component, can also be appreciated and preserved among musically-trained circles, whether classically inclined or not. That is why this study seeks to provide information and accessibility to basic vọng cổ concepts of notation, mode, improvisation, and form.

Previous research on Vietnamese music have individually focused on Vietnamese modal scales, tuning and pitch systems, traditional instrumentation, and cultural implications. While there are some English online entries on the basic concepts of vọng cổ, there are few in-depth studies or comprehensive guidelines on this topic. Traditional Vietnamese music masters such as Vĩnh Bảo Nguyên, Văn Khê Trần, and Thuyết Phong Nguyên have produced English-language works that discuss related topics, but the handful of works produced by these authors usually predate the year 2000.

Vĩnh Bảo Nguyên had the experiences of being a music professor in Vietnam (Saigon National Conservatory of Music) as well as a visiting professor at Southern Illinois Conservatory. His online essay “Introduction to Vietnamese Music” is one of the more detailed overviews of traditional Vietnamese music, its history, and its notation system, modes, and its pedagogical aspects. The 11-page document is concise, offering basic summaries and lists of various related topics. What is useful are Nguyên’s lists of Vietnamese solmization system and Western pitch equivalences that allow a better understanding of Vietnamese pitch and notation concepts. For the most part, the document tackles the surface-most level of traditional Vietnamese music and ends with advocacy for the art form. Aside from authoring online

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3 Ibid.
documents such as this, Nguyễn maintains a local school for traditional musicians and an online presence through websites, forums, and e-mail. He also gives lectures on traditional Vietnamese music on YouTube where many of his performance and pedagogy videos are made available by various YouTube users including his students. However, Nguyễn’s strong preference for oral instruction has left behind few written sources or instructional documents regarding vọng cổ, specifically.

Văn Khê Trần has produced various articles on specific facets of traditional Vietnamese music. He often focuses on one topic at a time, whether on East Asian scale systems or Vietnamese culture, music, and traditional instruments. Vọng cổ usually comes by as a sub-topic in his works. Trần has also produced encyclopedia entries with fellow author Thuyết Phong Nguyễn on Vietnamese music.

Thuyết Phong Nguyễn (he also writes his name without diacritics as Phong T. Nguyen or Nguyễn Thuyet Phong) is another author who covers Vietnamese music and vọng cổ in English-language studies and overviews. He has authored a chapter in The Garland Handbook of Southeast Asian Music and produced interdisciplinary research including a scientific study on perception and Vietnamese modal scales. One of his most innovative contributions is a table of

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Vietnamese modal scales featured in his many writings. The table imposes flexible Vietnamese notes over quasi-western notation, clearly illustrating the fluidity and microtonality of Vietnamese scales as opposed to fixed Western pitches.

The three authors remain leading resources on English-language research on Vietnamese music but do not feature vọng cổ as their main research topic. However, Vietnamese-language vọng cổ resources are also available, with more specific details on history, pedagogy, and performance practice. Beyond the Vietnamese Wikipedia, there exist a community of online vọng cổ musicians and pedagogues who circulate their lead sheets and how-to videos for the interested. Authors of these documents and medium are not scholars but rather practicing musicians who perform as a job (or side-job) or as a hobby. For example, websites such as vongco.vn, trinhnu.net, and vietnamclassical.wordpress.com provide archives of user-submitted lyrics, music, and documents focused on vọng cổ. For instance, a writer under the name Giòng Bách Việt has a posted document on vietnamclassical.wordpress.com, made available to anyone who accesses the site, with an in-depth explanation on Vietnamese pentatonicism and its various modes. On the same website, Lưu Viên Nguyên has a posted document specifically purposed to helping readers learn how to appreciate vọng cổ music. Vĩnh Phạm has a webpage dedicated to detailing common practice conventions and performance guides to vọng cổ music. There are countless sources such as the ones listed and referenced in this study. However, Vietnamese-language vọng cổ sources often lack the depth and explanation of vọng cổ’s internal musical

intricacies. They are mostly how-to websites or overviews of specific songs, instances, and related topics.

A specialized academic Vietnamese-language textbook regarding vọng cổ is, however, yet to be found. These sources on the vọng cổ genre has left many unanswered questions. Complicating matters for Western audiences, problems arise when attempting to translate the Vietnamese modal into Western pitch notation and concepts, especially with Vietnamese language-based sources. Nevertheless, the syncretic southern Vietnamese vọng cổ music has much potential as an area of academic and theoretical research. This study will demonstrate how the Vietnamese music theory that circulates within vọng cổ music circles can be conceptually translated into Western music theory concepts for study and understanding.

1.2 Traditional Vietnamese Music and its Influences

Vọng cổ music’s syncretic origins is shaped by a long-standing relationship with China, colonial rule under France, and contact with the Champa (Chăm Pa) Kingdom (and its associated Indian influences). Western music was introduced in Roman Catholic and French schools or entertainment programs for French officials, and the Vietnamese were exposed to Western popular music genres and concepts of meter and formal balance. Vọng cổ’s formal framework (see Chapter III) utilizes the idea of cadence as punctuation, much like that of Western music, to unify its melodious heterophonic improvisations into a singular musical performance.

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6 Phong T. Nguyen, “Vietnam,” *The Garland Handbook of Southeast Asian Music*, Terry Miller & Sean Williams, eds. (Routledge, 2008), 284. Nguyen goes in-depth on how Roman Catholicism and French colonialism affected the Vietnamese musical setting and how Western concepts were transmitted and embraced by the Vietnamese people as history progressed.
Throughout its history, Vietnam’s geographic location has allowed the country contact and access to various art and musical cultures, hence the notable similarities among Vietnamese, East Asian, and Southeast Asian music and instruments. Traditional Vietnamese instruments such as the đàn nhị (2-string fiddle) is related to Chinese huqin bowed string instruments. The Vietnamese đàn tranh (zither), bear similarities to Chinese and Japanese plucked string instruments, namely the guqin and the koto. One of Vietnam’s cultural instruments, the trống cơm (“rice drum”), is a percussive instrument that, according to Văn Khê Trần and Thuyết Phong Nguyễn, is “similar to the south Indian mṛdaṅgam” and “may be Indian in origin, since it was introduced into Vietnam through the former kingdom of Champa.” To further this observation, Trần explains in his own article on Vietnamese culture and music by stating:

In Vietnamese art both Chinese and Indian influences can be distinguished – for example in the use of onomatopoeia as a method of teaching drum-playing and in the use of modal concepts. The assimilation of Chinese and Indian elements is apparent as well in traditional painting, architecture, script, theatre, etc.

The deepest similarities of vọng cổ to Chinese and Indian music are far beyond the scope of this paper. However, a look at the basic musical principles of each tradition can provide much insight to vọng cổ music. Vọng cổ’s modal, scalar, sentimental, and microtonal concepts are like that of the Indian raga, a term referring to a specific collection of pitches that constitute a melodic concept. Vietnamese modes, while reminiscent of Chinese pentatonicism, may feature half-steps and semitones (hemitonic pentatonicism) more resonant of Indian raga. While

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Vietnam’s relationship to India is not as immediate or direct as that of China and France, it is possible that direct relationship with Champa provided Vietnam with Indian musical concepts that may add new ideas to conceptualizing melodicism and mode (for more, see Chapter II).

As Trân and Nguyên note: “Because of [Vietnam’s] multicultural status, it is impossible to define a uniquely Vietnamese music.”

Vietnam is presently home to a diversity of 54 ethnic groups, many with ties to surrounding countries Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. Contact with the Champa Kingdom brought more practices and music of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, adding more tonal possibilities to Vietnamese religious musicians’ improvisatory repertoire. Such multiculturalism is perhaps why many people, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese, may feel that it is difficult to pinpoint a specifically Vietnamese music. For instance, the Chinese pentatonic scale, traditional instruments, folk music, theater forms, and artistic culture have found their way to Vietnam during the nearly 1,000 years of Chinese rule beginning 111 B.C. Yet, as legendary vọng cổ and nhạc tài tử master Vĩnh Bảo Nguyên argues, traditional Vietnamese music is not simply cut-and-paste:

Along with Chinese literature, architecture, government, and religion, Vietnam had adopted Chinese music models and developed music of her own. However, in the process of adaptation, the system was likely reshaped by the Vietnamese people according to their own well established habit.

Vọng cổ developed over time through a transformational process evolved by a Vietnamese musical culture that expanded as Vietnamese countrymen settled southward. Like most

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10 Ibid.

11 Vĩnh Bảo Nguyên, 01.
Vietnamese music, **vọng cổ** is syncretic and diverse in its influences, incorporating Chinese, Indian, and Southeast Asian tonalities, modality, and instruments alongside Western concepts brought about by French colonialism and increased contact with modernizing Western culture. Yet no matter its origins, **vọng cổ** has unique conventions regarding the use of pitch, scales, modes, and notation. Pentatonic scales are a part of **vọng cổ**, but the addition of tones, pitch-bending, and ornamentation genre create the basis for **vọng cổ**’s main pitch set, a modal heptatonic scale. The current **vọng cổ** 32-bar form, which will be later discussed, may align with a basic Western idea of form, but **vọng cổ**’s lack of tonal and functional harmonic progression sets it apart from traditional Western practices.

### 1.3 History and Origins of Vọng Cổ Music

There are many varieties and genre of music even within indigenous Vietnamese music. Presently, traditional Vietnamese music is categorized based on their origins, distinct regional practices, and area of proliferation. As Trần and Nguyễn note:

> The musical practice and theory of the Việt people are featured in the professional training schools in the four main regions: north, central, south-central and south. Although historically related to each other, each region has its own system of folk, chamber, theatrical and religious music.\(^{12}\)

> The origin of the southern **vọng cổ** traces back to the *nhạc tài tử* (“amateur’s music”) chamber genre originated from the central region (*Miền Trung*), an area rich in traditional arts

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\(^{12}\) Trần and Nguyễn, “Vietnam, Socialist Republic of (Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam),” *Grove Music Online*. 


and home of the royal capital of Huế. The word tài tử is often translated as “amateur,” but the concept of tài tử would more appropriately be that of a “scholar” or the “talented” who performed nhạc tài tử in private gatherings and small circles. Music was not their main profession but rather a form of social and intellectual expressionism.

Nhạc tài tử originated in the Central Hue region and featured small-ensemble improvisation with instruments used in classical Vietnamese opera and theatre; that is, hát bội, meaning “masked theater.” Hát bội musicians eventually moved southward where they found work with other traditional musical genres including ritual and religious music. They sought to preserve their instrumental art form and would often gather after work practice improvisation on their daily melodies and work-related.¹³ The music that the artists practiced in the day influenced the evening improvisatory sessions, vice versa. This is how the ensemble instrumentation, music theory, and improvisatory nature of nhạc tài tử carried over to the southern vọng cổ genre.

There is a popular belief that vọng cổ also developed from the oral transmission and transformation of a specific composition, “Dạ cổ hoài lang,” credited to Sáu Lầu (“Sixth Lau,” true name Cao Văn Lầu).¹⁴ The song became so popular that it was taken, improvised upon, and transformed into the present vọng cổ form. There is good reason, however, to understand that the underlying basis of “Dạ cổ hoài lang,” not solely the composition itself, served an influential origin of vọng cổ. According to Cannon, who had his firsthand studies with Master (Nhạc Sư) Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn, “Dạ cổ hoài lang” can be seen as a culmination of improvisational and musical practices that migrated from Central to South Vietnam.¹⁵ The success of “Dạ cổ hoài

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¹³ Cannon, 126.

¹⁴ Ibid., 145. The Vietnamese and English Wikipedia and most Vietnamese entries regarding vọng cổ tell the same story.
“Dạ cổ hoài lang” could very well be a response to the growing interest in the underlying art form leading to vọng cổ singing and improvisation. In this sense, vọng cổ could be understood as having evolved from transforming “Dạ cổ hoài lang,” in the same vein that “Dạ cổ hoài lang” historically developed from its prior nhạc tài tử repertory.

Though vọng cổ’s true origins cannot be exactly pinpointed, the genre itself is a twentieth-century innovation, with most sources suggesting sometime between 1917–1920 as the year of its emergence. To Vietnamese people, it is considered a traditional art form that contrasts the saturation of native and international popular music now abundant in both Vietnam and diasporic Vietnamese communities. Owing to its present-day practices and performances, however, the genre treads the fine line between traditional and modern arts. The traditional ensemble of the nhạc tài tử genre have now been replaced by fewer modern instruments such as an electric guitar or pitch-bending keyboard. In other words, a group of five traditional performers could be quickly replaced by one or two musicians using electronic instruments. It is easier to travel with fewer instruments and saves money in buying and maintaining multiple instruments. In modern vọng cổ, a large ensemble would have about four people: a singer, a guitarist, a keyboardist, and one traditional instrument. However, the most common and cost-effective vọng cổ ensemble is a keyboardist and a singer—or better yet, a singing keyboardist.

