

## Stefan Östersjö & Nguyễn Thanh Thủy

### Traditions in Transformation: the Function of Openness in the Interaction between Musicians

Introduction: difference, sameness and mutual learning

This text summarizes some results from the international artistic research project *(re)thinking improvisation*, headed by the Malmö Academy of Music. The subproject we represent involves the two authors of this text and a series of other performers from Vietnam and Sweden and is a study of the evolving work in the Vietnamese/Swedish group The Six Tones. It draws on material from rehearsals, studio sessions and concert performances in which we were involved as musicians.

*(re)thinking improvisation* brings artists and researchers from different musical traditions and from different continents together. With the aim of identifying new manners in which musical improvisation can be understood and discussed, the project has three key objectives:

1. to delineate the field,
2. to research the social and musical interaction between improvising performers, and
3. to provide a cross-cultural perspective.

The studies we have carried out have been focussed on the topic of interaction between musicians situated in a particular cross-cultural context. The musician's listening, understood as the site for musical creation, has been a point of departure for our studies on musical interaction. We develop a line of reasoning around this topic starting in the second section. However, the third objective cited above also demands a further discussion. While it may be obvious that a group bringing performers together from two different continents immediately provides a "cross-cultural perspective", we find that the foundations for cross-cultural research need to be seriously considered. What are

the epistemological and methodological foundations for cross-cultural artistic research in music? Does a cross-cultural study imply a method built on comparative analysis? If so, how can a critical and postcolonial perspective inform the methodology?

Following Agawu (2003) we wish to contest the construction of difference that claims the a priori existence of a radical divide between cultures. Agawu discusses the political implications of the ethnomusicological project and the Eurocentric assumption of otherness as the point of departure for comparative research into the music of other cultures. Martin Clayton (2003) reminds us of the problematic nature of the translation from one discourse to the other in cross-cultural studies. The language and cultural tools of musicology are anything but culturally neutral. One cannot merely translate terminology from Indian classical music into English musical language, no more than one can transcribe an improvised performance into Western staff notation without radically changing the identity of the music. The relation between a theoretical discourse like Western musicology and a musical practice is indeed complex, and Clayton argues that "any theoretical system must itself be considered critically, alongside the music with which it is associated" (Clayton 2003, p. 60). The heart of the matter is the complex interrelations between the musical practice and the surrounding discourse. This critical examination must of course be directed not only towards the discourse of the non-European "other" but also towards Western thinking about music. In our research, the focus in this respect is directed towards three main features of Western art music and culture: 1) the analytical thinking about music that emerges from the technology of musical notation (Butt 2002; Wishart 1985; Östersjö 2008); 2)

the hegemony of the Western composer and the hierarchies created by way of this conception, not only in the interaction between musicians but also in our ways of listening (Wishart 1985); 3) the concept of difference as the dividing line between the (Western) norm and the "other". Agawu Agawu proposes an ethnography which embraces sameness as the basis for a "theory of translation that aims to show how the materiality of culture constrains musical practice in specific ways. The idea would be to unearth the impulses that motivate acts of performance, and to seek to interpret them in terms of broader, even generic, cultural impulses" (Agawu 2003, p. 235). Though we are not specifically concerned with identifying generic components in our practices, we find the notion of taking the "impulses that motivate acts of performance" (ibid) to be an excellent counter image to the old ways of comparative analysis. What is essential here is the denial of a referential entity (the Eurocentric idea of a norm) that can be used for comparison.

On a similar note, The Six Tones have been working on a long-term basis on the amalgamation of art music from Vietnam and Europe. We play traditional Vietnamese music in hybrid settings for Western stringed instruments and traditional Vietnamese instruments, we improvise in traditional and experimental Western idioms and we also commission new music by composers in Asia as well as in Western countries. The Six Tones are Nguyễn Thanh Thủy (who plays *đàn tranh*) and Ngô Trà My (who plays *đàn bầu*), two Vietnamese performers, and the Swedish guitarist Stefan Östersjö (also playing many other stringed instruments). Since the project started, we have been collaborating with the composer and improviser Henrik Frisk, who has both composed works for the ensemble as well as toured with the group as a laptop improviser. The name of the group, emanating from a composition by Henrik Frisk, relates to the fact that the Vietnamese language is a tonal language using six tones or intonations. Our main point of departure has been to create a foundation for a meeting between two distinct musical cultures on equal terms. This practice implies the

questioning of what is "centre" and what is "periphery": is the Western art music the norm (centre) and the traditional Vietnamese music an exotic other? For a long time after the world had been found to rotate around the sun, the world, in the mind of a Westerner, continued to be centred "around" Europe. In music, we find a parallel in the conception of differences of a hierarchic nature between notated and orally transmitted music. What can our distinct musical cultures learn from each other? How can Western art music adopt a listening role? Through our artistic practice we wish to question the conception of difference emanating from Western thought (and from the violence of colonial politics). The mutual learning that forms the basis for our work is concerned with the creative sparks drawn both from the creative friction between our respective traditions and from the sense of sameness that has motivated so many acts of performance up to this day.

#### The Musical Ear

The composer Roger Sessions, in his book *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, Listener* (1971), reminds us how the musical ear can be understood as the source of musical imagination and thus how it constitutes a starting point for creative interaction in musical dialogue:

The musical ear, then, discriminates; and this is one of its functions, a basic and indispensable one. [...] It identifies sound in all its aspects: their pitch, their tone quality, their relative intensity, their mode of production, their duration. It becomes [...] a more than purely auditory function, in identifying and responding to the basic rhythmic facts; tempo, meter, and that alternation of tension and release which is the essence of rhythm proper. [...] [T]he real role of the musical ear is to organize musical sensations. The ear not only discriminates; it associates and coordinates musical impressions. It creates, discovers, or becomes and remains aware of relationships between sounds, between musical ideas, and between rhythmic accents, motifs, phrases, periods, sections, movements. In the largest sense it develops into [...] musical imagination. (Sessions 1971, pp. 31–32)

It is exactly at this moment – when listening transcends the fundamental auditory functions it also affords and becomes a creative tool for the imagination of a performer – that our interest in the musician’s listening is sparked. Through listening we not only organize our perceptions but transform and appropriate them, making the sonorous event a vehicle for our creativity. The musical ear is the venue where we make creative choices in the sonic domain. All listening involves a choice of how to make use of our hearing. Listening is always a matter of sharing. The sound waves are echoed through the bodies of all beings in a given space. This re-sounding could perhaps be understood as a passive sharing of sonic space, but this is not at all that we intend. Jean-Luc Nancy finds this musical communication to be a matter not of transmission but of sharing. Following Nancy we may say that this communication appears in the sound itself, “that thing by which a subject makes an echo – of self, of the other, it’s all one – it’s all one in the plural” (Nancy 2007, p. 41). When our listening develops into musical creation, it also becomes a vehicle for communication. It has been essential for our analysis of the interaction between the players in the group to develop an understanding of how our listening constitutes the space in which the impulses for creation emerges. But what are the conditions for the creation of such a space for mutual learning and creative interaction?

