

# Composers of Modern Vietnam: Nguyen Van Nam, Nguyen Trong Bang, Doan Nho

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**Abstract**—Academic music in Vietnam from the very beginning of its history to the middle of the twentieth century was based on European genre samples. Among the composers who graduated from the conservatories in Moscow and Kiev, three composers are prominent: Nguyen Van Nam, Nguyen Trong Bang, Doan Nho.

**Keywords**—Vietnamese academic music; Vietnamese folklore; Nguyen Van Nam; Nguyen Trong Bang; Doan Nho; European music; biography

## I. INTRODUCTION

Until 1954, instrumental music in Vietnam was represented only by folk songs, arrangements for ensembles, or simply small pieces of experimentation.

After the Geneva Agreement of 1954, North Vietnam was completely liberated and became the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In this new setting, the development of artistic culture began and Vietnamese academic musical art began to develop.

The emergence of new theaters, orchestras, and especially the Vietnamese Music School in 1969 (now the Vietnamese State Academy of Music) all gave impetus to the rapid development of this field of creativity.

In the 60s and 70s of the last century, many Vietnamese composers had the opportunity to study in Russia. This was the period of the new heyday of music in the USSR. Soviet professors gave Vietnamese musicians knowledge of not only Russian music, but also classical and modern European music. This greatly influenced their work. Among those who achieved great success, having received higher musical education in the USSR, were the composers Luu Hu Fuok, Do Nyuan, Luong Ngok Trak, Hoang Van, To Hai, Ho Bac, Shi Tuk, Nguyen Van Nam, Do Hong Kuan, Nguyen Chong Bang and others. They all became the pride of young Vietnamese musical culture.

Vietnamese composers mastered the world musical art, especially Russian, experimented, mastered the technique of composing modern instrumental music, learned with the help of new knowledge to express their own original ideas, sought to create a special artistic world of Vietnamese music. The works created by Vietnamese composers very accurately

reflect the modern life and history of Vietnam with its two domestic wars (in 1945 and 1975), national heroes and famous people.

This article presents the biographies of three composers: Nguyen Van Nam, Nguyen Trong Bang and Doan Nho. They are united primarily by the fact that they studied in the Soviet Union in 1970-80. In addition, their work is capable of presenting modern Vietnamese symphonic music in a rather versatile way.

## II. NGUYEN VAN NAM

Composer Nguyen Van Nam (shown in “Fig. 1”) was born on July 14, 1936 in Vinh Kim, Province of Tien Giang — Vietnam. He lived during the revolution and is one of the professional composers who studied at the Vietnamese music school (now the Vietnamese State Academy of Music).



Fig. 1. Composer Nguyen Van Nam.

In 1966 he was sent to study composition at the Leningrad Conservatory (USSR). Here he clearly showed his talent and his abilities. Therefore, the Academic Council of the Conservatory agreed to take it to graduate school without a university degree. But at that moment he could not do it, because then the Vietnamese State demanded his return to serve in the army. After the army, Van Nam came to Leningrad again to study at the conservatory. In 1973, he defended with honors a diploma in composition with the Symphony No. 1 "Dedication to the heroic people of South Vietnam". After that, many Vietnamese professionals praised

his talent, although at that time academic music was very unusual for the Vietnamese public.

In 1974, he was again sent to study in Leningrad to continue his studies in postgraduate studies in composition. In 1976 he successfully defended his thesis — Symphony No. 3 “Peace to the People”. This composition made a special impression on the musicians during the 12th Musical Spring Festival in Leningrad. With this symphony, Van Nam established his place in the world musical culture. Such talented Vietnamese musicians could be met abroad very rarely. Therefore, Vietnamese students of other specialties, who then studied in the USSR, greatly admired and loved him.

