

The Making of ‘Musical Theatre’ in Socialist Vietnam: State-building and Opera, 1954–1965

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In 1954, following the Geneva Accords, Vietnam was divided into two parts, of which the northern part, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was based on a socialist system. The Worker’s Party of Vietnam, the country’s ruling party, not only imposed strict ideological control but also actively promoted the development of its own culture. Regarding opera, which has its origin in Italy in the end of 16th century, the Ministry of Culture founded a national opera company and produced foreign operas. Composer Đỗ Nhuận (1922–1991) composed a performance work, ‘Cô Sao’, based on this form of opera and it premiered in 1965 as the first ‘musical theatre (*nhạc kịch*)’ in the country.

Using official documents, newspapers, magazines, and musical scores, this paper examines Vietnam’s policies, activities, and discourses related to opera from 1954 to 1965. It describes how Vietnam, which had a close relationship with great operatic countries such as France and the Soviet Union, dealt with opera, an imported genre of art. Focusing on Vietnam’s foreign relations and their outlook on international society, this paper discusses the function of the opera in Vietnam’s state-building.

Inheriting its colonial heritage, such as the opera house, musical knowledge, skills, and musicians, as well as receiving the active cooperation of socialist countries, the Vietnamese government and musicians built operatic institutions, formulated new interpretations of opera, and created original work replete with Vietnamese colour. Opera, in terms of Vietnamese state-building, was the means for Vietnam to place itself on the international stage. Furthermore, Vietnamese musicians adopted the term ‘musical theatre’ as a unique concept of the genre, which enabled Vietnam to look at various countries, such as the European nations, Soviet Union, and China, and envision an independent state under the Cold War structure, especially when the Hot War was beginning in Vietnam.