



An Initial Approach to Revitalization of

Hát Xẩm

“the Blind Beggar Folk Songs of Việt Nam”

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Abstract

Hát Xẩm “the blind beggar folk music” has been marginalized in the Vietnamese written/literary history. Illiterate beggars, the lowest class, are believed to be incapable of creating music or literature. Bibliographic search for this genre is impossible. Yet, hundreds of singers, artists and musicians are still performing in the lower Red River delta. The national approach, since 1954, to help Hát Xẩm was research, preservation, and advancement, which has not yielded any significant improvement. The new approach explores a series of studies mixing performers and researchers, using web technologies, and multi-disciplinary approach, chiefly folklore, ethnomusicology, sociology, and oral history. The song *Giọt nước cánh bèo* “A fern petal in the turbulent stream” shows its richness in the Vietnamese folk arts.

Acknowledgment

- *The Linguistic String Project's Medical Language Processing* of the Computer Science Department, New York University Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences, since 1984
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- 2020-2021 Special Project of the *Vietnamese Studies Group* of the Association for Asian Studies.

Việt Nam in Southeast Asia



The “silence” of Hát Xẩm?

- Viet Nam has 5,000 years of history of folk songs, poetry, and music.
- *Hát Xẩm*, a rich but understudied genre of Vietnamese folk songs, was formed and spread by blind travelling beggars in small bands around the lower Red River Delta in the northern part of Viet Nam.
- *Xẩm* artists believe that the founder was a blind prince in the XVth Century, who invented *Hát Xẩm* with the *đàn xẩm* “monochord.”

Hát Xẩm family & troupe 1893



TONKIN MERIDIONAL. — MUSIENS AMBULANTS AVEUGLES ; reproduction d'une photographie envoyée par M. SAJOT (voir p. 247).

M. Sajot, Glorieuses Pages de l'Histoire du Tonkin, dans *Les Missions Catholiques* 25 (1905)
pp.580-584, 593-596, 605-608, 616-620 [?]

- Male voice
- Female voice
- *Đàn xẩm/đàn song/độc huyền* “monochord”
- *Cò ke/nhị* “two-stringed fiddle”
- *Sênh súa* “castanets”
- *cặp kè* “bamboo clappers”
- *Cặp Trống mảnh* “twin drums”
- *Mõ* “buddhist wooden fish”
- *Tiu cảnh* “twin copper cymbals”



What is Hát Xẩm?

- The first *Dictionarium Anamiticum - Lusitanum - Latinum* published in Rome in **1651** by Alexandro de Rhodes: *xắm* as “[latin] cæcus” [blind], *đàn cò ke* as “[latin] lyra rustica mendici” [rustic musical instrument of the beggars] and *rốan xắm*, or *phờng xắm* “[latin] cæcus adunatio.” [xẩm band].

LE TONKIN



(D'après - Travail après réduction japonaise)

Henry Gréville, *Exp. 18*, p. 91 Paris, France

Musiciens ambulants aveugles

— 10 —

Musiciens ambulants aveugles – Le Tonkin, in Harvard Arts Museum, Boston



Musiciens aveugles – Le Tonkin

A postcard dated Sunday, January 29, 1906 to France from a tourist in Hải Phòng.

The “silence” of Hát Xẩm?

- *Hát Xẩm* was sung by the blind travelling beggars, the lowest class of the society, in markets, river landings, and village harvest festivals to make a living, and act as inter-village messengers.
- *Xẩm* artists composed, improvised and performed their songs with lyrics depicting their life stories, commenting on social conditions, current events, injustice, satire, bittersweet human bondages, and occasionally employed vulgar folk expressions.
- Today, *Xẩm* learners and artists are still largely invisible in public although they do hold a *Xẩm* founding day every year.

The “silence” of Hát Xẩm?

- *Hát Xẩm* artists were looked down by the feudal scholars and literary circles until they were stunned by the recitals in the 1990's by Hà Thị Cầu, a *Xẩm* artist from Ninh Bình. She was named a national treasure in 1997.
- There have been calls for preservation again since 2011, but stalled by the lack of records, even though in their music is alive in front of everybody.

Hà Thị Cầu (1928-2013)



Đàn Cò ke “two stringed fiddler” of Hà Thị Cầu, mended with tin tea can...

Hà Thị Cầu (1928-2013)



Daughter Hà Thị Mận and the altar of Hà Thị Cầu at home

Hà Thị Cầu (1928-2013)



Group practice at the home of Hà Thị Cầu led by her daughter, 2/2018.

