



remember those carols and songs ... and to echo them from year to year.

“She has a romantic voice that says all the right things to a young couple about to be married. She accompanies them as they walk down our church aisle ... as her notes play the Lohengrin. The bride and groom will remember it in the years to come and tell their children about it. She can speak in a voice as soft as a lullaby ... and ring for us tinkling bells that sound as though there is a breeze amidst them. Her voice can be as soulful as singing over a lost one ... as soulful as a funeral dirge ... and yet as mighty as the songs that a patriot is called to sing as we proudly wave our American flags ... as we honor those who give of themselves for us and our country. Her voices join God’s voice in praise and worship ... at the communion table ... to settle us in at the beginning of worship and to send us out when worship is done.

“She waits. She wants her voices to be found. She wants to sing her songs for you. She has a potpourri of instruments all within herself ... a community of them if you will ... compatible one with another ... emulating instruments that we may already recognize and call to mind ... all called on in turn to give color ... to give voice ... to give expression to the songs she sings ... and, again, to help us remember. The most that I can truly claim credit for knowing about her is the awe I feel about all that is within her. What she is capable of in the company of someone who understands her and honors all that she can do. That someone is our beloved Dr. Kitty Yang.”

Echoing Strings

It is an evening in March ... just after the first day of spring. In the chancel of our sanctuary, chairs sit row on row and seated in them, the players of a stringed orchestra. Violins ... first and second ... violas ... and cellos. Waiting for the first sounds of these strings are those who love music and have come to hear.

Above them all rises a cathedral ceiling ... built of knotty pine ... built in the same way, I hear, as is a violin. That is to say, built with music in mind ... allowing the notes to rise upward. As the violin's body has an opening beneath its strings ... the sanctuary has a tall ceiling that rises from the openness of our special room giving the music a place to go ... allowing it to be lifted up ... "to escape" to and wander around in another place. Tonight it is the strings of these violins and violas and cellos that we listen to and contemplate.

It takes a bow ... strings and the magnificent body of the instrument ... together with the hands and fingers of the violinist ... a knowledge of music and its moods ... and the interpretations of "music language" on the page.

As the bow passes across the strings of the violin ... it sounds a note ... one of joy ... one of contemplative pause ... of consolation ... a "thought" far away somewhere. As it returns to its place of beginning it brings back with it the sound of itself from that "somewhere" ... its echo ... the echo of itself. Did you know that this magnificent

instrument has a "soul"? A "soul" that vibrates just as our own souls do? And as I speak to a "soul that vibrates," we can remember voices singing with magnificent vibrato that sounds again their notes.

Oftentimes a composer will repeat himself ... he seems to be told to "play me again ... and again!" I call them echoes ... each one a perfection of the first sound ... a purity in its being as it copies itself. An echo may not sound exactly like the one from whence it came ... kin but having something all its own ... perhaps wanting to strengthen itself ... perhaps diminishing itself. An echo that God tunes in His own way.

An echo grows out of itself ... waiting for the right time. In the higher notes I hear a quiver ... a desire to give birth to its first sound ... and knowing that it is good to repeat itself ... for it may be even sweeter. The lower notes that I hear ... the ones that seem to rise up from the belly of the cello ... those more plaintive notes ... can sound tired and struggle to repeat themselves. Yet they can gain courage and sound boldly ... and share with us her very joyful and rhythmic personality.

Who'd ever have thought that so much beauty ... so many delicate and so many full-bodied sounds ... moods and musical conversations could come from 4 strings stretched the length of a violin above a body carefully crafted mostly of spruce and maple with strings of a tensile strength just so as to deliver the myriad of perfect sounds that speak in such a way as they do? Who?

Vietnamese Strings ... and Springtime

It is April now. We sit in a quiet place today and listen to a stringed orchestra ... people of different origins ... lovers of music. Music tells a story ... whether one can hear the words or not. Today we hear notes of a song that speaks to Vietnam in the springtime.