During these years, Nguyen Van Nam was also engaged in scientific work, writing in Russian the study “The Essential Features of Vietnamese Traditional Music,” which he defended as a PhD thesis in art history in 1981 at the Leningrad Conservatory. When he lived in Russia, he not only composed music, but also taught at the Nalchik Music School and participated in many music conferences in several cities in Russia. In addition, the composer Nguyen Van Nam was engaged in the study of folk music in the Research Institute in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria (RF). Perhaps these works helped him to improve in composing music. His symphonies were a great success. The premiere of the symphonic poem “My Motherland”, which took place in the Moscow Kremlin in 1979, made a strong impression on the audience. In 1984, the premiere of the symphonic poem was a turning point in his career. After performing the trio “The Sound of Flute No. 1” in Nalchik, in Alma-Ata and in Moscow for the 100th anniversary of Ho Chi Minh, and also after the premiere of Symphony No. 4 at the All-Russian Music Festival, his talent became known to many music lovers, especially Vietnamese students who studied in the USSR. Since that time, Nguyen Van Nam - composer, composing Vietnamese symphonic works, was highly appreciated by colleagues and music lovers around the world.

Nguyen Van Nam always enthusiastically and diligently composed in many genres: solo works, ensembles, songs, operas... In addition to symphonies, he also composed symphonic poems, symphonic suites, music for performances, choral works ... His chamber works are also not only mentioned in Russian textbooks, but also in Vietnamese universities. He also wrote a string quartet, a quartet for pianoforte and string instruments and many solo works for piano, cello, and violins. In book “Nguyen Van Nam - the life of a symphonic composer” Nguyen Thi Minh Chau wrote: “*Without dwelling on this, he also wrote wonderful songs with piano accompaniment (romances) to poems of Vietnamese and Russian poets: “Young River” (poems by Le Anh Tho), “Soul of poor people” (poems of Khetagurov), “Lullaby” (verses H. Khubiyeva)...*” [3].

For the composer Nguyen Van Nam, it is important that the sound carries not only a purely musical image, but also an extra-musical idea. This means that before composing a work and thinking about a musical theme, the composer must first find the idea. Like vocal works, most of his

instrumental works have their own names and meanings. Such, for example, are all of his 10 symphonies. In addition to the ordinal numbers, they have their own names, and each part has its own short literary program in the form of a poetic epigraph. The names of the symphonic works of Nguyen Van Nam are often associated with the homeland and human destiny. These works received a very great popularity.

Without dwelling on this, the composer, a professor who cares about the next generation, also works in the field of scientific research. In his dissertation on music theory, Nguyen Van Nam noted the main features of “Vietnamese traditional music.” The thesis was not only successfully defended by the composer at the Leningrad Conservatory, but was recommended for publication. After that, Nguyen Van Nam began writing articles and books. His article “Traits connecting intonation and melody — this is the basis of Vietnamese folk music” was published in the book “The Mixing of the All-Russian Scientific-Theoretical Conference of Research Institutes of the USSR Ministry of Culture in 1978.” After that, Nguyen Van Nam wrote several books and articles, one of them was “Some features of traditional music of Vietnam (speech intonation, mood, rhythm, types of polyphony, genres)”, which was published in the Leningrad Conservatory in 1979. In this book, he examines the modal forms of Vietnamese traditional music, establishes their connection with speech intonation. The author wrote: *The rhythmic patterns in the traditional musical creativity of Vietnam have significant differences from the well-known principles of classical European music, which is also associated with the influence of speech intonation. Especially the influence of Vietnamese speech (its tonal, raznovysotnaya system) is manifested in various genres of vocal music with poetic text. The melody of instrumental genres is also affected by speech* [5].

Nguyen Van Nam did a lot for the music of Vietnam, especially in the field of symphony. To this day, he is the Vietnamese composer with the largest number of works: 12 symphonic scores of different genre inclinations: symphonic poems, symphonic suites and 8 symphonies. In addition to writing, he devotes time to teaching composition and musical theory at the Bachelor and Master Degrees at the Ho Chi Minh City Conservatory and at the Vietnamese State Academy of Music. He acts as an opponent on these defenses and as the author of scientific articles. Due to his great success, in 2002 he received the title of associate professor.

### III. NGUYEN TRONG BANG

The composer Nguyen Trong Bang (shown in “Fig. 2”) was born on May 1, 1931 in the family of a public servant. His family loved music. As a child he lived in the city of Vinh (Nghé An, Vietnam), where traditional folk songs are very common. When he was still in school, he already participated in school compositional works, and in 1950 at the age of 19, some songs by the young composer had already become quite famous. Then he was a member of the Association of musicians in his area.



