

Phạm Duy and Modern Vietnamese History



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The history of the Vietnamese in the twentieth century is the still incomplete story of a people's continuous material and spiritual self transformation as they sought, and gradually found, the means to replace ancient structures, thoughts, and habits with new ones that would enable them to throw off the yoke of colonial domination and enter the modern era, with identity intact, as a strong and free member of the world community.

In this article I propose to look at the musician Phạm Duy, born in 1921 in Hanoi and currently living again in Vietnam after a nearly thirty-year sojourn in Midway City, California, as one of the witnesses and spokesmen of this history. Fate and a series of personal decisions conspired to put Phạm Duy at the heart of the transformative processes taking place in his society, and his career as an artist enabled him to give expression to these processes in a way that was heard by great numbers of his compatriots.¹

Though personally acquainted with politicians and political thinkers of every sort throughout his life, Phạm Duy managed to fulfill his role as a spokesman for the modern without once entering the political arena himself; he always, in fact, looked with disdain upon the quest for political power. Commenting in his *Memoirs* on the first General Conference on the Arts held in Hanoi under Việt Minh auspices in 1945, in which, at the age of twenty-five, he was a minor participant, he says

Anyone involved in politics will necessarily wind up with dirty hands. As is said in the Fables of La Fontaine, "the justifications of the strongest are always the most convincing justifications." Or, as a proverb of ours says, "If you win, you're an emperor; if you lose, you're a bandit." My disgust with politics lies in this.

I ... saw clearly which party would vanquish the others in that competitive political card game... But understanding the situation was as far as I wished to go. As for the game of strife and bloodletting, that was an amusement that I was pleased to leave to others. I liked the arts; I did not like politics. From that time forth, I firmly resolved never to participate in such blood sports.²

The four volumes of *Memoirs* from which the above passage is quoted show us a man highly allergic to intellectual coercion, a man with a mind constantly engaged in a process of absorption and synthesis, a man inclined to see a purpose in all his experiences and a meaning to everything he

¹ Phạm Duy (original name: Phạm Duy Cẩn) is the composer of close to a thousand songs, many of which are parts of song cycles written in different styles on particular themes. As a composer, his approach has in general been to find ways of fusing indigenous musical traditions with western musical procedures. In addition to his four-volume *Memoirs* (see Note 2, below), he is the author of *The Musics of Vietnam* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), which is a comprehensive introduction to Vietnamese folk music that pays much attention to regional styles and genres. He has been active as well as a movie director and script-writer, and as a radio personality, both in Saigon and on British BBC, presenting programs on the history of Vietnamese popular music. For a summary characterisation and history of this music, see Eric Henry, "Tân Nhạc: Notes Toward a Social History of Vietnamese Music," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 44.1 (Winter 2005), pp. 135-147.

² Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký (Memoirs)* 2.5 (Volume 2, Chapter 5), concluding paragraphs. The *Memoirs* of Phạm Duy are in four volumes: I. *Thời Thơ Ấu – Vào Đời (Childhood and Young Adulthood)*; II. *Thời Cách Mạng – Kháng Chiến (The Revolution and Resistance Periods)*; III. *Thời Phân Chia Quốc Cộng (The Period of Communist – Nationalist Division)*; and IV. *Thời Hải Ngoại (My Sojourn Abroad)*. My citations of this work will be by volume and chapter number only; they will not include page numbers because, though the first three volumes have been published as books (Midway City, California: PDC Musical Productions, 1990 and 1991), the work has been available to the public chiefly as a set of documents on the composer's website (now unfortunately shut down); and I myself possess volumes II and IV only in the form of unnumbered pages printed out from this site. The first three volumes of the *Memoirs* were written in the period 1989-91, and the last volume in 2001. All translations of the *Memoirs* in this article are my own.

observes, a man who came to know everyone and everything in Vietnam, and a man under a quasi-confessional compulsion to tell the entire truth about his experiences. His fans often observe that he is a *tư tưởng gia*, a thinker, as well as a composer; and he himself implicitly assumes the mantle of a thinker in the introduction to his *Memoirs* with a casual invocation of certain personages from the past. "Goethe and Maxim Gorky," he says, "seem to have regarded their childhood experiences as their 'universities.' As one who never had the opportunity to pursue his studies among books in a school setting, I shall imitate those two august figures and say that my 'university education' consisted of the music of the common people, which I observed in the course of my earlier, wandering life."³

Phạm Duy's birth and childhood in a neighborhood in Hanoi's old quarter, only a block or two away from the Lake of the Sword's Return, placed him in the middle of the exciting new westernizing changes then taking place at the heart of Vietnam's intellectual culture. His father, Phạm Duy Tổn, was a progressive journalist, writer, and businessman, a close associate of the translator and reformer Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, and one of the earliest writers of European-style short stories. Phạm Duy Tổn was also among the first Vietnamese to cut his hair short and wear European clothing, was one of the key figures in the founding of the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục or Hanoi Free School movement of 1907, and, with Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and Phạm Quỳnh, took part in the Marseilles Exposition of 1922.⁴ All this was to prove a decisive influence on Phạm Duy, whose own career was to consist, among other things, of an untiring quest for all manifestations of the new, the progressive, and the enlightened. After Phạm Duy Tổn's early death in 1923 from tuberculosis, Trần Trọng Kim, the future historian and prime minister of Vietnam, assumed the occasional role of guardian for Phạm Duy and his siblings, the eldest of whom, Phạm Duy Khiêm, was the first Vietnamese to obtain an advanced academic degree in France, and was to serve for a time as Vietnam's ambassador to France under the Ngô Đình Diệm regime.⁵

