

MUSICAL ANCESTRIES – VIETNAM (#14)

Final

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

Nikki: Nikki Nguyen

Annie: Audrey Zelenka

Narrator: Kathy Lawton Brown

Narr: 17-year-old Annie was just finishing her junior year in high school when she received a very special phone call from Vietnam National Academy of Music. Her scholarship application to study abroad in her senior year had been accepted! She was going to Vietnam! Plus, she'd be earning advanced college credit as she studied music and she'd be living with a Vietnamese family...but not just any family!

Annie learned that the family was originally from Vietnam, but they'd moved to the States just before their daughter, Nikki, was born. When she graduated from high school, Nikki wanted to study music at the VNAM Academy, so they moved *back* to Vietnam, and were living right there in Hanoi! A dream-come-true for Annie! She immediately called and Nikki answered.

Nikki: Xin chào! Hello!

Annie: Hello Nikki – this is Annie! I just found out I won a music scholarship to the Vietnam National Academy of Music! I understand I'm going to be living with you and your family while I'm there! I'm sooo excited! The Academy is where *you* go, too - right?

Nikki: Yes! I'm majoring in Vietnamese Traditional Music.

Annie: Oh, gosh – and I'm studying piano!

Nikki: Annie - I'm so glad you called! We heard about it a couple of weeks ago, but the *Academy* needed to contact you and your family *first* – to make it official and all.

Annie: Yeah, that makes sense. So tell me all about VNAM, and you, and your instrument, and what you're studying, and the professors...and...

Nikki: (*laughing, amused by her enthusiasm*) Hey Annie, how about we FaceTime or something on this – we've got a lot to talk about!

Annie: You're right - we DO!

Narr: The two girls were instant friends. No doubt, they were going to be besties, even though they were about 3 years apart in age. Over the next few months, they spoke weekly, Annie full of questions, and Nikki ready with answers.

Annie learned that the Vietnam Academy of Music – VNAM – offers everything a college in the United States would, plus it's home to the Hanoi Philharmonic Orchestra, a professional orchestra with a worldwide reputation. The Academy also has a Vietnamese Traditional Orchestra. With an Institute of Musicology and departments in strings, winds, percussion, voice, piano and more, students have many opportunities to participate in choirs and instrumental ensembles. This was going to be a great year!

Finally, the big day came when Annie boarded the plane to Hanoi.

Annie: 'Bye Mom & Dad – thanks for letting me do this. I know I'll learn TONS! I'll miss you, but I'll text every day, I promise. *I. AM. SO. EXCITED!* Love you!

Narr: When she arrived in Hanoi, she got through customs and there was Nikki, ready to greet her with a big American-style hug.

Nikki: Hi Annie! Welcome to Vietnam! I've looked forward to meeting you today!

Annie: Me, too! I can't thank you and your family enough for letting me stay with you for nine months!

Nikki: You'll probably be tired of us in two weeks! C'mon – grab your stuff – Let's go home.

Annie: On a motorcycle?!?

Nikki: Well, a scooter, actually. But yeah, almost everyone has one here. You'll probably get one, too. OK, ready? Hang on! And don't mind the horns – everyone uses them. Not being rude, they're just letting people know they're going around them.

Annie: *(not quite sure)* OK...

Narr: After a nerve-jangling ride, with lots of vehicles, traffic and noisy horns, the girls arrived home. Nikki's parents greeted them graciously, welcoming their long-term guest. Her mother had prepared a lovely meal especially for Annie's arrival, and they all had a warm, memorable evening getting comfortable with each other. The next morning, Nikki was Annie's alarm clock.

Nikki: Hey Annie! Time to go check out VNAM!

Annie: Super!

Narr: It was a short ride, and Nikki was a great guide. After getting Annie registered, they went to the Student Center, where Nikki introduced her to some friends. Then they talked more about their favorite subject, music.

Annie: Nikki, would you please give me an overview of Vietnamese music? I've read about it, but I want to hear it from you.

Nikki: You'll learn lots more about this in your classes, but basically, our music is *modal* and based on scales from 2 to 7 notes. It's mostly pentatonic – a 5 note scale - and mostly duple meter – y'know – 2 beats a measure. There are some regional differences, but it really boils down to either being imperial (that's *our* "classical" music) or from the folk tradition.

