



## Musical Cosmopolitanism in Late-Colonial Hanoi

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Figure 1 (see article text for complete caption)

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**Le Studio.**

Figure 2 (see article text for complete caption)

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## Musical Cosmopolitanism in Late-Colonial Hanoi

This article investigates how radio was used to amplify the reach of vernacular forms of musical cosmopolitanism in late-colonial Hanoi. Between 1948 and the early 1950s, the musicians of Việt Nhạc—the first all-Vietnamese ensemble to appear regularly on Radio Hanoi—performed a unique blend of popular chansons in Vietnamese and local folk styles live on air to a radio audience across French Indochina. These creative artists sounded out the final stages of French imperialism in the region and its associated forms of Western European-influenced musical cosmopolitanism; they also nurtured an attentive radio listenership who gradually shifted their ears to Sino-Soviet-influenced musical cosmopolitanism following independence. Drawing on archival records, radio guides and interview data, this research excavates the story of the Việt Nhạc ensemble from the uncomfortable crevice between colonial and postcolonial history. In retelling this story, the writing interrogates the relationship between cultural and political change at the end of an empire.

Keywords: Vietnam; historical ethnomusicology; radio; colonialism; politics; cosmopolitanism

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## Introduction

On 17 February 2017, I visited the house of Nguyễn Thiện Tơ (b. 1921) on a busy street in central Hanoi. I was nine months into an eleven-month fieldtrip (June 2016 to April 2017) to research the musical history of Vietnamese radio. By that stage, I had developed a strong sense of the historical timeline from 1954 onwards, when Vietnam was divided into communist North (Democratic Republic of Vietnam; DRV) and capitalist South (Republic of Vietnam; RVN). Several Vietnamese sources repeated the same story: the first notable radio broadcast in Vietnam took place in 1945 when Hồ Chí Minh is thought to have read out the Declaration of Independence on air (Vũ, Lê and Trần 2015). Yet documents in the Vietnam National Archives I (VNA-I) contradict this official narrative. Tơ was one of several retired musicians I sought out for clarification. After I settled into the multipurpose living area of his small house, leaning against their upright piano and chatting with four generations of his musical family, Tơ appeared in the doorway clutching a photograph (Figure 1). In his early 90s by this stage, he had poor hearing and was short on energy, yet the topic of conversation animated him. He pointed at the faces in the picture and explained that these people were the Việt Nhạc music ensemble, a group of musicians with whom he had the most fulfilling musical experiences of his life. What happened after Việt Minh revolutionaries took over in the 1950s? That was the end of this particular form of French-influenced cosmopolitan music in Hanoi. Tơ joined the new station Voice of Vietnam Radio (Đài Tiếng nói Việt Nam) for a few years before moving to the orchestra of the Vietnam Feature Film Studio (Hãng phim truyện Việt Nam). Meanwhile, a different set of musicians and administrators took over the radio station to broadcast songs on political subjects influenced by musical trends current in other communist and socialist states.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Figure 1: Musicians of Radio Hanoi (*Đài Phát thanh Hà Nội*) pictured on the steps of the central recording studio in Quán Sứ Street, where the headquarters of the national radio broadcaster of Vietnam (*Đài Tiếng nói Việt Nam*) is currently located. The photograph is dated from 1949, although it may have been taken later than that. Back row: Canh Thân, Nghĩ, Nguyễn Hách Hiễn, Bùi Ngọc Bảo, Nguyễn Văn Sợi, Nguyễn Đại, Vũ Thành, Nguyễn Thường, Nguyễn Thái Quy, Trần Văn Nhơn, Nguyễn Trí Nhượng, Nguyễn Thiện Tơ, Dục Thu; front row: Minh Đổ, Minh Phương, Tâm Vấn. Photo: Nguyễn Trần Dũng.

This article recovers the story of the Việt Nhạc ensemble and situates their tale within the wider narrative arcs of French colonial and Vietnamese cultural history. Using the concept of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ (Bhabha 1996; Werbner 2006) to explore localised manifestations of musical cosmopolitanism, the writing surveys the early history of sound reproduction in Indochina, activities of the first amateur radio clubs, broadcasts during the Japanese occupation, and the establishment of Radio Hanoi during the First Indochina War, before considering the musicians and musical outputs of the Việt Nhạc. The study argues that the demise of the Việt Nhạc was inevitable for artistic reasons because the forms of musical cosmopolitanism they espoused were incompatible with the dominant political ideologies of early postcolonial Vietnam.

### **Vernacular musical cosmopolitanism in colonial and postcolonial Vietnam**

In his magnum opus, Trần Văn Khê argues that Vietnamese traditional musicians maintained a monopoly over radio broadcasts and recording studio activities up to 1939.



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2  
3 He was unable to adequately research Vietnamese popular music due to the lack of  
4 recordings and printed evidence (1962: 111). Although several amateur stations  
5 broadcast a plethora of musical styles to audiences in French Indochina prior to the  
6  
7 1940s, at Radio Hanoi the Việt Nhạc ensemble and its affiliated publications  
8  
9 consolidated this diversity of styles. At the height of its influence, Radio Hanoi  
10  
11 broadcast an array of Asian, European and North American recordings for up to eight  
12  
13 hours per day. While broadcasters in colonial India used jazz to break the hegemony of  
14  
15 European art music on air in the 1930s (Shope 2008), Vietnamese broadcasters mixed  
16  
17 recordings of art music with jazz, French language chanson, light orchestras such as that  
18  
19 of Nullo Romani and Vietnamese traditional music and theatrical styles. The musicians  
20  
21 engaged their audiences outside of the recording studio in performances around Hanoi  
22  
23 as well, including one widely publicised concert for patients at Bạch Mai hospital,  
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25 which promoted the musicians as a collective ensemble for the people. Until its funding  
26  
27 ceased, the Việt Nhạc was one of the most popular ensembles in French Indochina. The  
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29 musicians assimilated international styles, infused them with Vietnamese musical  
30  
31 inflections and broadcast them to an unprecedented number of listeners. This was a  
32  
33 unique form of musical cosmopolitanism fuelled by sound recording and broadcasting  
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35 technology and shaped by geopolitics.  
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43 Cosmopolitan musical styles have received a great deal of attention from  
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45 ethnomusicologists. In his study of popular music in Zimbabwe, Turino identified  
46  
47 ‘cosmopolitan loops’ that connected people and cultural trends beyond the local that are  
48  
49 ‘usually more heavily influenced by certain particularly powerful sites’ (2000: 8). In  
50  
51 late-colonial Hanoi, several distinct forms of vernacular cosmopolitanism existed which  
52  
53 were influenced by the complex demographics and geopolitical landscape of the region.  
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55 At that historical juncture in mainland Southeast Asia, two dominant forms of  
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3 vernacular cosmopolitanism stood out. One leaned towards the powerful sites of  
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5 Western European influence, and in Indochina was associated with French cultural  
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7 imperialism and the premise of art for art's sake; the other was born of the Comintern,  
8  
9 emphasised the motto of art for the masses, and was influenced by Sino-Soviet cultural  
10  
11 trends, in particular, socialist realism. Ninh (2002) examines the emergence of the latter  
12  
13 form of cosmopolitanism in Vietnam; the present research attempts to understand the  
14  
15 gradual attenuation of the former ideology through a study of musicians who performed  
16  
17 on the radio in late-colonial Hanoi.  
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19  
20 In French Indochina (officially, 1887–1954), radio emerged as a focal point of  
21  
22 social life for those who could afford it or who happened to live or work next to a radio  
23  
24 owner. Forms of communal or semi-public listening, where owners placed radios on  
25  
26 their windowsills in a public display of wealth (DeWald 2012), promoted the formation  
27  
28 of diverse communities of listeners and amplified the audience numbers for broadcasts.  
29  
30 Photographic evidence demonstrates that radio ownership was a mark of pride: families  
31  
32 posed next to their radios, which occupied a central space in the homestead. The  
33  
34 technology was quickly integrated into daily life, and people developed ways of  
35  
36 listening and non-listening that presaged the techniques employed by citizens in  
37  
38 contemporary Vietnam who are exposed to regular local authority broadcasts via wired  
39  
40 loudspeaker. Radio was the first widespread form of broadcast media to transform the  
41  
42 public sphere in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>  
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45  
46 The colonial authorities banned political content following several inflammatory  
47  
48 broadcasts during World War II (Marr 1997: 81–82). Instead, public radio broadcasters  
49  
50 were expected to focus on diverse, apolitical cultural themes and avoid fomenting  
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54 <sup>1</sup> See McHale (2004) for more information on the mass media, especially print, and its impact  
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56 on the public sphere in twentieth-century Vietnam.  
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3 discontent among listeners. On 31 August 1945, the Japanese transferred control of  
4  
5 broadcasting facilities at Bạch Mai station in Hanoi to the Việt Minh. At the outbreak of  
6  
7 the First Indochina War (1946–54) their station was overrun (Marr 1998: 11). The Việt  
8  
9 Minh moved to the mountains southeast of Hanoi, where these insurrectionary voices  
10  
11 resumed their broadcasts (Vũ, Lê and Trần 2015). In a battle for listeners, the French  
12  
13 authorities intensified their support for radio during the late 1940s by temporarily  
14  
15 increasing funding for Radio Hanoi, a station broadcasting from the city centre. These  
16  
17 resources enabled station employees to establish a versatile radio music ensemble, the  
18  
19 Việt Nhạc—the name translates roughly as ‘Vietnamese music’ or ‘music of the Việt  
20  
21 people’—which espoused a localised form of cosmopolitanism. Although the Việt Nhạc  
22  
23 does not appear in any major collections on the history of Vietnamese radio (Phan et al.  
24  
25 1989; Nguyễn 2004; Vũ, Lê and Trần 2015), thousands of Vietnamese listeners  
26  
27 regularly tuned into Radio Hanoi to hear its live performances before the station closed  
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29 in the early 1950s.  
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### 34 **Sound reproduction in French Indochina**

