[*Urban Culture Research Forum*](http://www.urpbkk.com/urp/Forum.html)

Studio Saigon: Telematic performance and recording technologies in light of the Covid-19 pandemic

# Abstract

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to affect individual musicians, ensembles and concert institutions, streaming technology has become a central vehicle through which musicians and audiences can meet. This paper discusses how networked performance, a format which has engaged artists for decades as an artform in its own right, may contribute to the sustaining of cultural heritage among migrant/minority communities as well as to the development of innovative intercultural artistic practices. Building on the experience of our group, The Six Tones, we wish to develop a more robust understanding of the possibilities, and the limitations, that networked technology affords. The central source of our own work is drawn from Musical Transformations, an ongoing project which studies the intersection between traditional and experimental music in globalized society.

The project has studied the dynamic history and contemporary performance practices of *Vọng Cổ*, a Vietnamese song which has experienced a radical set of transformations since the 1920’s. Recording technology has played a central role in this development, as evidenced even in the way its formal structure was shaped to match the duration of the 78rpm records on which this music was recorded on local labels still in the 1960’s (Gibbs et al 2013). We note that interactions both inside and outside recording studios contribute to urban culture. From the perspective of the street in Ho Chi Minh City, both recording studios used in this project blended into their surroundings, amongst residences, tiny convenience shops, hair salons, and restaurants selling *pho* and *banh mi*. Both studios also were negatively affected by traffic noise from a steady stream of motorbikes and trucks as well as construction projects. Local businesses were evidently accustomed to encountering foreigners leaving the studios for breaks in their recording sessions. Only a modicum of previous ethnomusicological studies have considered the role of recording studios in urban culture, which promote business in local communities while producing cultural products that have a lasting and expansive impact far beyond their neighborhood. Kay Shelemay observed that “recording technology is not only an integral part of our discipline’s intellectual history. It is an increasingly important part of our future as well” (Shelemay, 1991, p.288). We argue that the rise of telematic performance in the time of the pandemic also points to new avenues for recording technologies, inside and beyond the recording studio.

## Biographies

Henrik Frisk, professor at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, is an active performer of improvised and contemporary music and a composer of acoustic and electroacoustic music. His research is concerned with improvisation, interactivity, spatialisation and experimental electroacoustic music. He has contributed to the Routledge companion to research in the arts and is the co-editor and contributor of Acts of Creation, an anthology on artistic research supervision and has contributed to many other publications. Henrik has performed in many countries in Europe, North America and Asia including performances at prestigious festivals such as the Bell Atlantic Jazz Festival, NYC. As a composer he has received commissions from many institutions, ensembles and musicians.

David G. Hebert, PhD is a Professor of Music at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (Bergen), where he leads the Grieg Academy Music Education (GAME) research group. He is also manager of the Nordic Network for Music Education, Professor II with Lund University, and an Honorary Professor with the Education University of Hong Kong. His scholarly interests include ethnomusicology, technology, and cultural heritage policy. Among his recent books are Music Glocalization: Heritage and Innovation in a Digital Age and Theory and Method in Historical Ethnomusicology. A widely published and cited researcher (h-index: 15), he has published articles in 35 different professional journals and several books, and has worked for universities on five continents.

Nguyễn Thanh Thủy is a leading Vietnamese zither player/improviser in both traditional and experimental music. She was born into a theatre family and was raised with traditional Vietnamese music from an early age in Hà Nội. She is a founding member of The Six Tones (VN/SE), a group which has developed into a platform for intercultural collaboration across South East Asia, Europe and the US, since 2006. Between 2009 and 2011, she was part of the international artistic research project (Re)thinking Improvisation. Between 2012 - 2019 she carried out an artistic doctoral project at the Malmö Academy of Music concerned with gesture in traditional Vietnamese music. Since 2013 she has been part of a research cluster at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent, looking at subjectivity in musical performance. She is currently engaged as post-doctoral researcher in Musical Transformations, a senior research project looking at musical change, in transcultural and intercultural settings.

