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Alexander Cannon

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WMU professor studies a traditional Vietnamese music genre forging national Identity

By Carol Barber



A chance introduction to a largely unknown genre of Vietnamese royal court music that Dr. Alexander Cannon experienced while majoring in economics and music as an undergraduate forged an interest that changed the trajectory of his intended career path from analyzing economic trends to becoming an ethnomusicologist and an expert on *don ca tai tu*.

In graduate school, Cannon quickly discovered that very little had been written about *don ca tai tu* and decided that it would be the focus of his work in ethnomusicology. It is a genre of folk music of the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam known as “music for diversion.” “I was interested in the profound complexity of it; I had found a niche,” said Cannon, an assistant professor of music history and ethnomusicology at Western Michigan University since 2012. “Music is deeply embedded in Vietnamese culture. Rather than sitting down with their friends after work and cracking open a beer while telling each other about the awful day they had, the Vietnamese pull out their instruments and begin to play music together. It is that setting that really drew me in—the idea that language is incomplete. Language doesn’t express what we must express as human beings.”

“Music exists for different reasons for different cultures. We have to study it to identify what those reasons are.”

Cannon describes ethnomusicology as an interesting hybrid between musicology and anthropology, or the study of music in its primary context. He took his first trip to Vietnam in 2006, and he has spent nearly the last decade researching the impact *don ca tai tu* has had on the people of the nation. This music has been practiced since the late 19th century, and an effort is now underway to bring it to the world stage to foster national heritage and pride among the Vietnamese wherever they may live.

Cannon says *don ca tai tu* is very intricate with different modes of expression. Some modes are bright and happy, but he said musicians often express varying degrees of sadness. He recounts a description of the music offered to him by one of his teachers to explain: “Imagine you are dead in your grave and you want to get up and say just one more thing, but you can’t. This is how profoundly sad and powerful this music can be.”

In 2008, Cannon was awarded a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Fellowship to study *don ca tai tu* in Ho Chi Minh City. While this music is played mostly by amateur musicians, Cannon points out that in this context, “amateur” simply means someone who does not play for money. Over the course of 10 trips to Vietnam, Cannon has studied with several advocates and musicians who work to



ensure the continued viability of this tradition, two of whom have been integral to his research.

Pham Thuy Hoan is a nationally recognized Vietnamese composer and music teacher of *dan ca tai tu*, whom Cannon was introduced to by a friend. Pham works to “simplify” the complexity of the traditional music and hopes that by doing so, she can engage a larger number of people and generate a “national theme” that will be inclusive of all Vietnamese citizens and easily identifiable on an international level. Not only is the music technically complex, Pham is concerned that it may be difficult for the younger generation to relate to. “Much of the traditional style draws from literature,” Cannon said. “Unless they are familiar with

the literary references used, younger students may be unable to relate to the message.” Pham believes this disconnect could be a potential barrier to unifying the people through the music.

Cannon also studies with staunch music traditionalist **Nguyen Vinh Bao**, a ninety-eight-year-old master musician of *dan ca tai tu*. Cannon says Nguyen is known in Vietnam as the best performer of this music and is recognized by the French government on a list of people who are especially adept in cultural preservation. Nguyen passionately disagrees with Pham’s initiative to simplify the teaching and playing of the traditional style because it is the complexity of the music that gives it its unique identity.

Despite having differing opinions on how the music should be played, Cannon said both Pham and Nguyen passionately work toward the common goal of connecting this music to their nation’s heritage, and both have been successful at attracting different audiences. “The efforts of people like Pham Thuy Hoan and Nguyen Vinh Bao are paying off,” Cannon said. “In 2013, UNESCO recognized *dan ca tai tu* as an ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.’”

Based on his field experience and the relationships he has developed in Vietnam, Cannon is able to contribute a unique perspective on internationalization of the University to both his students in the classroom, and through his service as a member of the International Education

Council of the WMU Faculty Senate. While Cannon recognizes that much of a music student’s focus is on the technical aspects of learning to play their instruments, he is concerned that something is potentially lacking in their engagement with music. He encourages his students to consider music as a path by which they can relate with people on a deeper social and communal level. “Vietnamese people do this all the time,” Cannon says. “I always tell students that music is not an international language. Music exists for different reasons for different cultures. We have to study it to identify what those reasons are.”

Cannon begins each semester with a challenge to his music students. He places them in the role of music teachers who must, in five minutes, convince the superintendent not to cut the music budget. Most of his students struggle to find the words to effectively persuade the superintendent. Cannon laughs and says, “You can’t just go to him or her and say ‘Well you just can’t cut it, and you’re a fool if you don’t understand.’”

Cannon then explains to his students that an understanding of a culture’s visual art, history, and music are excellent tools for communicating and connecting with people from around the world. “I would like my students and colleagues to appreciate the benefits of engaging with other cultures purely on that level, but if I need to make an economics argument, I do have a degree in economics,” he said. “If you can communicate with that person from a different culture effectively enough to have that person say, ‘Hey, this person gets me and I want to work with him or her,’ you can make those significant connections.”