For the sake of interest and modernity, vọng cổ cycles now insert popular tunes in break sections, further fusing traditional and modern arts. However, the basis of this oral tradition remains traditional in its pedagogy and theory, with much of the information embedded in instrumental improvisation.

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15 Cannon, 146.
1.4 Instrumentation

Traditionally, vọng cổ music is performed by an ensemble of traditional instruments also used in hát bội and nhạc tài tử. The individual players create polyphony with individual heterophony by improvising freely and only coming together with the singer at certain cadential points. Ensemble instruments include the đàn bầu (monochord), đàn kim (2-string moon lute), đàn nhị (2-string fiddle), đàn tranh (zither), đàn tỳ bà (4-string, pear pipa), lục huyền cầm (6-string lute), and the song loan (woodblock). Additionally, the đòn sến is used to substitute the đàn kim whenever necessary, either because the former is preferred or later is not available. These instruments are tuned by ear and sometimes give off an out-of-tune impression to Western listeners.

Figure 1.1. A Vietnamese đàn tranh. Photography by Mai Thanh Mai.

Figure 1.2. A Vietnamese đàn kim. Photography by Mai Thanh Mai.
Each instrument has its specific fretboard-based tuning, and some have word-notation systems specific to the instrument’s topography. For example, the đàn tranh is a sixteen-string zither that uses a set of pitches with names like those used on the lục huyền cầm. However, the broad range of the đàn tranh requires more than one name for its pitch-class equivalent notes to express direction. In other words, a hò (scale degree 1) would be called lieu an octave higher and liu two octaves higher (Figure 1.3). Instruments with fewer strings or shorter fretboard may use hò and liu as scale degrees 1 and 8, skipping over the lieu of the đàn tranh. More information regarding Vietnamese music notation will be discussed in Chapter II.

Figure 1.3. Non-octave-equivalence in đàn tranh music (example not at pitch).

Of all the instruments, the song loan plays a pivotal role in defining the vọng cổ form and is the main communicator among the instrumentalists as well as between accompaniment and singer. The instrumentalist in charge of a song loan signals the mid-cadence and final cadence of a vọng cổ verse. Depending on style and necessity, a song loan player can also signal musical changes, instrumental breaks, or tempo change. The song loan is a simple instrument that emits a loud click when the tapping mechanism is pressed by the foot.

Modern instrumentation has replaced a majority of the traditional ensemble with the ghi-ta phẩm lôm (scalloped-fret guitar, acoustic or electric) and the song loan (woodblock) also
tapped by the guitarist. This modern vọng cổ instrumentation is more convenient for vọng cổ improvisers in terms of cost-effectiveness and travel. Whenever available, traditional strings or another ghi-ta phẩm lộm is used to supplement the main guitarist.

Figure 1.4. A Vietnamese electric ghi-ta phẩm lộm. Photography by Mai Thanh Mai.

Figure 1.5. A Vietnamese song loan. Photography by Catherine Nguyen.
Recently, the pitch-bending keyboard, called *đàn organ*, has risen in popularity for its versatility, ease of learning, and programmable tracks and effects. Its long-term benefits also include the instrument’s longevity and cutting the costs and necessity of tuning and repairs. Admittedly, the keyboard has moved the *vòng cổ* genre to an even more modern instrumentation of fixed tuning and further away from its origins as a plucked-strings ensemble genre.

Simultaneously, the increased use of *đàn organ* encourages standardizing a system of teaching *vòng cổ* that is relatable to the Western method of keyboard pedagogy. More so than on stringed instruments, establishing definitions for pitch equivalents and pitch patterning is necessary to the comprehension and successful execution of *vòng cổ* on the keyboard with unnatural pitch-bending. And the first step in doing so has been to translate and organize the notation systems, scales, and modes of the *vòng cổ* genre.
II. Notation Systems, Scales, and Modes

2.1 Vietnamese Notation Systems and Scales

The Vietnamese musical language uses syllables and solmization instead of standard musical notation. Prior to French Colonialism and the creation of the Vietnamese alphabet, the ancient Vietnamese people used the logographic chữ Nôm, a writing system based on the Chinese writing system (known as chữ Hán or chữ nho). The introduction of the 29-letter Vietnamese alphabet (chữ Quốc ngữ) switched a character-based music notation system to a solmization of the traditional Vietnamese solfege still in use today.¹⁶ As a result, the characters used to signify pitches were romanized into letter-based names. There are two major scale systems—a pentatonic and heptatonic system—central to the understanding of vọng cờ, and their solfege are used to syllabically notate traditional Vietnamese music.

When approximating Western-pitch equivalents of Vietnamese scales for this study, scale degrees were based on a synthesis of various sources, written and media, for the commonality and frequency of a pitch and any given scale degree. There were times when different written sources and vọng cờ musicians have different pitch equivalents for a syllable. These have proven to be contingent on their perception of pitch-bending, ornamentation, and intervallic relativity to their given starting pitch. The varied pitches were taken for their supposed intent, based on the nature of vọng cờ music and the pitch’s contextual function in an improvisational line.

2.1.1 Notation Systems and Solfege

The instrumental limitations of certain traditional vong cổ instruments such as the đàn nhã, đàn kìm, and đàn nguyệt (2-string moon lute) allow them to be tuned only to a basic pentatonic scale represented by Chinese characters of gong, shang, jiao, zhi, and yu. The pitches depend on the key of the tuned instrument but roughly translate to Western pitch scale degrees 1-2-3-5-6, with each correlating to the respective characters gong (1), shang (2), jiao (3), zhi (5), and yu (6). For example, a major pentatonic scale beginning on C as gong (1) would feature pitches C-D-E-G-A. There are five modes to this traditional East Asian anhemitonic pentatonic scale; they are the product of rotational pentatonicism in traditional Chinese music. This means that that the main scale, which begins on gong (1), can be rotated to begin on each note to create a new mode based on the starting pitch and the intervallic values between a given strain of notes. Figure 2.1 further illustrates this point.

Figure 2.1. Chinese Pentatonic Scale with Vietnamese Solmization Equivalents.\(^{17}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese solmization</th>
<th>Vietnamese Equivalents</th>
<th>Pitches of Each Mode</th>
<th>Intervallic Patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gong</td>
<td>Cung</td>
<td>C-D-E-G-A (PENT(_{0,2}))</td>
<td>2-2-3-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shang</td>
<td>Thương</td>
<td>D-E-G-A-C (PENT(_{2,2}))</td>
<td>2-3-2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiao</td>
<td>Gióc</td>
<td>E-G-A-C-D (PENT(_{4,7}))</td>
<td>3-2-3-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhi</td>
<td>Chuy</td>
<td>G-A-C-D-E (PENT(_{7,9}))</td>
<td>2-3-2-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu</td>
<td>Yù (or Vù)</td>
<td>A-C-D-E-G (PENT(_{9,0}))</td>
<td>3-2-2-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This pentatonic scale system is important to vồng cò because two of the rotations, the **thương** (shang) and **chủy** (zhi) modes are alternate names of two of three most frequently used vồng cò modes: the bắc and oán modes. Section 2.2 will expand on these modes.

While the anhemitonic pentatonic scales adhere to the idea of fixed pitches, the pitches themselves are prone to the subjectivity of the instruments. Sometimes, traditional instruments may sound out of tune and are not tuned to each other in ensemble performances, resulting in unequal pitches on same scale degree, and thus which can be referred to with the same solfege syllable. Furthermore, traditional performance practices use pitch-bending techniques to create auxiliary tones as a means of expression, artistry, and profundity. Ornamenting and bending pitches around these auxiliary tones result in the addition of pitches that approximate scale degrees 4 and 6, creating a temporary heptatonic world.

The intervallic nature of pentatonic scales such as the **thương** (shang) and **chủy** (zhi) rotations is retained in present-day Vietnamese music theory and vồng cò practices. Interval value and distance plays a greater role than fixed scale degrees in the Vietnamese understanding of scales, and many vồng cò modes are determined by intervallic proximities between notes. Inevitably, this leads to pitch discrepancies in determining the actual notes of a certain mode, especially with the addition of pitch-bending techniques. Nevertheless, traditional vồng cò instruments tuned to this system are often bound to these practices. The practice of pitch-bending is present in vồng cò practices whereby performers ornament by bending scale degrees 2, 3, 6, and 7, depending on the given mode. The syncretism of vồng cò music results in the crossing of this traditional, pseudo-heptatonic pentatonic + auxiliary notes system with another heptatonic system of fixed pitches.
Complicating matters, another notation system, a heptatonic system of fixed pitches, originated in ancient China and is still used in China and Vietnam today.\textsuperscript{18} This scale system is built on the solfege \textit{he, si, yi, shang, chi, gong, fan,} and \textit{liu}, with liu representing an octave (scale degree 8) above the starting pitch.\textsuperscript{19} Different Vietnamese scholars and sources have speculated and debated the origins of this scale and solmization, and many believe that the Vietnamese inherited the idea of heptatonicism via interaction with the Champa Kingdom.\textsuperscript{20}

If Champa and Indian musical influences are taken to account, it is possible that some of the hemitonic \textit{vọng cổ} pentatonic scales and modes pulled from heptatonicism are indeed like Indian \textit{raga}. Powers and Widdess define a \textit{raga} as “…not a tune, nor is it a ‘modal’ scale, but rather a continuum with scale and tune as its extremes.”\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Vọng cổ}’s improvisatory nature where a standard \textit{vọng cổ} melody, based on a scale or mode, is taken and elaborated could be based on a discrete, specific set of melodic pitches like that of \textit{raga}. The use of semitones, more inherent in Indian than Chinese music, could also point \textit{vọng cổ} music towards the direction of Indian music. Furthermore, Rangaraj M. Rangayyan states that a \textit{raga} must have five notes at minimum.

\textsuperscript{18} Vân Khê Trần, 83. Trần points out both 10\textsuperscript{th} or 11\textsuperscript{th} century Song Dynasty or 14\textsuperscript{th} Century China as the probable timeframes when China adopted the heptatonic scale solmization.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 83.


and must have at least two reference pitches (including tonic) to be definable.\textsuperscript{22} Five notes at minimum can account for any form of pentatonic scales, and the \textit{võng cỡ} scale features three stable pitches 1, 4, and 5 in any given mode to reinforce its identity. Indian \textit{raga} have a vast number of combinations and definitions not explainable within this study alone, but Powers and Widdess do explain that in addition to the tonic (\textit{ṣadja}), the fourth and fifth degrees of a \textit{raga} are also structurally important.\textsuperscript{23} Using this definition, there are similarities between the reference pitches of \textit{raga} and the stable tones of \textit{võng cỡ} music if we are to understand \textit{raga} at its most basic level.

Regardless of origins, the Vietnamese equivalents of this heptatonic scale are similar to their Chinese names, and five of the seven solmization are found in the \textit{võng cỡ} system. The equivalents translate to: \textit{hò, xự, y, xang, xê, cống, phan}, and \textit{liu}, respectively correlating to scale degree approximations 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8.\textsuperscript{24} These pitches are approximate because different genres and styles of Vietnamese music may assign different pitches to the same solfege syllable.

There is no octave equivalence as \textit{hò} and \textit{liu}, scale degrees 1 and 8, have specific functions in certain genres including \textit{võng cỡ} music. \textit{Hò} and \textit{liu} refer not only to register but also direction; a pattern going from \textit{hò} to \textit{liu} indicates upwards motion; a pattern going from \textit{liu} to \textit{hò} indicates downwards motion. In the \textit{võng cỡ} tradition, going from \textit{liu} to \textit{hò} is a specific downward action that signals the entry of the instrumental ensemble (for more, see Chapter III).

