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Transformations in the Performance Language of Vietnamese Traditional Music Under Contemporary Artistic Practice

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ABSTRACT:

Background: Contemporary staging, sound production, interdisciplinary collaboration, and digital circulation change how Vietnamese traditional music is performed and perceived. Such changes affect not only arrangements and instrumentation but also the social relationships through which musical meaning is communicated.

Objective: This study identifies the dimensions of performance-language transformation and proposes criteria for distinguishing responsible artistic adaptation from the decontextualised use of heritage materials.

Methods: An interpretive qualitative review combines performance and ethnomusicological theory with UNESCO documentation of Ca trù, Quan họ, and Đờn ca tài tử, together with recent Vietnam-related scholarship. The comparison concerns documented characteristics and analytical possibilities rather than recordings of a new performance sample.

Results: Four interacting dimensions are identified: sonic and musical organisation, embodied interaction, spatial-media presentation, and contextual attribution. Three modes of contemporary intervention are differentiated: technically mediated traditional presentation, openly interpreted adaptation, and new composition derived from heritage elements. A TRACE framework-Traceability, Relational continuity, Artistic transparency, Community agency, and Experiential interpretation-is proposed.

Conclusion: Contemporary creativity can broaden the expressive and public life of traditional music when transformations remain interpretable in relation to particular source practices. The framework requires subsequent assessment through actual productions and practitioner perspectives.

KEYWORDS: Vietnamese traditional music, performance language, contemporary art, adaptation, cultural identity, intangible heritage, performative interpretation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional music is often presented as a recognisable collection of melodies, instruments, vocal techniques, and costumes. This description is useful but incomplete. A performance is also a pattern of relations: who initiates a phrase, how performers respond to one another, where musical action occurs, which social occasion gives it meaning, and how listeners are expected to participate. Small (1998) captures this broader view through the concept of musicking, which treats music as an activity that creates and expresses social relationships. Turino (2008) further distinguishes participatory from presentational music-making, showing that musical organisation and audience relations are central to understanding performance.

Contemporary artistic practice can reorganise each of these relations. A traditional tune may be placed within a large-scale concert, amplified through new sound systems, combined with choreography, rearranged for mixed instruments, sampled in a digital work, or distributed as an edited video. These techniques do not inevitably diminish cultural value. They may extend accessibility, create new artistic dialogue, or offer practitioners fresh opportunities. Yet a change in context can also modify the musical logic itself. What audiences hear as an unchanged melody may operate differently if responsive singing becomes a continuous solo, improvisation becomes a fixed score, or a ritual sequence is presented as a detachable entertainment segment.

Vietnam offers particularly informative examples because its traditional musical practices are diverse in performance design. UNESCO documentation identifies Ca trù singing with a distinctive combination of vocal ornamentation, clappers, instrumental accompaniment, and multiple historical social functions (UNESCO, 2009a). Quan họ is closely associated with alternating verses, partner relationships, and social conventions of exchange (UNESCO, 2009b). Đờn ca tài tử involves ornamental variation, improvisation around melodic frameworks, and social contexts in southern Vietnam (UNESCO, 2013). These forms cannot be treated as variants of a single musical grammar. Their differences make them valuable reference points for studying what may change when artistic presentation moves across settings.

Academic discussions of media and performance complicate the distinction between an original live event and a mediated version. Auslander (2008) shows that performance is increasingly shaped by conventions of recording and mediatized representation. Taylor (2003) distinguishes

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embodied repertoires of cultural memory from the documentary archive, directing attention to what cannot be fully carried by a written or audiovisual record. Born (2010) advocates a relational musicology that connects musical forms with institutions, mediation, and social processes. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that analysis of contemporary adaptations must move beyond counting retained instruments or comparing melodic contours.

Recent Vietnam-related scholarship provides an additional reason to revisit the problem. Nguyen et al. (2026) examine the safeguarding of Quan họ and folk theatrical elements in the digital age and emphasise the need to identify culturally meaningful components before digitisation. Viet Nam's 2011 periodic report describes shortened and rearranged Nha Nhac performances designed for tourist schedules as a threat to the practice's cultural context (Viet Nam, 2011). Such sources illuminate preservation questions but do not establish a general typology of contemporary artistic transformations across genres.

