

# Hmong Songs of Memory

## Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music

A Presentation by Victoria Vorreiter



Over the millennia, the Hmong have developed an astonishingly rich culture as they migrated from their source in the far reaches of northern China along mountaintops that flank the great rivers of Southeast Asia, finally finding sanctuary in the foothills of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar, and further to the four corners of the world.

A traditional people living close to the earth—keenly attuned to the rotations of the sun and moon, the cycles of seasons, and the wheel of life—the Hmong have created a complex, all-encompassing belief system rooted in animism, where every entity in nature possesses a soul and the universe is organized by supernatural beings, both benevolent and malevolent. Frequent rites, ceremonies, and festivals are performed throughout the year to maintain harmony between the world of man and the realm of spirits.

The medium propelling these rites is music, which springs from a vast repository of songs, chants, invocations, and instrumental pieces that chart the human experience. Enacted by the keepers of the bardic tradition—the master Hmong musicians, shamans, headmen, matriarchs and patriarchs—this vibrant soundscape pervades daily life as it does sacred rites. For a culture that historically has no literary tradition, music also serves as the most enduring channel for transmitting everything the Hmong know about their inner and outer lives, linking the first ancestors with present generations and beyond.

**Victoria Vorreiter**, an American researcher, photographer, and filmmaker, highlights the traditional music, ceremonies, and culture of the Hmong of Laos and Thailand through **Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music**, a dynamic presentation enhanced by photographs and recordings, which complements her in-depth book and film of the same name.

Victoria's life in music has taken several forms in search of the heart response to melody and rhythm. Trained as a classical violinist, she has performed professionally and taught at universities and music schools around the world. These experiences propelled her to explore and document the cultural importance and primal power of music embedded in all civilizations.

After creating her first film, **The Music of Morocco and the Cycles of Life** (2002), Victoria moved to Southeast Asia, where she has spent over a decade documenting the ancestral music of highland communities in Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and China. This has given rise to the **Songs of Memory** (2009) and the **Hmong Songs of Memory** (2016) archival projects—books, films, recordings, and multi-media exhibitions that are brought to life by vivid photographs, musical instruments, artifacts, and textiles.