\hspace{1cm}


\textsuperscript{24} Vân Khê Trần, 83.
In the Vietnamese language, the corresponding octaves of any given note of this solfege system are indicated by inflected diacritics. Figure 2.2 provides an example of the pitch system of the *tháp lúc huyễn cầm*, a 16-string zither that utilizes the full range of solfege and was once used to perform nhạc tài tử.\(^{25}\)

**Figure 2.2. The pitch system used for Vietnamese zithers.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solmization Systems</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese Pentatonic</td>
<td>Cung</td>
<td>Trường</td>
<td>Giốc</td>
<td>Chuy</td>
<td>Yũ (Vũ)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet. Zither Solfege</td>
<td>Hồ</td>
<td>Sự</td>
<td>Sang</td>
<td>Sẻ</td>
<td>Kồng</td>
<td>Liêu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8va</td>
<td>Liêu</td>
<td>Xữ</td>
<td>Xang</td>
<td>Xê</td>
<td>Công</td>
<td>Liu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15ma</td>
<td>Lijo</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Sang</td>
<td>Xê</td>
<td>Công</td>
<td>Liu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In modern *vọng cờ*, the octave differentiation of solfege is simplified, and the scale generally works with seven pitches taken from this more traditional zither solfege. Some distinctions are made for 8va and 8vb notes, but they are not used as often as the five chosen note names hò (1), xữ (2/3), xang (4), xê (5), and công (6). After xữ was changed to represent both scale degrees 2 and 3, it often straddles between their two pitches for various reasons, including instrument tuning, ornamentation, pitch-bending, and mode.\(^{26}\) However, scale degree 2 remains the more consistent definition of xữ when it comes to defining a pentatonic scale based on the

\(^{25}\) Ong Đức Xuan, *Toi Học Dan Tranh (Tháp Lục Huyễn Cảm)* (Seattle, n.d.), 1. This *tháp lúc huyễn cầm* textbook provides diagrams and scales for learning the instrument.

\(^{26}\) Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn, 5–9. Vĩnh Bảo sometimes defines the xữ of the nam mode as scale degree 2 instead of scale degree 3 as some other sources and pedagogy videos have defined it.
heptatonic solfège. Figure 2.3 provides equivalents of the Chinese and Vietnamese solfège systems for the pentatonic and heptatonic scale systems.

**Figure 2.3.** Chinese and Vietnamese solfège systems leading up to the vọng cổ scale. Auxiliary notes are shaded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solmization Systems</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Pentatonic</td>
<td>Gong</td>
<td>Shang</td>
<td>Jiao (Jue)</td>
<td>Zhi</td>
<td>Yu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese Pentatonic</td>
<td>Cung</td>
<td>Thượng</td>
<td>Giác</td>
<td>Chuy</td>
<td>Yự (Vũ)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Heptatonic</td>
<td>He</td>
<td>Si</td>
<td>Yi</td>
<td>Shang</td>
<td>Chi</td>
<td>Gong</td>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>Liu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese Heptatonic</td>
<td>Hồ</td>
<td>Xử</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Xang</td>
<td>Xê</td>
<td>Công</td>
<td>Phan</td>
<td>Liu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Vọng Cổ Scale</td>
<td>Hồ</td>
<td><del>Xử</del></td>
<td>Xang</td>
<td>Xê</td>
<td><del>Công</del></td>
<td>Liu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pitches y and phan are treated like relative auxiliary tones that, when pitch bent, may refer to sharped and flattened semitones in between the more structural notes. For example, the y that falls between hò (1) and xứ (2/3) may refer to the semitone in between the two notes or—in the case of a xứ (3)—a whole tone. Y and phan are not used in the vọng cổ tradition but do appear in other traditional Vietnamese music genres. It should be noted that the note phan is also called oán in various Vietnamese resources and modes. There are at least ten variants of pentatonic scales that utilize this heptatonic system, of which the modern vọng cổ scale (shown in Figure 2.3) is one of them. ²⁷ Vietnamese modal scales fall under two umbrella terms: the bắc and nam systems. Keefe, Burns, and Nguyen explain these systems in detail:

> These terms do not represent music of these geographical regions in Vietnam, but rather two representative types of feelings: bắc modes are “happy” nam modes are “sad.” These systems differ even at the level of tonal materials, that is, the discretization of the continuous psychophysical scale differs in the two systems. The bắc system is similar in

its tonal material to those of Chinese and other East Asian modal scales, whereas the nam system’s material are dissimilar.28 These umbrella terms encompass a large collection of scales that include varieties of pentatonic and heptatonic scales. In Vietnamese music, the bắc system refers to variants of the pentatonic gong system that is more often used in recognizably north Vietnamese traditional music, while the nam system includes the heptatonic vong có scale of southern Vietnamese music that is the focus of this paper.

2.2 The Vong Có Scale System and Its Modes

In their science-driven study of Vietnamese modal scales, Keefe, Burns, and Nguyen remark that the “vông co scale functions as a true heptatonic modal scale.”29 This definition is made possible owing to the vông có scale’s potentiality to encompass all seven notes of the heptatonic hò scale and solfege system. However, basic vông có is typically taught using only five syllables from that system: hò (1), xự (2/3), xang (4), xê (5), and cống (6/7). The five notes become a pentatonic scale with two auxiliary notes. The distinct modes within the system utilize only five of seven pitches from the vông có scale at a time. In other words, the vông có scale theoretically utilizes only five fixed notes at a time but has the capability of producing seven pitches when integrating subjective pitch-bending that spans from a semitone to slightly more than a whole tone. Again, the distances are determined by ear. It is the heptatonic potential of the vông có scale that allows the extraction of pentatonic scale subsets dissimilar to the traditional gong pentatonic scale.

28 Keefe, Burns, and Nguyen, 452.
29 Ibid., 454.
The modern-day vồng cổ sound world is built on hemitonic pentatonic scale systems that uses solfege from the heptatonic hò system. The value of hò functions in the same manner as the Western movable-do system with hò representing any given starting pitch. The solmization of hò, xự, xang, xê, and công are used, where notes hò (1), xang (4), xê (5), and liu (8) are considered stable notes and xự (2/3) and công (6/7) serve as auxiliary notes. The bolded numbers refer to the auxiliary notes most consistent to the main vồng cổ pentatonic scale, while the non-bolded numbers refer to auxiliary notes also possible in a vồng cổ mode. Auxiliaries xự (2/3) and công (6/7) are determined by the mode used in a vồng cổ performance in addition to pitch-bending practices. Figure 2.4 illustrates the present vồng cổ scale system and its frequently used registers and notes. The composition “Đa cỏ hoài lang” that vồng cổ was based upon was sung with this specific vồng cổ solfege system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solmization Systems</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8vb</td>
<td>Liêu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Xê</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hò</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Vồng Co Scale</td>
<td>Hò</td>
<td><del>Xự</del></td>
<td>Xang</td>
<td>Xê</td>
<td><del>Công</del> (Phan)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Liêu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8va</td>
<td>Liêu</td>
<td><del>Ư</del></td>
<td>Xáng</td>
<td>Xê</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Liêu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three most frequent modes (diệu) used in vồng cổ are known as the bắc, nam, and oán modes. Each mode is a pentatonic scale pulled from the vồng cổ scale system with slight differences in scale degree equivalents and their auxiliary notes. This is a result of the specific mode’s ornamentation or pitch-bends. Because the Vietnamese tend to use the same term to refer to different concepts, it must be clarified that the bắc and nam modes are not to be confused with

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Vinh Bảo Nguyễn, 7. The author remarks regarding xự and công, “These two notes are to be regulated by the requirements of the Mode, specific composition and play.”
the umbrella systems bàc and nam. All three modes bàc, nam, and oán fall under the vọng cổ scale of the nam variety. Figure 2.5 lists the three modes and their differences in approximate pitch.

Figure 2.5. The three main vọng cổ modes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modes</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bàc</td>
<td>Hồ</td>
<td>Xự</td>
<td>Xang</td>
<td>Xê</td>
<td>Công</td>
<td>Liu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam</td>
<td>Hồ</td>
<td>Xự</td>
<td>Xang</td>
<td>Xê</td>
<td>Công</td>
<td>Liu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oán</td>
<td>Hồ</td>
<td>Xự</td>
<td>Xang</td>
<td>Xê</td>
<td>Công</td>
<td>Liu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the three modes, the nam mode best illustrates the hemitonic nature of the vọng cổ scales with the semitone between scale degrees 3 and 4. There is also a semitone between 7 and 1 of the oán mode. The bàc and nam modes are more consistent in their pitch definitions than the third oán mode. The auxiliary xự (2/3) of oán mode tends to vary depending on performer and scholarly resource. A reason is that most vọng cổ performers determine the xự (2/3) of the oán mode purely by ear and instantaneous sentiment. According to a chart of Vietnam’s pentatonic scale by Trần and Nguyên, the xự in oán mode is best understood as a pitch in between scale degrees 2 and 3.³¹ This pitch is difficult to equate to fixed Western notation and is achieved through specific ornamentation and pitch-bending practices of that mode. Accordingly, the references to Western pitch names used throughout this study in each case should be understood as approximations used for convenience.

The pitches of the bắc, nam, and oán modes are set by the dây, something akin to a “key,” dây đào, dây kép xang, and dây kép xe.32 These keys correlate to a specific pitch on a vồng cổ instrument and are standardized in their starting pitches. Dây đào, translated to the “female’s key,” is based on the starting pitch D and is associated with female theater actresses who used this key in renovated theater (cải lương) music.33 The two “male” keys, dây kép xang, and dây kép xe begin on G and A, respectively, although dây kép xang is more commonly used than the latter.34 Theoretically, a vồng cổ performer would take one of the three modes (diệu) and impose it over a key (dây) when singing or accompanying a composition, though their many compositions are specific in their mode and key. For example, an accompanist playing diệu nam on dây kép xang would utilize the pentatonic G-B-C-D-E-G pitch collection while improvising.

2.2.1 Vietnamese Concept of Mode and Modal Nuances

To strictly define modes by approximating scale degrees would ignore the multi-faceted nature of the Vietnamese concept of a diệu, a term most closely related to the Western concept of mode. Because of the overlap of terminology, it must be clarified that while the terms bắc and nam are associated with geographical regions of Vietnam and coincide with their frequency of

32 Dây is Vietnamese for “string,” referring to moving from one string to another as a means of changing keys. The term đào refers to the female actress traditions in renovated theater descending from Chinese opera practices. The names of the two “male” keys correspond with their scale degrees. The dây kép xe gets its name from the solmization xe, and A is indeed a fifth away from the đào key. Likewise, dây kép xang is a fourth away from the đào key.


34 Ibid.
use in each region, bắc and nam instead refer to specific “sentiments” of a vòng cờ mode. To a Vietnamese musician, a mode encompasses more than simply a specific succession of notes.

The scholar Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn is specific when defining the concept of mode, using five criteria to identify a diều: scale, intervals, ornaments, “determined mood,” and tempo.³⁵ This concept can be supplemented by idea presented by Thuyết Phong Nguyễn, who notes the following in explaining of the concept of the diều:

There is room to believe that this modal conceptualization, probably nurtured from time immemorial, is based on combined notions of both exact and flexible pitches, melodic patterns, specific ornamentation, timing, quality and type of vocal sound, and particular modal sentiments….For the music to be modally effective, three basic elements must be employed: sentiment, scale, and ornamentation.³⁶

Various Vietnamese sources identify the bắc, nam, and oán modes by relative sentiments or perceived emotions. The bắc mode is considered a “happy” mode that is associated with quick tempo and less ornamentation than the nam and oán modes.³⁷ This is the general consensus with other sources, including those of Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn as well as Keefe, Burns, and Nguyen. The nam and oán modes are often described as “sad” modes with the oán mode being even “sadder” than the nam mode. Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn’s article indicates that oán mode is used for songs of “profound sadness,” and Lưu Viên Nguyễn ascribes the slowest tempo (in relativity to the bắc and nam modes) and most extensive use of ornamentation to the oán.³⁸ These particular expressions of a mode are important to vòng cờ musicians, as Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn explains:

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³⁵ Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn, 5.
³⁶ Phong T. Nguyen, 253.
³⁷ Lưu Viên Nguyễn, 2.
³⁸ Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn, 8. Lưu Viên Nguyễn, 2.
Vietnamese music is built on melodic construction and single note colorations. It[s] beauty lies not so much in the succession of notes as in each separate note itself. Each note is an entity in itself, calculated to evoke in the mind of the listener a special reaction.  

The difficulty in determining sentiment lies in the subjectivity of this matter. A scientific experiment by Keefe, Burns, and Nguyen revealed that categorization of intervals and sentiment of a dięu is contextually-based. Even so, there were inconsistencies in determining a given mode and its nuances by ear. The study focused on results from a single musician, Thuyết Phong Nguyễn himself. While more data is required to make a confident conclusion on the effectiveness of aurally realizing a mode, it is probable that a larger number of musicians would encounter the same difficulties in accurately determining isolated modes and sentiments that require pitch-bending ornamentations. These difficulties relate to the general audience, too, one who may not be trained in vông cỗ music, whether in performance or appreciation. The “special reaction” that Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn was referring to is rather subjective.