This article addresses that conceptual gap through three questions. RQ1: Which components constitute the performance language of Vietnamese traditional music beyond the audible sequence of notes? RQ2: How can contemporary interventions be classified without equating change automatically with either progress or loss? RQ3: What criteria can guide artists, educators, curators, and cultural managers when interpreting new productions? The intended contribution is a comparative analytical framework for responsible artistic judgement. It does not claim to evaluate the acoustic quality, popularity, or safeguarding outcomes of particular contemporary performances.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Performance language as relational musical action

The term performance language is used here as an analytical metaphor, not as a claim that every tradition follows a universal musical syntax. It refers to a recognisable configuration of sound, timing, gesture, spatial placement, interaction, and culturally learned expectations. Small (1998) argues that the meaning of music emerges in relationships created through the act of performance. For traditional forms, this can involve the relation between soloist and supporting musicians, principal singer and responding group, artist and audience, or musical activity and the occasion that gives it purpose.

Turino's (2008) distinction between participatory and presentational performance is especially productive. In a participatory configuration, musical design may accommodate flexible entry, collective repetition, or an audience that also performs. Presentational settings place greater emphasis on a bounded work displayed to listeners. Neither is intrinsically superior. The analytical consequence is that transferring a practice into a theatre can change how musical roles are distributed even when the melodic material is recognisable. The essential issue is not the stage itself but the transformation of interactions that previously helped constitute the music.

Born (2010) offers a complementary argument: a musical form cannot be adequately understood as an autonomous sonic structure detached from institutional, social, and technological relations. This makes it possible to regard orchestration, notation, venue, rehearsal discipline, production budgets, and digital circulation as components of a performance ecology. Contemporary experimentation is consequently a process of reorganising musical and social relations, rather than simply adding modern sounds to old material.

2.2. Embodied knowledge, musical continuity, and context

Taylor (2003) identifies embodied practices-gesture, movement, speech, and enactment-as channels through which cultural knowledge is transmitted. This distinction matters when a repertoire is documented as notation or audio. A score can preserve melodic information, but it is less able to express the full distribution of attention, physical cues, movement, or locally recognised performance conduct. A recording captures a situated event, but its later reuse can detach that event from original relationships and purposes.

UNESCO's 2003 Convention frames safeguarding around the continued viability of knowledge and practice within communities (UNESCO, 2003). Its Ethical Principles further call for meaningful involvement and respect for those who create and transmit heritage (UNESCO, 2015). Artistic adaptation is not disqualified by this understanding, since living heritage changes across time. What becomes necessary is clarity regarding which features derive from a documented source, what has been changed, and how relevant practitioners are involved in those decisions.

A false opposition between 'pure tradition' and 'modern performance' obscures the actual history of adaptation. Traditions are neither identical across every locality nor frozen in one period; practitioners make choices, and musical conventions change. At the same time, treating every transformation as equally representative would erase the difference between transmitting a source practice and creating a new work inspired by it. The relevant criterion is not an abstract percentage of authenticity but a transparent relationship to a specified performance lineage, genre, or documented version.

2.3. Three contrasting Vietnamese performance configurations

UNESCO documents Ca trù as sung poetry organised through particular vocal ornamentation and an ensemble including clappers, a three-stringed lute and a praise drum, across historically distinct social settings (UNESCO, 2009a). Its identity cannot be reduced to an extracted tune: sung text, timbre and the relations among performers all matter. A new arrangement may quote a melodic contour while reassigning those functions. The change is an analytical possibility derived from the documentation; it is not evidence that any specific contemporary production has made that change.

Quan họ provides a contrasting configuration. UNESCO describes responsive singing between partners from linked villages, accompanied by customs of hospitality and social exchange (UNESCO, 2009b). Reciprocal performance shapes both timing and social meaning. A fixed chorus could be a legitimate concert adaptation, but should be described as an adaptation rather than as unmodified customary exchange. Nguyen et al. (2026) likewise distinguish components of heritage performance that require separate attention in digitisation; their paper does not directly measure contemporary concert effects.

Đờn ca tài tử illustrates flexible variation: its practitioners elaborate skeletal melodies with ornamentation and genre-appropriate improvisation in socially embedded performance settings (UNESCO, 2013). A fully fixed orchestral transcription may document one version without exhausting this practice. The three examples are purposeful contrasts rather than a representative sample; no universal authenticity score follows from them.

