

Review of

Musical Minorities. The Sounds of Hmong Ethnicity in Northern Vietnam. Lonán Ó Briain. 2018. New York: Oxford University Press. xxi, 208pp., photographs, music transcriptions, online audio and video examples, notes, glossary, references, index. Paper.

By

Catherine Falk

Hmong Studies Journal

Volume 19(2), 8 pages

Abstract

This article consists of a book review of *Musical Minorities: The Sounds of Hmong Ethnicity in Northern Vietnam*.

Keywords: Hmong music, Vietnam

Our knowledge of Hmong music and ritual since the end of the Vietnam War derives largely from research amongst the Hmong in diaspora, particularly in the USA where Catlin (for example, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1992 and 1997) and Poss (2005 and 2012) have reported on the music and ritual of White Hmong from Laos. *Musical Minorities* is a significant and welcome contribution to the western academic literature about Hmong music: it is both the first scholarly study in English devoted specifically to Hmong musical activities in Vietnam, and it is also the most comprehensive account of Hmong music in Southeast Asia in general since the work of Mareschal (1976) and Jähnichen (2006) in Laos, and Schwörer-Kohl in Thailand (1981, 1982, 1990 and 1991).¹

Ó Briain spent a total of three years between 2007 and 2016 conducting fieldwork in and around the district of Sa Pa in mountainous northern Vietnam, where the Hmong are one of the largest ethnic minorities. He was adopted as a surrogate son into a Hmong family of musicians and culture bearers. His fieldwork was conducted in two quite different languages and scripts - Hmong and Vietnamese – as well as in English. Scholars of Hmong music will be familiar with aspects of the content of some chapters of this book through Ó Briain's earlier publications: for example, on three female singers of the Hmong song form *kwv txhiaj* (Ó Briain 2012), on the

¹ Vietnamese scholarship on Hmong music became available in English translation in 1995, with the publication of Hong Thao's (1967) "Hmong Music in Vietnam." The translator, Nguyen Thuyet Phong says in his Introduction, "His (Hong's) experience would benefit from the perspectives of an ethnomusicologist..." (Foreword: no page).

effects of the dissemination of digital media (Ó Briain 2013), and on the Hmong and cultural tourism in Vietnam (Ó Briain 2014).

Although participant observation was his primary methodological tool, Ó Briain also places his arguments in various historical and socio-cultural contexts. For example, he provides concise accounts of the exodus of the Hmong from China to the mountains of Southeast Asia; of the impact of French colonial rule; and of the emergence of the independent unified state of Vietnam, including the development of Vietnamese musicology and the state's responses to issues of copyright and intellectual property. He also situates the music of the Vietnamese Hmong in the bigger landscape of Hmong studies, including millenarianism (114-115) and the notion of a Hmong nation (161). Further, he has positioned his work in a broader theoretical context, taking care that the book is not received as a 'standard' ethnomusicological study of the music of the Black Hmong in Vietnam. Both the title, *Musical Minorities* and the subtitle, *The Sounds of Hmong Ethnicity in Northern Vietnam* avoid the term "Hmong music" and provide some indication of the complexities of musical production that he encountered. This is not simply a reflection of the fact that there is no Hmong term equivalent to the word 'music.' Rather, he has engaged with Agawu's radical critique of colonial and postcolonial ethnomusicology in which the insistence of western scholars on the uniqueness of African musical experience, rather than proceeding from "the presumption of sameness" (Agawu 2003: 171), is characterized as "a patronizing and pernicious form of conceptual violence" (Agawu 2003: 163). Following Agawu, Ó Briain says that he aims to adopt an ethical stance in his representation of the Hmong, one that avoids "the essentialist objectification of other cultures on which the discipline [of ethnomusicology] was founded" (16). A little more explication than just half a page (16) of how the ethical goal was implemented and thought through in all stages of the research, from fieldwork to writing, would help the reader to understand better this philosophical and theoretical position.

