



## **VIETNAM CA TRÙ SINGING: FROM HERITAGE REVIVAL TO CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC HERITAGE**

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### **Abstract:**

This study explores the preservation and promotion of Ca trù, a traditional Vietnamese musical heritage listed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. The research objectives focus on understanding the methods and strategies employed by artists, artisans, heritage practitioners, and local communities in safeguarding this cultural form. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative interviews, participant observation, and case studies, the study investigates the innovative practices adopted to revitalise Ca trù within the framework of cultural and creative industries. The findings reveal that the transformation of Ca trù from a ceremonial art form into an artistic product has played a significant role in its preservation. This shift has not only enhanced public awareness but has also provided new opportunities for sustainable cultural development. The study concludes that integrating heritage preservation with contemporary creative practices is essential for ensuring the continued relevance and vitality of Ca trù in the modern era.

### **Keywords:**

Ca Trù Singing, Creative Industry, Cultural Industry, Heritage Preservation, Intangible Cultural Heritage.

### **Introduction**

Ca trù singing is the earliest known professional traditional art in Vietnamese music history. UNESCO recognised Ca trù as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding on October 1, 2009. Ca trù spans from at least the 15th century to the early 20th century, during which it experienced interruptions and almost disappeared from history for nearly 60 years.

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The years of renovation saw a gradual revival of Ca trù, yet it was not widely known until UNESCO recognised it as a world heritage. This acknowledgement brought more media attention to Ca trù, stimulating vibrant activities nationwide, including numerous festivals organised by various Ca trù clubs. However, Ca trù remains in urgent need of protection due to the scarcity of professional artisans, insufficient performance spaces, and limited audience interest. Recently, innovations by young groups, individuals, and organisations in preservation and promotion methods have brought new developments in the sustainable conservation and growth of Ca trù. The incorporation of traditional performing arts into popular cultural products is being utilised to bring these arts closer to audiences while generating profits through various forms of commercialisation. This approach can create cultural industry products with unique content that are competitive in the region. In preserving traditional art, it is crucial to integrate it with contemporary art and recognise it as an evolving art form.

### Characteristics and Historical-Cultural Significance of Ca trù

Ca trù is a unique, scholarly traditional musical art often associated with Vietnamese chamber music or opera. For a thousand-year-old, Ca trù has been an integral part of Vietnam's historical and cultural development.



**Figure 1: Ca nương (Female Singer), Kép đàn (Instrumentalist), and Quan viên (Audience Members) in Ca Trù art Performance in a private space at Đồng Cau Restaurant.**

References to Ca trù can be traced in historical documents dating back to the Ly Dynasty (1009-1225), during which Ca trù artists operated within organised guilds known as "giáo phường". Ca trù embodies a sense of identity and continuity in performing arts, with a creative element passed down through generations within these guilds. These guilds maintained close-knit communities, creating distinctive features for Ca trù. By the time of the Le Dynasty (1428-1527), historical records indicated their rights to perform at temples. From the late 19th to early

20th century, Ca trù featured two important performance spaces: ceremonial singing at temples and informal singing sessions, known as ca quán, at venues like the Cô Đầu theatre. Despite enduring various historical and societal changes, Ca trù continues to thrive due to its artistic value within Vietnamese culture.

Ca trù singing, also known by various names such as Ả đào, Cửa Đình singing, Cô đầu singing, Ca công singing, ... was originally a ceremonial music genre used in worship rituals for deities and village guardian spirits. Each name reflects different aspects, cultural spaces, or social functions of Ca trù music, vividly and authentically representing the history and artistry of this musical genre.



