

# THE ZITHER (ĐÀN TRANH)

## Tho Tho (TT) interviewed Professor Trần Quang Hải (TQH)

*(translated by Nghiêm Phú Phúc from an article written in Vietnamese)*

TT: Once again, we would like to thank you for your very enthusiastic support and your willingness to share your knowledge about music with the readers of Suối Nguồn. To save time, I would like to start with the first question about the musical instrument called “zither”: Please tell us where the zither came from.

TQH: The zither is probably the musical instrument that the Vietnamese people know about the most today. The zither was originated from China. The word "Tranh" means "debate", or "quarrel". According to an old legend, under the Qin Dynasty in China, there was a famous musician teacher who had two sons both learning how to play the zither. At that time, the zither had 25 strings. One day the sons fought against each other when both wanted to play the zither, which was the only one owned by the family. Bothered by the noisy fight, the father took the instrument and cut it into two pieces, one piece had 13 strings (the zither with 13 strings still exists today in northern China, similar to the Japanese KOTO) and the other piece had 12 strings (still commonly used in Korea and Mongolia). Another theory says that a man named Meng Tian, a wealthy merchant during the Qin Dynasty, invented the zither by cutting the original instrument into two small zithers, one with 12 strings and the other with 13 strings.

According to Professor Nguyễn Hữu Ba, there is another legend about a musician who taught the 32 string instrument. The teacher had two daughters. Normally, the younger one would let her older sister play first. But one day, the younger sister wanted to play first, starting the fight with her older sister. The noise woke the father up and he angrily cut the instrument into two pieces, each had 16 strings. And since then, the 16 string zither appeared in Vietnam.

No one in Vietnam today can determine exactly when the zither started to show up in the country. The only certain thing is that the zither was mentioned in the description of a small orchestra under the Tran Dynasty (1225-1400) in a book called “Vũ Trung Tuy Bút” written by Phạm Đình Hổ. Mr. Phạm Đình Hổ indicated that the zither at that time had only 15 strings, instead of 16 or more, as currently existed in Vietnam, and that the instrument was played by plectra (or onglets), made of silver, or by two small sticks of wood similar to the tool used to play the 48-string instrument. But the technique of playing with two small sticks of wood has disappeared.

TT: So now, how many strings the zither has today?

TQH: Typically, the zither has 16 strings, it is also known as a "16-string instrument". The name “16-string instrument” is being used mainly in the north and in the central parts of the country, whereas the name “zither” is widely used in the south. People in the south prefer short words, so they would reduce the word “đàn tranh” to one word “tranh”. That habit of name shortening makes it amusing to hear when the people in the south describe a traditional orchestra with many musical instruments each sounds like plants, birds, tools, etc.

In the '70s, Music Professor Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo in the south as well as other zither musicians in the north added more strings to the instrument, increasing the total number of strings to 17, 19, 21 and 25 in order to cover the larger range of tones for modern music.

TT: Please describe for the readers of Suối Nguồn the basic elements of the zither as well as the fundamental characteristics of its sound.

TQH: The Vietnamese zither is the smallest in size among all other zithers currently used in Asia. The body length measures from 100 cm to 110 cm. The size of the larger end is from 17 cm to 20 cm, and the size of the smaller end is from 12 cm to 15 cm. The sound board is made of special wood called in Vietnamese “ngô đồng” bent into semi circular shape. Currently in Vietnam, the sound board is made of ordinary wood resulting in a low quality sound, and furthermore the wood is not treated properly making the body of the instrument less resistant to the large change in temperature in European and North American countries.

The ends of the instrument are made of hard wood, and the bottom is a thin piece of wood having three holes. The hole at the head of the zither has a shape of a half circle, where the strings are securely tied. The hole in the middle is rectangular shape, where fingers would be inserted to carry the instrument around. The third hole which is round and small, is used to hang the instrument on the wall. A zither hung on the wall is considered as a piece of decoration, as well as a “signal” telling the male visitor that there is a young girl living in the home.

At the head of the instrument, there is a curved copper wire used as a bridge to support 16 steel strings, noting that in the old days, until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the strings were made of silk, then until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the strings were made of brass. Each string running from the bridge at the head to the other end of the instrument, is also supported in the middle by a wooden bridge which could be moved back and forth to change the tonality of the sound. The old zither could cover three octaves, whereas the modern ones can cover four octaves with 25 strings.

