



Foundations and Fundamental Characteristics of Phonetics in the Music of the Vietnamese People

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Abstract

As a form of social consciousness, music has always held an extremely important position and role in the spiritual life of humankind. Furthermore, music strongly influences the material production activities of society. Music and lyrics are the two fundamental components that create the value of a song. Although each element has independent values, when combined to create a song performed by the human voice, the relationship between melody and lyrics is close, mutually supportive and complementary. However, Vietnamese music also exhibits certain patterns and specific characteristics within its linguistic and cultural context. Therefore, this article provides an overview of the development process and basic characteristics of Vietnamese musical art.

Keywords: The Natural and Social Conditions of the Vietnamese People are Linked to the Formation and Development of Lyrics and Music, the Basic Characteristics of Vietnamese Songs, and the Basic Phonetic Characteristics of Vietnamese Music

The Natural and Social Conditions of the Vietnamese People are Closely Linked to the Formation and Development of Lyrics and Music

Characteristics of the Situation: Compared to many other art forms in general, and traditional Vietnamese singing in particular, such as Tuong, Cheo, and Cai Luong, our modern singing art is still very young. Its first appearance dates back to the 1920s and 1930s, with the "reform music" or "new music" movement of Vietnam at that time. During the pre-revolutionary period and the August 1945 Revolution, modern singing played a significant role in encouraging and motivating the revolutionary spirit of the entire population, but it was mainly in the form of collective singing, amateurish in nature, with songs such as: "Let's Go Together, Red Army" (Dinh Nhu), "Guerrilla Song" (Do Nhuan), "Suicide Squad" (Hoang Quy), "Onward" (Luu Huu Phuoc)... During the resistance against the French, Vietnamese singing continued to play its leading role as the vanguard of revolutionary music, which had just officially taken center stage. With the emergence of performing arts troupes and civilian or military vanguard units, the number of Vietnamese singers and artists at that time increased, they matured, and played a significant and positive role in the musical life of the resistance, leading to the historic victory at Dien Bien Phu. Training at this time was limited to self-study or oral instruction. However, the selection of talented young musicians and the formation of the "Children of the Resistance" art troupe in the Viet Bac war zone, as well as the selection of some outstanding singers to prepare for study in friendly countries, were considered strategic preparations for the Party's building and development of socialist culture, arts, music, and society according to the criteria of national, scientific, and popular as outlined in the 1943 Cultural Outline. In 1954, North Vietnam was liberated, embarking on the path of building socialism and providing manpower and resources to the revolutionary cause of liberating South Vietnam and unifying the country. In 1956, the Vietnam Music School was established as the first professional center for academic music training in Vietnam and the region at that time, bringing the training of modern Vietnamese vocal art to a new level of development. The founding of the former Vietnam Music School, now the Vietnam National Academy of Music, is also considered the birth date of professional vocal music in Vietnam.

For nearly 55 years, despite its relatively young age compared to the established tradition of classical vocal technique in the world, since the development of Vietnamese singing according to the academic and professional criteria of Europe, particularly the Russian, Italian, and Bulgarian schools, the understanding of the aesthetic unity between beautiful singing – *Bel canto* – and clear pronunciation and articulation has not only been considered a theoretical understanding of Marxist aesthetics but has also become an intrinsic need of national aesthetics for the art of singing in general, and professional Vietnamese vocal music in particular. This is the reason why our professional vocal artist training has achieved great success, and at the same time, it has given the European classical vocal school in Vietnam a unique identity, a new vitality, and made significant contributions to the overall growth and success of Vietnamese revolutionary music, playing a considerable role in the cause of national liberation and reunification of the country today.

It can be affirmed that, among all forms of musical art, from folk to classical, singing is the most popular and versatile art form. For example, compared to instrumental performances (solo, ensemble, ensemble, etc.) or traditional theatrical performances (tuong, cai luong, cheo, etc.), except for independent musical pieces, if performing a "play" or "excerpt,"... it still requires a "stage," musical instruments, actors, props, costumes, etc. However, for singers, they can sing anywhere: working on construction sites, in factories, or in the fields; during marches to battle, on artillery platforms, in trenches, on cooperative warehouse grounds, or on a mound of earth by the roadside... The musical instruments are also very simple; a mandolin, a guitar, or even simpler, an accordion... are enough for a singer to travel along the Truong Son mountain range, singing for soldiers and youth volunteers at military posts or on the communication lines of the front lines throughout the arduous years of the war against the US. Like the case of Meritorious Artist Thanh Dinh; The late People's Artist Quoc Huong on the Southern battlefield during the resistance war against the French from 1946 to 1954, etc...

