



## Music Feature and Characteristics in *Ca Tru* Singing

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### ABSTRACT

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Traditional Vietnamese singing is very rich and diverse, in the Red River Delta alone, there are many different genres such as: *Cheo*, *Xam*, *Quan Ho*, *Hat Van*, *Ca Tru*... Each of them has its own characteristics of music, singing method, performance form, etc. *Ca Tru*'s basic feature requires a poetic expressing in a high level and the singing techniques become different compared to other traditional singing forms. The vocal techniques of *Ca Tru* include vibrating/bouncing, singular sound, accent and rubato... In this article, the author clarifies some specific characteristics in *Ca Tru*; analyzing the standards and the factors that directly affect the quality of *Ca Tru*, etc. and find out some solutions to help preserving and popularizing the traditional *Ca Tru* values and intangible culture of Vietnamese.

### KEY WORDS:

*Ca Tru*, *Ca Tru* music, vocal features, *Ca Tru* vocal standard, *Ca Tru* techniques.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the treasure of Vietnamese traditional singing, there are many genres recognized by UNESCO as the intangible cultural heritage. In the northern region, there are *Quan Ho* (recognized in 2009), *Ca Tru* (2009), *Hat Xoan* (2017). In the central region, there has been *Ca Hue*, *Vi Giam* (2014), *Bai Choi* (2017). The southern area has *Don Ca Tai Tu* (2013). Among all of them, *Ca Tru* is recognized by UNESCO as a cultural heritage in need of urgent protection.

Many researches on *Ca Tru* refer to the historical, cultural and musical origins of this kind of singing such as: "Vietnam *Ca Tru*" edited by Do Bang Doan - Do Trong Hue [1], "Ca Tru viewed from various perspectives" by many authors, synthesized by Nguyen Duc Mau in 2003 [4], "Special examination of *Ca Tru* Vietnam" by many authors, synthesized by Dang Hoanh Loan et al in 2006 [5], "Ca Tru Hai Phong - a time to look back" by many authors, synthesized by Nguyen Duc Giang in 2015 [6], "Music of *Ca Tru* in Hanoi" by Nguyen Hien Duc in 2019... Studying *Ca Tru* singing style, the above mentioned works come to conclusion that a good *Ca Tru* singer must achieve many special criteria. However, what factors to maximum the vocal *Ca Tru* quality and how to promote those factors have not been clarified yet. Within this research, the author further

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analyzes some basic features of *Ca Tru* and find out the standards of vocal and the basic factors affecting the sound quality; the specific techniques in *Ca Tru*, etc. which may help being the basis for a further in-depth study upon the method of *Ca Tru* singing method.

### 2. RESEARCH METHODS

In the research process, the author uses a number of scientific research methods including documents analysis and synthesis; historical research and expert method.

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Concept and the musical features of *Ca Tru*

##### 3.1.1. Concept of *Ca Tru*

The results of the literature study show that many authors and musicians have researched and given out several different concepts about *Ca Tru*. As Pham Phuc Minh (1994) defines, "*Ca Tru* is a type of traditional folk singing upon chamber nature, it originated from *Nha To* singing (or *Nha Tro* singing) and was developed from rural areas to towns and cities". Nguyen Thuy Loan (2006), introduced the concept, "*Ca Tru* is a popular kind of singing from the North to Thanh-Nghe-Tinh areas. It is an ethereal singing, rich in scholarship and of high artistic value" [11]; According to Vu Nhat Thang, "*Ca Tru* is a long-time art in Vietnam, originating from folk songs, folk music, along with a number of folk performances and dances... is an art synthetic art form includes reciting poetry, singing, music, dancing and acting" [5]. Many other researchers have also studied and given the views and concepts of *Ca Tru*. On the basis of synthesis, analysis and on

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the own point of view, it can be assumed that Ca Tru is a kind of traditional singing, which has been popular form the Northern region down to Thanh Hoa and Nghe Tinh. *Ca Tru* bears many different names depending on the performance space and has the common characteristics of ethereal, scholarly and high artistic value.

### 3.1.2. Musical characteristics of *Ca Tru*

Investigating musical characteristics in *Ca Tru* shows that *Ca Tru* has its own unique characteristics in terms of structure, form and rhythm.

The ornament sound in *Ca Tru* is commonly used in the form of leaning sound, slurring up and down; also using many double jumps for the minor 3, perfect 4 and 5 intervals, multiple jumps for the minor 7 and perfect 8 intervals.

In terms of structure, according to Nguyen Duc Mau (2006), "Among 46 *Ca Tru* tunes, there are more than 10 songs in preset verse or poetic forms, for example, the "Ty ba hanh" tune by Bach Cu Di [5]. The structure of *Ca Tru* is often divided into different verses, especially the strict rule between the verses in recitative vocal part. For example, the tune "A meet with Hong Dao Tuyet" is full versed. (Full-verse: including 11 sentences; Over-verse: more than 11 sentences; under-verse: less than 11 sentences).