### Openness

Taking Heidegger’s rethinking of the origins of Western reason as point of departure, Gemma Corradi Fiumara counters what she calls “logocratic thinking” by a “philosophy of listening”. The unlimited openness of listening is found to be a prerequisite more fundamental than the question itself (Fiumara 1990, pp. 33–34). The concept of openness emerges from the thinking of Gadamer. In his discussion of the fundamental conditions for the hermeneutic experience, a radical kind of openness is advocated: an openness that is the result of listening.

Anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without this kind of openness to one another there is no genuine human relationship. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another (Gadamer 2004, p. 355).

Corradi Fiumara identifies a fundamental problem in Gadamer’s line of thinking, situated in the link between what he calls the “logical structure of openness” on the one hand and the “primacy of the question” on the other. Rather than elaborating on this primary state of openness through listening, Gadamer continues by asserting that the essence of the question is what constitutes the identity of this radical openness.

However, it is essential here to bear in mind that for Gadamer there is an immediate link between language and our thinking. He regards the linguistic level of communication as a universal mystery which precedes everything else. Hence, through this movement into the verbal domain, the hermeneutic experience is directed into a specific perspective, what he calls the “horizon of the question” (2004, p. 357). The interpretative processes at play in the fusion of horizons are bound to the mystery of this communion:

[T]he fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language. [...] Language is so uncannily near our thinking, and when it functions it is so little an object, that it seems to conceal its own being from us. (Gadamer 2004, p.370)

Contemporary epistemologies counter this assertion, grounded in a Cartesian mind-body split that has been questioned by the development of an understanding of knowledge as situated in the body’s interactions with the world. Lakoff and Johnson launch the opposite claim, that “the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment” (Lakoff 1999, p. 4). Listening to, and interacting with, the environment through sound is a fundamental of human life that precedes language. In a discussion of musical interpretation, Gadamer’s conception of the linguistic as a fundamental of all thinking must be put in doubt. Trinh Minh-ha reminds us of how this other side of language also emerges

from migration, from being a foreigner in a new language, and points to how contemporary society demands of post-colonial thinking to move beyond logos. She argues that musical listening is, for the attuned ear, the first language:

But with what ear does one receive the other side of speech? Already there, never gone. Neither out-side nor in-side, the music of alterity has been playing on without interruption – if only one can hear it. Sight, crossing over, is not merely sight, but speech freed from the limitations of speech. (Trinh 2010, p. 14)

But perhaps the structure of the hermeneutic process that Gadamer proposes may still be relevant outside of the verbal domain. If the question comes to us through listening, why does it have to take shape as a verbal utterance? Is not the core of the matter rather the nature of this question and how it comes to us?

### Thinking-in-music

Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us of how our thinking is also situated in the body. He finds the visual arts to be a domain in which a specific kind of nonverbal thinking, in which the painter lends his body to the world in order to transubstantiate it into painting, takes place:

[T]his philosophy still to be done is that which animates the painter – not when he expresses his opinions about the world but in that instant when his vision becomes gesture, when, in Cézanne’s words, he “thinks in painting”. (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 178)

The painter brings vision and movement together in an artistic formation which is independent of words. To Merleau-Ponty it comes naturally to identify a certain kind of thinking in the way in which the visual and the conceptual are surpassed (not molded together) in painting.

In knowledge production specific to the sonic domain we encounter the notion of a second species of musical interpretation, of a *thinking-through-listening*. This kind of thinking may often interact with analytic interpretation and verbal discourse, but equally importantly, it can also develop along independent lines, sometimes even

in ways that counter our verbalized (and verbalizable) ideas (Östersjö 2008). What does this imply for Gadamer’s discussion of the primacy of the question? Are we looking at a hermeneutic experience which at times may develop along lines distinct from the verbal domain of the question?

### Listening to the question: A philosophy of musical listening

We may now return to the moment at which Corradi Fiumara fires off her critique of Gadamer’s line of thought. She argues that Gadamer sidesteps the field of listening that he had himself introduced by turning his gaze away from the “fundamental openness” of listening and moving towards the logocratic realm of the question:

The possibility of exercising a dominant contractual power over the natural world and thus distinguishing us from other living beings is certainly appealing. But there is also an insidious, all-pervading risk: we can see from the ecological history of our coexistence upon earth that it consists of an uninterrupted series of acts of domination which have been performed by means of a symbolic superiority expressed through the cogent questions we know how to pose. These relations, however, based as they are on the possibility of symbolic control, are bursting with the immense power that lies within their jurisdiction; a linguistic power that in the long run becomes an end in itself and that ultimately stiffens and becomes inertial, thus impeding an equilibrium of survival and coexistence. In the absence of listening the symbolic function whereby we construct and interact with ‘reality’ may turn out to be diabolic. (Corradi Fiumara 1990, p. 39)

But is not the core of the matter rather the nature of this question and how it comes to us? In our reading of Gadamer, the way in which the question poses itself to the interpreter is intimately linked to the kind of listening that Heidegger advocated saying that “the authentic attitude of thinking is not a putting of questions – rather it is listening to the grant, the promise of what is to be put in question” (Heidegger 1971, p. 71). Rather than contributing by putting questions, we interact by an active “listening to the question”. Could one imagine a question that is posed outside of the

verbal domain, outside of *logos*?

Is not the "question" that emerges through musical listening – that, as it were, poses itself to the one who is listening – a factor of action and perception? Can we connect Gadamer's concept of the openness of listening and the primacy of the question also to a *thinking-through-listening*? Ecological psychology suggests that our perception is deeply grounded in action (Clarke 2005; Gibson 1979; Windsor 1995). If the musician's listening is the site for musical creation, "listening to the question" in the musical domain may then be expressed as a contribution to the musical discourse. Hence, the "primacy of the question" in the encounter with the other does not necessarily have to lead us into verbal discourse; this conception deals with the necessity for us to contribute in the hermeneutical experience, be it in the form of musical performance or in analytical thinking. But this contribution cannot be a matter of what Gemma Corradi Fiumara terms "talking without listening". Only when we have learnt the fundamental openness of listening can we contribute by "listening to the question".