“Sentiment” is however a long-conceptualized idea that comes from the traditional instrumental tradition, especially that of the zither. It was common in performances of Confucian and traditional Chinese music (the music that predated the ancestors of vông cỗ music) for the performers to contemplate a single note or mode and its abstract values. Bell Yung discusses this matter in his study on the traditional Chinese zither (guqin) and its repertoire:

The “mood” of a composition is prescribed by its programmatic title and, in most zither handbooks, also by a literary preface to the notation. The primary aim of a performance is to evoke that prescribed mood; the musical sound itself is but a vehicle by which to arrive at that aim…. The "mood" of the music, specified in

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39 Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn, 4. Correction, mine.

40 Keefe, Burns, and Nguyen, 449.
the programmatic title and literary preface, is of the utmost importance to a composition.⁴¹

It is highly probable that Vietnamese zither varieties traditional to vống cỏ take after guqin performance ideals. This is due to ancient Vietnam’s ongoing musical, literary, artistic, and intellectual trade and relations with China before, during, and after the nearly 1,000 years of Chinese rule. The inclusion of zithers in vống cỏ would then undoubtedly inherit or involve such deeply rooted ideas into the concept of mode, and the notion of “mood” is similarly understood as a “sentiment.” Indeed, many vống cỏ music books often indicate the mode (with its implied sentiment) or programmatic mood of a given song in its title or heading. Therefore, despite the subjectivity of sentiment in determining a mode, this deep-rooted criterion remains a present-day concern of vống cỏ musicians. In vống cỏ, the concept of “sentiment” applies to individual modes and affects the expression of any instrument. The modern-day replacement for zithers and traditional string instruments, the ghi-ta phím lõm, was created in part to retain the ornamentation and expression of musical sentiments.

To further complicate matters, the bắc, nam, and oán modes have “sub-modes,” or modal nuances that further colorize a sentiment. Nuances such as nam ai or nam xuan are determined only by slight pitch differences, changed on the spot by pitch-bending a string to the subjectivity of a performer’s sentiment. Pitch-bending then blurs the lines between embellishing a mode, expressing sentiment, and changing to another related scale that shares the same pitches. Specific

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nuances termed hoi ascribes ornamentation techniques on an umbrella mode’s conventional pitches.\textsuperscript{42}

Vietnamese musicians exposed to the twelve-tones of Western notation also approach the concept of modes as pulling a pentatonic scale combination from the body of twelve notes. There are never all twelve pitches sounding at once, so this abstract idea is but a hermeneutic view of vọng cò’s pentatonicism. Outside of the three main vọng cò modes, there is a great variety of Vietnamese scales, modes, and nuances that is far beyond the scope of this study.

2.2.2 Instrumental Ornamentation in Vọng Các

Up until this point, ornamentation has been mentioned as a means of inflecting temporary pitch change to a fixed note of a vọng cò mode. There are many ornamentation techniques transferred from traditional East Asian music, but the central technique of vọng cò ornamentation is pitch-bending. There are a variety of pitch-bending techniques, and different musicians term them according to its physical execution. For example, rung (or run, Vietnamese for “shaking”) is a form of vibrato achieved by continuously pressing one’s finger on a string. This may be visualized on a keyboard with modulating wheels where the keyboardist must physically and continuously shake the hand to pitch-bend. Trần and Nguyễn explain that ornamentation is specific to an instrument, such as arpeggiation and specific vibrato techniques are reserved for

\textsuperscript{42} Trần and Nguyễn, “Vietnam, Socialist Republic of (Công Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam),” *Grove Music Online*. 
the đàn tranh. They go further as to say, “A singer or musician is appreciated much more for his ability to ornament than for the number of pieces in his repertory.”

In this case, ornamentation became a focal point of representation for many vồng cờ musicians, and many have been appreciated for their sentimental ornamentation. There are many techniques of pitch-bending in modern-day vồng cờ, but ornamentation is not usually notated in vồng cờ music. Techniques of pitch-bending are usually orally transmitted from teacher to student, resulting in great variability in ornamentation practices. Some musicians contemplate where and when to pitch-bend so far as to make a highly personalized song theirs or a trade secret.

There are a few general pitch-bending techniques that vồng cờ musicians utilize universally. These pitch-bends happen very quickly and frequently in a typical performance, but every note is purposefully bent according to the laws of a mode and a musician’s personal taste.

A vibrato, called the rung, is a quick and continuous action that rapidly bends a pitch. This technique is reserved for certain notes in a mode. Vồng cờ performer Hữu Phước explains that rung is applied to xang (4) in the bác mode and to xang (4) and cỏng (6/7) in the nam mode.

There are many pitch-bending techniques associated with certain vồng cờ instruments. String instruments have a technique called the ngân. Lưu Viên Nguyễn stresses that the ngân is

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44 Ibid.

not a vibrato or a trill, but a continuous motion that nuances a note more than a vibrato.\textsuperscript{46} The difference between a \textit{ngàn} and a \textit{rung} (vibrato) is the tension of the left hand. The \textit{ngàn} dips into the strings lower and creates a wider vibrato than a normal a vibrato would. The objective of a \textit{ngàn} is to produce a more “vocal” and “sentimental” sound. Highly trained \textit{vọng cổ} musicians use the \textit{ngàn} to emphasize notes they seem important, especially cadential notes at the end of phrases and verses.

There is another quick action that involves bending from and back to a pitch, called \textit{luyén}. While it originated from bending the string of traditional instruments, this technique is imitated on a \textit{đàn organ} (pitch-bending keyboard). This is simply done with a modulating wheel, via a built-in console or extension box, on any digital piano keyboard. The \textit{luyén} differs from the \textit{rung} or \textit{ngàn} because it is a single to and from action. This technique must be done quickly after a note is played. In his pedagogical videos, Hữu Phước stresses that the \textit{luyén} must be done after a note is played; if not, the technique is considered incorrect.\textsuperscript{47} When playing the \textit{đàn organ} in the \textit{bắc} and \textit{nam} modes, the \textit{luyén} is by default inflected on every note that is not characterized by the \textit{rung}.\textsuperscript{48} Again, that would be the \textit{xang} (4) in the \textit{bắc} mode and \textit{xang} (4) and \textit{cọng} (6/7) pitches in the \textit{nam} mode.

The last technique is the \textit{nhân}, a pressing action that dips the string low enough to change a fundamental tone. The \textit{nhân} is not quite “sharpening” a note but rather an aurally perceived raising of a pitch. Sometimes, the \textit{nhân} can bend a fundamental pitch a whole step, transforming one mode to another. For example, changing the \textit{xự} (2) of the \textit{bắc} mode by a whole step would

\textsuperscript{46} Lưu Viên Nguyễn, 1.

\textsuperscript{47} Phước Nguyên Văn, “Hướng dẫn chơi đàn ca - vọng cổ trên đàn organ - Hữu Phước Phần 1,” YouTube.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
result in switching over to the nam mode’s xu (2), or changing the bắc’s công (6) to công (7) would result in the oán mode.\textsuperscript{49} This is effectively one way to “modulate” between two vòng cổ modes without having to retune an instrument.\textsuperscript{50} However, a vòng cổ song more often stays in the same mode without changing. While the nhân has functional implications, it is most often used for expressiveness. It is less frequently used than the rung, ngân, and luyện because it only raises a pitch; ornamentation that “return” the pitch to its fundamental tone are more useful when improvising and playing a continuous vòng cổ pattern. Figure 2.6 provides a visualization of soundwaves created by all the discussed ornamentation techniques.

Figure 2.6. Ornamentation used in vòng cổ instrumental music.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{soundwaves.png}
\end{figure}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{Sound motion}
\begin{itemize}
\item rung
\item ngân
\item luyện
\item nhân
\end{itemize}
\item \textbf{String motion (general)}
\begin{itemize}
\item Frequent dips
\item Slow dips
\item One dip
\item Pressing down
\end{itemize}
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{49} Giòng Bách Viết, “Ngũ Cung Việt Nam trong hệ thống Nhạc Lý,” vietnamclassical.wordpress.com.

\textsuperscript{50} Vietnamese traditional music theory does not share the western concept of modulation. The term modulate could refer to pitch-bending or scale and key changes. Or it could refer to switching modes.
2.3 The External Influence of Language

From its inception during the twentieth century, vồng cổ is a song form with sung lyrics. As a result, the perception, sentiment, and performance of vồng cổ is directly influenced by the Vietnamese language. The Vietnamese language is based on a 29-character alphabet with diacritics for six different tones: ngang (không đầu), huyễn, sắc, hỏi, ngã, and nặng. The diacritics add another layer of intonation on top of the pitch-bent music, and each tone is crucial in differentiating words with the same spelling yet different meaning.

In addition to sung lyrics, Vietnamese folk songs also feature vowel vocal ornamentations such as “i” (ee), “a” (ah), and “i-a” (ee-ah). While these sounds are more common to traditional Northern Vietnamese music, the original “Đạ cổ hoài lang” did utilize these vocal inflections.

From another perspective, vồng cổ music’s emphasis on sentiment moves the music towards organicism and vocalizing the pitches in a way that reflects speech or singing. Pitch-bending techniques as those previously discussed facilitate recreating music that follows the nuances of the Vietnamese language in ways that often especially important. This deeply-rooted external influence on vồng cổ is a reason why this genre strongly remains an oral tradition and transcribing its music is challenging. Even the slightest difference in intonation, affected by layers of pitch-bending and lingual intonation, creates variability in a transcription.

2.4 Rhythm

Even though rhythm in vồng cổ is complex, it is not a main concern of vồng cổ notation, and performers usually learn by mirroring the singing line and then embellishing the rhythm at
their will. The basic method is to divide the beat into duple values, though masters have created more intricate syncopated patterns to fill in the beats. Sometimes, songs are learned in speech rhythm or slowly as the student imitates a melodic strain by the teacher. The first sixteen bars of any vọng cỏ song is improvised and unmetered and is rarely written down in any form. This opening, or the rao, will be further discussed in Chapter III below. Master pedagogue Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn reveals that during lessons students are taught using a watch-and-learn method, and that only “when all notes have been learned in order, the rhythm is added.”

However, vọng cỏ does feature characteristic rhythmic cadential patterns or improvisatory riffs. For example, it is common to hear a pattern of two sixteenth and eighth notes before the ending of a verse. This pattern is frequently reserved for the final cadential pattern of a verse. The rhythm also tends to speed up towards the end of measures, though vọng cỏ musicians have improvised other syncopated or even counterintuitive rhythms such as a pattern featuring slow rhythms sandwiched between faster patterns. Vọng cỏ is grounded in the beat of the quarter note and may feature an occasional half note. Whole notes are less frequent in instrumental vọng cỏ improvisations. Typically, the music does not exceed the value of shorter than a sixteenth note.

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51 Vĩnh Bảo Nguyen, 9.
2.5 Effective Transcription Notation Systems

While vọng cổ is mainly learned by rote, students can also purchase books, download lead sheets, or transcribe the notes for learning. There is no current standardized system for notating vọng cổ music. Most of the music is notated like lead sheets using the hò solmization system. The sheets may contain only lyrics with a specified mode as well as cadence pitches. Little booklets aimed at the versed often print only the lyrics with underlined cadence points but do not indicate the pitches. Other book varieties may have an accompanying instrumental part that details the basic pitches for each verse. The pitches may be loosely encased in 4/4 measures without specific indications for rhythm.

Outside of print media, vọng cổ is most accessible online via internet communications, online forums, and video websites such as YouTube. This accessibility outreaches a
demographic of vượng cổ students who do not read music notation or the solmization system. Instead, they learn either by rote memory, fixed-do equivalents, or with the ghi-ta phẩm lopenhagen numbering system. While unstandardized, the ghi-ta phẩm lopenhagen system uses fret and string numbers instead of pitch names. The numbering system varies by teacher generally assigns a number from 0 to 6 for the strings and other values for the frets on the guitar neck. For example, the number 62 might indicate the sixth string and second fret, but this can be done in any combination, depending on the teacher or transcriber. Trân and Nguyễn describe another pitch notation system in their Grove Music Online entry:

Nowadays, however, the names of the notes are written in modern script with Roman letters. A circle or a dot in red ink beside a character shows that the note is on a strong or a weak beat respectively.\(^5^2\)

This system’s effectiveness rests on its focus on rhythmic stress. It is similar to the Chinese jiānpǔ notation system but uses solmization instead of scale degrees to indicate notes. Other systems include using western solfege and accidentals such as Do# or Mib (written exactly like this without correct accidental symbols) to indicate pitches on a guitar. Western solfege systems are most familiar to classically-trained musicians. But another pitch system that may serve an equally comprehensible and universal purpose would be a numbered musical notation system, known as the jiānpǔ in Chinese or the Ziffersystem (cipher notation) in German. This system uses numbers to represent scale degrees of any given diatonic major scale.

