



# NEWSLETTER

of

## The American Musical Instrument Society

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### THE MUSICAL INSTRUMENT COLLECTION OF WALTER ERDMANN

BY GREGG MINER

For AMIS members who read my Summer 2018 “Collector’s Corner” article and/or my Listserv email in which I shared my news and queries about the obscure February 2018 Mehlis Auction in Germany, I am pleased and honored to follow up with this fascinating, but ultimately sad, story.

I found out about the auction of hundreds of exceedingly rare and unusual musical instruments by dumb luck – a single image posted in the Cittern Group on Facebook. After bidding on several items and winning three, I polled AMIS members at the 2018 meeting and found only one who had even been aware of the auction. Meanwhile, the Mehlis web site and personnel had not shared any information on the provenance of the instruments, which I found irresponsible at best and a tragedy at worst. I thus went back and painstakingly downloaded their photographs of all the better or more unusual plucked string instruments (there were hundreds more I did not archive). Once done, and in light of the seemingly total lack of awareness of such an unusual and fairly large collection being auctioned off “under our very noses,” I realized that others might similarly find research, archival or entertainment value in some of these lots (i.e. the images and the scant information, even with its errors).

To that end, I cleaned up my folder of captured images, and went back to better collate listings of those items in my areas of interest.

I next shared the above with the AMIS Listserv, asking for any information on the collection. Happily, a couple people responded, and we learned that the collection



Image from the Walter Erdmann House Museum, pre-auction.

had belonged to one Walter J. Erdmann of Goslar, Germany. Mr. Erdmann seemed to be otherwise completely off the radar – just one of the hundreds and perhaps thousands of private collectors (like myself) who scatter the globe – many intentionally private, others hiding in plain sight. Eventually a colleague managed to contact Erdmann’s widow who was happy (eager, I might add) to talk to me as much as I was anxious to query

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encouraged and not deterred by the German language.

☞ **Thomas Reil**  
Clarinet collector,  
historian, and restorer  
Uhingen, Germany

**Victoria Vorreiter.** *Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music: essays, images, and film.* Chiangmai, Thailand: Resonance Press, 2016. 267 pp., about 350 color photos, color map, glossaries, references. ISBN (paperback) 978-0-99-81239-0-5, (DVD film, 75 min.) 978-0-99811239-1-2, \$65.00 plus \$20.00 shipping from Thailand ([www.Tribal-MusicAsia.com](http://www.Tribal-MusicAsia.com)).

*Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music* offers readers a unique window into the daily life and spiritual activities of Hmong communities living in the upland areas of mainland Southeast Asia. Vorreiter's insights come from more than a decade of field research with "hilltribe" communities from this region (primarily Laos and Thailand), including the Hmong, but also Karen, Mien, Lahu, Akha, and Lisu ethnic groups. Her previous publication, *Songs of Memory* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Resonance Press, 2009), presented a survey of music and cultural activities associated with these populations, whereas this work examines the musical instruments, repertory, and contexts for performance associated

only with the Hmong, giving greater depth of attention to ethnographic description, instrument construction and performance techniques, and text analysis of song.

First impressions of this work focus on the stunning photography that highlights the colorful and intricate textile designs of Hmong clothing, as well as a museum quality presentation of instruments and other artifacts found in Hmong culture. An "Instrument Archives" at the end of the book offers photographs and descriptions of

fourteen upland instruments, which are complemented by "Tonal Preludes" of performances on melodic instruments on the accompanying DVD. Vorreiter's publisher sup-

ported a full-color presentation that would have been greatly diminished with a traditional black and white monograph. Her natural eye for creating memorable images is evident throughout the book, as well as the accompanying DVD offering a complementary view of the music and ritual with dynamic visual imagery, unencumbered by intrusive dialogue. To this end, the video is subtitled throughout in either English or Hmoob Dawb (a Romanized script of the White Hmong language). This pres-