In spite of these culturally glittering surroundings, Phạm Duy's childhood, though not tragically deprived, was at the same time not comfortable in material terms, and was also not exclusively urban and intellectual. His mother regularly took him with her on far-flung expeditions to festivals at Buddhist pagodas, and into the highland areas to obtain deer antlers and tiger bones to make medicinal powder cakes, the sale of which helped supply the costs of raising a brood of children; and his wet nurse took him with her to her rural village in Trại Trời for extended periods, giving the young Phạm Duy a familiarity with rice fields, thatched huts, and village festivals that laid a basis for his many later evocations of country life.⁶

Even before he was drawn into the world of music, certain proclivities that were to remain with him throughout his life announced themselves early. These included a fascination with performance, a delight in the exploration of modern technology, an inability to endure any kind of regimentation, and a boundless optimism that converted every unpleasantness or disaster that befell him into what seemed to him an exciting adventure or a shining opportunity.

His interest in performance was aroused, initially, by showmen and acrobats who would perform for crowds in an open field by Sword Lake, and in particular by a Mr. Hai Tây, who could stick spikes through his nostrils and make sounds like a trumpet by blowing on the flesh between his thumbs and forefingers.⁷ The young Phạm Duy soon afterward came to be captivated by the magicians, trapeze artists, and animal tamers in the traveling circuses that would come through Hanoi and give performances at the Hàng Da market. He was so enamored of these performances that he gave himself the name, meaningful both in Vietnamese and French, of "*em-mê-xiếc*," or "the kid wild about circuses."⁸ He dreamed of being a traveling magician throughout childhood, would regularly demand that his friends and family watch him perform sleight-of-hand tricks learned from professionals,⁹ and on one occasion went so far as to run away for a few days with a circus magician, getting as far as the

³ Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký 1*, Introduction.

⁴ Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký 1.3*

⁵ Ibid, 1.11

⁶ Ibid, 1.4

⁷ Ibid, 1.2

⁸ Ibid, 1.5 and 1.9. The name *em-mê-xiếc* was meaningful in another way as well: at the time he gave himself this name, the future composer was in love with a little girl of half-French parentage named Emilienne. The Vietnamese transliteration of her name was *em-mê-liên*, that is, "the kid wild about lotus flowers." Thus, with the name *em-mê-xiếc*, he and Emilienne had matching names!

⁹ Ibid, 1.10

city of Nam Định.¹⁰ These dreams were to take concrete form throughout his adult life, in which wandering and performance have been two of the main motifs, though in the (no doubt analogous) realm of music rather than magic.

As a teenager, his interest in technology took the form of using kits to construct model airplanes and other gadgets, making ham radio sets with quartz crystals, visiting foundries in the Hanoi's Ngũ Xã district near West Lake to absorb lessons in bronze casting techniques,¹¹ working in such technical fields as radio repair, land surveying, power station maintenance, and so on.¹² This penchant for understanding the workings of things expressed itself later in his research into the technical aspects of all the styles of folk and traditional music in Vietnam. In the late 1980s, he became the first Vietnamese expatriate to manufacture and sell a music CD, and in the years since, he has turned into a computer and electronics wizard. He has published half a dozen "electronic books" (his own term; CD ROMs with sound, text, and images), which he is convinced will replace conventional books, and for many years maintained an elaborate website devoted to his own career, inferior to none in stylishness, richness of content, and smoothness of operation.¹³

Phạm Duy's *Memoirs* are full of the cries of delight with which he met each new situation into which life thrust him. When consigned to an industrial trade school by an elder brother no longer willing to waste money on providing him with a liberal arts education, he is almost immediately enchanted at the prospect of learning the secrets of modern steel technology.¹⁴ When doing the laborious work of a rural surveyor, going from place to place on a little horse in order to determine the boundaries and calculate the areas of dispersed plots of farm land, he is soon delighted because the work takes him to all the places in the adjacent villages of Nhã Nam and Yên Thế, and because he is given a warm welcome by all the tenant farmers in these places.¹⁵ When, in the remote border province of Moncay, he is working as a furnace stoker in an electric power plant amid blistering heat and carbon dioxide fumes, his days pass rapturously because his co-worker is a former professional opera singer who talks tirelessly about *cải lương* opera and sings southern *vọng cổ* arias in a finely expressive manner.¹⁶ In the spring of 1946, as a newly trained guerrilla soldier riding south on a train with twelve other youths in a unit called Cadre Group 13 to fight the French in the Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu military district, he is full of patriotic fervor; he jots down a song full of martial enthusiasm called "Bringing Forth the Troops" (Xuất Quân) and is delighted to find himself in a group prized and loved by the other passengers, who give him and his companions vast quantities of things to eat.¹⁷

The indomitably affirmative quality of Phạm Duy's personality finds definite expression in his music, where we find a penchant for major modes, and a celebratory and life-embracing impulse not typical of Vietnamese *tân nhạc* as a whole, which is much given to minor modes, long winding phrases, and expressions of cosmic yearning and despair.