Narr: From 1955 to '75 (the 20 years during the Vietnam War) the only regions ever referred to were "North and South." But after the country reunified in 1975, more of the individual regions were recognized again: southern, central, northern, coastal, highland, urban, and rural Vietnam. Now, people embrace each region's unique cultural and musical characteristics.

Annie: You mean the music's all starting to blend together?

Nikki: No, actually the differences are respected and looked at as distinct or different traditions. (But, this doesn't apply to our popular music, V-POP.) In our traditional *vocal* music, there are four different types of song styles in Northern Vietnam alone. The Central Region has two, and so does the Southern Region. (Then there's Theatrical vocal music, which is *another* category!)

Annie: Wow! That's a lot to keep track of!

Nikki: You actually learn to tell the difference pretty easily once you "get it in your ear" – y'know? You get used to each style.

Annie: OK...if you say so! (*playful, grinning*)

Nikki: Yeah, I do, girlfriend! (*laugh from both.*)

Annie: So, that's *vocal* music. How about instrumental? Tell me about that!

Nikki: OK, NOW we're getting' into the good stuff! Welcome to *my* world!

Annie: (*aside*) Uh-oh...

Nikki: Let's get a cup of coffee (a favorite drink here in Vietnam, by the way) and go to the music building where they have some older classical instruments displayed.

Annie: Great plan!

Narr: As they walked, they talked about the importance of music in the culture, and how it ties into so many aspects of Vietnamese life. Annie learned that music wasn't just for concerts...it was a living part of every event and aspect of life. She thought about how music surrounded her in the USA, but it was the ancient traditions linked to Vietnamese music that set it apart from American music.

For instance, one tradition Nikki mentioned was the students wearing the **Ao Dai** to perform. *Áo* translates as shirt and *dài* means "long." This traditional garment goes back to the 18th century Nguyen lords. As it evolved over the years, French and Hanoi designers adapted it, and it was used as formalwear for both men and women. In the 1950s, Saigon designers adjusted the fit to produce the modernized Vietnamese national garment now worn by women. Versatile and visually appealing, it consists of a long split tunic worn over silk trousers.

Annie: You know I've got to get an Ao Dai, right?

Nikki: Oh, you will! Probably more than one! Here we are - the instruments.

Annie: I thought you'd said these were classical instruments. I've never seen any of these in a band or orchestra.

Nikki: Ah – the term “classical.” Let me explain. So, when I say “Classical Music” I don't necessarily mean *Western* Classical music – y'know, Bach, Beethoven...and all. When we're talking about *Vietnamese music* and I say “classical,” I mean the classic, traditional music of Vietnam...right?

Annie: Ahhh! Got it.

Narr: There are all sorts of folk and traditional instruments that have developed or been adapted for Vietnamese music. They fall into four main categories: Two types of stringed instruments that are either (1) plucked or (2) bowed, (3) wind instruments, and (4) percussion instruments.

Nikki: I should probably focus on the six instruments that are known outside of Vietnam. Let's start with the **Dàn Tranh**. You may have seen pictures of female musicians playing it in the traditional Vietnamese dress. In its early use, mostly women played this for royalty.

Narr: The Dàn Tranh is, essentially, a 16-string zither, about 43 inches long, with a sound box that has a flat bottom plate, a rounded top plate, and six side pieces. Its strings are made of steel, and it has movable bridges and tuning pegs on its top. It's played flat (like an autoharp), with the musician sitting in front. The instrument is tuned to a pentatonic scale. The right hand plucks the strings, and the left hand controls the pitch and vibration, often using micro-tone adjustments and ornamentation. Players usually wear finger picks made of plastic or tortoise shell to pluck the strings, but they can also cup, press or stroke the strings to alter the sound.

Nikki: The Vietnamese Dàn Tranh originated in the late 13th century in the ancient capital city of Hue, and it's still considered a symbol of that city. It can be used in an orchestra or to accompany a singer, but is usually played unaccompanied. You can find similar instruments to our Dàn Tranh in China, Japan and Korea.

Annie: It's beautiful. What a long, interesting history!

Nikki: Yes, and it's challenging to play, too!

Annie: Isn't that true for all instruments?!

