

Research Article

THE ROLE OF CAODAIISM IN PRESERVING AND ENHANCING SOUTHERN VIETNAMESE FOLK MUSIC HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Caodaism in preserving and enhancing Southern Vietnamese traditional music. Using a qualitative ethno musicological approach, the research is based on field observations at the Tay Ninh Holy See and the analysis of musical structures within ritual practices. The study focuses on three core dimensions, including repertoire, modal systems, and instrumentation. The findings indicate that Cao Dai ritual music functions as a cultural mechanism that not only preserves traditional musical elements but also restructures them within a formalized liturgical system. Through regular ritual activities, Caodaism creates a stable environment for the continuous performance and transmission of Southern Vietnamese folk music. The study also identifies current challenges related to intergenerational transmission and documentation, and proposes solutions such as digital preservation and community-based educational initiatives. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between religion and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary Vietnam. This study provides an analytical framework for understanding the role of religious institutions in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Southern Vietnamese traditional music, CaoDai ritual music, cultural preservation, heritage conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Southern Vietnam is characterized by a dynamic and diverse cultural landscape shaped by centuries of migration, frontier expansion, and land reclamation. Within this historical and environmental context, various forms of folk music emerged and developed through the interaction of different ethnic communities and cultural traditions. These musical practices are not isolated artistic expressions but are closely tied to the processes of settlement and social integration, reflecting the adaptability and resilience of communities in the Southern region.

However, the preservation of these traditions is currently facing significant challenges. The number of experienced practitioners, who play a key role in maintaining and transmitting musical knowledge, is gradually declining. At the same time, the transmission of this heritage to younger generations encounters difficulties due to changing cultural preferences and the absence of stable institutional support for long-term training. These conditions highlight the need to identify cultural environments in which traditional music continues to be practiced and sustained. Examining such contexts may provide a basis for developing strategies for documentation and community-based preservation, thereby supporting the continued presence of Southern Vietnamese musical traditions in contemporary society (Đặng Thế Đại, 2017).

Cao Dai ritual music is formed through the inheritance and integration of multiple elements of Southern Vietnamese traditional music, particularly ritual and ceremonial forms. Through regular religious practices, a wide range of traditional musical repertoires is maintained and performed within the Cao Dai community. In this sense, the religious environment does not simply preserve existing musical forms but also provides conditions for their continued use and adaptation.

Although Caodaism has been studied from various perspectives, previous research has largely focused on its historical development, religious doctrine, organizational structure, and architectural features. The role of Caodaism in maintaining and promoting Southern Vietnamese folk music has received comparatively limited attention and has not been examined in a systematic way. This gap suggests the need for further research that considers the relationship between religious practice and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

In this context, this study examines the role of Caodaism as a cultural environment in which traditional music is maintained and transmitted. Rather than viewing religion solely as a system of belief, this research considers it as a social and cultural space that supports the continuity of musical practices. By analyzing the participation of the practitioner community and the organization of ritual activities, the study aims to clarify the mechanisms through which musical knowledge is sustained within the Cao Dai context. The findings also contribute to broader discussions on cultural preservation and provide a reference for developing community-based approaches to safeguarding traditional music.

Cao Dai ritual music thus represents an important field for further investigation. This article seeks to address existing research gaps through a comparative approach, highlighting both the continuity and the specific characteristics of musical practices within Cao Dai liturgy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach grounded in ethnomusicology in order to examine the role of Caodaism in preserving and enhancing Southern Vietnamese traditional music. The research focuses not only on the structural characteristics of ritual music but also on the broader cultural and religious context in which this musical system is embedded.

The study is primarily based on fieldwork conducted at the Tay Ninh Holy See, which serves as the central institution of Caodaism. As illustrated in Figure 1, the Tay Ninh Holy See represents the central religious space where ritual practices and musical performances are systematically organized. Through direct observation of ritual practices, the research documents the presence and function of music within religious ceremonies. Particular attention is given to both regular liturgical services and major ceremonial events, where musical performance plays an essential role in shaping the ritual process and the sacred atmosphere.