Minor keys’ pitches can be indicated in a number of ways, from being written in the Aeolian mode (beginning on 6), adding standard accidentals, or simply indicating key at the

A variant of the cipher notation can be used to indicate pitch, register, and rhythm of a vồng cổ song using scale degrees to signify pitch would be a universally understandable method for both Western-trained and traditional Eastern-trained musicians. Its ease of use is befitting for the monophonic nature of vồng cổ music. Symbols for pitch bending would be necessary, and the system would operate on modes instead of keys. The challenges for this system, however, is to accommodate more complex rhythmic patterns that vồng cổ musicians usually improvise. Nevertheless, a cipher notation would not only provide at least necessary basic materials for entry-level vồng cổ pedagogy, but also preserve a body of oral repertoire.
III. Vọng Cô Form and Functions

The scales and modes that create the vọng cô sound world is organized into a composition via an improvisatory cyclical framework comprised of a singer and a heterophonic ensemble. This chapter seeks to explain the evolution of vọng cô form, beginning with its origin song, “Đạ cô hoài lang” and tracing its expansion into the modern sâu câu framework.

This study will organize the components of vọng cô form into a hierarchy of Vietnamese terms as seen in Figure 3.1. A basic vọng cô framework is built on stringing six complete câu (verses) together. Câu refers to a total unit of 32 nhịp (measures) divided into eight separate khuôn (phrases) denoted by cadences. These eight phrases are further subdivided into 4 nhịp (measures) of 4 phách (beats).

Figure 3.1. Metric hierarchy in a vọng cô câu (verse).
It must be noted that Vietnamese musicians tend to use the same terminology for different concepts, and the term ô nhịp may refer to a measure of music, the time signature, or a beat of music. For clarity, this paper will refer to ô nhịp as a measure, số nhịp as time signature, and phách as beats.

3.1 The Origin: “Đa cô hoài lang”

“Đa cô hoài lang,” the early form of vồng cô, can be studied to better understand how the modern-day vồng cô framework formed and function. The song “Đa cô hoài lang” uses the same concepts and terminology as modern vồng cô, just in a shorter compositional framework. When vồng cô came about, the basic concepts mostly remain the same as in the early song but in a more elaborate and expanded framework.

“Đa cô hoài lang” is made of 20 short verses (câu) of 4 measures (ô nhịp). The song was set in 2/4 (instead of vồng cô’s 4/4 meter), and meter was observed freely and casually as long as the ensemble met each other at designated cadential points. “Đa cô hoài lang” was split into four unequal sections according to the lyrics. The first half consists of two sections of 6 câu each: câu 1–6 and câu 7–12. The second half is comprised of câu 13–16 and 17–20, giving rise to an ABC form. There is no apparent functional meaning behind these câu groupings except that it is structured around the lyric verses. The song still circulates today, both orally and online. It can easily be found on related vồng cô websites as well as the Vietnamese Wikipedia.

A traditional performance of “Đa cô hoài lang” features a nhạc tài tử ensemble accompanying a singer performing with free rhythms and emotional sentiment. All musicians are free to improvise at their discretion but are required to cadence on specific pitches with the
singer. For example, câu 1–6 must end on cỏng, xang, hè, hè, xê, and liu, respectively. Figure 3.2 charts out the cadence notes in câu 1–6 of “Đạ có hoài lang.” Cadence points are additionally marked by the song loan foot clapper. Song loan taps do not mark strong beats as a metronome would, but instead occur at the end of measures or phrases to synchronize the ensemble’s cadences. Song loan do not mark the final note of a phrase, per se, as the ensemble can embellish cadence pitches and subdivide them into smaller rhythmic units.

Figure 3.2. The first 6 câu of “Đạ có hoài lang.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bạc Mode</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2 (cadences)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>hò (1)</td>
<td>cỏng (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>cỏng (6)</td>
<td>xang (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>xê (5)</td>
<td>hè (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>xê (5)</td>
<td>hè (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>liu (8)</td>
<td>xê (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>xê (5)</td>
<td>liu (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Vọng Có Form: Sáu Câu Form

Like “Đạ có hoài lang,” vọng có focuses on the idea of simultaneous cadences on specific pitches. A 20-verse song set in 2/4 is expanded upon, though popular consumption and musical elaboration, to create the modern vọng có form.

Modern vọng có in its purest form is called sáu câu form, consisting of six 32-bar verses set in 4/4 for a total of 192 bars. Performers memorize certain pitches to cadence with the entire ensemble (known as ân khớp, or to “match each other”). Ensemble musicians learn the

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53 Different books and sources may have variations in the suggested pitches for the song, but cadences all remain the same. The bars in this chart reflects those found a vọng có classics book. See Yến Linh, Tuyển tập những bài ca vọng có hay nhất: Hòn Vọng Phu (Vietnam: Nhà xuất bản Hồng Đức, n.d.).
accompaniment through a teacher or by learning standards. Vĩnh Phạm notes the universality of a song is characteristic of traditional Vietnamese music, and a single song could be applied to many different melodies and song lyrics based on that particular song.\textsuperscript{54} He compares the differences between traditional music (cổ nhạc) and new, popular music (tân nhạc). His original text reads:

“Sự khác biệt giữa tân nhạc và cổ nhạc là cổ nhạc ít có sáng tác mới về bản nhạc. Mỗi bản nhạc được xử dụng rất nhiều lần để soạn gia viết lời ca. Ví thế khi hát một bài có phải biết bài hát đó hát theo nhạc Tây Thi, Cổ Bản, Tứ Đại Oán, Trường Tương Tư, v.v. Lời hát này rất khat khi vì ca sỉ phải thuộc cám điều của bản nhạc mà các bản nhạc cổ đều có âm điệu khó học thuộc lòng. Từ đầu đến cuối bài đều dài mà không có các đoạn lập lại thành điệp khúc, tiểu khúc, với luật cân phương AABA như tân nhạc.”

(“The difference between new music and traditional music is that traditional music seldom has new musical compositions. Every [traditional] song is used many times to compose lyrics. Because of that, [a singer] must know the specific music Tây Thi, Cổ Bản, Tứ Đại Oán, Trường Tương Tư, etc., whenever a traditional song is sung. This singing style is strict because the singer must memorize each rhythm and mode of the traditional song, which is difficult to memorize. The songs are long from beginning to end without repetition of the chorus and post-chorus or the balanced AABA verse form of new music.”)\textsuperscript{55}

A song is not always faithfully preserved, as is the case of “Đạ cổ hoài lang” and vọng cổ music. In a more abstract sense, the cadential pitch patterns of a piece could be retained while a new melody is imposed or vice versa. Over time, three forms of instrumental improvisations have arisen in vọng cổ; I identify them as _lyrical_, _preset_, and _freeform_ accompaniment. While these three forms are distinct, they can operate on a spectrum, flowing in and out of one another.


\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
A lyrical accompaniment retains the most immediate and recognizable musical similarity to the singer’s line and the embellishments are often basic, decorating or echoing the melody. This is a useful technique for beginning students learning to embellish and improvise on a melody. It is also a good technique for master musicians who want to focus on the melody or create a more pensive sentiment. Lyrical accompaniment can closely follow a vocal melody, or it can be heterophonic.

A preset accompaniment is a predetermined (or pre-written) accompaniment music sheet that can be applied to any vọng cổ song. These accompaniments are usually songs, standards, or original compositions that are universally adaptable to vọng cổ melodies, much like those cited by Vĩnh Phạm. These preset accompaniments are useful for learning as well as for performances of unfamiliar melodies. These presets also include transcribed music that is learned for this purpose and are useful for immediate analysis.

Finally, a freeform accompaniment is strictly improvisational and freely embellishes a vọng cổ melody according to a musician’s personal style. A veteran musician may skillfully embellish the melody with another heterophonic melody while keeping the cadential points intact. As Vĩnh Phạm explains, freeform also occurs when a performer who has not memorized standards plays “anything” to match the singer until they cadence together.56 “Anything” is a vague term that leads to limitless improvisational possibilities. Matching a singer could mean playing in the same mode or with the same pitches, but less often with strict matching rhythm (as that would be more of a lyrical accompaniment). However, this outlook on freeform

56 Vĩnh Phạm, “6 câu vọng cổ,” trinhnu.net.
improvisation must not be misunderstood as an amateur technique; master vồng cổ musicians often improvise as a means of pinnacle expression or to avoid overusing standards.

All vồng cổ songs begin with a rao, or an unmetered improvised introduction by the instrumentalists. The rao serves three main purposes. According to Lưu Viên Nguyễn, the rao is meant to (1) tune the instrument, to (2) synchronize the ensemble, and to (3) display skill.\(^\text{57}\) It is more often the case that vồng cổ performers may be performing together for the first time. A rao allows them time to tune to each other (in relativity) and synchronize their tempo, modes, nuances, and styles. Because instrumentalists are tasked with opening a song, they must hook the audience with spectacle and skill before the singer enters.

The singer enters (nói lối) with an unmetered, rubato introduction.\(^\text{58}\) The accompaniment drops out and the singer is free to cadence when he or she is ready to begin the vồng cổ cycle. At that moment, both singer and ensemble cadence together and the ensemble will xuống hồ (literally “go down the hồ”) by making an octave leap on the starting pitch. This action signals the beginning of the vồng cổ cycle.

The rao and the nói lối are freeform and are considered a long introduction substituting the first 16 bars of câu 1. After the music enters the vồng cổ cycle (vò vồng cổ), there will be 16 measures remaining in câu 1. Câu 1 begins on the hò of xuống hồ and the ensemble is free to improvise while cadencing together in bars 20, 24, 28, and 32. Figure 3.3 charts out a typical câu 1 by bar and cadence pitches (bolded text):

\(^{57}\) Lưu Viên Nguyễn, 3.

\(^{58}\) Vĩnh Phạm, “6 câu vồng cổ,” trinhnu.net. In his article, Vĩnh Phạm terms the singer entry as nói lối.
Figure 3.3. An example Vòng cổ câu 1 in nam mode.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nam Mode</th>
<th>Ô nhịp (4 measures per phrase)</th>
<th>total bars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unmetered Intro</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rao</td>
<td>Unmetered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nội lơi</td>
<td>Unmetered, rubato cadence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrases (4 remaining)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vòng cổ</td>
<td>Xướng hồ (octave leap) and a tempo</td>
<td>Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>(Hồ [1])</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Improvised Interlude or Nội lơi

As seen in Figure 3.3, each câu is followed by an improvised interlude. There is also a specific technique, the nội lơi (literally, “to stuff” something), used to conjoin two câu together. According to Phạm Vĩnh, the nội lơi encompasses the last beat of a câu and the beginning of the next câu and determines the tempo of the following câu. The nội lơi is a technique that is used in place of longer improvised interludes.

3.2.1 Vòng cổ Form: Cadence and Song Loan Patterns

The cadences in all 6 vòng cổ câu varies from song to song. There is, however, a basic and general format that applies to any vòng cổ improvisation. A 32-bar vòng cổ câu cadences in bars 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, and 32. The only exceptions to this are any câu that xướng hồ and begins a vòng cổ framework (for example, câu 1). Unlike the original “Đã cổ hoài lang,” the song loan double-taps every 24 bars to prepare the ensemble for the final cadence in bar 32. Like the practices in “Đã cổ hoài lang,” a musician can choose to tap every measure, every phrase, or

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59 Vĩnh Phạm, “6 câu vong cổ,” trinhnu.net.
only at crucial points (bars 24 and 32). Song loan taps are usually marked by underlining or bolding the lyric text or with other predetermined symbols. In this study, song loan taps will be marked by an asterisk (*), and double-taps are marked by (**). The song loan marks what I call a cadential zone inclusive of phrases 6–8 and bars 24, 28, and 32 of any given câu. After the song loan signals the close of a câu in m. 24, there is usually a cadential phrase 7 leading into the final cadence in phrase 8.

The vồng cổ form presented in this section is a general form synthesized from studying various vồng cổ resources and sources. The pitches selected are based on frequency of appearance and various pedagogical websites and printed manuals. There are instances where certain songs had different cadence notes from the norm, but no immediate explanation can be found for this. One speculation is that certain lyrics and intonations would be easier to express if cadences were changed. For example, Vĩnh Phạm’s instructional website provides detailed lyric and cadence instructions to learning the vồng cổ song “Bạch Thu Hà Khóc Vỡ Động Sơ” with comments on performance-practice. In one instance, he remarks how the lyric’s intonation matched that of a hò cadence, even noting the exact diacritics. In his discussion of câu 3, his cadences are slightly modified from the general framework and better match the lyric intonation. From this, it is surmised that language has an effect and validity in altering some of the framework cadences.