The *Memoirs* provide much testimony concerning another trait, also somewhat at odds with the author's cultural background, and also prominent throughout his career as a musician and public figure: a profound inability to endure any form of authority or regimentation. He lasted less than a year at the Industrial Arts School because, as he observes, his violations of school regulations were a bit frequent – things such as getting into fights, sneaking away from school when he was supposed to be confined to the premises, and raising a hammer to strike a steel foundry director who was about to box his ears for some mistake.¹⁸ Some months later, unable to endure the supercilious remarks of an elder brother and brother-in-law who regarded him as a total screw-up, he left home and began an independent existence in Hanoi as a repairman in a radio shop.¹⁹ It was insubordination as well that led to his fateful break with the Viet Minh in 1951. In the previous year, at the Second General Conference on the Arts held in the forests of Yên Giã in the far northwest, the Việt Minh leadership started making its first serious attempts to control the output of artists, starting with such heavy-handed measures as forbidding any further performances of *cải lương* opera or of verse drama, forms

¹⁰ Ibid, 1.9, 1.13

¹¹ Ibid, 1.10

¹² Ibid, 1.12, 1.16, 1.13

¹³ Ibid, 4.18

¹⁴ Ibid, 1.11

¹⁵ Ibid, 1.16

¹⁶ Ibid, 1.13

¹⁷ Ibid, 2.8

¹⁸ Ibid, 1.12

¹⁹ Ibid, 1.12

judged to be soft, weak, and awash with negative emotions that would weaken the spectators' resolve to fight the enemy.²⁰

Phạm Duy had been serving the Viet Minh as a cultural cadre since the inception of the Resistance War, and had by this time composed many famous songs thought to be indispensable to the war effort, such as "The Warrior Without a Name" (Chiến Sĩ Vô Danh), "The Debt of Bones and Blood" (Nợ Xương Máu), "Remembering the One Gone Forth" (Nhớ Người Ra Đi), "Song of the Warrior's Wife" (Chinh Phụ Ca), "Battlefield Autumn" (Thu Chiến Trường), "Music of the Years of Youth" (Nhạc Tuổi Xanh), and many others. It nevertheless came as a surprise to him, at the Second General Conference on the Arts, that the Việt Minh leadership had singled him out for special treatment.

It was the senior musician Nguyễn Xuân Khoát who broke the news to him. The leadership, he said, had decided to admit Phạm Duy to the Communist party and send him to Moscow for musical and political training. He would have a medal pinned on him by Hồ Chí Minh. But there were conditions. He would have to give up his taste for frivolity and dissipation. He would have to publicly repudiate an extremely popular song he had written, "By the Bridge at the Border" (Bên Cầu Biên Giới), that was judged by the leadership to be unacceptably subjective, romantic, and petit bourgeois, and he would have to go to Moscow alone; his pregnant wife, the singer and actress Thái Hằng, would have to remain in Vietnam.

These conditions were all more or less problematic to Phạm Duy, but he was particularly incredulous, angry, and contemptuous at the requirement that he repudiate "By the Bridge at the Border." It seemed to him, he says, that the leadership was taking the matter entirely too seriously:

A song, in my opinion, if it has the good fortune to be sung for a period of time, will have a life no different from that of a flower that blooms in the morning and wilts in the evening – why must its importance be magnified to the extent that you have to subject the poor thing to a public execution?

Phạm Duy also sensed at once that belonging to the party would involve him in endless trouble. Though a person whose revolutionary sympathies were no doubt very strong, he saw clearly that, by background and personality, he was a petty bourgeois, not a member of the proletariat. What he had feared most throughout his life was being subject to a set of rules. His ability to grasp abstract theory was moreover very limited. When in the presence of high-ranking cadres discussing fine points of Communist doctrine, he would sit, he says, like a duck listening to thunder – i.e., with total incomprehension. He was certainly not the sort of person who could memorize the lessons, edicts, and theories of the party. Any attempt to belong to such an organization, he says, would have ended in a few days with his ejection, administered by means of a swift kick to his posterior.

The reply that Phạm Duy gave a few days later to Nguyễn Xuân Khoát was therefore that he felt deep gratitude to everyone, but wished to be given no special favors of any sort. His sole request was to be allowed to return at once with his wife to his previous location in Zone IV: the liberated area in Thanh Hoá province.²¹

After returning to Thanh Hoá, however, he found that he had in effect become invisible to the Việt Minh leadership – he was assigned no further work in any Việt Minh performing arts group.²² Finally, after living for a year in conditions of ever increasing want, he found it necessary, after six years of serving the Resistance, to slip away from the liberated zone with his wife and her family and return to the French occupied cities, first Hanoi and then Saigon, merely to have the means to support his family.²³

The Việt Minh's desire to remove Phạm Duy's song "By the Bridge at the Border" from public circulation was of course a particular manifestation of the more general communist principle that all art must be made to serve revolutionary objectives; but this and other efforts to suppress suspect music also harmonized perfectly with an ancient east Asian superstition originating in China, according to which some types of music can make states and dynasties flourish, while other types can bring about their destruction. The term used in classical Chinese texts for music of the undesirable type is *wang*

²⁰ Ibid, 2.32

²¹ Ibid, 2.33

²² Ibid, 2.34

²³ Ibid, 2.34, 2.35

guo zhi yin (*vong quốc chi âm* in Vietnamese) – “lose-country music.”²⁴ One aspect of this conception is the idea that “bad-for-the-nation” music is darkly and insidiously attractive, and therefore must be opposed with manly, determined puritanism.