Figure 1: Tay Ninh Holy See, Tay Ninh Province, Vietnam: (a) Main temple; (b) Entrance gate (Source: Author)

In addition to field observation, the study analyzes musical materials associated with Cao Dai ritual practices, including repertoire structures, modal systems, and instrumental arrangements. These elements are examined in relation to their origins in Southern Vietnamese ritual music and *Đờn ca tài tử*, thereby clarifying processes of cultural continuity and transformation.

Document analysis is also employed through the review of relevant academic publications, historical sources, and ethno musicological studies. This approach helps situate the research findings within existing scholarship and provides a basis for comparison.

The analytical framework is organized around three principal dimensions, including repertoire, modal structure, and instrumentation. A comparative perspective is adopted to examine the relationships among Southern Vietnamese ritual music, *Đờn ca tài tử*, and Cao Dai liturgical music.

Although the study focuses on the Tay Ninh Holy See and selected temples, the qualitative approach provides in-depth insights into the

mechanisms through which traditional music is maintained and transmitted within the Cao Dai religious environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Historical Background and the Adaptation of Southern Vietnamese Traditional Music into Cao Dai Liturgical Practice

The Prevalence of Southern Vietnamese Traditional Music in the Early 20th century

It can be argued that during the first three decades of the 20th century, Southern Vietnam - and the country as a whole - underwent profound socio-economic transformations. Alongside long-standing feudal elements, the impact of French colonial exploitation introduced novel dynamics into colonial society, sparking a complex interplay of positive and negative changes. Within this shifting social fabric, the rise of the urban bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia proved pivotal. As the core forces in constructing and expanding urban centers, these groups frequently engaged with, disseminated, and harmonized Eastern and Western cultural values, thereby providing a stable "foothold" for entertainment and artistic activities.

The rise of urban life, intrinsically linked to the early 20th-century urbanization process, functioned as a pivotal axis connecting Eastern and Western cultural and artistic values. These values intertwined and complemented each other, enriching the spiritual lives of city dwellers. While Saigon-Cho Lon was planned according to European models - featuring grand boulevards, public buildings, theaters, and post offices - it coexisted with a bustling Chinese commercial district along the canals. It was within this environment that a new market for tastes emerged: civil servants, clerks, teachers, printers, shop owners, and Western-educated students became a paying audience with regular entertainment needs and a conscious desire to assert Southern traditional identity amidst the tide of Westernization. They sought *Đờn ca tài tử* for elegant evenings in garden houses and assembly halls; they flocked to theaters for *Hát bội* during festivals and ceremonies; and they favored performances with clear structures, reasonable durations, masterful techniques, and refined staging. In other words, urbanization did not merely expand the physical landscape; it molded a new type of public - the decisive factor in the evolution of traditional arts (Phan Huy Lê, 2021).

Blessed with unique natural conditions - including a dense network of waterways, fertile rice fields, and a temperate climate - the inhabitants of Southern Vietnam developed distinct regional musical forms such as hò, lý, lullabies, ritual music, and *đờn ca tài tử*. In his 2007 interview with Nhan Dan Newspaper, Prof. Dr. Nguyen Thuyet Phong emphasized that "the loss of national music is a catastrophe", noting that "Vietnamese music is multifaceted and diverse, deeply intertwined with human migration. Each time a new land is reclaimed, a new melody is born. The Vietnamese people cherish culture and are always ready to embrace the beauty of different regions" (Nguyễn Thuyết Phong, 2007). These genres not only inherit the essence of national traditions but also reflect cultural preservation with the Khmer, Chinese, and Cham people, reshaping the nation's musical landscape.

Indeed, the process of urbanization and the socio-cultural shifts in early 20th-century Southern Vietnam were characterized by "acculturation" rather than "assimilation". While Western culture provided the tools, organizational models, and new leisure habits, Southern Vietnamese culture remained the arbiter of content, melodic nuances (*hơi điệu*), and emotional depth. This dynamic resulted neither in purely Western music, nor in traditional music in its original

state, but in a harmoniously hybrid entity: Tài tử music evolved as both a “leisurely” and “professional” practice. This hybridity explains why traditional arts did not merely survive but expanded their influence: laborers sought spiritual solace after a day of toil, while city dwellers required a symbol of Vietnamese cultural identity amidst the tide of Westernization.

