

KHAC CHÍ



Making Old Music in a New World

BY GARY CRISTALL

T

he quality of the tape was iffy. A dub of a television performance. It was a little hard to see exactly what was going on. A woman was playing some kind of fiddle but it seemed that the string she was playing ended somehow in her mouth. There was what appeared to be a large panpipe mounted on a rack, and the same woman was making sounds come from it, but it appeared she was moving her hands in front of it, never touching the instrument. Surely there must be something missing! There was another instrument that looked and sounded a bit like a steel guitar; the

man playing it wrung an astonishing series of sounds from what seemed to be a single string. The sounds were like nothing I had ever heard.

That was January 1992. I was the artistic director of the Vancouver Folk Music Festival. A Canadian who was working in Vietnam called me to ask if I was interested in hearing some Vietnamese music. I was, and shortly the videotape arrived. Slowly work stopped in the office and folks began to gather as we rewound the tape again and again and tried to puzzle out what we were watching and hearing. There were no notes, no explanation and it was totally compelling. The instruments and sounds were as foreign to our ears as if they had been on a demo tape from another planet. I wanted it!

That July, five members of the Khac Chí Ensemble arrived in Canada for a short tour we had organized. Finally we, and 10 thousand or so members of the festival audience, had the opportunity to see, live and close up, what we had tried to puzzle out of the video. It was a marvel – instruments and sounds the like of which were totally unknown to us. When the tour was over, two of the group decided to remain in Canada. A dozen years later Hồ Khắc Chí and Hoàng Ngọc Bích (Chí and Bích, pronounced “chee” and “bick”) are settled in Vancouver and perform across Canada and the United States with journeys to Europe and Asia. Mainly as a husband and wife duo, sometimes with guests, they perform as the Khac Chí Ensemble. In November of 2004, I sat down with them for a three-hour chat to talk about how it all came to be.



Chí was born in 1950 in Nghe An on the coast of central Vietnam. While formally in Hue province, the site of the old royal capital city, Nghe An was in North Vietnam when the country was partitioned after the 1954 Geneva Accords. Chí came from a family of intellectuals. His grandfather was a translator for the French. His father and mother were both accomplished musicians. After the division of Vietnam the family moved to Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam where Chí entered the National Music School

(later the Vietnam Conservatory) at the age of eight. For the next 11 years, Chí studied the enormously varied music of Vietnam, specializing in the dan bau (a one-string zither) and flute, as well as the Vietnamese vocal tradition. In the late '60s, the school was evacuated from Hanoi to remove the students from the American bombing. Shelters were dug to protect the instruments and to allow the students to continue to practice in the midst of the war. There was even a big one made for the piano. Chí's main memory is of being hungry all the time. Sometimes there were 15 air raid alarms in the course of a single day.

In 1968, Chí graduated but stayed on as a teacher. Even in the middle of the war the government was committed to expanding the level of musical education. Chí was chosen as one of four talented young graduates to be trained as conductors, composers and advanced teachers. This training included a year at Tashkent University in what is now Uzbekistan, where they were taught techniques in the performance and teaching of traditional music. When, in 1982, the National Music School became the Vietnam Conservatory of Music, and was promoted to the status of a university level institution, Chí was one of the first generation of master instructors in the new Department of Traditional Music. In 1982, he won first prize in the Vietnam Competition of Professional Instrumentalists and in 1985 performed at the 12th World Youth Festival in Moscow, where he won the Gold Award. In 1987, Chí became the Assistant Department Head and conductor of the Traditional Music Orchestra. The following year he won first prize in the Improvement of Traditional Instruments Awards for his work in adding frets to the dan bau. He performed across Vietnam as well as in Italy, Germany, Czechoslovakia and South East Asia. In every respect Chí had reached the very pinnacle of Vietnamese music success.

Bích's accomplishments are equally impressive. Born in Hanoi in 1964, she too started her music studies at the age of eight. Evacuated from Hanoi during the bombing, she remembers missing her mother who remained in the capital, and her father

(Above) As a student Chí specialized in the dan bau – a one-string zither. (Left) Bích plays the k'longput by cupping her hands and clapping directly in front of the open ends of the bamboo pipes.



who was in the army fighting in the south. From the small town where the school was evacuated she could see the lights of the bombs in Hanoi, 15 kilometers away. Bích's first instrument was the 36 string Vietnamese hammered dulcimer (tam thap luc). A friend of hers played it, and Bích was entranced. When she entered music school she thought that would be her instrument. When she was assigned the dan bau she was miserable. Her only experience with the instrument was seeing street musicians play it for a few coins. Having overcome her disappointment, Bích went on to become a virtuoso on the instrument, winning scholarships to the Conservatory and becoming the first female dan bau player to win the top prize in the Vietnam Competition of Professional Instrumentalists. She graduated with honors from the Conservatory in 1987, and started teaching at the Hanoi School of the Arts. In 1989, she won the same Gold Award at the 1989 World Youth Festival that Chí had won in 1985. Bích also immersed herself in many other relatively rare traditional instruments, including the ko ni, a stick fiddle found only in Vietnam that uses the mouth of the player as a resonating chamber. Bích is the first woman to break with the all-male tradition of the instrument. Like Chí, she performed both in Vietnam and abroad.

