

**The 1988-89 Saxophone Solo Recitals at the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ Việt Nam*  
(From the files of *Quyền Văn Minh: A Jazz Life Story*)**

*Stan BH Tan-Tangbau\** and *Quyền Văn Minh\*\**

Abstract:

In 1988 and 1989, Quyền Văn Minh, a Vietnamese saxophonist with a state song and dance troupe, gave two consecutive solo recitals at the prestigious *Hội Nhạc Sĩ Việt Nam* [Association of Musicians in Vietnam] featuring three genres of instrumental music: mainstream Classical Music, Vietnamese Chamber Music and International Light Music. Under the genre of International Light Music, Minh was in fact playing Jazz. The two recitals could be seen as balancing acts on a knife's edge for Minh. These were years when the Đổi Mới reforms were still being carefully and gradually tested, and contested. It was a time when ideological dogmatism of the socialist revolution still permeated every aspect of life in Vietnam. The success of the recitals marked a key turning point in the story of Jazz in Vietnam. Minh's narrative is not one of domination and resistance that framed every scholarly tale of how the Đổi Mới reforms came about. Instead, it is about an individual exploring the possibilities of life in the limited context of difficult times. And it tells of how artistic free spiritedness was manifested in a latent fluidity, which allowed it to speak the prescribed language sanctioned by authoritarianism and cultural essentialism, and yet be unconfined by such dogmatism, subtly seeping through the crevices and working on the seams to create something new.

Keywords: Jazz, Vietnamese music, Đổi Mới, Life Stories, Quyền Văn Minh

\* Dr. Stan BH Tan-Tangbau is Associate Professor at Akita International University. Stan started out as a Vietnamologist focusing on agrarian change and ethnic relations before expanding his research to cover the Southeast Asian Massif. In 2010, Stan founded Kachin Life Stories, a public autoethnographic project designed for the Kachin people originating from the uplands of northern Myanmar, and also Yunnan (China) and Arunachal Pradesh (India). He believes in producing knowledge with stakeholders, for stakeholders and by stakeholders in a multi-directional, open and inclusive knowledge ecology. Stan is currently building on the foundations of #kachinlifestories to develop a more ambitious project to help remake our ethnographic understanding of Transboundary Continental Southeast Asia where China meets India. In spite of all the changes in his professional life, Stan remains a Vietnamologist at heart.

\*\*Maestro Quyền Văn Minh is a recipient of the Eminent Artist Award from the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Minh has recorded ten Jazz albums to date, beginning with *Birth '99* released in 2000. He is the owner and resident principal musician of *Bình Minh Jazz Club* in Hà Nội, which has been around since 1997. Minh is one of the premier musicians in the Vietnam music circle, rising to prominence in the late 1970s. He has performed with various leading state song and dance troupes, experimental music ensembles, the Vietnam National Symphony Orchestra and of course, his own Jazz groups, namely the Red River Jazz Band and the Red River Jazz Big Band. Minh has performed in many international Jazz festivals since 2001. He has been teaching at the *Học Viện Âm Nhạc Quốc Gia Việt Nam* [Vietnam National Academy of Music] (formerly the Hà Nội National Music Conservatoire of Vietnam) since 1989, being the first teacher of Jazz Saxophone at the conservatoire. Minh plays nightly at the Jazz club.

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## Prelude

Hà Nội, 2017. You could walk into a Starbucks and enjoy a signature frappuccino while listening to the music of Miles Davis in the background and watch the world go by behind the thick glass windows that block out the soundscape of the streets of Hà Nội. You could indulge in the hip global café experience of coffee, dimmed lighting, sofa chairs and Jazz (or World Music).<sup>1</sup> You could Uber your way around, or better still, UberMoto your way through the traffic jams and narrow lanes of the fast changing historical capital city of Vietnam. All these amidst the *phở* [Vietnamese rice flat noodles], *bánh mì* [Vietnamese bread], *cà phê sữa đá* [iced milk coffee], *nón lá* [conical thatched hat], yellow star red T-shirt and relics of war that are emblems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Vietnam experience. Hà Nội has come a long way since the Đổi Mới reforms were carefully ushered in during the mid-1980s at the tail end of the Cold War. The sound of Jazz as background music in the slightly more ‘hip’ boutique cafés and lounges that filled the major cities in Vietnam is pretty much a norm nowadays. This is very much in contrast to the days when Michael Learns to Rock, ABBA and Bee Gees ruled the airwaves of cafés and lounges that were not playing ballads sung by Hồng Nhung, Mỹ Linh, and Bằng Kiều in the 1990s. And this is starkly different by many levels from the soundtrack of pre-Đổi Mới days. To speak of Jazz in Hà Nội, or Vietnam in general, is no longer a jaw-dropper topic.

You would not be surprised also to know that there is a dedicated Jazz music club with a resident band that plays nightly, seven days a week, on No. 1 Tràng Tiền, just behind the Hà Nội Opera House. *Minh’s Jazz Club* (called *Bình Minh Jazz Club* now) has been around since 1997. For those of us who grew up with the Cold War, familiar with Vietnam’s painful experiences during the *thời bao cấp* [collectivization era] and the various wars, witnessed the labored process of the Đổi Mới reforms, and experienced the persistent cultural surveillance in Vietnam before the digital revolution changed the world, this is something hugely significant. Originally opened in Giảng Võ, the club has moved locations several times in the last twenty years, the longest being at 31 Lương Văn Can in the Old Quarters. The existence and longevity of the club has a lot to do with the life story of the owner and resident principal musician, Quyền Văn Minh. Minh was conferred the order of *Nghệ Sĩ Ưu Tú* [Eminent Artist] by the state in 1997, a significant public recognition of his achievement as an artist and affirmation of his contribution to state and society through his art. Minh’s life story is an important and major component of the story of Jazz in modern Vietnam.

Remarkable stories of Jazz in America and its travels around the world have always stayed faithful to the spirit of Jazz by paying close attention to voices of individual artists who brought this art form to the public, while maintaining a critical awareness of the larger assemblage of race, culture, ideology and state.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, editors of the incredible volume, *Meanings of Jazz in State Socialism*, begin by stating:

<sup>1</sup> This café experience of aroma, style, comfort and Jazz was established as the signature ambience of the Starbucks brand when it expanded across US and globally (Schultz and Yang 1997: 12-13 and 175).

<sup>2</sup> For the stories of Jazz in America, see Ake (2002) and Gioia (2011); Starr (1983) for the Soviet Union; Atkins (2001) for Japan; for early modern China, Jones (2001); Pietraszewski (2014) for Poland; and for fascinating discussions of Jazz in the Cold War, see Von Eschen (2006), Davenport (2009) and Pickhan and Ritter (2016a).

Jazz has never been just music... Under discussion were not only questions of musical aesthetics and subjective judgement ... but also broader issues, as Jazz was associated with a certain lifestyle and habitus.<sup>3</sup>

Jazz transcends assumed 'finished' assumptions of ideology and the state. Following the journeys of individual artists involved in the State Department's Jazz tours, Penny Von Eschen breaks out of an overly simplified view of how Jazz served as a subservient cultural instrument in the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> E. Taylor Atkins' empathetic account of the individual pathways of Japanese Jazz musicians navigating the tensions between 'Jazz in Japan' and 'Japanese Jazz' reveals that the persistence of 'ethnically and nationally defined notions of authenticity' could only lead to a situation where 'Jazz as a culture reneges on its promise to cultivate and value equally the visions of its individual artists.'<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, by telling the stories of these individual musicians, Atkins' account has already helped to restore agency to the protagonists in the story of Jazz in Japan.

I believe the story of Jazz in Vietnam could only be told by following the fine examples mentioned above that faithfully follow the spirit of Jazz, paying attention to the individual endeavors of Jazz musicians who brought this art form to us in the midst of struggles against racism, ethnocentrism, cultural imperialism, colonialism, authoritarianism and ideological fanaticism. It is only through narratives of the individual that perhaps we could begin to tease out stories of transcendence beyond assumed categories and paradigms. Quyền Văn Minh's story does not follow the major motifs that have been in vogue, both within Vietnam and outside of Vietnam, that guide the way we understand Vietnam's political and social change, and thus Vietnamese lives. His story is crucial to the story of Jazz in Vietnam and understanding the story of Jazz in Vietnam could encourage us to begin rethinking the way we have been looking at Vietnam's past and present. This paper is an account of the first sets of notable public performances of Jazz by Quyền Văn Minh in 1988 and 1989.

### A Note About the Presentation of the Story

*Quyền Văn Minh: A Jazz Life Story* is a collaborative narrative project by maestro Quyền Văn Minh and me. The project was first mooted in 2009 during a memorable after-hours conversation we had at *Minh's Jazz Club*. After that, I would stop over in Hà Nội regularly to visit Minh when traveling to Lào Cai for other projects.<sup>6</sup> But for personal reasons, I had to put the project aside until 2012. From 2012 to 2015, I would travel to Hà Nội for between one week and one month annually to spend time with Minh. We passed time chatting at *Minh's Jazz Club* every night; at his residential home in Nghi Tâm; his old place on Phố Hàng Giấy; over meals at different places in Hà Nội; with his friends and relatives; and while visiting different places of memory. During these informal sessions, we exchanged stories as *anh em*

<sup>3</sup> Pickhan and Ritter (2016a: 9).