The Demand for a Unique Musical Genre Aligned with the Open and Syncretic Nature of Caodaism

Cao Dai, formally designated as Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do (The Great Religion of the Third Period of Universal Redemption), was established in 1926 in Long Trung Village, Tay Ninh Province. Founded by a diverse coalition of colonial civil servants, the bourgeoisie, landowners, and intellectuals, the faith rapidly expanded its influence, becoming a dominant socio-religious force throughout the provinces of Southern Vietnam.

At the dawn of the 20th century, while the traditional doctrine of “Three Religions from the Same Source” (Tam giáo đồng nguyên) had begun to wane, its revival was catalyzed by the rising influence of the Ngu Chi Minh Dao sects. Concurrently, the influx of Western Spiritism introduced practices such as “table-turning” which resonated deeply with indigenous soul-summoning traditions and the spirit-writing rituals of the Minh Dao groups. This convergence birthed a widespread movement known as *Cơ bút* (Spirit Seance). Within this movement, two pivotal circles emerged to lay the foundation of Cao Daim: the first, led by Ngo Van Chieu, adhered to traditional Asian mediumship; the second, comprising Cao Quynh Cu, Cao Hoai Sang, and Pham Cong Tac, embraced Western-style occultism. The unification of these two lineages in 1926 culminated in the formal establishment of the Cao Dai religion, with Ngo Van Chieu consecrated as its inaugural Pope (Giáo tông).

Cao Dai ritual music inherits the musical system of Southern Vietnamese liturgy, integrating elements of the Bắc and Nam modal systems to create a solemn and structured ritual atmosphere. During the Midnight Service (Cúng Tý) at the Tay Ninh Holy See, the coordinated performance of the kèn, nhị, and trống pháp in the Nam Ai mode produces a stable and contemplative sonic environment. The steady rhythmic patterns and sustained melodic lines contribute to a sense of calmness, facilitating a meditative state among practitioners during the ritual.

Throughout each service, every musical composition corresponds to a specific liturgical stage: the opening music, with its clear rhythm, helps practitioners stabilize their minds; the offering music, played at a slow tempo, evokes deep reverence; while the majestic hymns of praise heighten the sanctity of pivotal moments. Through music, ritual gestures - such as kneeling, prostrating, joining palms, and silent meditation - become synchronized, manifesting the collective solemnity of the faithful before the Supreme Being. This harmony generates a sacred energy field, transforming the ritual space into a realm where humanity aligns with the cosmic order - a quintessential concept of Cao Dai doctrine.

Caodaism as a Conduit for the Vitalization of Southern Traditional Musical Values

In the tapestry of Vietnamese history, particularly in the South, music has always transcended mere artistic entertainment. It stands as a powerful vehicle for expressing the deep-seated cultural values of faith and religion, reflecting how people sense and interpret their existence. Though a “young” territory, the South is steeped in layers of cultural history, shaped by centuries of pioneers who carried their

native songs and traditions to this new frontier. For nearly 400 years, these ancestral echoes have blended with the raw, poetic essence of the southern waterways. Through a long history of migration and ethnic convergence, where traditional and modern, local and global, and folk and academic elements intertwine, a distinct cultural soul has emerged - one that is as open-hearted and rustic as it is deeply soulful.

In this unique cultural environment, the birth of Cao Daim represented more than just a spiritual answer to social upheaval; it stood as a prime example of Vietnamese cultural resilience and innovation. Just as its theology embraces the spirit of universal harmony, Cao Dai music acts as a gathering point for various artistic streams, blending Southern ritual folk music and *Đờn ca tài tử* with the elegance of court music and Western-style organizational elements. By selectively integrating and reshaping Southern traditional music, Caodaism has forged a distinctive musical identity. This system balances the familiar with the majestic, creating a sacred resonance that binds the community together through shared spiritual and cultural heritage.

Constructing the Traditional Musical Performance Environment in Cao Dai Liturgy

The results of the survey clearly indicate that one of the most prominent manifestations of Cao Daim's contribution to the preservation of Southern Vietnamese traditional music lies within the very practical environment of its religious rituals. Within the liturgical system of Cao Dai, music transcends its role as a mere supportive element to become an ontological component of the ritual itself. As illustrated in Figure 2, ritual music is embedded within a highly structured sacred environment, in which architectural space and ceremonial activities are closely integrated, reinforcing the solemnity and collective nature of the liturgy.