The widespread appeal of the new art of singing is also manifested in its ease of learning, memorization, and dissemination. From the pre-insurrection days to the August 1945 general uprising, revolutionary songs were widely disseminated not only in liberated areas or war zones. Many people knew the songs, many sang them, and many sang them very well even without knowing the Vietnamese alphabet – this was commonplace. Workers, students, soldiers, youth volunteers, frontline workers, members of agricultural cooperatives, militia... all could learn the songs, practice them, and even know and sing many songs. Singing alone, in groups, in choruses... all forms of "performance" depended little or no on sound equipment, lighting, musical instruments, or stage facilities. Singing and the art of singing have become a driving force in building and developing the cultural and artistic life of the entire population, promoting mass art movements in localities, agencies, enterprises, schools, or armed forces units... becoming a powerful and effective means of propaganda in conveying the Party and

State's guidelines, policies, and strategies to all strata of the people, motivating the entire population to actively respond and successfully complete the tasks of labor, production, combat, building, and defending the Fatherland.

Numerous examples can be cited regarding the role of singing and songs in the aforementioned propaganda. For instance, during the resistance wars against the French and Americans, on the topic of agricultural taxes, we have representative songs such as: "*Harvest Day*" by Van Cao, "*Harvesting Quickly and Well*" by Le Loi - Huyen Tam, "*The Ripe Rice Season*" by Hoang Viet, "*Planting the Chiem Rice*" by To Vu...; to encourage the movement to enlist in the army to fight the enemy, we have: "*Green Leaves*" by Hoang Viet, "*Suicide Squad*" by Hoang Quy, "*On the Road*" by Luu Huu Phuoc, "*Seeing You Off*" by Nguyen Van Ty, "*Heroic Men and Capable Women*" by Do Nhuan....

We see that the universality, relevance, and motivational power of singing always demonstrate their advantage and strength, even though today, technical means and technology seem to be gradually replacing singing and singing movements in social life.

In the daily lives of individuals and in the daily lives of groups, organizations, schools, factories, etc., singing and the art of singing are always present in the spiritual and mental lives of each person. In professional music, the revolutionary Vietnamese music scene, officially formed from 1945 to the present, has seen songs occupy a large proportion and play a very important role with rich content, themes, forms, and genres: homeland, country, the Party, Uncle Ho, to specific themes as just mentioned above.

Looking back at the development and growth of professional vocal music in Vietnam, with hundreds of classical and chamber singers, leading soloists of all central and local professional art units nationwide, military and branch performing arts troupes, regional and provincial music training centers, radio and television stations, music research centers, publications, and newspapers... it is enough to speak of the remarkable growth of our country's vocal music workforce. Hundreds have been awarded the title of Meritorious Artist by the state, dozens have been awarded the title of People's Artist... Many artists hold doctoral and professorial degrees and hold important positions in the country. Many artists have won well-deserved awards at international competitions and have been recognized and highly appreciated by the international vocal music community, such as: People's Artist Trung Kien, People's Artist Quang Tho, the late People's Artist Quoc Huong, the late People's Artist Le Dung, singer Tran Khanh, People's Artist Tran Hieu, People's Artist Quy Duong...

In professional performing arts organizations, whether at the central or local level, singing always accounts for a large proportion of the program: solo performances, group performances, duets, singing and dancing, choral performances, etc., almost always occupy a key position in the program, are carefully invested in and given careful attention, and are warmly received by the audience...