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37 At the dawn of the twentieth century, sound reproduction technology was popularised in  
38  
39 the major regional hubs of French Indochina including Hanoi, Hải Phòng, Saigon,  
40  
41 Vientiane and Phnom Penh. Radio was adopted for use by the military and transport  
42  
43 workers but not initially as a means of entertainment (Lamarche 1949). In the 1910s,  
44  
45 gramophone machines provided the first widespread means of access to recorded music  
46  
47 and other forms of audio entertainment. Regular advertisements in Vietnamese  
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49 newspapers illustrate how the major labels of the time—Victor, Odeon, Beka, Columbia  
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2 and Pathé were prominent in French Indochina—staked their claims to the market.<sup>2</sup> One  
3 typical example advertises recordings from abroad alongside a selection of regional  
4 styles such as *cải lương* (reformed theatre, particularly popular in southern Vietnam; see  
5 Gibbs 2000), *hát tuồng*, *hát chèo* (both theatrical forms popular in central and northern  
6 Vietnam; see Wettermark 2017 on *tuồng* and Meeker 2015 on *chèo*), *hát văn* (trance  
7 recitation associated with *chầu văn* mediumship rituals; see Norton 2009), *hát cô đầu*  
8 (an early form of *ca trù* chamber music; see Norton 2014) and *kể truyện* (*kể chuyện* are  
9 recited stories; see Durand and Nguyen 1985). Although only a minority of locals could  
10 afford their own household gramophone machines or record collections, tea houses  
11 invested in these players and became the primary access points and places for debate  
12 about recorded music.  
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26 Several amateur radio stations were established in the 1920s and 1930s by a  
27 niche group of wealthy, predominantly European entrepreneurs to cater to the growing  
28 interest in broadcast sound. In 1928, Radio Sindex was the first officially licensed  
29 station in French Indochina. Three daily broadcasts were scheduled at 11.00am, 6.00pm  
30 and 8.30pm from the port city of Hải Phòng. Content included programmes on weather,  
31 news updates, exchange rates, trade and securities, and concerts of European,  
32 Vietnamese and Chinese music. Berg (2013: 288) counts nine registered stations  
33 operating in French Indochina up to 1945. This figure represents the number of different  
34 names of stations and not the actual number of broadcasters. In the colonial capital, for  
35 instance, Radio Hanoi, Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord and La Voix du Vietnam  
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50 <sup>2</sup> See Jason Gibb's active blog for an extensive compilation of advertisements for gramophone  
51 players, records, musical instruments, instrumental lessons and music performances in  
52 early twentieth-century French Indochina (<http://taybui.blogspot.com>, accessed 4 July  
53 2017) and Gronow (1981) for a survey of record label catalogues and archives in the  
54 region.  
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3 were effectively the same station. The catchy title, ‘Voice of Vietnam’ (*Đài Tiếng nói*  
4 *Việt Nam*; VOV), in its Vietnamese iteration was retrospectively and confusingly  
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6 claimed by the Việt Minh as the official name of their station (see [www.vov.vn](http://www.vov.vn)); this  
7  
8 strategic move facilitated the omission of Western European-backed stations from  
9  
10 contemporary accounts of that period. Not all stations remained in the same location  
11  
12 either: Radio Hironnelle, a French Army station initially based in Hanoi, moved south  
13  
14 after the Geneva accords were signed in 1954.<sup>3</sup> During this pre-Indochinese War period,  
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16 communities of amateur radio enthusiasts or radio hams sprouted up in all of the major  
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18 urban centres of French Indochina.  
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### 23 **The first amateur radio clubs (1928–39)**

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26 The popularisation of radio technology and the proliferation of stations unfolded in  
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28 similar manner to the situation in pre-World War Two Malaya:  
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32 Not only was the gramophone expensive, but also 78 RPM records were not  
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34 durable in the humid and hot climate of the tropics. The radio was less expensive,  
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36 was easier to maintain, and provided a greater variety of music. It was also a one-  
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38 time investment, unlike the necessity of continuing to buy new discs. Thus radios  
39  
40 and transistors began to replace the gramophone in public places. (Tan 1996/97:  
41  
42 34)

43  
44 These stations did not entirely usurp the gramophone or other media technologies.  
45  
46 Rather, radio was integrated into a multivalent print and broadcast media network that  
47  
48 was used to inform and entertain the people. The immediacy of radio helped to position  
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51 <sup>3</sup> <http://www.radiotsf.fr/radio-sindex-la-premiere-radio-dindochine-est-nee-a-haiphong/>,  
52  
53 accessed 3 July 2017, and ‘Création des diverses associations à Haiphong’, VNA-I, Fonds  
54  
55 de la Résidence supérieure au Tonkin, d79728-02. The former source lists the first  
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57 broadcast from Radio Sindex as occurring in February 1928; the latter indicates that the  
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59 station was not established until 21 July 1928.  
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3 the technology as a central source of information. Whereas the gramophone era was  
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5 defined by ‘monopolistic control over both musicians and audiences’ (Qureshi 1999:  
6  
7 64), the possibility of live broadcast via radio attenuated that control. However, the cost  
8  
9 and technical issues due to equipment shortages, humidity, and a shortage of expertise  
10  
11 limited accessibility. Respectable print media outlets redistributed the news via reports  
12  
13 intercepted from abroad. Meanwhile, local radio hams established clubs with  
14  
15 membership fees, strict regulations that had to be approved by the colonial authorities  
16  
17 and periodicals that could be used to provide more financial stability to their enterprises  
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19 by enhancing their audience and generating revenue through advertisements.  
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22 The more long lasting of the colonial broadcasters produced printed bulletins or  
23  
24 journals alongside their audio broadcasts which were used as ‘radio guides’ (Pasler  
25  
26 2015) to educate listeners about complex transnational cultural trends with a distinct  
27  
28 Western European emphasis. These guides publicised programme schedules, included  
29  
30 information about off-air performances by radio musicians and affiliated performers,  
31  
32 advertised radio equipment to facilitate public access and engagement with their stations  
33  
34 and, perhaps most importantly for potential Vietnamese listeners, included directions  
35  
36 for building homemade radios. On 15 August 1938, for instance, the *Bulletin Officiel du*  
37  
38 *Radio-Club de l’Indochine du Nord* (henceforth, *BORCIN*) published four pages of  
39  
40 directions on how to construct a radio at home using widely available and inexpensive  
41  
42 equipment. Alongside official letters, orders, decrees and other documentation in the  
43  
44 archives, these publications provide the most comprehensive data on the history of the  
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46 stations because no recordings from any of the colonial broadcasters have survived to  
47  
48 the present day.  
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52 During the first few years, the radio guides were published almost entirely in  
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54 French, thus denying access to a non-French literate indigenous readership, the majority  
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3 of the population, yet remaining accessible to French-educated Vietnamese. The most  
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5 comprehensive of these guides, *BORCIN*, was published entirely in French, and each  
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7 issue (published in 1935, 1937–9) contains more references to France and other  
8  
9 European colonial powers than to mainland Southeast Asia. The first issue includes an  
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11 opening address from the club's president and mayor of Hanoi, Henri Virgitti, in which  
12  
13 he estimates that there are three to four hundred radio receivers in all of Indochina  
14  
15 (Virgitti 1935: 4)—this number only represents the quantity of imported radios and does  
16  
17 not include homemade devices. That first issue is an 88-page bulletin largely dedicated  
18  
19 to the opening article, 'Le Tourisme par Radio' (Tourism by Radio), which details  
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21 channels that can be received from around the world. Readers are told how and when to  
22  
23 connect to France, Holland, England, French Morocco, Germany, Italy, the Vatican  
24  
25 City, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Java, Japan, Africa  
26  
27 (stations listed by city only), South America (nine national stations listed) and  
28  
29 Mexico—this globalising trend built on practices at other regional Indochinese stations  
30  
31 in the 1930s. Thus, these guides and their affiliated stations presented 'a particular,  
32  
33 historically contingent, cosmopolitan complex ... [which carried] connotations of elite  
34  
35 status and sophistication' (Turino 2000: 8).  
36  
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39  
40 This perceived social standing can be further deduced from the advertisements  
41  
42 in *BORCIN*; only luxury products (such as Moët & Chandon champagne) are listed. The  
43  
44 committee members of the club are named at the back of this issue along with the club  
45  
46 regulations: Moreau Lebon, Guionaud, Chaucot, Bouscaren, Saumont, de Condemoy.  
47  
48 No Vietnamese names are included.  
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51 Club regulations created a further barrier to local engagement with this  
52  
53 burgeoning broadcast media industry. Article 15 of the statutes of Radio-Club  
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3 Tonkinois à Haiphong permitted one local representative out of eight committee  
4  
5 members:

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8 The Committee shall be composed of not more than six French members and two  
9 Asian members, including an Annamite member and a Chinese member, who shall  
10 be elected from among the active members and appointed annually for one year by  
11 the General Assembly. The members of the outgoing Committee are re-eligible.<sup>4</sup>  
12  
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14  
15 The Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord in Hanoi continued with this arrangement in  
16 the late 1930s—the vice-president was Mr Long, a common first name for Vietnamese  
17 men. In contrast with Radio Hanoi in the late 1940s, which was almost entirely operated  
18 by the Vietnamese, and its flagship journal *Việt-Nhạc*, which was published solely in  
19 Vietnamese, these clubs made inadequate tokenistic gestures towards the indigenous  
20 population.  
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28 Cross-pollination between French language periodicals and Vietnamese daily  
29 newspapers was usually unidirectional (European news to Vietnamese papers) and  
30 incomplete. In spite of the presence of amateur broadcasters from the late 1920s  
31 onwards, it was not until 1936 that an article appeared in the Vietnamese periodical  
32 *Khoa Học* (Science) with the declarative title, 'Hanoi has a Radio Station' (issue 127,  
33 30 June 1936). This was their first public advertisement about the station for  
34 Vietnamese-language readers, although French-reading Vietnamese would have already  
35 been informed through French language guides and newspapers that targeted  
36 Vietnamese and other readers.  
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47 <INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>  
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54 <sup>4</sup> 'Création des diverses associations à Haiphong'. VNA-I, Fonds de la Résidence supérieure au  
55 Tonkin, d79728-02.  
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3 Figure 2: Photo of the studio at the Radio-Club de l'Indochine du Nord taken in the  
4 mid-1930s and published in *Ondes Indochinoises: Radio Hanoi* (n.d.).  
5

6 The colonial authorities' restrictions on indigenous engagement with radio  
7  
8 contributed to stunting the growth of this medium, and few of the early stations lasted  
9  
10 more than a couple of years. The first to close was Radio Sindex or, as it became known  
11  
12 shortly after its launch, Radio l'Indochine à Hải Phòng. An exchange between Mr  
13  
14 Bouchet in Hai Phong and the Resident Superier of Tonkin in Hanoi detailed the  
15  
16 process of shutting down the station after only one year. Bouchet's letter from 11  
17  
18 December 1929 explains how the local court ordered the society to pay compensation to  
19  
20 the director and return all the equipment:  
21  
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23  
24 The Society of Radio Indochine [in Hải Phòng] is in liquidation. This process was  
25  
26 initiated by its director, Mr. Bellemin. The Haiphong court has ordered the Society  
27  
28 to pay Mr. Bellemin \$10,000 in damages without delay, and a seizure of the  
29  
30 equipment has been made.<sup>5</sup>

31 The equipment included a 100-watt substation as a power source and 100 vacuum tubes  
32  
33 to broadcast the signal. Only 12 to 15 of the vacuum tubes were retrievable, with the  
34  
35 rest missing or damaged. Adverse climatic conditions were a perpetual challenge for the  
36  
37 Europeans. Their imported equipment was designed for more temperate, dry climates,  
38  
39 and they had limited time and resources to overcome these issues. Electrification had  
40  
41 not yet spread throughout the region either—in many parts of rural Vietnam this would  
42  
43 not happen until the 1990s. This limited the potential to enhance audience numbers and  
44  
45 build up sufficient independent revenue sources from advertisements. By the late 1930s,  
46  
47 when the stations in Hanoi and Saigon were finally in more secure financial positions,  
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53 <sup>5</sup> 'Engagements pris par la Société Radio-Indochine à Hải Phòng envers le gouvernement  
54  
55 provincial Yunnanais'. VNA-I, Archives Centrales de l'Indochine – Résidence Supérieure  
56  
57 au Tonkin, d40.988.  
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3 war broke out in Europe. Funding and equipment donors ceased contributions, and the  
4 expatriate radio hams abandoned their sound recording and broadcasting equipment  
5 (Figure 2). In contrast with curtailment of expatriate-produced content for radio at the  
6 outbreak of World War II, a few eager locals who were marginalised from production  
7 prior to the war acquisitioned the technology and, in certain cases, redeployed it in  
8 support of the anti-colonial struggle.  
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### 17 **Instability and insurrection during the Japanese occupation (1940–5)**

18  
19 The Japanese occupation of French Indochina (September 1940 to August 1945), the  
20 German occupation of Vichy France, and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45)  
21 disrupted the trajectories of broadcast media in mainland Southeast Asia up to 1945. On  
22 29 July 1941, the Vichy government signed a power-sharing agreement with the  
23 Japanese that permitted the French to maintain administrative control over public  
24 broadcasting during the occupation, albeit from their temporary federal capital in Da  
25 Lat. This agreement followed a decree on 20 November 1940 that banned the  
26 production and broadcast of any form of anti-imperial or anti-colonial broadcasts in  
27 public places (*Đạo Luật ngày 20 November 1940 về việc nghe tin vô tuyến điện truyền*  
28 *thanh tại các nơi công cộng*). An updated decree published in the newspaper *Tràng An*  
29 on 29 November 1941 specified that those found tuning into broadcasts by Mao's  
30 followers (*người Hồng-mao*) or any anti-French propaganda (*propagande*  
31 *antinationale*) would face extreme penalties. Cafes, tea houses, bars, hotels, theatres,  
32 clubs or any other public gathering place where these broadcasts were heard would be  
33 subject to closure for up to six months. Individuals found breaking these rules would  
34 have their radios confiscated, be subject to a fine of between 200 and 10,000 piastres  
35 and/or face a prison sentence of between six days and two years depending on the  
36 severity of their crime. While still struggling to contain anti-French propaganda, in June  
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3 1943 Governor General Jean Decoux wrote to the employees of Radio Saigon to  
4  
5 admonish them for straying from ‘the facts’ (les fait) about France’s positive  
6  
7 contribution to Indochina.<sup>6</sup> These harsh penalties and repeated pleas evidence the  
8  
9 fragility of the Franco-Japanese administration during the war.  
10