This is evidenced by the ubiquitous presence of the ritual orchestra in almost every significant religious ceremony, ranging from routine daily services to large-scale major festivals. In this context, music is not treated as an external embellishment but as a primary structural force that defines the sacred atmosphere. The precise coordination between the ritual's progression and the musical shifts ensures that the spiritual intent of each prayer is conveyed effectively. Consequently, the ritual music system has become inseparable from the faith's identity, providing a constant and formal stage for traditional melodies to be performed and heard in their most authentic and solemn state.



Figure 2: Ritual environment at Tay Ninh Holy See: (a) Night-time liturgical space; (b) Ritual performance during festival activities (Source: Author)

In contemporary religious practice, the participation of the ritual orchestra is a fundamental requirement for ceremonies such as the Sóc – Vọng (New Moon and Full Moon rites), Thượng Nguyên, Hạ Nguyên, the anniversary of the Supreme Being, and the Great Festival of the Diêu Trì Palace. These ceremonies, held periodically across various Cao Dai temples, establish a stable and continuous environment for musical activity within the practitioner community. Unlike stage performances which are subject to commercial trends, these religious events provide a sanctuary for traditional music to flourish outside the pressures of modern entertainment. By embedding ancient musical scores into the repetitive cycle of the religious calendar, Caodaism ensures that these sounds remain an active part of the community's cultural consciousness. This institutionalized frequency acts as a natural barrier against the erosion of cultural heritage, as it necessitates a constant supply of skilled musicians and active listeners. (Phí Thành Phát, 2025).

A defining characteristic of Cao Dai ritual music is its absolute divergence from the paradigms of theatrical performance; instead, it is intrinsically anchored within the sacred space of faith. In a secular stage setting, music is often presented as an object of aesthetic consumption, separated from the audience by a fourth wall. However, in the Cao Dai Holy See or local temples, music functions as an environmental architect. It is deployed to inaugurate the ritual, guiding the liturgical progression and maintaining a solemn atmosphere

through every transitional phase of the service. This spatial integration means that the music does not exist for its own sake but serves as a spiritual conduit. This bond ensures that the melodies are never perceived as mere entertainment; they are the invisible threads that weave together the architectural grandeur of the temple with the internal devotion of the practitioners, creating a cohesive sensory experience of the sacred. (Janet Alison Hoskins, 2015).

Ultimately, the profound connection between music and the space of faith fosters a unique form of ritual agency that actively shapes the cultural and spiritual identity of the Cao Dai community. Because the music is interwoven with the acts of kneeling, praying, and meditating, it becomes a deeply internalized experience for the practitioners. The rhythmic structures and melodic modes (such as Nam Ai or Bac) are not learned as abstract theory but are absorbed through years of participation in the sacred rites. This creates a powerful form of cultural continuity where traditional musical values are passed down through a living, breathing tradition of faith. By embedding traditional music within the core of religious life, Caodaism transforms what could be a fading artistic heritage into a vibrant, essential component of the people's worldview.

The Manifestation of Traditional Musical Systems in Cao Dai Ritual Music

Through field surveys conducted at various Caodaism temples, and a meticulous analysis of musical materials, it is evident that many familiar repertoires of traditional music remain integral to Cao Dai religious rites. Notable among these are compositions such as **Xàng Xê, Ngũ đối thượng, Ngũ đối hạ, Long Đăng, Long Ngâm, Vạn Giá, and Tiểu Khúc**. These pieces belong to the traditional Southern Vietnamese liturgical system and maintain a profound connection to the vast heritage of Đờn ca tài tử (Lê Anh Dũng, 1995). As illustrated in Figure 3, the integration of traditional instruments within ritual practices reflects the continuity of Southern Vietnamese musical heritage in Cao Dai liturgical contexts.

