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Filming Music as Heritage

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Abstract

A burgeoning body of scholarship has critically evaluated heritage discourse and UNESCO’s 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage. Ethnographic studies have also begun to assess the impact of policies aimed at safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) on music practices and communities. Audiovisual representations of ICH, however, have received little scholarly attention. This chapter reflects on how film intersects with the heritagization of music traditions, focusing on the official videos submitted by state parties as part of the process of nominating elements for inscription on UNESCO’s ICH Lists. As a case study, it considers the Ví and Giặm folk song tradition from the Vietnamese provinces of Hà Tĩnh and Nghệ An, which was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2014. Drawing on a research trip to Vietnam in 2013, the chapter unpacks the complex issues involved in the audiovisual representation of intangible cultural heritage and problematizes the notion that film is a neutral form of documentation. Through a comparison of the official video about Ví and Giặm folk songs submitted to UNESCO and a television broadcast of a large-scale staged show featuring performances of folk song and dance, it is emphasized that films are historically situated cultural artifacts with the potential to affect how music heritage is perceived and practiced.

Keywords: Film, intangible cultural heritage, Vietnam, folk song, audiovisual representation.

A burgeoning body of scholarship has evaluated discourse on heritage and scrutinized the assumptions, implications and consequences of UNESCO’s 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage. Heritage has often been characterized as a phenomenon that is deeply implicated in processes of globalization. Owe Ronström, for instance, refers to heritage as “a homogenizing counterforce to the diversifying and globalizing forces of post- or late modernity” (Ronström 2014: 56). Relatedly, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett has argued that heritage is “a mode of metacultural production that produces something new” based on operations of “valorization, regulation and instrumentalization” (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 196, 162). Both Ronström and

Kirschenblatt-Gimblett emphasise that the process of heritagization fundamentally alters “the relationship of practitioners to their practices” (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 196).

Despite an increasing number of ethnographic studies that address the impact of heritage policies on musical communities (e.g. Howard 2012), audiovisual representations of ICH and their effects on the vitality and transmission of heritage practices has received little attention.¹ This chapter reflects on how film intersects with the heritagization of music traditions, focusing particularly on video materials included as part of the nomination files submitted to UNESCO’s ICH Lists. As a case study, I discuss the Ví and Giặm folk song tradition associated with two provinces in the northern central part Vietnam called Hà Tĩnh and Nghệ An, which are often referred to collectively as Nghệ Tĩnh. The nomination file “Ví and Giặm folk songs of Nghệ Tĩnh” was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2014.²

First let us briefly consider two contrasting audiovisual representations of Ví and Giặm folk songs as music heritage. Video example 1 is the official 10-minute video that was submitted to UNESCO as part of the nomination process; Video example 2 is an extract from a large-scale staged show that was held on 31 January 2015, and broadcast live on Vietnamese television, to celebrate UNESCO’s recognition of Ví and Giặm folk songs as Intangible Cultural Heritage. Both of these video examples are available to view on YouTube.³

The official UNESCO-inscribed video focuses on the singing of Ví and Giặm folk songs in villages known for making traditional handicrafts. For example, early in the film (from 1’42’’ to 2’56’’) we see a woman singing a Ví song and a man responding with a Giặm song. They both sing while making the iconic Vietnamese hat (called *nón* in Vietnamese). The footage in this section of the film was shot in the village of Thạch Hà

¹ For a reflexive account about the making of one ICH film submitted to UNESCO about violin craftsmanship in Cremona see Caruso (2016).

² For details of the UNESCO inscription of “Ví and Giặm folk songs of Nghệ Tĩnh” which includes some background information about the characteristics of Ví and Giặm folk songs see <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/Vi-and-Giặm-folk-songs-of-nghe-tinh-01008>.

³ See video example 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qiGNPvtMAIQ>; and video example 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fp-WeCXOp9A>. Video example 2 is an extract from a long concert performance. In the full concert - which lasted around 1hr and 48 minutes and can be viewed in full at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPD76dRC564> - the song performed in video extract 2 begins at 1hr 08’49’’.

in Hà Tĩnh province, where there is still a traditional handicraft guild for making conical hats by hand. In video example 2, we see members of a folksong club from Trường Lưu village in Hà Tĩnh province, performing songs associated with the ‘Textile weaving guild’ on a huge stage in front of a big audience of national and local government officials and the public at large.