The team of revolutionary singers in Vietnam's professional vocal music scene has not only grown in number and professional skill but also in political integrity and aesthetic

ideals, using their voices to serve the revolutionary cause of the Fatherland and the public. Many Vietnamese singers have left a lasting impression on generations of audiences, not only for their talent and singing ability but also for their dedication to training and honing their skills, for using their voices as sharp weapons to serve the glorious revolutionary cause of the nation, such as the late People's Artist Quoc Huong, People's Artist Tuong Vi, People's Artist Trung Kien, People's Artist Tran Hieu, singer Tran Khanh, and Meritorious Artist Thanh Dinh...

In short, singing possesses a special power in social life and plays a significant role in the lives of the entire nation, as well as in the revolutionary music of Vietnam. Vietnamese classical and chamber vocalists have made immense, positive, and effective contributions to the revolutionary cause of national liberation, building and defending the socialist Vietnamese Fatherland. We have every right to be proud and confident that: With the leadership of the Party and the State, the growth of training centers, the strong professional development of vocal instructors and performing artists, and international exchange and integration... the Vietnamese voice will soar even higher and further...

Fundamental Characteristics of Vietnamese Folk Songs

In Vietnam's nascent professional vocal arts scene, the role, position, and impact of the song genre have always been dominant and held a significant proportion in the musical life of society as a whole. Songs, whether folk songs or professional songs, are widely popular among the music-loving public and in the lives of the people, gaining their advantage and strength due to the following factors:

Universality: Anyone can sing: soldiers, workers, laborers, youth, volunteers, students, even craftsmen...

Singing can take place anywhere: in the North or the South, in the mountains or by the sea, on the border or on the islands, in factories or in fields, in trenches, on artillery platforms, in prison cells or in university lecture halls, in a space with a magnificent stage equipped with modern facilities or on an earthen mound in the front lines of a border guard post...

The forms of performance are rich and diverse: solo, male or female duet, trio, quartet, group singing, choral singing... Singing with a choir or symphony orchestra, with a piano or a zither, a bamboo flute... And perhaps, without any musical instrument, the soldier still sings, the worker still sings, the cooperative member still sings, the artist is still ready to sing, singing to the point of self-forgetfulness like the late People's Artist Quoc Huong, artist Tran Khanh, Meritorious Artist Thanh Dinh, To Lan Phuong...

Singing took place in any circumstance: during labor and production, in combat, in study, or in laboratories and scientific research... in times of joy and sorrow, in moments of triumphant victory or temporary defeat, in times of reunion or separation... Vietnamese songs, with their imagery of "singing drowning out the sound of bombs," evoked the heroic and proud spirit of the Vietnamese revolutionary artists and their art of singing during the resistance war.

Timeliness: As a means of reflecting objective reality, songs are also considered "musical messages" of the vibrant, rich, and inspiring life of the Vietnamese people over the past half-century. From victories and triumphs to the excitement, pride, and anxieties of the land, to the golden rice grains contributing to the fight against invaders and national defense, to the stirring emotions of the heart before first love... Songs not only reflect but also effectively convey aesthetic and educational meanings. Furthermore, the policies and guidelines of the Party and State, the tasks of the revolution at each turning point and each specific historical stage of the nation, seem to have been expressed by Vietnamese revolutionary songs not only through the ordinary function of art but also through genuine aesthetic thinking and emotion, reflecting the responsibility of citizens with patriotism and national pride. Vietnamese revolutionary songs can be likened to a "chronicle" in music:

For example, in the period before the August 1945 revolution, we have: "*Destroy Fascism*" by Nguyen Dinh Thi, "*Together We March with the Red Army*" by Dinh Nhu, "*Guerrilla Song*" by Do Nhuan, "*Onward*" by Luu Huu Phuoc, ...

During the resistance war and the liberation of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, we have songs like: "*Winter Pond*," "*Thao River Guerrillas*," "*Evening in the War Zone*" by Do Nhuan; "*My Homeland*" by Nguyen Duc Toan; "*Rice Harvest Season*," "*Going to the Mountains*" by Hoang Viet; "*People of Hanoi*" by Nguyen Dinh Thi; "*Lo River*," "*My Village*" by Van Cao; "*My Village*" by Ho Bac; "*Ba Vi*" by Huy Du... up to "*Long March*," "*Victory at Dien Bien Phu*" by Do Nhuan; "*Through the Northwest*" by Nguyen Thanh... After 1954, the temporary division of North and South Vietnam marked the birth of songs such as: "*Love Song*" by Hoang Viet; "*Song by the Banks of Hien Luong*" by Hoang Hiep - Dang Giao; "*I Am a Worker*" by Hoang Van; "*Night Stars*" by Phan Huynh Dieu; "*Far from Shore*," "*Singing in the Pac Po Forest*" by Nguyen Tai Tue; "*Liberation of the South*" by Huynh Minh Sieng...