Ó Briain represents the Hmong through many localized case studies which examine the "musical outputs of, by and about" (16) the Hmong in diverse contexts, and not surprisingly these examples offer multivalent levels of meaning to different participants be they Hmong, Vietnamese or foreign tourists (and the ethnomusicologist/Irish scholar?) He stresses that the book is concerned with multiple Hmong-themed sounds that show how the Hmong (and other minorities) are "iconically referenced through musical and extramusical features" (11). The Hmong people he introduces in the course of the book represent the panoply of intersecting and overlapping situations—"a complex web of relations" (16)—in which music and meaning are produced in North Vietnam: the protagonists are male and female; young, middle-aged and old; ritual specialists, singers and performers for tourists; master instrumentalists, amateurs and musical acrobats; conservers and innovators; animists and Christians; instrument makers and craftsmen; literate in Hmong script and Vietnamese or not; and listeners and consumers of Hmong-themed sounds produced at the household, village, local, regional, national and international levels.

The Introduction engages the reader in this *mélange* of field sites and personalities with three descriptive narratives in true ethnographic style—that is, "sketches from the field"(5)—that describe just some of the divergent situations in which Hmong and Hmong-like sounds are produced in northern Vietnam. The first

sketch describes a demonstration at the Vietnamese Institute of Musicology, when a Vietnamese-composed piece, a fusion of Hmong and Viet musical sounds called “Hmong Pay Deference to the Party,” is played by a Vietnamese musician on a Vietnamese instrument (*sáo mèo*), which is a highly modified (Vietnamese) appropriation of the Hmong reed pipe, *raj nplaim*. This sketch is subsequently expanded to form the basis of a large part of Chapter 2. The second sketch describes the multiple and contradictory representations of Hmong music and culture at an annual festival, the so-called “Love Market” (a misrepresentation of Hmong courtship rituals), where state-directed staged and amplified performances of stereotyped Hmong and other minority cultures enthrall both local and foreign tourists. Chapter 4 builds on this sketch and provides a finely grained analysis of the complexities of cultural tourism experienced by both audiences and participants. The final sketch takes us into a Hmong home for an after-dinner session of talking, drinking and singing. Here Mu, a female singer, performs the extemporized sung poetry of the Hmong, *kwv txhiaj*. We meet Mu and other women singers of *kwv txhiaj* again in Chapter 3. These sketches are brought to life by the video excerpts included in the online website of both audio and video items that accompanies the book.

Thus we are plunged from the outset into the multifaceted world of Hmong musical identity-markers in the mountains of northern Vietnam. Ó Briain argues in his conclusion that his examination of a “polyphonic assemblage” (183) of sounds associated with the Hmong, (rather than an examination of a particular musical style),

counterbalances previous scholarship on the Hmong and other minorities to show that far from being a unified or cohesive cultural group, people who identify as Hmong have multiple music cultures that exist in manifold performance styles, infused with influences from both neighboring cultures and geographically distant trends (181).

The book is organized into six chapters, with an Introduction and a Conclusion. The first two chapters describe the response of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to the presence of ethnic minorities within its borders, and the successful use of music as a tool for incorporating musical features of the minorities into the national awareness: “the creative appropriation and fusion of Hmong, Viet and other musical styles illustrates the potential of music to reflect and refract social and political dynamics” (57). Chapter 1 demonstrates how Vietnamese-language popular songs in both revolutionary and current times inscribe stereotyped images of the Hmong into the national consciousness. The “dutiful, deferent” (39) Hmong were initially characterized in popular songs as leading a simple if impoverished life in the mountains; in later songs an image of deviance that included wife kidnapping and the consumption of rice wine was portrayed. The lyrics and different renditions of the most widely performed of the minority-themed songs, “Hmong Pay Deference to the Party,” are discussed here in some detail. The chapter then moves to a description of “songs of deviance” in the Socialist Republic, as well as the songs of Bla’k Siu, a Bahnar woman who has been highly successful as a minority singer in the mainstream Vietnamese popular music industry. Ó Briain argues that the patterns revealed by his analysis of representations of the Hmong in Vietnamese popular music demonstrate “the myth-making processes by which the Hmong are becoming Vietnamese” (40). He foreshadows some of his later chapters when he notes that to some extent the Hmong have been complicit in this mythmaking process—for example, by becoming literate

in their own language as well as in Vietnamese, by participating in the transmission of their culture through electronic media, by engaging with others through tourism, and by collaborating with Vietnamese musicians in musical fusions.