11 Writing on the military potentials of radio technology, David Marr observes,  
12  
13 ‘[t]he radio receiver acquired an almost magical capacity to seize information out of the  
14  
15 sky. Whoever controlled radio transmitters inside Indochina possessed considerable  
16  
17 communicative power’ (2013: 514). He estimates that by 1945 between two and three  
18  
19 thousand registered radio receivers were in Vietnam (ibid: 516). Operable radios were  
20  
21 used to pick up long-range broadcasts on the war in Europe. This information was often  
22  
23 rebroadcast by Radio Hanoi or Radio Saigon and then printed in local newspapers. On  
24  
25 31 December 1942, for instance, *Tràng An* included a page of news dedicated to reports  
26  
27 picked up by Radio Saigon. This included several updates from Saigon and Hanoi  
28  
29 followed by news from France and its colonies (Tangier, Rabat, Dakar), England, the  
30  
31 United States and Ankara. Reputable Hanoi-based newspaper outlets also owned radio  
32  
33 receivers, which they used to redistribute news from abroad, and Catholic parishes often  
34  
35 had one receiver to listen to news and reports from Europe.  
36  
37  
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39 These institutions needed suppliers to provide equipment and technical  
40  
41 expertise. In Hanoi, several Vietnamese former assistants and clerks to the European  
42  
43 radio hams were able to take over as storeowners. Radio Hanoi on Nhà Chung Street,  
44  
45 which was run by Chu Thịnh and employed Vietnamese staffers who had been trained  
46  
47 as assistants working for the Philips corporation (Nguyễn 1998: 25). In 1941, the  
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53 <sup>6</sup> ‘Délivrance des documents relatifs aux activités financiers des Services de l’Indochine à la  
54  
55 Radio-Saigon 1940, 1943, 1944’. VNA-I, Fonds de la Direction des Finances de  
56  
57 l’Indochine, d16875.  
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3 engineer Nguyễn Dực established his own eponymous radio store on Hàng Bài Street  
4  
5 where he distributed and repaired receivers and sold records of music from around the  
6  
7 world, which he had sourced on excursions to Bangkok and Singapore. These  
8  
9 distributors' most reliable income source during the occupation was from the sale of  
10  
11 Japanese records. They also sold public address systems for dance halls to play  
12  
13 recordings and traders to amplify their advertisements—according to his son, on 2  
14  
15 September 1945, Nguyễn Dực used one of these systems to broadcast Hồ Chí Minh's  
16  
17 voice when he read the Declaration of Independence in Bà Đình square.<sup>7</sup>  
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19

20 This example illustrates how Vietnamese entrepreneurs exploited a commercial  
21  
22 vacuum created during the Japanese occupation. Yet beyond a few wealthier families,  
23  
24 and neighbours who could hear the broadcasts through open windows, still only a  
25  
26 minority of the general public had access to radio receivers by the early 1940s. The  
27  
28 French administration required owners to register for a license, and frequently  
29  
30 confiscated receivers at times of unrest (Marr 1998: 11). As the decade progressed,  
31  
32 radio quickly shifted from the realm of the wealthy to a more accessible technology of  
33  
34 the masses. In spite of strict regulations to the contrary, Japanese broadcasters managed  
35  
36 to circulate messages in Vietnamese that encouraged pan-Asian unity (Marr 1997: 81–  
37  
38 82). Mass media were used to propagate the Japanese ideology of a Greater East Asia  
39  
40 Co-Prosperity Sphere (*Dai Tōa Kyōeiken*), which encouraged East and Southeast Asians  
41  
42 to unite together against the European colonisers. They also abstained from censoring  
43  
44 Vietnamese broadcasters who challenged the French. Following a 9 March 1945 coup,  
45  
46 the Japanese consolidated their power by confiscating receivers belonging to French  
47  
48 citizens (Marr 2013: 514). Later that year, as the Japanese position in the Pacific War  
49  
50 weakened, Vietnamese revolutionaries, who were aware of the potential of radio  
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56 <sup>7</sup> Interview with Nguyễn Lân Bình, 9 December 2016.  
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3 technology to communicate across rugged terrain to the illiterate masses, sought to  
4  
5 assert their own sonic power.  
6

7           During the August Revolution (*Cách mạng tháng Tám*) against French rule in  
8  
9 1945, the Việt Minh commandeered French and Japanese broadcasting equipment at  
10  
11 Đại La, just off Bạch Mai Street in southern Hanoi. Supporters of the movement who  
12  
13 had been trained by colonial sound engineers used this equipment to produce political  
14  
15 broadcasts that were interspersed with patriotic songs promoting the Communist Party  
16  
17 and its leader, Hồ Chí Minh (see also Goscha 2012). Lê, a former musician with the  
18  
19 group, reminisced about the sparse accompaniment of harmonica and banjo used when  
20  
21 they performed ‘Song of the Song Lo River’ (Trường ca Sông Lô) by composer of the  
22  
23 national anthem, Văn Cao, ‘Lo Giang’ (Lô Giang) by Lương Ngọc Trác, ‘Thao River’  
24  
25 (Du kích sông Thao) by incoming General Secretary of the Vietnam Musicians’  
26  
27 Association, Đỗ Nhuận, and the iconic radio melody, ‘Kill the Fascists’ (Diệt phát xít)  
28  
29 by Nguyễn Đình Thi (1995: 6–7).<sup>8</sup> By late 1946, the French had regained control of  
30  
31 most urban centres in Vietnam. Việt Minh radio—which would later become the official  
32  
33 national broadcaster, the VOV—made its final broadcast from Hanoi on the evening of  
34  
35 19 December 1946 to declare the beginning of the war of independence. The radio  
36  
37 technicians then moved their equipment to Chùa Trầm, an old temple in the hills  
38  
39 southwest of Hanoi. There they began broadcasting as a pirate station in a battle of the  
40  
41 airwaves with French-sponsored and licensed broadcasters in Hanoi (Vũ Hải, Lê and  
42  
43 Trần 2015: 44–50).  
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55 <sup>8</sup> After the First Indochina War, an instrumental version of ‘Kill the Fascists’ was recorded for  
56  
57 use as the signature musical jingle for the VOV.  
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### **Radio Hanoi during the First Indochina War (1946–54)**

In the city centre, Radio Hanoi (*Đài Phát thanh Hà Nội*) took over regular broadcasting responsibilities during the early stages of the First Indochina War (1946–54). Interim Vietnamese employees who had worked at the station during Japanese occupation took over more senior roles from 1946 onwards. No regular French or other European representatives were involved in production, as far as can be deduced from the archival records. However, just as in other contested colonial spaces (Scales 2010), colonial administrators and local sympathisers maintained a careful ear on broadcasts to avoid the dissemination of anti-colonial propaganda during those politically unstable times.

The Director General of Information and Press of the Provisional Central Government of Vietnam, Lê Văn Kim, was particularly active in his work on behalf of the station. Writing on 8 April 1949 to the publicist Pierre Argence in Paris, Lê responded to an advertisement he received the previous month from Archat-Dil Outremer about new equipment that could be purchased for the station:

For the realization of our programme, we will certainly have recourse to your organisation, whose experience and means have been confirmed. I am studying carefully the circular you have kindly sent me and will shortly submit to you full proposals. But today, I note in your leaflet a few articles of which I could place a firm order, after communication of your part of the conditions of purchase and delivery:

1. A magnetic tape recording apparatus, and the equipment therefor.
2. A double-plate disc recording apparatus and the material relating thereto.
3. The typewriter to write Vietnamese is of particular interest to us and we would like to know the cost (wholesale and retail).