Hà Thị Cầu (1928-2013)



Group performance in a buddhist temple, Feb 2018



Locations of known Hát Xẩm artists in the lower Red River Delta

Hà Thị Cầu (1928-2013)

- Hà Thị Cầu was born to a three generations of beggar family.
- At 11, she was sent by her parents to help the beggar boss Mậu, a famous and talented Xẩm.
- when she was 16, she was drugged by him and became his 18th wife. She ended up taking care of her parents and his family.
- He was blind, brutal and jealous. Many of his wives left him. Hà Thị Cầu had 7 children with him: only 3 alive. 3 died of illnesses. 1 was given away.
- After he died, she was single, and continued to live alone to take care of his children.
- She stunned the country in 1990's, which put Hát Xẩm on the national scene and she, a treasure of folk music in 1997.
- Yet, her biography remains sketchy.

Giạt nước cánh bèo

Tumbling fern in turbulent streams

- Hà Thị Cầu said her famous song “tumbling fern in turbulent streams” belongs to the Xẩm Hà Liễu genre.
- Popular theme: A woman was born accidentally like a drop of rain, some land in oceans, some land in the mud. Her life is like a fern petal, tumbling along the turbulent streams of men’s whims.
- She turned a popular Xẩm song into her personal life stories of pain and sufferings, common to all lives of women in Vietnam. She was faithful to the ungrateful and unfaithful world.

Giạt nước cánh bèo

Tumbling fern in turbulent streams

“A fern petal, I have always been, in turbulent streams

I am here alone at night, tears kept falling like rain...

Sisters, hardships are our fate since we landed in wrong places at heaven's whims.

If one is lucky, one falls into an open well (*instrumental*)

If you're really lucky, you fall into an open well where the water is clear, and clean... The water is just clear and clean where you can relax (*instrumental*)

I, like all of you, fell into a wrong place. You just have to endure hardships, whereto can you complain

I am all in pain, but I have to look cheerful on the outside (*lưu không*)

I can't feel sorry for my stupid lot (*instrumental*)

Sisters, we are all golden dragons falling into dirty mud ponds, we are the smart ones dragged down by dumb husbands, how can we not otherwise...

That's why I just keep enduring... in silence

Revitalization of Hát Xẩm: Initial Approach

Hát Xẩm has always communicated orally, and a real daily struggle for a living. Revitalizing Hát Xẩm is proposed to include 5 parallel strategy approach:

- **Education:** Revitalization of Hát Xẩm includes campaigns of education on all channels, from elementary, middle, high schools, and universities,
- **Research:** Revitalization of Hát Xẩm also includes university research and research institutes as a live musical and literary arts, esp. in context and setting improvisation.
- **Mass media:** at least once a year, reports on Xẩm Founder's Day.
- **Professionalism:** Training in levels of excellence: in singing, style lyric and music improvisation, repertoire of instrumentals, ...
- **Community and competitions:** Revitalization of Hát Xẩm recreates the Xẩm daily fight for a living.

An international conference on the Arts of Hát Xẩm

- An international conference on the arts of Hát Xẩm is to occur on May 21-22, 2021 in Ninh Bình, Việt Nam, after several COVID-19 delays. Cf. <http://mlp.cs.nyu.edu/folk.arts/hatxam/call.html>
- It is a joint efforts of Temple University, Sài Gòn University, the Center for Research, Preservation and Advancement of Vietnamese Folk Music, and mainly the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Ninh Bình Province. with live performances from the best Xẩm artists.

■ Temple University ■ Center for Vietnamese Philosophy, Culture & Society ■ Folk Arts Studies ■



OPEN CALL FOR PAPERS



**THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON SAFEGUARDING AND PROMOTION OF
THE ARTS OF HÁT XẨM IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