Chapter 2, “Hybridity and the Other in Modern National Music,” expands and analyses the first sketch of the Introduction and moves from the (Vietnamese) vocal styles presented in Chapter 1 to modern styles of Vietnamese orchestral music. The chapter introduces a history of the research conducted by Vietnamese musicologists into the music of the ‘other’— the ethnic minorities, and especially the Hmong. The legacy of Kim Vinh, a renowned Vietnamese composer and researcher of Hmong music, and in particular his compositions for the modified reed pipe *sáo mèo*, are described and analyzed. Ó Briain concludes that the sound of the *sáo mèo* has become “a commonly invoked synecdoche for a pan-minority identity” (47). One particular piece by Kim Vinh in the modern nationalist fusion repertoire, “*Dêm trắng ban Méo*” (no translation provided), has become an “aural icon” for the Hmong; Ó Briain reports that “the ubiquity of the recording during my fieldwork is difficult to overstate” (61). He presents an extended musical analysis of this piece (62-67) in order to demonstrate that the composition bears little relationship to Hmong sounds, but rather has evolved into its own unique style. Nevertheless, the wide circulation of recordings of the compositions for the *sáo mèo* in the mountains of north Vietnam has led Hmong to regard these sounds as their own marker of ethnic identity, and further of belonging to the socialist state.

Chapters 3 and 5 are case studies of Hmong traditional music, presented through finely grained ethnographic narrative writing. Chapter 3 deals with the best known and most widely discussed forms of Hmong music: firstly the secular female extemporized sung poetry, *kwv txhiaj* and secondly, the sounds of the multiple reed pipe *qeej*, in particular during the funeral ritual. Ó Briain offers an alternative to the very many attempts by missionaries and scholars from the nineteenth century onwards to classify *kwv txhiaj* by apparent but superficial functions (“wine-drinking song,” “harvest song” etc). He shows how the adroit manipulation of song language and word- and rhyme-play gives each song many layers of meaning, depending on the occasion of performance and the age and status of both the singer and the listener. His account of the iconic instrument, the *qeej*, describes its construction and playing techniques, which will be of great interest to organologists. He offers an account of how the instrument embeds the language of the funeral poems into its polyphonic layers of sound. He refers to Falk’s account (2004a and 2004b) of *what* the *qeej* ‘says’ during the funeral, but neglects to mention that Falk has also provided an extended musical analysis of *how* the *qeej* communicates messages to the soul of the deceased (Falk 2003).

Chapter 5 provides valuable ethnographic descriptions of shamanic practices around Hmong New Year and of the conduct of the funeral rites, including the *hu plig* ceremony that takes place thirteen days after the main three-day ceremony. This account of the funeral ritual of the Black Hmong in North Vietnam is remarkable for the similarities of the texts of the opening chant, and the first section of the *qeej*’s message to the deceased, to many other accounts of Hmong funerals over time and place, as discussed by Falk (1996). The stability and robustness of this oral tradition is an indication of the resilience of the Hmong in the face of the momentous socio-cultural, geographical and political changes and challenges they have faced since their exodus from China to southeast Asia, and later, to the West.

Chapter 5 also describes the affect of Christianity—both Catholicism and Protestantism—on Hmong music-making, ceremonial life and social relationships. In order to accommodate both animist and Christian beliefs, in some instances two funeral rituals were necessary; Ó Briain refers to this as “the sonic demarcation of religious boundaries” (136). Choral singing is completely alien to Hmong musical life, and hymn language is completely incompatible with the Hmong linguistic system of tones and inflections. Many Hmong regard the adoption of Christianity as a threat to the sustainability of their cultural heritage and Ó Briain, like Falk in Australia (2004a and 2004b), was asked to record the animist traditions as a safeguard against the loss of tradition. One by-product of Hmong conversion to Christianity is the increased number of Hmong who are literate in the Hmong RPA script, which was used to spread the gospel. Further, familiarity with the RPA script has also enabled Hmong to access new information about Hmong in other parts of the world, contained in the new media produced by American Hmong, and now in circulation in North Vietnam.

