



FILM AUSTRALIA PRESENTS

# Vietnam Symphony

In 1965, as Hanoi faced the threat of massive US bombing, students and teachers from the conservatorium of music fled to the countryside, where they built an entire campus underground: this is their story.

**8.30pm Thursday 13 October 2005**  
**SBS Television - Storyline Australia**

**Writer/director** Tom Zubrycki

**Producer** Kerry Herman

**Executive Producer** Penny Robins

**Duration** 52 minutes

A Film Australia National Interest Program in association with Stonebridge Productions. Developed with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission. Produced in association with the NSW Film and Television Office and SBS Independent.

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## **Synopses**

### **One line synopsis**

In 1965, as Hanoi faced the threat of massive US bombing, students and teachers from the conservatorium of music fled to the countryside, where they built an entire campus underground: this is their story.

### **One paragraph synopsis**

In 1965, as the Vietnam War intensified, students and teachers from the Hanoi National Conservatory of Music were forced to flee the city for the relative safety of a village in the countryside. With the help of villagers, they built an entire campus underground, creating a maze of hidden tunnels connecting an auditorium and classrooms. There, as the war raged around them, they lived, studied and played music for five years. Vietnam Symphony tells their extraordinary story. Combining remarkable archival footage with contemporary interviews and a sublime soundtrack, it paints a portrait of life then and now, in a rapidly changing nation.

### **One page synopsis**

In 1965, as the Vietnam War intensified and Hanoi faced the threat of massive US bombing, students and teachers from the National Conservatory of Music were forced to flee the city for the relative safety of a small village in the countryside. With the help of villagers, they built an entire campus underground, creating a maze of hidden tunnels, connecting an auditorium and classrooms. Here, as the war raged around them, they lived, studied and played music for five years. Vietnam Symphony tells their extraordinary story.

Stunning black-and-white archival footage captures almost surreal scenes - of pianos wheeled on handcarts along dusty tracks, lessons held in round-the-clock shifts in subterranean caverns, performances for soldiers among heavy armaments, and the unexpected meeting of hard labour and high culture, of the pragmatic and the sublime. This remarkable footage is combined with contemporary interviews with the people involved, who recount personal stories of danger, hunger, fear and loss, counterpointed by moments of humour and beauty. And their music, of course.

Since the war, Vietnam has undergone profound changes. These talented musicians and composers are now among the country's cultural leaders, yet their children tend to take little interest in the past, looking to the west to shape their future.

Beautifully photographed, Vietnam Symphony records the coming together of the former conservatory students and villagers for a reunion concert 30 years after the war, to paint a moving portrait of life in Vietnam then and now.

## About the making of the film

By the producer, Kerry Herman

In 1993 my mother, Ina Herman, read that Vietnam was opening up to the west and at that time she was looking for somewhere different to tour Musica Bella, a small musical ensemble she managed in Perth. My younger sister, who played the recorder, started the ensemble, which specialised in baroque music – an area of music in which the Hanoi National Conservatory of Music was very interested.

My mother approached the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT), which had just started sponsoring cultural groups to Vietnam, to discuss touring the ensemble. DFAT agreed to cover part of the costs of the ensemble's initial visit and its subsequent visit in 1995. Musica Bella was the first cultural group of any sort to visit Vietnam from Western Australia.

Around the same time my mother was approached by Charles Devenish, a Perth businessman with interests in Vietnam, to help raise money for the Hanoi National Conservatory of Music. On a business visit there, he had attended a concert and met a member of the Conservatory who explained the enormous financial and physical difficulties staff and students were working and teaching under. Many instruments were in a state of disrepair, there were few orchestral scores and many of them were outdated scores that came from Russia years before. The lack of resources and materials to assist in running repairs meant many of the instruments were in terrible condition – fine wire was being used to replace broken violin strings, there were huge dents in the timpani and a beautiful grand piano was tucked away on its side under the stairs because no-one could fix it.

Aware my mother was organising a visit to Vietnam for the ensemble to give a performance and series of master classes to Conservatory students, Charles Devenish asked her to see how much help was needed.

Following her visit to Hanoi, my mother agreed to become involved in what became known as the Music Instruments for Vietnam Project. In mid 1993 she made contact with the Department for the Arts in Perth and travelled to Melbourne and Sydney to contact companies with established business interests in Vietnam which could potentially provide financial support.

Over a period of two years she raised \$50,000 in cash and in-kind support from companies and organisations including Telstra-Vietnam, the School of Music at the University of Western Australia, Musica Bella and PC Doctor Western Australia. In-kind donations included a computer, printer, harpsichord and new orchestral scores that enabled the Conservatory to establish a library. Cash sponsorship covered the purchase of two new violins, a viola, cello and double bass, as well as materials to help repair older string and reed instruments. Singapore Airlines donated cargo space to uplift all the instruments to Hanoi and LEP Transport sponsored the cost of packing and transporting all the instruments to the airport.