Nikki: *(laughing)* Yeah, you're right! But this next instrument only has two strings instead of 16. That helps! It's called a **Dàn Nguyệt**. It's sort of like a 2-stringed lute, and it's also called the Vietnamese two-chord guitar. Look how the resonator resembles the moon...which is probably how it got its name. Dàn Nguyệt literally translates to "Moon Lute," although people from South Vietnam often call it the Dàn Kim.

Narr: The moon-shaped Dàn Nguyệt is seen in ancient carvings dating back to the 11th Century – and is widely used in folk, court and academic music. Having a loud, pure sound, capable of expressing different emotions and moods, it's used at both solemn and joyful occasions, and even in chamber music. It's made of wood – with no sound

hole – and has 10 frets placed for the pentatonic scale. In the past it had two silk strings that were played with the fingernails; now the strings are made of nylon and can be strummed or plucked with the fingers or a pick.

Nikki: You can hear this instrument as accompaniment, in an orchestra, or solo. It has even been used as a decoration because of its striking appearance.

Annie: Tell me more about the instrument you play, Nikki. What is it called?

Nikki: It's called the **Dan Bau**. It's said to go all the way back to the first dynasties in Vietnam. It's one of only two musical instruments that is *purely* Vietnamese, so it's very closely linked to our culture. I just love the sound of it - so lovely and soothing.

There's an ancient tale of a blind woman whose husband was away at war. She played the Dan Bau to make money while he was gone. Her music was so sweet and beautiful that people were deeply touched, and that is how the instrument was discovered. So the story goes, anyway.

Annie: It looks pretty simple because it only has one string to play, but I don't think I've seen anything quite like it.

Nikki: It *is* simple looking...but it's *not* easy to play! It takes years of practice to master controlling both the tone and pitch, because it's very delicate. The name of the instrument, Dan Bau, tells you what it is. "Dan" means stringed instrument, and "Bau" means gourd.

Narr: The traditional Dan Bau basically has four parts – the soundboard (originally a bamboo tube, now wooden), the spout, (a flexible rod made of buffalo horn that controls the pitch), a gourd for a resonator (to make the sound carry), and a string which is plucked. Traditional instruments had a silk string, but now it's made of metal. Because it has *one* string only, it's called a *monochord*. Monochord instruments are in many parts of the world.

Nikki: There is one other important piece that you can't see, because it's inside the instrument. It's the tuning peg...the string goes through the bottom of the instrument and attaches to it. Usually the instrument is tuned to C, so that's its basic sound – C and its harmonic overtones. I use the flexible rod by changing pressure on the string for different pitches, so I can play melodies and trills. To sound it, I pluck the string with a small stick made of bamboo or rattan.

There's a saying that every pluck of the string is a tale of love and history which touches the listener's heart and stirs the soul. Maybe that's why the Dan Bau is so well-loved in Vietnam.

Annie: I'll bet it has a beautiful sound when you play it.

Nikki: When anyone does! Trust me, you're going to hear it a lot at home when I practice! Speaking of beautiful sounds, here is one more stringed instrument you should know about. This one's *bowed*, so it falls into that second category of strings. Its traditional name is **Dan Nhi**, but it's often called a two-chord fiddle. Basically, it's like a small hexagonal (or six-sided) violin that sits in the player's lap...so you play it sort of like a very small cello.

Narr: Popular in several ethnic groups in Vietnam, the Dan Nhi's tubular body is made of hardwood. Snake skin (python) is stretched over one end and it has a bridge. There are no frets on the neck, which goes through the body and there are two tuning pegs. The strings (similar to the other instruments we've seen) were once made of silk, but are now metal. The bow is bamboo wood, strung with horsehair. But in *this* instrument, the hair goes *through* the space *between* the strings! Many different techniques can be used on this instrument, and an accomplished player who's good at fingering can create all sorts of effects, including trills, rapid runs and more.

Nikki: Because it has such an expressive voice, the Dan Nhi is important as a solo instrument in orchestras. The Dan Nhi's sound is often compared to the singing voice and is said to express the subtle mood of a man's soul. It is thought to have originally come from China, because archaeologists found carvings of it on the base of an ancient Chinese pagoda.

Annie: Isn't it just amazing how different cultures influence each other?