Prelude Chamber Ensemble

Kevin Pham, Conductor –

Kitty Yang, Guest Conductor

Although I could find no underlying basis for the music about Vietnam in springtime, I find myself wanting to know. I hear that the words to the music may never have been written on paper but learned “by heart” and taught to generations to come, echoing over and over again. I hear that, in Vietnam as in other countries around the world, festivals are loved. The people there celebrate in a big way the lunar New Year, or Tet ... for three months or so. It is a time when people take time out to rest from their labors, to allow the soil to rest as well, and they relax after a year of hard work.

*Michele Kwan
enjoying typical
"Mai" flower
during Tet ...*

*and other springtime
celebrations*



... with friends in the Flower Market

During this time, they rejoice in nature. Flowers abound. They are enjoyed in profusion. The people spend time with family and friends, and pay honor and respect to their ancestors. The spirit of Tet is interwoven with the spring festivals in Vietnam, and the villagers begin their festivals

during or just after Tet ... continuing as already noted throughout the three months of spring.

They love music. They love poetry. And though I don't know the song their violin strings remember, the imaginative part of myself wonders if the notes are echoes of what the countryside was like years ago and what it is today ... longing for ... beckoning yesterdays that they have not known. Yes, beckoning the yesterdays ... and the hopes for tomorrow that will be the echoes of the yesterdays ... and of today.

As we listen to the strings played in this place called "sanctuary" ... I wonder if they sound differently here than in a large concert hall in Saigon ... or is the difference only known to the hearer there and the hearer here? I find myself wondering about those heart sounds ... do they feel the same to another people?

As I listen to the musicians ... and look at each one ... noting the beauty of them and the beauty of the music that they give us ... I wonder about them. I wonder who is a descendant of a family who left Saigon those years ago for safety and to secure freedom. I think of the stories that surely are passed from grandparent ... to child ... to child's child ... tales about what used to be and what can be. Echoes for this time and generations to come.

I wonder how young were these artists when they picked up their first violins ... stroked the violin strings with its bow ... and tried to bring out the first sounds to hear in their young ears. I wonder who taught them. And when

did those fingers first touch piano keys? Who showed them how to touch the keys in such a way as to make a beautiful song? Who taught them how to instill spirit into the notes? Who?

Does it all go back to springtime in Vietnam? Sounding echoes that bring remembrance?

A young couple sit closely ... watching ... listening to the dancing keys of the piano. They are connected to each note ... enamored not only with one another ... but with the relationship of one note to another ... responding. Sounding again and again ... seeking the echo that one note asks of the other.

I'm intrigued by the classical guitar ... the guitarist and his song. How the notes speak the words when there are no words. Perhaps there are no words ... but each melody must have a story. Listen to how the bass strings echo the melody on the fret above ... as if they are drums ... keeping time. Yet they are strings with gifted fingers evoking the sounds.

Among the songs is one called "Beautiful Sunday." The tempo and the joyful sounds of the strings cause one to envision carriages pulled by pretty ponies ... carrying ladies under parasols ... in a place faraway ... or perhaps in a place like St. Louis or New York ... a long time ago. I hear no words ... but know they're there.

Usually Kevin Pham conducts this ensemble. He is enormously proud for its vision -- "Through our belief in

music, we will transform hearts, minds and communities.” He says, “Our outstanding musicians value Respect and Trust. They are believers in sharing their knowledge of music in its diversities. They work hard for excellence and think of themselves, not individually, but as a group.” Kevin is also first chair violinist with PCE, and has been generous in sharing these thoughts for my writing.

Today, our church’s Director of Music, Dr. Kitty Yang, guest conducts this chamber ensemble and causes it all to happen in time. As if by magic she points delicate fingers

*Kitty Yang
Kevin Pham
PCE in Concert
St. John’s UMC
Springfield, VA*



to a place among the orchestra and dancing notes come forth ... images of beauty ... many things ... a kind of voice in music that causes the heart to sing. And hear it again later ... and again ... in that other place where we think there is only quiet. Today I hear the sounds audibly ... tomorrow they will be heartstrings ... mine and yours?

It is August now, and I must add a postscript here. There's always something we learn later that we longed to know that other day ... and we're glad for it. PCE conductor Kevin Pham tells me that the song that wouldn't go away from me is called "Xuan Ca," its composer Mr. Pham Duy.