**Figure 2: Ca nương (Female Singer) and Kép đàn (Instrumentalist) in a Ca Trù Performance at Cửa Đình**

Ca trù represents a harmonious combination of vocal performance, instrumental music, and literary art. Central to this performance is the singing by "Đào nương", accompanied by three musical instruments: phách (percussion), đàn đáy (a traditional three-stringed instrument), and trống châu (a small drum). Among these components, the singing of the đào nương is the most important. The musician, the singer, and the audience participate in the performance, harmonising seamlessly in achieving the state of perfection, elegance, and luxury. Although Ca trù, performances are showcased in intimate settings such as temple courtyards or communal houses, the clarity and freshness in every of percussion beats, and the harmony of the instruments with the singer's voice are perceptible.



Kép đàn (Instrumentalist) and Đàn đáy  
(A Traditional Three-stringed Instrument)



Phách (Percussion)



Trống châu (A Small Drum)

**Figure 3. Musical Instruments: Đàn đáy (A Traditional Three-stringed Instrument), Phách (Percussion), Trống châu (A Small Drum)**

Ca trù is highly selective in both its audience and performance space. The golden age of Ca trù was from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Influenced by the professional art trends of the West during the French colonial period, talented singers from rural areas began migrating to urban areas to establish professional concert halls, known as Cô Đầu theatres. This marked the introduction of a new professional performance form tailored to the tastes of urban audiences. The artistic activities at the Cô Đầu theatres quickly attracted urban intellectuals, particularly in Hanoi, where numerous theatres thrived in the streets like Hàng Giấy, Khâm Thiên, Vạn Thái (Bạch Mai), Gia Lâm, Ngã Tư Sở. Many talented singers and musicians performed in these venues, becoming legends among famous literary figures in Hanoi. This professional business approach of Ca trù demonstrated the older generation's ability to commercialise a high art form effectively. Unfortunately, by the post-liberation period of Hanoi in 1954, with the advent of socialism, Cô Đầu theatres gradually closed. In rural areas, village associations disappeared, and traditional forms of singing at communal houses and temples ceased, leading to the decline of Ca trù. Many singers abandoned their profession, hid or sought alternative livelihoods, ending the golden era of Ca trù and resulting in a 60-year hiatus.

### **The Revival After 60 Years Of Absence Posed Significant Challenges To The Preservation Of The Heritage.**

The Đổi mới (Renovation) period in 1986, with its renewed focus on national culture revival. The state allow enthusiasts of Ca trù to their activities, the beginning of the revival Ca trù

movement. However, many artistic values suffered severe erosion after 60 years of interruptions, and some even disappeared with the passing of elderly artisans. Only a few skilled artisans remain, and the performance space for Ca trù is gradually diminishing. The performance space for ca trù is gradually disappearing due to various reasons, while this heritage art form itself appeals to a niche audience. Most young audiences today primarily prefer modern youth music and Western contemporary music. Ca trù faces three significant risks: erosion of the heritage due to the dwindling number of skilled artisans, the disappearance of the performance space, and limited community access to this art form.

## Literature Review

### *Conservation and Sustainable Development of the Traditional Heritage*

Most research on Ca trù has primarily approached it from historical, literary, or Han-Nom (classical Chinese Vietnamese script) perspectives, leading to superficial coverage of its musical aspect. In-depth research on musical theory remains largely unexplored. Entering the 21st century, the system of materials and standards regarding the musical notation and rhythm of Ca trù still perplexed both the new generation of Ca trù singers and enthusiasts from engaging it. Music researcher Bùi Trọng Hiền dedicated over six years to studying the musical system of Ca trù to determine what constitutes the proper musical scales, modes, and pitch ranges, such as northern and southern modes. The research results were implemented through training sessions at Ca trù clubs in Hải Phòng<sup>1</sup>, modelling and assembling various scales and pitch ranges to create diverse compositions. Despite the exact musical timing that has been preserved for hundreds of years, there has been no documentation or books recording this knowledge, with top artisans rarely disclosing it. Hiền extracted information from Ca trù materials from the 20th century, such as audio recordings from the 1930s and expertise obtained from the last generation of artisans. His findings revealed the mysterious and miraculous nature of Ca trù's scales and musical systems that artisans have preserved for hundreds of years. In terms of cultural preservation, it contributes to its cultural preservation and practical application.

