

## Songs of Memory: Origin of the Music of Life at the Golden Triangle

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Not very far from the hectic Siam area, the second floor of the Jim Thompson Art Gallery is filled with the music of 6 tribes from the Golden Triangle – Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, and Lisu. The sophisticated exhibition hall contrasts with musical instruments made from natural materials like bamboos or animal horns. The instruments are displayed beside the clothes of tribal adults and children, implying how the instruments are full of life and meaning to the owners of these clothes. Small corners of TV are playing video records of rituals and musical performance of tribal people. The music is simple yet beautiful and miraculous, not in any way inferior to that of the city.

Victoria Vorreiter, an American curator, who carefully puts together an exhibition called “**SONGS OF MEMORY: Traditional Music of the Golden Triangle**” is a classical violinist, a music teacher, and has become a music-anthropologist to study the meaning of music to human life. For the last four and a half years, Victoria has been living in Chiang Mai, and traveling to remote villages in the mountains of the Golden Triangle. Victoria records their music and rituals in various formats: audio, video, photographs, and writing, all by herself. From such numerous sources, Victoria selects stories of 6 tribes (out of over 130) to exhibit at the Jim Thompson Art Center since April 24, 2009.

Being a musician herself has inspired her to study tribal music in such depth. Victoria asks: why is music so essential to mankind, as it is present in every culture? Her method of teaching music called Suzuki Method also contributes to her acknowledgement of the significance of communicating through music like tribal people.

*“Suzuki Violin Method is also called the mother tongue method. It teaches little children at a very young age. We’ll begin them with little instruments. So before they learn to read music, they learn to imitate it.”* Victoria believes that this method is just like the oral tradition employed by tribal communities where written language is not available. Culture, beliefs, and spirituality of the community are all passed on through the sound of music.

Victoria points out that one of the reasons that make music so important is its power and beauty which make music an excellent medium of communication. *“Music can affect us physically as a vibrational wave-like energy. We feel it mentally because it regulates the two spheres of our brain. The logical, analytical side understands the rhythm, pattern, repetition of melody. And you also feel it in the heart It’s abstract and also invisible”.* She compares listening to the music of the tribal rituals to a journey to the spirit and identity of these tribes. Some rituals can take hours or days, and she feels she can gradually learn and truly understand these people.

The simple tribal lives bear fruit in an incredible variety of musical treasure. On the contrary, urban people, whose lives are complex and sophisticated, ironically possess the music of life that is humdrum and lacking spiritual power. People are hardly making their own music anymore. Of course, at times we sing “Happy Birthday” at a party, but such a song does not say who we are nor give an important life lesson, and lacks the healing or spiritual power. Meanwhile, tribal people use music to express respect and to create a bond with the spirit directly, hence its crucial role to every stage of life. *“You don’t find a mate unless you do it through music. Really. The way you find your partner is singing: you communicate, you play music back and forth to each other. It’s not just a way to get to it or play it intimately. These songs, you’d rather play very close together. When you play a mouth harp you have to play cheek to cheek. And you can tell a lot about somebody. Are they clever? Are they imaginative? Are they suitable for me? Is their heart true? So it’s all through music.”*

Tribal songs are replications of natural sounds: the birds, the wind, and the trees. The melodic nature is embedded within the music. And the nature of the golden triangle’s jungles where a vast variety of plants and animals resides is the essential contribution to the extraordinary beauty of the tribal music of this region. It is the life surrounded by music that Victoria has dreamed of experiencing. Tribal music embraces one’s life from birth, marriage, giving birth to children, falling ill, to death. Even in the afterlife, one has their descendants to pray and send the music to their passed spirits. But although all tribes similarly use their music for rituals of different stages of life, this does not mean that all their music is plainly the same. *“These tribes, although they migrated from the same areas, each culture was developed in different places. Each group, because they are in isolated mountain tops, they each develop their own culture. So each group is unique in the way they look, in their language, their history, in the story they tell, Each has had its own journey, its own trajectory, its own hero. And these differences are reflected in the music. There are common materials. There*

might even be common instruments, but each group plays them uniquely". Once again, Victoria stresses the cultural wealth that Northern Thailand possesses.