The idea that music can lead to national good fortune or disaster was pervasive enough in Vietnam that it sometimes influenced the behavior of politicians and writers in the South as well as in the North. In the early 1970s, for example, President Thiệu of the Vietnamese Republic made it illegal to give public performances of a song “Hận Đồ Bàn,” (“Fury at the Loss of Đồ Bàn”) by Xuân Tiên and Lữ Liên, lamenting the fall of the Chăm capital to Vietnamese troops led by emperor Lê Thánh Tôn in 1470. Thiệu believed that the song possessed a malign supernatural influence that might lead to the loss of the republic. He even went so far as to forbid the singer chiefly associated with the song (Chế Linh, a man of Chăm background) to perform anything in public.²⁵ In the same manner, when Phạm Duy wrote a highly influential war protest song in the mid 1960s called “A Souvenir For My Sweetheart” (Kỷ Vật Cho Em),²⁶ in which a soldier predicts to his beloved that she will see him return – as a cripple or as a corpse – various people raised accusations against the composer, saying that the dissemination of this song had made military men lose heart, with the result that the Southern Republic was defeated by the Northern Communists. Phạm Duy, taking a typically progressive, rational, anti-obscurantist stance, ridicules this idea in his *Memoirs*, asking if we are to believe that a song is more effective at attacking the enemy than an army with a million people that enjoys the support of an allied nation with the atomic bomb.²⁷

Anyone looking for an easily grasped consistency in Phạm Duy’s views, however, will be disappointed, for he is an heir, not only to his father’s progressive rationalism, but also to the traditional collectivism of Vietnamese thinking. Phạm Duy often expresses the view in his *Memoirs* that artistic productions, both his own and those of his friends, played an important role in educating and motivating the soldiers and the public during the anti-French Resistance phase of the war.²⁸ Nor does he think, as westerners are liable to, that it is either wrong or futile for governments to enlist the aid of artists in gaining public support for their programs. He in fact believes that a government that fails to make use of artists is missing the boat, and he faults the successive governments of the South for failing in precisely this area;²⁹ whereas he praises the Việt Minh, particularly in its early years, for recognizing the importance of the arts in mobilizing people to fight the French, and for going to great lengths to create performance groups, the mission of which was to entertain soldiers and civilians in liberated areas.³⁰ The Vietnamese word for propaganda (*tuyên truyền*, or *xuan chuan* in Chinese) doesn’t have the entirely negative connotations that the English word has. While working as a cultural cadre for the Việt Minh, Phạm Duy at times went on journeys to places where military activity was occurring or where civilians faced particularly severe conditions, so that he could use his observations as the basis for new compositions furthering the war effort. Songs by Phạm Duy such as “The Sound of Singing on the River Lô,” (Tiếng Hát Trên Sông Lô), “When Will You Take the French Encampment,” (Bao Giờ Anh Lấy Được Đồn Tây), “Twelve Lullabies,” (Mười Hai Lời Ru) and “The Mother of Gio Linh” (Bà Mẹ Gio Linh) were the direct result of such investigative missions and would not otherwise have come into existence.³¹

The last three songs in particular were among the fruits of a dangerous and physically challenging journey that took him and his companions south from Thanh Hoá province over the Trường Sơn mountain range into the Bình - Trị - Thiên area – the three provinces of Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Thiên. The Hồ Chí Minh trail didn’t yet exist at this time; Phạm Duy and the others in his small

²⁴ An example of the concept occurs in *Shuo Yuan* (“Garden of Discourse; a text offered to the Chinese throne in 17 B.C.), Book 13, Item 6, in which a court annalist predicts the demise of the state of Zhongshan after having observed that its ruler does nothing to prevent his people from abandoning themselves to customs such as “listening to mournful music.” Liu Xiang, *Shuo Yuan Jiao Zheng*, edited by Xiang Zonglu (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1987), p. 317.

²⁵ Hồ Trường An, *Theo Chân Những Tiếng Hát* (“Tracking Voices”), Arlington, VA: Tổ Hợp Xuất Bản Miền Đông Hoa Kỳ (East Coast U.S.A. Vietnamese Publishers’ Consortium), 1998, p. 273.

²⁶ This was a setting of a poem by a soldier in a paratroopers’ unit that Phạm Duy had seen in a newspaper. The poem was called “An Answer To a Question” (“Trả Lời Một Câu Hỏi”), Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký* 2.22.

²⁷ Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký* 2.33.

²⁸ Ibid, 2.17.

²⁹ Ibid, 3.6.

³⁰ Ibid, 2.26.