Nikki: Yes! And to prove your point, Annie, look at this instrument! It's a wooden flute – here we call it the **Sao Truk**. Flutes are found all over the world, as you know, and also have ancient roots. But they vary from culture to culture.

Narr: The bamboo flute called the Sao Truk is a very simple instrument, but it takes a great deal of expertise to drill and fashion the holes in the exact way to make them into fine instruments. They are played transversely, which means it is held across the body horizontally, with the finger holes to the right side.

Sao Truk are made from the very bottom of a bamboo tree. On that stem of fine bamboo, the flute maker places a mouthpiece and 10 finger holes. (At one time, there were only 6 finger holes, but in the 1970s, a new version with 10 was developed. This extended the registers, which opened up more repertoire.) As in other flutes, the sound and pitch is determined by the flutist controlling the air column, the angle of the mouthpiece and partial or complete covering of the air holes.

Nikki: These flutes are all over Vietnam. People from all walks of life play them in everything from dances to festivals, or simply relaxing after a hard day of work. Sao Truk can be performed as a solo instrument or with other instruments in orchestras...like in Vietnamese popular opera.

And now, here we are at the percussion instruments!

Annie: Oh, wow – that looks like a xylophone!

Nikki: That's pretty much what it is – but made of bamboo. It's called a **Dan T'rung**. This folk instrument is the *other* instrument that is purely Vietnamese. It comes from the Central Highlands of Vietnam, and is very closely tied to the spiritual life of the ethnic minority groups in that region. See how it has lots of bamboo tubes – each tube is a different size to create different pitches. The longer, bigger tubes are lower and the shorter ones are higher-pitched. They're all notched at one end and have a finished edge at the other. Look at how they're arranged by length, with two strings attaching them together.

Narr: The T'rung is one of Vietnam's favorite traditional folk instruments...both inside and outside the country. Its enchanting sound and percussive nature make festivals and dances all the more lively! But T'rung is not just for merry-making. It is often played when relaxing after a long, hard day, or for evening get-togethers with friends. Over the years, T'rung has improved, developed and been expanded to as many as 48 tubes, arranged in 3 groupings. This makes them suitable for modern music, too, but still giving it that traditional tone.

Nikki: OK...so do you know how T'rung got its name?

Annie: No. How?

Nikki: Because when you knock on them, each tube goes, "T'rung" – get it?

Annie: Aww, c'mon!

Nikki: (*amused*) No, REALLY! Kinda' funny, tho', huh?

Annie: (*also amused*) Yeah! I'll never forget the name now!

Nikki: Well, it's a good "memory hook"...keeps you from forgetting.

Narr: The two young women continued to explore the rest of the music building, with Nikki showing Annie where her classes would be. She also met a couple of her professors who were fluent in English. (A huge relief to Annie, because in Hanoi, which is in North Vietnam, not as many people speak English as they do in South Vietnam.)

They ate at a café that had a beautiful garden. Annie began to realize just how much the beauty of art and nature was part of everyday life in Vietnam.

Annie: Flowers are everywhere. They must be very important in your culture.

Nikki: Oh, definitely...especially two. The **Lotus flower**, our national flower, is known as the *flower of the dawn* because it closes and sinks underwater at night, then rises back up and opens again at dawn. It's a symbol of purity, and it also reminds us to commit ourselves to creating a good future.

The other is the **Chrysanthemum flower**.

Narr: For centuries, the chrysanthemum has been known as the "*Flower of the Emperor*" – the Emperor-King. In many East Asian cultures, including Vietnam, the chrysanthemum symbolizes a long life and nobility. Used on jewelry and the clothing of the aristocracy, it also appears on statuary and artwork.

Nikki: But it is used in humble settings as well. Chrysanthemums are often offered to the Buddah and our ancestors – as a sign of respect and reverence.

Annie: Ah...like on your altar at home?

Nikki: Exactly.

Annie: I was gonna' ask about that, but I didn't want to seem rude...

Nikki: Not rude at all. In Vietnam, almost every home, office, and business has a small altar to honor ancestors. Usually there is [an] incense burner, a vase for flowers, a small

oil lamp or candle, and a place for offerings of food, sweet treats and tea. We put photos of family members who have passed away on the altar or nearby. Burning incense and the lamp honors and remembers the ancestors, as do gifts of food. During **Tet**, the Vietnamese New Year celebration, the family altar is decorated with a special arrangement of fruits and food.