Fig. 2. Composer Nguyen Trong Bang.

After that, he worked in many professional music groups as a conductor and director of musical works. In 1956 he was sent to study orchestral conducting at the Moscow Conservatory. He was the first Vietnamese to study professionally in this specialty. This period was very important for his future creativity both in the field of conducting and in composition.

In 1963 he became the first Vietnamese who defended his diploma perfectly. Returning to his homeland, along with teaching at the Hanoi Conservatory (now the Vietnamese State Academy of Music), he also led the Vietnamese National Symphony Orchestra. After some time, from 1969 to 1971, he was sent to study at the graduate school and it was there that he became a real conductor. After returning to his country, he assumed the post of Director of the Vietnamese Symphony Theater and the Hanoi Conservatory.

Trong Bang devoted a lot of energy to musical pedagogy, and he raised a large number of students from the younger generation — schoolchildren, students who have become talented composers, orchestral conductors.

Despite the fact that his work took a very long time, he still devoted time to composition and conducting. Under his direction, hundreds of works for symphony orchestra, created by great composers, were performed. Among them are the writings of Mozart, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Prokofiev, and Rachmaninoff...

In his creative career, along with works on political themes (they were very successful in Vietnam), he wrote music that was deeply lyrical and complex philosophical. He wrote, for example, 5 fugues for piano (written from 1969 until 1971), a nocturne for cello and piano. For these works, he received the Gold Medal at the festival of Vietnamese professional music in 1991.

Another equally important area of creativity of the composer Trong Bang is music for films and performances. In his book “Vietnamese music, composers - works” Nguyen

Trong Bang, he wrote: “*Trong Bang very like to write a lot of music for dozens of films, television news, documentaries, cartoons, for dramatic performances*” [4]. It can be said that Trong Bang is the composer with the greatest contribution in this field in Vietnamese music of the first period of development. This is what gave the composer an impetus for writing major works in the future, such as the overture “The Greeting” (1986), “Long live the new millennium” (1999), the symphonic poem “The Return brings joy” (1990).

#### IV. DOAN NHO

Doan Nho (see “Fig. 3”) is one of the few Vietnamese composers who are interested in not only vocal, but also instrumental music. In these two areas of creativity, he has already made a significant contribution. The audience loved his songs for optimism and lyricism, for the strong characters he created. Among professional musicians, he was also known as a symphonic composer and musicologist.



Fig. 3. Composer Doan Nho.

Born August 1, 1933 in the village of Cot (Tu Liem, Hanoi, Vietnam), Doan Nho grew up under the lullabies of his mother and the singing of his father. His parents were famous throughout the district for their voices, from them he knew a lot about the Vietnamese traditional Cheo theater, in the traditions of which Doan Nho will write many songs in the future that have become popular in Vietnam. In the book “Cheo art and prospects for renewal” Do Trong Quang said: “*Cheo originated in the tenth century on the basis of folk music and dance, and was primarily a comic play called Tro Nhai. These were stories about the lives of ordinary people, as well as members of the royal family. Over time, short stories were combined into larger works.*” [1]

At the age of 10, he learned to play the violin and became acquainted with the professional Western musical culture.

The composer's childhood was not peaceful and cloudless; there were not only musical lessons, cheo singing, but also hunger, the death of many people in the war against the French colonialists, which ended only in 1945. All this left a deep impression in the memory of a 12-year-old child.



The tragedy of the people of almost 30 years later Doan Nho conveyed in a symphonic poem "August's history"<sup>1</sup>.

Since 1945, the teenager Doan Nho joined the revolutionary movement, joined the Army, played the violin in the campaign team of Bac Giang and Vinh Yen, participated in the distribution of revolutionary songs in the National Salvation Army.

His first composition is a song (1948), which was solemnly presented in the report of the "School of Resistance" by Nguyen Thai Hoc. This event he could not forget his whole life.