³¹ Ibid, 2.15 (“The Sound of Singing on the River Lô”); 2.29 (the three other songs)

group of cultural cadres may well have been among the first groups to use machetes to start creating this route to the South.³²

While stationed in Thanh Hoá, known in Việt Minh parlance as “Military Zone IV,” Phạm Duy was for more than a year under the direct supervision of the zone commander general Nguyễn Sơn and the writer Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh, a political cadre in charge of mobilizing artists and intellectuals to participate in the resistance effort. Phạm Duy expresses nothing but praise and enthusiasm for the way these two figures worked with artists. The guidance they provided was basically supportive, and was oftentimes more practical than ideological in nature. Nguyễn Sơn, who had worked with arts units in Mao Zedong’s eighth route army, would teach actors and singers to project their voices by having them say their lines while standing on opposite sides of a lake until the two groups could understand each other. There were no electronic amplification systems in the liberated areas in those years.³³

Nguyễn Sơn once made a remark to the young Phạm Duy that the composer was to remember throughout his life. He had just written a song for a mobilization campaign entitled “Competing in Patriotism” (Thi Đua Ái Quốc) that contained the lines, “If you have a gun, Then I have a workman’s hands; If you have a hoe, Then I have a guitar; If you kill so many colonials, Then I’ll steal so many guns and bullets; If you have flowering fields, Then I have a thousand sets of lyrics.” On hearing the composer sing the song, the general half closed his eyes and said, “You must keep that promise, O.K., young fellow? You must make a thousand sets of lyrics.” Some forty years later in Midway City California, Phạm Duy printed a book entitled *A Thousand Sets of Lyrics* containing the texts of most of the songs he had written up to that time. He regretted only that general Nguyễn Sơn was no longer there for him to present the book to.³⁴

Thus, even though Phạm Duy had been disturbed, in 1945, to notice the exclusion from the first General Conference on the Arts of such patriotic and anti-French factions as the Self-Help Literary Group of Nhất Linh and Khái Hưng, and the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, and even though he had heard reports of Việt Minh directed assassinations of members of such groups,³⁵ he nevertheless appears to have had no feeling of intellectual coercion in the Việt Minh arts groups to which he belonged from 1946 to 1950 – groups that were full of camaraderie, enthusiasm, and adventure. It was only when the Việt Minh leadership, partly in response to Mao Zedong’s 1949 victory in China, revealed its determination to apply ideological rules to everything that Phạm Duy and many other artistic and intellectual figures began expressing their preference for freedom of thought by returning to the French-occupied cities.³⁶ By that time, emperor Bảo Đại had been able to obtain from France what Hồ Chí Minh had earlier sought without success: a recognition of Vietnamese national sovereignty; so a nominally free and independent Vietnamese government that continued to press for further autonomy now existed in the urban areas, not to speak of other politically autonomous groups like the Cao Đài, the Hoà Hảo, the Bình Xuyên, and the Catholic communities of Phát Diệm and Bùi Chu.³⁷

Phạm Duy’s Việt Minh mentors, Nguyễn Sơn and Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh, both people accustomed, like the composer, to the exercise of independent thought, were also affected by the Việt Minh leadership’s move toward leftist totalitarianism. Nguyễn Sơn left for “further training” in China after having a violent argument with Hồ Chí Minh over the extent to which the leadership was accepting Chinese communist aid and advice.³⁸ As for Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh, he at length “voted with his feet” as had Phạm Duy, and joined the latter in Saigon, where the two continued to exchange ideas on art and politics and to collaborate on projects.³⁹

In Saigon in the early 1950s, both Phạm Duy and Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh were closely associated with *Đời Mới* or *New Life*, then the most influential and handsomely produced periodical in the South. In an effort to build up a spirit of modern nationalism among the public, they used this periodical as a forum in which to define and celebrate all the traits that bound the Vietnamese together as a people. Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh published a series of articles with titles such as “The Vietnamese: A People Worthy of

³² Ibid, 2.29.

³³ Ibid, 2.26, 2.28.

³⁴ Ibid, 2.28.

³⁵ Ibid, 2.5.

³⁶ Ibid, 2.32

³⁷ Ibid, 3.4

³⁸ Ibid, 2.33

³⁹ Ibid, 2.34, last par., 3.3

Love” (Người Việt Đáng Yêu), “Vietnam: A Land Worthy of Love” (Đất Việt Đáng Yêu), and “Vietnamese: A Language Worthy of Love” (Tiếng Việt Đáng Yêu). Among the contributions of Phạm Duy to this effort were two of his most well-known songs, “Feeling For One’s Homeland” (Tình Hoài Hương) and “Song of Feeling” (Tình Ca).⁴⁰

The first song, an extended expression of nostalgia for specific countryside scenes, turned out to exactly fit the circumstances of the million refugees who soon afterward, in 1954, had to emigrate from the North to the South, and, later on, of the million-some refugees who fled Vietnam after 1975. The second song aimed to unite all the people of the country in a common feeling of love for their language, land, and race:

*I’ve loved my country’s language from the time I entered life,
oh friends;
My mother’s distant lyrics soothed me into sleep, oh ah,
immortal sounds!*⁴¹