### Example 1: The West lake [excerpt]

Verse: Nguyễn Khuyến

Vocal: Nguyễn Thị Chúc

Recorder: Nguyễn Hiền Đức

8. Xuân vắng vẻ ư biết cùng ai ngâm họa

9. Gió hây hây bóng nước mùi nhan sạ

The above melody consists of only two verses but has continuous jumps and twists, using many intervals of minor 3, perfect 5 (*xuân-vắng; vẻ-ư; hây-bông; nước-mùi; mùi-nhan*), perfect 8 steps happen oftent. This type of melodic progression is often seen in many other *Ca Tru*

songs: "the West lake", "The beautiful girl", "Being the man"...

The repeating sounds are often used. This is a measure of repeating a high pitch - a very common feature in *Ca Tru*.

### Example 2. Being the man [excerpt]

1. Thông minh nhất nam tử ư

2. Yêu vì thiên hạ kỳ

Thơ: Nguyễn Công Trứ  
Hát: NSND Quách Thị Hồ  
Ký âm: Nguyễn Hiền Đức

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In the example 2, entire first sentence of melody remains the note G; the word "nhất" belongs to the high sound, but in this case the melody remains the G. Similarly, in the song "the West lake" (example 1), in the beginning of sentence number nine; the word "gió hây" also uses two notes A-A, but the A of "gió" adds a close ornament note to clarify the word "gió" in the melody.

Ca Tru often uses the adding sounds "uhm", "hmm", interspersed between a word, or a special phrase among the double jumps of perfect 4 and perfect 5 (the example 2).

The rhythm in *Ca Tru* has fast and slow sentences, there are also the un-defined beats, or sometimes, the rhythm is constantly changing. According to Nguyen Xuan Khoat (1942), "a characteristic of the rhythm that makes the Ca Tru flexible is the tempo of a song that rarely stays stable [4]. Vu Nhat Thang (2006) also said that: "in the middle or near the end of many *Ca Tru* songs, the rhythm is often accelerated" [5]. As mentioned above, the rhythm in Ca Tru often changes. From the above analysis, it can be seen that the music of Ca Tru is distinguished by its structure in the form of verse organizing, following the idea of poetry and depending on the poetic structure. The melodies often have many embellishments and double-step jumps; using the adding words "umh, hmm", using alliteration. *Ca Tru* is often in pentatonic scales and the rhythm of *Ca Tru* is rarely constant.

### 3.2. Standards and factors affecting Ca Tru

#### 3.2.1. Singing standards

To learn about *Ca Tru* singing standards, the author has researched and synthesized many different sources and research works, on that basis selected some general research results. It shows that, compared with many other traditional singing genres of Vietnam, *Ca Tru* is classified as difficult vocal art. According to Vu Nhat Thang (2006), "a person who sings *Ca Tru* must first of all have a naturally beautiful voice with clear, resonant timbre, also must have a musical sensibility and be able to control the voice in a skillful way". [5]. Also according to the author, the mandatory standard of a Ca Tru singer is: "learning how to control wavy sounds to release words so that the lyrics are clear and consistent with the meaning of song; must not using a fake voice; must keep the mouth close to make a deep 'uhm' in the throat; must not produce the vowels a, o, i or e... [5]. The standard defined by Vu Nhat Thang includes four items: expressing of the adding sounds in the vocal work; singing full and clear sounds; using real voice and close mouth; humming sound deep in the throat. Nguyen Hien Duc (2012) briefs that singing *Ca Tru* is: "skillful hands, steady rhythms, clear words, good timbres, mild accent and adding sounds" [2]. Nguyen Hien Duc also argues that, it is a good *Ca Tru* singers whose warm and high voice, whose soft and warm vocal, the sound is not only inside the mouth, but deep in the throat. The singer must not singing too lightly, but must be fine-tuned word by word and understanding the melody" [2]... According to Ngo Ngoc Linh (2003) "singing *Ca Tru* is singing poems, it is an obligatory of expressing poetic ideas and poetic love in a high

level. The singer must learn to spell words and control the lyrics very well" [4]. The author describes the sentence "*Yên thủy mang mang vô hạn cảm*" in the song "Visiting the West lake" that, each word is like a full circle, the vocal carefully bends to fully produce words, leaving not any sound unbent" [4, p. 291].

