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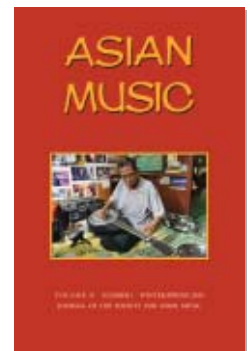


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Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music; Essays, Images, and Film by Victoria Vorreiter
(review)

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(20–21) and has slight coverage in other chapters, but there is no clear place in the textbook that would provide a reading for a class meeting focused on arranged folk music.

The audiovisual resources provided via an accompanying website (www.musicofcentralasia.org) come primarily from Levin's work with Smithsonian Folkways, so each chapter has high-quality video and audio examples that students and scholars can access easily (but examples are not available for download). The website's A/V and additional readings are useful to interested students and scholars alike. As a teaching tool, however, streaming audio and video have significant limitations. It was extremely difficult to get music majors to master the complex and unfamiliar aural material since they could not download and install the examples on their own devices. A supplementary playlist or album available for download (perhaps via the Smithsonian Folkways website) would allow students to interact with the music in a more flexible and focused way, which would make this text an even more effective teaching tool.

In sum, *The Music of Central Asia* presents decades of research from leaders in the field in an appealing and approachable fashion—it is truly a magnum opus. The volume is beautifully produced and fills the significant void in available scholarship and classroom materials on Central Asian music. It is now the first resource I recommend for anyone looking to learn more about the music and culture of the region.

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Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music; Essays, Images, and Film. Victoria Vorreiter. [Chiangmai], TH: Resonance Press, 2016. ix + 267 pp., color illustrations, one map, glossaries, bibliography, + one DVD (75 min.). ISBN: 9780998123905 (hardcover), \$90.00; ISBN: 9780998123912 (film) \$65.00 + \$20.00 shipping from Thailand. Publisher website: <http://www.TribalMusicAsia.com>.

Encountering either of Victoria Vorreiter's books, *Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music* or *Songs of Memory: Traditional Music of the Golden Triangle* (Resonance Press, 2009), in a Bangkok bookstore, one cannot help but become engrossed in her artistic design as well as her books' amazing array of eye-catching color photos, all printed and bound by a high-end company in Hong Kong. Vorreiter, however, is not just a gifted artist who produces her own photographs, audio recordings, video recordings,

and design but also a skilled ethnologist with extensive musical training and a penchant for detail. The result is an unusual combination of solid ethnography and artistic presentation.

Although Vorreiter originally studied Western music as a classical violinist, a number of mentors inspired her to change direction—including ethnomusicologist William Malm at the University of Michigan; composer/author Paul Bowles, who recorded traditional Moroccan music; and Shinichi Suzuki, who taught her mother tongue (oral tradition) pedagogical method around the world. These influences eventually led Vorreiter to northern Thailand, where she has worked for thirteen years as an independent researcher.

Her earlier book, *Songs of Memory*, is essentially an extended guide to the elaborate exhibits of upland musical instruments, clothing, and other kinds of material culture that she has mounted for museums, universities, and cultural societies. In this book she covers the music of six ethnic groups (Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Ahka, and Lisu) in a text linked to a CD of the same name intended to accompany her exhibits. An “Instrument Archives” at the end of the book illustrates and describes 106 upland instruments, certainly the most complete inventory yet compiled.

Her newest volume, *Hmong Songs of Memory*, concentrates on a single ethnic group, based on extensive fieldwork in both northern Thailand and the PDR Lao. Vorreiter divides her study into two unequal parts, the first on Hmong secular music (64 pp.) and the second on sacred music (185 pp.). Because she has approached this study as an ethnographer rather than as an ethnomusicologist, her attention is focused on genres and instruments instead of the analysis of musical sound. Indeed, associating the word “music” with the Hmong is somewhat problematic in that what sounds like Hmong “melodies” to outsiders are actually poems recited in heightened speech. The apparent musical characteristics of both recited poetry and surrogate-speech instrumental realizations are derived in part from speech tones, although within a simple scale or mode. What Vorreiter has provided instead is the text of a complete vocal ballad (performed on the accompanying DVD) in both romanized Hmong and English translation. The Hmong text, however, makes use of the RPA (Romanized Popular Alphabet), a system not of her making first developed in the 1950s that combines consonant-vowel with tone, the result of which is extremely challenging for those not familiar with it. For example, a ballad is known as *Kwv Tshiaj*, but I found myself unable to sort out her perfectly logical analysis of the poetry using all the proper terms. For example, she writes, “The majority of *kwv txhiaj* performances are based on four *bi txwm*, with eight corresponding *ib sab txwm*” (18). Vorreiter, however, also offers English phonetic pronunciations for every Hmong word when it is first

introduced and explains both the meaning and context. The RPA romanizations also appear as subtitles in the video recording.