According to extensive research on Southern Vietnamese ritual music, these traditional repertoires transcend mere melodic value; they are deeply imbued with symbolic meanings rooted in the cosmological worldview of traditional culture. For instance, the piece Ngũ đối thượng (The Upper Five Correspondences) symbolizes the formation and primordial essence of the Heavens, while Ngũ đối hạ (The Lower Five Correspondences) represents the manifestation and stability of the Earth. Furthermore, the compositions Long Đăng (The Dragon's Lamp) and Long Ngâm (The Dragon's Chant) are not just instrumental displays but evocative portrayals of the dynamic movement and eternal interaction between Yin and Yang within the universe. These profound symbolic associations transform the musical repertoire into an indispensable pillar of religious rites, where every note serves as a bridge between the mundane world and the divine order.



Figure 3: Traditional musical practice in Cao Dai ritual settings:
 (a) Instrumental performance; (b) Ritual training and ceremonial context
 (Source: Author)

In addition to these structural compositions, several quintessential Southern traditional modes, such as Nam Ai and Nam Xuân, are frequently integrated into Cao Dai liturgical rites. These modes are characterized by their slow, deliberate tempos and high emotional resonance, which align perfectly with the solemn and meditative atmosphere required for sacred ceremonies. The Nam Xuân mode, with its serene and dignified quality, often accompanies rituals of peace and offering, while the Nam Ai mode - steeped in a sense of nostalgic longing and profound gravity - guides practitioners toward a state of inner reflection and spiritual connection with the Supreme Being.

The integration of these melodies into the Cao Dai framework also demonstrates a unique preservation mechanism. By embedding these tunes into a religious context, the faith ensures that the technical intricacies of the Southern musical heritage - such as specific vibratos, glissandos, and the distinct “hoi” (nuance) - are maintained with absolute fidelity. Consequently, the ritual space becomes a living archive where the ancient sounds of the ancestors are not just preserved as relics of the past, but are continuously revitalized as a vital part of the community’s spiritual life. Through this symbiosis of music and faith, the cultural identity of Southern Vietnam remains vibrant, resonating through every ceremony and echoing the timeless order of the cosmos. The comparative characteristics of Southern Vietnamese ritual music, Đờn ca tài tử, and Cao Dai ritual music are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparative analysis of scale and modal systems in Southern Vietnamese ritual music, Đờn ca tài tử, and Cao Dai ritual music

Criteria	Southern Vietnamese Ritual Music	Đờn ca tài tử	Cao Dai Ritual Music
Provenance and Objectives	Used in communal rituals and traditional ceremonies, emphasizing sacredness and community cohesion	Chamber music for artistic expression and personal reflection, highlighting improvisation and technique	Used in religious rituals and ceremonies, emphasizing structure and collective participation
Scale System	Based on a stable pentatonic scale	Based on pentatonic scale with flexible pitch variations to express nuance	Inherits pentatonic structure, standardized for ritual performance
Modality	Defined by fixed ritual repertoires with limited variation in nuance	Highly developed modal system with Bắc and Nam modes and expressive nuance	Inherits modal system but simplifies and formalizes it for liturgical use
Musical Nuance	Stable and solemn, with limited ornamentation	Highly expressive, with vibrato, glissando, and ornamentation	Reduced ornamentation to ensure consistency in group performance
Transition Techniques	Structured and predictable transitions	Flexible and complex transitions with individual variation	Simplified transitions, emphasizing uniformity

Source: Author

The structural features of solfège patterns and melodic organization are further detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparative analysis of solfège patterns and melodic structures across Southern Vietnamese ritual music, Đờn ca tài tử, and Cao Dai ritual music

Repertoire System	Structural Criteria	Southern Vietnamese Ritual Music	Đờn ca tài tử	Cao Dai Ritual Music
Nam Xuân	Introductory motifs	Core melodic pattern: Xang Xe Xang Xe Xang Ho, with repetition of Xang Xe Xang and a gently sustained final Ho creating a stable tonal effect	Core melodic pattern: Xe Xang Xe Xang Ho, maintaining inversion with more flexible rhythm and expressive nuance	Core melodic pattern: Xang Xe Xang, simplified by omitting additional tones to ensure clarity and rhythmic precision
	Performance technique	No vibrato, moderate tempo, final Ho sustained for a short duration	Gentle glissando between Xang and Xe, light vibrato on Ho	No vibrato, steady tempo, slightly slow pace
	Stepwise melodic progression	Ho Xang Xe Xang Xe Xang Ho, creating a balanced tonal	Similar structure with additional expressive	Ho Xang Xe Xang Xe, simplified by omitting the