In 1988, Bích and Chí married. Both accomplished virtuoso players and teachers, they were among the finest practitioners of traditional Vietnamese music and recognized as such. They were also moving in a somewhat unorthodox musical direction.

Vietnam, like many countries, has a wide variety of regional styles of music. There are distinct forms in the North, Centre and South as well as music of the many ethnic minorities. There are 54 ethnic groups. The Kinh is the biggest, comprising 80% of the population. Kinh music is very similar to Chinese. (No surprise given that the Chinese ruled Vietnam for almost 1,000 years.)

In Vietnamese musical circles, particularly academic circles, there are two tiers of instruments. The first and primary tier reflects the Chinese influence. Of the tier's seven instruments, the dan bau is the only one authentically Vietnamese. Hailing from the middle of the country, it is also known as the King dan or "instrument of the king." Hue was the old royal capital, and the dan bau was associated with the royal tradition. In the south it is known as the "one string," and in the north it takes its name from the Bau tree. Originally, the dan bau was made from the fruit of this tree. The other first tier instruments are the dan ty ba (four

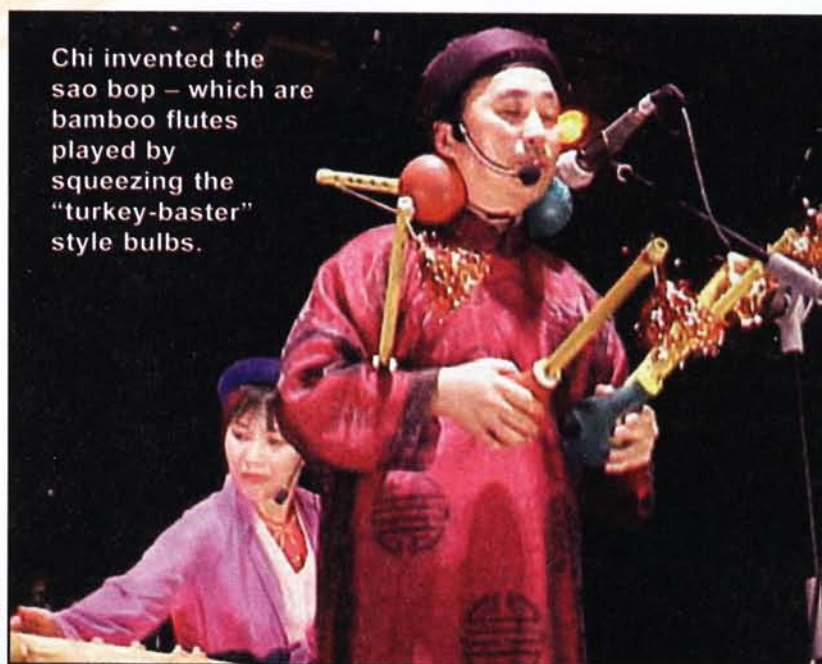


Bích plays the k'ni – a Vietnamese stick fiddle.

stringed lute), dan nguyet (two stringed lute), tam thap luc (36-string hammered dulcimer), dan nhi (fiddle), dan tranh (16-string zither, similar to the Chinese zheng) and sao tre (six-hole, end-blown flute). When a student entered the path of musical studies they were assigned or allowed to choose two of the seven.

After independence from the French was won, the government in the North began to pay attention to the musical traditions of the so-called "ethnic minorities" and their musical traditions. There was some formal collecting done but much of the folklore research was done spontaneously by musicians in theater troupes sent to remote areas, partially to entertain soldiers stationed there. These troupes collected instruments and music and brought them to the conservatory. About 30 years ago,

these instruments became part of the second tier of instruments taught in the music schools. In a certain sense this is a division between what could be called the classical tradition and the folk tradition. While they were trained in the first tier, Chí and Bích found themselves more and more attracted to the folk instruments of the second. There is no room here to describe the several dozen instruments that Chí and Bích use in a typical performance. Some are unique to particular ethnic groups; others are variants of instruments found throughout Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Some date back to the Hindu influence of the Cham culture of past millennia. There are various bamboo tubes, xylophones, mouth organs and buzzers. There is the double reed ken bau and many percussion instruments. (For information on some of them, check our their web site: <www.khacchi.com>)



Chi invented the sao bop – which are bamboo flutes played by squeezing the "turkey-baster" style bulbs.

