

TEACHERS NOTES

# *Vietnam* *symphony*



FILM AUSTRALIA

NATIONAL INTEREST PROGRAM

In 1965, as the Vietnam War intensified and Hanoi faced the threat of massive US bombing, students and teachers from the National Conservatory of Music were forced to flee the city for the relative safety of a small village in the countryside. With the help of villagers, they built an entire campus underground, creating a maze of hidden tunnels, connecting an auditorium and classrooms. Here, as the war raged around them, they lived, studied and played music for five years. *Vietnam Symphony* tells their extraordinary story.

Stunning black-and-white archival footage captures almost surreal scenes—of pianos wheeled on handcarts along dusty tracks, lessons held in round-the-clock shifts in subterranean caverns, performances for soldiers among heavy armaments, and the unexpected meeting of hard labour and high culture, of the pragmatic and the sublime. This remarkable footage is combined with contemporary interviews with the people involved, who recount personal stories of danger, hunger, fear and loss, counterpointed by moments of humour and beauty. And their music, of course.

Since the war, Vietnam has undergone profound changes. These talented musicians and composers are now among the country's cultural leaders, yet their children tend to take little interest in the past, looking to the west to shape their future.

Beautifully photographed, *Vietnam Symphony* records the coming together of the former conservatory students and villagers for a reunion concert 30 years after the war, to paint a moving portrait of life in Vietnam then and now.

## Curriculum Links

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students from middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Studies of Asia, Languages Other Than English, Studies of Society and Environment, Modern History, Music, English and Media Studies.

## About This Guide

This guide is not designed as a definitive resource for teaching about the modern history of Vietnam; rather it draws its perspectives largely from the film itself and also from a Q&A with the film's writer/director, Tom Zubrycki. Therefore, there is a natural emphasis on process and representation.

## Before Watching

### Key concepts and vocabulary

capitalism, colonialists, communism, feudalism, imperialism, mercenaries, socialism

### Historical context

The following is a brief overview of the backdrop to the war in which *Vietnam Symphony* is set. Students will benefit from gaining an understanding of this historical context before watching the film, and may also find it useful to refer to a map. (Place names in this guide appear in bold for their first mention.)

Today Vietnam is an independent country, but for centuries the nation's history has been one characterised by a near-continuous struggle for autonomy. Going back, Vietnam was ruled by national feudal dynasties including the Ly Dynasty (11th and 12th centuries), the Tran Dynasty (13th and 14th

centuries) and the Le Dynasty (15th, 16th and 17th centuries). During this 500-year period the Vietnamese people managed to repel invading enemies such as the Song (11th century), the Yuan or Mongols (13th century) and the Ming (15th century).

The 17th and 18th centuries saw feudalism in Vietnam weakened. Many peasant revolts led to the Tay Son movement (1771-1802) whereby the feudal lordship that divided the country into two parts was overthrown. This period also saw the Qing (Manchu) invaders from China chased off.

However, in 1858 French colonialists began invading the country and by 1884 they controlled the whole territory of Vietnam. Although the Vietnamese people constantly revolted against French rule, it wasn't until 1930 when Nguyen Ai Quoc (who later became President Ho Chi Minh) founded the Communist Party that the uprising began having an impact. In August 1945 the Great National Uprising under Communist leadership drove out both the French and the occupying Japanese (during World War Two the Japanese government had wrested control of much of Vietnam from the French colonial government).

On 2 September 1945 the Communist Party established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

After World War Two, France tried to win back areas it had previously controlled. However in March 1954 the Communist Viet Minh under the leadership of General Vo Nguyen Giap launched a massive artillery barrage. The siege at **Dien Bien Phu** lasted 55 days and resulted in a devastating French defeat.

