

Musician Do Nhuan and Opera Composing Career

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Abstract

Since the musical play *Co Sao* by musician Do Nhuan, the first Vietnamese opera, was born in 1965 until now, our country's opera art has gone more than half a century. Although it is not a long journey, not yet a massive opera with many works with the participation of many musicians, Vietnamese opera has made great contributions to the country's music, creating a grandeur, a meaningful voice internationally about a musical genre with a large form that requires high artistic composition techniques and methods; affirming the richness, erudition as well as the development of the compositional style of the team of professional music composers. The contributions of Vietnamese opera composers such as Nhat Lai, Nguyen Dinh Tan, Hoang Viet, and Luu Huu Phuoc are truly worthy of recognition and the first person to mention is musician Do Nhuan. Musician Do Nhuan has made great contributions to opera, which is the merit of pioneering a professional music genre, which requires a high level of composers, performers, and audience. Moreover, it is the merit of the musician who has contributed a larger number of opera works than other musicians (up to now, March 2023): 3 operas (*Co Sao*, *Nguoi tac tuong*, *Nguyen Trai*).

Keywords— *Do Nhuan, Musical, Opera.*

I. THE PATH TO OPERA ART OF MUSICIAN DO NHUAN

Do Nhuan is a musician who matured from the early period of modern Vietnamese music? He has shown his talent in many fields: opera, music, instrumental music, and songs. The majority of the Vietnamese public knows and loves musician Do Nhuan mainly through his song compositions. His songs are imbued with national identity, rich in content, and diverse in musical characteristics; the simplicity and rusticity of the lyrics and the folk quality in many songs have made his style unique and left a deep impression on listeners. Many songs have become anthems that have accompanied the years such as *Guerrilla Song*, *Long March*, *Dien Bien Victory*, *Guerrilla Song Thao*, *Winter Coat*, *My Homeland Vietnam*, *Singing to Celebrate the Militia Elders*, *Road of Four Spring Seasons*, *Our Homeland Rises from the Land*, *Drums of the Army*, *Joyful Road Opening...* In particular, *Dien Bien Victory* was for a long time the theme song at the beginning of each broadcast program of the Voice of Vietnam Radio. With its unique artistic style and familiar, easy-to-understand language, it is completely

understandable that the song by musician Do Nhuan is loved by the Vietnamese public.

The success of the song is one of the bases for musician Do Nhuan to write opera. In opera, vocal music plays a key role, it can be said that vocal pieces such as aria, arioso, romance, ballade, and song... are the main elements expressing the language of the opera, no matter how good the musician is at writing symphonic instrumental music, if the vocal pieces in the opera they compose are dull, the work cannot be successful. As mentioned above, the songs of musician Do Nhuan are rich in character, from songs rich in fighting spirit, and lyrical songs to witty, humorous, or strong, muscular songs... enough to show his diverse writing style, and thanks to that diverse writing style, Do Nhuan is successful in writing music for the stage in general, and opera in particular.

His path to opera was based on songs, followed by compositions of operas and musical plays. Since the period of the resistance war against the French, Do Nhuan devoted himself to the field of operas and musical plays with many works such as *The Khang Chien Bird* (1949), *The whole family competes*, *The waves are great* and the

oars do not fall (1952), *Anh Pan ve ban* (1954), *Hon da* (1954) co-written with Manh Thang... Among them, the most outstanding is the opera *The Great Waves Don't Fall Back on the Rowers*. During the anti-American period, the musician continued to write many more operas: *Chu Teu and Miss Lua* (1966), *Mr. Stone* (1966), "watermelon" (1970), and "Who is more beautiful" (1973)... The opera *Chu Teu and Miss Lua* is often called *Chu Teu* for short, with a performance length of "about 70 minutes, requiring over 50 actors" [3, p.466], which can be said to be a rather large opera. Do Nhuan's operas are truly the building blocks of stage music and also paved the way for the musician to step into the opera genre.