In terms of policies, guidelines, and professions, many songs have become exemplary and classic hits, such as "*I'm Working in Credit*" by Nguyen Van Ty, and "*The Song of the Forest Worker*" by Pham Tuyen...

In short, with the advantage of keeping up-to-date with political, military, economic, cultural, and social events, songs always have the ability to penetrate and popularize with high propaganda effectiveness, practically impacting all aspects of life and society. And their contributions and effects on the lives of our entire population over the past 50 years or so are a very valuable and proud reality.

The Power of Mobilization, Appeal, and Ability to Unite:

Besides aesthetic and educational value, the strength and ability of Vietnamese songs, with their rhythmic characteristics, especially in the march genre, and their familiar, easy-to-learn and easy-to-remember melodies and rhythms—both musically and lyrically—are even more powerful than ever in the context of the difficult and challenging circumstances of labor, struggle for survival, and self-defense faced by the Vietnamese people, especially

during the continuous marches and battles to protect and liberate the country from 1945 to 1975.

Highly Expressive: As a vocal genre expressed through the human voice, with a concise structure that is easy to learn, memorize, and disseminate, songs are also considered a "message of human emotions" through sound and language. Under the specific influence of the vocal organs, the elements of language, both spoken and sung, are formed and "amplified" into sounds – sounds – under the control of the brain and central nervous system. Speech and singing are not only products of a physiological and mechanical thought process, but also products of an incredibly rich and subtle inner life, spirit, and emotions, and a vivid and authentic expression of each person's real life.

Therefore, songs are still considered a highly expressive, profound, direct, and genuine form of singing that reflects the experiences of all three creative parties: the author/songwriter, the singer, and the audience who enjoys the song with its myriad nuances of inner life. In themes concerning private life, romantic love, and love for one's homeland, songs remain the most sensitive and effective form of expression, conveying these feelings to society through their unique language.

Basic Phonetic Characteristics in Vietnamese Music

The modern Vietnamese phonological system is a mechanism comprising subsystems: initial consonants, medial consonants, vowels, final consonants, tones; stress and intonation. The first five systems are inherent features of syllables, forming the syllables themselves, while the last two systems belong to linguistic flow. Within the scope of this study, the thesis will present and analyze the first five systems.

Initial sound

Most Vietnamese syllables have an initial consonant, and all of these initial consonants are single consonants; for Example: tiếng, Việt, hiện, đại, ...

Syllables such as: anh, em, ăn, uống, oanh, uyen, are believed to have glottal stop consonants but are not represented in written form.

Generally, each initial phoneme is represented by a single letter, but some phonemes are written by combining two or three letters. Some phonemes are written in a single form; others are written in two or three different forms.

For example: - The phoneme /ŋ/ is written as *ng* and *ngh*

- The phoneme /z/ is represented in three forms: *d*, *gi*, *g*

Initial Sounds in Dialects and Vernaculars:

The above initial consonant system is the standard Vietnamese initial consonant system. However, not all regions fully distinguish between the 21 initial consonants mentioned above.

In the northern dialect (including Northern Vietnam and Thanh Hoa), the retroflex sounds /t, s, z/ are absent; tre = che, sa = xa; ru = du. In some vernaculars of the northern dialect, the sound /l/ is confused with /n/ and vice versa, /n/ is confused with /l/: lan – nan; làng – nàng.

In the Central dialect (including Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, and Thua Thien), the /ŋ/ sound is absent; it is replaced by the /j/ sound, and the /z/ phoneme is also represented by the [j] sound: nhi = di__gi.

