

KHAC CHI ENSEMBLE

Art Form: Music

Style: Traditional

Culture: Vietnamese

MEET THE ARTIST:

Khac Chi Ensemble is headed by Khac Chi, the founder and premiere musician. Renowned throughout Vietnam for his master of the *dan bau*, a rare, beautiful one-string zither, Chi is a graduate of the Vietnam Conservatory of Music in Hanoi. After graduation he remained at the institution as an instructor and conductor for the acclaimed Traditional Music Orchestra. He also began to tour in solo concerts and with his own ensemble. Joining Khac Chi in the performances is Ngoc Bich, an exceptional vocalist, arranger and multi-instrumentalist. She is a specialist in *dan bau* and a number of other rare instruments from the rural and mountainous regions of Vietnam, including the *dan t'rung*, *dan k'longput* and *dan ko ni*. Both of these outstanding musicians have toured internationally as solo artists and as Khac Chi Ensemble, with performances in Japan, Thailand, North Korea and Canada.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Khac Chi Ensemble features the music of the mountain people of Vietnam, as well as classical, folk or contemporary music of the country. The songs are played on a variety of traditional instruments, often accompanied by vocal music. Students should watch for rare and unique instruments such as the *dan bau* (one-stringed zither) used in the "Village Festival song," or the *dan t'rung* (suspended bamboo xylophone), played in the "Full Moon Dance." Other instruments include a two-string violin used to play a children's musical fairy tale called "On the Mountain Top;" and a long flute (invented by Khac Chi) played by two persons during the "Riding Horse" song. The haunting lyricism, energetic rhythms and fascinating timbres of Khac Chi Ensemble offer intriguing glimpses into the rich musical traditions of Vietnam.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Vietnam is a land characterized by diversity and a profound ability to adapt. The diversity is most apparent in the people themselves. The main ethnic group of Vietnam are the Kinh people, who account for 90 percent of the total population. But the highland areas, where most of the music of Khac Chi Ensemble comes from, are inhabited by a dramatic array of over 54 ethnic minorities totaling around 6 million people, including the Muon, Thai, Meo, Nannan, Man, Cham, Gia rai and Mngong Gar. Many of these groups have managed to maintain their indigenous cultures, traditions and music.

The resourceful nature of the culture and people of Vietnam is strong despite the troubled history of the country, which was often ruled by others. China, France, Japan, the United States and frequent battles between north and south Vietnam all impacted this country over the centuries. Fortunately, the traditions, particularly the music, stayed strong and have survived to this day. Home to many musical and theatrical innovations, the music of Vietnam is ancient. Some of the wind and percussion instruments date all the way back to the Bronze age of western Asia, around 1800 B.C. Many of the vocal traditions are also unique, such as "Hat Quan Ko." In this special folk song from northern Vietnam, young men and women from different villages take turns singing to each other in a contest to measure their ability to create and sing extemporaneous songs and melodies.

The ability of the Vietnam people to adapt and use even natural events to advantage is shown in *roi nuoc*, a particularly fascinating form of theatre. Ancient puppeteers, inundated yearly by floods in the Red River Valley, used their watery stages to create a new style of puppetry. *Roi nuoc* uses puppets moving on a stage of water to tell stories of the great men and women who helped to shape Vietnam.

The music played in the performances by Khac Chi Ensemble - festival dances, work songs, wonderful vocals - is just a small sample of the rich, resilient heritage that still thrives and prospers in the land of Vietnam.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Describe what you saw. What instruments did you recognize? Which ones were new to you? Was the clothing worn by the performers a style you had seen before?
- Describe the music you heard in the performance. How was it different from music with which you are already familiar? How was it similar?
- Talk about the instruments you saw and the different ways they were played. If you were going to learn to play one of those instruments, which one would you choose?
- Many of the songs were sung by the Vietnamese people as they worked at various jobs, such as cutting trees, harvesting rice or other everyday tasks. What is the purpose of a “work” song? What song, if any, do you sing when you are working?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SOCIAL STUDIES:

Many of the instruments played during the performance are made from materials that can be easily found in the hilly countryside of northern Vietnam, with different sizes of bamboo being the most often used. What kinds of instruments could you make if you lived in a desert? A forest? A northern land with lots of ice and snow? Select one geographic area and write a short paragraph that describes what kind of materials you could find, collect and turn into musical instruments. Then select an actual country, and read about the music and instruments indigenous to the area. See if you were successful in identifying some of the possible types of instruments.



dan truong

Legend:

- Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▮ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- Take an empty paper towel roll and stretch a rubber band so that it stretches down the body and across both ends. Holding the tube gently, play the instrument by plucking the band. What kinds of sounds does it make? Can you alter the sound by stretching the band tighter, snapping different parts of the band, adding more rubber bands, by shortening the tube or holding the tube in a different way? Create a song with your tube.
- ▮ Using a classroom map, locate the country of Vietnam. What other countries share its borders? What body of water defines the eastern coast of Vietnam? Why do you think that Vietnam would attract people from many different Asian countries?
- * Compare a map of Vietnam to a map of California. Do you see similarities? Differences? Write a paragraph about how the borders of these places and their proximity to the ocean, might have encouraged or influenced their development.
- ❖ During the performance the musicians used their hands and mouths to create sounds. Join in a group of three or four students and work together to create a “sound song,” using the techniques learned in the performance. Vary rhythms, dynamics (volume) and pitch to influence and focus the effect your song creates. Do you want listeners to laugh? Be serious? Be sad? Present your sound “song” to the class. Next, try larger group songs or solo performances enhanced by a “backup” group of hand and mouth sound makers. If there is a piece you really like, title the song.
- ⇒ Listen to one of the “sound song” performances and working individually or in a group, write a review of your classmates’ work. Remember to provide positive comments, observations on what worked, and constructive suggestions about how the song might be improved. Present your comments to the class, then join in a question and answer session to discuss your review.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Nguyen, Phong, *From Rice Paddies and Temple Yards : Traditional Music of Viet Nam*. World Music Press, New York, NY, 1990.
- Vuong, Lynette Dyer, *The Brocaded Slipper and Other Vietnamese Tales*. Harpercollins, New York, NY, 1992.