<sup>4</sup> Von Eschen (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Atkins (2001: 275).

<sup>6</sup> I spent years, beginning in 1997, studying about ethnic relations and agrarian change in Vietnam and the Southeast Asian Massif; conducting field research in Đồng Tháp, Đắc Lắc, Pleiku, Kôngtum and Lào Cai in Vietnam; carrying out field and archival research in Yunnan province of China; and doing archival research in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City. During these years, when in Hà Nội, I spent most of my nights at *Minh's Jazz Club*, which gradually led to a treasured friendship with the maestro. But from late 2009 onwards, I devoted almost all of my time to the #kachinlifestories project.

[brothers] would *tâm sự* [confide] with each other; and from there Minh would think about what stories he wished to tell during the recorded sessions. The recorded autoethnographic sessions resembled little of a conventional interview. The stories followed Minh's trains of thought and emotions invoked during these sessions and his mood for the day rather than structured and topical based deliberations. I asked only a few questions during the recorded sessions, usually only because I could not hold my curiosity anymore. These sessions very much resembled the collaborative autoethnographic sessions used in *#kachinlifestories*, a project I founded for the Kachin people.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Minh generously passed me all the newspapers and magazine cuttings, old documents and whatever memorabilia he managed to keep over the years from his life in music. His wife kindly sent me copies of DVD recordings of television programs featuring Minh, transferred from old and moldy VHS tapes; and a complete collection of Minh's CD and DVD albums. This narrative is a collage I pieced together from stories Minh told during different formal and informal autoethnographic sessions over all these years, collected materials from Minh and my own interventions as his 'biographer.' I kept Minh's words as close as possible to the original renditions in Vietnamese when I pieced the stories together. I also tried to keep the translation as close as possible to his original phrasings, even sacrificing readability to capture the original emotions and nuances. I put his original words in italics, materials quoted from other sources in caption and my interventions in normal case. Hence, this story is essentially a collaborative autoethnographic-biography hybrid. You would find some minor repetitions of certain stories here and there only because these stories, for Minh, were related and crucial in order to contextualize a particular chapter in his life. Life stories, if told as lived, are haphazard but interconnected through the serendipity of human interactions. I try to keep things this way while telling Minh's Jazz Life Story using key watershed events.

### The 1988-89 Recitals

14 October 1989, in a small column on *Báo Hà Nội Mới* [*The New Hà Nội Newspaper*] was a brief announcement:

#### Saxophone Recital

The artist Quyên Văn Minh will be presenting a recital program featuring Classical, Modern Vietnamese and International compositions at 1930hrs on 16 October 1989, at the Music Club of the Association of Musicians in Vietnam [*Câu lạc bộ Hội Nhạc Sĩ Việt Nam*] (51 Trần Hưng Đạo, Hà Nội).<sup>8</sup>

A small column it might be, but for something to be printed in a newspaper in Hà Nội and in 1989, that was something major. The audience attending the recital would receive a brochure consisting of an A4-sized paper, printed on only one side, in black wording on 'white' background (or whatever color the faded yellowish program was before) and folded into three panels. Right on top of the front panel is printed '*Câu lạc bộ Hội Nhạc Sĩ*' [Clubhouse of the Association of Musicians], the venue hosting the event; and just below that, '*Đoàn Ca Mùa*

<sup>7</sup> For more about the *#kachinlifestories* project, please see Tan-Tangbau (2017, 2016a and 2016b), Tan-Tangbau, Koh-Maran and Maru (2016) and the project website, <https://kachinlifestories.com>.

<sup>8</sup> (Báo Hà Nội Mới, 14 October 1989, p 4.)

*Thăng Long*’ [Thăng Long Song and Dance Troupe], the institution responsible for presenting the program. The title of the brochure reads, ‘A performance by the artist, QUYỀN VĂN MINH, on various types of Saxophones.’ The name is printed in upper case, in bold and on a separate line that effectively draws attention of the reader to the name. A silhouette graphic of a man playing a saxophone is the only artwork that takes up two-third of the print surface of the front panel.

The performance took place in Hà Nội, so it was right in the political heart of Vietnam that sprung forth more than three decades of socialist collectivization and ideological conformity. At the same time, Vietnam in 1989 was experiencing an embryonic attempt at political liberalization that would be called the *Đổi Mới* reforms. In this recital program, we have an understated public performance featuring the solo talents of an individual in place of a collective. Amidst a short period of fervent Vietnamization of the Vietnamese vocabulary and phrases to remove commonly used Han-Viet words and phrases, we have the word ‘Saxophone’ printed as it would be in any English language materials rather than the Vietnamized version, ‘*Sắc-xô-phôn*.’ Every printed material for public distribution in that era was scrutinized and sanctioned by relevant authorities. The late 1980s in Vietnam were years of balancing on a knife’s edge for any performance in the public sphere, when the *Đổi Mới* reforms were still being carefully and gradually tested and contested; and the ideological dogmatism of the socialist revolution still permeated every aspect of life in Vietnam.

We were at the tail end, albeit a rather extended one, of a period where any form of cultural manifestation must be state approved; before, during, and after. It was a time when mainstream Classical Music and Vietnamese Music were ideologically defined, and International Light Music must be ideologically sanctioned. These two very minor details on the front panel of the brochure could be read as subtle micro relaxing of the cultural atmosphere in Vietnam during those watershed years. The story of Quyền Văn Minh is not one that follows the motif of domination and resistance that framed every scholarly tale of how the *Đổi Mới* reforms came about. Instead, it is about an individual exploring the possibilities of life in the limited context of difficult times. And it tells of how artistic free spiritedness was manifested in a latent fluidity, which allowed it to speak the prescribed language sanctioned by authoritarianism and cultural essentialism, and yet be unconfined by such dogmatism, subtly seeping through the crevices and working on the seams to create something new. For Quyền Văn Minh, it was not a question about what he could do amidst the baby steps undertaken towards political and social change. It was really just about his pursuit of artistic expression through the sounds of his saxophone in a context of limited possibilities.

For those *not* among the live audience privileged to witness that path breaking performance in 1989 at the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ*, Vietnam National Television (VTV) was there to record the recital that would be broadcasted later as part of its *Chương trình Câu lạc bộ Nhạc* [Music Club Program]. We have Đàm Linh, the eminent composer and then Deputy Secretary-General of the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ*, introducing Quyền Văn Minh to the national audience in the beginning of the program:

Brother Quyền Văn Minh, through two performance programs, saxophone solo recitals, to grace the occasion of the Fourth Congress of the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ Việt Nam*, before and after, has unveiled a genuine talent. With regard to music, with regard to the saxophone, he is passionate and treats it as his life. As a result, he could overcome numerous challenges and difficulties presented by Life. He worked industriously to attain a musical level higher with each passing day and

produced such a pinnacle level of performance in the just concluded recital that received a huge affirmation and respect from the audience, which included both domestic and foreign guests. Respect for the music, innate curiosity and his personality have combined to help Minh create an individual style that is unique, and to give promise of a beautiful tomorrow.

This was no political statement or polite testimony typically delivered by senior cadres in communist Vietnam for the occasion of a public broadcast. Đàm Linh, the highly respected composer who was trained at the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire, Moscow and Deputy Secretary-General of the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ*, and Quyền Văn Minh, the self-taught musician holding the saxophone chair at a state-owned music troupe, the Thăng Long Song and Dance Troupe, were worlds apart in terms of social and political stature.<sup>9</sup> But Đàm Linh and Quyền Văn Minh possessed mutual respect and appreciation for each other's musicality. These were sincere words from Đàm Linh. Behind these words were stories that culminated in the twin solo recitals of 1988 and 1989, watershed events in Quyền Văn Minh's Jazz Life Story.

*During the time of 1988, all other saxophonists in Vietnam, even the seasoned ones, did not attain the kind of standard to consider staging a saxophone solo recital. It was a pioneering event and I put in a lot of effort to consider the model for the recital. The title of my proposed recital was 'The Different Types of Saxophones with Three Genres of Sound'; and I performed on three types of saxophones: the alto, the tenor and the soprano. I must be the first to perform with the soprano on the public stage in this country, before that I have not heard anyone do so. Or there might have been someone who played the soprano in the Catholic parishes, playing it in a simpler context. But I was the first to perform the saxophone with a serious conception featuring big compositions. The studio at Hội Nhạc Sĩ could sit maybe one hundred and twenty people or so, the maximum was one hundred and fifty people. And the performance itself was kind of a private event, but I was proud to be able to perform there and VTV recorded the recital in 1988. In the second performance, Đàm Linh, the Deputy Secretary-General of the Hội Nhạc Sĩ, he was motivated by the second program I gave and he even went on television to introduce the broadcast of the second recital in 1989. At that time, I was still with the Thăng Long Song and Dance Troupe. Unfortunately I don't have a copy of the performance from first recital. In those two recitals at the Hội Nhạc Sĩ, I performed three Classical pieces, three Vietnamese pieces and three Jazz pieces. The recitals at the Hội Nhạc Sĩ were very successful.*

In his curriculum vitae submitted for conferment of the order of *Nghệ Sĩ Ưu Tú* [Eminent Artist] by the state, Minh reported:

<sup>9</sup> Đàm Linh had an illustrious musical and revolutionary career. At the age of twelve in 1944, Đàm Linh already started participating in the communist revolution. From 1960 to 1964, he studied at the prestigious Tchaikovsky Conservatoire in Moscow, the USSR. After graduation, Đàm Linh was immediately delegated to Laos to help develop the cultural troupes of the Pathet Laos and support the revolutionary effort in Laos. Back in Vietnam, Đàm Linh composed numerous soundtracks, choral music, theatre music, symphonic music, ballet suites and chamber music, etc; many of which received prestigious national awards (Hùng 2007). Đàm Linh was the Deputy Secretary General for *Hội Nhạc Sĩ Việt Nam* for two consecutive terms from 1983 to 1989 and from 1989 to 1995 (Vận, Kha, Đông and Hải 2007: 722-723).