Research showed that variance usually involved xang (4) or xê (5). Functionally speaking, sometimes replacing a xê (5) cadence with a xang (4) made the intermediary phrases less final, adding more drive to the xê (5) that ends an overarching câu. There are never cadences

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60 Vĩnh Phạm, “6 câu vồng cổ,” trinhnu.net.
on the auxiliary tone xê. However, there are few cadences on công (6/7). Figure 3.4 presents the stock pattern for a vong có sáu câu cycle in the nam mode. These cadences remain the same for the bac and oan modes; only adjusting the defining auxiliary tones is necessary.

On a larger scale, the vong có cycle features a nested cadence strain from the first six verses of “Dạ cổ hoài lang.” The pitches công (6), xang (4), hò (1), hò (1), xê (5), liu (8) matches the final cadences of each verse with the liu (8) replaced by a hò (1) in câu 6. This illustrates how the cadence pattern found in “Dạ cổ hoài lang” was expanded into the modern sáu câu form.

Xê plays an important role in sáu câu form, always appearing at the penultimate phrase in a câu. It is positioned in the cadential zone, phrases 6–8 of a câu, and is usually preceded by another xê (5) or xê (5) cadence in phrase 6. The exception is câu 3, where phrase 6 has a công cadence. While xang is an optional cadential point, xê is often suggested as the stronger cadence with solid dominant to tonic motion. Much like common practice Western music, the motion of a fifth creates a stronger sense of resolution.

Câu 1, 2, and 5 are the only câu where xê (5) does not lead to a hò (1) but to a công, xang (4), and xê (5), respectively. Naturally, câu 1 is an introductory phrase that leads to subsequent câu; therefore, a xê–hò cadence would not be as appropriate here. As pertains to its location, câu 2 and 5 act as a bridge for câu 1–3 and 4–6. Câu 2’s heavy concentration of non-dominant cadences and final xang cadence creates a passing câu function that strengthens the xê and hò cadence in câu 3. Câu 3 itself does not feature many xê cadences, so the weakening of câu 2 through a final xang cadence (phrase 6) would better support the câu 3 cadence before the contrasting section while relegating câu 2 to a subordinate large-scale function. Câu 5 is saturated with scale degree 5–1–5 (xê–hò–xê) motion, defining this as a large-scale dominant function câu. This is crucial because câu 5 is the penultimate câu of the framework, closing out
Câu 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nam Mode</th>
<th>Bar 1</th>
<th>Bar 4 (Cad)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rao</td>
<td>Unmetered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vỗ ca sī</td>
<td>Unmetered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vỗ vọng cổ</td>
<td>xướng hở</td>
<td>Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hồ (1)</td>
<td>Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Xế (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Xang (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Công* (6)</td>
<td>Improvised Interlude / Nhos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Câu 4(c)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cadences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Xế (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Xế (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Xế (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Xế (5) or Xang (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Công* (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(If first half of câu 4 is used as rao material.)

Câu 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cadences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Xế (5) or Xế</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Xang (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Xang (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Câu 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cadences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Xế (5) or Xế</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Xang (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Xang (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contrasting Section

1. dân ca
2. ngâm thơ
3. nhà cỏ
4. toàn nhạc
5. rao 2
6. dialogue

Câu 4(a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cadences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 xướng hở</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Xế** (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Xế (5) or Xang (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Hồ* (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Interlude / Nhos)

Cậu 5 (a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cadences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Xế (5) or Xế</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Xế** (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Xế (5) or Xang (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Hồ* (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Interlude / Nhos)

Cậu 6

Câu 4(b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cadences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Xế (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Xế (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Xế** (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Xế (5) or Xang (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Hồ* (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Interlude / Nhos)

Cậu 5 (b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cadences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Xế (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Xế (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Hồ (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Hồ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Xế** (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Xế (5) or Xang (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Hồ* (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Interlude / Nhos)
the framework with what may be described essentially as a large-scale dominant-to-tonic structure. Regardless of the alternatives shown in Figure 3.4, câu 5’s cadential zone is always dominant-tonic focused, reinforcing its intermediary purpose in the framework.

Figure 3.4 shows that câu 4 has the most complicated conventions in the vồng cố cycle. Because câu 4 follows a contrasting section, it is used to restart the vồng cố verse framework. The first 16 bars are treated like a reopening, mirroring câu 1. In this vein, the ensemble has a choice to follow a xướng hồ with a rao or they can follow a more structured cadential pattern of hò (1), xê (5), xê (5), xê (5), xang (4), xê** (5), xê (5) or xang (4), and hò (1). Since câu 4 and câu 1 have similar functions as starting verses, cadences from the first half of câu 4 can be used as the rao for câu 1, as seen in alternative 4(c).

Revisiting câu 5, Figure 3.4 illustrates the câu’s multiple roles in realizing a vồng cố framework. It can have a transitory function, bridging câu 4 to câu 6. In that case, it would follow the path of 5(a) (Figure 3.4). However, there are abbreviated variations of the vồng cố cycle may omit câu 4. In this case, câu 5 is then used to xướng hồ and can be filled with either a rao or a structured cadence pattern of hò (1), xê (5), xang (4), xê (5), like that of bars 20, 24, and 28 of câu 1. Câu 5 replaces the cống (6) in câu 1, bar 32 with a xê (5), thereby retaining the dominant focus of câu 5. In this sense, it becomes a restarting phrase for the framework.

3.2.2 Vồng cố Form: Repetition as a Basis

Vồng cố music is based on repetition on various musical levels and surfaces. According to Trần, repetition in Vietnamese music is “more interesting, because it postpones the

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information of the song and thus holds the attention of the listener.\textsuperscript{62}

At the largest scale, the six câu operate on a cyclical relationship, interchanging between a binary of vocal and non-vocal units. This interaction forms a figurative, contrasting framework fixed to no more than five interchanges between said musical units. Figure 3.5 illustrates the relationship between the vocal (câu) and non-vocal (interlude/nói lói) macro-sections found in the \textit{sáu câu} form.

Figure 3.5. \textit{Sáu Câu} Form: Linear framework unfolding and cyclical relationships between vocal and non-vocal units.

This cyclical relationship is reminiscent of rondo form and could possibly be influenced by the French rondeau concept. Typically, a structurally basic rondo would feature alternating sections between an established constant (A) and an alternating section (B). For example, \textit{vọng Cô}’s instrumental unit could act as an A section and the vocal unit could act as a B section.

\textsuperscript{62} Trân, “Vietnamese Culture and Music,” 50.
However, there must be a recognizable recurring theme or harmonic motion to establish an A section and enough musical contrast to define a B section. Despite the cyclical relationship, the sáu câu form is not quite a rondo due to the lack of underlying harmonic structure in the instrumental improvisation and recurring melodic material in vong có vocal melodies.

In his analysis on repetition in popular music, Richard Middleton identifies “musematic” (short units, single-level) repetition and “discursive” (longer units, hierarchical) repetition occurring over marco- and micro-levels of musical surfaces. He further remarks that these units of repetition can be defined by various methods of material selection: “monad,” “repetition,” “binary switching,” “digital selection,” “analogue selection,” and “infinite set.” These six types of selection methods operate on a spectrum and range from maximal to minimal repetitiveness.

Middleton’s concepts of provide another lens on vong có music. While vong có is improvisatory in nature, the internal musical material of each 32-bar câu most often relies on combinations and repetitions of learned riffs and conventional patterns—which Middleton refers to as “musematic”—to build an overarching câu. These riffs are structured using musical strains gleaned from various methods of selection within vong có’s functional framework. As previously discussed, the vong có sound world features 5 notes for a given mode (bác, nam, and oán). Improvisers are creating music based on Middleton’s digital selection method—working with a limited or restricted set of discrete quantities, whether in pitch, rhythm, or direction. Because

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64 Ibid., 237.

65 Richard Middleton, 237.
võng cổ accompaniment is built on riffs and small musical units, there are high chances of recurring musical patterns that create conventional characteristics of this music tradition.

Repetition is also attributable to võng cổ pedagogy. Beginning students are taught standard patterns and combinations to include in their practices. They learn by rote memory and imitating their teachers. Oral instruction of this art is built on a binary of watch-and-learn, and a student will spend a lesson and practice hours repeating after a teacher to ingrain musical information. This method of oral instruction provides students with a discrete set of improvisational patterns, riffs, and motives to execute and combine in a semi-randomized manner. Therefore, at a smaller level, võng cổ improvisation is operational on conventional musical units that characterize võng cổ music. For example, a popular way to cadence in võng cổ is to repeat a tone at the octave or play a sixteenth- and eighth-note figuration with an intervallic leap to the desired cadential pitch. Xuống hồ also signals entry via repeated notes and figuration, and the same applies to the nhỗi technique.

On a larger scale, longer phrases can be repeated across different câu, especially those who share similar cadential patterns. Based on a chosen accompaniment pattern, võng cổ music is capable of being repeated at various intervals of musical time within the sáu câu form. For instance, a lyrical accompaniment would adhere to a repetitive structure of a phrase or song form (for example, ABA or strophic) in addition to the sáu câu framework.

A preset accompaniment would instead be locked onto a set number of repetitive structures programed into the music. Even freeform accompaniment relies on repeated figures and patterns to create functional passages, the freedom being in the seemingly unlimited combination choices a musician has at disposal. This is what Middleton would consider an “analogue” repetition method, whereby a decision is made on “how much” of something is
repeated.66 Yet regardless of accompaniment type, sáu câu form is a framework supported by smaller-scale units of repeated music, riffs, cadential patterns, and melodic figuration. The result is a flexible six-part framework indicative of modern vọng cổ form.

3.2.3 Vọng cổ Form: The Insert Section and Overarching Tripartite Form

There is section between câu 3 and 4 where a singer can insert a dân ca or cổ nhạc (folksong), tân nhạc (modern or pop song), ngâm thơ (recite poetry), rao (instrumental break), or a dialogue (if in a duet). There is no specific unified term for this section, though there are sources that translate this section as the “break” section, referring to a break in the sáu câu pattern.67 However, it is believed that the term “contrasting section” would better fit the function of this section as it allows a vọng cổ performer to augment the form with a performance free from formal restraints. It is something akin to a cadenza where the performer can choose a musical insertion that best portrays his or skill as well as the performance’s sentiment. This term also better envisions the fluid transition between sáu câu framework and the contrasting section.

The implications of the break section are significant as it determines the genre of the vọng cổ form. If a performer chooses to perform an option other than a ngâm thơ or a rao, the traditional nature is interrupted by another music form. Whereas dân ca or cổ nhạc are traditional music forms, the folksongs, deriving on one of the three Vietnamese regions, have their own form and even their own scales and modes. The inclusion of a tân nhạc modern or pop song changes the vọng cổ genre to a newer form called tân cổ, a descendant of the vọng cổ form.

Spoken dialogue between two or more characters is reminiscent of cãi lương Vietnamese folk opera and renovated theater. An interjection of any of these additional music form would alter the true form of traditional vồng cổ music. Nevertheless, it has become a trend to have fusion music forms that utilize vồng cổ form and performance while synthesizing songs and numbers from various pop and folk opera traditions.

The formal interruption of contrasting section performance options is a highly important, but a full exploration of this matter lies beyond the scope of this study. There are, however, some basic observations that can be made here. The contrasting section disrupts the six-part sáu câu framework. Not only can it contrast the genre and style of the traditional Vietnamese form, but it also redefines the framework into a macro-scale tripartite ABA formal organization (Figure 3.6): câu 1–3/contrasting section/câu 4–6.

Figure 3.6. Sáu Câu Form: Nested ABA forms.

This formal alteration differentiates vồng cổ from other traditional Vietnamese music.