Xuan Ca

Rực rỡ

1. Xuân trong tôi đã khời trong một đêm vui Một đêm, một
 2. Xuân tôi ra, góp chung câu gào thiết tha, Là xinh, là
 3. Xuân tôi sang bên yêu tôi tìm gió trăng Tinh Xuân, là
 4. Xuân lên cao, chót Xuân buồn nhìn xuống sâu Hồn Xuân, hồn
 5. Xuân tôi ơi! Sức Xuân tôi còn khát khao Dù nay, dù

đêm gối chân phòng the đón cha mẹ về Xuân ấm ư, tất
 tươi có Xuân thuở xưa ước mơ hiển hòa. Xuân xanh ư, hát
 Xuân có khi mừng vợ, có khi sầu đây Xuân yêu đương, muốn
 thiêng ngút lên từ lâu Cõi Xuân còn dài Xuân trong ta đã
 mai cũng như mọi ai chết trong địa cầu Xuân muốn năm, có

leo trong nguồn suối mơ Bùng reo rồi theo nắng lên từ cha chời chạn lòng
 hiu trong trời nắng mưa Vườn Xuân là Xuân có hoa ngày mai Hát Xuân thật
 cẳng lên nhưja sống ngon Tim em, gặp em đón Xuân nghìn năm Bão Xuân ngập
 muốn ngàn lần đã qua Mặc cho, mặc em đón Xuân nghìn năm Bão Xuân ngập
 ta Xuân còn hơi Xuân Thi xin, thì Xuân hãy cho tình nhân Sống thêm vài

A page from the words and music of "Xuan Ca"

Mr. Pham (Kevin) was pleased to share with me the intended words to the song. I seem to remember that the song of springtime speaks of a flower just opening ... just beginning to blossom. It can be analogized as a relationship beginning to grow ... a certain love ... a marriage ... and the family that grows out of it. Springtime. That's what I believed he meant.

The program that song came from was called "Timeless Classics from the '70s." Kevin speaks to the time when Vietnam was "going on," the stories of those who left Vietnam for safety and freedom ... risking lives ... some dying ... some perhaps willing enough to risk their lives for the sake of something ... like his own music. These were the songs they came to know. They are among their echoed memories today. They still relate to them, as does Kevin.

Kevin talks about the "70's Classics" in this way: "It's really quite simple why those songs were chosen. Music from the 70's somehow related to a lot of generations: my parent's generation, yours and mine and those in between. These songs would bring back memories to most of us about when we were very young. We'd remember our 'first dates,' 'first love,' 'first kiss.' Those things would be remembered by hearing the songs. For my parents' generation, the songs remind them of good times when they first 'heard from the radio or a movie or a record.' Even though the music is from the U.S., they loved it."

We as Americans can relate to those feelings as well when we listen to certain songs that cause us to remember someone ... somewhere ... sometime ... and our feelings.

Kevin was unable to join us in America until later. He sacrificed in some ways and gained in others. His music there was sacrificed ... but once in America ... he pursued it again and organized the Prelude Chamber Ensemble (PCE) using "Prelude" as part of its name characterizing this new time in his life. Kevin is reminded by that word

of his challenges before finding his way back to the music he loves.

Prelude means “beginning,” you know ... and after “prelude” come many other songs. Kevin Pham is sharing those with many other people every chance he gets ... just as many as he can ... and is teaching people everywhere to love music as he does.

** Prelude Chamber Ensemble (PCE) is a non-profit group of passionate musicians who are dedicated to promoting classical music and cultural exchange, encouraging the development of young musicians with a love of music It is committed to opening artistic and cultural borders by inviting diverse talented artists that may not be known to local audiences. As part of its mission, PCE encourages young musicians from all levels and ages across Northern Virginia to join the Vietnamese American Youth String Orchestra in concert, seen below. [Quoting Kevin Pham, PCE]*



*Photos in this writing regarding Prelude Chamber Ensemble
Courtesy of Tin Nguyen www.tinnguyenphotography.net.*