### *Reviving "Hát Cửa Đình" (Communal House Singing) - Restoring Heritage Values*

The art of Ca trù is considered the earliest form of professional music among the Vietnamese and is widely practised in northern provinces such as Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh. Each district had one or two villages where Ca trù artists resided, performing ceremonial music at village communal houses (đình). Hence, Ca trù is also known as "Hát cửa đình" (Singing at the communal house). The term "Ca trù" itself originally referred to the artistic fee paid to performers through a reward system (trù). During performances, village officials would strike a gong as a sign of approval, and reward cards were tossed into a bronze basin behind the performers. These cards were later exchanged for money or goods, marking the first system of cultural artistic patronage in Vietnamese history.

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<sup>1</sup> A city in Northern Vietnam



**Figure 4. Ca nương (Female Singer), Kép đàn (Instrumentalist), and Quan viên (Audience Members) in a Ca Trù Performance at Cửa Đình**

Each ancient Vietnamese communal house had the value of a "people's theatre." Different communal houses shared the rights to perform Hát cửa đình, while respecting other's performance territories. Despite its fluctuations, the practice of Hát cửa đình persisted until the 1950s, when various factors, including the rise of Ca quán Cô đầu (singing houses), led to its decline. This period marked the darkest time for the genre, with many artists switching to other professions while others quietly disappeared and abandoned the arts.



**Figure 5. Ca Trù singing at Cửa Đình**

In the past two decades, heritage restoration efforts have gradually revived this invaluable artistic treasure. Society's perception of Ca trù has transformed, especially after its designation as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in urgent need of safeguarding. The restoration programme of Hát cửa đình (Singing at the communal house) is genuinely cherished by Vietnamese people, with teachings passed down by one of the few remaining veteran artists at the time, Mr. Nguyễn Phú Đệ (91 years old). He was among the last practising musicians of

Hát cửa đình in the Hải Dương<sup>2</sup>. His efforts, along with Hiền, have been instrumental. On January 14, 2015, at the Hàng Kênh communal house in Hải Phòng, Nguyễn Phú Đệ and his students officially introduced the first restored Hát cửa đình performance in history, turning memories into reality by meticulously reconstructing a scene of Ca trù ceremonial singing. Since UNESCO recognised Ca trù as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in urgent need of safeguarding, efforts to preserve it have intensified. However, it was only years later that the most ancient and significant form of Ca trù singing was successfully restored, owing to the memory of the sole surviving artist who had practised this ritualistic singing style. The successful restoration of this invaluable cultural heritage ensured the continuation of this heritage and safeguarding it for future generations.

### **Commercialising The Unique Artistic Value Of Ca Trù Involves Transforming Heritage Into Cultural Industry Products.**

Alongside state support, individuals and organisations have astutely applied the process of producing mass cultural products to bring traditional performing arts closer to the audience while generating profits through commercialisation. Changes in social infrastructure have significantly impacted the authenticity of traditional performing arts, necessitating their transformation and adaptation to the market economy and the vibrant mass culture.

#### ***The Products And Methods Of Promoting Heritage***

**Commercialisation of Research Publications:** Bui Trong Hien's nine-year study represents a breakthrough in applied, laying a solid foundation for sustainable heritage conservation. In 2024, the work was published as a monograph titled "Ca trù: A Study of History and the System of Musical Rules." This study delved into its historical, cultural spaces, and musical rules. It was, finally, clarifying past perplexities. The research findings decrypted the intricate system of musical rules, frameworks, and musical instruments, which astonished the scientific community and successfully brought Ca trù closer to the public. This is a comprehensive study, arguably the first of its kind. It was published in a commercial format, funded by a private enterprise and publishing company, and received widespread acclaim from local and international readers.