### The question of vibrato playing

In Western art music, the term vibrato has had several different meanings, and furthermore, what is today understood as vibrato has had many different names. Only during the 20th century have we arrived at a consensus on the use of the term as referring to periodic differentiations in pitch and/or intensity, and even today there is an overlap between the meaning of tremolo and vibrato (Moens-Haenen 2012). But more importantly, vibrato has been employed as an ornament during the greater part of history (Brown 1999). David Hurwitz reminds us of the danger in oversimplifying the function of vibrato and making it out as a single ornament (Hurwitz 2012, p. 35). Vibrato has always served multiple functions, for instance, related to emotional expression, timbral variation or the articulation of accentuated beats. Towards the end of the 19th century, the present-day practice of continuous vibrato saw the light of day, and during the early 20th century it gradually became

an established practice<sup>1</sup> (Moens-Haenen 2012). The 20th century also saw the rise of research into historical performance practice. The concept of historical listening (Kivy 1995, p. 71) has made a profound difference in Western musical culture, introducing the coexistence of distinct musical idioms in a manner unthinkable only a hundred years earlier. Simultaneously with the reintroduction of non-vibrato playing (i.e., the return of the ornamental vibrato) in early music performance, the same manner of playing appeared in modernist music and has since the mid 20th century been an important aspect of many stylistic directions within contemporary classical music. However, vibrato has rarely, if ever, been understood as what Stephen Davies would call a "work-identifying" parameter of Western art music (Davies 2004). Regardless of whether it has had an ornamental function or whether it has been a continuous element of the sound production, vibrato in Western art music is a surface-level phenomenon, although one that stirs up the feelings both of ordinary listeners and music scholars.

Vibrato playing in traditional Vietnamese music is a different matter. In these traditions it is an essential structural component. These traditions of various kinds of chamber music and music for theatre have brought forth a complex spectrum of articulation that makes for a subtlety of expression very similar to that of Western baroque music. But vibrato is not merely a means of expression but a factor that defines the identity of the music. The Vietnamese modal scales, or *điệu*, can be divided into two main systems, the *bắc* system and the *nam* system, which can be translated as "North" and "South" respectively. These terms do not simply represent music from these geographical regions, but rather they refer to emotional types not unlike those of the Western cultural construct of major and minor scales, hence *nam* modes are "sad" and *bắc* modes are "happy". However, the way these types are distinguished is equally dependent on the articulation and vibrato types stipulated by the mode and not always by different pitch shapes. For instance, the *Ai* and *Xuân* modes (see Figure 1) have identical pitch structures, but by the way the ornamentation is sha-

1) The exact dating of this change is of no relevance for our discussion though it may be noted that the view of historically informed vibrato playing in early 20th Century music is currently a hot topic. Much of the debate is centred around the recordings and writings of Roger Norrington and Clive Brown (1999) arguing for non vibrato performance of Romantic orchestral music and authors like Hurwitz (2012) who claim opposite positions, also with reference to historical evidence.

Figure 1a: The *Ai* mode with its characteristic articulation-types.



Figure 1b: The *Xuân* mode, with different vibrato but all pitches identical to the *Ai* mode.



ped, the modes afford clearly distinct musical materials. It is a common feature in exam concerts to have pieces in these two modes on the program in order to display the ability to properly master these crucial differences. If you know this music, the function of vibrato in the different modes is as strongly bound to the musical material as ever the distinction between major and minor tonality in Western music.

Hence, the different kinds of vibrato of Vietnamese music were constantly present in the interaction between the musicians in the project, whether we were in a workshop with a composer, performing traditional Vietnamese music or in the midst of an improvisation in Western experimental style. Of course, equally present has been the layers of different approaches to vibrato in Western music. In addition to the above overview, it is worth noting how vibrato in Western popular music differs from the classical idioms and how these instrumental styles have permeated contemporary art music as well. In addition to the strong presence of the characteristic articulation of Vietnamese music, the vibrato types of classical and electric guitar technique all make their way into the musical dialogue in the group. One may say that the encounter between these traditions can be understood as a "question" in the way Gadamer discusses it: a question in the musical domain that has posed itself to us in many different ways over the past few years and continues to contribute to the ongoing changes in the ways in which we interact through listening in the context of the group. Listening to the "question of vibrato" implies a movement from perception to action; outside of the verbal domain, the "question" may take shape as a musical response from one performer

to the other. Reading Gadamer through Nancy (2007), listening to the question then is all about sharing, about becoming resonant subjects in a musical dialogue in which we interact in the shaping of the musical question around which a common understanding can be negotiated.

### Viken

One instance of when the "question of vibrato" came to the fore was when we were transcribing *Viken*, a piece by the Swedish composer Love Mangs. This is originally a composition for guitar, banjo, e-bow and electronics (2004–2005) and was commissioned by the Swedish Arts Grants Committee. The transcription for trio was made by The Six Tones without involving the composer. We did not produce a new score and did not change the pitch structures in the parts of the piece that are fixed in musical notation. The transcription expands the original guitar part with novel sonorities and modes of articulation brought into the piece by the Vietnamese performers. The question of vibrato as it posed itself to Thùy in this work was concerned with the relation between the personal authenticity of a traditional performer and the identity of the composition. But it is also a reflection of the ways in which we have constantly been negotiating musical meaning throughout the course of the project.

When the new version had been premiered, we had a Skype conversation in summer 2008 about the making of this transcription. It has surprised us to find how the greater part of the conversation points to a common concern about difference in a manner that we have come to question more and more over the years. We felt that the best way to attempt to understand the processes that were ongoing

at the time and, furthermore, what the development has been over the last few years was to continue with a new dialogue that comments on the first. This is the section we wish to revisit:

**Stefan:** Was there any 'friction' or influence from Vietnamese traditions in the making of the transcription, apart from the fact that you bring the sonorities of your instruments into the piece?

**Thủy:** I think of course there was a lot of friction and influence from Vietnamese traditions in the making of the transcription.

By Vietnamese traditions here I mean the way I think, the way I feel about the melodies in *Viken*; the way I usually play on my instrument; the way I extemporize when I meet a strange, unknown situation. I am sure what I felt of *Viken* was different from you. Of course we found many things in *Viken* that is common to both traditions. I mean, for instance, you know, many melodies in *Viken* appear as very Vietnamese to us, very familiar to us. So even if I tried on purpose to refuse the influence of Vietnamese traditions, I think they are still there, like I couldn't refuse that I am Vietnamese.

I was conscious of that, so that is why I sometimes had this sense of friction. When I played *Viken* with you, I often asked myself, should I put something Vietnamese in here or not? I wondered whether this glissando was too Vietnamese. Should I play something strange, not Vietnamese here? Was it good if the audience could feel that there was something Vietnamese in *Viken*, or it is better they can feel a music without barriers... I know normally people like to hear something Vietnamese from us. Sometimes I think I could do something that is not Vietnamese and still make people like it.

**Stefan:** I am a bit surprised to read my question. In retrospect, the way I phrase the second half of the sentence seems a bit naïve and somewhat ignorant of the complexities of the project. But I also seem to lead you into the track of thinking in terms of difference as a major factor in the work we did.

**Thủy:** Yes, I reply with an entire catalogue of ways in which difference between our musical traditions create this friction. I seem to be very aware of what is perceived as "Vietnamese" in my playing. I believe I was myself quite

constantly aware of this difference when we worked.

**Stefan:** It seems to me that the perception of this difference is also projected from outside, your identity as a performer when playing to a Western audience appears to be built on the expectations from the audience on this 'otherness'.