On 25 September 1988, I had the opportunity to present a solo concert featuring three types of saxophones:

Soprano: Mainstream Classical Music

Alto: Vietnamese Chamber Music

Soprano & Tenor: International Light Music

For Classical Music, I performed compositions by:

J S Bach

Antonin Dvorak

Camille Saint-Saens

For Vietnamese Chamber Music:

Giai Điệu Quê Hương composed for the saxophone by Hoàng Vân

Trăng Sáng composed by Đặng Hữu Phúc

Tên Hội Em Về also by Đặng Hữu Phúc

Part Three: International Light Music

The concert was recorded by the Vietnam Broadcast Station and aired via the program, Music Club and introduced by the musician, Hồ Quang Bình.

[sic]

Minh did not use the term 'Jazz' at all in the first recital; not in his recollection and not in his report on the first performance.

*I dared not use the term Jazz then. I think I still might have the program sheet somewhere. In those days, no one would dare to proclaim, 'I play Jazz music!' Those years, 1987, 1988, music in Vietnam was subjected to very strict conceptions. In the first section, I presented Saxophone with Classical Music, 'chính thống' [mainstream and proper] music. I have to emphasize the use of the term 'chính thống' here. In the second section, I presented Saxophone with Vietnamese Chamber Music. I played pieces composed by Vietnamese musicians. Those days, when people composed Vietnamese Chamber Music, they used the sounds found in traditional folk music in Vietnam and composed according to the frameworks of concerto and sonata, etc, to give the music a formal structure. I had to make sure that I used the words 'International Light Music' in place of 'Jazz' to present what I intended to play in the third section, such as 'In The Mood' and 'Stardust,' etc. The first few steps were the most difficult, especially in a society where the genre of Jazz music, a musical genre from America, was treated as 'âm nhạc phản động' [reactionary music]. In the second recital, I have the VCD somewhere, I also played a piece by Debussy; I kept the Classical part. And part three featured standard Jazz pieces.*

In the program brochure for the second recital in 1989, it was printed:

Program: Solo Saxophone

I - Classical Section

Rondo in Em - B. Romber - Solo: Saxo Alto

Thái meditation - J. Massenet - Solo: Saxo Alto

Sarabande - Claude Debussy - Solo: Saxo teno

Concerto in C (First Movement) - Joseph Haydn - Solo: Saxo Soprano

II - Vietnamese Music Section

5. Gọi bạn dưới trăng [Calling a Friend Under the Moon] - Đỗ Hồng Quân -

Solo: Alto and Soprano

6. Vũ Khúc 89 [Dance '89] - Hoàng Vân - Solo: Teno Saxo  
 7. Bài Ca Không Lời [Song Without Words]- Đỗ Hồng Quân - Solo: Soprano  
 III - International Music Section  
 Jazz and Jazz - C. Packe - Solo: Sax Alto  
 Star dust (Blues) - Carmichael - Solo: Teno  
 Mon amour - A. Hornez - Solo: Soprano  
 A Few Jazz Rhythms - C. Trenet - Solo: Alto and Soprano  
 Rhythm Section:  
 Piano: Văn Thành  
 Guitar: Anh Tuấn  
 Organ: Quang Trung  
 Bass: Hoàng Dũng  
 Drum: Lê Huy

[sic]

What was intended to be the section featuring a repertoire of Jazz pieces was again merely subtitled 'International Music Section,' although the word 'Jazz' appeared three times in the song titles.

In the broadcast of the recital on television, the host for the Music Club program on VTV introduced the Classical Section:

Although it has a brassy but yet seductive sound, many Classical Music composers used the instrument (saxophone) effectively in their compositions, for example, *L'Arlésienne* by Bizet, *Iolanta* by Tchaikovsky and *Bolero* by Ravel. Coming up, let's listen to *Súy Trạng* [Méditation] by Massenet, performed by Quyèn Văn Minh on the alto saxophone.

Wearing an impeccably pressed and smart white suit, a black tie with slanted white stripes and hair of length just dropping below the ear but neatly combed, typical of the Vietnamese artists of that era, Minh was styled for a sombre performance. Minh looked the part of a serious artist expected from the clichéd 'Classical Musician in a Classical Music recital' setting but with a slight flamboyance that could not be contained. In contrast, the accompanying pianist, who dressed the part of a Classical Musician, totally exuded the sombre movements of a Classical Music trained professional and seasoned performer on the grand piano. But there was no mistaking the perfect Classical timbre in Minh's alto saxophone, adding only a hardly detectable flair perhaps with his use of a metal mouthpiece. A serious listener would be totally captured by Minh's total concentration on the delivery, perfect memorization of the score and flawless execution of the instrument. Clearly, the soloist is the 'conductor' of the performance, but demonstrating an understated musical understanding with the pianist in order to bring out a meditated flow of emptied thoughts from the singular duet. Towards the end of the piece, you could feel the thoughts and emotions on stage rising to the top, dissipating with the recording's fade off.

In the first recital, Minh performed Bach's *Violin Concerto No. 1*, which he transposed from an arrangement for the oboe. In this second recital, he performed an equally challenging piece, the first movement of Haydn's *Oboe Concerto in C*. Demonstrating an effortless pitch perfect articulation on the soprano saxophone of the intense opening that traversed the expanse of the key in which the movement was composed, Minh immediately took charge of the performance after a brief introduction by the pianist. Minh's leadership,



confidence and perfect execution instantly transformed an orchestral composition rearranged for the piano and oboe into a native duet between piano and soprano saxophone. Oh, was this piece originally composed for the oboe? You could not tell from the way Minh took ownership of the concerto with his fluid execution on the soprano saxophone. Man and instrument were one recombinant entity, and one might be tempted to claim that any composition channeled through his saxophone would immediately be ‘naturalized’ by Minh.

When it came to the Vietnamese Chamber Music section, the host introduced an original composition, *Vũ Khúc ‘89*, which Hoàng Vân composed for the tenor saxophone using melody from an ethnic Thái folk song. Amidst a stepped staccato rhythm punctuated with open spaces as played on the piano, Minh poured out his winding flow of a saccharine motif textured with the full bodied timbre of a tenor saxophone. A poetic painting depicting villages surrounded by cascading rice-fields along the gradients of mountainous valleys carved out by rivers; the landscape of the ethnic Thái in the northern uplands of Vietnam. In a contrasting display under the Vietnamese Chamber Music section, Minh performed *Bài Ca Không Lời*, a Light Music piece composed by then rising star composer, Đỗ Hồng Quân, for the alto saxophone and combo band. With a change of clothes and band, featuring rhythm guitar, drums, keyboards and bass guitar, the opening tone of the piece paralleled the relaxed stage presence of the performers. Having jettisoned his jacket and tie for a more laid back look, the sound of Minh’s saxophone filled the room with the ambience of a therapeutic chanson without words. The saxophone was clearly the singer here, while the able rhythm musicians provided steady layers of tracks to shine the limelight on Minh.

Introducing the third section of the recital, International Music, the television program host carefully enunciated:

Now we invite the audience to try some Jazz, the home of the saxophone, with a piece entitled ‘Jazz and Jazz’ by Parker, performed by Quyền Văn Minh on alto saxophone.

Jazz aficionados would not take more than three notes to recognize one of the signature tunes by Charlie ‘Bird’ Parker, *Bloomido*, although the host introduced it as *Jazz and Jazz*, as printed in the brochure distributed during the live performance. Playing at a slower speed than any recorded rendition by Charlie Parker, and with a trio of backup musicians on piano, drums and bass guitar playing a steady and by-the-score rhythm, Minh’s saxophone explored the different possibilities afforded by the Bebop piece yet holding back any overly complicated licks; and all the while maintaining a catchable melody - for his uninitiated audience, I would presume - amidst his very skillful and thought-out improvisation.

The year was 1989, and it was most likely the first time in the public history of Vietnam that the word ‘Jazz’ was uttered without ideological disdain on television or radio. And it was probably the first time that the sound of Jazz was performed by a Vietnamese musician on the public stage since the socialist revolution penetrated every cultural aspect of life in the country.

*I would say that it was only until the 1980s, after the 1988 and 1989 recitals, when VTV broadcasted the performances on national television and the Conservatoire invited me to join the faculty, that a pathway was opened for Jazz to be performed publicly, ‘danh chính ngôn thuận’ [right and proper in name and speech], in Hà Nội. Before that, the saxophone was all along seen as a musical instrument that was not serious. It was not an instrument used for serious music. They could see from the recitals that the saxophone was in fact a mainstream*

*and proper musical instrument. They heard my solo recital and they could see that ‘chả có gì tội lỗi’ [there was nothing criminal] about Jazz music. Some of the lecturers in the Conservatoire, who were teaching about Classical Music and had the opportunities to be trained overseas, they also understood that Jazz was already a global phenomenon then; and they had to ‘ủng hộ’ [give support]. But I was aware the support for Jazz was very limited.*

In fact, the VTV broadcast began by stating:

We like to introduce a musical instrument that plays an important role in Jazz music, the saxophone. Before going into the program, let’s invite Maestro Đàm Linh, Deputy Secretary General of the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ* to say a few words.