Stefan Östersjö is Chaired Professor of Musical Performance at Piteå School of Music, Luleå University of Technology. He received his doctorate in 2008 for a dissertation on musical inter-pretation and contemporary performance practice. In 2009, he became a research fellow at the Orpheus Institute. Östersjö is a leading classical guitarist specialising in the performance of contemporary music. As a soloist, chamber musician, sound artist, and improviser, he has released more than twenty CDs and toured Europe, the USA, and Asia. He is a founding member of the Vietnamese group The Six Tones, which since 2006 has developed into a platform for interdisciplinary intercultural collaboration. As a soloist he has worked with conductors such as Lothar Zagrosek, Péter Eötvös, Pierre-André Valade, Mario Venzago, and Andrew Manze. Östersjö is PI of Musical Transformations. His most recent book is Listening to the Other, Leuven University Press.

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# Script

## Introduction

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to affect individual musicians, ensembles and concert institutions, streaming technology has become a central vehicle through which musicians and audiences can meet. Culture is now disseminated mostly irrespective of the physical structures of cultural institutions in urban centers, which is a historically unique situation. In this presentation, our research team considers how networked performance contributes to the sustaining of cultural heritage as well as to the development of innovative intercultural artistic practices. Building on the experience of our group, The Six Tones, we aim to develop a more robust understanding of the possibilities and limitations that networked technology affords. Our work is mostly drawn from Musical Transformations, an ongoing project which studies the intersection between traditional and experimental music in globalized society.

The project has studied the dynamic history and contemporary performance practices of *Vọng Cổ*, a Vietnamese song which has experienced a radical set of transformations since the 1920’s. In this paper we provide a historical background to the impact of recording technology on this development, but we also propose that these technologies--in themselves transformed through practices of telematic interaction--also suggest new possibilities for intercultural collaboration, and for the sustaining music traditions in diasporic contexts.

## Short description of colonial urbanization in Saigon

Clip 1Stefan: Since the beginning of the 20th Century, the recording industry’s spread across the west and its colonies entailed a significantly increased access to music from remote parts of the world, although music recorded in South East Asia was first and foremost sold on the local market. Still, in a recent book, Danielle Fosler-Lussier (2020) provides numerous examples already from the 1920s and 1930s of how the “new availability of audio recordings succeeded in moving music among diasporic populations” (p. 98). The 20th Century brought colonial urbanization to the city of Sài Gòn, and its inhabitants experienced new teaching systems, a different state apparatus, and of course, an increasing presence of western culture. In the 1920s, Sài Gòn had become the greatest harbor city in all of French Indochina (Logan 2005). Radio was brought to Vietnam by the French in the 1930’s, and international broadcasts, in both French and English were sustained until 1956. As the French left Vietnam, American broadcasts were a new voice in the ether:

Archive clip with radio show

## The role of recording technology in the development of Cai Luong and Vong Co (1920-1970s)

Clip 2 Stefan: Since 1930, when Radio Sài Gòn started its international broadcasts, radio became an exposition of modernity in the south of Vietnam. Erich DeWald (2012) observes how “jazz was a particularly popular programming option, but traditional theatre was equally popular”, and he claims that its “modernity was just as conspicuous as that of jazz from France” (DeWald 2012, 155). At around the same time, western motion pictures were also introduced in Vietnam, and soon became a central source of inspiration for Vietnamese actors, playwrights and theatre directors. In this melting pot of ancient traditions and the novelty of modern, western culture, *Cải Lương,*  a new form of theatre was created in southern Vietnam. This then was the context in which *Vọng Cổ* was created. It soon became the central music in *Cải Lương,* as it continued to develop and rise in popularity. And so did also the fame of the star performers of *Cải Lương,* resting to a great extent on the technologies for recording and broadcast, and the emerging record labels.