How are we to understand these two contrasting audiovisual representations of heritage? Compared to video example 2 where we see people on the stage pretending to spin yarn at fake spinning wheels while miming along to a pre-recorded track, we might think that the video example 1 is more ‘authentic’ as it seems to show ‘real’ folk singers, singing ‘naturally’ and ‘spontaneously’ while working. But why did the makers of the UNESCO film represent Ví and Giặm folksong in that way? And what do televised staged performances tell us about the impact of the heritagization of folk music? Both videos evoke the past, but in different ways: the first suggests that past cultural practices, and the bond between singing and handicraft guilds, are still living in the present. Whereas in video example 2 a staged evocation of the rural past is reconstructed as part of a modern, national spectacle.

Such contrasting representations of music heritage are widespread and they provide numerous opportunities for reflecting critically on processes of heritagization. In this chapter, I will focus mainly on the Ví and Giặm folksong film made for UNESCO and discuss the role of video material in the UNESCO’s ICH system.

Video Documentation, Intangible Cultural Heritage and UNESCO

All of the elements inscribed on UNESCO’s various ICH lists – the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, and the Urgent Safeguarding and Representative Lists - include edited videos. Yet UNESCO has not outlined detailed guidance on the style and content of audiovisual materials. This is partly because video has occupied a peripheral position as supplementary documentation, firmly in the service of the written information in the nomination file.⁴ In essence, the purpose of the video

⁴ In UNESCO ICH nomination forms video materials are frequently referred to as documentation and in some earlier forms as supplementary documentation.

documentation submitted to UNESO is to provide a “pictorial representation” (David MacDougall 1998: 76) of the existing written content of the ICH nomination file. In other words, video should confirm the information provided in the text rather than providing new information or new perspectives. UNESCO documents state that videos are a useful medium through which to ‘increase visibility and awareness’, but prior to the 2015 cycle, videos were not considered in the process of examining and evaluating nominations submitted to the Representative List.

The peripheral status of video as an instrument for publicity in UNESCO’s ICH system seems to be shifting. Beginning with the 2015 cycle, video materials were included in the evaluation of nominations to the Representative List for the first time, and they also became mandatory for all nominations.⁵ This shift in the status of video, however, has not come with new detailed evaluation criteria; in keeping with the idea that videos are additional documentation that simply reproduce or replicate information in the written files, the videos are seemingly judged on the same criteria as the written nomination. UNESCO have still not provided detailed guidance on video materials, and it is extremely hard to imagine how a 5-10 minute video can adequately fulfill all of UNESCO’s 5 main criteria.⁶ However, some piecemeal guidance about how state parties should create videos is scattered through UNESCO documents, and some key points are listed in the 2016 Aide Mémoire.⁷ To summarise, the small amount of guidance about video materials that has been outlined by UNESCO is oriented around three areas: 1. Coherency; 2. Context and 3. Community participation.

The first area of coherency, which has already been alluded to in the previous section, is that videos are meant to demonstrate a ‘close correspondence’ with the

⁵ Prior to 2015, videos were optional for nominations to the Representative List and were only mandatory for the Urgent Safeguarding List. However, as far as I can tell from the UNESCO website, all nominations to the UNESCO ICH Lists have included video materials.

⁶ In brief, the 5 criteria on which ICH nominations to UNESCO are evaluated are: 1) The element constitutes ICH; 2) inscription will contribute to visibility and awareness of the diversity and creativity of ICH; 3) safeguarding measures are elaborated; 4) the element has been nominated following the widest possible community participation; and 5) the element is included in an inventory. Full details of the criteria for the UNESCO Lists are outlined here: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/procedure-of-inscription-00809>.

⁷ This 2016 Aide Mémoire is available here: www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/ICH-02-2016_aide-memoire-EN.doc.

nomination text. In regard to the second area, UNESCO encourages state parties to: a. shoot the ‘normal’ context, rather than staging performances for the purposes of filming; b. shoot comprehensively to show diversity and complexity, rather than focusing on a few selected aspects; and c. provide information that will make the context understandable (for example, the film should include explanations about where and when filming took place and who is speaking). Under the third area of community participation, UNESCO encourages state parties to film ordinary participants, rather than emblematic figures or celebrities, and to allow participants to speak on their own behalf with subtitled translations, rather than relying only on third-person narration in English or French.