	character	variation	final tone to create a clear ending
Performance technique	Ho sustained briefly without vibrato	Subtle glissando, possible variation of pitch, vibrato applied to final tone	No vibrato or glissando, stable rhythmic structure
Cadential motifs	Xe Xang Ho, short and stable ending	Xe Xang Ho Xu Ho, extended and expressive resolution	Xang Ho, minimal and direct ending
Performance technique	Clear articulation, short duration of final tone	Light vibrato and smooth glissando toward the final tone	No vibrato or glissando
Note duration	Xang and Xe short duration, Ho moderate, Xu short	Flexible duration, Ho often extended with expressive nuance	Fixed duration to maintain rhythmic consistency
Vibrato intensity	Generally absent	Present on key tones, especially Ho	Limited use for consistency
Glissando extent	Minimal use, subtle melodic connection	Moderate use for expressive transitions	Very limited or absent
Melodic range	Moderate, stable contour	Flexible range with smooth variation	Moderate, simplified contour



Figure 4: Cao Dai ritual orchestra and ensemble arrangement in liturgical performance (Source: Author)

Source: Author

The comparative analysis presented in Table 1 indicates that Cao Dai ritual music inherits the fundamental pentatonic structure of Southern Vietnamese traditional music while simplifying modal variations and limiting improvisational elements. This transformation reflects the shift from a flexible performance practice toward a more structured liturgical system.

Similarly, Table 2 demonstrates that while core melodic patterns are preserved, Cao Dai ritual music standardizes performance techniques in order to ensure consistency within collective ritual settings. These findings highlight both continuity and adaptation in the process of musical integration.

Sustaining the Traditional Instrument System within the Cao Dai Liturgical Orchestra

In addition to preserving a vast repertoire of musical pieces, survey results indicate that Cao Dai ritual music significantly safeguards a diverse array of traditional Southern Vietnamese instruments. The ritual ensemble is meticulously structured, integrating a harmonious blend of various instrument families, most notably string and percussion instruments, to fulfill its sacred functions. As illustrated in Figure 4, the Cao Dai ritual orchestra is structured as a cohesive ensemble, in which various traditional instruments are systematically integrated to fulfill both musical and ritual functions.

According to specialized research on ritual music in Tay Ninh, a standardized ceremonial ensemble typically consists of approximately seven musicians. This traditional formation includes a master drummer, three string instrumentalists, and several percussionists responsible for the *bac* (clappers) and *mo* (wooden fish), each contributing to the collective spiritual resonance of the ritual.

Common string instruments within the ensemble include the *dan co* (two-stringed fiddle), *dan kim* (moon lute), *dan tranh* (sixteen-stringed zither), or *dan doc huyen* (monochord). These instruments are foundational to Southern Vietnamese traditional music, playing a vital role in articulating the intricate melodic nuances of the repertoire. Conversely, percussion instruments such as drums, clappers, and wooden fish function as the rhythmic backbone, defining the tempo and providing structural accents to the performance. Field surveys further reveal that while modern constraints may reduce the ensemble size to three or five musicians, these core traditional instruments remain indispensable, enduring as the fundamental pillars of the musical fabric.

The sustained use of these traditional instruments in contemporary ceremonies demonstrates that Cao Dai ritual music does more than merely archive ancient melodies. It serves as a living vessel for the preservation of performance techniques and the profound cultural wisdom associated with each instrument. By maintaining this musical lineage, the religion ensures that the intangible heritage and specialized craftsmanship of Southern Vietnam continue to thrive within a modern institutional framework.

Pedagogical Approaches to Ritual Music among Cao Dai Adherents

Drawing from empirical field surveys and documentary analysis, it is evident that the vitality of traditional music within the Cao Dai faith is not merely a product of the ceremonial environment, but is deeply rooted in the continuous transmission process within the practitioner community. These intergenerational pedagogical mechanisms play a pivotal role in safeguarding the core repertoire and the sophisticated performance techniques of Southern Vietnamese ritual music within a religious context.