However, composing opera requires the musician to be good at both vocal and instrumental music. Being successful in songs and operas is not enough, another condition is the ability to write instrumental music. During the period 1945 - 1954, musician Do Nhuan composed many operas and operas, and in him arose the desire to write a larger genre: opera. However, due to the difficult circumstances of the long-term resistance war, our country did not have a professional music industry that was consistent in terms of composition, performance, and audience level, so that aspiration could not be realized. On the other hand, at that time, the musician himself had not experienced the field of instrumental music composition, nor had he studied opera systematically. From 1960 to 1963, musician Do Nhuan was sent by the State to study at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, to delve into the fields of opera and instrumental composition. Studying abroad supplemented his lack of knowledge. From here, he created new marks with instrumental works such as *Variations for flute and piano Spring in the Forest* (1963), three variations for violin and piano (1964), a quartet for Tay Nguyen strings (1964), *Dien Bien Symphony Suite* (1965)... The success of his instrumental works provided enough conditions for Do Nhuan to realize his ambition of composing opera.

On September 2, 1965, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the opera *Co Sao* by musician Do Nhuan was introduced to the audience in Hanoi capital, performed by the Symphony - Choir of Music and Dance, directed by artist Vo Bai, becoming the first opera in Vietnam. The main actors are Ngoc Dau, Tam Trung, Quy Duong, Quoc Tru, Gia Hoi, Quang Hung, Trung Kien... The opera *Co Sao* was originally called *A Sao*. He wrote the first part of this play while studying at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory. When he returned to Vietnam, he continued writing and changed the name to *Co Sao*. The premiere of *Co Sao* caused a stir among the music public. From then until the 80s of the 20th century, this play was re-staged,

performed many times, and was enthusiastically received by the audience. After many years of Vietnamese opera being absent from the stage, in 2012, musician Do Hong Quan, son of the late musician Do Nhuan, restored the score of the play *Co Sao*, printed it (with revisions), and together with the Vietnam National Opera and Ballet, the Vietnam Symphony Orchestra re-staged and performed this play on November 25, 2012, at the Hanoi Opera House. The play was warmly welcomed by a large audience at home and abroad.

In September 1971, also at the Hanoi Opera House, the second opera *The Sculptor* by composer Do Nhuan was performed. It was the success of the opera *Co Sao* that encouraged him to write this opera. Do Nhuan was truly a musician "fated" for the art of opera, which was confirmed when he wrote the third opera *Nguyen Trai in Dong Quan* (1980), later shortened to *Nguyen Trai*, an opera based on the poetic drama of Nguyen Dinh Thi, on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the birth of the national hero Nguyen Trai.

II. OVERVIEW OF THREE OPERAS BY COMPOSER DO NHUAN

2.1. *Co Sao Opera*

Cô Sao is an opera about the anti-French theme, in the epic-lyrical genre. Inspired by two lines of poetry by President Ho: "There are thousands of bitter things in life / Nothing is more bitter than losing freedom", musician Do Nhuan created *Cô Sao* with the theme: Revolution to liberate people. The story takes place in a mountainous region in the Northwest. A Sao is a beautiful Thai girl but her life is unfortunate. She is an orphan and was accused of being a vampire by the third wife of the French consul, so she was shunned by the villagers and had to live alone in the forest, near Son La prison. Sao helped Van, a female revolutionary cadre, escape from the enemy's pursuit. Enlightened by Ha, a political prisoner who escaped from prison, and Van, Sao regained her faith in the future and life. The beautiful love blossomed between Ha and the Thai girl, creating lyrical and poetic pages for the opera. However, when she had just regained her faith, misfortune came to Sao, she was captured by Ba Su and forced to join her Xoe girl troupe. Mr. Sinh, an old Mong man, saved Sao from Ba Su's house and took her to the revolutionary base. In March 1945, Japan staged a coup against France, many Son La political prisoners escaped from prison and joined the people of the Northwest in the struggle to gain power. In the spring of 1946, on the victory celebration day, Sao met Ha again, they recalled old memories, celebrated the country's independence and Ha prepared to go South for the cause of national liberation. The opera *Cô Sao* is written in

the form of acts, scenes, and items. The original version by musician Đỗ Nhuận has a structure of 3 acts and 36 acts. Act I is from item 1 to number 15, Act II is from number 16 to number 25, and Act III is from number 26 to number 36. Because the score left by musician Đỗ Nhuận is handwritten, musician Đỗ Hồng Quân restored, edited the score, and had it copied into a printed version. After editing, in addition to the opening (overture), the opera *Cô Sao* consists of 29 acts.