A number of works such as: "Vietnam Ca Tru Bien Khao" (Vietnamese Ca Tru References) [1], "Đặc khảo Ca Tru Việt Nam" (Special Examination of Vietnamese Ca Tru) [5], "Nghe thuật hát nói trong Ca Tru" (The art of recitative singing in Ca Tru) [2]... all confirm that there are 8 standards for a good voice of Ca Tru, including: "quan" (control) - accurate beat and timing; "xuyen" (full) - clear and completed words; "dan" (press) - inhale and compress sound inward; "thét" (shout) - resounding voice; "khuon" (mould) - following the vocal rules; "ray" (slur) - humming, breathful, and connected voice; "dieu" (grace) - keep the natural singing voice soar and luxurious; "voi" (high) - flying and clear voice. There are 6 mistakes to avoid upon singing Ca Tru, including: "loy" (late) - wrong rhythm and bad timing; "ngang" (fault) - wrong tone, wrong pitch; "can" (stuck) - incorrect word released; "chan" (block) - bad voice, mumbling; "hut" (miss) - inaccurate beat; "sa" (lost) - unable to match the music accompaniment.

Comparing the standards of *Ca Tru* with some other singing genres within the Red river delta area such as *Cheo*, *Quan Ho*, *Trau Van*, *Xam*, etc., it can be found many similarities, specifically the vocal needs to be achieved resonance, strength, full breath, correct pronunciation, clear words, real voice interval and accurate rhythm. However, being different from the other ones, Ca Tru requires four criteria: strong, grace, tragic and ingenious [4].

#### 3.2.2. Factors affecting the standard of Ca Tru vocal

The requirements for singing *Ca Tru* are so complicated, but the factors that help the voice achieve the 8 standards of *quán, xuyên, dẫn, thét, khuôn, hơi, điệu, vôi*, in general, include 3 elements of breath, aperture, sound position. In which, the singer must know how to use the breath to achieve strong and grace vocal; or how to set aperture to release words and sentences... According to the author, not only singing *Ca Tru*, but also in any type of vocal, the breath, aperture and sound position are the factors that directly affect the sound quality, creating a distinctive difference for that type of singing. These factors are not separate but always support each other. According to Ngo Ngoc Linh (2003), "*Ca Tru* uses completely clear, real inner air and real breath" [4]. The "real breath" means using breath in singing *Ca Tru* in stead of strength. To be able to hold the breath for a long time and regulate the breath effectively, singer needs to combine the opening of the mouth with a flat shape, pursed lips, vibrating sound while closing mouth, especially when pronouncing sounds deep in the throat. The way to set aperture is also an important factor to help regulate singer's breath when singing *Ca Tru*.

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Besides the breath and aperture, the position of sounds in *Ca Tru* is a very important factor. *Ca Tru* singers often use the end of nose as a place for their singing to reach resonance. Stemming from the characteristic elements in the music and vocal, the reverberation in *Ca Tru* often resonates in the chest and throat. For example, in order to sing two lines: “*Xuân vắng vẻ biết cùng ai ngâm họa/ Gió hây hây bỗng nức mùi nhan sạ*” (the example 1), the singer starts with a gentle sound, takes a quick, light and deep breath, compressing the air in the abdomen (diaphragm abdomen), then singing as if speaking with the mouth open naturally, the sound coming from the throat; and at the same time, pushing the air into small pulses, bouncing in the throat.

### 3.3. Featured techniques in Ca Tru

Like some other traditional singing forms in the Red River Delta, *Ca Tru* has bouncing technique songs such as *Cheo*, *Quan Ho*; or songs with breaking words and straight voice like *Xam*... However, the bouncing vocal technique and the breaking words technique in *Ca Tru* have been own characteristics.

#### 3.3.1. The bouncing technique

In general, this is a difficult and special vocal technique in traditional Vietnamese singing. In the opinion of many researchers, sound bouncing implies the sounds that is blocked in the throat, then bounced out; it is a phenomenon

that causes the listener to perceive the sounds that are emitted like each particle pouring out. Researching an example of artisan Quach Thi Ho, the author Nguyen Hien Duc comments that: "sound bouncing does not occur very often, but occasionally appears and is used in moderation" [2]. To find out more upon this technique, the author interviewed *Ca Tru* singer Pham Thi Hue, she also said that the typical vocal technique in *Ca Tru* is either *bouncing-off* or *dropping-down*, both are similar but *bouncing-off* implies a technique to produce a big and separate sounds - the method preferred by famous artisan Quach Thi Ho. Vice versa, artisan Pho Thi Kim Duc often use *dropping-down* technique (short bounce and more even). In fact, either methods used is due to singer's vocal style. In a song, many artists often mix the two techniques.

The type of sound bouncing (long bounce, short bounce) in *Ca Tru* is similar to *Cheo*. Relating the matter of sound bouncing in *Cheo* singing shows that most of the artists and singers said that the technique of long bounce vs short bounce is due to the vocal style and habits of each person. However, the position of the sound bounced off is different. In *Cheo*, the sounds bounce inside mouth (the gums of the upper teeth); but in *Ca Tru*, sounds bounce within the throat. According to Tran Ngoc Lan (2015), "bouncing always follows the verse, it is replaced into the length of the verse" [7].