The Viet Minh victory led to the 1954 Geneva Accords that partitioned Vietnam into Communist administered north (under Ho Chi Minh) and pro-French (later pro-American) administered south. This divider was meant to be temporary; the nation was to be reunited in the national elections of 1956. When the Communist regime set up its headquarters in **Hanoi** in the north under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, many people fled to the newly proclaimed Republic of Vietnam in the south of the country. Its capital was **Sai Gon** (known in the west as Saigon) and it was under the rule of Ngo Dinh Diem. The Sai Gon government tried to prevent the national election but the National Liberation Front (NLF) of South Vietnam was established on 20 December 1960, with the intention of unification of the country.

The United States of America funnelled aid directly to the Sai Gon government and agreed to train the South Vietnamese army. In the 1960s half a million American and Allied troops fought the Communist government. Australia's involvement began in 1962, when the first members of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam arrived in South Vietnam. From August 1964 America bombarded North Vietnam. America feared the threatened Communist takeover because they had seen communism advance in Eastern Europe, Korea and Cuba and feared another country falling to communist ideology. The Cold War escalated.

- What do you think is meant by the 'Cold War'? Why was this period so named?

- Make a timeline of events which built up to the war. Visit [www.curriculum.edu.au/accessasia/vietnam/vietwww.htm#history](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/accessasia/vietnam/vietwww.htm#history) for a comprehensive account of the war in Vietnam, including access to source materials as well as American and Vietnamese perspectives. (See also references on page 5.)

Many Australians and Americans protested vigorously over their countries' involvement in the Vietnam War (which in Vietnam was known as the American War) from the mid-1960s and through the early 70s. Finally, pressure prevailed on the US President Richard Nixon and a ceasefire negotiation known as the Paris Peace Agreement was signed in January 1973. Foreign troops began leaving the country. In July 1976 North and South Vietnam united officially as a single communist state. It is estimated that over 2.5 million people from both sides died in the bloody conflict and many more were maimed and injured. Some of the ramifications of those deaths and injuries can be seen in *Vietnam Symphony*.

## After Watching

### Documentary styles

Writer/director Tom Zubrycki's filmography reveals a substantial and widely respected body of documentaries. As a filmmaker, he enjoys working in an observational style.

- What does 'observational' mean in this context?
- Explore an element in the film that you consider reflects this approach, citing reasons why you believe it to be so.
- What are some other styles of documentary filmmaking?

### Following the narrative

- Write a paragraph summarising the narrative of *Vietnam Symphony*.

Zubrycki tells the historical story of the underground conservatory through a large 'cast' of interviewees, blending archive, interview and music.

From the Hanoi Conservatory:

Professor Vu Huong: the key 'character', a cellist  
 Mrs Huong: his wife  
 Nguyen Thuy Ha: singer  
 Tran Thi Tuyet Minh: piano teacher  
 Vu Thi Mai Phuong: plays zither  
 Professor Ngo Van Thanh: violinist  
 Pham Hung: singer, sat on rocket to sing  
 Vu Anh Tuan: Professor Huong's son; jazz musician and game show host  
 Lisa Tuan: his Australian wife

From **Xuan Phu** village:

Do Van Cong: older man, relates story of students helping to harvest  
 Do Van De: Cong's son, chosen to study at the music school  
 Nguyen Xuan Nghiem: villager, says students are clever and gentle  
 Tran Thi Thinh: explains about singing and academic classes in the village  
 Nguyen Thi Ly: woman, tells how much students were missed. The school wanted her to study zither, but her parents refused.

- How does the 'size of the cast' influence the film's message?

The story is character driven; the protagonist and many others are typical of those people who interest filmmaker Tom Zubrycki. They have been displaced from their homes by an event beyond their control.

- How might the young lives of members of the Hanoi National Conservatory of Music have been affected by their removal from Hanoi to Xuan Phu? Explore both immediate and long term consequences.

People generally have an idea of the direction they wish their lives to take.

- What events other than war might alter a person's future?
- Could a negative and unplanned event bring a positive consequence? Can you see any such positives in *Vietnam Symphony*?