In this opera, musician Do Nhuan has created a variety of vocal repertoire: choir, chorus, quartet, trio, duet, and solo. The solo repertoire includes arias (mainly of the character Sao), romance, songs... In particular, the arias of the character Sao stand out such as number 2 of Act I "The Endless Forest and Mountains" and number 12 of Act I "Em nghỉ sao không ra", which are arias used by many vocal training institutions in their teaching programs because of the beauty of the melody and vocal techniques that are very good for developing the voice. The romance of the character Ha in Act 6 of Act I is also a special vocal performance. In addition, in the opera *Co Sao*, the vocal performance that left a deep impression on the audience was the song of the character Cu Sinh. In general, in the opera *Co Sao*, musician Do Nhuan used folk music in many vocal performances and orchestral parts such as Tay Bac Thai folk songs in Sao's aria, dance music for the Xoe team, in the choir performances; Mong folk songs in Cu Sinh's song...

2.2. Opera Người tạc tượng

The sculptor is also a magnificent epic painting of the indomitable will like the kônia tree that clings deep into the ground, like the legendary Dam San and Mo Trang Long of the ethnic groups in the Central Highlands. Thach Son (the main character of the opera) is a revolutionary cadre, an artist of the people, who previously worked as a stone carver on Ngu Hanh mountain, and was assigned by his unit to go to Bra village to mobilize the masses to prepare for the uprising. During the encounter with the enemy, Thach Son was injured, the people of the Central Highlands treated him and hid him in a cave. In the cave, Thach Son demonstrated his talented hand as a stone sculptor, he carved a statue of a brave warrior, the image of hero Nguyen Van Troi, expressing the ideal and also the romantic optimism of the revolution. Thach Son was captured by the enemy and brutally tortured. They used all kinds of tricks to persuade him to return, but they could not subdue the heroic soldier nor destroy the statue of the brave man. The sculptor also wrote poetic lyrical pages about the pure and passionate love of H'Nuon, an Ede girl, daughter of the village elder of Ae Pong, and Thach Son. H'Nuon took care of Thach Son wholeheartedly when he was

injured, and she also bravely accompanied him in prison. The musical ended on the day the liberation army and the ethnic people of the Central Highlands rose to win.

The structure of the play *The Sculptor* has 3 acts with 29 items. Act I is from number 1 to number 8, Act II is from number 9 to number 20, and Act III is from number 21 to number 29. Musician Do Nhuan also created a variety of vocal performances in this play: choir, chorus, trio, duet, and solo. Solo performances include arias, arioso, ballade, songs... Unlike *Co Sao*, which dedicates all arias to the character Sao, the opera *The Sculptor* dedicates one aria to the main characters Thach Son, H'Nuon, Y San, and Y Giang, each with one aria. The arias are all outstanding and highly expressive. With the theme of the Central Highlands, the musician used many Central Highlands folk songs to create vocal performances and the music of the orchestra.

2.3. Nguyen Trai Opera

The only opera that reflects the historical theme of fighting against Northern invaders is *Nguyen Trai*. Based on the story of Nguyen Trai's life, the author built a rather large opera to tell the merits of the national hero and the tradition of fighting against foreign invaders of our country. This opera is taken from the poetic script of Nguyen Dinh Thi. The lyrics of the songs and recitations are all poems, so they are rich in imagery.

The play *Nguyen Trai* was also built by musician Do Nhuan according to the structure of 3 acts including 27 items. Act I is from number 1 to number 11, Act II is from number 12 to number 19, and Act III is from number 20 to number 27. Opera *Nguyen Trai* does not have many vocal forms like *Co Sao* and *Nguoi tac tuong* but mostly solo and in two forms: singing by the character alone, singing with a group, or choir accompanying. Do Nhuan used a lot of traditional Vietnamese folk music materials in this play. Solo songs in other operas are usually structured with one, two, or three single sections in European music, but here there are some songs in the style of the structure of the choir, the verses, and the singing and the playing. Almost all the vocal performances are based on or influenced by a certain melody in traditional music: cheo, Northern folk songs, "ca tru", and "quan ho"... the play is about the national hero Nguyen Trai who fought against the Ming invaders when describing the Chinese invaders, Do Nhuan also used Chinese musical materials.

Aria has 2 acts: number 6 (act I) is the aria of the character Dao Xuan (soprano), the aria has a two-part structure and uses materials from many genres in traditional music, and the lyrics use the seven-seven-six-eight verse. Before entering the aria, Xuan sings with the male choir in the singing-song style, with the sound and rhythm of rowing a boat (Northern folk song). The second aria is number 12 of

Act II of the character Nguyen Trai, the melody uses many long jumps, a typical interval progression in Northern folk songs, the musical nature is tinged with sadness but still dignified, calm, and determined, which is the personality of Nguyen Trai; the lyrics use five-word verse.