Aside from the dan bau, the two most important and unique instruments in the Khac Chi repertoire are the k'long put and ko ni, which are found only among small indigenous groups. The k'long put is a set of bamboo pipes of different lengths, closed at one end and set horizontally. It is played by forcing air from the player's cupped hands into the pipes. It is the creation of the Bahnar of the central Highlands. The ko ni is the invention of the Jarai of the south-central highlands. It is a one-stringed violin that has no resonating chamber; this is created by the player placing a bamboo disc in their mouth attached to the instrument by silk cords. The movement of the lips and tongue determine the sounds. Rarely heard even in Vietnam, these, among the other rare instruments they have collected, are what give a Khac Chi performance a character that is totally unique. The combination of seldom heard instruments and technical virtuosity have produced a duo capable of an orchestra's worth of sounds.

Teaching during the day, in the evenings Bích and Chí performed in their respective groups. Their audience ironically, given the government's efforts to preserve the various minority traditions, was mainly tourists. Like many countries, east, west, north and south, the Vietnamese audience was more interested in pop music that combined elements of the national tradition with western music. Folk music was of little interest to urban audiences. "The tourists taught us," says Bích. "Through tourism we came to understand more about our culture." Performing three or four times a week at hotels or theaters for foreign travelers, Chí and Bích created a repertoire of arrangements of traditional songs and tunes from all over Vietnam. They also learned performance skills and how to introduce the music to non-Vietnamese audiences.

While respected members of Vietnam's music milieu, Chí, in particular, was less than satisfied with life in Vietnam. He did not like the "new" pop music that was becoming more prevalent. He was evolving a style of music that broke with traditions, creating new music to accompany younger singers. There was resistance to this ap-



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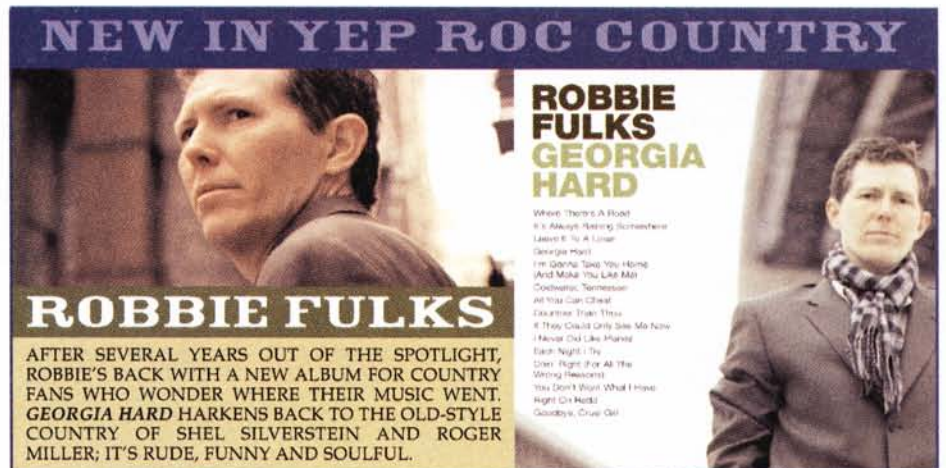
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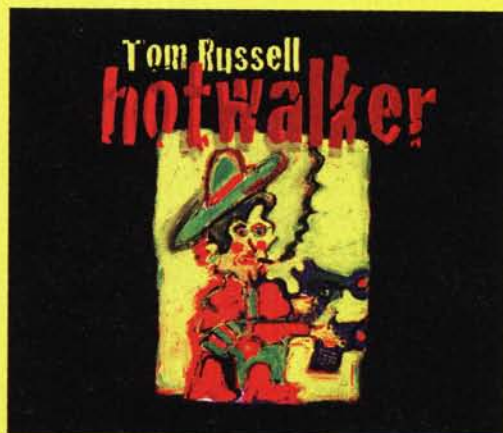


Khac Chi performs on the sao ba nguoi – a novelty instrument that can be played by three musicians at the same time.

proach, and Chí felt he was better off somewhere else. When they came to Canada in 1992, they decided to stay. Another reason behind Chí's decision to stay was because of what had happened in the USSR and Eastern Europe. He saw the collapse of the regimes there and thought something similar might happen in Vietnam. Having lived through one war, he had no appetite for another. He also was very attracted to the diverse ethnic composition of Vancouver, a city where almost half the population is Asian and with large communities from Europe and Latin America. Bích was less convinced; family was important to her and she missed them profoundly. In the end she decided to stay with Chí. It was certainly not easy at first. They went from being members of

a relatively privileged elite to being immigrant workers, unable to speak the language or work in their chosen profession. They cleaned office buildings for low wages. Bích worked in a Vietnamese bakery and restaurant, adding a second shift at McDonald's to earn enough to survive. They gave free lessons in the Vietnamese community to keep their musical skills alive. Most of the Canadian Vietnamese community were from the south and were leery of these northerners. Vietnamese pop music was much more to the taste of the community than rare gems of traditional music from obscure ethnic minorities. It was a long three-year rite of passage before they found their feet and began to work as musicians again.