During her initial visit to the Conservatory in 1993, my mother met Professor Vu Huong who, over dinner one night, told her about the Conservatory's departure from Hanoi and its life as a campus beneath a village in the countryside during the war. When she returned to Perth she related this story to me, and the germ of the idea for *Vietnam Symphony* was born.

## **An interview with the writer/director, Tom Zubrycki**

### **Q: What drew you to want to make the film?**

When (producer) Kerry Herman showed me the unique footage of the Conservatory in the village filmed during the war I knew that this was an incredibly strong foundation for a film. It was then a process of finding the right people to tell the story. In Vietnam, Kerry introduced me to the Professor (Professor Vu Huong) and his son Anh Tuan. What interested me was how Tuan had started out in the same way as his father, but then had gone in a completely different direction as a musician. Not only was he playing jazz, but he'd become an entertainer as well. This seemed to have upset his father and he was not quite reconciled to how his son had changed. What was fascinating is what this said about modern Vietnam's relationship with the US. The US might have been beaten on the battlefield, but were they winning the cultural wars: the hearts and minds?

The other thing that excited me was how the story of the underground Conservatory was a way of telling the story of how the war was experienced from the North. What happened to the people who lived through the American bombing, and what happened to the next generation? Very few films have looked at this side of the story.

### **Q: Did you want to make the film straight away?**

I did. In fact we got very close to getting it up in 2001. I was in New York in September of that year for meetings with PBS. However after 9/11, broadcasters re-prioritised their pre-sale commissioning and it took us a huge amount of work to find new support.

### **Q: How is Vietnam Symphony different from your other films?**

Most of my films, with the exception of my first film *Waterloo* and a film I made in 2000 *The Secret Safari*, are closely-observed narratives. They are driven by key events that happen in the lives of one person or one family. Usually I spend around eight months filming, following events as they unfold – for instance the relationship between Molly and the young Afghan refugee Mobarak in *Molly & Mobarak*. These films are usually very intense and intimate. In *Vietnam Symphony* I wanted to achieve a similar intimacy using interview technique – but this time not with one or two people, but with several.

### **Q: Were you successful in this? Did it work?**

I believe that it did work to a large extent. You're not going to forge the same closeness with the characters as when they're on screen for 80 minutes, but you can still be very

affected by their physical presence and their ability to tell a story. During the two research trips Kerry and I made, we found a number of people who would produce this kind of 'performance'. In making our final selection for interview it was important that they complement each other, and I believe this worked out very well. Each person has their own unique way of recalling events and re-telling them. The two women, for example, have completely opposite responses. Mai Phong breaks down and cries, while Tuyet Minh can only recall the amusing and ironic details. Of the men, Professor Huong recounts the events in quite a matter of fact way – as something that needed to be done and was done, while Professor Thanh goes between the extremes of humour and tragedy. His account of being caught-up in the bombing of Hanoi in 1972 is harrowing in the extreme. In total contrast is Thuy Ha, the singer, who delivers her piece with incredible bravado – almost to the point of exaggeration.

**Q: What themes and ideas does Vietnam Symphony embody?**

*Vietnam Symphony* is a look at Vietnam today through the prism of the past. The historical story of the underground Conservatory is told through a large cast of interviewees, blending archive, interview and music. The key character is Professor Huong – a cellist and his son, also a musician. His son goes against his father's wishes, turning his back on a concert career to work as a quiz show host on television - a relevant metaphor for modern Vietnam and the rapid social changes sweeping the country.

What really interested me were the tensions between the older and younger generations and I wanted to use the music to build and explore the generational change. I also wanted to explore the legacy left by the war. One of the interesting things is how the country's younger generation just wants to get on with the present. Wearing fashion labels and watching pop on TV quiz shows is more important than contemplating a war that for them has little relevance and is long since past. It's ironic how Vietnam – still a one-party socialist state – is flexible enough to absorb a range of influences emanating from its former arch-enemy and still remain true to its ideological roots.

**Q: What were the challenges?**

The film changes styles as it unfolds. The first half uses an interview-driven style to tell the story of how the Conservatory survived in the village. In the second half the film changes gear and tells the contemporary story in more of an observational style – especially the return to the village. To get the historical to blend into the contemporary I needed to find a meeting point between the two distinct styles. Music was the key to

making this work. It was the film's unifying element and an expressive one as well.

In editing the film I was very aware of the tendency of people to romanticise the past. An element of that is inevitable, even expected. However, the variety of stories and the way they are told belies an authenticity that is both genuine and believable.