Clip 3 Stefan An important player on the scene in Sài Gòn was Asia, the first label owned by a Vietnamese, Ngô Văn Mạnh, The label was specialized in *Cải Lương* andin 1937, they released their first recording of *Vọng Cổ* with the singer Năm Nghĩa. The recordings of *Vọng Cổ* on the Asia label covers the entire period during which the piece developed from an 8-bar structure, as heard in this recording, to a 16-bar structure heard in recordings of the year after, and eventually, in the 1950s, many recordings from when the piece had found the 32-bar form favoured still today. Gibbs et al observe how this version appears to have been specifically fashioned to fit the two sides of the 78 rpm record, further underlining the central importance of recording technology in the development of this genre.

Asia was essential in the early phases of *Vọng Cổ*, covering the development up to the early 1950s. What follows thereafter is often referred to as the golden days of *Cải Lương* and of Vọng Cổ, stretching from 1950 to 1975. A new label, named after its owner., Lê Văn Tài, was started in 1947 and became important in the 1950s. In 1960, with the creation of the Continental label, Nguyễn Văn Đông entered the music scene in Sài Gòn, and was to dominate it for the next fifteen years. However, the 1960s was also a time when the number of record labels literally exploded in southern Vietnam. But Continental signed many of the leading singers, and also instrumentalists like Văn Vĩ, Năm Cơ and Hai Thơm. In an interview with Jason Gibbs, Nguyễn Văn Đông recalls how Cải Lương was the main income for the label. He would sell 70 000 copies of a Vọng Cổ or Cải Lương release, and maybe just 5 000 of a pop song (Gibbs, 2018)

Clip 4 Stefan Since 1992, when the Viet Tan studio opened in Sai Gon, it has been the leading production site for Vietnamese popular music, a genre which has remained closely aligned also with *Cải Lương* and *Vọng Cổ* through its shared origins in combining elements of Vietnamese and western culture.

Cut (5:07 + 1 intro)

**David:**

Interactions both inside and outside recording studios contribute to urban culture in myriad ways. From the perspective of the street in Ho Chi Minh City, both recording studios used in this project (*as shown in these slides*) blend into their surroundings, amongst residences, tiny convenience shops, hair salons, and restaurants selling *pho* and *banh mi*. Both studios are also negatively affected by traffic noise from a steady stream of motorbikes and trucks as well as construction projects. Local businesses are evidently accustomed to encountering foreigners leaving the studios for breaks in their recording sessions. But how do recording studios fit in an urban area defined by “tube housing” and “motorcycle culture” (Truong-Young & Hogan, 2020)? Only a modicum of ethnomusicological studies have considered recording studios in urban culture, which promote business in local communities while producing cultural products that have a lasting and expansive impact far beyond their neighborhood. Kay Shelemay observed that “recording technology is not only an integral part of our discipline’s intellectual history. It is an increasingly important part of our future as well” (Shelemay, 1991, p.288). We see the future of recording studios as not only spaces for production of sounds to be consumed at any time, but also potentially as sites for the rejuvenation of music performance. This can be through live-streaming under pandemic restrictions, but also irrespective of the public health situation, recording studios offer unique opportunities for quality production of video-linked live performance of both local heritage and experimental international collaborations to be shared with the public. In this way, recording studios may become an even more essential part of urban culture in the future.

**VIDEO-2:**

In performances of *Vọng Cổ* today, sections of the piece are often interwoven with pop songs.

Recording technologies were central to the research design of the Transformations project. We selected a group of three leading masters of Vong Co and worked with them in recording studios in Saigon, between August 2018 and October 2019, when the final recordings were made at Viet Tan Studios, for a double CD containing traditional and experimental versions of this music.