In practice, the transmission of ritual music among Cao Dai adherents primarily follows a traditional apprenticeship model. Distinct from formalized institutional music education, learning in this context

occurs through direct mentorship by master musicians or seasoned practitioners within the temple's ensemble. This process immerses students in an environment of active observation, deep listening, and collaborative performance alongside their predecessors. This 'hands-on' instructional method enables learners to progressively master complex melodic structures and the nuanced techniques specific to each traditional instrument (Janet Alison Hoskins, 2015).

During periodic liturgical ceremonies at the temples, novices typically assist the ensemble or observe the performances of seasoned musicians. By directly witnessing the sacred rites and the intricate coordination among various instruments, learners gain a profound understanding of musical structures and the specific functional roles of each repertoire within a given ceremony. Consequently, the acquisition of musical knowledge is not confined to isolated learning spaces but is intrinsically linked to the community's living religious practices. Mastery begins with the foundational repertoires of traditional ritual music before progressing to those specific to Cao Dai liturgy. In many instances, this educational journey extends beyond mere melodic memorization; it encompasses mastering ensemble synchronization and understanding the structural significance of each musical segment within the ceremonial progression.

Furthermore, the transmission of ritual music is inseparable from the dissemination of Cao Dai cultural and spiritual wisdom. Beyond technical instruction, learners are educated on the profound meanings behind religious rites, the symbolic role of music in each ceremonial phase, and the strict codes of conduct required during participation (Minh Lý, 1985). This highlights that learning ritual music is far more than the acquisition of performance skills; it is a holistic process of engaging with the cultural value systems and spiritual beliefs of the Cao Dai practitioner community.

The Community's Role in Maintaining Ritual Music and Promoting Southern Vietnamese Traditional Musical Heritage

The practitioner community serves not only as the primary audience but also as the living custodians essential to the survival of ritual music. Their proactive engagement in organizing, practicing, and transmitting musical knowledge has cultivated a resilient cultural ecosystem, where the traditional repertoires of Southern Vietnam are meticulously preserved within the sanctity of liturgical spaces. Driven by deep religious devotion and a collective sense of responsibility, this community ensures that these musical values remain intact despite the pressures of modern societal shifts. Furthermore, their efforts foster the promotion of this heritage, positioning it as an inseparable component of both religious identity and national cultural consciousness. (Nguyễn Thái Bảo, 2021).

In many Cao Dai religious institutions, the ensembles are primarily composed of devoted practitioners who voluntarily serve the liturgy. These musicians are responsible for performing during daily ceremonies while maintaining regular rehearsals to ensure seamless coordination among the instruments. Driven by the deep-seated commitment of these community members, ritual ensembles remain remarkably stable across various localities in Southern Vietnam, thereby significantly contributing to the preservation of the traditional space for ceremonial musical practice.

Cao Dai religious life is characterized by a high frequency of ritual activities, encompassing a structured liturgical cycle that ranges from daily prayers to semi-monthly rites (*Soc-Vong*) and major annual festivals. In this sacred context, "music plays a pivotal role in guiding the ritualistic procedures and cultivating the venerable atmosphere of the service" (Mohammad Jahagir Alam, 2019). This incessant ritual

calendar provides a vital platform for the regular performance of traditional musical repertoires, effectively ensuring their vibrant and continuous presence within the community's cultural fabric.

Proposed Solutions for the Preservation and Sustainable Development of Southern Vietnamese Traditional Music in Caodaism

Amidst the transformative shifts of contemporary society, the preservation and promotion of Southern Vietnamese traditional music within the Cao Dai faith are confronting significant challenges. The erosion of traditional cultural environments under the influence of urbanization, global cultural exchange, and the rapid expansion of modern entertainment has diminished the communal spaces that once served as the bedrock for folk arts. In this evolving landscape, traditional musical forms, including Cao Dai ritual music, are increasingly compelled to adapt to the multifaceted changes of socio-cultural life.

In addition to environmental pressures, the inheritance and transmission of ritual music present notable concerns. Currently, the vast knowledge of musical repertoires, performance techniques, and ensemble organization is primarily conveyed through oral transmission between master musicians and apprentices within the faith. While this traditional apprenticeship model helps maintain the authenticity of the art form, it simultaneously poses a risk of disappearance as the older generation of masters passes away without a sufficiently skilled successor lineage to carry the heritage forward. Furthermore, the lack of in-depth scholarly research and systematic scientific documentation of Cao Dai music means that many of its unique musical values have yet to be fully recognized within the broader discourse of Vietnamese traditional music studies.