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2.4. Mediation, spectacle, and attribution

Auslander's (2008) account of mediatized culture shows why technological mediation is not a merely external accessory to contemporary performance. Microphones influence vocal choices; edited video can reconstruct the sequence of an event; lighting directs attention; digital distribution introduces audiences who lack the interpretive context of an original occasion. Such interventions can improve access while changing the terms on which an audience recognises a practice.

The UNESCO Convention, its ethical principles, and Viet Nam's 2024 Law on Cultural Heritage establish relevant safeguarding and institutional responsibilities (UNESCO, 2003, 2015; National Assembly, 2024). These instruments provide a reason to distinguish public access from representational authority. A popular adaptation can be culturally responsible if its sources are identified, its artistic transformations are disclosed, and its use does not misleadingly claim to replace the tradition. Conversely, a well-produced video can generate confusion if a newly composed work is labelled as an unchanged community practice. Thus, attribution is not simply a matter of copyright credit; it is also a statement about the relationship between a present product and the cultural knowledge on which it draws.

Vietnamese evidence helps to clarify a second, mediated layer without replacing performance analysis. Phuong (2026) reviews the opportunities and constraints of heritage digitisation; Nguyen and Nguyen (2026) examine how storytelling supports experience in heritage tourism; and Phuong and Lam (2025) assess the role of community feedback in heritage communication. These findings concern infrastructures, visitors and communication, not measured changes in vocal timbre or ensemble coordination. Their contribution here is to motivate documentation, audience interpretation and practitioner feedback as safeguards when traditional music enters contemporary platforms.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research design and unit of comparison

The article employs interpretive qualitative document analysis and purposive contrastive comparison. The unit of analysis is the performance configuration: the organisation of sonic material, embodied roles, spatial and mediated presentation, and contextual meanings. Ca trù, Quan họ, and Đờn ca tài tử are selected because UNESCO's descriptive records document different configurations of vocal interaction, musical flexibility, and social participation. The aim is analytical contrast, not a representative sampling of all Vietnamese traditional music.

3.2. Documentary sources and selection principles

The source set comprises three types of material. Foundational works in ethnomusicology, performance studies, and media theory provide concepts for relational music-making and embodied transmission (Small, 1998; Taylor, 2003; Auslander, 2008; Turino, 2008; Born, 2010). UNESCO's 2003 Convention, Ethical Principles, and heritage-element descriptions establish normative and genre-specific reference points. A recent scholarly discussion of Quan họ and folk theatrics supplies a contemporary Vietnamese comparison (Nguyen et al., 2026). The 2024 Cultural Heritage Law provides the national policy background.

Sources were chosen for their direct explanatory relevance and identifiable provenance. Genre descriptions were read as documented summaries of heritage forms, not as recordings of all current variants. No primary interviews, acoustic measurements, rehearsals, observations, audience surveys, or new experimental interventions were conducted. No exact source-search count or systematic-review claim is made. Contemporary adaptation scenarios in the discussion are explicitly analytical illustrations, not accounts of observed productions.

The cases were compared against a common template: source configuration (documented roles and contexts); conceivable intervention (arrangement, staging or digital mediation); likely interpretive question; and evidence required for evaluation. The third column is explicitly conditional. It identifies questions for a future recording-based or field-based study rather than reporting observed changes in performances.

3.3. Analytical sequence and epistemic boundaries

The synthesis proceeded through four interpretive steps. First, documented musical relationships were extracted from the three UNESCO element descriptions. Second, each was coded against four dimensions: sound and musical organisation, bodily and social interaction, spatial and media framing, and contextual attribution. Third, hypothetical categories of intervention were compared with these dimensions to identify where continuity and transformation could coexist. Fourth, the resulting questions were translated into a framework intended for evaluating actual productions in future research.

A distinction was maintained between documented genre characteristics, conceptual inferences about possible artistic changes, and management recommendations. For example, UNESCO's account of Quan họ exchange supports the importance of reciprocity; it does not show that any named contemporary concert has removed it. Similarly, Đờn ca tài tử's documented improvisatory practice supports questions about fixed arrangements but cannot establish their consequences without listening and interviews. This boundary limits causal claims while protecting the interpretive value of the comparison.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Four dimensions of performance-language transformation

The comparative synthesis identifies four interdependent dimensions. The first is sonic and musical organisation: melody, rhythm, ornamentation, vocal placement, instrumentation, and degrees of improvisation. The second is embodied interaction: how singers and instrumentalists initiate, respond, move, and coordinate action. The third is spatial and media presentation: the arrangement of performers and audience, the role of amplification, lighting, and digital editing. The fourth is contextual attribution: how a work identifies its source, community, purpose, and changed artistic status.