**Thủy:** That is different today. I think I am not as concerned with the expectations on my being Vietnamese when I play to an audience outside of Vietnam. In fact, instead I seem to more often reflect on how my playing is changing; now it seems to be less and less shaped by my background in traditional music.

**Stefan:** To me, that seems like a positive turn. I always found the final sentences above quite disturbing, like when you say, "I know normally people like to hear something Vietnamese from us. Sometimes I think I could do something that is not Vietnamese and still make people like it." So do you think it has become possible for you to create a hybrid identity as a performer in later years?

**Thủy:** For many years, my identity as a performer was completely rooted in the idea of being shaped by tradition. I grew up in a family of actors and started my training to be a *đàn tranh* player at early age. I am not sure if it is right to speak of a hybrid identity, but I do believe that my perspective on myself as a performer has changed through the work in the group. Perhaps sensing the expectations to be "representative" of a culture, when playing in Europe, started that process. And of course, that I began to resist this expectation. Today, I feel more free to include influence in my playing from anywhere that I myself find artistically relevant.

**Stefan:** Those changes seem to be directed towards the community outside of Vietnam. How do you then think that this shifting identity is perceived from the 'inside' of your culture?

**Thủy:** I think, even if I always try to be aware how my identity might change, I cannot refuse its influence in my work. It doesn't mean that I change my identity, but the way I see my tradition is different. For instance, the way I see the vibrato in Vietnam music is more clear and feel it stronger when I can see how that works in Western music, like I try to see my tradition from outside. So my identity might not change, but my perception is changed

somehow, so I am not sure how much it might affect my identity. And I think the audience in Vietnam can "feel" that change in my work. **Stefan:** In what ways have you seen this in the reaction from audiences?

**Thủy:** Well, for instance, last year I premiered my first composition for *đàn tranh* called *Lost in Vibration* in which I use the traditional vibrato as a theme and material. Many people in the audience who knew my performances of traditional music had trouble to see the connection to tradition in the piece. To them it was just new music.

**Stefan:** On a completely different note, I wonder if there is a kernel somewhere inside all of us that refuses the transparency that is presumed by Agawu when he contests the notion of difference. Is there an opaque corner of our musical and cultural identity that cannot be understood and analyzed from the outside? Of course, I am thinking here of the writings of Édouard Glissant and his claim for the right to opacity.

**Thủy:** This is still unknown ground to me. I mean, I cannot discern within myself – or in what I see of our work – how to think of the poles of opacity and transparency. I sympathize with Agawu's line of reasoning but I can see the danger of reduction also.

**Stefan:** I am very much attracted by some individual lines in Glissant's text: "Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components" (Glissant 1989, p. 190).

**Thủy:** Coexistence instead of explanation? That could be a way to understand what is going on in a group like The Six Tones. **Stefan:** Yes, a bit like creating an ecology where different traditions can weave these fabrics that Glissant speaks of.

**Thủy:** Perhaps one can also understand my concern with difference as a temporary constraint. I was preoccupied with these issues, trying to resolve internal questions of identity. So there is no simple grid for difference or sameness as inhibiting or creative factors. I think we have experienced both in the course of our work.

**Stefan:** Indeed we have. But in the making of the transcription of *Viken*, would you agree that this perception of sameness, of a sense

of common ground in some materials in the piece – like when you found the (mainly pentatonic) melodic material in *Viken* to be "common to both traditions" – perhaps this was an impulse that "motivates acts of performance" as Agawu would put it? (Agawu 2003, p. 235).

**Thủy:** In order to "work with" opacity, we need some kind of trust. At that time, when we worked for the first time together on *Viken*, maybe I needed to find those moments of sameness. But now I think we can work together while also recognising the opaque areas of our respective musical identities.

### Move

The collaboration between The Six Tones and the Vietnamese composer and vocal artist Kim Ngọc Trần Thị started in autumn 2009 during *Hanoi New Music Meeting*. This event, curated by Kim Ngọc, brought performers from several countries in Europe together with performers of traditional and experimental music in Vietnam for a series of workshops that resulted in two productions of improvised music and composed works. In 2010, Kim Ngọc was invited to recording sessions with the group for the recording of a double CD<sup>2</sup> that also involved several other artists from the scene in Hanoi. The process of making the piece could be understood as yet another example of how listening to the "question of vibrato" has been central to our practice. In this case we find a listening composer with her ear bent not only to the performers in dialogical working sessions but, more specifically, to the performance traditions of *Tài Tử*<sup>3</sup> and eventually creating a work in which the decomposition of characteristic ornamentation in this style is the structural building block. As is obvious, the work we did rested firmly on the ground of an already ongoing collaboration as improvisers. Not only was Kim Ngọc familiar with the playing of all three musicians in the group, but we had already shared musical ideas and interacted as performers in several different contexts. The first working sessions on the piece took place in Hanoi in October 2010, but it was in a workshop in Hanoi a year later that the piece received its final shape, a month before the premiere during *(re)thinking improvisation*<sup>4</sup> at the Inter Arts Center in Malmö.

2) This double CD titled *Sig-nal Noise* is due for release on db-Productions, Sweden in October 2013.

3) *Tài Tử* is a form of chamber music that was developed in the south of Vietnam. *Tứ Đại Oán*, a piece discussed in the next section of the text, is one of the most famous pieces in this tradition (Le 1998).

4) The recording of the premiere is found on the audio CDs in the present publication.

Figure 2: The first page of the score to Kim Ngoc's *Move*.

When we met to work in October 2010, Kim had already found a title for the piece. It was to be called *Chuyển Dịch (Move)* but the way in which it would relate to movement was exactly what she wanted us to test. In this first session we tried different possible interrelations between physical movement and instrumental playing, including improvisations that move from high to low register or slide gradually from one register to another. Most of the music we played was quite dynamic and full of momentum. When we met again a year later, Kim presented a concept based on how in traditional Vietnamese music a single note is often set in elaborate movement through ornamentation and vibrato playing. We worked from the composer's abstract notion of music that starts out with single plucked notes and never leaves this meditative state of complete stillness but still consists of elaborate movement. Kim explicitly claimed inspiration from the non-dualist concept of yin and yang. In contradistinction to Western dualism, stillness and movement in the piece are understood as complementary entities that "permeate each other, emerging as two extreme aspects of the constant transformation of the Đạo [the "Way" of the universe]" (Dualism, Encyclopedia Britannica 2012). The working sessions in Hanoi

in October 2011 were very much about searching for ways in which this paradox could be translated into sounding music. There was also a second guiding principle: though building on the traditions of *Tài Tử*, the ornamentation should gradually become distorted and transformed. The nature of this transformation was also an element that we experimented with in the sessions.