This song seems to have been the first well-known artistic production in Vietnam aimed at expressing a feeling of an ethnically-defined national identity. In earlier eras, political divisions, regional rivalries, feudalistic notions of loyalty, and, most recently, the Communist - Nationalist chasm, had all worked to prevent expressions of cultural and spiritual unity. In this song, as in all his other work, Phạm Duy seeks to speak directly to all classes of people in the nation without using any political or religious path whatsoever to approach them. He seeks also to transcend all divisions, suspicions, and prejudices arising from regionality; to erase, in short, the demarcation lines between the north, south, and central regions. He regards all manifestations of particularistic politics – blind devotion to personages, parties, political dogma, religions, and regions – as throwbacks to Vietnam’s feudal past, and seeks to do his part toward encouraging the disappearance of such phenomena by acting always as if they do not exist. This makes large numbers of his countrymen remark, with puzzlement and suspicion, that “Phạm Duy has no political stance.” As for Phạm Duy himself, he has remained serenely confident in all phases of his career that the nationalistic but non-factional attitude that he cultivates will gain greater understanding in later generations, and will in fact become eventually the orientation of choice for most Vietnamese.

One example of Phạm Duy’s lifelong determination to behave as if political divisions did not exist among Vietnamese was his 1956 use of a poem by Huy Cận to write a song that would turn out to be one of his most continuously performed efforts, “Ngậm Ngùi” or “Melancholy.” The poem had originally appeared in the 1930s when Huy Cận was one of a new group of proponents of a “new poetry” that had wide and immediate appeal among young people. Like several other members of this group, Huy Cận later joined the Resistance, remained with the Việt Minh, and turned into a regime poet and party spokesman.⁴² The song that Phạm Duy wrote in 1956 was thus a melding of cultures. It joined two periods, an earlier time of peace, and a later time of warfare; and it was a collaboration between artists who lived in two regions, each of which regarded the other as evil incarnate.

When studying in Paris during the two years just prior to his creation of this song, Phạm Duy noticed that a clear and deep line of division had appeared among Vietnamese students resident in the city. Conflicts between those who “followed” Mr. Hồ and those who “followed” Mr. Diệm had already begun to appear. It was as if the “us-them” dualistic thinking that had been necessary to oppose the French during the resistance war had now been immediately and silently transferred by the Vietnamese to elements within their own community. Most students in Paris had been swept off their feet by the charisma of Hồ Chí Minh in the summer and fall of 1945, when he was in Paris to participate in the Fontainebleau conference on Franco-Vietnamese relations. With their enthusiasm further bolstered by the exhilarating news of the Vietnamese victory at Điện Biên Phủ, and with little or no personal experience of life under the Việt Minh regime, these students were ardent believers in the mythology of revolution, and regarded anyone who was not a follower of Hồ as “the enemy.” No middle ground was possible. Phạm Duy was “the enemy” because he socialized, that is, “consorted,” with Võ Lãng, an old Fine Arts School classmate who was now an advisor to Bảo Đại and Ngô Đình Diệm – and Phạm Duy was moreover the younger brother of Diệm’s ambassador to France, Phạm Duy Khiêm. So he found himself, in the mid 1950s cut off from a large portion of the Vietnamese community in Paris. Phạm Duy notes, however, that when he returned to Paris some thirty-five years later, after the collapse of communism in eastern Europe and the fading of the socialist myth in Vietnam, the radical

⁴⁰ Ibid, 3.3

⁴¹ Ibid, 3.3

⁴² Ibid, 3.8, concluding paragraphs.

young Vietnamese firebrands of the mid fifties had all, to a man, turned into well-to-do doctors, professors, and barristers whose human feelings had evidently ceased to be controlled by politics.⁴³

When, due purely to the strength, abundance, and persuasiveness of his creative endeavors, Phạm Duy became one of the chief cultural ornaments of the southern republic, so that he was often invited to other countries as an artistic emissary, it of course became necessary for the northern regime to characterize him as a leader of the forces of evil; so articles by regime spokesmen, some of them musicians, appeared in state-controlled media in which he is characterized as a purveyor of *nhạc vàng* or “yellow music” – music which, by regime definition, seduces its listeners into despair, dissipation, and enslavement.⁴⁴ Unfortunately for his attackers, Phạm Duy’s music is in general marked by a quite unusual degree of sunniness, serenity, and *joie de vivre* (e.g. the song “Bearing Back the Rice Harvest” or “Gánh Lúa”). This observation is not intended as praise (for surely it is possible for music to be simultaneously excellent and suicidally morose!), but simply as an objective statement of fact. The Việt Minh’s grudge against Phạm Duy remained highly operative within Vietnam for three decades subsequent to its conquest of the South. Books on the history of music published under the regime have all maintained an eerie pretence that no person named Phạm Duy ever existed. All public performance and distribution of his music remained illegal, and singers could be denied permission to perform if they violated the ban.⁴⁵ Thus, “revolutionary” modes of thought continued to provide a haven for backward, feudal, particularistic, quasi-superstitious practices.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Phạm Duy’s refusal to associate himself with the hard right politics of a large and vocal section of the expatriate community, and his decision, taken in the year 2000, to start returning to Vietnam for visits, regularly gave rise to accusations in the Vietnamese expatriate press that he was *thân Cộng*, or pro-communist – in spite of his often expressed disdain for the more extreme practices of the communist faction.