And we heard the strong words of endorsement by Đàm Linh on Quyèn Văn Minh, the saxophone and Minh’s musical endeavors. Đàm Linh’s public endorsement of Minh’s performance was a significant uplifting moment because it was indeed a most arduous task for Minh to bring Jazz into the public sphere in that particular historical context.

*Really, many things were beyond my control. There were only so few people who would want to pioneer the genre of Jazz in Vietnam; there was me and, later, a few lecturers at the Conservatoire who only started doing it recently (after 2000). They (pointing to the musicians on the stage of his Jazz club) were not like me. I have to find my own way and try things out on my own. They were able to study overseas; they were exposed to the music; they could listen to the music; and they could buy reference materials. I had to embark on my own and **I had to prove** (emphasis in original) that I could play Jazz. I still recall when I started out, in the old days, people would say that there was a wedding gig and they needed a quartet, usually a clarinet, an accordion, a guitar and drums. I would go around and ask who would be available for this gig, a wedding coming up this Sunday and this was how much the hosts would be paying, etc. If I got the gig, then come the day and time we would arrive and play, after that people would pay me and I would divide up the money. That was it. It was nothing like now (looking at the stage where the musicians are playing *Work Song*). We were really backwards in those days. But I was born in that kind of environment! And I told myself there was nothing I could do to change the situation. I was stuck in that situation.*

*I suffered many setbacks because I had no one to guide me. I wasn’t the best at every step of the way. But I believed in what I was doing. I was aware of what I was doing; I was aware of what other people were doing; and I compared the difference. Why must I compare? Because I never had a chance to study. So if I hear anything different, anything strange, I quickly asked how and why, and I tried to practice to do the same. And I would tell myself, ‘oh, if I do it this way then it would be more interesting!’ So I improved. As for a teacher, a proper teacher at heart and in soul, given my circumstances, I did not and could not have a proper teacher. I asked the older players, ‘how did you do this, how did you do that?’ The answers I got would often be, ‘oh come on, this is so easy!’ But they didn’t teach me. They wouldn’t teach me. I heard people used the vibrato when they were playing, and I asked, ‘how did you do that?’ I got the remark, ‘you are young, you would pick it up very fast!’ But they wouldn’t teach me. I could only imagine from listening. When I heard the music played from the radio and later from vinyl records, I couldn’t see anything; I could only listen. So I have to imagine how they produced that sound. And I came to realize one thing, I had to be really good, it was that simple! Nothing else could help, even if you knew people. If I was not good, I could not play well, no one would come and invite me. I practiced really very hard. Even*

*when people said that I was the pampered artist in this theatre (pointing to the floors above Minh's Jazz Club on 31 Lương Văn Can, Hà Nội), I practiced even harder! I dreamt of performing a solo recital, and that opportunity came in 1988.*

1987 was a crucial year that really motivated Minh to envision putting together a solo recital program so that he could prove himself on the national stage as a bona fide serious and top-class musician; and so that he could play the music he wanted to play – Jazz. That year, he received recognition of his professional excellence as an artist. And he would be presented with an occasion to further his horizons, which led to him setting a more ambitious target in his pursuit of musical freedom and excellence.

*At the time when I gave the solo recitals, I was with this theatre troupe, Thăng Long Song and Dance Troupe. Those days I had lots of gigs beside the shows with the troupe because I had the reputation of being the 'top cat.' I think I am allowed to be proud of myself a little because I was recognized as the leading soloist in this theatre group and I could do every task given to me. As a result, I was given a 'căn hộ' [flat] in the collective housing in 1987! That was a period of time when the various government units in the country were allocating living quarters to their own cadres. The selection criteria were very comprehensive. But the committee decided to recognize my specialization as an outstanding saxophone artist and my contributions. So I was given some priority in the selection. Of course, at that time, I was also in a situation where father and two children were all living in a shelter on the rooftop. That was after my divorce. This very rooftop at my mother's house (as we were walking up the steps leading to the rooftop). This is where I sold my bicycle to build a hut, six square meters, so that my two children and I could stay together. The directorate sent people to evaluate my living situation and agreed that the existing environment was not ideal for my children, and that I should also be given some priority because of individual living circumstances in the selection. The flat located at Khu tập thể Nghĩa Tân [Nghĩa Tân Collective Residential Area] was on the fourth level and slightly more than forty square meters. Those days, we saw this as a huge present given by the state! At that time, the city built very few new buildings, the Directorate for Culture was only allocated six apartments, and I received one of these six apartments. That was in 1987. I knew very clearly at that time, if I had no specialization, if I was not excellent in what I did and I had no achievements, I would be nothing. I have to say, I was a really outstanding saxophonist in the country during the 1970s and 1980s, no one came close to my reputation through to the 1990s.*

*So there were two things. One was the apartment. That was in early 1987. And towards the year's end, I had the opportunity to travel overseas and perform in Germany. They had originally made the decision to send me, but changed their minds and planned to send another fellow. This fellow also played the saxophone and clarinet in the troupe. He studied at the Conservatoire before and had certification from the school. He questioned the supervisors why Minh was selected for this overseas trip when Minh had no proficiency certificate, while he was not selected when he had proper certification. Others felt that in terms of musical proficiency it was only right that the troupe selected Minh for the trip. At the same time, a number of people voiced out that since I was rewarded with the apartment, it was already a 'lộc to' [huge fortune] because the house was worth a few 'cây' [bars] of gold and the trip was only worth a few 'chỉ' [3.75 grams] of gold, so I should give up the opportunity to go overseas and let someone else benefit from it. It was quite sad because those days, people tend to reduce everything to money. I was upset because we played music together and now because of an overseas trip we developed this kind of friction. I rebutted*

*these talks. I stated that the issue about the apartment, it was about my living environment, I could return the apartment. As for my career, my work, the issue about going overseas to perform, that was my work as a musician. And for me, that was the most important thing! Well, the director agreed with my argument. At the end of the day, they had to send two of us.*

*In 1987, when I performed with the Thăng Long Song and Dance Troupe in Berlin, I played the clarinet to perform Vietnamese folk music with the troupe. But my official tenure with the company was the saxophone chair. I had to play the clarinet because whenever the troupe traveled for this kind of performance, they only performed folk music. And I had to support the performance by playing the clarinet. (Taking a puff on his pipe and reminiscing for a bit). When I was there, I could hear Jazz everywhere, East Germany, of course, in Berlin. I could hear it riding the escalator; I could hear it at the hotel lobby; I could hear it when I returned to my room and switched on the radio; and I could hear it on several channels when I turned on the television. I saw musicians playing Jazz on the saxophone or clarinet almost everywhere. And I knew I must put together a solo recital when I return to Vietnam. I created the pressure for myself that I must do the same, to play Jazz. I told myself, I must definitely perform this kind of music. So in 1988, after the trip, I started planning for a solo recital. I knew that, for sure, to be able to convince the audience I must show them that I could perform Classical Music on the saxophone and I must perform Vietnamese Music on the saxophone before I show them Jazz. I knew if I did not do this then, I might never do it. It was the same thing after performing in Paris in 1996 when later I decided, in 1997, that I must have a place for musicians to play Jazz. After every memorable travel I would have a new motivation to work towards the next level. I am telling you this story because after this trip in 1987, when I decided I was going to do the recital in 1988, there was always a pressure motivating me to make the recital 'đàng hoàng' [right and proper].*

But to put together Minh's envisioned solo recitals were no easy tasks. He had to literally do everything himself in order to prepare for these performances. Mere ideas and vision do not a successful path-breaking performance make; not to mention two recitals. Putting on a top-class performance for any artist requires first and foremost, the right tools, materials and support. Just in terms of the music side of things, Minh would have to dig deep into every crevice to seek out the suitable instruments, peripherals, equipment, materials and committed personnel who would dare to embark with him on such a risky adventure in the late 1980s of socialist Vietnam.