This letter provides the only known evidence of an order for a sound recording device in Vietnam prior to 1954. Unfortunately, the equipment and any recordings made with it have not been preserved, but the request itself demonstrates the desire of these

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3 administrators to build a station that could produce its own recordings for broadcast,  
4  
5 maintain print and audio records of those activities and produce printed documents that  
6  
7 could advertise the broadcasts to a Vietnamese readership.  
8

9 The revived station appears initially to have been spearheaded by the influential  
10 musician and composer, Thẩm Oánh (1916–96). Thẩm Oánh grew up in Hanoi, where  
11 he studied art music and became known for his compositions of pre-war music (*nhạc*  
12 *tiền chiến*; Lê 1970). Alongside his contribution to the radio, between 1948 and 1950 he  
13 served as editor of the journal *Việt Nhạc* (*Nguyệt san Việt Nhạc*), a vital ‘organ for the  
14 promotion and propagation of music in Vietnam’ (Gibbs 2017). The journal was  
15 structured similarly to the French-language *BORCIN*, which was in circulation when  
16 Thẩm Oánh was honing his skills as a musician and educator in Hanoi. *Việt Nhạc*  
17 articles of several pages in length introduce European art music composers and  
18 conductors and popular musicians from Europe and North America, provide  
19 information on forthcoming live concerts in Hanoi and music broadcasts by Radio  
20 Hanoi, and include promotional advertisements for local products including record and  
21 radio dealerships in Hanoi, Hai Phong and Saigon.<sup>9</sup> The *Việt Nhạc* journal was  
22 exclusively produced by Vietnamese writers and written in Vietnamese for a native  
23 readership. Issues of *Việt Nhạc* fulfilled a similar function to radio guides in the  
24 imperial centres of France, Great Britain, Germany and the United States by giving  
25 ‘listeners a way of not only listening to music, but also thinking and talking about it’  
26 (Pasler 2015: 246). This illustrates the impact of the *mission civilisatrice* on Vietnamese  
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53 <sup>9</sup> Examples of the introductory articles include a two-page biographical sketch on Louis  
54 Armstrong (*Việt Khúc* 1949) and three pages on the Italian conductor, Pierino Gamba  
55 (*Việt Khúc* 1950).  
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3 culture, even while the Việt Minh and other revolutionary factions were fighting for  
4  
5 independence.

6  
7 In reaction to anti-colonial content produced by the Việt Minh and the Japanese  
8  
9 military band-inspired revolutionary themes that sporadically infiltrated the airwaves  
10  
11 during World War II, all Radio Hanoi programmes had to be approved by Lê Văn Kim  
12  
13 before they could be broadcast. Perhaps as a result of these restrictions, Thẩm Oánh  
14  
15 stepped back from his role with the station sometime in 1949 after he had invited  
16  
17 notable colleagues from Saigon to join the radio music ensemble. He was replaced by  
18  
19 an administrator who was willing to devote more time to typing up playlists for the  
20  
21 colonial administration than producing new content for listeners and readers. The  
22  
23 following memo from Lê, dated 17 May 1949, details the new administrative structure:  
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25

26  
27 The broadcasting department of the Voice of Vietnam (Đài Tiếng nói Việt Nam) is  
28  
29 entrusted to Mr. DAM QUANG THIEN from Monday 16/5/49. The latter will  
30  
31 report to the Director General of Information at the end of each week on the results  
32  
33 of the new programmes for broadcast and propose any necessary modifications.  
34  
35 Broadcasts in French continue to be the responsibility of Mr Rene LE VAN DUC.<sup>10</sup>

36  
37 Đàm Quang Thiện was a doctor, author, film pioneer and member of the first  
38  
39 Vietnamese parliament (Đại biểu Quốc hội Việt Nam khóa I; founded in 1946)  
40  
41 representing the Việt Cách party. A Việt Minh military court sentenced him to death.  
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43 This background suggests that he was senior to Thẩm Oánh, also came from  
44  
45 a cultural background, was active in politics and had a reason to be strongly anti-  
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52 <sup>10</sup> ‘Chương trình phát thanh âm nhạc của đài phát thanh tiếng nói Việt Nam, do ban Việt nhạc  
53  
54 trình bày 1949’.; VNA-I, Phòng Sở Thông tin tuyên truyền Bắc Việt (hereafter PSTTBV),  
55  
56 d219. Lê’s reference to the station as the Voice of Vietnam using the Vietnamese term  
57  
58 rather than Radio Hanoi challenges the standard historical narrative about the VOV.  
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3 communist, hence his suitability for this role at the station.<sup>11</sup>  
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5 The prominence of Vietnamese language during Đam's stewardship indicates  
6 that the French-funded Radio Hanoi was now directed primarily towards an indigenous  
7 Vietnamese audience. Partial documentation of the approval requests from this period  
8 are recorded in the VNA-1, and can be cross-referenced with the print advertisements  
9 for these broadcasts that were published in the specialised journal, *Nguyệt san Việt*  
10 *Nhạc*, and the more accessible daily newspaper, *Tạp chí Tia Sáng*, to describe the  
11 typical format of daily broadcasts.<sup>12</sup> In 1949, Radio Hanoi broadcast for over three  
12 hours in the morning entirely in Vietnamese and one hour in the evening in several  
13 languages. The evening broadcast was split into 20 minutes of French language news  
14 and 40 minutes of Vietnamese folksongs: *chèo cổ* (old-style *chèo* theatre), central  
15 Vietnamese folksongs (*ca Huế*) and northern folksongs feature prominently. Folk singer  
16 (*ca sĩ dân gian*) Mộng Hoàn and instrumentalist Nguyễn Trần Du were regularly  
17 advertised as soloists on these evening shows; these musicians performed Vietnamese  
18 folk music for Vietnamese audiences who may have had ties with the colonial  
19 establishment.  
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37 An editor's playlist from the first weekend of June 1951 provides further  
38 illustration of the place and relative importance of each programme to the broadcasters.  
39 By this stage, programming ran from 7:00am to 1:30pm and from 5:58pm to 9:30pm  
40 each day. The morning broadcast ended and the evening broadcast started with two  
41 minutes of 'Music on a Green Day' (*nhạc ngày xanh*), presumably a rendition of the  
42 song by Dương Thiệu Tước (1915–95), an important figure in the *tân nhạc* or *nhạc cải*  
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53 <sup>11</sup> <http://dbqh.na.gov.vn/daibieu/19/0000000320/Đam-Quang-Thien.aspx> (accessed 21 June  
54 2018). I am grateful to Jason Gibbs for directing me to this information.  
55

56 <sup>12</sup> 'Chương trình phát thanh của Đài phát thanh tiếng nói Việt Nam'. VNA-I, PSTTBV, d220.  
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3 *cách* new music movement which emerged from Hanoi's tea house culture in the 1930s  
4 and 1940s.<sup>13</sup> Between each feature, which usually lasted between 10 and 30 minutes  
5 depending on the relevance of the programme, the editor played a musical interlude  
6 (labelled '*nhạc nối*'). News programmes were broadcast in Vietnamese, French, English  
7 and Chinese at fixed times during the day, and one update was broadcast on events in  
8 the United States. A second, longer form Vietnamese news programme was 'read  
9 slowly' at 8:01am to offer an opportunity for additional detail and elaboration. The  
10 frequency of these programmes and their place in the schedule illustrate their perceived  
11 importance for the editors.

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Several music programmes were scheduled throughout the day on Friday 1 June  
1951. One 26-minute programme dedicated to the music ensemble Việt Nhạc (*ban đàn  
Viet-Nhac*) at 1:01pm, one *cải lương* reformed theatre programme, 21 minutes of  
records from abroad played at 7:40am and a further feature of pre-recorded art music  
from Europe in the evening. On 2 June, the Việt Nhạc programme was extended to 59  
minutes—by far the longest programme on the schedule—and a programme dedicated  
to central Vietnamese folk songs (*ca Huế*) replaced the *cải lương* feature. This rotation  
of programmes dedicated to Vietnamese traditional music, European art music and  
popular music from Europe and North America remained relatively consistent  
throughout 1951.

The styles of music played on gramophone records are listed on a separate sheet,  
which provides the only documentation available on the actual pieces of music played  
on the radio during this period.<sup>14</sup> On Friday 1 June, three minutes was dedicated to each

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<sup>13</sup> For further information on *tân nhạc* see Henry (2005), Phạm (2006) and Gibbs (2008).

<sup>14</sup> 'Biên bản phát thanh của Đài phát thanh Hà Nội'. VNA-I, PSTTBV, d152 and 'Biên bản phát  
thanh của Đài phát thanh Hà Nội'. VNA-I, PSTTBV, d71.