Both in his Saigon years and during his sojourn in the United States (which began in 1975), Phạm Duy consistently applied himself to themes that transcended political factionalism. His song cycle *The Mandarin Road* (Con Đường Cái Quan), begun in 1954 and completed in 1960, in which an imaginary traveler makes his way along Vietnam’s “National Highway Number One” from the northern to the southern extremity of the nation, was among other things a protest against the Geneva Convention’s division of Vietnam into two political entities.⁴⁶ His *Mothers of Vietnam* (*Mẹ Việt Nam*) a song-cycle completed in 1964, with sections entitled “The Maternal Earth” (Đất Mẹ), “The Maternal Mountains” (Núi Mẹ), “The Maternal Rivers” (Sông Mẹ), and “The Maternal Oceans” (Biển Mẹ), upholds a value and a symbol that reverberates equally in Communist and Nationalist hearts; and it concludes with a song, “Vietnam, Vietnam,” that has the character of a national anthem.⁴⁷ Unlike the anthems of the northern and southern regimes, which call upon Vietnamese to make blood sacrifices for the nation, Phạm Duy’s song simply calls upon Vietnamese to unite in love and build a free and democratic nation. When the intervention of various foreign powers led to the drastic escalation of the war in the later 1960s, Phạm Duy wrote several song-cycles protesting the tragically pointless mayhem that was the result, and expressing a determination to uphold human values amid the carnage.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid, 3.5

⁴⁴ A highly representative specimen of this type of criticism is Đỗ Nhuận, “Nhạc Vàng” (“Yellow Music”), written in 1969 for presentation at Hải Phòng youth association and collected in Đỗ Nhuận, *Âm Thanh Cuộc Đời* (“A Life of Sound”), Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Âm Nhạc, 2003, pp. 349-358. In this article Đỗ Nhuận assures his audience that the people of the South detest Phạm Duy’s reactionary music, and listen to it only because it is being forced upon them through the media controlled by the American puppet regime. Đỗ Nhuận (1922-1991) was a talented professional musician who remained with the Northern regime after the 1954 division of the country. He received training at the Tchaikovsky Music Conservatory in Moscow and eventually produced two operas, among many other works. He and Phạm Duy were friends and artistic colleagues when both of them worked for the Resistance in the years 1945-51.

⁴⁵ It is worth noting, however, that the government’s efforts to turn Phạm Duy into a non-person have done little to restrict the public’s exposure to his music, since the country is awash with CDs and videos produced abroad that can be effortlessly (though illegally) obtained by anyone. With Văn Cao and Trịnh Công Sơn, Phạm Duy remains among Vietnam’s three most widely admired composers.

⁴⁶ Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký* 3.11

⁴⁷ Ibid, 3.13

⁴⁸ Ibid, 3.14. This phase in his creative career was inaugurated in 1965 by the somber but ferociously affirmative “I Still Love, And I’ll Go On Loving” (“Tôi Còn Yêu, Tôi Cứ Yêu”). A remarkable feature of this song and some others written in the ensuing years is that Phạm Duy addresses the public in his own voice through the

During his life in exile, a period that lasted for thirty years, Phạm Duy wrote song cycles on the sufferings of the victims of revolutionary ideology, such as a very large group of *Refugee Songs* (*Ty Nạn Ca*)⁴⁹ and a set of *Songs of Imprisonment* (*Ngục Ca*) in which he set to music the poems of the long-term political prisoner Nguyễn Chí Thiện.⁵⁰ At the same time he continued to write song cycles on universal themes. These included a group of songs (*Hoàng Cầm Ca*) written in 1984 using poems by Hoàng Cầm reflecting a young boy's hopeless love for an older girl (which to the composer seemed like an allegory of a patriot's love of the socialist regime).⁵¹ Hoàng Cầm, perhaps Vietnam's most illustrious living poet in the year 2005, is an old friend and artistic colleague of Phạm Duy's from his years in the Resistance who later became both a regime poet and a victim of cultural totalitarianism. Other cycles, written in the 1990s, include *Ten Zen Meditation Songs* (*Mười Bài Thiền Ca*), centered on a person's relationship to the familiar things of the world as he enters old age,⁵² and a group of songs that use as lyrics the mystical and religious poems of Hàn Mặc Tử, an early twentieth century Christian poet who died of leprosy in his late twenties.⁵³ Recent song cycles include the newly (as of May, 2005) completed *Homeland Fragrance Songs* (*Hương Ca*), devoted to the composer's reflections on returning to Vietnam after more than two decades of absence, and, most significantly, the not yet complete *Illustrations of Kieu* (*Minh Họa Kiều*), a set of four linked song cycles on four phases of Vietnam's national poem *The Tale of Kiều* (*Truyện Kiều*).⁵⁴

In this last work, begun around 1998, Phạm Duy, more decisively than ever, has seized the cultural middle ground. The early 19th century narrative poem in "six-eight" couplets from which the lyrics are culled, relates in more than two thousand lines the predestined romantic tragedies of a peerlessly gifted beauty.⁵⁵ This is preeminently the poem in which every Vietnamese, of whatever background, sees his or her own character and destiny. Its author, Nguyễn Du, a court officer under the Nguyễn dynasty, belonged to a culture hugely earlier than, and hugely different from, that of Phạm Duy; but, like the modern composer, he was a person remarkably free from the constraints of absolutist thinking. His characters are drawn in half-tones; none are wholly good and few are wholly evil; and the ultimate guide to behavior, in this poet's eyes, lies not in adherence to any doctrine-driven value, such as feudal loyalty or chastity, but in cultivation of the innate impulses of the heart.⁵⁶

