

## An initial approach to a description of *Hát Xẩm* — the blind beggar folk songs of Vietnam

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### Abstract

*Hát Xẩm* “the blind beggar folk music” – newly rediscovered of folk arts in the late 1990s -- is almost invisible in Vietnamese written history. Bibliographic search for this genre is almost impossible. However it began to disappear from the public during the 1950s. Yet, hundreds of musicians of this genre are still living in the northern flat land of Vietnam. They hold annual festivals of the founder, who is believed to be a blind prince of the XVth Century. The music is unique. The songs are poignant. The instruments are light for travelling, consisting of a lead *đàn nhị* “two-string fiddler”, two *trống mảnh* “light small drums”, a *cặp kè* “dual clappers”, a *đàn bầu* “monochord”, and sometimes a *chiêng* “gong”. A beggar troupe consists of three or four persons. They wander from village markets to markets or festivals. Their song forms alternate between vocal *khố* blocks of verses and *lưu không* “instrumental melodic refrain”. The *lưu không*'s are rhythmic and stable to serve as a trigger for the vocal improvisation. The lyrics are sung in improvised folk poetic forms, telling the stories of common people and their conditions in the society, laden with the beggars' own experiences. The personal and regional accents are prominent. In this paper, we begin to explore the complex stories behind the authors and their songs, as well as the stories they are trying to tell.

As a dying genre that is in dire need of preservation, we approach this genre through a comparative study of two famous songs: female vs male composers, two *làn điệu* (styles), two origins, two regional accents, two musical forms, ornamentations, and two points in historical timelines. One is called *Dạt nước cánh bèo* “A fern petal in the turbulent stream” sung by Hà Thị Cầu (1928 - 3/3/2013), describing her life as the 18th wife of a jealous Xẩm beggar, and women's conditions. The other is called *Đón dâu về làng* “Greeting the new bride to our village” sung by the prize-winning Xẩm artist Tô Quốc Phương on the close relationship between villages across Mã River in

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Thanh Hoá Province. We will use the pitch/intensity/time contour graphs of the song spectrographic analysis to preserve the distinct characters of the melodies as well as the ideolectal and dialectal features, key pitches in contexts, accompanied by a melodic and poetic improvisations of Hát Xẩm music. The process is aimed to propose a multi-disciplinary methodology to analyze and interpret characteristic *finesses* of an unfamiliar musical culture, more specifically, the complex intertwined elements of an unfamiliar culture.

#### SHORT ABSTRACT

*Hát Xẩm* “the blind beggar folk music” – newly rediscovered of folk arts in the late 1990s -- is almost invisible in Vietnamese written history. It began to disappear from the public during the 1950s. Yet, hundreds of musicians of this genre are still living in the northern flat land of Vietnam. The instruments are light for travelling, without missing a lead *đàn nhị* “two-string fiddler”, two *trống mảnh* “light small drums”, and a *cặp kè* “dual clappers”. A beggar troupe consists of three or four persons. They wander from village markets to markets or festivals. Their song forms alternate between vocal *khổ* blocks of verses and *lưu không* “instrumental melodic refrain”. The lyrics are sung in improvised folk poetic forms, telling the stories of common people and their conditions in the society. The personal and regional accents are prominent.

We will explore the complex stories behind the authors and their songs, as well as the stories they are trying to tell through a comparative study of two famous songs: genders of composers, two *làn điệu* (styles), two origins, two regional accents, two musical forms, and two points in historical timelines. One is called *Dạt nước cánh bèo* “A fern petal in the turbulent stream” and the other is *Đón dâu về làng* “Greeting the new bride to our village.” We will use the pitch/intensity/time contour graphs to analyze and anchor characteristic *finesses* of an unfamiliar musical culture.

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