III. SOME COMMENTS ON THE OPERA CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES OF MUSICIAN DO NHUAN

In general, the opera of composer Do Nhuan is a subtle combination of European opera composition techniques with the use of Vietnamese folk music materials. In absorbing European opera composition techniques, it is necessary to mention the structure, mode, way of building the repertoire, orchestration, use of European vocal techniques in the style of Bel canto singing (beautiful singing), resonance, resonant, and bright sound with typical techniques such as legato, emphasis singing, gradually louder and softer singing...

It is especially necessary to mention the technique of building the main sound image in the opera of musician Do Nhuan. This is a technique that is very popular with European romantic musicians. This technique creates a close connection and unity between the scenes and acts in the opera, deepens the image, fate, and personality of the characters, and increases the role of the symphony orchestra because the orchestra actively participates in expressing the main sound images, even more than the vocal part. The main sound images in *Co Sao* have the themes of Sao, Ha, Cu Sinh...; in *Nguoi tac tuong* have the themes: Da (of the character Thach Son), Nuoc (of the character H'Nuon), Natural forest (of the character Y Giang); in *Nguyen Trai* has the theme of the character Nguyen Trai...

The main sound images are used a lot, making a special impression on the audience such as the character themes Sao (Miss Sao), Y Giang (The Sculptor)... The two plays *Miss Sao* and *The Sculptor* have built a system of main sound images for the main characters. In particular, the main sound image system in these two plays is mainly performed by the symphony orchestra, which shows the important role of instrumental music in Vietnamese opera. In *Miss Sao*, the main sound image of Sao appears many times in both the orchestra and the singing parts, in *The Sculptor*, the author builds the main sound image of the character Y Giang mainly through the orchestra. With a main sound system logically built for each character in each plot, each scene, and each scene of the play, it can be said that the operas of musician Do Nhuan have achieved a fairly tight level of opera writing techniques following the European model.

The national character in Do Nhuan's operas is shown through the use of national musical materials in each play. First of all, we must mention the use of folk music such as Thai folk songs, Mong folk songs in *Co Sao*; folk songs of the Central Highlands in *Nguoi tac tuong*; ca tru, cheo in *Nguyen Trai*. Then there are many other techniques such as:

In terms of structure, there is the structure of traditional music such as the structure of the opening part, the opening part, the singing part, and the playing part in the songs of Dao Xuan, Ong But, and Tran Nguyen Han of the play *Nguyen Trai*.

Regarding the modes, using the 5-tone modes like Sao's repertoire, Mr. Sinh (in *Co Sao*) has many passages written in the 5-tone mode of the Northern mountainous region; the mode in the folk songs of the Central Highlands in *Nguoi tac tuong*, the character Kieu Nga in this play is from the South so Kieu Nga's singing part uses the mode of Southern folk songs. In *Nguyen Trai*, many 5-tone modes typical of cheo, ca tru... are used.

Regarding the melody, the high pitch lines have the characteristic of Vietnamese folk songs with slurs and repetitions... In addition, we must mention the singing style of traditional music, which is to sing clearly with attention to clearly pronouncing Vietnamese phonetics.

The combination of European opera composition techniques with the use of national musical materials by composer Do Nhuan shows that he has built opera with Vietnamese characteristics. This is his creativity in writing opera in the direction of nationalization and is also a great contribution to Vietnamese professional music in general and opera art in particular.

IV. CONCLUSION

Vietnamese opera has gone through more than half a century, on the way there were ups and downs, strong development, quiet and sparse, but up to now, Vietnamese opera has made contributions to the professional music industry, affirming the development of a genre of high-level scholarly music with national characteristics, affirming the position of the country's music industry before international friends. That great credit belongs to opera composers such as Nhat Lai, Nguyen Dinh Tan, Hoang Viet, and Luu Huu Phuoc, especially the pioneer, who contributed a lot to opera, musician Do Nhuan. Following the previous generation of musicians, later musicians composed operas such as An Thuyen with the play "Country Stand Up", and musician Do Hong Quan with the play *La Do*. Having today's opera art, we

remember even more the merits of the talented musician
DO NHUAN.

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