Even though the film ‘Vĩ and Giặm Folk Song of Nghệ Tĩnh’ was submitted to UNESCO’s Representative List in the 2014 cycle, before videos became mandatory and were officially evaluated, it goes some way to ticking the boxes in the three areas of coherency, context and community participation. The film clearly aims to present diversity and the ‘normal’ context: it consists of a sequence of 10 song extracts performed by ‘ordinary’ folk singers living in rural areas, not famous performers. In addition to showing singers who belong to the ‘conical hat making’ guild, the film presents a variety of supposedly ‘normal’ contexts, from seeing a woman singing a lullaby while rocking her young child in a hammock to shots showing men and women singing to each other while making wooden furniture and fishing on river boats. The voice over and the titles provide basic information: the voice-over heard in the sequence featuring the singers from the ‘conical hat making’ guild, for instance, offers information about the number of syllables in each line of song, giving the film an air of scientific authority. Nonetheless, the voice over is used sparingly; much of the film consists of singing performances with little or no voice-over commentary and there is minimal use of explanatory text in expository intertitles. Notably, the Vĩ Giặm film does not show any participants speaking, so it does not ‘allow participants to speak on their own behalf’, as encouraged by UNESCO. This is the case not just for the films submitted by Vietnam to

UNESCO but also for most of the official videos submitted to UNESCO that I have watched.⁸

Wim van Zanten's brief paper on UNESCO audiovisual files, which he presented at the First ICH Researchers Forum, offers an assessment of ICH videos inscribed on the 2011 Representative List. His damning conclusion is that the videos have "many shortcomings" (van Zanten 2012, 92). To rectify common flaws, he recommends that: First, the filmmaker should respect the "cultural flow of time" "as experienced by the community concerned" rather than editing together short shots of 1 or 2 seconds in length (van Zanten 2012, 89); Second, the amount of information should be "adequate: not too much and not too little" (van Zanten 2012, 90); Third, the social interaction and the wider social context of performances should be presented; And fourth, heritage communities should give feedback about the way they are represented in the films.

Instead of pointing out pitfalls or making recommendations about how to improve the videos submitted to UNESCO as Wim van Zanten has done, I would like to question the underlying assumption that films about ICH are somehow neutral documentation or data that can be unproblematically assessed according to the same criteria as the written nomination forms. The idea that film is a transparent medium for conveying information, I suggest, seriously underestimates the extent to which films are cultural and artistic artifacts infused with particular values and agendas. Without detailed knowledge of the historical and cultural context in which the films are made, the intentions of the filmmakers and the meanings conveyed in images may be opaque, or at least not entirely transparent.

The areas of context and community participation are particularly complicated when thinking about film. As David MacDougall (1998) has eloquently expounded, film favours the particular rather than the general; while film is good at showing the relations between individuals in specific contexts, broader generalizations and explanations about cultural context are harder to depict with film. This point is relevant to community participation in UNESCO videos. Although it might be quite easy to superficially evidence participation by including 'vox pop' style statements from practitioners, which

⁸ For further discussion of participatory video and UNESCO's position on community participation see Norton 2018.

can be seen in some videos submitted to UNESCO, selected individual statements may not represent the views of the majority. Quotes from individual practitioners do not typically feature in text, presumably because they are too specific and difficult to contextualize, so why should they be present in videos? Conflicting individual views, of course, do not usually feature in UNESCO nominations as they have the potential to undermine the attempts by state parties to gain UNESCO recognition for intangible cultural heritage.

Representing Music Heritage in the Film “Vĩ and Giặm Folksongs of Nghệ Tĩnh Province”

The 10-minute film “Vĩ and Giặm Folksongs of Nghệ Tĩnh Province” was made by a team from VICAS, the Vietnam Institute for Culture and Art Studies, based in Hanoi. Here I would like to offer some brief comments about this short film in order to bring attention to some of the different cultural values and agendas at work in the filmic representation of Vĩ and Giặm folksongs. In June 2013, I was invited by VICAS to be a foreign ‘expert’ on a short research trip to Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces in June 2013. During the research trip, staff from VICAS along with myself and 4 other invited foreign guests, met many of the local singers who appear in the film and we visited the handicraft villages where they lived and worked. On a later trip to Hanoi in November 2014, I also interviewed the director of the film, Phạm Hùng Thoan. The following discussion draws on these fieldwork trips in 2013 and 2014.