Chapter 4 contains case studies of different formal and informal instances of the ‘ethno-industry’ of cultural tourism, and here Ó Briain draws heavily on Thomas Turino’s (2008) model of ‘presentational’ and ‘participatory’ performances in order to show how these staged shows, which supposedly demonstrate how the state is working for the preservation of the cultural heritage of its ethnic minorities, are completely decontextualized and bear no relationship to Hmong culture. Staged performances of Hmong, Yao and Thái culture for internal Vietnamese and foreign tourists also blur the differences in music, dress and language between the ethnic minorities. At work here is “the manifestation, manipulation and contamination of ethnicity through sound” (9) that Ó Briain discusses in the Introduction. Hmong song and instrumental sounds are not readily accessible to non-Hmong ears. Thus in the case of demonstrations for tourists of the Hmong leaf instrument the *nplooj*, which is used for private communications between lovers in the village context, “what was preserved was not the traditional practice of communicating by *nplooj* but only the decontextualized technique of making sound on a leaf” (119). The ‘dirty words’ of ethnomusicology – appropriation, commodification, essentialising, folkloricization, stereotyping, decontextualisation – are all applicable to these staged performances. In this age of fake news it is depressing to learn that the American tourists surveyed by Ó Briain appreciated these shows because they were “very traditional” and “close to nature” (119). They “liked the simplicity” because “that’s what their culture is” (119).

Chapter 6 shows how most aspects of Hmong life in the mountains are being transformed by the introduction of electricity, followed closely by new media and communication technologies: VCDs, radio, public loud speakers, cell phones, MP3, YouTube, and the internet. Thus the Hmong in the mountains of north Vietnam are inevitably drawn into the transnational world of overseas Hmong, in particular that of the media-savvy and highly literate North American (White) Hmong. What is significant here is that the Vietnamese Hmong are overwhelmingly consumers rather than producers of new media music and film. Despite the efforts of Vietnamese authorities to prevent the circulation of foreign media, the Hmong who viewed these productions are made intensely aware of how different their situation is from that of Hmong in capitalist countries. Ó Briain points out that rather than offering Vietnamese Hmong a liberating identification with a transnational Hmong

community, the new foreign-produced Hmong-language media constitutes a new form of oppression, portraying them as “living an idealized, traditional lifestyle with a few undesirable communist associations” (161) and affording them only limited agency for change. Their only social currency, he says, “lies in the perceived authenticity of their cultural practices” (161).

Hmong voices are a welcome presence throughout this book. For example, the Hmong criticize the staged performances for tourists at Cát Cát: “When people sing [in the village] they just sing about their own lives, but in this [performance] they sing about something Vietnamese. When tourists see this they think it’s real but it’s not” (120). Young Hmong men who dress up in Hmong costume, dance around and blow the *qeej* at the Love Market for money are not respected by young women, and are dismissed by elderly Hmong culture bearers: “They’re not *real* musicians, not like the master *qeej* players. You have to practice for years and years to develop the proper skills” (129). The modern nationalist fusion compositions of Kim Vinh were respected and noted for their popularity, but “he could not speak Hmong, and you can’t play Hmong [traditional] music without being able to speak the language” (79). The consumers of American Hmong music videos in the Sa Pa district said “This is just Hmong in America performing American music!” (175).

The Conclusion introduces some thoughts about the effects of efforts at preservation of Hmong and other minority cultures by both Vietnamese and external agencies such as UNESCO, who bring large sums of money to projects aimed at safeguarding traditions. Ó Briain notes that such projects can lead to damaging internal disputes, the stereotyping rather than the promotion of diversity of musical activities, and the distancing of cultural artifacts from their local contexts. His concluding remarks note again that Christianization can be viewed as a form of resistance against assimilation into the Viet-centric world, although earlier the rapid spread of evangelical Christianity was identified as the source of possibly fatal loss of heritage at the village level (“the next time you come back here we’ll probably all be Christian” said a female shaman” (141)). He reasserts the importance of his approach to studying Hmong music and culture as multiple sets of intersecting and interlocking sounds, rather than aiming for the preservation of a single musical culture. Perhaps the most powerful image of resilience comes from the Hmong themselves, and derives from their long heritage of maintaining agency and identity as a minority group:

My Hmong consultants use cultural heritage as a means of maintaining a resilient community identity, one that is malleable to their everyday needs and to negotiations among themselves and with others in and beyond the locality (9).

This book is a fascinating, wide-ranging and deeply intriguing account of Hmong musical and cultural life in northern Vietnam in the early years of this century. It is the product of very careful and thoughtful scholarship, sensitive fieldwork, and musical acuity. Congratulations are due to Ó Briain for producing such a valuable addition to our knowledge about the sonic world of the Hmong in northern Vietnam.