*At that time, I had to 'tự lực cần kiệm' [be very frugal and do everything on my own]. I just completed the divorce and, in order to save up, I had to take on many gigs in order to have the three saxophones that I used for the recital, the soprano, the tenor and the alto. I managed to purchase the soprano, which I was the first to use for a public performance. When I finally managed to get hold of the three types saxophones, I could put up the performance: a Solo Saxophone Recital with Three Genres of Music - Saxophone with Classical Music, Saxophone with Vietnamese Chamber Music, and Saxophone with International Light Music.*

*The first saxophone I ever held in my hands was, I remember, a Linton saxophone. It was a saxophone that people purchased in Sài Gòn, from a Catholic parish, and brought up north, which they later sold to my father. That was the very first saxophone I ever held. Later on, I learnt from my father, when he was still alive, that he lent the saxophone to a friend and never asked for it back. The friend passed away already. I found the address and the family, but the saxophone could not be located anymore. Now, the saxophone I use is a Super Action*

*(Selmer), before this I was using a Mark VI. I had a collection of saxophones, but I sold them when Đắc went overseas to study. I was able to buy some of these saxophones in Sài Gòn from the Catholic parishes. In the old days, when life was not so stable, it was possible to find these saxophones and buy them. People did not know about the value of these saxophones, and I also did not know about the value of these saxophones. We just negotiated with each other the price according to its worth in the market then. Many people would bring their saxophone to me and tell me that they wanted to exchange that saxophone for something else. That was how I got the Czechoslovakia saxophone! I would exchange with them, and I would fix up the saxophone. I would repair and fix up the saxophones myself. By the time I learnt about the actual worth of the saxophones I collected, people in Vietnam could not afford to pay for these saxophones!*

*I remember hearing the recording of a musician from Czechoslovakia, I can't remember his name now, he played both Jazz and Classical music, and on both clarinet and soprano saxophone; one of my favorites. I played the soprano simply because of that cassette of his recordings! I immediately decided that I had to get a soprano saxophone. At that time, no one would want to buy a soprano saxophone. There was only one available in Hà Nội, someone brought it back from the Soviet Union, and it was originally made in East Germany. No one would want to buy it! But I understood the sound of the soprano saxophone. The guy who brought it back, he was tired of the instrument so I approached him to buy it. But I did not have the money to pay for it! When I went home, I told my mother about the soprano saxophone. And I asked if it would be possible for her to help me, so that I could practice and improve myself further, and that I would repay her later. Just like the story of my first clarinet, the one that I sold away to repay my mother, but bought it back after I joined the theatre. My mother took out two 'chỉ' of gold (1 chỉ = 3.75gm) to help me pay for that soprano saxophone. It was a B&S brand saxophone, from East Germany. People don't think much of that brand now, but it was really very valuable at that time. I gave the solo recitals using that soprano saxophone. And that was the only way I could get that saxophone; no other ways.*

Getting hold of a soprano saxophone was difficult. Finding good saxophone reeds in the collectivization era and early days of Đổi Mới was just as difficult. Getting enough reeds to sustain a disciplined practice ethic required resourcefulness and innovation.

*Those days we got our reeds supplied by the Eastern European countries in the COMECON, like Democratic Republic of Germany, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, etc. You could also buy from the Germans, who would buy from the musical units that were supplied with these accessories. The musicians in these units saved up their assigned supplies and would sell it to willing buyers. We would practice and play using these reeds for a long time, until the reed became too soft. But in those days we did not have a reed cutter. So when that happened, we used a coin to press against the reed and a lighted matchstick to burn the head of the reed, then we shaved away the charred part. After that, we could continue to use the reed! One saxophone reed I could use for about six months. I practiced a lot, so I just keep burning the reed in this way to extend its life. It was difficult, I could make sound from the reed, but it took more effort because the reed got heavier with each burn. That was the only way because I could not afford more reeds or find more reeds. You burn with the coin then you use a knife to shave it away. I had to learn how to repair my reeds in this way, so as to be able play longer. In the old days, everyday I practiced for about two hours when I went to school, then in the evening I practiced for about one and half hours. I have tried so many*

*different types of reeds, and it was a costly endeavor, trying so many different types. But the result was good.*

*After liberation, we learnt there was a large amount of reeds, heaps of reeds, in Sài Gòn. People who went down to the South brought these reeds back. 1975 was the year of liberation, so around 1977 or 1978, we were able to get our hands on reeds made in US and France. But it was only around 1986 or 1987, when I was teaching the saxophone to foreigners in Hà Nội that I could ask them to buy reeds from overseas for me. It was only then that I learnt what US Dollar really meant! They studied with me and they paid me in US dollars. It was around 1985 or 1986 that I first started having foreign students. At that time, I used Vandoren Reeds No. 2. When I first bought the soprano saxophone, there were no soprano reeds available! So I had to use clarinet reeds! Later, I was able to ask a foreigner friend to help me buy the correct soprano reeds. I could practice properly after that and have the confidence to perform the concerto by Bach. It was only in 1986 that the reeds I used were relatively good, but the saxophones were still not of a very high quality. Nowadays I use both Rico and Vandoren Reeds, No. 2.5. Last time, I could use a reed for six months, a brand from Germany, but I could not remember the name. I also used reeds from Czechoslovakia, a brand called Vibraphone. Nowadays, I order from overseas because it is still difficult to import. There was, for a while, a plan to produce our own reeds, but the venture failed. There was this Vietnamese who went overseas to study, in Poland, and he even brought back a machine to produce reeds, an old machine that was used to make Vandoren reeds, French reeds. His name was, I think, Văn Liêm. The brand of that reed was called 'Văn Đô Liêm,' but it was unusable! You blow three songs with it and you have to throw it away! The saliva would get stuck inside the reed and you had to squeeze it out! So, the venture was a failure and there were only imported reeds. Vietnam did not have a very good nurturing environment in that sense.*

*The first saxophone mouthpiece I bought was from Germany. The B&S saxophone mouthpiece was made of plastic. There were various brands that supplied the troupes (overseas), so when the players got their hands on mouthpieces from France or USA, they would sell off the mouthpieces from Germany (East Germany), and we would buy those mouthpieces. Later, when I have the means, I would choose my own. I could get the catalogue and see which one I want to order. I like the Selmer mouthpieces. The Selmer mouthpieces are not categorized by number, the brand uses alphabets, for example, C, D, E, etc. I like the E mouthpiece. I also use a metal mouthpiece; of course I like the metal mouthpiece. I used the metal mouthpiece quite a fair bit, but now when I play the alto, I use a plastic mouthpiece. When I play the tenor, I like the metal mouthpiece. When playing tenor, the metal mouthpiece could brighten the sound of the tenor. And when using a plastic mouthpiece, it gives the sound more depth. I could give it a more airy sound, but I would have to notice the volume so as to better balance with the other instruments at play. If you want to produce a refined sound with the metal mouthpiece, that would be most arduous! But if you want to produce a big sound for popular music, it was very effective. I have tried many types. In terms of experience of choosing mouthpieces, I could only learn from my own experience. In terms of the various types of saxophones, I am a pioneer in my own right; I would try the instrument and find the best way to produce a good sound. Before me, it was common for people who played saxophone to use either the tenor or alto. For the soprano, I was the first to perform it formally on the public stage. Before, people would only perform with the alto or the clarinet. From 1968 all the way to the 1980s, I was just using very ordinary instruments that were very old, and often broken. Even reeds, those days, without a reed cutter, either I used scissors to*

*cut or pressed a coin to the edge and burned the edges just so I could extend the life of the reed.*

A saxophone solo recital is, technically speaking, not a solo individual performance. Rather, the saxophone is the featured solo instrument. To find the musicians who would come together to support such a performance was no easy affair. Inevitably, the musicians would ask, what kind of music would Minh be playing? If Minh were merely going to perform the usual repertoire then the recital program would not have been a ‘big deal’ altogether; and probably would not receive any attention or even be supported by the authorities. Such a mediocre program by a mere saxophone chair of a song and dance troupe would not have been allowed to grace the occasion of the Fourth Congress of the prestigious *Hội Nhạc Sĩ*. It could not and would not be the usual repertoire. When Minh decided to present the three genres of music, he was presenting a challenge both for himself and the audience, in particular the dignitaries of the music scene in Vietnam.

Minh would be scrutinized in every aspect to see if he would do justice to the national genre, Vietnamese Chamber Music. These were original compositions that presented to the Vietnamese audience and the world, the national sounds of Vietnam. Hoàng Vân (the composer for *Vũ Khúc* ‘89) defines in a theoretical paper three types of compositions in this genre: compositions that utilized both materials and approaches based on traditional folk music; compositions that borrowed base materials and approaches that originated from outside of Vietnam; and compositions that combined both base materials and approaches from within Vietnam and outside of Vietnam. In the 1960s, these compositions revolved around themes related to the Vietnamese socialist revolution and Vietnamese folk culture such as *Quê Hương* [home village], *Tổ Quốc* [the motherland], politically significant regions such as *Điện Biên* (site of the famous victory over the French colonial forces in 1954 and heartland of the ethnic Thái communities) and *Tây Nguyên* (the strategic Central Highlands crucial to ultimate unification of the country in 1975 and home to the Central Highlanders), and socially significant topics such as *Nông Thôn Đổi Mới* [Agrarian ‘Renovation’] and *Dân Ca* [Ethnic Folk Songs]. Dominance of these theme-based compositions would very gradually loosen after 1975, especially in the early 1980s, when a younger group of composers led by Đỗ Hồng Quân began to emerge in the scene.<sup>10</sup> Đỗ Hồng Quân, the rising star composer who recently graduated from Tchaikovsky Conservatoire in 1985, would later become the Secretary General of the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ*.

Vietnamese Chamber Music was the very genre defined and shaped by this key group of people among the audience, the composers; and they dominated the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ*. Hoàng Vân himself is a pioneer Vietnamese Chamber Music composer who was already elected into the central executive committee of the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ* back in 1963.<sup>11</sup> Performance musicians had little influence in what defined Vietnamese Chamber Music and, in fact, they were poorly represented in the central committee of the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ*.<sup>12</sup> Minh recognized the influence of the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ*.

<sup>10</sup> Vân (2007: 398-401).

<sup>11</sup> Vân, Kha, Đông and Hải (2007: 722-723).