In 1995, having finally received their residency status in Canada, Bích and Chí found a manager and agent and entered the recording studio. *Moonlight in Vietnam* was issued on a Rounder Records world music subsidiary (Henry Street), and given a warm reception. A baker's dozen of traditional songs and tunes, it presented the rare repertoire of Chí and Bích to an audience that had never heard anything like it before. The dynamic growth of interest in all kinds of



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Chí has introduced Vietnam's music to eager audiences at many schools.

world music opened doors for Khac Chí. They performed at festivals, in concert and at many schools. Four years later, they released *Spirit of Vietnam*, on Vancouver's Jericho Beach label. The second recording features more adventurous arrangements of traditional material and two original compositions by Chí. The disc marks the beginning of Khac Chí's music to transcend the presentation of traditional music and embrace a new aesthetic that features original combinations of music from different regions and traditions. *Spirit of Vietnam* made several "best of" 1999 lists and received a couple of industry nominations. These days, they perform throughout the United States and Canada, and have also made visits to Europe and Asia. The Canada Council for the Arts gave them a grant to travel to Vietnam to collect traditional music throughout most of the country, something they never had time or resources to do when they lived there.

While Khac Chí's repertoire remains based in Vietnam's traditional music, they have had to adapt it to fit the duo format. They have absorbed by osmosis some non-Vietnamese influences. They have added the tambourine. They have made adaptations to the instruments to be able to create the full range of sound with only two musicians. In some numbers one or another of the duo resemble the proverbial one man band, a la Jesse Fuller. They also inject "fun" into their performances. The Vietnamese tradition calls for musicians to present a serious demeanor; Khac Chí have broken with that aspect of the tradition. Working for audiences of children they have picked up a few "western" tricks – like "Frere Jacques" and "Mary Had a Little Lamb" played on traditional wind instruments. They enjoy performing for both children and adults, and when they have done too many performances for one particular audience, they miss play-

ing for the other. The economics determine the duo format, as does the lack of other virtuoso Vietnamese performers near the duo's home base in Vancouver. A dancer is a possibility at some point. But a Khac Chí performance is primarily an introduction to the riches of the Vietnamese tradition, mainly that of its minority peoples, along with dan bau pyrotechnics performed by arguably the finest practitioners of the venerable instrument.

It has been almost six years since Khac Chí has recorded. Their two CDs are essentially timeless, but they are actively trying to figure out where to go next. There is no clear picture yet. One option is an entire recording of new compositions for dan bau. Another idea

is a "singing bamboo" recording featuring the various instruments made of bamboo, most of what they use. They have explored using their traditional instruments to perform composed "new music," including recording with a full symphony orchestra. To a degree they are trapped by being an ensemble of two, which limits how far they can go in live performance. There is also a certain tension between the complex music they might want to make and the audience appeal generated by the novelty of the traditional instruments, where even a simple folk song wows an audience unfamiliar with the instruments.

Chí and Bích are poised on the edge of some big creative decisions. The last 12 years have taken them from Vietnam to Canada. They have survived the transformation from senior teachers and players in an extremely structured environment to itinerant freelance artists at the mercy of a fickle market. Their relationship has survived and their music has grown. They have seen a modicum of economic success, buying a house in Canada's most expensive city. They have recorded and toured. Their calendar is reasonably full for 2005. They have introduced remarkable music to tens of thousands of people who have never heard it before. In that sense they have

been true to their love for the music of their homeland. As artists, however, they are searching for the way forward, how to realize the dreams that inspire them. Given their talent and determination, the answers to those creative questions promise to be both beautiful and interesting. 🔑

Having labored for almost 30 years in the folk music mines, Gary Cristall works as an artist's manager while researching a history of folk music in English speaking Canada. Check it out at: <www.folkmusichistory.com> or <www.garycristall.com>.

DISCOGRAPHY

Spirit of Vietnam, 1999, Jericho Beach #9902
Moonlight in Vietnam, 1997, Henry Street #0005

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ON THE WEB: <www.khacchi.com>

For more reading on Vietnamese music, check out Pham Duy's *Musics of Vietnam* (ISBN 0-8093-0644-1, Southern Illinois University Press).

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