May 23-24, 2020 December 18-19, 2020 May 21-22, 2021

The Reed Conference Center, Ninh Binh Province

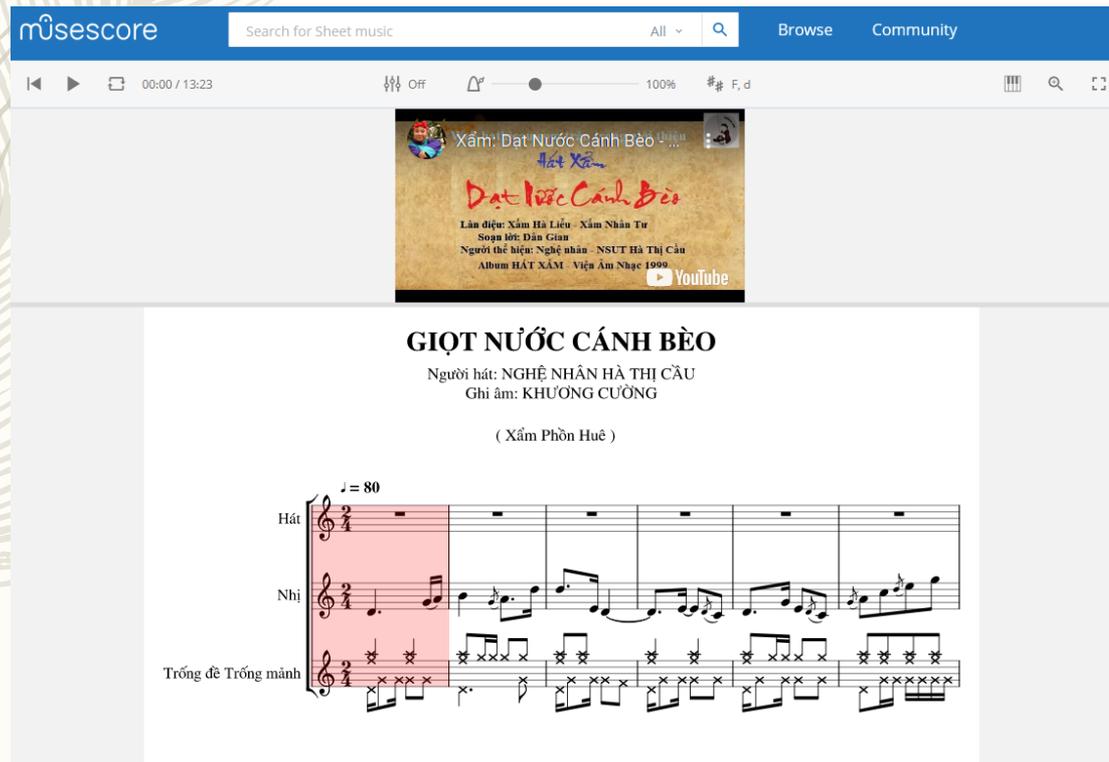
MESSAGE: Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Hát Xẩm 2020 Conference Postponement to December 18-19, 2020 May 21-22, 2021

An international conference on the Arts of Hát Xẩm: elaborate

The new strategy will be introduced with the leading technologies to

- elaborate: <https://musescore.com/user/29277646/scores/6007912> by merging multiple channels: original audios vs transcription.