<sup>12</sup> Tường (2007: 679-80) notes that while there were fourteen performance musicians out of a central committee of twenty-four in the Second Congress in 1963, this had dropped to four out of twenty-six in the Third Congress in 1983 and one out of thirteen in the Fourth Congress in 1989.

*To prove that I could play Jazz and for Jazz to be recognized, and if I want people to look at the saxophone with a different perspective, that it was not an instrument that was not serious, I had to do it in front of people who had the power to recognize Jazz as a proper form of music and the saxophone as a serious instrument. At that time, it meant performing on the stage at the Hội Nhạc Sĩ (referring to the club house). The Hội Nhạc Sĩ (referring to the institution) was the center of music where composers and leaders of the Vietnamese music scene were gathered.*

Minh put much thought into the pieces he wanted to perform for the recitals and even asked a few notable composers such as Đặng Hữu Phúc, Đỗ Hồng Quân and Hoàng Vân to write pieces featuring the saxophone specially for the recitals. As a reputable saxophonist in the Vietnamese music circle, Minh had come to know these luminaries in the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ*. Earlier in 1986, Minh had performed on saxophone a few Classical pieces in a concert conducted by Đỗ Hồng Quân. In his own recitals, Minh attended to both the thematic-based school and non-thematic-based school of Vietnamese Chamber Music when he presented a contrasting set of compositions that featured both dominant themes (e.g., *Vũ Khúc '89*) and emerging trends (e.g., *Bài Ca Không Lời*) in the genre.

Performing for the dignitaries of the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ* meant that Minh would have to make his performance exceptionally precise, at the same level as any world class Classical Music artist, and blow the critics away. Indeed, many of the leading figures in the *Hội Nhạc Sĩ* then were trained in prestigious music conservatoires in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Classical Music was placed at the pinnacle pedestal of what defined a proper, serious, and high standard musician. As Minh himself emphasized, Classical Music was perceived as 'chính thống' [mainstream and proper] music. Minh would have to demonstrate his competency and the seriousness of the saxophone instrument by performing Classical Music.

*For the first recital, I was also worried because there was never a precedent of anyone giving a solo recital in this fashion, in this country. Not on violin, not on piano, not on any woodwind or brass, and not even by those music professors who were educated overseas. And yet I dare to stand up and put together a saxophone solo recital playing Bach's concerto and pieces by Haydn, Mozart, etc. In the first recital, I used the soprano saxophone to play a concerto piece, first movement of Bach's Violin Concerto. To perform these pieces, I had to borrow books to copy; copy with paper and pencil! The first movement of Bach's concerto was composed for violin. There was a book – a musician who was also a lecturer at the Conservatoire teaching the oboe, he had the book. It was only through my sister and her husband that I was able to borrow that book. And I sat down to copy it by hand because in those days where could one find a photocopy machine? So I sat down to copy, copied the melody, and I copied the piano accompaniment. After that I practiced the melody and then I practiced with piano accompaniment.*

*When the piece (Bach's Concerto) was arranged for oboe, it was already abridged and rearranged for the oboe. Even then, when you play the arrangement on soprano saxophone, there were many complicated problems. But I was determined to perform the piece because I wanted to prove that the saxophone could play a diversity of music and that I could present that diversity. I could tell you a story that happened during the 1988 program. The first piece I played in that recital was Bach's concerto for violin. Back in the old days, when I was playing for weddings, when I was growing up, I never had to prepare fully for the gigs. But that first recital, psychologically speaking, I was nervous. The committee seated among the audience evaluating the performance, they were experts. I played a few bars of the*



*piece, but my mouth was totally dry! I had to stop. I apologized to the audience, 'sorry, I need to drink some water first.' After that I could play without any problem. That was a memorable lesson for me. Later on, when I was teaching, I would tell my students that on big occasions, drink a lot of water before going on stage. So now you see my students, before going on stage, they are always drinking water (pointing to the musicians seated by the stage sipping glasses of ice water and non-alcoholic drinks during the music interval at the Jazz club). Later, I would perform this piece again during the third recital held at the Opera House in 1994. When I returned to the big stage in 1994, it still wasn't perfect but I managed to present the performance with a string quartet at the Opera House. Before, I played it on a smaller stage at the Hội Nhạc Sĩ.*

For the 1989 recital, Minh would even be scrutinized by the leadership of the *Nhạc Viện Quốc Gia Việt Nam, Hà Nội [Hà Nội National Music Conservatoire of Vietnam] (now known as Vietnam National Academy of Music)*. For the International Music section, Minh played Jazz but he was literally on a knife's edge. What would be the point of the recital if he were not going to do something drastically different from the usual musician? Would he win over the audience by means of showcasing his technical sophistication through the improvisation that was required of a Jazz performance? Would he be able to convince the critics that Jazz was not 'reactionary music,' but really a proper genre of international music? Would the audience be able to accept the sound of Jazz? Would he be able to convince the critics using Classical Music, Vietnamese Chamber Music and Jazz to show that the saxophone was a serious musical instrument that should be respected just like any other solo orchestral instruments? To do all these, would he be able to put together a group of musicians sufficiently capable and willing to perform with him on stage?

*There were so many constraints. One story really stayed with me. In 1988, I was a soloist in the Thăng Long Song and Dance Troupe. The band that I was playing with was a light music band, we called it 'Extra Music.' We played additional gigs in many places, such as in the tea-lounge for people to dance. So I approached the musicians in this band, telling them that I have a solo recital in the works and I would be able to compensate them for their time and effort. And I asked them to rehearse with me. At first, everyone I approached agreed to play the gig. But when I brought out the scores, they shook their head and backed out! Yes, the score was difficult. But at that time, these individuals all had their own reputations in the music circle, for example, I was the best saxophonist and he was the best guitarist, etc. And they would not take the risk to do something that might not turn out well for fear of harming their own reputations. Another thing was that when they heard the way I was playing, they could not follow, but they could not oppose. Since they could not agree with the music, they chose not to play. Each step was small and difficult. Then, there was no one who wanted play for the recital. Everyone refused because it was really too difficult and too new. If people didn't like the sound, in Vietnam we have this concept called 'ngang tai' [piercing to the ear]. I had to do it by myself in order to fulfill these two recitals.*

*That was why I had to persuade my elder brother and younger brother to play for me. I assured them; just play according to this way and it would be fine. They did not have to do more. Well, they did it because they loved me and were willing to give in to me, although they were really worried. You could see in the disc containing performances for 1989 concert, I have my youngest brother on guitar and my elder brother on bass guitar for the recital at the Hội Nhạc Sĩ. The first recital in 1988, I have my elder brother, my youngest brother, a drummer and the pianist, Đặng Hữu Phúc, who was a folk music composer and didn't play*

*Jazz at all, you could tell from the way he played. This was the group that provided the backup for my solo recital. In the 1989 recital, I was able to recruit a few more other young musicians to accompany me. By the 1994 concert, I had a totally different crew, the Sông Hồng Band [Red River Band]. For the 1988 and 1989 programs, I had to write out every single note on the music score for those who agreed to play with me; there wasn't anyone who was able to improvise on their own. So any improvisation by them was really the result of industrious practice of a written score! I had to write out every single note. But it was clear that they really enjoyed playing even though they were only the rhythm section. Somehow the sound of Jazz gave them a sense of satisfaction. Twenty years later, some of these players still tell me how memorable that performance was for them! There was this organist, from the 1989 gig, his name is Trung, who is currently doing a Continuing Education Program at the Conservatoire, he told me, just recently, that he was honored to be able to accompany brother Minh in this piece and that piece.*

Talent, industry, resourcefulness, perseverance, personality, and devotion to Jazz were the qualities that Đàm Linh made reference to when endorsing Minh's recital programs on public television. It was an earlier, rather memorable and personal encounter between Đàm Linh and Minh that allowed the former to witness this precocious talent that is Quyèn Văn Minh. And it was closely related to one of the many personal challenges Minh had to overcome while pursuing his musical ambitions.

*There was an incident in 1984. That morning, there was a very famous and respected composer who came to the theatre; unfortunately, he passed away already. Đàm Linh. He composed a ballet piece with parts that featured the saxophone and he came to rehearse with this theatre and asked, 'who is the best in this theatre?' People told him, 'Minh, the saxophonist.' Well, that morning, the court informed that they would be hearing my case. That was in 1984, my divorce. I don't have to hide anything from you. Having to undergo the divorce was really a last resort, but I could not live like that. I could not condone such kind of nonsensical living existence and I could not allow such a bad influence for my kids. And it hurts my mental focus for playing music. I rather not have that kind of marriage. My first wife was two years older than me, born in 1952. I was born in 1954. We got married in the beginning of 1977 and had our first child at the end of the year. It wasn't a big wedding, my workplace even provided a car to fetch the bride and fulfill other needs of the wedding of a cadre. It was a proper wedding, we had a band performing at the wedding, not Jazz, of course. We were both musicians, so naturally many of our friends came to perform at the wedding. I remember we rented a room that belonged to the Directorate for Education. It was just enough for our guests. That day it rained very heavily, but we were still able to hold the wedding. It wasn't very crowded, but the room was about enough for the guests, the band, and friends and relatives of our parents. When I got married the second time, the wedding was bigger. By then I had already joined the Conservatoire. The first marriage lasted from 1977 to 1984. My daughter was seven at that time, and Đắc was five. If I want to practice to be good, I must be clear-headed. I put in a lot of hard work. Definitely natural talent was a factor, but I must say a lot was due to hard work.*

*So I went to the court that morning in 1984. The court gave me custody of my two children and ordered her (estranged wife) to contribute to their living expenses. I told the court, 'no, I don't need her to contribute, I could take care of the children.' At that time, however, I could not convincingly assure them that I alone was able take care of my children; like the way I could now. But I told the court, 'if every time something related to this issue*

about supporting the children pop up, I would be called up to the court again. I am tired of the whole proceeding, and there are so many things to do at work. I do not want to have to come to court again over that matter.' I told the presiding judge all that. Anyway, that morning, I returned to the theatre late and the conductor, Đàm Linh, was very unhappy. He admonished me in front of everyone, 'this fellow is ridiculous! I never ever had to wait for a mere 'nhạc công' [music cadre] and now I have wait for you!' I immediately apologized and explained that the court was hearing my divorce case this morning, that was why I returned late and asked for his understanding. He said, 'Alright then, get to your position in the orchestra and let's start the rehearsal.' I went to my seat, but I had yet to copy the music score!