Annie: What a beautiful tradition. I love it that you remember your ancestors. Is everyone here Buddhist?

Nikki: No, not really – the altar is a very “Asian” custom. As far as Buddhism, about three quarters of the country practices **Vietnamese folk religions**, which have strong Buddhist ties. But we also have Christianity and other religions here, too.

Narr: The young women headed home, enjoying their growing friendship. It was so nice for Annie to have Nikki for a guide. With only three years’ difference in their ages, they had a lot in common besides music.

Nikki: Tomorrow, I have a real-life Vietnamese experience for you – we’re going to the market! Then a couple days later, two dance performances! Next weekend, we’re going to the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long - Hanoi, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and then seeing the Thang Long Water Puppets afterwards. You are gonna’ *love* it!

Annie: I know I will! Thanks for all these amazing experiences!

Nikki: Well, even though you’ll be here for nine months, it IS good to get an overall feel for your new home right away.

Annie: Yeah, it is. Thank you.

Nikki: And because you’re pretty independent, you really ought to think about getting a scooter one of these days!

Annie: Hmm...that is worth thinking about...

Narr: The next day, the two of them went to a large market in Hanoi. Vietnam's markets and shopping areas are as diverse as its landscape. You can find markets and items for sale almost anywhere...including small street corner stands, the backs of scooters, and even on boats along the many waterways...floating markets. And then there are the large-scale covered markets in urban centers...

Annie: Holy cow, Nikki! There's gotta' be EVERYTHING for sale here!

Nikki: Yep. Pretty much. At least it seems that way.

Annie: Look! Handmade Vietnamese flutes! Oh my gosh... what was that name again? Ummm... Sao Truc, right?

Nikki: YEAH! Good, Annie! These may not be the most professionally made – for a really good instrument you want to go to a flute maker that you know. BUT... this one'll be a great memento of our first shopping trip together!

Annie: I'll buy it. THEN, some coffee! My treat this time!

Nikki: You're on!

Narr: The following two evenings, they went to dance recitals at VNAM. Dances from the Hue Royal Court of Vietnam were featured. Most of the dances date back centuries, and have some Chinese influence because, being neighbors, the two countries' histories intertwine. Among the dances are the Lion Dance, Fan Dance, Lantern Dance and Hat Dance.

Nikki: These are what you picture when you think of Vietnamese Dance. One is the **Dragon or Lion Dance**, where the dancers mimic the animal and its power. You see this at Lunar New Year celebrations.

Another one that celebrates the New Year is called the **Lantern Offering Dance**.

Narr: This joyful New Year's "Lantern Offering Dance" is held outdoors. All of the dancers hold a lantern and form circles around a large or elevated statue. At the end, much to the delight of the thousands of children watching, they all release their lanterns which drift up into the sky, bringing good luck and a happy new year to everyone.

Nikki: This performance we're about to see is a lantern dance and it is gorgeous. The costumes are breathtaking and so colorful! There are six offerings made: incense, flowers, dang, *which is a light like a lamp or a candle*, tea, fruit and food.

Annie: Like the altars.

Nikki: Exactly! Originally this dance was a religious *and* folk dance. But when it was brought into the courts, it was refined through their dance system. So now, the lantern

dance expresses the beauty of Vietnam. Each dancer carries two lanterns shaped like Lotus flowers. Cultural meaning is in every element of it.

Narr: Since its introduction into the palace, the "Six Lantern Offerings" has become a ritual dance of the imperial court, but the Chinese lyrics that praise the Buddha have remained the same.

Annie was fascinated by the exquisite dancing, which matched the music and poetry seamlessly.

Annie: Oh, Nikki! That was amazing. Wow.

Nikki: You liked it, huh? Wait till tomorrow night's performance – the Graceful Lotus Dance.

Annie: The Lotus again!

Nikki: Told you - it's the national flower! We love it!

Annie: Well, it *is* lovely. But I don't know that anything could match what we just experienced.

Narr: The following evening they saw artists from **Bong Sen Theatre in Ho Chi Minh City** who presented a unique dance program called "Lotus Dance."