In response to this reality, the preservation and promotion of Southern Vietnamese traditional musical values within Cao Dai ritual music must be approached through the lens of "living preservation" This strategy entails a harmonious integration of safeguarding traditional elements with a flexible adaptation to the transformative shifts of contemporary cultural life. A foundational solution lies in "strengthening the collection, documentation, and scientific research of Cao Dai ritual music" (Vietnamnet Global, 2025). The processes of audio-visual recording, musical notation, and structural analysis of these repertoires will establish a valuable scientific repository. This not only serves long-term conservation goals but also provides a robust framework for in-depth studies in ethnomusicology and cultural studies. Simultaneously, the development of digital databases for ritual music will enhance accessibility for both the scholarly community and the general public, broadening the reach of this traditional art form.

In tandem with research and documentation initiatives, the reinforcement and modernization of musical transmission within the practitioner community are of paramount importance. Beyond the traditional apprenticeship between master musicians, religious institutions should "organize dedicated workshops to facilitate systematic engagement and formal training for the younger generation" (Nguyễn Phước Tài, 2023). Furthermore, the development of instructional manuals or a foundational curriculum for Cao Dai ritual music will serve to standardize this specialized knowledge, ensuring that the transmission process becomes more sustainable and resilient in the years to come.

Furthermore, "integrating Cao Dai ritual music with local cultural and educational initiatives is a vital strategy for raising public awareness regarding the intrinsic values of this musical heritage" (Nguyễn Thị Quế Hương, 2024). Through scholarly symposia, cultural exchange

programs, or interdisciplinary research projects, Cao Dai ritual music can achieve broader visibility within both the public sphere and academic circles. Such efforts not only solidify the standing of ritual music within the broader system of Southern Vietnamese traditional music but also expand the methodological horizons for future research into this multifaceted art form.

In the era of rapid digital transformation, leveraging modern technical tools for heritage conservation offers promising prospects. The digitization of audio-visual recordings of ritual music, coupled with the development of online data repositories, serves to ensure the long-term preservation of these invaluable resources. Furthermore, these digital initiatives facilitate the broad dissemination of traditional musical values, making this heritage more accessible to the general public (Nguyễn Bình Định, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

Southern Vietnamese traditional music constitutes a significant component of the nation's intangible cultural heritage, reflecting long-term processes of historical formation, regional adaptation, and cultural interaction. However, in the context of rapid socio-economic transformation, many traditional musical forms are facing a gradual contraction in both performance space and practitioner communities. The erosion of traditional cultural environments, together with shifting patterns of cultural consumption, poses substantial challenges to the continuity of these practices. This situation underscores the need to identify and examine cultural contexts in which traditional music remains actively maintained.

The findings of this study demonstrate that Caodaism functions not only as a religious system with considerable social influence but also as a cultural institution that contributes directly to the preservation and transmission of Southern Vietnamese traditional music. Within the structured framework of ritual practices, key musical components—including repertoire, modal systems, instrumentation, and ensemble organization—are maintained through regular performance. In this context, music is not preserved as an isolated cultural artifact but continues to exist as an integral part of religious life.

The close integration of music within ritual practice creates a stable and recurring performance environment, which plays a central role in sustaining traditional musical knowledge. Through repeated participation in ceremonies, practitioners internalize both technical and symbolic aspects of the musical system. This process forms an embedded mechanism of transmission, allowing musical knowledge to be reproduced and maintained across generations without relying solely on formal institutional structures.

From a broader perspective, the study suggests that the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage is closely linked to the existence of "living" cultural spaces supported by community participation. Rather than focusing exclusively on documentation or preservation in static forms, it is necessary to consider the social environments in which cultural practices are continuously enacted. In this regard, Caodaism provides a relevant example of how religious institutions can function as active contexts for cultural continuity.

At the same time, the study also points to several issues that require further attention, particularly in relation to intergenerational transmission and the need for more systematic documentation of ritual music. Future research may expand the scope of investigation to include comparative studies across different religious or cultural contexts, as well as the application of digital methods in the

preservation of musical heritage. Such directions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between cultural practice, community structure, and the long-term sustainability of traditional music.

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