Traditionally, Vietnamese in the north and in the centre play the zither with three fingers (the thumb, the index and the middle finger), whereas people in the south play with only two fingers (the thumb and the index). Players must grow their fingernails long enough to pluck the strings, otherwise they must wear plectra

There are many ways to play the zither. The most popular technique among the young generation would be “surfing” the strings making a long string of sounds. The players always use both hands, with fingers on the right hand plucking the strings, and fingers on the left hand pressing on the strings being plucked to slightly change the tone making the sound more pleasant. (*Notes: the author has described several complex ways to play the zither, which are too technical to translate*).

TT: When did the zither become popular and widely used?

TQH: The zither became very popular after 1975, when the Vietnamese started to immigrate as refugees to everywhere in the world. In Vietnam today, both music conservatories in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) offer several classes teaching the zither. Hundreds of students have registered to these classes. A female musician, Mrs. Phạm Thúy Hoan, in Saigon has opened a school of traditional music. And a band named “Tiếng Hát Quê Hương” has many very talented zither players. Another female musician named Hải Phượng, the daughter of Phạm Thúy Hoan, is considered as one of the best zither players in Vietnam. She has been invited to perform in France, Japan, Korea and in many other European and Asian countries. She has won the Zither Gold Medal in 1992. Another female artist named Thanh Thủy, professor of zither at the conservatory of Hanoi, has also won a Zither Golden Medal and has been invited to perform in several countries in Europe and Asia. And Professor Vĩnh Bảo is still busy making the zithers and other traditional music instruments in addition to operating his online classes teaching overseas students.

At the same time, many Vietnamese musicians living overseas also opened up classes to teach the zither to Vietnamese children. In France, female artist Phương Oanh started her zither classes in the early 1980s in Paris and its suburbs, as well as in Belgium, Switzerland, Norway, Holland, Germany, etc.

Another female musician Quỳnh Hạnh has also been operating her zither class in Paris. And another female artist named Hồ Thụy Trang, who came to France in 2000, has also opened up her zither classes in France and in Switzerland. All these three female artists frequently performed in France in their effort to preserve the zither music.

Furthermore, Professor Trần Văn Khê has founded the Centre for Studies of Oriental Music in Paris since 1960, which has graduated hundreds of Vietnamese and European students.

I myself has recorded 23 CDs of zither music in Paris and have received two awards from the “Académie du Disque Charles Cros” in France in 1983 and in 1996 with the cooperation of Bạch Yến.

My own sister, Trần Thị Thủy Ngọc, who is an excellent traditional zither player, was also a professor at the Centre for Studies of Oriental Music. She had recorded 2 CDs in Paris with our father Trần Văn Khê. In Canada, there is an excellent zither musician named Đức Thành, who has produced a video to teach the zither by correspondence. In Vancouver, musician Khắc Chí, who is a very talented zither and mono-string player, has produced together with his wife who is female musician Ngọc Bích two CDs of Vietnamese music including zither music. Female musician Lê Kim Uyên, who emigrated from Australia to Canada, and who has written a Master’s thesis on Vietnamese music, is also an excellent zither player frequently performing across Canada.

In the U.S., professor Nguyễn Thuyết Phong, who is a specialist on Buddhist music, also plays the zither and many other traditional music instruments very well. He is also teaching the zither and other musical instruments at many American universities. Doctor Đào Duy Anh was another wonderful zither performer before completing his medical studies. Female musician Ngọc Dung in San Jose, CA, is a professional zither player, who was a former member of the “Hoa Sim” group in Saigon before 1975. She has formed a traditional musical group in San Jose and frequently played the zither with her group across the U.S.

In Australia, there is a very talented musician couple, Lê Tuấn Hùng and Đặng Kim Hiền, who have been making a great contribution to the Vietnamese music scene in Australia. Mr. Lê Tuấn Hùng, who is a Ph.D. graduate in ethnomusicology, has written a number of articles on the zither, the instrument he excels. His wife Đặng Kim Hiền, who won a Gold Medal in singing Vietnamese folk music in Vietnam, is also very good in playing many traditional music instruments. Together they form a very rare and talented group specializing in Vietnamese music with a “new wave” touch.

TT: What is the influence of the zither on Vietnamese folk music?

TQH: The zither does not have much influence on folk music in Vietnam. In theory, folk music is sung without being accompanied by any instrument. But since the division of the country in 2 parts (1954-1975), people in the north started to use the zither to accompany folk singers.