Phạm Duy's *Illustrations of Kieu*, of which the first two phases, much of the third, and a piece of the fourth are now complete, has the character of a dramatic oratorio and is of composite texture, including intoned poetry, melodic narration, part-writing, orchestral color, and melody. Its musical episodes have little repetition and many "undetachable" passages – stretches of music too entangled in what precedes or what follows, or in what is happening simultaneously, to be taken away and sung as independent tunes.

Thus throughout his life, and preeminently in this most recent magnum opus, Phạm Duy has created a body of work that will be inconvenient, and finally impossible, for Vietnamese societies and governments to suppress. While most of his compatriots, under the pressure both of world politics and feudal habit, have been running to peripheral locations from which they hurl invective at the occupants of other peripheral locations, Phạm Duy has remained, with relaxed insouciance, in the center, driving people nuts by smiling and waving at anyone and everyone. His prominence in the culture as a celebrated musician has moreover made it impossible for others to take no notice of his occupancy of

lyrics of the song, using the pronoun "I" (*tôi*). I cannot think of any other composer in this genre (or for that matter in *any* genre) who does this.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9, 4.10, 4.11, 4.12, 4.13.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 4.13. Nguyễn Chí Thiện was imprisoned for about thirty years, from c. 1961 to 1991, in consequence of his refusal to submit to intellectual control. In 1982, while still a prisoner, he managed to get a manuscript with about a thousand of his poems into the hands of the British embassy. These poems, eventually published under the title *Hoa Địa Ngục* ("Flowers of Hell"), created a sensation when they became known to the Vietnamese expatriate community. Phạm Duy set twenty of the poems to music.

⁵¹ Ibid, 4.14, 4.15

⁵² Ibid, 4.24

⁵³ Ibid, 4.25

⁵⁴ Ibid, 4.26

⁵⁵ cf. Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kiều*, bilingual edition with translation and annotation by Huỳnh Sanh Thông; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

⁵⁶ cf. my discussion of this poem in: Eric Henry, "Chinese and Indigenous Influences in Vietnamese Verse Romances of the Twentieth Century," *Crossroads* 15.2 (2001), pp. 1-40.

the center – it has forced people to recognize the possibility that an ethnic and cultural patriot can exist who has no loyalty to any doctrine, person, or faction.

While it is not as yet possible to predict in what generation this will occur, it is inevitable that Phạm Duy's *Memoirs* and Phạm Duy's music will one day join *the Tale of Kiều* in the school curricula of youngsters throughout Vietnam. A people cannot deny their own identity forever. The process of amalgamation has already begun. The government's prohibition of public performance of the works of Phạm Duy remains in force, but more and more singers are ignoring the prohibition, and the government seems less and less interested in enforcing it. A few years ago, there was even a person with the courage to open a little place in Hanoi with seating for about eight people, called the "Café Phạm Duy." There, people could go and sip delicious coffee-based concoctions and listen to Phạm Duy's music – not performed by live singers, but on a collection of CDs maintained at the premises. The woman who ran the establishment was initially arrested for "engaging in cultural propaganda," but was then released and allowed to continue her business.

Phạm Duy himself has now (as of May, 2005) electrified both in-country and expatriate Vietnamese by carrying out, with his family, a highly publicized "return for good" to Vietnam – a move that he says he prophesied in his song cycle *A Flock of Birds in Exile* (*Bầy Chim Bỏ Xứ*).⁵⁷ The government of Vietnam has now (as of August, 2005) lifted its ban on a number of songs that he wrote for the Viet Minh during the Resistance, and a few later compositions. Whether the government will go further in the de-banning of his music remains to be seen, but many prominent people within the country have now written articles expressing the hope that this will occur.⁵⁸

Meanwhile more and more expatriate Vietnamese are starting to ignore the voices of the hard right and seek exchanges and relationships with people within Vietnam. The yearly expatriate commemoration of the loss of the southern republic, originally called the "Day of National Bitterness" (Lễ Quốc Hận) is now being referred to in a less emotionally charged way as the "Day of National Upheaval" (Lễ Quốc Biến). The changes now occurring on the two sides, are all of a small, random, individual nature, like the shifting of grains of sand on a beach or the falling of leaves in autumn, but there can be little doubt as to the eventual outcome. And when the two sides finally make their peace with each other, Phạm Duy, who foresaw the outcome throughout his life, will be waiting for them.

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⁵⁷ Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký* 3.11. This work was written in stages in 1975, 1985, and 1990. Phạm Duy's return is currently being widely compared to the "returns-for-good" of two other long term exiles: Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Thích Nhất Hạnh.

⁵⁸ Among those who have publically expressed such hopes are the composer Nguyễn Văn Tý, the writer Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, and the poet Lưu Trọng Văn (the son of Lưu Trọng Lư).