Clip 5 Thuy: Our method was built on stimulated recall. Each morning, we would listen back to the recordings from the day before, and discuss them with the whole group. On the second to last day of the recording sessions in 2019, at Viet Tan studio, we made individual interviews with all three players. Here, we invited them to reflect on their experience of the entire working process. We interviewed Tuấn, the dan kim player who also runs the recording studio in which we made the first sessions in 2018. He had just recorded extraordinarily convincing solo versions of *Vọng Cổ* for the album, and the development in his solo playing was the first obvious topic. He first confirmed that he felt that the project had forced him to develop new aspects of his playing, and he referred to the listening practice, the high quality recordings that were made each time, and the repeated joint listening back to them, in the stimulated recall sessions as a central factor. He describes how, “when I listen back to recordings of my playing, several months or a year ago, I often think that “I did it like that then, but I would do it differently now”. Further, he describes how the project has made him practice solo playing at home, and together with the critical and attentive listening practice in the studio work, he has developed an increased awareness of musical shaping. (Huỳnh Tuấn, Interview, October 16, 2019)

Clip 6 Stefan: But, just as recording technologies have been a vehicle for live transmission through radio broadcast, they have also been part of enabling telematic performance, which has emerged as a form for artistic collaboration across geographic boundaries mediated through the internet. During the Covid-19 pandemic, The Six Tones have worked with telematic performance as a means to connect with musicians in Vietnam, with the aim of launching long-term telematic interactions, with Manzi, a gallery space in Hanoi, as the hub for setting local musicians in contact with many artists and venues around the world.

### Show excerpt of video of remote interaction with Ty

**Clip 7 Thuy:** You are listening to an experimental version of Vong Co, recorded in the summer of 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, This recording again allowed me to play with Phạm Công Tỵ, one of the masters of this tradition with whom we worked in the Transformations project. Due to technical limitations, related to Covid 19, it was not possible to set up a real time interaction with him, and we instead played with a video we had recorded earlier on, of him playing the piece. We see novel possibilities for musicians in exile to reconnect through the use of technology with musicians from their country of origin.

### The potential of networked performance to enhance intercultural collaboration etc

While networked performance has a history that goes back several decades, intercultural collaboration of the kind we are experimenting with here through network technology has been sparse. But there may be social and cultural gains as the technology may, under certain conditions, level the playing field, so to speak; the participation is on equal terms for all members in the performance. However, in reality infrastructure limitations may push the performance in the opposite direction as computer networks tend to be more stable in Europe and North America than the rest of the world.

The mediating framework in networked performance can be daunting: in advanced communication technology a whole range of things can go wrong and the internet was not originally built to handle high bandwidth data streaming in real time. Yet, in principle, these technologies are not more complex than other systems for performance, such as an opera house or a recording studio. Whereas the latter have developed during many years to promote one specific genre or artform, the former is a multi purpose network with a number of different uses. But, just as these traditional structures have contributed to framing the aesthetics and politics of the musical styles that they foster, we should allow a specific aesthetics to develop through the particular context of networked performance. This is one reason why it may be necessary to consider the structural, political and aesthetical limitations/possibilities that also networked performance institutes, especially in the context that is discussed here: In what ways does the technology limit or allow the potentialities in intercultural interaction?

(Video 2 is 6:15)

**David:**

Our presentation has offered a description of the role of recording studios and music technologies in urban culture, and in particular how *telematic* performance changes what forms of collaboration are possible among musicians. More than a decade ago, in the Hungarian music journal Parlando, I published an essay centered on the question “To what extent may a ‘virtual’ embodiment retain the profundity of meanings associated with traditional musical experience.” This question endures, but since 2010, the Six Tones have directly explored technologically-mediated performance practices in the sphere of intercultural experimental music, with provocative projects that test the meanings of virtuality for “traditional musical experience”. Recently Stefan Östersjö describes the ensemble’s vision as based on an “ecological and postcolonial understanding of a musician’s listening” (Östersjö, 2020, p.157) and the group’s approach demonstrates a commitment to equitable methods for both intercultural artistry and collaborative scholarship. Under the conditions of a global pandemic, there is even more of a pressing need to develop such inclusive approaches to both music experimentation and heritage sustainability, thereby broadening public accessibility to urban culture.

# References

Danielle Fosler-Lussier: Music on the Move (2020)

Phạm Công Tỵ đàn cò

Huỳnh Tuấn đàn kìm

Phạm Văn Môn Vietnamese guitar

Nguyễn Thanh Thủy đàn tranh

Ngô Trà My đàn bầu