But even these tribal people living in remote villages far from big cities, cannot escape the modernization influences. *"Technology is getting to even the most remote places. Children are being sent to school. So, instead of learning from the elders, they're forgetting their whole heritage, filling their heads with the figures and facts like the capital of India and who's the Queen of England. If one generation fails to pass on life lessons from one generation to another, within decades millennia of knowledge will be gone. So I felt compelled to make these videos and record their music."* Within only four and a half years that Victoria has been visiting these tribal villages, she begins to really feel the change that is happening. The young people of the tribes want to be a part of the modern world. They adopt the world beat from outside, and are forgetting the beat of their own clans.

The reason that Jim Thompson Art gallery is now a home to tribal music is because Victoria intends to bring the tribal culture right to the heart of Bangkok's hustle and bustle. *"This is a living cultural diversity unlike any other country and Thai people should very proud. As an American, I can tell you, with the Native American, it is very saddening. We don't even have archives. We have some music but we don't have the wealth that you have here. And I hope people honor them. I hope that they acknowledge the value of all that your country has to offer."*

Victoria tells us that she is the only one member as well as the whole team of the project. She carries her recording equipment to these villages, stay with the people for about 2-5 weeks to get to know them and their lives, and will return there again when it is time for the village's important ritual. Although it is definitely a hard work, being on her own does have a benefit. *"If I went too professionally, the villagers might be scared and not open their doors. I found that being alone and being a woman is a great advantage. But I certainly would have to go with a guide because I don't speak their languages. Even my guide wouldn't either. But he would speak Lao and surely there would be somebody in the village who could talk with him. But as soon as I would say I'm interested in your culture, your music and ceremony, they would open up their hearts to me."*

But this doesn't mean that she wants to go on working alone, especially for her future projects which only sound all the more challenging. When asked if this exhibition is the conclusion of the project, Victoria laughs and answers, *"this is just the beginning!"* She has other ceremonies to record, and more songs and poetry to translate. She wants the exhibition to travel to other countries around the world. Besides, she plans to settle down in Chiang Mai so she can build a museum for these stories of tribal music, as well as a recording studio for the villagers to record their very own songs. *"So, anybody that's interested in this, please contact me. I'm looking for people with like minds. The train is ready. I need people to get on. Because I can't do this alone."*

Having now joined the ride to tribal villages with Victoria to the end, many may still wonder why a classical musician from a big city like Chicago would want to leave her background behind and walk against the global streams, to study the tribal music that no one knows about, in almost-developed countries. Victoria answers: *"I want to go backwards. Because a, I don't want people to forget. B, I think we're missing a lot. Honestly, I look at the problems in the world and I see the miscommunication, the violence. And I think: why is that? It's because everybody is so independent. Everybody wants to get ahead of themselves. And people have forgotten the importance of family, of community, of identity. And I think that causes the crisis of conscience. If we go back and look at the smallest, most common unit, where people depend on each other, their spirituality is the same. They have common belief system of ethics. Their value. The commonalities will draw people to each other and they already form a kind of kinship. We are really away from it, and I worry for the world."*

Victoria emphasizes that any kind of music – classical, tribal, and others – can all communicate with human heart and mind. But classical music is often the stories of the composer's own feelings, and can hardly relate to the musician who plays the piece. In contrast, tribal music tells stories of the people's own ancestors, and the community's values and beliefs. This makes tribal music meaningful for everyone. While classical music is played by professional musicians for the elite, tribal music is open for everyone's full participation. Everyone sings and experiences the musical journey together. No line is drawn between musicians and the audience. Such music, filled with life and spirit, is what Victoria longs for as a modern individual whose life is excluded from nature and kin. This journey, then, is a quest both for the meaning of music and of family and community for her.

For more information about tribal music and Victoria Vorreiter, the website <http://www.musicandthecyclesoflife.com> is available. The SONGS OF MEMORY: Traditional Music of the Golden Triangle exhibition will remain at Jim Thompson Art Gallery, Soi Kasemsan 2, Rama I Rd., until July 23, 2009 – free admission.