1  
2 track to cover the full 21 minutes dedicated to the programme. This would have given  
3  
4 the editor just enough time to change the record between each track, and no time would  
5  
6 be spared for discussion or introduction. On Saturday 2 June, again three minutes was  
7  
8 allocated to each track in the morning and the playlist and programme were shortened  
9  
10 accordingly. Listeners could access broadcast timings via local newspapers, especially  
11  
12 *Tia Sáng*, and develop more in-depth knowledge via the radio guide, *Việt Nhạc*. Those  
13  
14 familiar with music at the tea houses of the early 1940s would recognise the musical  
15  
16 styles, instruments and voices of singers such as Tino Rossi, Josephine Baker, Maurice  
17  
18 Chevalier and Rina Ketty, which reinforced the Western European-influenced  
19  
20 cosmopolitan culture of colonial Hanoi.<sup>15</sup> The same records, and in certain cases  
21  
22 perhaps even the same physical discs, were played on air via gramophone player.  
23  
24 Examples included contemporary hits and slightly older but still popular recordings in  
25  
26 French such as ‘Les Vieux Bateaux’ (‘The Old Boats’, Edith Piaf, 1948) and ‘Si Vous  
27  
28 L’Avez Compris’ (‘If You Could Understand’, Tino Rossi, 1938). Playlists from the  
29  
30 period illustrate that popular chanson, arias from operettas in French and light  
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38 <sup>15</sup> Curiously, both Baker and Chevalier recorded versions of ‘The Little Tonkin Girl’ (*Le Petite*  
39 *Tonkinoise*), which included a chorus that could sound playful to Parisian audiences or  
40  
41 offensive in an oppressed colonial setting:  
42  
43

44 It’s me who is his little,  
45 His Anana, his Anana, his Annamite  
46 I am a vivid, I am charming  
47 Like a little singing bird.  
48 He calls me his lil’ bourgeoise,  
49 His Tonkiki, his Tonkiki, his Tonkin girl.  
50 Others look at him with tender eyes,  
51 But it’s me he loves the best.  
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3 instrumental tracks imported from Europe were the dominant pre-recorded styles  
4  
5 broadcast to the listeners of Radio Hanoi.  
6

7 In the evening, a shorter music programme started at 9:01pm and was dedicated  
8  
9 to instrumental Western art music. On 2 June 1951, for instance, listeners were treated  
10  
11 to a 1943 recording of Schumann's *Violin Sonata No. 2 in D minor*, Op 121, by Adolf  
12  
13 Busch (violin) and Rudolf Serkin (piano) (Columbia Y3 34639) followed by Alfred  
14  
15 Cortot playing Schumann's *Etudes Symphoniques Op 13*, recorded for Gramophone in  
16  
17 1929 (DB-1325). By December of the same year, when finances were under increasing  
18  
19 pressure as the war intensified, the musical content for the evening programme changed  
20  
21 to light popular styles similar to those played in the morning. The diligent recording and  
22  
23 archiving of these playlists illustrates how the administration monitored broadcasts and  
24  
25 maintained close control over radio as a means of propagating French soft power in the  
26  
27 region.  
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30  
31 Letters provide additional insights on the collection of records that were played  
32  
33 on air. A letter from Mr Kiang Si-Ling, Consul General of China in Hanoi to Lê Văn  
34  
35 Kim, dated 23 March 1949, demonstrates that beyond funding from the French  
36  
37 administration, the station also relied on donations to build its collection of recordings:  
38  
39

40 In reply to your letter No. 288 / DGI of March 9, 1949, I have the honor to send  
41  
42 you by separate package 8 Chinese (modern) music records.

43 I will not fail to send you other (classics) as soon as I have found them.  
44  
45

46 No Chinese recordings are listed in the approval requests. They may have been played  
47  
48 as an introduction or interlude to the Chinese language news programmes, included in  
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50 programmes for which the official requests are now lost, or simply donated as a gesture  
51  
52 of goodwill.  
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3 This diverse array of international musical styles—French popular, European  
4 art, Vietnamese traditional and popular, and perhaps also Chinese and other regional  
5 traditional musics—was broadcast every week to thousands of people in Tonkin  
6  
7 (northern Vietnam) and further afield. Recordings of popular *chanson* played in the  
8  
9 morning and instrumental art music in the evening contributed a particular cosmopolitan  
10  
11 flavour to musical life in the urban centres of French Indochina. These recordings must  
12  
13 have whetted the public's appetite for Vietnamese language renditions of popular songs  
14  
15 and built a fervent following for the Việt Nhạc ensemble.  
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### 21 **Forgotten musicians of the Việt Nhạc**

22  
23  
24 Few individual track lists were recorded for programmes of the Việt Nhạc ensemble or  
25  
26 other features performed live on air by the artists of Radio Hanoi. The following  
27  
28 information is gleaned from individual payslips of the station employees in 1949. These  
29  
30 payslips include the names, roles and salaries of all performing artists at the station that  
31  
32 year. When compiled into graphic format (Table 1), the information illustrates the size  
33  
34 of the permanent music ensembles already broadcasting by the time Việt Minh radio  
35  
36 (i.e., the VOV) announced their supposedly pioneering plan to establish a radio music  
37  
38 troupe in 1949 (Phan et al. 1989). Altogether 13 instrumental musicians (*nhạc sĩ*), six  
39  
40 singers (*ca sĩ*) and four voice actors (*kịch sĩ*) were paid regular salaries at Radio Hanoi.  
41  
42 They were assigned to one of two roles: either directly to the station (*Đài phát thanh*) to  
43  
44 perform theatrical plays and traditional folksongs (*dân ca*) or as part of the Việt Nhạc  
45  
46 performance troupe. The former group could have represented each of the cultural  
47  
48 regions of French Indochina—*cải lương* for the south (Nam kỳ or Cochinchina), unless  
49  
50 northern versions were broadcast, *ca Huế* for the centre (Trung kỳ or Annam) and *hát*  
51  
52 *chèo* for the north (Bắc kỳ or Tonkin). However, the northern and central Vietnamese  
53  
54 accents and dialects of the performers would have inflected the renditions and perhaps  
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also appealed to their regional listeners.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Salary</i>
Vũ Thành	Musician and conductor, Việt-Nhạc	3,300
Trần Văn Nhơn	Musician, Đài Phát thanh	2,500
Vĩnh Trân	Musician, Đài Phát thanh	2,500
Anh Hồng	Voice Actor, Đài Phát thanh	2,250
Bùi Thị Loan (Châu Loan)	Singer, Đài Phát thanh	2,200
Đàm Thị Hoa (Mộng Hoàn)	Singer, Đài Phát thanh	2,000
Nguyễn Thái Quy	Musician, Việt-Nhạc	1,800
Bùi Ngọc Bảo (Ngọc Bảo)	Singer, Việt-Nhạc	1,600
Đỗ Thị Nga (Minh Đỗ)	Singer, Việt-Nhạc	1,600
Nguyễn Đại	Musician, Việt-Nhạc	1,600
Nguyễn Hách Hiên	Musician, Việt-Nhạc	1,600
Nguyễn Thiện Tơ	Musician, Việt-Nhạc	1,600
Nguyễn Trần Dư	Musician, Việt-Nhạc	1,600
Nguyễn Trí Nhượng	Musician, Việt-Nhạc	1,600
Nguyễn Văn Sợi	Musician, Việt-Nhạc	1,600
Nguyễn Thị Thọ (Bích Thọ)	Singer, Việt-Nhạc	1,500
Nguyễn Thị Vinh (Ngọc Lan)	Voice Actor, Đài Phát thanh	1,500
Nguyễn Thị Kim Lich	Voice Actor, Đài Phát thanh	1,500
Linh Tâm	Voice Actor, Đài Phát thanh	1,500
Trần Quan[ <i>g</i> ] Minh	Musician, Việt-Nhạc	1,500
Đào Khanh	Musician, Việt-Nhạc	1,300
Leisoui Ming	Promotions, Đài Phát thanh	1,300
Lý Trung Dung	Translator, Đài Phát thanh	1,200
Vũ Tuấn Đức	Musician, Đài Phát thanh	1,000
Bùi Mè (Ba Mè)	Singer, Đài Phát thanh	800
Nguyễn Thị Bảo Xuyên	Promotions, Đài Phát thanh	800
Hoàng Văn Đức	Promotions, Đài Phát thanh	500
Trịnh Đình Phi	Promotions, Đài Phát thanh	500

Table 1: Monthly payments to employees of Radio Hanoi in 1949.<sup>16</sup>

The salaries give an indication of the status of individuals and their respective roles. Musicians were among the highest paid staff at the station, the promotions team

<sup>16</sup> Monthly salaries at the station were calculated according to the national fiscal budget for the year (chapter 16, article 4, section 1). Salaries were paid in Vietnamese đồng even though French Indochinese piastres were still in circulation. The purchasing power of this currency is difficult to ascertain due to corruption, currency manipulations and dramatic fluctuations in the exchange rate during the war.