The score to the piece was produced during the sessions in October 2011. It is part descriptive, reflecting the playing we did in the sessions, and part prescriptive, defining elements that Kim brought into the discourse. The score consists of a single page with a series of verbal instructions and a single line of the opening in the *đàn tranh* part in staff notation (see Figure 2). The *đàn tranh* leads up to the first phrase in the electric guitar in which the first notes are also notated. The primary instruction is that consistently through the piece, a single note should be plucked and ornamented until the sound dies out. No new notes may be played before the first sound has died out. The ornamentation should be in *Tài Tử* style, and in fact based on the same scale as quoted in figure 1a. In addition, the large scale form of the piece is fixed by the score, with the precise timing of sections in an arch form starting in the

Figure 3: Some traditional ornamental types from *Tài Tử* that in that are used in *Move*.



higher register of all three instruments, gradually moving down and eventually returning to the same single pitches in the high register in the end.

The notated opening line raises questions concerning the relation between tradition and the identity of the composition. Kim went home after a working session to write this opening phrase, frustrated with the way the opening was (or was not) taking shape in our improvisations. Starting out on C, the first note is plucked and then rings until it dies out, without any ornamentation. What is striking is how the phrase develops from here, and specifically how the vibrato is distributed.

The phrase continues from C to D, with vibrato indicated on every D except the first. As can be seen in figure 1, in *Ai* and *Oán* modes, there should be no vibrato on D. (Moreover, D is not even mentioned as a possible ornamental note in the table of the scale in the score to *Move*.) This is one of the crucial differences between the *Xuân* and *Ai* modes discussed above. Hence, it is only on the last note in the *đàn tranh* part that the piece moves into the vibrato characteristic of *Tài Tử*. As a model for how to play the rest of the piece, the opening line would serve very badly. However, it was a crucial moment in the working process when this scored opening was written, since it creates the beginning of a transition from single notes that are gradually more and more ornamented, a development which is the core identity of the composition and a characteristic that also demands some violation of the traditional rules.

Though on a level of fine detail, this departure from tradition is soon to be taken much further over the course of the piece. While the music moves down in register, the ornamentation and the pitch material goes further and further astray from the traditions of *Tài Tử*. At this point, the affordances of the Vietnamese electric guitar come to the fore in two ways: first, in the introduction of the bottom register as the guitar enters a dramatic extra octave below

the normal electric guitar, and second, in big chords in which multiple glissandi can be played on the carved out frets which afford bending up to a fourth just like on a *đàn tranh*. It is also at this point that the *đàn tranh* starts playing double stops. Gradually the music ascends from this low register and simultaneously makes a gradual transition back to the ornamental figurations of the opening. The piece closes with figurations around the opening C, but now two octaves higher.

Although this is not specified in the score, we have up till now been playing the piece in the *Oán* mode. Some examples of typical ornamentation in *Oán* can be found in figure 3 above. As can be seen in those examples, the *Oán* mode is very closely connected to *Ai*, but the characteristic expression is even more profound. In *Oán*, the same scale as in figure 1a becomes the point of departure for the most elaborate ornamentation that you find in Vietnamese traditional music. The music of Kim Ngoc's *Move* gravitates towards the same core expression as this severe tradition of *Tài Tử*.

Interestingly, with the way the identity of the composition is communicated, performing this music is not unlike playing a traditional Vietnamese piece. It is hard to see how it could be possible to play this piece without having a fundamental understanding of *Tài Tử*. But also, the transformations that this material is subject to would be equally impossible to create without reference to experimental Western music. In *Move*, Kim Ngoc does not only create a gradual dissolution of the traditional modes of expression in traditional Vietnamese music. She also creates a dialogue between Western experimental music and the traditions of *Tài Tử*, and eventually returns to the original point of departure. This movement between distinct musical traditions could not happen without listening in the Gadamerian sense, without the sharing in a sonic space that transforms not only the music but in some important

ways as well the individuals involved. In the course of these working sessions, a common understanding was created in negotiations between the musicians and the composer: a shared language that also constitutes the identity of the composition, without which the instructions in the score would have very limited relevance.

### Tứ Đại Oán

A central approach to the work within the group has been to bring improvisation in Vietnamese traditional music together with experimental Western modes of expression in the performance of traditional pieces. One of the first traditional tunes that we started working on is called *Tứ Đại Oán* (a famous piece in the *Oán* mode discussed above). We played it for first time in concerts in Sweden in 2007. In the first versions we decided on a simple formal structure, dividing the piece in the middle with a free improvisation in traditional style. At this time, we were well aware of the experimental nature of this approach. *Tứ Đại Oán* is a piece that belongs to a firmly established tradition, in which the ornamentation and the sequence of melodic patterns are quite clearly defined. Hence, the identity of this music is in many ways as fixed as that of any composition in Western art music. How can hybrid identities be negotiated in a cross-cultural collaboration like ours? How can we define musical meaning in music that redefines the fundamental building blocks of a certain musical tradition? No doubt, these questions remained unresolved after the tour we gave in 2007. But we were quite enthusiastic about having started this exploration, and when planning a tour in Scandinavia in winter and spring 2009, we decided to continue the work we had done on that same piece.

We rehearsed for the tour in a studio at EMS (The Electronic Music Studios) in Stockholm. In *Tứ Đại Oán*, we specifically wanted to find better ways of creating transitions between the different styles of music. Of course, we were also constantly negotiating a shared language in the encounter between our different idioms. In these sessions, Henrik and I were quite reserved, leaving the initiative much to

Thùy, since we felt that we were intruding into her territory in this piece. Since she also seemed unsure of what to do with the piece, we were all quite hesitant of how to move ahead. The insecurity of all three of us can be seen in our stiff body language but is also heard in much of the music in the first rehearsals, as we were often searching for ways to connect quite disparate elements. However, following Thùy's suggestion, we tried more complex approaches to large-scale distribution of the traditional and experimental elements and grew more confident with the way the piece developed. Ever since the tour, the ways in which we worked with this piece has served as a model for approaching other Vietnamese music.

Though we have tried to distribute the traditional material and the layers of experimental improvisation differently over the years, the opening improvisation has remained the same, always drawing on traditional models. Still, the question of vibrato has remained highly resonant. Even though the melodic structure in this first part is drawn from idiomatic Vietnamese improvisation, what emerges has been a hybrid music that brings the vibrato of traditional Vietnamese music together with bottleneck playing typical of popular Western music guitar traditions. This encounter comes out clearly in recordings from the tour in 2009<sup>5</sup> but what are perhaps more important are the ways in which these vibrato types have become shared between the players in the group. In later performances, for instance, the extensive slow vibrato on the third and sixth scale degrees in *Oán* have come to serve as material for bottleneck improvisations on the 10-string guitar.