Redefining a sáu câu framework into an overarching ABA form changes the formal organization at smaller levels. For instance, the B contrasting section create two A sections that can be further subdivided into smaller ABA sections.
3.3 Variations of Sáu Câu Form

Vọng cờ form is flexible, its definitions changing with the type of contrasting section chosen by the performers. But there are even more formal alterations such as abbreviated vọng cờ forms that complicate matters. A complete vọng cờ cycle takes time and dedication from both performers and audiences. For the sake of time, vọng cờ cycles have been abbreviated into many different verse combinations. Câu 1 is always a given. A popular variant omits câu 3 and 4 because câu 3 is considered “difficult to sing” and câu 4 is like câu 1.68

In variations, any câu (other than câu 1) can xuống hồ with the option either playing a rao or cycling through set cadences hồ (1), xê (5), xang (4).69 To do this, they imitate the beginning of câu 1 and then switch over to the last 16 bars of the respective câu that is xuống hồ. Another popular combination, câu 1-5-6, is an effective abbreviation that focuses heavily on the intervallic 5-1 (dominant to tonic motion). Returning to Figure 3.4, câu 1 includes the necessary rao and introductory materials and cycles through its cadences. Câu 5 and 6 have a heavy concentration of xê (5) and xê (5) cadences driving towards the hồ (1) at the end of câu 6. This provides what may be regarded as a tonic-dominant-tonic paradigm, one that omits other câu that provides more predominant-like functions, especially câu 3 ad its heavy concentration of xang (4) and cờng (6) cadences. There are countless permutations of a vọng cờ cycle, and its verse and contrasting section combinations are determined ahead of time by the ensemble.

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Regardless of the combination or reduction of "vọng cơ câu", the form retains a teleological functional narrative, always beginning with câu 1, moving through an intermediary phrase or 2, and cadencing on the tonic "hò". The instrumental framework’s overall narrative is at the most basic level a tripartite structure, complicated by the addition (or subtraction) of câu or the contrasting section. Another layer of complexity surfaces with the addition of the vocal melody, often sung speech-like with asymmetrical phrase structure. The next section will examine a commonly-practiced "vọng cơ" preset accompaniment for similarities with and differences from the pure "sâu câu" framework.
IV. Analysis

4.1 Analytical Limitations

The pedagogy and circulation of Vọng cổ music has been transmitted largely through oral means. While there have been recent attempts at transcribing vồng cổ, there remain very little accessible vồng cổ standards that are transcribed (ký âm) into Western pitch notation. Vồng cổ’s improvisatory nature allows the music limitless possibilities. Master improvisers may invent individualized improvisations, and the different interpretations are appreciated by the audience. As said by Vĩnh Bảo Nguyên, “Vietnamese listeners are not listening to a composition, but to the rendering of music by such or such musician.” It is the improvised material of the rào, much like that of the entire vồng cổ framework, that defines a vồng cổ performance governed by fleeting simultaneity.

In preparation for intricate improvisations, beginner students are taught standard patterns and combinations by imitation and rote. However, many vồng cổ teachers have begun to transcribe (ký âm) standard vồng cổ riffs for learning. For example, Văn Thành Lê’s (credited in his work as Lê Văn Thành) transcription of a standard sáu câu is circulated on the internet by various Vietnamese music and vồng cổ websites for the interested to access and learn. This transcription is made available online via vietnamclassical.wordpress.com for the interested to download and use. Lê’s transcript has also been circulating on another website, posted by

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70 Vĩnh Bảo Nguyên, 9.

another user on cungchoinhac.com, for the same purpose. Links to it are also occasionally passed around in fleeting YouTube comments. Because vong cờ transcriptions of sáu câu are not widely available or published, physically or electronically, this study will use Lê’s transcript, retrieved from secondary sources, for the academic purpose of education and analysis. All work is credited to the original transcriber, Văn Thành Lê (in Vietnamese name order, Lê Văn Thành).

While Văn Thành Lê’s sáu câu (including rao) is only one documented example of a vong cờ framework, it provides many examples of patterns and concepts common to a typical vong cờ improvisation. It is possible for a student to participate in heterophonic vong cờ improvisation with solely this preset accompaniment, applying the accompaniment to sung and unsung performances. Ideally, a student would learn a preset such as this—notation-wise or orally—well enough before modifying it to personal tastes.

This section will analyze Lê’s transcription (hereafter the LVT transcription, based on the Eastern Vietnamese name order Lê printed on his transcription) with a commentary on traditional vong cờ accompaniment. The LVT Transcription is written in dây kép xê (starting pitch A) and can be transposed to to kép xang or đào to accommodate any vong cờ singer. Like jazz lead sheets, the LVT transcript is best followed as a notated guide for which the melody and rhythm can eventually be elaborated. In the original transcription, the numbers added above the notes by Lê indicate guitar fret numbers while the bottom circled number represent guitar string number, with 1 representing the thinnest E string on the guitar. The numbers ascend with string thickness. This study will, however, mainly focus on the written notes of the transcription.

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Lê’s *rao* gives an example of a possible *vọng cổ* introduction with cadences on *xang* (m. 4), *xê* (m. 8), and *hò* (m. 12). There is a *nhờ* that follows. The three cadences focus on the stable pitches of any *vọng cổ*, and thus no auxiliary tones are used as cadences in this section. This reinforces the strong notes in preparation for the singer’s entrance, as the music locks into a framework. The transcription provides what a *vọng cổ* framework does not: information on how phrases are connected and how to lead into cadences. For example, successive pitches between measures (divided by a barline on written scores) are continued by (1) retaining the same note or (2) moving stepwise to the nearest note from the mode. If there are any skips, they are mainly consonant due to the nature of the intervallic relationships in a pentatonic *vọng cổ* mode. An in-depth analysis of the transcription’s six câu reveal much data on notational and musical techniques in the following discussion.

4.2 Pitch Register

Because the LVT Transcription is intended for modern guitars or keyboards, the music covers a larger range than that of *vọng cổ*’s *hò* solmization system, from the lowest E3 to the highest F6. There are cadential pitches that coincide with the correct cadential points regardless of register, and it is assumed that the transcription (and its source) treats cadential pitches with octave equivalence. In other words, any note of a given pitch class, regardless of registral position, and could be considered functionally equivalent.

There are no apparent voice-leading or parsimony rules guiding a melodic or improvisation line in *vọng cổ*. The accompaniment may freely use consonant skips and leaps up to an octave, many of the skips arising from the chordal and accompanimental arpeggiations.
characteristic of vông cọ improvisation. At times, the register seems uncommon and inconvenient for keyboard music. It is probable that Lê transcribed this with the guitar in mind, where shifting octaves on a fretboard can require less topographical movement than it would in a piano. Lê possibly used octave equivalence to add a level of registral variety and musical sophistication to his sáu câu accompaniment. Nevertheless, it encourages consideration for the target instrument (guitar) and its facilities and limitations.

4.3 Mode and Pitch Content

Set in the nam mode, the transcription generally follows preset scale degrees hò (1), xṳ (3), xang (4), xê (5), còng (6), liu (8). There are three ways to explain notes outsides the mode (nam) that the transcription is set in: notation errors, embellishment and pitch-alteration (bending), and modulation (mode-changing).

First, Lê faces the challenge of transcribing a purely aural improvisational possibility. The music and transcription are in a sense prone to errors depending on the transcriber’s transcription methodology, skill with Western notation, the nature and tuning of the transcribed instrument, and the (non-)observance of major and minor intervallic qualities. Answers to these variables remain unanswered and there are questionable moments in the LVT transcript. For example, there is a tritone in câu 3, m. 1 between a C-sharp and G-natural (Figure 4.1). This interval does not exist in vocabulary or pentatonic-mode pitch collection and is likely an error. It could be true that this interval is in truth an untuned fifth on a guitar or traditional instrument, but this remains uncertain. If this is intentional, then the music is somehow drawing from a
heptatonic pitch space (see “II. Notation” for more) while loosely maintaining the pentatonic solmization system to distinguish mode.

Figure 4.1. Unexplained dissonance in the LVT transcript, câu 3, m. 1.73

Another instance in câu 1, m. 16 has a high C going down to a c-sharp. Again, this dissonance of a half-step is unusual in the context of vọng cổ and is very noticeable when played on a keyboard. However, there is a slide indication from the A5 to C6 suggest a level of pitch ambiguity, as a slide (marked on the score by angled lines) on a plucked string instrument is more approximate than absolute. It is theoretically possible that the C6 and the subsequent c-sharp would sound less dissonant when played on the guitar, by ear, after the slide. Otherwise, there is no strong explanation as to why this dissonance is there.

This is not to say that the LVT transcript is error-ridden. The music still provides examples of filling in a vọng cổ framework. Embellishment via pitch bending or figuration is common in vọng cổ music. As a matter of fact, passing tones are a staple of instrumental vọng cổ riffs. They are more so available on modern instruments, such as a keyboard, capable of

73 Văn Thành Lê, “Sáu Câu Vọng Cổ (Nhạc Sĩ: Lê Văn Thành),” pdf., vietnamclassical.wordpress.com
heptatonicism or all possible twelve-tones. Traditional fretted instruments are tuned to the pentatonic on their frets and have less heptatonic capabilities. The *đàn kim* is fixed to a pentatonic scale and thus has less pitch capabilities as a keyboard.\(^{74}\) The complexities created by passing tone is the temporary creation of heptatonicism. It is also possible that tones are inflected with specific pitch bends, thus already affecting the approximate values of every written pitch. The variable *xております* (3) includes both major and minor qualities and scale degree (2) as a byproduct of pitch-bending. Guitarists can slide from note to note, and a keyboardist may also achieve this using a modulation wheel. Additionally, scale degree (2) may arise as a passing tone between *hò* (1) and *xております* (3) but does not create enough structural or functional significance to be considered a modulation (or shift) between two *vọng cơ* modes. Neighbor tones are also common pitch embellishments that may include both native and non-mode notes.

Repeated three-note patterns with a passing tone are also common in *vọng cơ* riffs and serve to embellish the structural tones of the mode. Passing tones are usually fleeting instances that are not immediately reinforced by repetition or the appearances of other non-mode pitches that may otherwise indicate possible modulation. Passing tones may additionally be used to lead into cadences, giving them a more teleological goal. Not all passing tones involve non-mode tones. For instance, a three-note figure moving through *xang* (4), *xe* (5), and *cống* (6), vice versa, would constitute all pitches within a *nam* or *bạc* mode. Figure 4.2 provides excerpts of passing and neighbor motion in câu 1 of the transcription.

The third possibility for non-mode pitches is modulation. While not a central topic or concern of *vọng cơ* music, brief modulation to another mode may explain long strains of non-

\(^{74}\) Phong T. Nguyen, 262.
mode pitches. This concept of modulation is however not harmonically linked. Instead, it refers to the retrospective comprehension of non-mode auxiliary tones. Because the auxiliary pitches xū (2/3) and cỏng (6/7) that define a mode is no more than a step away (discounting major or minor interval qualities), it is easy to move from one mode to another by simply moving stepwise for either of the auxiliary pitches. An example of this is shown in the seventh system of Figure 4.2 and in Figure 4.3.

Modes can be switched as a result of the change of focus and frequency of a non-mode pitch. As seen in Figures 4.2 and 4.3, this can occur rather quickly as music unfolds. While changing modes is a deliberate action, it is possible that a vọng cô musician may change modes purely on sentiment. In their encyclopedic entry, Trần and Nguyễn speak of the concept of “metabole” as:

…an alternation or succession of two or more five-note scales (with or without a periodic and final return to the point of departure) in the course of a pentatonic melody. Derived from the Greek word meaning ‘change’, the term was used and defined by the musicologist Constantin Brăiloiu and characterizes a musical phenomenon that is often found in Vietnamese folk music, especially in north and central Vietnam, in folk theatre music and in the chú văn repertory (medium's songs).75

From their entry, Trần and Nguyễn see modulation as a harmonic event and metabole as a melodic event, going far enough to distinguish the two. While Trần and Nguyễn attribute this phenomenon to traditional northern and central Vietnamese music, it is a possibility that vọng cô may have inherited this idea in the process of its materialization and evolution. In this case, a five-note mode that switches to another by melodic succession and the omission of notes from the previous mode may result either from modulations or the creation of a “metabole.” There is

75 Trần and Nguyễn, “Vietnam, Socialist Republic of (Công Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam),” Grove Music Online. The two provide a brief entry on the “metabole” concept but do not go into depth with this subject matter.
not yet sufficient data on the practice of modulation and metabole in Vietnamese music, other
than Trân and Nguyễn’s entry, but this topic of vòng cờ music need to be addressed to better
understand modulation trends and their implications in vòng cờ.

Figure 4.2. Passing and scalar motion in the LVT transcript, câu 1.76

Figure 4.2, (Cont.). Passing and scalar motion in the LVT transcript, câu 1.77

6-7-1 Passing motion. All other notes in this measure are common to nam.

3-2-1-7 scalar passage leading to a skip to xê. Possibly using pitches from the oăn.

3-2-1 passing motion with non-mode 2.
5-6-5 neighbor motion with notes in the mode. Embellishing the xê (5).
6-5-4 passing motion with nam notes.