Although '*nhạc sĩ*' typically translates as composer, at Radio Hanoi the composers doubled as instrumental musicians. Hence, they are labelled with the more generic term: musician.

Information collated from 'Bổ nhiệm các nhân viên vào làm việc tại Đài phát thanh 1949', VNA-I, PSTTBV, d56-1. The spellings of these names are taken directly from the source and amended only where the names could be confirmed elsewhere.

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2  
3 (*quảng bá viên*) and translators (*người dịch*) were among the lowest paid, and three of  
4  
5 the four regular voice actors (*kịch sĩ*) appear in the lower half of the table. Only Anh  
6  
7 Hồng, a voice actor who was known for his singing ability and recitation of spoken  
8  
9 theatre, was paid near the top of the scale. By tracing the biographies of the more  
10  
11 notable performers, these payslips indicate the artistic styles that were performed live on  
12  
13 air and the standing of particular musical and dramatic styles within the artistic  
14  
15 landscape of Hanoi and its environs in the mid-twentieth century.

16  
17  
18 The ensemble was directed by Vũ Thành (1926–87), a conductor, composer and  
19  
20 musician who honed his musical skills in the tea houses of Hanoi in the early 1940s. He  
21  
22 learned flute from a French musician in Hanoi, occasionally sang, and was most  
23  
24 renowned as a guitarist (Quỳnh 1988: 19–20). Phạm Duy, one of Vietnam's three most  
25  
26 influential musicians of the twentieth century alongside Văn Cao and Trịnh Công Sơn,  
27  
28 wrote in later life on his blog about the first tea houses of Hanoi ('Phòng Trà Đầu Tiên  
29  
30 ở Hà Nội'). He recalled seeing Vũ Thành play flute and left-handed guitar in the Tuyết  
31  
32 Sơn Tea House at the intersection of Hàng Bông and Thợ Nhuộm, two famous streets in  
33  
34 the Old Quarter of the city:  
35  
36

37  
38 [Vũ Thành] was the first composer of Vietnamese modern music (*tân nhạc*) ... The  
39  
40 songs (*ca khúc*) of Vũ Thành were very elegant, like a breath of fresh air for the  
41  
42 New Music movement (*Tân Nhạc*). ... Still with the same emotions of other  
43  
44 musicians from that time, with references to love of the homeland, poetry, sorrow  
45  
46 ... [and] the beauty of nature ... but the songs of Vũ Thành were not set to tango,  
47  
48 rumba or slow foxtrot like those in the semi-classical style of the West, they  
49  
50 sounded very luxurious and noble.<sup>17</sup>

51  
52 This tribute praises a musician who has been ignored by scholars in Vietnam. In  
53  
54 describing Vũ Thành's compositions as luxurious, noble and distinct from those heard

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57 <sup>17</sup> <http://www.phamduy2010.com/02sokhao/phongtra3.php> (accessed 18 January 2017).

1  
2  
3 in ‘the West’, Phạm Duy highlights the originality of the compositions, which were  
4  
5 largely written in later life. Vũ Thành was a key member of Radio Hanoi, as is evinced  
6  
7 by his salary and job title. He wielded greater influence over the musical styles that  
8  
9 people listened to in the city than any other Vietnamese person had done up to that  
10  
11 point. Between 1948 and the early 1950s, he had the largest listenership, and he exposed  
12  
13 them to a new world of Vietnamese traditional and modern music, regional styles of  
14  
15 East and Southeast Asian music, and art and popular styles from Western Europe and  
16  
17 North America.  
18

19  
20 The other outstanding figure composing in a contemporary modern style for  
21  
22 Radio Hanoi was Trần Văn Nhon (1912–73), whom Thẩm Oánh had invited up from  
23  
24 Saigon to join the Việt Nhạc. Trần’s most enduring composition, ‘Hanoi 1949’ (Hà Nội  
25  
26 49), illustrates his skilled appropriation and localisation of the popular chanson style for  
27  
28 Vietnamese listeners. The melancholic lyrics romanticise pre-war Hanoi in the autumn,  
29  
30 recall its century-old legacy and lament the ongoing turbulence in the city.  
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35	<i>Bước men quanh hồ Hoàn Kiếm giữa thu chiều ủa,</i>	Strolling round Hoan Kiem lake on an autumn afternoon,
36		
37	<i>Tôi nhớ tháng ngày sống nơi Thủ Đô hồi qua.</i>	I remember the days I lived in the capital.
38		
39	<i>Hồ đẹp gương nước liễu xưa la đà bóng hồ,</i>	Long ago the lake was beautiful with glistening water
40		reflecting the willow trees above,
41		
42	<i>Đời vui thái bình trước lúc chiến tranh!</i>	Oh, the peace of life before the war!
43		
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47 Trần avoids excessive partisanship by emphasising the pre-1945 history of the city. The  
48  
49 lyrics praise the spirit of the Vietnamese people—his audience—without making  
50  
51 reference to other ethnic groups or nationalities, and descriptions of environmental  
52  
53 degradation allude to wider issues in the colonial capital without explicitly apportioning  
54  
55 blame, until he wishes for ‘this time of sorrow’ to end. This final phrase implies that life  
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would be easier if the insurrectionary forces of the Việt Minh and others ended their struggle.

Hà Nội yêu quý! Là chốn lịch sử ngàn năm,	Hanoi beloved! A place with a thousand years of history,
Là trái tim của Việt Nam, là chính hồn Việt anh dũng!	The heart of Vietnam, the soul of the heroic Vietnamese!
Là nơi đẫm thấm, máu xương biết bao anh hùng,	This place is drenched, blood and bones of many heroes,
Chính nơi muôn đời ghi dấu sử xanh thắm ghi chiến công!	The eternal place to mark a clear sign of victory!
Hà Nội yêu quý!	Hanoi beloved!
Cầu chúc cho ngày ấm êm,	We wish for a quiet day,
Rày mau chấm dứt tháng ngày than khóc ưu phiền!	Hurry and end this time of sorrow!

The musical setting reflects the prevalence of Western European popular music in late-colonial Hanoi (see Gibbs 2008). ‘Our songs following Western melodies’ (*hát lời ta theo điệu Tây*) was a popular compositional trend in the 1930s (Tô, Chí and Nguyễn [1977] 2003: 688–90). By the 1940s, composers in Hanoi moved on to writing original melodies inflected with Western European musical traits. Thâm Oánh described the former trend as an attempt to find the ‘Vietnamese Tino Rossi’. According to him, composers in China and Japan inspired the shift to original compositions (cited in Gibbs 2003/4: 73).

On a Saturday evening in January 1949, the popular singer Ngọc Bảo (1925–2006) performed ‘Hanoi 49’ on Radio Hanoi (*Tia Sáng*, 19 January 1949).<sup>18</sup> In addition to his work at Radio Hanoi, Ngọc Bảo regularly performed in the tea houses of the city where musicians sang and played along with popular gramophone recordings imported

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<sup>18</sup> Ngọc Bảo later became renowned as a singer of revolutionary songs. He is also credited as the first Vietnamese musician to be invited to the Pathé-Marconi Studios in Paris to record. In 1951, he recorded several songs with Guy Théven and his Orchestra. Five of these recordings are included on the recently released compilation, (*Nhớ Việt Nam Xưa*) *Nostalrique Vietnam: Chansons de Charme, Poèmes et Prières 1937–1954* (2014, Budapest Music Center, Catalogue no. 860245).