In the Southern dialect (from Quang Nam to Ca Mau), the phoneme /v/ is absent and replaced by /j/, and as in the Central dialect, the phoneme /z/ is represented by the sound [j]: va = da-gia. In some Southern dialects, the sound /z/ is replaced by /y/: rô__gô; /c/ is replaced by /s/: chuôi → xuôi (pronounced [sujz]).

In the Northern dialect, in some areas, there are two common phonetic transformation phenomena: /t/ → /t'/ or vice versa /t'/ → /t/;

For example: tre → te, trâu → tâu, thảo → sào, thừa → xura. Many dialects in Central China also exhibit similar phenomena.

Certainly, a more detailed study of Vietnamese dialects would reveal many more unique phenomena regarding initial sounds (as well as other parts of initial sounds).

Accompaniment:

In the medial position, there is only one phoneme /w/. It is a semi-labial consonant, which serves to lower the pitch of the syllable: compare *ta* and *toa*.

The phoneme /w/ is represented in writing in two forms:

- u, when /w/ appears before the vowels i, ê, iê(ia), o, ă, etc. For example: tuy, quê, luyện, huơ, huân... and when /w/ appears after the letter q: qua, quy, quê, quan, quân,...

- o, when /w/ appears before the three vowels a, ă, and e: hoa, hòe, hoạc, ...

The vowel sound /w/ is limited in its appearance in certain cases:

-/w/ does not appear after initial labial consonants /b, f, v, m/. Words with labial initial consonants accompanied by a glide sound can certainly be considered foreign words, for example, bus (bus), fut (fut), voile (voile), muy (mu).

The -/w/ sound does not appear after the /r/ sound. The word "cu-roa" is borrowed from the French word "courroie".

The -/w/ only appears after /y/ in one word: widow (derived from Sino-Vietnamese).

-/w/ also only appears in a few words beginning with the sound 'n': noa, noãn (which are Sino-Vietnamese words) (see Table 1 – Appendix 1)

Table 1: List of Northern Sounds

Minus	Letter	For Example	Minus	Letter	For Example
/ i /	i	silent reason	/ u /	u	collect
/ e /	y	hallo	/ ɔ /	Umbrella	Miss
/ ε /	e	Mom		o	small
/ a /	a	brother,		ia	ray
/ ω /	Uh	yoke		ya	late
/ ɔ /	Hey	private	/ ɔ /	ie	fairy
/ ă /	a	flag		love	advice
/ a /	a	favor	/ ω, ɔ /	like	rain
/ ă /	a	us		drink	late
	eat	eat	/ u, ɔ /	ua	ua
	a	au, ay			want

Consonant clusters in dialects and vernaculars:

In the Southern dialect, syllables containing a glide sound that have no initial consonant or have an initial consonant of /hkv/ are pronounced with the initial consonant /y/: oa, hoa, qua, ngoa → goa.

In some dialects in the South, such as in Quang Nam, the vowel sound is absent in some words with initial sounds /t, tr, c, th, ηj, s, l/ and main sounds i, ê, e, iê. For example: toe toét ___te tét, truyền triền, chuyên chiên, thúy thí, thúê thê, thuê thê, nhược nhiên, duyên diên, xuyên xiên, suyền siên, loè loẹt lè lệt...

Main Note

In the phonetic structure of the Vietnamese language, the unit responsible for the primary sound element is always the vowel phoneme. There are no cases where a consonant plays the primary sound role; Vietnamese has both single and diphthongs.

- Single vowels: consist of 11 sounds a, ă, â, e, ê, i/y, o, ô, ơ, u, ư.

Diphthongs:

It consists of 3 phonemes: /ia, wa, ua/, evenly distributed among the preceding, middle, and following lines.

Written sequentially with *ia, ua, ua* when the syllable has no final consonant: chia, chura, chua;

Written sequentially with *iê, ươ, uô* when the syllable has a final consonant: chiếc, chút, chúc, chiên, chương, chuông,

...

The phoneme /i/ is represented by the letter y in context with the vowel /w/ in words like tuy, thúy, lữ, suy, etc.

Main Sounds in Dialects and Vernaculars:

Compared to other components of a syllable, the vowel is perhaps the component that undergoes the most transformation in dialects and vernaculars.