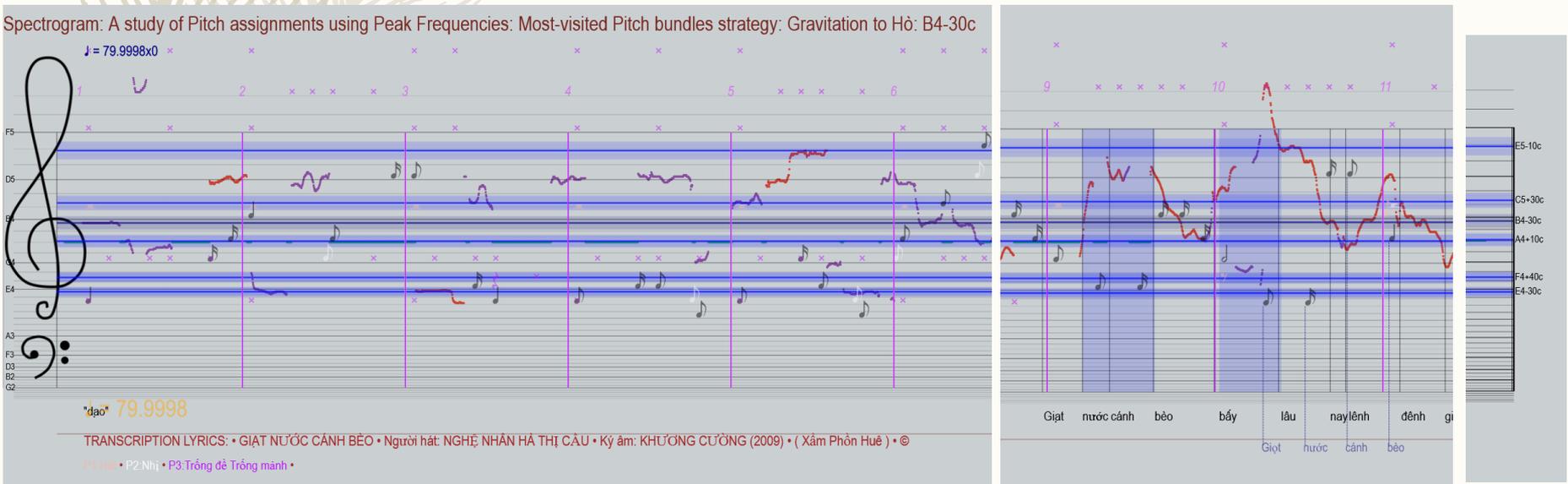


The image shows a screenshot of a Musescore page. At the top, there is a search bar with the text "Search for Sheet music" and a dropdown menu set to "All". Below the search bar, there are playback controls including a play button, a progress bar at 00:00 / 13:23, and a volume slider. The main content area features a video player with a thumbnail for "Xẩm: Dạt Nước Cánh Bèo" by Nghệ Nhân Hà Thị Cầu. Below the video player, the title "GIỌT NƯỚC CÁNH BÈO" is displayed in large, bold letters. Underneath the title, it says "Người hát: NGHỆ NHÂN HÀ THỊ CẦU" and "Ghi âm: KHƯƠNG CƯỜNG". A tempo marking "♩ = 80" is visible above the first staff. The sheet music is arranged in three staves: "Hát" (Vocal), "Nhị" (Erhu), and "Trống dè Trống mảnh" (Drums). The vocal staff is highlighted in pink. The music is in 2/4 time and F# major.

An international conference on the Arts of Hát Xâm: analyze

- The new strategy will be introduced with the leading technologies to
- analyze spectrograms of recorded performances, to encourage participation of youth and young programmers, essentially to establish a common scientific platform to settle academic disputes, where tempered music transcription method fails to help... where pitches and durations are at odds.

<http://mlp.cs.nyu.edu/folk.arts/hatxam/tabcpa.php>



An international conference on the Arts of Hát Xẩm: compare

The new strategy will be introduced with the leading technologies to

- compare genres and styles, using frequencies of occurrence and the circles of fifths: <http://mlp.cs.nyu.edu/folk.arts/hatxam/xamana.php>

HÁT XẨM — Folk Songs of the Blind Traveling Beggars

by Trần Việt Ngữ • Recorded by Mạc Hy, Nguyễn Trọng Oánh, Minh Văn & Nguyễn Trọng Lộc

A VIETNAMESE FOLK MUSIC STUDY • Phan Gia Anh-Thư & Ngô Thanh Nhàn • Oct 17, 2020

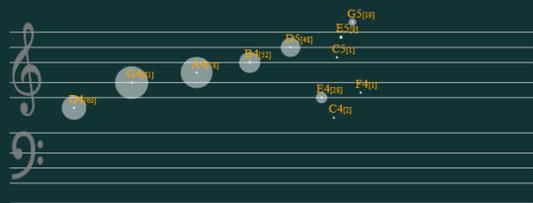
MusicXML source (manual transcription): MuseScore 2.3.1, July 6, 2018

Song Ranges, Circles of Fifths, Circles of Chromatics and MuseScore Song Sheets.

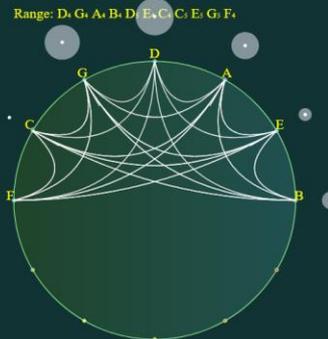
Each note and key-pitches-in-context are displayed with their frequencies of occurrence.

GIAT NƯỚC CẢNH BÈO/Hát Click for playable MuseScore music sheet
Người hát: NGHỆ NHÂN HÀ THỊ CẦU
Ghi âm: KHUÔNG CƯỜNG
(Xẩm Phồn Huế)

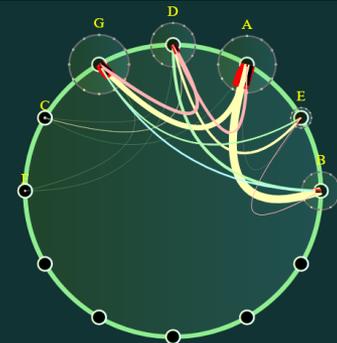
Song Pitch Range and Distribution [Range: 11] • Total 379 notes
Span: D4 G4 A4 B4 D5 E4 C4 C5 E5 G5 F4



Circle of Fifths



KEY PITCHES IN CONTEXT



An international conference on the Arts of Hát Xẩm: archives

The new strategy will be introduced with the leading technologies to

- Be searchable through web digital open archives, ... A sketch of a Xẩm archive can be <http://mlp.cs.nyu.edu/folk.arts/hatxam/>

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FOLK · ARTS · STUDIES

A research project in the Vietnamese folk arts heritage



HÁT XẨM

Folk Songs of the Blind Traveling Beggars

[Phan Gia Anh Thư](#) & [Ngô Thanh Nhân](#)

October 14, 2017

- The first International Conference on Safeguarding and Promotion of the Arts of Hát Xẩm in Contemporary Society
[Open Call for Papers](#), May 21-22, 2021 in Ninh Bình, Việt Nam.

The Vietnamese Studies Group/AAS awards a grant for a qualified junior scholar to the Conference as a Special Project.

The Conference will select the best papers from its Proceedings to be published in a Special Issue of *The Journal of Vietnamese Studies*.



Thank you!

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