Vietnam

As part of a consultancy for the British Council, Barley Norton travels with a group of young Vietnamese artists-in-residence to meet Cham and Bahnar musicians in the remote provinces of Ninh Thuan and Gia Lai.

Phan Rang is a laid-back coastal city in the south-central province of Ninh Thuan in Vietnam. I’m here with a group of eight Vietnamese musicians and visual artists who are on a British Council residency to explore cultural heritage. These young contemporary artists from across the country are on a mission to understand more about the music of the Cham people, whose ancient civilisation dates back millennia. The first stop on our itinerary is a village an hour’s drive inland from Phan Rang. A meeting has been arranged with two master drummers Mr Lai Lau and Mr Sum Van Tanh. The young visiting musicians, many of whom have never directly experienced Cham music before, are eager to learn about the ginang (double-headed barrel drum). The two drummers play intricate interlocking patterns demonstrating the different sounds made with the stick and hand.

The remnants of the glorious Cham civilisation of the past can be seen in the red temple towers dotted around south-central Vietnam. The towers, some of which date back to the 13th century, were once at the heart of religious and cultural life, but now they are tourist sites and rarely used for worship. Cham culture has gradually been assimilated and eroded since their kingdom fell under Vietnamese rule after a decisive battle in the late-15th century. The Cham communities in Vietnam today are struggling to keep their cultural heritage, their language, music, and diverse religious traditions, alive.

Cham traditional music is often performed for rituals, and Mr Lai Lau tells us about an ancestor ceremony taking place that evening. So, as dusk fell we made our way to the house of a local Cham official where the ritual is being held. When we arrive, a group of male musicians wearing white shirts and head scarfs, have already gathered under a temporary awning in the courtyard. A female ritualist, also dressed in white, is kneeling in front of an altar dedicated to her ancestors. Once the final preparations are complete, two drummers beat out heavy, interlocking rhythms on the ginang and the woman slowly begins to dance focusing intensely on the altar. A male musician playing a shawm called the saranai adds a strident melody over the drumming and the ritualist dances more vigorously, holding a blue fan in each hand. During the ceremony, members of the extended family reverently prostrate themselves in front of the altar. The main purpose of the occasion, we are told, is for the community to honour their ancestors and seek their protection.

One of the aims of the artist residencies is to foster interaction between contemporary musical expression, traditional cultural heritage and archival material. Far from being frozen in time, cultural heritage is constantly being transformed, and the residencies encourage new creative collaborations to help heritage thrive in the future. Before arriving in Phan Rang, the artists on the residency meet Bahnar musicians in Gia Lai province in the Vietnamese Central Highlands. The Bahnar are famous for their gong orchestras, which have links with other ensembles in South-East Asia, from the similar gong orchestras in Laos through to the gamelan traditions of Indonesia. On the final night of the residency in Gia Lai, the young artists jam with Bahnar musicians playing gongs and drums in the large communal house (trong), where traditional events are held. The revelry continues late into the night, fuelled by the pulsating gong rhythms and a copious supply of potent, locally brewed rice wine.

The trips to Ninh Thuan and Gia Lai in August and September 2018 are a pilot residency within the two-year British Council project, Heritage of Future Past (2018-20). The overall aim is to promote inclusive growth through sharing and promoting cultural heritage, and the British Council is currently supporting heritage development projects in Colombia and Kenya as well as Vietnam. The British Council’s Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth initiative includes a Film, Archive and Music Lab (FAMLAB) Fund, which has a budget for artists based in Vietnam and the UK to pitch for individual projects. Over the next two years, a total of £100,000 is available to support projects focusing on music or film heritage in Vietnam. This offers exciting possibilities. As the young female singer Linh Ha says during the pilot residency: “This has been a great opportunity for me. I’ve learned a lot about cultural identity and explored collaborations that I’m sure will influence my music in the future.” In a world that seems increasingly riven with division, such opportunities to develop cross-cultural artistic collaborations are to be celebrated.