After the tour in 2009 we coded the video from working sessions at EMS and recordings of concerts. We worked mainly in pairs from a model of stimulated recall<sup>6</sup> involving all four players that were part of the tour. The aim of this research was to look for ways of analysing the interaction between us. Roger Sessions reminds us of how the site for musical creation is the musician's ear (see p. 184). Our analysis was built on this understanding of musical dialogue, looking at the interaction in terms of different ways of listening. In the

5) For an example of how these different kinds of vibrato can be merged in the work of the group, see the opening of *Tứ Đại Oán*, for instance in a video from a concert at Atalante in Gothenburg in 2009. This video can be found on [youtube.com/ostersjo](http://youtube.com/ostersjo) or following this link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbVN0VgBKfw&list=UUwb61pVeOp\\_HwFK85CTAdw&index=16&feature=plcp](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbVN0VgBKfw&list=UUwb61pVeOp_HwFK85CTAdw&index=16&feature=plcp)

6) "Stimulated recall" is the overarching term for similar introspective research procedures through which cognitive processes can be investigated by inviting subjects to recall their concurrent thinking during an event when prompted by a video sequence. Many writers credit Benjamin Bloom with the first description of 'stimulated recall' in 1953 which he described as a method for retrieving memories: "The basic idea underlying the method of stimulated recall is that a subject may be enabled to relive an original situation with vividness and accuracy if he is presented with a large number of cues or stimuli which occurred during the original situation" (Bloom 1953, p. 161). In our research, stimulated recall was applied in the form of joint sessions in which we reviewed video from rehearsals and concerts and made joint coding of this material.

7) Though most of the coding we have been doing over the years has been carried out as negotiations between two performers at a time, in this study, the third performer, Henrik Frisk, was not involved in the coding process. However, the results have been further discussed with him and the analytical framework was also highly dependent on the joint work of all players in the group over the past years.

coding of the video we identified a series of modalities of listening. The most prominent codes were the following:

*Attentive listening*, a way of being in which all or some of the players are in tune with the others and with the ongoing music. By this we also understand a state of mind in which new directions can be found at any moment. More than many other modalities, the state of attentive listening presupposes the fundamental openness of listening that Gadamer discusses.

*Structural listening*, by which we did not at all intend the kind of analytic listening advocated by, e.g., Adorno which is closely bound to the listening cultures of Western art music. Rather, by "structural" we seek to describe the kind of being-in-listening that creates an understanding of the past while also shaping the further direction of the music, a kind of listening reminiscent of Husserl's concept of the "living present" also discussed by Jean-Luc Nancy and Granel (Nancy 2007, pp. 18–19). Nancy calls this evocation: "It anticipates its arrival and remembers its departure, itself remaining suspended and straining between the two: time and sonority, sonority as time and as meaning" (ibid. p. 20).

*Integrated listening* refers to a specific kind of attentiveness when several players become resonant to the other. It is a state in which the playing of two or more performers is integrated and works towards a similar direction.

*Searching listening*, a state that often occurs in the beginning of an improvisation, or at a transitional point. One may say that the listening is attentive but the musical means in the individual playing has not yet been identified. This is a vitally important and also difficult state in which one may find a conflict between the openness of listening and the search for musical material and tools that will allow the performer to contribute to the ongoing music.

*Failed listening* is how we have characterized moments in which musical intentions in the ongoing music have not been fulfilled, when individual initiatives have been

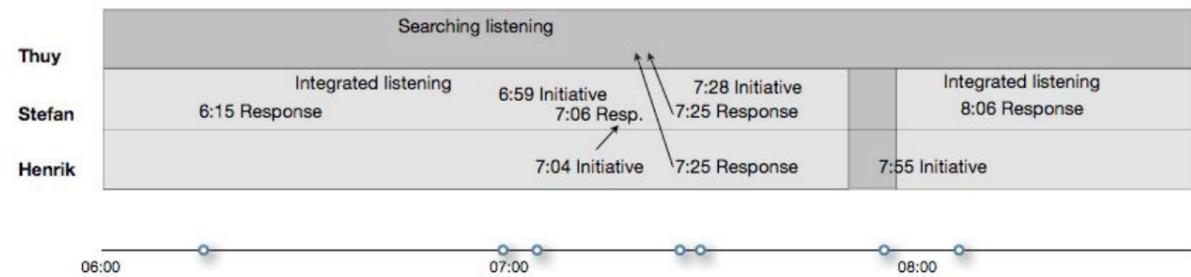
contrary or disregarded.

### Listening and interaction

When we started out the research within (re)thinking improvisation, the work in the group had been ongoing for three years, but with a cross-cultural exchange like this, three years is just about enough time to create a platform from which to start. Every time we finished a production we would feel that we had taken enormous steps forward. The next time we met, we would normally have the feeling that we had been so ignorant and superficial. Hence, at this time we did not feel that we had a lot of experience and material to draw on in the analysis, and our perspective was very much to build a preliminary understanding of the ongoing work. In 2011, with a series of more large-scale projects behind us, we became aware of the need to adopt a different approach to our documentation of the working process and to look at the development of our work over time. While maintaining the ambition to look at our interaction from the analytical perspective of our listening, we now wanted to come to a better understanding of how the work in the group had not only developed but perhaps also transformed us as participators over the years.

### A longitudinal perspective

After adopting this more longitudinal perspective on the development of the interaction between us, one study was carried out by coding<sup>7</sup> video recordings of free improvisations in two performances of *Tứ Đại Oán*: one in 2007 in the Rosenberg Hall at the Malmö Academy of Music and the other from 2011 in the Red Room at the Inter Arts Center during (re)thinking improvisation. The material was coded using two grids: first, a very simple mapping of individual initiative and response, and second, an analysis of the modes of interaction through our understanding of different modalities of listening as described above. The first grid calls for a further discussion. When taking Gadamer's insistence on the "primacy of the question" into the musical domain, what is really the meaning of "initiative" and "response"? In musical listening and performance, action



and perception are tightly interwoven. If the point of departure need be a common fundamental openness of listening, we believe that the distinction between initiative and response is in many ways a superficial one. Both emerge from the same listening, from subjects that are resonant to the question of the unfolding music. The distinction intended with this coding is related to the creative output; "initiative" denotes a "listening to the question" that results in new material, and "response" is how we refer to output that continues to develop already existing material.

In contradistinction to the earlier studies we conducted, in which the focus was on extremely local aspects of the musical interaction, in this cross-reference study between performances in 2007 and 2011 we specifically wanted to address questions concerning long-term change in our playing and development of our interaction.