These dimensions interact rather than operate as a hierarchy. A new microphone arrangement may appear purely technical yet alter how vocal timbre is produced and heard. A shift from an exchange setting to a formal concert may affect gesture and timing. An edited excerpt might preserve acoustic details but remove the social cues that made them meaningful. The framework therefore recommends asking what relationship each intervention changes before judging whether the change is aesthetically successful or culturally responsible.

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Table 1. Documented performance anchors and questions for contemporary interpretation

Documented genre	Performance-language anchors	Potential transformation to examine	Evidentiary caution
Ca trù	Sung poetry, specialised vocal ornamentation, clappers, instrument–voice dialogue	Rebalancing timbres; substituting accompaniment; converting dialogic patterns into orchestral texture	A scenario, not a finding about a named production
Quan họ	Alternating sung verses, reciprocal social roles, contextual performance conventions	Choral consolidation; shortened exchanges; television staging	Recognition of a melody does not establish retention of exchange
Đờn ca tài tử	Variation within melodic frameworks, responsive ornamentation, social music-making	Fixed notation, rhythmic regularisation, mixed-genre improvisation	Actual effects require comparison of specific performances

Source: Analytical interpretation of UNESCO (2009a, 2009b, 2013) and Turino (2008).

4.2. Three modes of contemporary artistic intervention

Three modes of intervention can be distinguished without ranking them by artistic worth. The first is technically mediated traditional presentation. Amplification, careful lighting, subtitling, and recording improve access while the organising choices of recognised practitioners remain central. The second is openly interpreted adaptation. A traditional source is rearranged for a different venue, audience, instrumentation, or duration, and substantial alterations are acknowledged. The third is a new composition or performance work inspired by heritage material. It can legitimately transform melodies, rhythmic patterns, or vocal colours, but should be presented as a newly authored work rather than evidence of an unchanged customary practice.

The categories clarify different kinds of accountability. The first prioritises precise representation and documentation of the performance context. The second requires explanation of which relationships are retained and which are modified. The third prioritises source acknowledgement, artistic authorship, and ethical treatment of the materials incorporated. A work can move across these categories during development; the value of classification lies in making claims transparent to listeners, curators, and heritage communities.

4.3. Analysing transformations without a single authenticity score

The three genre descriptions show that different traditions rely on different configurations of continuity. In Ca trù, the relation between distinctive sung delivery and accompaniment is salient. In Quan họ, reciprocal exchange and social convention matter. In Đờn ca tài tử, knowledgeable variation around a framework contributes to performative identity (UNESCO, 2009a, 2009b, 2013). It follows that a fixed universal checklist-same instruments, same tune, same costume-cannot adequately assess diverse artistic practices.

Instead, the analysis distinguishes sonic continuity, relational continuity, and contextual continuity. Sonic continuity concerns recognisable musical materials and techniques. Relational continuity concerns the organisation of participation and artistic agency. Contextual continuity concerns the provenance, meaning, community, and circumstances represented by a performance. An adaptation can conserve one while transforming another. The scholarly task is to specify that configuration rather than declare a production absolutely authentic or inauthentic.

4.4. Risks and opportunities created by media and interdisciplinary practice

Contemporary presentation creates new opportunities for documenting skilled technique, introducing younger audiences to unfamiliar genres, and supporting cross-disciplinary artistic experimentation. It can also increase dependence on digital audio balancing, visual spectacle, edited narratives, and short attention cycles. Auslander (2008) suggests that mediated performance changes expectations of liveness, while Taylor (2003) reminds researchers that reproduced artefacts cannot simply be equated with embodied repertoires of knowledge. Neither implication renders mediation harmful by definition.