### Analysing the film

- Explore possible meanings implied in the title of the film.
- How is the story structured to hold our interest?
- Excluding the conveyance of war's reality, what are some of the purposes for including archival footage?
- Look at ways in which music is a unifying element in the film. Are there other filmic techniques which give the film unity?
- List types of music you hear throughout the film. Choose three examples, name them if you can and explore reasons each may have been chosen for its specific context.

Tom Zubrycki says *Vietnam Symphony* is a look at Vietnam today through the prism of the past.

- To what extent do you agree with his statement? List issues the film touches on.
- What values do you think the film upholds?
- Decide whether or not this is an effective way of telling a story for you, citing reasons for your judgement.

To juxtapose means to place side by side in order to achieve a desired impression. Focus on what the film achieves through using this central juxtaposition in the following two examples.

- Archival footage of student practising/colour footage of performer
  - Child's hands playing piano/adult hands playing piano
- Past and present are not the only juxtaposition used to tell the story. In the following examples, what has the director achieved with the coupling?
- American planes dropping bombs/playing classical music
  - Archival footage of Thuy Ha singing to the soldiers/singing at the piano/singing in the reunion concert
  - Find a juxtaposition which speaks to you and explore its effect.

Although the villagers initially seem very different from the School of Music people, the film brings out their common humanity.

- Find three examples of this and explore how the film brings out our understanding.

We hear many different instruments throughout *Vietnam Symphony*.

- Choose two examples and explore the mood each creates in several examples.

### Legacies of war

Filmmaker Tom Zubrycki says that he wanted to explore the legacies of the war in Vietnam.

- What is a legacy and what connotations does the word have?

The opening sequence of the film seems to signal Zubrycki's stated intention.

- Look at the images he selects.
- What mood is created from the sequence?
- Select several shots which you consider fulfill his intentions and explore the reasons he may have selected them.
- Examine the feeling each of these shots create.
- What part does music play in eliciting your reactions to the scene?
- Is colour significant in creating atmosphere? Justify your answer with evidence.
- Do you see any symbols that contribute to the overall impact? Explain their significance.

Throughout the film we see images of gentility and peace associated with the contemporary Vietnamese people and their countryside.

- Choose three of these and explain how they function to create calm.

There is a sequence at the beginning of the film which introduces Professor Huong and his story. During it he feeds the caged birds.

- What is the significance of this image? Justify your judgement.
- How does the action help characterise him?
- What other details in the room help you form a picture of him?
- Given that he is recalling the story of the Conservatory's relocation to Xuan Phu and it is 30 years on, what do you believe influences his memories most?
- Why can memories be classed as legacies of war?

We cannot see the consequences of war without seeing war's reality.

- Select several moments of archival war footage.
- How do these images function and what do they contribute to the film?

The legacies of war are a mixture of negative and positive.

- Look at the camaraderie which formed between members of the School of Music and the villagers.
- Explore why such relationships formed during the time the musicians spent in Xuan Phu.
- How did the school's presence affect the villagers?
- Explore the stories of Ly and Do Van De.

Before the reunion concert an old woman says 'Your return makes me strong'.

- Why does she find strength in Minh's visit?
- Is the rekindling of friendships a legacy of war?

Tuan says the villagers 'loved my father like their own family' and that his father returned their feelings.

- Explore the notion of family. Is a family only blood relations?
- Can you think of other units or groups which are not related by blood but which function as a family? Explore the reasons that create this bond.
- In what ways can the School of Music be seen as a family?

Look at the footage where Tran Thi Tuyet Minh talks about fear and the scattering of the family.

- Can emotion be a legacy of war? What is the difference between an immediate legacy and a long-term legacy in terms of consequence?
- Do you believe family becomes more valuable during times of adversity? Discuss.
- Can you recall a time of separation or danger when you realised the value of family? Give details and say why the circumstances enhanced your understanding.