At this point Đàm Linh was really angry and said, 'this is not acceptable!' I asked him to let me copy the score immediately and ten minutes later we could play the piece as per normal. Đàm Linh told the orchestra to take a break, while I copy the saxophone part from the conductor's fullscore. And he added, 'I will personally check your part, if you play one note wrong, I will have to punish you. But if you could play every note correctly from beginning to end, I will reward you with a bottle of wine.' A bottle of wine at that time! Although it was just domestically brewed wine, but in those days who could afford to buy a whole bottle? We could only afford to drink a cup on normal days! Anyway, I agreed to his challenge. As I was copying my part from the conductor's score, a few guys who walked past the window of the room where I was copying music remarked, 'gosh, that must be scary, huh?' To which I replied, 'you are very fortunate because you are gonna have some free wine soon!' By the time I finished copying the saxophone part, I knew straight away I had no problem playing it. I was already playing Jazz at that time, so that was easy. After copying the music, I went back to the rehearsal room and Đàm Linh said, 'Well, start playing.' I was thinking to myself, 'How do you want me to play it?' As a musician in an orchestra I knew very well that the conductor leads the orchestra and you have to wait for the conductor to indicate the tempo and direct everything. So I asked him politely, 'sure, could you please let me know the tempo you want?' The piece that day was a ballad suite that Đàm Linh wrote to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of liberating the capital. So, he was both composer and conductor of the piece! Đàm Linh went ahead and gave me the tempo. You know, when you perform this kind of composition, a ballet suite, after playing the main parts with the rest of the orchestra, the saxophone might have to rest for like thirty bars or even more! So, when I reached the extended section where I am supposed to rest, I continued counting the beats and played when it was time to enter, rest, count the beats, and enter the music again. As for Đàm Linh, after indicating the tempo, he sat down to listen and to observe me.

Three quarters way through the score, he said, 'Alright, you got your bottle of wine. Thank you! There is no need to listen anymore because you totally understood the music!' He noticed that even for the most complex part of the piece, I had no problem at all; and observed that I could keep to the tempo, stay precise and not miss a beat even when there were extended rest sections for my part. And it was just myself playing my own parts, so I have to keep my own time. 'Thằng này được [This fella is good]!' Đàm Linh commented and ordered someone to immediately run out and buy a bottle of wine for me to enjoy straight away. I politely told him, 'No, it's okay, thank you. I could not drink this wine. I am a good drinker, but I could not drink this bottle of wine because it was positioned next to a punishment.' After this incident, Đàm Linh and I would get along well with each other. Because of this incident, the maestro accepted the fact that I was good. That was a memorable incident until 1988, when I gave my solo recital. In the 1989 program, you could see Đàm Linh introducing the program that Quyền Văn Minh was the musician who

performed for the opening of the congress of the Hội Nhạc Sĩ in 1988 and again in this second performance to commemorate the successful conclusion of the congress. He was one of the reasons for the two successful solo recitals in 1988 and 1989.

After the first performance, the Hà Nội National Music Conservatoire of Vietnam invited me to teach at the school, in 1988. The head of the woodwinds faculty at that time, Phúc Linh, he studied in Hungary, so he understood my recital. He was among the audience at the performance and later, coincidentally, we went to the same session to record music for the soundtrack of a film. He told me, 'I want to invite Minh to teach at the school, but I understand that it would be difficult because the earnings from teaching is quite low. However, if Minh is passionate about music and wishes to help future generations, then Minh should teach.' I told him, 'I really love to do so and I have collected a lot of materials. We should discuss the concrete details of how this could be done, but a primary condition would be that I must be allowed to teach Jazz.' He was very positive, telling me, 'sure, sure, Jazz music of course, and Classical as well! Just like the model you performed at the recital, that would be how you should teach our students.' I loved that idea and I agreed. But I asked the Conservatoire to give me one week to consider before properly accepting the invitation. In the past, people would always consider very carefully the available opportunities and would bite on one to give it more consideration. I finally accepted because to be able to give birth to a new field of music in Vietnam, the worth of that is much more valuable than any material gain in life.

After that, when it came to the 1989 recital, it was like a solo audition to see if I was qualified to teach at the Conservatoire. The leadership of the Conservatoire was there among the audience. When the recital was over, the director, Trọng Bằng, told me that in principle the Conservatoire would require some kind of paper qualification for someone to be able to teach there because it was a state regulation. Although I did not have the paper qualification, my performance proficiency was way above any paper standards. They decided to give me an ad-hoc accreditation of 'trung cấp đạt cách' [intermediate level proficiency achieved] (high school qualification), so that I could officially teach at the Conservatoire. I understood their constraints and I found that reasonable. There has never been anyone in Vietnam like my case. They studied in school, received formal training overseas and were retained by the Conservatoire to teach music. When I started out and applied to join the professional music troupes, they always asked me, 'where did you study?' My reply was, 'I studied at home.' And this would be followed by the next question, 'do you have a diploma?' To which I could only answer, 'no.' How could I have a diploma if I learnt by myself at home? It was only when they really needed me, then they would put aside the issue that I did not have any diploma to certify that I could play. That was how I got to join the Thăng Long Song and Dance Troupe. When they really needed a saxophonist, a clarinetist and Quyèn Văn Minh, then they would be willing to go around the organizational structure to give me the position. That was why I could accept the fact that the Conservatoire only gave me a 'trung cấp đạt cách' certificate just so that I could start teaching formally at the school.

In 1989, I started teaching at the Conservatoire. There never was anyone teaching students to play Classical Music on saxophone, or anyone using the saxophone to play Vietnamese Chamber Music and definitely no one playing Jazz. At that time, I was still with the Thăng Long Song and Dance. I only transferred out my tenure formally in 1991. But in 1991, the people at the troupe wanted me to stay solely with the troupe and not teach at the school anymore. They even promised to promote me. I told them, 'that would be impossible because the school started a new department and that required the permission of two ministries, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education. If you make me abandon the

work now, that would not be possible; and my reputation would suffer.' That was what I told the troupe chief. And I continued, saying, 'when I went over to the Conservatoire to start teaching, that was sanctioned by the chief of the Directorate (of Culture), only with his approval then I could start teaching there.' The new troupe chief, who was just promoted to that position, he began to pressure me to concede. The chief of the Directorate at that time, he had worked at the Conservatoire before; he was formerly the Head of Training there. He felt the new troupe chief was short-sighted and immediately signed the papers for me to teach at the School of Arts, so that not only could I formally teach, I could teach anywhere; I could even teach concurrently at two schools and there would not be any problem at all! When I went over to the School of Arts, the principal was hesitant about my appointment there. So I went back to the Directorate, and they finally agreed to transfer my tenure completely to the Conservatoire. By 1991, I was fully transferred to the Conservatoire. In the past, when we started working, there were only state institutions. And it was the same for me, for thirty-six or thirty-seven years, I was a tenured state cadre, except for a short period of time when I was not employed.

The consecutive recitals in 1988 and 1989 echoed each other, highlighting a limitation I faced when performing the Vietnamese Chamber Music compositions; there was no space in the music to develop my ideas. In Jazz music, it is all about improvisation. After I started teaching at the Conservatoire, I really began to focus more on studying Jazz in order to teach better. When the Conservatoire invited me to teach there, I had already collected a substantial amount of materials on my own, but I went about to find more materials to enable me to teach the subject better. Throughout that period I deliberated and thought very carefully about the way we played Vietnamese Chamber Music. The outcome was not ideal and definitely could not lead on to Jazz. This was because the composers already wrote out every single note. Even for Cadenza parts where we could improvise a tiny little bit, it was still very much restricted by the written notes. So, after the second recital in 1989, when I started teaching, through to 1993, I thought about the need to write my own music for me to play, so that I could give a more effective performance. Some standard Jazz pieces, for example, Coltrane's *Blue Train*, the melody and the sound, if you play it according to the Vietnamese style, it could sound like a Vietnamese composition. If you follow according to the original style, the framework of the melody, it resembles the pentatonic scale found in Vietnamese folk music and Asian music.<sup>13</sup> But when you come to the solo part, you could break free and play out your ideas. Studying that piece made me think, why others could write a melody in such a framework and why couldn't I do the same? Why couldn't I have the right to write my own melody of our own music? Why couldn't I do something like that and take back my own artistic agency like he, Coltrane, did?