Part I also focuses on four musical instruments: *ncas* (lamellophone), *raj ntsaws* (side-blown flute), *raj lev les* (single idioglottic aerophone, or “folk clarinet”), and *rab qeej* (free-reed mouth organ). After she discusses the construction, making, use, and repertoire of each instrument, the poetic text that is realized in the DVD performance is presented in RPA and English and also appears as subtitles in the video. As the most prevalent instrument, the *rab qeej* (“geng” mouth organ) is given the greatest attention. In the video, musicians demonstrate martial arts movements seen during New Year festivals as they play melodic strains that have no poetic meaning. In this case, each move is listed by a name that reflects its military function.

Vorreiter’s extensive “Part II: Sacred Music” is organized around a complete healing ceremony conducted by shaman Rhiav Lis (Tria Lee) for a sick grandchild, Cas Khoos (Cha Khong). The ceremony, called *Hu plig* (Soul-calling ritual) and *Ua neeb ua yai* (Soul-retrieval ceremony), is included in its entirety on the DVD and consists of 591 lines of text, all transcribed in RPA, translated into English, and also appearing as subtitles. To put Lee’s ritual section in perspective, Vorreiter offers an unusually thorough introductory study of Hmong religious ritual with extensive photographic documentation. Beginning with Lee’s biography, Vorreiter’s study continues with sections on Hmong shamanism, the musical instruments used, the pantheon of spirits, invisible life forces (“souls and shadows”), Hmong cosmology, and how the sacred occupies the human world.

Rather than begin with a review of the scattered published studies of Hmong poetry, ritual, instruments, and songs/recitations, Vorreiter in effect started anew, with the Hmong communities she visited being her primary interlocutors. Those earlier studies would not have necessarily informed her work to any extent, since the most extensive study known to me is David Crockett Graham’s 1954 *Songs and Stories of the Ch’uan Miao* (the Chinese call the Hmong “Miao”), researched in China. While Graham provides numbing detail in his extensive work, there is no discussion of music per se and only a few black-and-white photos for illustration. A great many publications appeared in the 1970s and into the 1980s, after tens of thousands of Hmong who had fled from Laos were resettled in the United States, France, Australia, and elsewhere. Jean Mottin’s *55 Chants d’amour Hmong Blanc* of 1980 transcribed the texts of fifty-five songs and provided French translations with a few line drawings. The most extensive studies of Hmong music were conducted in the Providence, Rhode Island, region by Amy Catlin. What differentiates Vorreiter’s work from virtually all previous studies, however, is that researchers typically

can spend only limited time among the Hmong in Asia, whereas Vorreiter has lived in northern Thailand with constant access to Hmong communities for thirteen years. Nonetheless, readers wishing for more detail on the musical aspects of Hmong recitation and instrument playing can consult Catlin's many articles, chapters, and monographs.

Understandably, most researchers see themselves as links between the communities they study and people outside the community, whether students, journal readers, or scholars in other fields. In a sense, Vorreiter avoided taking on this role so fully by limiting her writing to the background needed to understand what her Hmong informants/performers are telling us through their performances. By offering a combination of text, photographs, and video, the author provides as complete an experience as possible for us armchair observers who delve into her work. She does not feel the need to be an omniscient interpreter beyond that.

Hmong Songs of Memory offers a variety of uses: an enlightening introduction to Hmong music and ritual, a textbook on the Hmong world and Hmong organology, and an enticing documentary photo essay on Hmong life. Vorreiter's attention to detail in the extensive translations of poetry and ritual is unprecedented. *Hmong Songs of Memory* and the earlier *Songs of Memory* CD can be acquired through her website, which also includes further information regarding Vorreiter's exhibits, presentations, and published writings. Hopefully this study of Hmong music and ritual culture will lead to further publications and research.

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