The film made by VICAS presents romanticized and idealized images of folk singers who seemingly sing as part of their everyday lives in the village and while working. For instance, people are seen singing while cooking, fishing, laboring in the fields, and making traditional handicrafts. Such images of ‘authentic’ rural singers are informed both by a history of Vietnamese folklore research as well as by anxieties about cultural loss. Marxist-influenced Vietnamese scholarship during the second half of the twentieth century typically presents Vĩ and Giặm folk song as the authentic voice of the masses. According to this research, folk song is embedded in relations of production and is understood as an expression of national character (see, for example, Nguyễn Đông Chi

and Ninh Viết Giao, 1963 (1944), and Vi Phong, 2000). With the ‘open door’ policy since the late 1980s, which has gradually opened Vietnam up to neoliberal globalization, narratives about the loss of national culture and identity have moved centre stage and this has in part fuelled initiatives to safeguard ICH (see Norton 2014). The scenes depicting performances by folk singers in the film are not entirely fabricated, but they were staged for the camera and, arguably, they are not very representative of Ví and Giặm folk singing in contemporary Vietnam.

Rather than being integrated into everyday life and rural labour, most folk song activity now exists in the context of ‘clubs’ (*câu lạc bộ*), in which singers give presentational performances to entertain an audience. Notably, there is only a brief mention in the 10-minute film of the Centre for Safeguarding and Promotion of Folk Songs of the Nghệ Region, even though this Centre is a hub for professional musicians who regularly give theatricalized performances of Ví and Giặm folk songs. It is also worth noting that professional state run troupes have presented modernized, staged performances of Ví Giặm folk song since the 1950s, yet the members of these troupes are almost entirely excluded from the film. Arguably, the television broadcast about the staged performance celebrating UNESCO recognition, which featured members of a local folk song club, is more representative of prevailing performance practices than the evocation of village folk song performances in the film submitted to UNESCO.

In terms of filmmaking style and approach, the film is informed to some extent by observational styles of ethnographic filmmaking. VICAS has been involved in several anthropological filmmaking projects and training programmes with foreign partners. Partly through this contact, staff at VICAS are familiar with some ethnographic filmmaking techniques, including observational styles that eschew voice over and favour long sequence shots to preserve the spatial and temporal integrity of events. The director Thoan, however, told me during our interview that voice over was needed to enhance intelligibility, to convey important information about Ví Giặm folk song to audiences. Much of the film consists of extensive use of montage sequences, which include numerous out-of-synch cut-aways shot by multiple cameras. Such montage sequences were used for practical and aesthetic reasons: they were easier to edit and increased the pace and diversity of the film. While more can be said about this film, I hope to have at

least hinted at the complex issues involved in the representation of Ví and Giặm songs and the cultural context in which the film was made.

Concluding Remarks

The short film submitted to UNESCO about Ví and Giặm folksongs, discussed in this chapter, highlights the importance of recognising that films are historically situated cultural artifacts. It also helps problematize the notion, which is predominant in the UNESCO ICH system, that videos about heritage should aspire to be objective representations of information or data. Even short films whose primary aim is to document musical heritage for UNESCO purposes are influenced by historical, cultural and aesthetic factors that complicate an understanding of them as simply a vehicle for conveying the information required to fulfill certain criteria.

The large number of videos that are being produced about intangible cultural heritage are part of a broader process of heritagization, which is sweeping across many parts of the world. Like other aspects of heritage discourse, videos that promote intangible cultural heritage can strongly affect how cultural practices are perceived and practiced. Far from being a neutral form of documentation, audiovisual representations of music heritage can be discussed in terms of what they reveal about the political, cultural and historical processes in which they are embedded.

Sound film is a complex medium of signification; it favours forms of experiential and embodied understanding, and ways of knowing that extend beyond text (see Taylor 1996, and MacDougall 1998). Given the complexity of film as a medium, it is not surprising that UNESCO's ICH system has had difficulty in providing detailed guidelines about the content and approach of films about ICH. In the wake of the change in the status of video documentation in the 2015 nomination cycle, however, this seems to be changing and it will be interesting to see how guidance about the video materials required for nominations to UNESCO develops in the future.

There is potential for audiovisual ethnomusicologists to do applied work that makes a contribution to the filming of music heritage. Some music researchers, for instance, have been involved in the making of films about ICH submitted to UNESCO

(e.g. Caruso 2016). Yet applied ethnomusicologists could play an even more active role by working with music communities to create innovative films about music heritage and by engaging with UNESCO's policies on audiovisual materials. The rapid growth in films about intangible cultural heritage also provides music scholars with numerous opportunities for critical reflection on audiovisual representations of music as heritage and the impact of these representations on musical practices.

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