#### Initiative and response

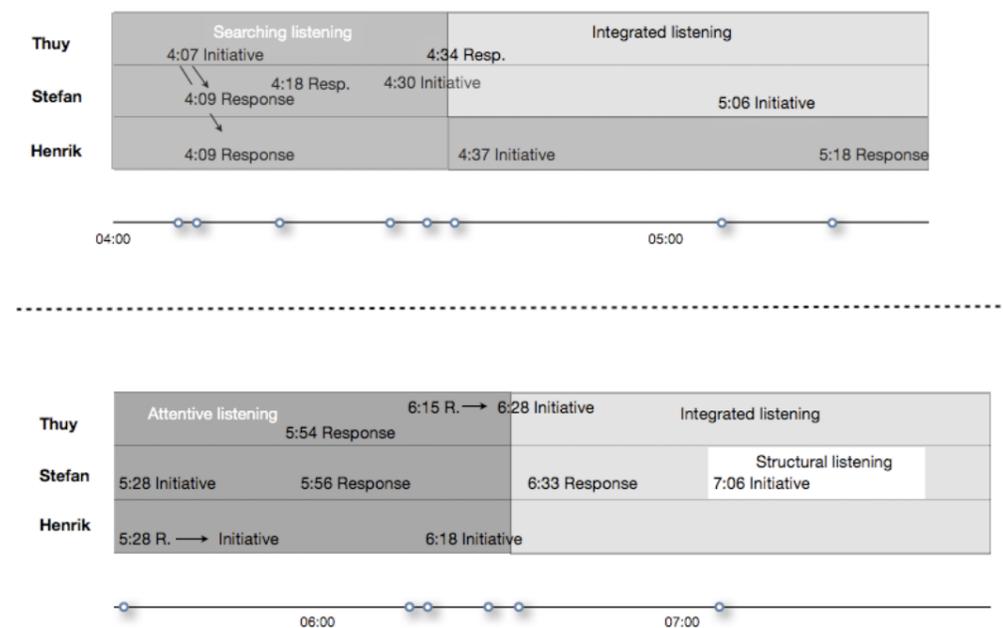
In the recording from 2007, the most striking aspect of the interaction is the way it is distributed between the players. While Henrik and Stefan develop a series of initiatives and responses, Thuy neither responds nor takes any clear initiative throughout the entire section. She was following the agreements made about this improvisation and remained in a traditional mode of improvising in the *Oán* scale of *Từ Đại Oán* (see Figure 3). But with the constraints on playing techniques and gesture that followed from this agreement, her playing never dynamically interacted with the other two. In Stefan's playing we find four instances of responses and one of a new initiative. These initiatives and responses have much to do with attempts to merge Thuy's playing with the texture created by the guitar and the electronics.

Henrik takes the initiative twice, both times by introducing faster and louder electronic materials. In these two instances, Thuy is at the same time more alienated since the texture moves further away from her idiomatic traditional improvisation. This is also a moment when which Stefan chooses to integrate with Henrik rather than stretching towards the layer of *dàn tranh* music. Since the electronics consists of processing of the live-input, it is difficult to discuss Henrik's performance in terms of response; every moment in the electronics literally responds to the ongoing performance. This also applies to the second performance in 2012. However, this is only at a technical, surface layer. Musically speaking, of course, he is also able to respond and, perhaps in this case more importantly, not to respond.

In the 2011 take, the dynamics of the group interaction are strikingly different. Moments of response and initiative are distributed between all three players. One feature found in all parts is a movement from response to initiative (see Figure 4) identified the first time in Stefan's playing in 4:18 and onwards, in Henrik's part in 5:28 and in Thuy's playing in 6:15. Thuy moves from response to initiative when Henrik and Stefan have developed some duo phrases in the low register. Thuy responds with an echo in a high register of Stefan's last phrase. The introduction of this higher register in turn leads to the arpeggio material that characterizes the next section. A similar process is seen in both Stefan's and Henrik's playing. First, a response is presented in a manner that becomes a resonance of the previous initiative. When the material is twisted in a new way, this movement from response to initiative takes place.

Figure 4: A graph of the interaction coded in modalities of listening and instances of response and initiative.

Figure 5: A graph of the interaction coded in modalities of listening and instances of response and initiative.



#### Modalities of listening

In the 2007 recording, Thuy appears to remain in a mode of searching listening throughout the clip. We sense a conflict in her listening, and we believe that the restrictions in the material she was using were reflected also in a lesser sense of openness. Thus, even if her listening is surely attentive, she is neither fully open to the ongoing musical discourse, nor does she have the tools to truly contribute. At this point we were all affected by the ongoing negotiation of how the identity of the original piece could be modified in the course of a "free" improvisation. The strongest factor delimiting the openness in Thuy's listening is certainly to be found in this conflict between musical traditions.

Henrik and Stefan build a duo music that starts out from percussive clicking sounds that were part of the sound world of *Từ Đại Oán*. The duo structure is tight, and Stefan and Henrik remain in a mode of integrated listening throughout the improvisation, apart from a moment of searching listening at 11:36 when Stefan has introduced more material that relates to Thuy's playing and Henrik also brings in more active material. At this point it appears to take a while before these new materials are integrated into their duo. Again, in the 2011 recording, the coding reflects a more dynamic interaction. The opening is characterized by searching list-

ening in all three parts. When Thuy responds to Stefan's first initiative they both move into a section of integrated listening. Henrik takes the next initiative but remains in a state of searching listening until Stefan enters with new material, and all three move into attentive listening at 5:28. (It may be worth noting here that Thuy at first responds with silence, a response that should perhaps have been coded as structural listening. Silence is often a highly active contribution. Here, it allows for the reintroduction of material from the first section.) During the last two minutes of the piece, all three remain in a state of integrated listening, building a common texture from the arpeggio introduced by Thuy in 6:28.

#### Summary and discussion

##### Listening

The analytical approach to musical interaction in this study builds on the conception of listening as the primary site for musical creation (Sessions 1971). Obviously, we cannot hear ourselves listening, but the traces of our listening can be observed in the musical (inter)action. From this starting point we coded the video documentation of performances and rehearsals in terms of different ways of listening. In order to move into a further discussion of this analysis, we must first assert that the

modalities of listening presented are not an attempt to identify absolute characteristics of musical listening. The intention is quite contrary to the prescriptive typology of listeners that Adorno provided (Adorno 1989, p. 5). What we intended when defining these codes was to map our embodied knowing as performers and listeners. One may wonder if it would even be possible, much less relevant or meaningful, to set out to define a generic typology of listening taking these modalities as points of departure. This would demand an entirely different research project and is not within the scope of our work. The series of modalities of listening that form the basis for the analysis refer to our own subjective understandings and do not have an aim beyond constituting a description of the musical interaction.

Having said this, we find that the way in which these modalities of listening refer to the musical interaction is that they become part of an analytical framework that is relevant for our understanding of musical creativity. The different modes of listening revealed by the analysis can be helpful in tracing both the large-scale trajectory of an improvisation as well as underlying factors in the interaction in a specific moment in the performance. At times, we bend our ears towards the greater form of the unfolding music, sometimes towards integrating the finest detail of the sound production. We may blend in integrative listening or activate critical listening, such as discussed by Peter Szendy in his book *Listen* (2008). The particular polemology<sup>8</sup> of listening he suggests lies in the open the way in which the larger discourse of a musical work or the interaction between improvising performers can take shape as a "battlefield: a theatre of operations of listening where various camps clash with each other" (Szendy 2008, p. 114).