Figure 4.2. (Cont.). Passing and scalar motion in the LVT transcript, câu 1.78

The unexplained dissonance of the auxiliary xú. Looking at the string (2) and fret (2) number in the score would indicate the fret between pitches C and D.

Translation: Nhớ (continue to the opening beat of câu 2)

Figure 4.3. An example of switching modes in the LVT transcript: câu 6, first phrase (mm. 1–4).79

Scale Degree: 5-2-1 2-1-7-1 7-1-5-1 7-5-7-1 7-- 3-- 7-- 1-7-1

Pitches indicative of oàn mode.

3 is outside of oàn and native to nam.

4 and 1 common to oàn and nam.

7 = oàn

Pitches belong to nam mode.

Continuation of music in global nam mode

Modes Apparent
Stable tones are similar; auxiliary tones are dissimilar.

Nam: 1-3-4-5-6-1
Oàn: 1-2-4-5-7-1


79 Ibid.
4.4 Cadencing Patterns

The LVT transcription details all the cadences of the vồng có framework. A keen eye would detect that after the rao, the câu has a total of odd-numbered measures, except for câu 3. This is because Lê writes in all his nhọi sections. These nhọi carry over to the first measure of the next câu, and the bar lines used to maintain 4/4 time could not accommodate this information. That is why the LVT transcript has 17 or 33 bars when it should be 16 or 32. Câu 3 has even-numbered bars because it was set-off to accommodate the two cadence-zone alternatives between xê and xang as well as the contrasting section. The written nhọi also offsets the cadences in the 17 and 33-bar câu, generally moving the cadences one beat later and into the first beat of the following measure. In other words, a cadence that one expects to occur on beat 4 is instead moved to beat 1 of the next measure. It should be kept in mind that the cadences still occur at the end of lyrical phrases. Furthermore, the bar lines, now offset, do not indicate that cadences are always delayed so as to land on the strong beat of the next phrase. It is also typical for singers to begin a new verse on an offbeat or weak beat of a measure, leaving space for the offset cadence to resolve before moving on. The LVT transcription prescribes a half note (2 beats) to a nhọi after the cadence. These nhọi are distinguished in the score by a half note followed by rests that are placeholdering the melodic continuation found in the beginning of the following câu. Figure 4.4 illustrates this concept.
Figure 4.4. How the nhòi concept is represented in the LVT transcription.\textsuperscript{80}

Câu 1, mm. 30-33

Câu 2, m. 1

The LVT transcriptions provides insight on various methods of cadential approach in vồng cố music. Intervalic leaps and skips, passing tones, neighbor motion, repetition, and oblique motion are among the technique used to approach cadences. More specifically, certain cadential tones seem to have more typical approaches. For example, the hò is most often approached by consonant leaps, commonly sixths or octaves. Sometimes, they are also approached by step, but the former is more frequent than the latter. The stable tones hò and xê (regardless of octave equivalence and register) are not often approached by dissonant intervallic leaps. That is more frequent of xang, which sometimes approached by a seventh leap in addition to consonant sixth leaps. Fourth leaps are also common cadential approaches, possibility because of their subdominant intervallic relationships. Figure 4.5 charts all the LVT transcription cadences and their approaches, sorted by câu.

Figure 4.5 reveals that dissonant cadential approaches are reserved for xang (4) cadences. Most of these were leaps of a seventh and featured upwards motion. Xang cadence pitches approached by this dissonant intervallic value are often immediately repeated with pitch bends or embellishment of xang. Fourth motions were common to hò (1), xê (5), and cỏng (6), all cadential pitches most consistently approached by consonant intervals.

Other instances of cadential pitches repeated in succession involve either a form of anticipation (if preceding) or prolongation (if succeeding). The motion to these cadences are oblique and relatively unelaborated, yet they create the most metrically and aurally noticeable cadences in a vồng cỏ improvisation. Such approaches to the cadence are associated with the xê
and xang cadences that reinforce the stable pitch triumvirate alongside hò in a model sậu câu framework.

4.5 Rhythmic Content

Rhythms in the LVT transcription follow the general vọng có rule of thumb, maintaining sixteenth notes as the quickest rhythms. In most cases, the elaborated even sixteenth-note passages serve as prolongations of a strong beat xê, or they may lead to and from a strong beat xê. The transcription above offers many examples of stock vọng có rhythmic patterns, including irregular dotted figurations. The combination shown in Figure 4.6 is a particularly common way to rhythmically cadence in vọng có.

Figure 4.6 is a basic unit used in a preceding beat to round off a cadence. This pattern is usually preceded by longer note values, typically an eight note or no more than a quarter note value. Outside of cadencing, it is very common to have this figure approach hò on any strong beat. This may be seen in the LVT transcription as well. Sometimes, as seen in câu 3, the basic pattern in Figure 4.6 can be variated to create a syncopated cadential approach. Figure 4.7 illustrates the various rhythmic units, cadential and non-cadential, typical to vọng có.

Figure 4.6. Typical cadential figure in vọng có music, rao, LVT transcription.\(^{81}\)

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4.6 Historic Evidence

There is no exact explanation on how these notational, intervallic, cadential, and rhythmic characteristic became a staple in vòng cờ. However, insight can be gained by looking at “Đạ cờ hoài lang,” considering its assumed role in the origin of vòng cờ music. The original solmization of “Đạ cờ hoài lang” is frequently circulated on the internet and in print sources, sometimes with slight alterations. The pitches given in hò solmization is rather basic and does not account for the embellishment and melismas added by singers. It also does not include Vietnamese-language diacritics and intonation. Nevertheless, there are many similarities between the compositional features of “Đạ cờ hoài lang” and the musical characteristics of vòng cờ improvisation. Now, this study will compare two versions of “Đạ cờ hoài lang,” one transcription by Văn Đức and one standard solmization by Vĩnh Phạm, to find similarities to vòng cờ conventions (see Figure 4.8). Văn Đức’s version features a written introduction not part of the

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Figure 4.8 Annotated comparison of Đức’s and Phạm’s “Đa cổ hoài lang.”

transpositions of this very melody. I have selected the one set in đây kép xê to maintain a relationship with the previously analyzed LVT transcription.

For the solmization, see Vĩnh Phạm, “6 câu vọng cổ,” trinhnu.net, accessed April 2018, http://www.trinhnu.net/van/45044. Phạm’s complete solmization (20 câu), consistent with various printed and online sources, can be found at the end of his webpage.

original “Dạ cổ hoài lang,” and that section will not be analyzed. His transcription is also set in 4/4 as opposed to the 2/4 the song was originally written in. Văn Đức may have done this to observe modern practice, but meter will not be focal to this pitch- and interval-based analysis.

There are differences in pitch content between Đức’s and Phạm’s version, most immediately noticeable is the hò to xê at the beginning of the first verse (Figure 4.8). Figure 4.8 compares the differences between Đức’s and Phạm’s version, showing that the octave in the solmization is reduced to a fifth leap in the transcribed version. That is because Đức’s version sounds closer to how “Dạ cổ hoài lang” is sung in recordings or in everyday gatherings. Reasons behind this are still uncertain, but oral transmission, pedagogy, and learning of the song may have led to alteration and differentiation between solmization and common practice. Take, for example, Figure 4.8, which compares the first 6 câu of “Dạ cổ hoài lang,” the six verses for which the song is most recognized and from where the sáu câu framework evolved.

The annotations indicate many similarities to vòng cổ improvisation. Even the rhythmic cadential pattern is used for cadencing. Phạm’s solmization feature more stepwise cadential approaches, mostly stepwise aside from the two leaps (a fourth and an octave, respectively). It is possible that Phạm’s solmization is a lead sheet for instrumentalists to improvise upon while accompanying a singer singing a melodic line more akin to Đức’s transcription.

In the end, a close examination of the LVT transcript, Đức transcription, and Phạm’s solmization provided may similarities to a typical vòng cổ. The result supports the many musical details analyzed in this section, all useful for the learning, analyzing, and creating of an improvisational sáu câu improvisation.
V. Conclusion

In the end, this study seeks to scratch the surface of vọng cổ music, its origins, notational system, formal framework, and musical techniques. There remain many unanswered questions beyond the scope of this study that aims to academically define this world music genre.

This is important because vọng cổ music is losing interest even in its native country. Pedagogues and scholars such as Vĩnh Bão Nguyễn and Thuyết Phong Nguyễn have addressed these issues in their writings. This is a result of a change in musical-social interest and priorities. Vĩnh Bão Nguyễn tells of how the National School of Saigon (began in 1956) became a leading example of music school dedicated to teaching Western music while deemphasizing traditional music learning through academic promotion of Western music. Vĩnh Bão holds firm opinion that Western music’s complexities, professionalism, and culture is more attractive to younger musicians, especially in the rapidly modernizing Vietnam. He is concerned that Vietnamese music will lose its identity when it interacts with Western music, at the same time advocating:

I sincerely hope that the Vietnamese traditional music can adapt itself to the new condition of modern life without affecting its essence. Every innovation in a tradition must be brought about willingly, and by crafted masters of the traditional music. It is indispensable and in my opinion, that the qualified authorities must shoulder their cultural responsibility, takes steps to perpetuate the tradition. They must also review the position of the traditional musicians, foster musical research, encourage the study of traditional music, and reorganize the school of music.

To preserve a traditional art form’s essence is to first understand it at its deepest levels and doing so sometimes requires inter-dialogue between two different traditions. While this

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84 Vĩnh Bão Nguyễn, 10.

85 Ibid, 11.
study to understand vồng cổ music through an academic lens does align with Vĩnh Bảo’s call to action, it does not aim to reorganize or change ideals. Instead this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of vồng cổ music through a detailed Western musical-theoretical lens that produces significant analysis and accessible information. This is necessary and addresses the ongoing status of music theory in Vietnam: there is a lack of solid theoretical vocabulary to explain, preserve, and translate traditional Vietnamese genres to Western analytical systems or any other musical analytical systems. As a matter of fact, Thuyêt Phong Nguyễn writes:

Vietnamese scholars have not thoroughly and conclusively addressed questions of music theory. The difficulty lies in the fact that, even though Vietnamese music is nationally and culturally unified to a great extent, regional styles and ensembles exhibit striking differences. A general formality and customary manner of presentation are typical of all Vietnamese music, but no all-embracing theory can be applied to the genres found from north to south….Methods of learning and instrumentation vary greatly from one region to another, and musicians from different regional ensemble do not play together.  

Indeed, this study is the first step in translating and unifying the disparate concepts within one singular vồng cổ tradition under a standardized musical-theoretical approach. Unlike Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn, this study approaches vồng cổ from an outside-in lens, having researched and learned of vồng cổ through exposure to the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States and communication with Vietnamese vồng cổ musicians overseas. It is hopeful that this work in progress will eventually facilitate the transmission of the vồng cổ genre. Oral pedagogy is indeed the most authentic method of learning vồng cổ, but permeance through written standardization is necessary the face and danger of losing an art form. Total unification and standardization of Vietnamese traditional music is possible in a longitudinal and corpus study of all traditional Vietnamese musical forms. Only then may trends arise between regional variants and unique-

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86 Phong T. Nguyen, 251.
yet-related genres. For example, *vọng cổ* music’s history reaches far beyond “Đa có hoài lang” and into the northern region where everything began. Tapping into the nhạc tài tự may very well provide more musical-theoretical insight into *vọng cổ* music, vice versa. Related genres of renovated theater (*cải lương*) and modern *tân cổ* that include improvisatory practices similar to *vọng cổ* can also be understood with similar theoretical approaches to notation, mode, and form.

This study is the first step towards investigating said relationships. So far, *vọng cổ* music can be effectively defined through this study’s methodology while still honoring its musical and cultural roots. Undoubtedly, it is mechanical to incorporate measured note values and pitch bends as well as preset accompaniments to a *vọng cổ* performance. However, it is a good informational approach for beginning students and the interested to familiarize themselves with the otherwise “word-of-mouth” and trade secret conventions. And as a skilled painter knows best what colors to use, a beginning *vọng cổ* student will find their own musical originality and mastery through understanding, practicing, and exploring the basis of this oral tradition.

To this end, this study is purposed to provide a body of information that can be used for study or even in response to Vĩnh Bảo Nguyễn’s cultural advocacy. Regardless, *vọng cổ* music is best understood as a syncretic traditional world music genre that features modern and traditional instruments, improvised heterophonic accompaniment, a flexible pentatonic notation and modal system, and a variable six-part framework of fixed cadences. From these most basic ideas arise musical elaborations and alterations over time that have evolved the genre to where it is today.
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