TT: In what region do you think the zither is widely used?

TQH: Perhaps in South Vietnam. In the north, people use the zither to accompany singers. In the central region, zithers are used in small bands, or five-piece bands. In the south, the zither is used almost everywhere, in small bands, in folkloric plays, in amateur bands, in solos, in duos, in trios, and to accompany Tao Đàn poem reading.

TT: Who are the best zither players in Vietnam?

TQH: The contribution of many traditional music professors such as Nguyễn Hữu Ba, Bửu Lộc, Vĩnh Phan, Ba Dư, Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo, etc. has created a number of new progressive young talents such as Phạm Thúy Hoan and the “Hoa Sim” Group including Quỳnh Hạnh, Phương Oanh, Ngọc Dung in Saigon before 1975. Professor Nguyễn Vĩnh Bảo has designed and built many new zithers with 17, 19, 21 and 25 strings offering many beautiful low and high frequency sounds.

In Hanoi, female musician Phương Bảo teaches the zither at the conservatory and at the same time designs several new experimental instruments.

Currently in Vietnam, besides Phạm Thúy Hoan and Hoàng Cơ Thụy, there are three young and talented musicians: Hải Phượng (winner of National Young Talents award in 1992), Vân Ánh (winner of zither

young talent in 1995), and Thanh Thủy (winner of zither young talent in 1998). In Saigon, the first Asian Conference on the zither was organized from 10 to 14 September 2000, with the participation of more than 200 zither musicians from Vietnam, Korea, Japan and Singapore. This has brought forward a lot of enthusiasm into the field of traditional music in the country, and could very well help grow the zither music in Vietnam.

TT: Do people in foreign countries know much about the zither?

TTH: In France, many people studied the zither with Professor Trần Văn Khê. Ms. Catherine Despeux studied the zither to better her knowledge on Asian music. She wrote a thesis on Chinese martial arts and became professor of Chinese culture at the University of Paris. Ms. Lucie Rault studied the Vietnamese zither and the Chinese zither during her many years of research for her Ph.D. thesis on the Chinese zither. She is now Director of the ethnomusicology department of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. In Belgium, Mr. Pierre Thạch studied the zither with Phương Oanh, then opened up a class teaching Vietnamese children how to play this instrument.

TT: Based on your experience, how do people judge the quality of a zither?

TQH: A good zither produces clear and loud sounds. If its soundboard is made of special wood called "ngô đồng" the sounds would be clear and loud. The instrument itself must be light, and its soundboard should not be painted to let the wood breath and vibrate when the instrument is being played.

TT: Do you play the zither?

TQH: I have been playing the zither since I first came to France almost 50 years ago. I played the zither in more than 3,500 performances in 70 countries, in 120 international conferences on traditional music of the world, in many French movies in cooperation with French composers such as Vladimir Cosma, Philip Sarde. Jean Claude Petit. Gabriel Yared. I was the first zither musician using electro-acoustical technology in 1975 when recording the composition "Về Nguồn" written by myself and the late Nguyễn Văn Tường, in which I played the zither, the spoons, the Jew's harp and demonstrated the overtone singing technique. I have produced 15 long-playing records and 8 CDs on the zither since 1971. Having learned how to play the zither with my father, professor Trần Văn Khê, I play the instrument according to the tradition and the technique commonly used in the south of Vietnam (in my family, I am the fifth generation of musicians).

TT: And now I would like to ask the last question for the today's interview: having given more than 3,500 performances around the world and with your vast knowledge and experience on ethnomusicology that you have acquired over many decades, how do you judge the current number of zither players?

TQH: There are many who want to play or learn how to play the zither, but only a few reach the professional level. Zither students in Vietnam know how to read music, but when paying too much attention to music reading, they no longer have much inspiration to express themselves when playing. Outside Vietnam, there is also a great number of people who want to play the zither, but they play for their own enjoyment or they consider playing the zither as a hobby, without investing more efforts to become true performers or teachers.

When doing research on the zither, I only picked out a few books and CDs covering Vietnamese zither music, without touching the books and CDs covering zither music in China, Japan and Korea.

**<http://thuvien-ebook.com/forums/archive/index.php?t-1485.html>**

For additional information on traditional musicians in Vietnam and in other countries, please refer to trần quang hải's blog: **<http://tranquanghai.multiply.com/links>**