### Generational differences

The director notes, 'one of the interesting things is how Vietnam's younger generation just wants to get on with the present. The film could have easily become a cliché about heroism and struggle against the odds, but what really interested me were the tensions between older and younger generations.'

- How does the film visually convey this duality?
- List reasons the war is less relevant for contemporary Vietnamese youth.
- Why might Tuan's quiz show on TV be so successful in Vietnam?

Tuan says he values his father as an inspiration to his life.

- Why did he wish to play jazz instead of cello?
- Can you be inspired by someone yet go against their wishes? Explain.

Professor Huong hoped Tuan would become a classical musician.

- Why do some parents want their children to follow in their footsteps?
- Why do children want to do their own thing?
- Is this situation of conflicting life visions a healthy one? Justify your answer.

The making of *Vietnam Symphony* gave Tuan the opportunity to find out more about his father's history. It was Lisa, Tuan's Australian wife, who prompted Tuan's interest in the story.

- Why do you think Lisa was initially more interested in learning about Tuan's father's past experiences than Tuan himself?
- Does Tuan's son benefit from his grandfather's past? How?
- How can knowledge of other people's stories enhance our lives?

## Politics

Vietnam is still a one-party socialist state.

- Why is a socialist state defined as a 'one-party' state?
- What is the difference between socialist and communist?

Pham Hung says he 'never imagined [he'd] perform for Uncle Ho'.

- What are the implications of the word 'uncle' when applied to a country's leader by one of its citizens?
- Why were only the girls allowed near Ho Chi Minh?
- What are some apparent differences of culture between the ways in which Australians and Vietnamese relate to their political leaders?

Introducing the 30-year reunion concert, the master of ceremonies welcomed guests with the words 'It is an honour for the party officials...' and recalled the nation 'struggling against American imperialism'.

- Why is it an honour for the Communist Party? Do they 'own' the orchestra?
- Does Australia's government own the country's major orchestras?
- Research how Australia's orchestras are funded.

The Hanoi National Conservatory of Music was evacuated to Xuan Phu when the USA began bombing.

- Why was it important for the Communist Party to protect the music school?
- In what way can any form of the arts be used if it becomes a voice of the government? Explore any dangers you see when this situation arises.
- Research examples where the arts have been made voices of the government. Explore dances, songs or paintings which were produced during such a period.

## Media representations

Newsreel footage has its own propaganda value because it reports from the point of view of the country producing it and aims its message at its own people. Look at the newsreel coming from the United States about pilots raiding industrial centres in North Vietnam.

- Why is Hanoi called 'the red capital' and what would have been the effect of this label on the American audience?
- Did you see evidence that US bombs fell anywhere else than 'industrial centres'?

Immediately following the American newsreel is footage from the Vietnamese.

- What does the word 'invading' imply? Is it appropriate from a Vietnamese point of view?
- Which footage is more informative? Which is more inspirational? Justify your choice.
- Decide the purpose of each newsreel.

Another newsreel told Vietnam viewers 'Beethoven and other great musicians are with us in our fight against the US'. We see a young female piano student.

- Why is the camera angle selected so successful?
- How does the student's gender affect the message?
- Find other examples of propaganda where a country maintains that a respected figure or entity is on their side.

## Ideology

The director notes 'it's ironic how Vietnam is flexible enough to absorb a range of influences emanating from its former arch-enemy and still remain true to its ideological roots'.

This is perhaps the most surprising legacy of the war.

- Define irony and say why it is ironic that capitalism and communism co-exist in Vietnam.

Tuan turns his back on a classical music career.

- Why is this 'a relevant metaphor for modern Vietnam'?
- Why is a games' show a good representation of what are perceived as American values? Explore how these values sit with communist ideology.

## References & Further Resources

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**Vietnam Symphony**

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Writer/Director: Tom Zubrycki

Producer: Kerry Herman

Executive Producer: Penny Robins

Narrator: Tara Morice

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