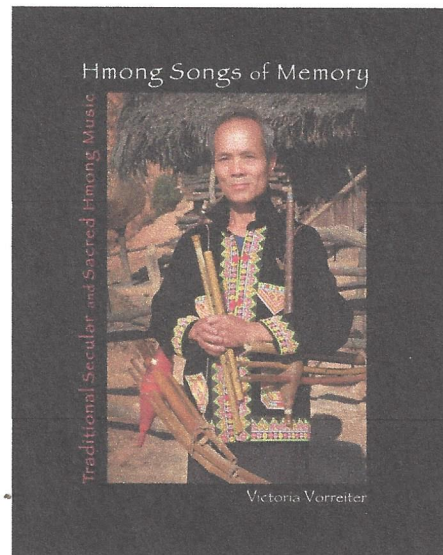
ents the reader with an opportunity to prelude the music and ritual discussed in the text, as an initial enticement for learning more about the examined activities. Specialists and non-specialists alike will appreciate her presentation in such an accessible and conscientious manner. Vorreiter avoids the pitfall of trying to explain the focus events and their meaning through narration that oversimplifies the more robust review found in the accompanying literature. As such, reading the text is a necessity to gain a

more complete understanding of the imagery presented in both the book and film.

After a brief introduction to Hmong history and cultural customs, the secular and sacred music of the Hmong groups is addressed in two parts. Ac-

knowledging that variations in music and dance performance exist among Hmong communities, her discussion gives the reader a thorough understanding of how instruments are made, performed, and valued in Hmong culture. Each example from the film has a parallel discussion in the text that is enhanced by supporting photographs, many taken from the same performances featured in the video.

While the review of secular traditions acquaint the reader with a breadth of musical activ-



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ities found among the Hmong, a majority of the presentation in both media focuses on the healing ceremony of a young boy (Cas Koos) who had fallen ill as a baby. The film presents the ritual as a largely uninterrupted documentation of the event; the book expands on the ceremonial activity to introduce related aspects of Hmong cosmology and sacred ritual as conveyed by community members and local interpreters familiar with the Hmong language and customs. Vorreiter steers clear of speculation on the meaning of music and ritual, opting instead to present a discussion with an objective and descriptive tone common to ethnographic study.

This decision to avoid an ego-centric perspective of Hmong musical culture may invite criticism from post-modernist scholars who consider inherent researcher bias a necessary topic for consideration in contemporary academic literature. In conversations with the author, however, Vorreiter regards such indulgences as distracting and somewhat disrespectful to the people who trust her to share their worldview and life experiences with a global audience. While outsiders may view a preservationist attitude as antiquated, the Hmong recognize the encroachment of modern society on their way of living; welcoming and encouraging Vorreiter's interest and enthusiasm in documenting and disseminating knowledge of their history and cultural expressions.

Notably absent is music transcription and analysis within the text itself. While the accompa-

nying DVD certainly offers a sonic experience that notational representations of sound could never provide, a thorough attention to lyrical content would be enhanced with a transcription suggesting the rhythmic and melodic elements of performance. As this work is easily the most extensive documentation of Hmong musical practices and is unlikely to be replicated by researchers for many years to come, the addition of a musical transcription will benefit future scholars who may not have access or the means of hearing the video recordings. While some transcription of music is found in other resources, such as the writings of Amy Catlin, Vorreiter's musical background and training in oral tradition provide insights into musical production that may prove invaluable to future generations of not only scholars, but Hmong descendants as well.

In conclusion, this work is a formidable contribution to the understanding of Hmong musical culture and the experiences of their daily lives and worldview. The author's passion and preparation for presenting this work is considerable and rare. *Hmong Songs of Memory* implicitly reminds us that extended ethnographic fieldwork should be appreciated and valued among all scholars of cultural studies. As such, this book should be on the shelves of libraries at any institution that offers programs of scholarship in any area of cultural study, particularly if ethnomusicology is part of the curriculum. Hopefully, Vorreiter plans to offer

parallel resources focused on specific ethnic groups based on her extensive research with other minority upland populations in Southeast Asia.

✎ **Andrew Shahriari**  
**Kent State University**  
**Kent, Ohio**