**Q: What earlier documentary experiences shaped Vietnam Symphony?**

I've made several films where English was not the dominant language spoken - films like *Billal* and to a lesser extent *Homelands* and *The Diplomat*. When I made *Billal*, which is about a Lebanese family dealing with the racism and personal trauma over the near-death of their son, I realised just how much an interpreter could bring to a film – a person who is not only translating for you, but also deeply engaged with the subjects. In *Vietnam Symphony* we had one such person: Dinh Thuy Hang. I met Hang when I was teaching at the University of Technology in Sydney. She was doing an in-service course before going back to her academic job in Hanoi. It turned out that she had gone through very similar experiences in the war as our interviewees. When the US started to bomb the north she was a young girl going to school. Like the other characters in the film she was transported to an evacuation zone – to another village further North. Having had similar experiences made her respected by our characters, and the interviews became very intense heart-felt conversations.

## About the filmmakers

### Tom Zubrycki – writer/director

Tom Zubrycki has a substantial and widely respected body of documentaries. He works mainly in an observational style and his films are narrative-based and strongly character-driven. Many have gained cinema release and played in major documentary festivals around the world.

Prior to *Vietnam Symphony* he made *Molly & Mobarak* (2003) – a story about a relationship between a young Afghani refugee and a school teacher in an Australian country town. The film takes up the themes of displacement, identity and the search for home – ideas that he been exploring since the 1990s in films such as *Homelands* (1993) and *Billal* (1996). *Molly & Mobarak* opened the Margaret Mead Film Festival (2003), and was screened in the Joris Ivens competition at IDFA (2003). It has gone on to screen at 15 international festivals.

Zubrycki's filmography as director also includes *The Diplomat* (2000) – a Film Australia National Interest Program - the documentary about Jose Ramos-Horta, the exiled East Timorese freedom-fighter and the final two years of his quarter-century campaign to achieve independence for his country. The film won two Australian Film Institute Awards - Best Director and Best Documentary. His other films have included *The Secret Safari* (2002), *Lord of the Bush* (1990), *Bran Nue Dae* (1991), *Friends and Enemies* (1987), *Kemira – Diary of a Strike* (1984) and *Waterloo* (1981).

Tom also works as a producer mentoring emerging filmmakers. His credits include *Exile in Sarajevo* (1996, International Emmy for Best Documentary), *Stolen Generations* (2000), *Making Venus* (2001), and *Gulpilil – One Red Blood* (2002). He also teaches documentary at the University of Technology, Sydney.

### Kerry Herman – producer

Kerry Herman started to research the story behind *Vietnam Symphony* in 1997. She was previously a major events producer, specialising in producing events for the film and television industry during the 1990s. Her credits include the Australian Film Institute's AFI Awards (1992-1995), national and international conferences for the Screen Producers' Association of Australia (1990-1992), Women in Film & Television (1997) and the NSW Film & Television Office (1998-1999).



Turning her event producing experience to television, she was East Coast Line Producer for *Surfing The Menu* (2003), a cooking/lifestyle/adventure series screened in 2004 on ABC-TV. *Vietnam Symphony* is her first project as Producer, and she is currently developing several new projects including one-off documentaries and a documentary series as well as an anthology series of telefeatures.

Kerry lectured in event management from 2000-2003, and she continues to produce major events for the corporate sector while developing her film projects.

## Credits

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### **VIETNAM SYMPHONY**

Special thanks to the musicians and staff of the Hanoi National Conservatory of Music and to the people of the village of Xuan Phu, who made this film possible

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Frame Set & Match  
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BONNIE G. ROWAN

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Concerto for Violin, Piano and Orchestra in F Major  
by J Haydn  
Performed by HANOI STRING ORCHESTRA  
Conducted by NGO VAN THANH

Return To Motherland  
by Nguyen Van Thuong  
Performed by HANOI STRING ORCHESTRA  
Conducted by NGO VAN THANH

Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor  
by J.S Bach

Concerto #3 in G Major for Violin  
by W A Mozart

Etude in D# Minor  
by A N Scriabin  
Performed by TRAN THI TUYET MINH  
My Country  
by Luu Cau  
Performed by NGO VAN THANH

Gigue from Suite C Major for Cello  
by J S Bach

Prelude in Suite D Major for Cello  
by J.S Bach

Traditional Vietnamese Folk Song  
Performed by DO VAN DE

The Only Confidence  
Composed and Performed by VU THI MAI PHUONG

The Bird That Brings Good News  
by Dam Thanh  
Performed by TRAN THUY HA

Making A Winter Garment For Soldiers  
Performed by PHAM HUNG

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Commissioning Editor  
NED LANDER

Executive Producer  
PENNY ROBINS

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