References Cited

Agawu, Kofi

2003 *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*. New York and London: Routledge.

Catlin, Amy

1985 "Harmonizing the Generations in Hmong Musical Performance." *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 6: 83-97.

1986 "The Hmong and Their Music...A Critique of Pure Speech." In *Hmong Art: Tradition and Change*. Joanne Cubbs, ed. 10-19. Sheboygan, Wisconsin: The John Michael Kohler Arts Centre.

1987 "Songs of Hmong Women: Virgins, Orphans, Widows and Bards." In *Textiles as Texts: Arts of Hmong Women from Laos*. Amy Catlin, ed. Los Angeles: The Women's Building.

1992 "Homo Cantens: Why Hmong Sing during Interactive Courtship Rituals." *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 9: 43-60.

1997 "Puzzling the text: Thought-Songs, Secret Languages, and Archaic Tones in Hmong Music". *World of Music* 39 (2): 69-81.

Falk, Catherine

1996 "Upon Meeting the Ancestors: The Hmong Funeral Ritual in Asia and Australia." *Hmong Studies Journal* 1 (1).

2003 "If you have good knowledge, close it well tight": Concealed and Framed Meaning in the Funeral Music of the Hmong *Qeej*." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 12 (ii): 1-33.

2004a "Hmong Instructions to the Dead: What the Mouth Organ *Qeej* Says (Part One)." *Asian Folklore Studies* 63 (1): 1-29.

2004b "Hmong Instructions to the Dead: What the Mouth Organ *Qeej* Says (Part Two)." *Asian Folklore Studies* 63(2): 167-220.

Hong Thao

1995 (1967) *Hmong Music in Vietnam*. Translated by Nguyen Thuyet Phong. *Nhac Viet. The Journal of Vietnamese Music* 4 (2) 1-114.

Jähnichen, Gisa

2006 "Local Typology and Individuality of Hmong Song Melodies." *Guandu Music Journal* 4:161-212.

Mareschal, Eric

1976 *La Musique des Hmong*, Paris: Musée Guimet.

Ó Briain, Lonán

2012 "Singing as Social Life: Three Perspectives on *Kwv Txhiaj* from Vietnam." *Hmong Studies Journal* 13(1):1-26.

2013 "'Happy To Be Born Hmong': The Implications of a Transnational Musical network for the Vietnamese-Hmong People." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8(2): 115-48.

2014 "Minorities Onstage: Cultural Tourism, Cosmopolitanism, and Social harmony in Northwestern Vietnam." *Asian Music* 45 (2):32-57.

Poss, Nicholas

2005 "The Communication of Verbal Content on the Hmong Raj : An Ethnographic Analysis of Performance Practice. " (Electronic Thesis or Dissertation). Retrieved from <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>

2012 "Hmong Music and Language Cognition: An Interdisciplinary Investigation." PhD diss., Ohio State University.

Schwörer-Kohl, Gretel

1981 "Sprachgebundene Mundelorgelmusik zum Totenritual der Hmong in Nordthailand und Laos." Bayreuth: Bericht über den Internationalen Musikwissenschaftlichen Kongress. 609-618.

1982 "Über den Begriff *Ntiv* in der Musikterminologie der Hmong in Nordthailand und Laos." *Jahrbuch für Musikalische Volks- und Volkerkunde* : 68-83.

1990 "Considering Gender Balance in Religion and Ritual Music among the Hmong and Lahu in Northern Thailand." In *Music, Gender and Culture*. Marcia Herndon and Susanne Ziegler, eds.143-155. Wilhelmshaven: Florian Noetzel Verlag, Intercultural Music Studies.

1991 "Mouth Organ and Drum: The Symbols of Death among the Hmong in Northern Thailand." In *Tradition and its Future in Music*. Tokumaru Yosihiko, ed. 249-253. Tokyo: Mita Press.

Turino, Thomas

2008. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dr Catherine Falk
Professor Emerita
University of Melbourne
Parkville
Victoria
AUSTRALIA 3010

Author Bio

Catherine Falk studied ethnomusicology at Monash University. Her doctoral research concerned the village music of West Java (1981). She conducted research with Hmong people in Australia 1986-2006. She was Dean of the Faculty of Music at the University of Melbourne 2006-2009 and is Professor Emerita at the University of Melbourne.