In order to create a platform for interaction between musicians we find that, below the various modalities of listening discussed above, a certain openness of listening is called for (Gadamer 2004). We have seen, in the dialogue about the transcription of *Viken*, how preoccupied Thùy was in the early parts of the project with "difference". If we look back also to the video of the 2007 performance of *Từ Đại Oán*, we

believe that a similar focus on difference underlies the searching listening that we found characteristic of her interaction with the other players in this performance. Is this not also likely to inhibit the openness of listening? How can a self that is preoccupied with difference adopt this openness? When looking at the large-scale picture of the interaction, in the two graphic representations in figure 4 (see p. 195) and figure 5 (see p. 196), we find the change in the interaction – both in terms of the density of initiative and response and in the dynamic shifts between different modalities of listening – to be dependent on the development of this openness of listening. And furthermore, this "listening to the question" has also developed into a much more dynamic and intense interaction between action and perception as represented in the coding of initiative and response in these two graphs. What then has made this openness emerge throughout the years? We believe it has to do with developing trust, finding how we can live with the element of risk that is part of all true listening and with the fact that our identities are not fixed. When we dare to face the other and to contribute in a musical dialogue built on this openness of listening, we also invite the possibility of change, a change that underlines the fluid identities that constitute our selves. Or, returning to Gadamer: "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (Gadamer 2004, p. 371).

#### Transformations: towards a politics-of-listening

This study has brought many concepts together that all deal with listening, learning and interaction in a globalized context.

We have also seen how common concepts in Western thought concerned with how we relate to the (non-European) other tend to collide, often in the space where philosophical thinking encounters the political nature of human existence. Our intention in this final section is to discuss these conflicts in relation to our artistic practice. There are many possible perspectives on trans-cultural interactions. One may adopt

8) Polemology normally denotes studies in war and human conflict but in Szendy's case it refers to animated debates of musical aesthetics.

an aerial perspective and consider the migratory movements between continents. This does not necessarily mean that global forces are blurred. It can instead make us see, for instance, the closed borders of the European community, the too little discussed fences that divide Greece, and hereby also the EU, from the Arab world, keeping out refugees who should be allowed entry according to international law. But one may also study the local situation for migrating individuals at any given site. Here, the conditions for the individual who is negotiating identity in a society with multiple layers of cultural and social paradigms are in focus. While not adopting an explicitly political perspective in the case studies, we have been looking at both minute negotiations of identity and the confrontations with difference and sameness that are part and parcel of this, but also from a more longitudinal perspective on our work. For instance, in Thùy's reflections on the way she perceived the work on Love Mang's *Viken* in 2008, we can see how Glissant's claim for the right to opacity destabilizes the poles of difference and sameness. It appears that the sense of sameness that emerged from the encounter between traditional Vietnamese performance practice and the musical structures of the composition was instrumental in the making of the transcription. However, Thùy's present-day reflections on her preoccupation with difference in this process points to another factor which perhaps could be understood as a weaving together of sometimes opaque elements. In order to create a cross-cultural understanding based on the concept of sameness, we would need to embrace the Western trust in transparency. If there are zones that remain opaque, despite our attempts at dialogue and mutual learning, we need to work beyond a simplistic belief in cross-cultural understanding and aim towards a concept of interaction in a space where difference and sameness are not mutually exclusive.

The question of vibrato was strong in the making of *Viken*. It forced Thùy into reflections concerned with her identity as a performer and with the identity of the work we were transcribing. However, this "question" became more elaborate and multidimensional in the process of creating

Kim Ngọc's *Move*. Here, the demand for individual contributions in the process of "listening to the question" became apparent. Also, the presence of both Western and Asian concepts of vibrato was further accentuated. The specific merging of traditions that takes place in the piece is highly dependent on the individual knowledge and practices of the performers. Hence, the composition makes itself dependent on the identity of the performers, but also of the ongoing transformation, on the hybridity, of these identities and on the tension in the transformation between them. In music, just as in everyday life, the other is not transparent. Furthermore, there exists no stable point of reference, no fixed 'self' that remains untouched by the encounter with the other. The trajectory of Kim Ngọc's *Move* – the transformation from the performance practices of *Tài Tử* towards an experimental paradigm and the gradual return – is relative to the embodied traditions that we represent. Hence, the identity of the composition is no more fixed than our personal selves. But if opaque corners of our respective selves remain, what are the conditions in cross-cultural practices for the fundamental openness of listening that Gadamer proposes in his hermeneutics? What is the relation between opacity and openness in these artistic processes?

First, Glissant shifts the Gadamerian viewpoint of a philosophy of listening towards the politics involved in the act of bending the ear towards the other. Second, we believe that such a politics-of-listening will have to shift the focus from models based on fixed cultural and social identities towards a play with fluid identities in states of transition. By problematizing the concept of mutual learning that constituted the starting point for our artistic work in the group, we wish to suggest that this politics-of-listening goes beyond the logocentric concept of learning, beyond the polarities of sameness and difference. This is a point where our analysis may benefit from a more longitudinal perspective on the work carried out in the group. Not only may the identity of a musical work change, like in the transcription of *Viken* or in the renderings we have made over the years of pieces like *Từ Đại Oán*, but the identity of a performer also can be equally

fluid. One trace of these transformations can be seen in the interaction between us. The dynamics of this change are reflected in the graphs of the coding in figures 4 (see p. 195) and 5 (see p. 196) in which not only the amount of initiative and response has increased and spread over all parties in the group, but one can also see that there is a new platform for creating more integrated sound worlds and musical structures, as seen in the analysis of the 2011 performance of *Từ Đại Oán* and the tendency towards integrated listening in that improvisation. But does this integrated listening emerge from transparency? Does the concept of mutual learning involve a movement beyond opacity? We believe that this is not the case. The concept of transparency is a Eurocentric concept built on the privileged perspective of the Western gaze (always from above). This is one aspect of what Corradi Fiumara calls an "act of domination" (1990, p. 39). Rather than this "symbolic superiority" (ibid.) we embrace a different kind of listening, evading the transparency of logos<sup>9</sup> and instead building trust that can also embrace the opaque corners of the other. Corradi Fiumara reminds us of the danger of "thinking without listening". Do we need to "rethink" improvisation in order to bend an open ear towards a politics-of-listening? Perhaps we do. While bearing in mind the necessity not to blur the boundaries between art and everyday life, we wish to assert that all human action has a political significance. Musical improvisation is no exception. The openness of listening that we advocate is, in our understanding, not only the constitutive grounds for successful intercultural musical performance but also for dialogue that stretches beyond the domain of art. Just as social interaction is essential when bringing performers together from different cultures, the reverse is also true: social change should also be the outcome of true listening. Not only traditions may change but also the individuals involved in the dialogue. In a further trajectory, these transformations also signal the dissolution of the hierarchies of the old world and the dominating gaze of the Western eye (and, as it were, of the ways of listening, instead bending the ear towards the other).

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9) Is this what one might call "thinking improvisation"?

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