In some dialects, certain single vowels change in tone to varying degrees, especially in open syllables, due to the presence of another vowel element preceding or following them.

In local dialects, there is also the phenomenon of not distinguishing vowels in some contexts. In Quang Binh, the sounds *o* and *o* are not distinguished when combined with [-η, -k]: trông = trong; khóc = khóc. In Quang Nam, the sounds /e/ and /ε/ are not distinguished when combined with /-m/ and /-p/: êm = em; thếp = thếp.

Local dialects may or may not have phonemes as in the standard system; for example, in Quang Nam, there is the phoneme /a/ as in "our village," but not the phoneme /ă/ (this phoneme is replaced by the phoneme /ơ/). Sometimes, in a series of words, standard vowels are alternated with other vowels, which can lead to a "chain reaction." In Quang Nam: / ɔ/ [ă] [ε]: benefactor ___eat frown; repent → en nen; very → much, doing → a lot...

Final Sound

Vietnamese has 8 final sounds, including:

-Noises: /-p, -t, -c/. These three phonemes are all oral consonants.

-Voices: consist of three nasal sounds /-m, -n, -η/ and two semi-vowels /-w, -j/.

Final sounds in the Southern dialect:

- In the Southern dialect and in the Hue dialect, the final consonants /-t, -n/ are transformed into the corresponding consonants /-k, -η/: làn - làn, liên - liêng, mát - mát, mặt - mặt...

- In the Southern dialect, after combining with final consonants, in some contexts, the second element of complex vowels is lost and transformed into simple vowels: kiệp ___kíp, cướp ___cúp, tiêm ___tim, kiếm ___gum, chiêu ___chìu, hươu ___hru, cười ___cừ, ...

Tone:

In modern Vietnamese, the six tones that have phonological value are: level, falling, rising, glottal stop, high, and low.

In written form, the horizontal tone is not represented by diacritical marks like other tones.

All six tones can appear in syllables without a final consonant or with a nasal or semi-vowel final consonant. In syllables with a voiceless stop consonant, only two tones—rising or glottal stop—appear. This is due to the articulatory and acoustic conditions. The voiceless stop consonants /-p, -k, -t/ are essentially just silences, thus preventing the expression of level and falling tones, which are flat tones requiring a certain length, as well as the rising and questioning tones, which are broken tones and cannot reveal their complex characteristics if their length is limited.

For example: - "cup" only has meaning when it has an acute accent (cúp) or a grave accent (cụp)

- "buc" only has meaning when it has an acute accent (búc) or a grave accent (bực)

- The word "tat" only has meaning when it has an accent mark (tát) or a grave accent (tạt).

Tones in dialects and vernaculars:

- In the Northern dialect, especially in the Hanoi dialect, the six tones are fully and clearly distinguished.

- In Central dialects, generally, most dialects have five tones: level, falling, rising, glottal stop, and questioning; the glottal stop is incorporated into the questioning tone. However, some dialects, such as the Do Luong dialect (Nghê An province), do not incorporate the glottal stop but instead incorporate the questioning tone. There are also some dialects with only four tones, such as the Ha Trach and Bac Trach dialects (Bo Trach district, Quang Binh province) which only have level, falling, rising, and glottal stop tones because both the questioning and glottal stop tones are incorporated into the glottal stop tone. Particularly, the dialects of Thanh Hoa, Huong Hoa, and Lam Hoa (Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh province), although also having four tones (level, falling, rising, and glottal stop), have a more complex transition: the glottal stop tone is incorporated into the glottal stop tone, while the questioning tone is incorporated into the rising tone. The characteristics of the tones in the Central dialect are also slightly different from those in the Northern and Southern dialects: their pitch is not as distinctly separated.

Thus, it can be affirmed that the Vietnamese nation was formed very early, and throughout its history, it has experienced various periods of ups and downs. However, the distinctive characteristics of patriotism, indomitable spirit, and cohesion of the Vietnamese people have created and preserved the unique nuances of the Vietnamese language, with its rich and subtle vowel system. In the art of singing, the Vietnamese have always known how to blend this richness to create songs that are characteristic of the ebb and flow and profound depth of their language.

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