#### Example 3. Hardly to meet the beauty again [excerpt]

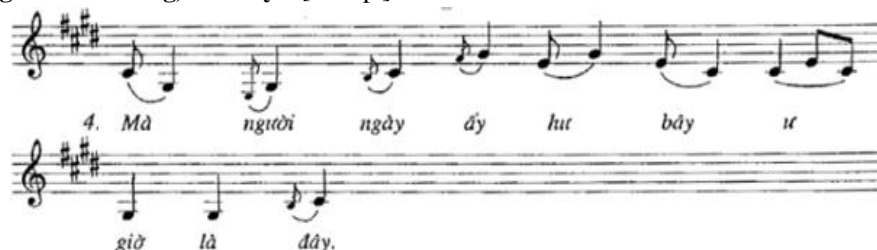


In example 3, when the C and E sounds are sung, singer keeps breath low, relaxes the facial muscles and body, compressing and regulating the air, creates a natural, hummed, bouncing reverberation in the throat.

This is one of the very typical techniques in *Ca Tru*, showing straight perforation, singing like speaking; accent on each single word. This is a way of stretching the previous word to emphasize the next word.

#### 3.3.2. The technique of breaking-word vocal

#### Example 4. Meeting with Ms. Hong, Ms. Tuyet [excerpt]



The example 4, consisting of a verse of 8 words: "mà người ngày ấy bây giờ là đây" (the lady from the past is now being here). Using the breaking-word technique, the sound when singing is often separated into: "mà người/ ngày ấy/ bây giờ/ là đây" or "mà người/ ngày ấy/ bây/ giờ/ là/ đây". It is often to think that the verse is an alternation of breath, but in fact, the verse is only one or two breaths: "mà người ngày ấy bây giờ/ là đây".

Upon performing the above verse, singer must show the ability to let go of each sentence, sing with mouth closed, pronouncing clearly the words combined with emphasis. Singer must gain certainty from the breath and the special sound position, also needs to control the tempo in the verse. According to Professor Tran Van Khe (2003), the beauty in the singing style of A Dao (*Ca Tru*) is not the beauty of European style with high-pitched, long-sentence vocalism,



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neither the vibrating like in contemporary music. Ca Tru show its beauty in techniques of producing full and clear words of lyric, connected sound with echoes where the words like the beads and the echo that is the small thread to deepen the beads together [4].

### Example 5. Meeting with Ms. Hong, Ms. Tuyet [excerpt]

Lyric: Duong Khe

Singer: Artisan Quach Thi Ho

Recorder: Nguyen Hien Duc

3. Mười lăm năm thắm thoát có xa gì  
4. Ngoảnh mặt lại đã tới u kỳ tứ liễu

Upon singing the above excerpt, each word needs to be pronounced very clearly, from the beginning, opening and closing words must be done relatively, slowly and spreading out. Specifically, with the two verses in the above excerpt: "Mười...uoi lăm...ăm năm thắm...âm thoát...oat co...ó...o xa gi...i/ Ngoanh...oảnh mặt lại đã...à tới ky...ỳ tở...ờ...liêu...iểu". The tone in a sentence usually follows since letter has been closed, pulling from the top down or pushing from the bottom up, every word must have an echo and releasing the word in the style of letting go. Along with that, the reverberation intensity changed in each word creating nuances, clarifying the subtlety releasing and pushing slightly of *Ca Tru*.

It can be seen that the pronunciation of words in *Ca Tru* has many similarities with ordinary speech, thanks to the ingenuity in letting go of sentences, releasing words in combination with emphasis between words, helping audience enjoy the lyrics both as separate and cohesive as if there is no tension and restraint in the singing, helping listeners understand the song.

## 4. CONCLUSION

*Ca Tru* has been a scholarly and chamber music genre with many distinctive music features: structure in the form of stanzas; melodies with many double steps, many adding sounds, the using of alliteration... The standard of *Ca Tru* is first and foremost expressed in its resonant, bright and strong voice, which is the harmonious synthesis of the requirements of *quán, xuyên, dẫn, thét, khuôn, hơi, điệu, vờ*. Besides, *Ca Tru* vocal is not regular, but very special compared to other types of singing. To achieve these standards, the essential factors that singers need to cultivate include breath, aperture and sound placement. These factors become the keys helping *Ca Tru* singers achieve their eloquent, loud and ethereal vocals; also showing the ingenuity in each technique of

Indeed, because singing *Ca Tru* is like singing poems, singer must learn to spell words skillfully and clearly. According to Ngo Ngoc Linh: "in order to achieve the right spirit and emotion from the lyrics, artists must always be creative, release words in the style of letting go, suddenly or fully" [4].

vibrating, entangling, bouncing sounds, releasing words by word.

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