I thought about playing Vietnamese Folk Music and mixing it up with Jazz. But my life, since young, has always been about overcoming obstacles and challenges. I have to be very careful when it comes to the idea about developing Vietnamese Folk Music here. I am known as a Jazz musician, who was basically self-taught before becoming a teacher; it is an honor for me, and a form of respect by others, to be called a teacher. But to some others, they might not think so nicely about what I do, one could even use the word 'jealousy' to describe this kind of animosity towards the things I do. I told myself, I have already worked so hard to be where I am, if I am not careful and make some mistakes, I would be accused of desecrating Vietnamese Folk Music simply because they could not accept Jazz. That was why I kept the

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<sup>13</sup> For a basic appreciation of the musical style of John Coltrane and his usage of the pentatonic blues scale, see Baker (1980: 16 and 68).

*Vietnamese Chamber Music section in the recital separate from Jazz. I played Vietnamese music in both recitals in 1988 and 1989, and there were three sections featuring different genres of music. The first section was always Classical Music because I wanted to show them that I recognized Classical Music as the foundation to understand different genres. In the second section, I played Vietnamese Chamber Music to feature the compositions by Vietnamese musicians, using the saxophone. And in the third, I played Jazz.*

*But if I compose my own music, and if I were accused of desecrating any music, it would be my own music, and that would not affect anyone else. For any artist, we always want to be good in our art and we wish that all the possible factors would be available so that we could be good. But in the case of Quyèn Văn Minh, these factors were not available. I would have to do it through pure devotion, industry, and self-respect.*

The twin 1988 and 1989 recitals were indeed a crucial crossroad for Quyèn Văn Minh, and I might add, for the music scene in Vietnam. The recitals indirectly contributed to the birth of a new music department at the Conservatoire. Minh received the first official recognition for pioneering Jazz music in the public sphere when he was invited to help start this new music department at the prestigious Hà Nội National Music Conservatoire of Vietnam. His decision to join the Conservatoire would mark a significant turn in the story of Jazz in Vietnam. For the first time in communist Vietnam, perhaps, the term Jazz was used in a positive sense in the public sphere. For the first time since reunification, Jazz played by a Vietnamese musician was publicly performed in two major events and broadcasted on national television.

*During the 1989 performance, I played within, what I thought, were the confines of what the audience could accept in Jazz improvisation. But in 1994, it was different. I could try more. I could go as far as I wanted to show them what was Jazz. Later in the concerts, for example the first 'Father, Son and Jazz' [Cha, Con và Nhạc Jazz] concert, I could just let out the ideas. I don't have to prove or show anything anymore. I could just play.*

But what Minh gave in the 1989 recital was sufficient to impress the audience. In a brief review of the 1989 recital, Quang Nghi concluded:

Ninety minutes filled with the beautiful sound of the saxophone by Quyèn Văn Minh in an enthusiastic atmosphere among the audience: A beautiful moment in the musical life of the capital.<sup>14</sup>

But little did the audience privileged to witness these two watershed recitals live, those who saw it on television, and the people who supported the materialization of these two performances know that the seeds for the birth of original Vietnamese Jazz were being sown. Vietnam would have to wait until 1994 to hear the original sounds of Vietnamese Jazz at the prestigious Hà Nội Opera House. Minh premiered his original compositions in this third solo concert. Meanwhile, Minh would have to continue to overcome more hurdles and difficulties before he could finally realize his dream of finding a permanent voice for Jazz in his home country. And he always found the strength to do so through his mother.

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<sup>14</sup> Nghi (1989: 11).

*My whole life making music, even right until this very second, all these successes that I had, all the difficulties I managed to pull through, that spiritual strength was due to my mother. The image of my mother, every time I encountered the most dire difficulty, I would suddenly think about my mother, and I would pick myself up to fight again.*

### Interlude

What follows is a story for another time, but necessary to mention in passing here and therefore the heading, 'Interlude.' Quyèn Vãn Minh was called to Jazz from the first time he heard, as a teenager, that beautiful, complex, improvised and free sound of Jazz featuring the clarinet received through a small transistor radio owned by his father. Minh found out later, he had heard Benny Goodman in a regular program most likely broadcasted by the Voice of America (VOA).<sup>15</sup> And that was probably the *Music USA – Jazz Hour* program produced by Willis Conover for VOA, broadcasted worldwide and received by millions of listeners.<sup>16</sup> But Minh's attraction to Jazz was no triumphant cultural moment to be claimed by any side in the Cold War.

Jazz was indeed used as a cultural instrument in the Cold War by the Americans.<sup>17</sup> The US State Department tried to convey its cultural soft power through Jazz, but it was only a particular type of Jazz as imagined in the narrow mindsets of the politicians and bureaucrats.<sup>18</sup> However, Jazz was not just used in the Cold War by America alone, it was used by the Eastern Bloc as well.<sup>19</sup> Lisa E. Davenport even notes how some Soviet cadres turned this cultural chess play on its head when they saw Jazz as 'the music of the class struggle,' where black people, as the lower class, could break free of the bondage by the white capitalist class!<sup>20</sup> In turn, Eastern European cultural agencies promoted their own forms of Jazz to counter the Americans' cultural program.<sup>21</sup> There was Jazz in the Eastern Bloc. Thus, Quyèn Vãn Minh was even able to obtain Jazz vinyl records originating from Eastern Europe during the late 1970s and early 1980s to enrich his exposure to the genre. When Minh first performed in East Berlin in 1987, he heard the sounds of Jazz reverberating throughout his sojourn and it hardened his resolve to play Jazz in the public sphere.

But Jazz 'transcends political and cultural barriers.'<sup>22</sup> Introduced to the Soviet Union's allies, Jazz intermingled with existing Eastern European sounds and developed distinctive Jazz styles in these places.<sup>23</sup> As a result, Jazz heard in these places, for example, in Poland, could no longer be just referred to as 'Jazz in Poland,' but it would be more appropriate to call

<sup>15</sup> Minh told this story to many journalists, domestic and foreign, over the years since the late 1990s. In some of these earlier accounts, although Minh said it was probably a BBC channel, he was not sure exactly which program and on what channel he caught Jazz on the transistor radio. During our autoethnographic sessions between 2009 and 2015, Minh came to the conclusion that he most likely must have caught the program on VOA.

<sup>16</sup> Ripmaster (2007).

<sup>17</sup> Fosler-Lussier (2015: 77-100).

<sup>18</sup> Davenport (2009: 165).

<sup>19</sup> Pickhan and Ritter (2016a: 10).

<sup>20</sup> Davenport (2009: 18).

<sup>21</sup> For a comparison of the stories of Jazz in Poland and East Germany, see Schmidt-Rost (2016); the specific case of Poland, see Domurat-Linde (2016) and Pietraszewski (2016); see Havadi (2016) for the case of Hungary; and Motycka (2016) for the story of Czechoslovakia.

<sup>22</sup> Davenport (2009: 32).

<sup>23</sup> Pickhan and Ritter (2016b).

it ‘Polish Jazz.’<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, as Penny Von Eschen suggests, the American Jazz Ambassadors complicated ‘the characterization of Jazz as “America’s music”’ because they saw Jazz as ‘an international and hybrid music combining not just African and European forms, but forms that had developed out of an earlier mode of cultural exchange’ arising from the slave trade, racial relations, and migration.<sup>25</sup> There is little controversy in stating that Jazz grew in America and could be seen as perhaps the greatest cultural gift Americans gave to the world. The ability of Jazz to transcend, however, made it a global phenomenon in its own right, as astutely perceived by Minh. Jazz was no ‘*âm nhạc phản động*’ [reactionary music] and ‘*chả có gì tội lỗi*’ [there was nothing criminal] about Jazz music.

For Minh, it was the artistic possibilities he could realize through Jazz that matter. After all, he had no idea what America was like, having only learnt what the US dollar looked like when he started giving saxophone lessons to foreigners in the late 1980s. He would practice incessantly and perfectly replicate every single note of the tunes, including the improvised solos, he heard from the transistor radio, vinyl records, and the cassette tapes. He would slip in these licks and apply these techniques in his playing for the day-to-day performances and additional gigs, rising to prominence in the late 1970s as the premier saxophonist in the Vietnam music scene. With the 1988-89 solo recitals, he realized his immediate objective of playing Jazz on the public stage in Vietnam. He played Jazz in Vietnam.

Taking inspirations from his lived environment and extensive travels across the country and beyond as a music cadre in various state song and dance troupes, Minh would compose his own original tunes and record eight of these compositions in his first Jazz CD, *Birth '99: Những giai điệu dân gian Việt Nam với phong cách Jazz* [The Traditional Music of Vietnam with Jazz Style], released in 2000. In spite of the album title, these were bona fide original tunes entirely of Minh’s creation that borrowed no melodies from existing folk songs or ethnic tunes in Vietnam, although the tunes would carry a hint of decorative frills commonly found in the traditional musical genres in Vietnam. It was indeed the birth of Vietnamese Jazz after a decade long labor beginning with the audibility of Jazz on the public stage through the 1988-89 twin recitals.

<sup>24</sup> Domurat-Linde (2016) and Pietraszewski (2016).

<sup>25</sup> Von Eschen (2006: 250).



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