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2  
3 from abroad. Quoted in his obituary, Ngọc Bảo recalled his exposure to these European  
4 and American recordings at the same club frequented by musicians he would later work  
5 with at Radio Hanoi:  
6  
7

8  
9  
10 I often skipped school to walk to the nearby Thiên Phúc Tea House on Hàng Gai  
11 street and listen to Tino [Rossi]'s voice. I spoke and sang along really well. Every  
12 evening at 9 or 10pm, they turned on his music, and to this day I pause, enraptured,  
13 reciting from the beginning of every phrase, every word. (Quoted in Trần 2006)  
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16

17 Ngọc Bảo recorded 'Hanoi 49' in a crooning style with Trần Văn Lý's band for  
18 Polyphon (57015). After a brief instrumental introduction, Ngọc Bảo enters in a playful,  
19 florid style with winding phrases sung using rapid, narrow vibrato and at a gentle  
20 volume suitable for intimate settings. The volume of the vocal line on the recording is  
21 uneven because the singer is also acting for his audience in the recording studio. One  
22 can almost hear the smile on his face as he moves from side to side, never consistently  
23 singing directly into the microphone, because he may have been more attuned to the  
24 tangible interaction with his live studio audience than with the inanimate recording  
25 device in front of him.  
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37 Trần's preference for Western European musical styles is evident in the score to  
38 'Hanoi 49'. Written in a chanson style typical of Parisian café-concerts or European  
39 operettas of the 1920s and 1930s, the instrumental accompaniment comprises a small  
40 chamber ensemble of string-bass, wind instruments and piano. His arrangement for light  
41 café orchestra is remarkably similar to 'A Violin in the Night' (Un Violin dans la Nuit),  
42 recorded by Tino Rossi in 1935 for Columbia Records (CL5465). On Ngọc Bảo's  
43 recording, a flute takes over the melody at the vocal break and is answered by a lower-  
44 pitched clarinet. String bass and piano maintain the harmonic rhythm while saxophones  
45 and a trumpet accompany the vocal line with an improvisatory countermelody. Ngọc  
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3 clarinet interludes and countermelodies fill the musical spaces at pauses between  
4 Rossi's phases, and harmonies shift from minor in the verse to major in the chorus, with  
5 a dramatic *ritardando* by the singer leading up to these transitions. In 'Hanoi 49', these  
6 harmonic shifts follow the lyrics as they describe contemporary (minor) and pre-war  
7 (major) Hanoi. Each phrase in the accompaniment of both songs ends with a heavy  
8 upbeat dominant chord followed by a light downbeat resolution to the tonic. In Ngô  
9 Bảo's recording, this emphasis is most evident in the final two chords. His recording  
10 ends with a strong, *sostenuto* dominant followed by an inaudible resolution to the tonic,  
11 perhaps just after the maximum track length was exceeded.  
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22 These lyrical and musical features exemplify the music of the Việt Nhạc  
23 ensemble. The recording combines traits of the tân nhạc movement with Western  
24 European trends, all of which were made accessible by cultural currents that were  
25 facilitated by French colonial rule. The ensemble alternated between these trend-setting  
26 modern styles and local folksongs and folklore in Vietnamese as they sought to  
27 represent the majority ethnic group of Vietnam, their largest potential listenership,  
28 through contemporary forms of Vietnamese music.<sup>19</sup> This diversity of styles became  
29 difficult to maintain when the flow of resources and recordings from Europe slowed.  
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39 As opposition to the recolonisation of Indochina grew in France and substantial  
40 material support for the Vietnamese communists began to arrive from Mao Zedong's  
41 communist China (1949 onwards), the People's Army of Vietnam were able to reverse  
42 the balance of power around the middle of 1950 (Brocheux and Hémery 2009: 361–70).  
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53 <sup>19</sup> See Ó Briain (2018) for a consideration of musical representations of minority ethnic groups  
54 in the Vietnamese media.  
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3 sources for creative material were less accessible, and French officials gradually  
4  
5 reduced their financial backing and contribution of technical resources to the station.  
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7 The first indication that the musicians were unhappy appeared in the form of a  
8  
9 letter of complaint from one of the highest paid singers, Mộng Hoàn, to the station's  
10  
11 director on 30 March 1950. Even though they were experiencing one of their most  
12  
13 active periods, Mộng Hoàn complained that she was not being repaid adequately for the  
14  
15 money she had to give to her accompanying musicians. Vũ Thành followed up with  
16  
17 another written plea for support on 21 December 1950, and then the senior musicians  
18  
19 sent a co-authored letter of complaint on 18 January 1951. Finally, on 11 June 1951,  
20  
21 Director General of Information Phạm Toàn wrote to the station's employees to renew  
22  
23 their contracts. 15 employees were retained. Mộng Hoàn, author of the first letter of  
24  
25 complaint, was not. Their contracts were only renewed for a period of six months from  
26  
27 30 June to 31 December 1951.<sup>20</sup> One month later, Director of Information in northern  
28  
29 Vietnam Trần Quang Cẩn wrote to the Head of the Ministry of Finance and the  
30  
31 Financial Control Centre to explain that although they had promised to pay the  
32  
33 employees' salaries, he did not have a sufficient budget to support the station for more  
34  
35 than a few months.<sup>21</sup> Playlist approval requests continued until the beginning of 1952,  
36  
37 which suggests that Radio Hanoi maintained a skeleton staff despite the cutbacks, but  
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39 their activities appear to have ended shortly thereafter.  
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52 <sup>20</sup> 'Về việc trả lương cho các nhân viên của Đài Phát thanh Hà Nội. 1950-1951'. VNA-I,  
53 PSTTBV, d248.

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55 <sup>21</sup> 'Về việc trả lương cho các nghệ sĩ công tác với Đài phát thanh Hà Nội của Sở Thông tin  
56 tuyên truyền Bắc Việt 1951'. VNA-I, PSTTBV, d247.  
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### Political ideology and music

Bothwell argues that pre-2011 revolution Syrian radio broadcasts excluded large segments of the population from their definitions of ‘Syrian youths’ by portraying ‘a state-sanctioned map of Syria’s future, which promised a place in that future only for certain types of listeners to the detriment of others’ (2018: 105). Radio Hanoi empowered many of its listeners by positioning popular local styles such as *ca Huế* and *cải lương* alongside international hits mostly produced in France and neighbouring European countries. However, segments of the population found closer political and cultural ties with the insurrectionary Việt Minh broadcasts concurrently available on receivers in northern Vietnam. When the Việt Minh returned to Hanoi to occupy the former premises of Radio Hanoi on Quán Sứ Street in the mid-1950s, they were able to establish a robust national media network by building on the creative foundations, sedimented technologies and attentive listenership of Radio Hanoi. The newly legitimised station pivoted from a cultural cosmopolitanism influenced by Western European trends to forms of programming that drew ideological and musical inspiration from the Soviet Union, China and other friendly socialist states. During the transition from colonial to postcolonial politics, when Vietnamese communism replaced French Indochinese capitalism, one dominant form of cosmopolitanism replaced another as a means of buttressing the political establishment.

Creative artists who were unwilling to produce art in the style of socialist realism either moved to the more liberal South or abstained from public performance. Musicians such as Thẩm Oánh, Vũ Thành and Trần Văn Nhon moved to Saigon in the 1950s, where the *tân nhạc* movement thrived until 1975 (Henry 2005). Despite many key figures in the *tân nhạc* movement hailing from central or northern Vietnam, experimental forms of cultural cosmopolitanism that fed the birth of the movement were suffocated in the North. A prominent study of the influence of European music on

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2  
3 Vietnamese song from 1930 to 1950, which implicitly foregrounds musicians based in  
4 Hanoi, ignores all of the Radio Hanoi musicians in favour of naming composers who  
5 remained acceptable to communist cadres post-1954 (Vũ 1996). State institutions and a  
6 sizeable proportion of the population now memorialise the music and musicians that  
7 replaced the Việt Nhạc ensemble on public radio in the DRV. This memorialisation  
8 conjures a latent animosity and suspicion towards nonconformist cultural influences. By  
9 retelling the forgotten story of the Việt Nhạc ensemble at Radio Hanoi, this article  
10 partially diffuses that tension by explaining its origin: the emergence of new, rigidly  
11 socialist musical styles in the late 1950s was made possible by the forced silencing of  
12 another vibrant performing arts scene, one which provided the musical and  
13 technological foundations for the establishment of an independent Vietnam.  
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