In 1950, Doan Nho was officially enlisted in the Vietnamese army. Here he gradually improved his talent as a composer. The beginning was marked by the famous song of this time "The Adoptive Mother" (1951). Thanks to the help of composers Nguyen Xuan Khoat and Do Nyuan, Doan Nho made his way from a simple soldier with a little knowledge of the art of music to a famous musician throughout the country. He always considered Nguyen Xuan Khoat and Do Nhoan his first teachers in composition. The young man soon confirmed his talent with compositions on popular themes - the Cantata "Wave of the Cua Tung" (1955), the songs "The Death of the Pioneer" (1956), "The Movement under the Military Banner" (1958).

After two years of study at the Kiev Conservatory (1962-1964), Doan Nho completed several works: a quintet for brass and a quartet for stringed instruments.

Returning to Vietnam, when the country was fighting with the American imperialists, the composer immediately got onto the battlefield: he fought in northern Laos, in the Vietnamese cities of Thai Nguyen, Quang Tri. The most difficult was the transition through the district of Truong Son in the years 1966-1967. It is not known what was more dangerous — spilled rivers, winding roads or severe malaria. Not to mention the fact that after chemical attacks, toxins destroyed human health and, even worse, affected the health of children born after the war. All these horrors of war did not stop the soldiers and military musicians, including the composer Doan Nho. Their death trip was made by the songs "Silent Bomb" (1964), "K'la K'lon" (1964), "Celebration" the cities of Tai Nguyen "(1965)," Greet Ho "(1965)," Our Country of Liberation "(1966)," Five Brothers on a Tank "(1971) and others. The composer never ceased creating songs for the big album "Fighting America". The songs from this album were associated with current events and heroic feats of the people of Vietnam.

In the early 1970s, Doan Nho turned to symphonic music. He writes the already mentioned poem "The History of August" (1972). In 1974, he again arrives in Kiev to continue his musical education, and in 1977 he graduated from the Kiev Conservatory with a red diploma. His graduation work was the symphony number 3 "Victory" (1977). Returning to his homeland, he composed many works in various genres. During the 1980s-90s, he replenished his creative baggage

<sup>1</sup> In August 1945, the Vietnamese people won a final victory over the colonialists.

with several major works: the symphony "Thanh Giong" (1984), Requiem (1991), the oratorio "Carnival in the Temple of Hung" (1995), the cantata "Eternal memory" (1997).

In the field of dance music, Doan Nho also left his mark with the compositions "Children of the Sea", "The Flower of the Sea", "Meeting in the Spring", "Country — Faith", Strike of Victory. He also composed the music for the films "Memories of the Dead", "Demonstration", and to the dramatic performances of "See You", "Emperor of tanners", "Testaments of love", "Tales".

Due to the constant self-education and expansion of his musical horizons, Doan Nho was able to write a number of studies. Since the 1980s, Doan Nho has been not only a composer, but also a musicologist. After he defended his Ph.D. thesis on "Song folklore and modern mass song of Vietnam: on the question of the evolution of the general laws of the monodic system of the Vietnamese song" in Kiev (Kiev University of Arts, Folklore and Ethnology of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 1982). In the book, he wrote: "*one of the most materials for development professional music in Vietnam, it is traditional music's materials*" [2]. So that the future creators of modern Vietnamese musical culture should explore more deeply the traditional music of our people, as well as master the knowledge of advanced music in the world in order to create many works of high artistic value.

Besides that, he wrote many articles, studies, and musical-critical works.

The achievements that Doan Nho achieved in his life were awarded gold and silver medals at the All-Vietnamese professional music festivals in 2001 and 2017. He received many awards from the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Defense, Vietnamese Union of Composers. "Soldier's Composer" Doan Nho can be proud of his musical career, he was awarded: the Victory Medal of the third category (1955, 1956, 1969), the Labor Medal of the third category (1958), the military medal of the third category (1984), the anti-American war of the first category (1984), third category medal of honor and others. Finally, in 2002, he received a state award in literature and art.

## V. CONCLUSION

All three composers presented in this article adequately embody the achievements of the Vietnamese school of composition. Their work is worthy of the attention of the wide international music community. Undoubtedly, it will eventually win its audience in Russia.

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