**Children's Book Publication:** Publishers are focusing on releasing publications related to Vietnam's traditional cultural heritage, including Ca trù, to help children understand and appreciate it. The elements are explored and incorporated into stories suitable for children's ages, enhancing attractiveness through drawings.

**Exploring Costume Elements:** In the context of Vietnam's strong economic development, traditional cultural values are increasingly being valued. With a spirit of building brand value from heritage, young Vietnamese creatives are increasingly interested in researching conventional materials for their products. Y Van Hien, led by a young Vietnamese person with a passion for history and culture, has an operating model that focuses on traditional Vietnamese costumes and rituals. Their goals include conducting in-depth research into conventional artistic fields through performing arts, cinema, literature, and exhibitions, as well as commercialising traditional cultural products for local tourism and international markets. The traditional costumes reconstructed by Y Van Hien contribute to promoting and introducing Vietnamese culture globally.

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<sup>2</sup> A city in Northern Vietnam

### ***Activities And Creative Products Associated With Traditional Art By Creative Hubs, Youth Groups, And Private Organisations***

Various individuals and organisations in Vietnam are involved in the process of conserving and promoting traditional performing arts. Creative professionals such as content creators, producers, and designers of educational programs play a crucial role in connecting with young audiences through meetups and discussions. The development of Ca trù involves adapting and evolving within the modern social and cultural environment. Symbiotic relations between Ca trù artists and contemporary artists can create innovative performance products that attract and engage young people. A prominent feature is the proliferation of creative cultural and artistic spaces in Vietnam. These spaces, both physical and virtual, offer a creative ecosystem by creating a friendly and safe environment, encouraging interactions, exchanging ideas, and challenging their creative boundaries. These spaces help bridge the gap between heavy academic concepts and cultural and artistic activities, empowering communities through public events.

The involvement of various state organisations, international agencies, and social organisations has created positive momentum. Governments have begun implementing policy reforms tailored to the needs of creative hubs engaged in traditional arts. These spaces and groups focusing on traditional performing arts are gradually becoming places for young people to express and realise their ideas and creativity in traditional arts, inspiring young creatives. Combining traditional art with creative hubs, both in-person and online, will foster the development of art and change the way the public understands and engages with it. Therefore, it will rejuvenate traditional arts and attract new audiences. Current trends in the operation of creative hubs in Vietnam include:

- Efforts to preserve traditional art are increasingly focused on creativity to improve the introduction and promotion of these arts. Sustainable strategies are developed to engage the audience effectively, leveraging media to spark curiosity about traditional arts through various streaming forms such as gaming, music, competition and live events on Facebook, YouTube, Twitch and TikTok. Streaming has emerged as a dominant trend in technology, offering users 24/7 internet access and a plethora of diverse entertainment options. The creative community in Vietnam utilises heritage materials, optimising digital platforms, and gradually transitioning traditional publications and artworks online to enhance access for audiences.
- Inculcating an appreciation for diversity and changing the accessibility of traditional by audiences involves innovating contemporary experiential products. Creative Hubs are experimenting with traditional materials, aiming to refresh art, sell experiences, and integrate media to attract audiences while preserving heritage. These cultural spaces benefit from established customer bases, with all projects evaluated based on criteria such as preferences, aesthetics, habits, and tastes of the target audience. Most decisions will be data-driven rather than intuition-based.
- Leveraging contemporary creativity and traditional heritage materials generate an appeal for "ca trù" and other traditional arts. Currently, creative products feature experimental music that incorporates traditional materials. Online creative hubs, like Domdom - Center for Experimental Music and Arts, Xplus - Studio, Lenngan, etc., are experimenting with combining traditional arts (such as "tông") and offering new experiences. These efforts bring a different approach, presenting "ca trù" in new spaces, telling different stories while retaining its essence. Creative hubs provide avenues for artists, curating professional spaces, developing audiences, and commercialising products through domestic artists and international collaborations. The



domestic market, especially the large Gen Z demographic, is a primary focus. The business model prioritises selling experiences rather than just products, aiming to create an appeal for traditional heritage.