Table 2. Artistic possibilities, interpretive risks, and review requirements

Intervention	Potential creative or access value	Principal interpretive risk	Review requirement
New instrumentation	Timbre exploration and cross-genre dialogue	Signature roles or phrase relationships become inaudible	Annotate source and changed musical functions
Choreography or multimedia	Embodied storytelling and expanded access	Movement distracts from or substitutes for source action	Identify inherited and newly composed gestures
Shortened stage version	Accessible festival or educational format	A fragment is presented as the whole tradition	State the selection and the larger sequence

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Intervention	Potential creative or access value	Principal interpretive risk	Review requirement
Audio-video production	Documentation and wider circulation	Editing conceals original timing or context	Record production choices and provenance
Digital sampling or recomposition	Innovation, collaboration, new audiences	Heritage material is mislabelled or unattributed	Clear authorship, source recognition, permission as relevant

Source: Author's theoretical synthesis; illustrative intervention categories, not empirical observations.

4.5. The TRACE framework for responsible transformation

The proposed TRACE framework comprises Traceability, Relational continuity, Artistic transparency, Community agency, and Experiential interpretation. Traceability requires identifiable source repertoires, performers, versions, or traditions. Relational continuity asks which interactions and embodied practices structure recognition. Artistic transparency explains departures in orchestration, sequence, medium, and purpose. Community agency concerns appropriate involvement and recognition of heritage bearers. Experiential interpretation concerns whether audiences can distinguish the source practice from the contemporary artistic product.

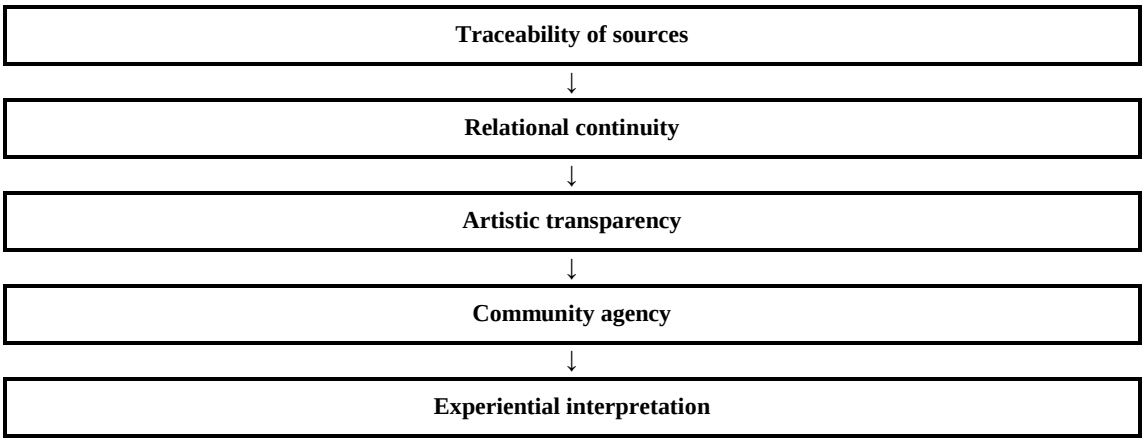


Figure 1. The TRACE framework for applied review
Source: Author-developed conceptual framework (proposed; not empirically validated).

Table 3. Operational content of TRACE

Component	Key evaluation question	Suggested evidence
Traceability	What precise source and version inform the new work?	Source log, repertoire notes, credits
Relational continuity	Which sonic, bodily, and social relationships are retained or changed?	Annotated rehearsal/video comparison
Artistic transparency	Are creative modifications explicitly explained?	Programme note, arrangement statement
Community agency	Who participates in decisions and receives recognition?	Practitioner review, consent and credit records
Experiential interpretation	Can an audience understand what is traditional and what is newly made?	Audience interpretation tasks and feedback

Source: Author's proposed framework; the criteria require field validation.

TRACE should operate as a set of questions before, during, and after production. Its intention is not to require every concert to reproduce every historical feature. Rather, it creates an accountable relationship between preservation and artistic freedom. For a concert programme, traceability and transparency can be documented in a brief note; for an archival film, the production log and practitioner review may be more important; for a digitally sampled composition, clear attribution and differentiation from documentary recordings become essential.