The 13-part program reflects the life of Vietnamese people from the North to the South. The dances depict the daily activities of people in the old imperial capital of Hue; the southern area in the past; the rite of ethnic people praying for rain in Tay Nguyen, and more. In each scene, the image of the lotus is in every dance movement, in the patterns on the costumes, and in the arrangement of the stage. Even the dance movements create lotus images.

Annie: That performance was spectacular! I loved how they covered everything from the ancient times right up to the present, weaving the lotus into everything!

Nikki: Me, too. One of my friends saw it in Ho Chi Minh City and said it was just amazing. I've got to agree! And there's more to come, too! After our first week of classes, it's the Thang-Long Citadel and Water Puppet Theatre next weekend!

Annie: Great! Can't wait!

Narr: The following Saturday, the girls headed out to the **Central Sector of the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long – Hanoi**. A **citadel** is a stronghold or fortress that protects a city.

The Citadel was built in the 11th century by the Ly Viet Dynasty. It marked the independence of the Dai Viet – which would one day be part of Vietnam as we know it. Built on the ruins of a 7th Century Chinese fortress, it sits on drained land that had once been part of the Red River Delta in Hanoi. For almost 13 centuries, it was the center of political power in the region.

The buildings and the remains at the archaeological site give a unique view into South-East Asian culture. It is located at the crossroads where Chinese influences came in from the north and the ancient Kingdom of Champa's culture came from the south. It is so rich in history, it has been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage site.

Nikki: Today, we'll just visit briefly so you can see a few of these ancient buildings. We'll come back later in the year, once you've had a chance to feel more "at home." We could spend weeks here and still not see it all!

Annie: I've never seen anything like it. Three totally different cultures all in one place...from China, Champa and Vietnam. It makes me feel a little overwhelmed.

Nikki: It does. I love coming here – I feel a special connection to my ancestors.

Annie: I even feel a sense of awe and connection. We must come back.

Nikki: We will. But right now, we'd better leave for the Water Puppet Theatre or we'll miss the show. Y'know, you DO need a scooter!

Narr: On the way, Nikki explained that water puppets were completely unique to Vietnam. They had been developed by the country people as entertainment when the rice fields were filled with water.

Nikki: These puppets are true works of art! They are all hand-crafted, and they're operated by puppeteers who stand waist-deep in water, hidden behind a bamboo screen. They operate them with controls that are hidden beneath the surface of the water.

Annie: You mean, from below instead of from above, like a marionette?

Nikki: Exactly. It's a fascinating afternoon of entertainment. Not only are there puppets themselves, there's also a live orchestra, playing traditional Vietnamese instruments, and dressed in traditional Ao Dai. Singers tell the stories about the action in song. This **Thang Long Puppet Theatre** is one of the most well-known tourist attractions in all of Hanoi. But it's not "touristy"...it's deeply rooted in the true culture of Vietnam.

Narr: Annie was completely absorbed by the colorful handmade puppets. Many of them were able to move in ways she didn't expect, and the puppeteers were true masters at their craft. It was particularly pleasing to hear the authentic traditional music as the puppets played out their stories. At the end, when the puppeteers came out from behind the bamboo screen, Annie couldn't clap hard enough!

Annie: That was incredible, Nikki! Coolest thing I ever saw! Like an entirely different world! How come I'd never heard of water puppets before?

Nikki: (*amused*) I dunno' - maybe because they're unique to Vietnam? I'm so glad you enjoyed them so much! They really *are* something to experience!

Annie: I've gotta' tell you, Nikki, since the first day I called you about winning the scholarship, I've felt as if I'd known you forever! Really – just like a sister!

Nikki: Me, too! We were so thrilled that you'd be coming here to live with us this year! I hope you'll experience Vietnam like it was a second home. It is so great to learn about new customs, culture and foods – and new people! You grow so much as a person! In some ways, I feel like I have two homes – one here and one in the States. I hope you'll feel the same way one day.

Annie: One day!?! How about NOW! I know I've only been here a couple weeks, but I know exactly what you mean. Even though I'll be learning tons in the next few months, I want you to know...you and your family will *always* be part of me – as will Vietnam. Forever.

Nikki: Forever. Now... about that scooter... (*both laugh*)

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