- Applying diverse traditional art materials to bring art closer to the audience. These projects aim to bring art closer to the audience by using heritage core values to develop interactive content. Mini game shows are organised to facilitate knowledge on traditional arts. Artists and creative practitioners also develop products based on traditional art materials, organising activities like painting, making postcards, tote bags, and tarot cards themed on an art form. These products serve as cultural communication tools, effectively mobilising resources, and connecting creative factors.
- Creative Hubs connect and organise traditional art activities, train traditional art classes and promote the arts to domestic and international audiences. These spaces contribute to the preservation and maintenance of Ca trù art. They help create an environment where Ca trù artists can fully dedicate themselves to their craft.

Recently, folk-contemporary art programmes have gained appeal among young people. These programmes provide a platform where artists from various musical backgrounds connect, understand, and challenge each other. Additionally, they offer audiences the opportunity to listen, engage in dialogue, and experiment. These activities effectively help raise awareness of traditional cultural and artistic values. The methods of young artists demonstrate the diverse application of traditional art forms in contemporary contexts, including performing arts, experimental music, stage performance, multimedia integration, fine arts design, fashion, and other cultural industries. The incorporation of traditional art materials and contemporary creativity contributes to effective communication, spreading heritage values, and increasing appeal and accessibility, especially to young audiences. This approach also offers suitable, appropriate solutions for preserving and promoting traditional arts in response to evolving cultural and artistic consumption changes.

## Conclusion

Restoring, preserving, and promoting traditional heritage is one of the strategic and fundamental steps for each nation in the era of global integration and sustainable development. Heritage serves as a valuable resource for the development of cultural and creative industries. In the crisis of increasingly depleted natural resources and excessive exploitations and production, creative solutions are vital for sustainable development. The trend of developing a creative economy, with a particular focus on cultural and creative industries, has generated positive changes in cities worldwide. Amidst digital solid transformation and increasingly sophisticated cultural consumption habits of the public, preserving and promoting traditional cultural heritage require innovative approaches. These approaches must be synergised through preservation and public engagement alongside the creation of commercially valuable cultural products. This approach aligns with the sustainable development of heritage.

Current efforts to develop and recreate spaces for traditional art transcend academic, professional or amateur status. The primary factor is finding suitable methods and means for the public to relate to past stories within a contemporary context. The curiosity stems from the desire to understand human destinies and how previous generations navigated the challenges of their times. Rapid advancements in digital technology are transforming the way the public enjoys contemporary art, providing various channels for the integration of knowledge into life. Effective communication, using simple, modern, lively language that resonates with public

cultural tastes, practical experience. Many young individuals are hoping to bring historical knowledge, heritage, and local identity to life through the language of contemporary experimental art. Amidst these rapid changes, many young, reputable, and brave intellectuals are becoming disseminators of knowledge to the public through various channels. This movement includes experts, cultural practitioners, media professionals, and artists who are keen to bring historical knowledge and its applications to social issues through contemporary experimental art, accompanied by state resources and policy support. This results in a long-term yet irreversible trend.

Developing "ca trù" within cultural creative hubs creates engaging performance products that capture the attention and interaction of the audience, especially young individuals. This initiative fosters connections among creative individuals who are interested in creativity and even connecting with authorities. Such opportunities promote creativity and enhance the roles of artists and communities while maintaining and developing the arts. Artists can experiment with suitable traditional elements in their contemporary works while preserving traditional cultural identities. Creative hubs incubate ideas, increasing the communication effectiveness of traditional performing arts. Creating an interactive environment for the public, especially young audiences, with traditional performing arts in general and "ca trù" in particular, through the integration with cultural creative hubs, effectively promotes heritage and develops spaces for traditional art for the public.

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