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5. DISCUSSION

5.1. From musical objects to relationships in performance

The proposed approach corresponds with Small's (1998) understanding of musical meaning as relational action and with Born's (2010) call for an interdisciplinary, socially embedded musicology. It extends these arguments into a practical distinction between retaining sonic content and retaining the organisation of a musical practice. An arrangement is not made culturally responsible simply by using a familiar instrument; nor is it necessarily irresponsible because new instruments are present. The pertinent question is how the intervention reorganises the practices and meanings that audiences recognise or need to understand.

Turino's (2008) participatory–presentational distinction is particularly useful for avoiding simplistic aesthetic judgements. A staged presentation may deliberately create a work for a listening audience; a community occasion may allow fluid boundaries between listeners and performers. The difference need not imply cultural decline. It does, however, justify an accurate description of the new configuration. If a stage work is offered as a creative adaptation, its changed participation structure is intelligible; if the same work is presented as an exhaustive reconstruction of a living tradition, the claim requires stronger evidence.

5.2. The role of artists, practitioners, and cultural institutions

Artists working with traditional repertoires face a legitimate task of generating new expressive value while remaining clear about inherited material. Practitioners can contribute not only as performers but as sources of critical judgement about timing, articulation, and cultural meaning. Universities and cultural institutions can support this exchange by recording source versions, facilitating dialogue on changes, and distinguishing teaching materials from entertainment products. UNESCO's safeguarding principles provide a normative basis for this partnership (UNESCO, 2003, 2015).

For educational programmes, a useful exercise would compare a documented source performance with a deliberately altered version, requiring students to annotate what changed in the four dimensions identified above. The same exercise could encourage students to justify artistic choices rather than label every deviation a loss of authenticity. It would also teach the distinction between an original work inspired by tradition and an interpretation presented as a heritage practice. Such activities are instructional proposals, not evaluated interventions.

5.3. Digital circulation and the need for interpretive honesty

Mediated music can reach audiences far beyond its original setting. Yet audience attention should not be confused with understanding, and the existence of an online recording does not guarantee practical transmission. The distinction between archives and embodied repertoires (Taylor, 2003) is instructive: videos can preserve evidence and extend access, but the ability to reproduce phrasing, negotiate response, or understand occasion-specific conduct often requires participation with experienced practitioners. The evaluation of digital presentation should therefore include the quality of explanation and opportunities for deeper learning.

TRACE also helps distinguish artistic freedom from inaccurate attribution. A producer may appropriately create a hybrid musical work with source-informed material and a new rhythmic arrangement. Clear labelling allows this work to be appreciated as innovation without presenting it as documentary evidence of an unchanged ritual or communal occasion. Such clarity protects both the artist's authorship and the audience's capacity to identify the heritage relation accurately.

The distinction between communication and musicianship is important. Findings on interpretation quality at the Hue Imperial Citadel (Ha et al., 2026) support evaluating clarity for audiences, but cannot verify the stylistic validity of a Quan họ exchange or a Ca trù ornament. Future validation must pair source recordings, performer interviews, movement/ensemble observations and community review with audience data, rather than importing tourism indicators as substitutes for musical evidence.

5.4. Limitations and directions for future research

The comparative evidence is deliberately selective: three UNESCO-documented genres illustrate contrasting performance configurations but cannot represent all Vietnamese musical traditions, regional variants, or contemporary developments. The study has no independently recorded performance corpus and does not analyse scores, acoustics, rehearsal decisions, or audience responses. Consequently, neither its transformation categories nor its TRACE framework have been statistically or ethnographically validated. Future research should pair annotated recordings of specific source and adapted performances with interviews involving practitioners, arrangers, stage directors, and audiences, and with careful analysis of creative intent and cultural effects.

6. CONCLUSION

Vietnamese traditional music possesses performance languages that extend beyond melodies and instruments to encompass vocal and instrumental interaction, bodily organisation, performance setting, media conventions, and the attribution of cultural knowledge. Comparison of documented Ca trù, Quan họ, and Đờn ca tài tử shows why there can be no single measure of continuity suitable for every tradition. Contemporary artistic practice may preserve particular features while changing others, and these configurations must be described rather than reduced to an opposition between the traditional and the modern.

This article proposes TRACE as an interpretive framework linking traceable sources, relational continuity, artistic disclosure, community agency, and audience understanding. The contribution is methodological and conceptual: it supports more precise artistic criticism, teaching, and curatorial decisions while preserving room for experimentation. Its effectiveness in evaluating actual performances remains a question for future practice-based and community-engaged research.

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