MODAL JAZZ AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH VIETNAMESE FOLK MUSIC ON THE JOURNEY TO BUILDING AN INTEGRATED, IDENTITY-RICH JAZZ LANGUAGE

Nguyen Hien Duc, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Modal Jazz is a prominent movement in Jazz that marks a shift from functional chord progression-based harmonic thinking to exploring the expressive depth of modes and tonal centers within a sonic space. Meanwhile, Vietnamese folk music, with its rich array of scales, modes, vocal ornamentations, rhythms, and regional intonations, holds significant potential for creating and developing a Jazz language imbued with national identity. However, the relationship between Modal Jazz and Vietnamese folk music should not merely be viewed as a combination of two sound systems; rather, it must be approached as a dialogue between two musical mindsets, in which each tradition preserves its distinct characteristics while opening up new avenues of musical expression. In this presentation, we outline the fundamental characteristics of Modal Jazz, examine points of convergence and divergence with key features of Vietnamese folk music, and propose several practical directions for integrating folk material into contemporary Jazz composition, harmony, improvisation, and performance. Through this, we aim to establish a theoretically grounded creative approach that contributes to developing a Vietnamese Jazz language at the intersection of international integration and national cultural identity.

Keywords: Modal Jazz, Vietnamese folk music, modes, scales, improvisation, Jazz Piano, national identity.

In the history of global musical development, the cross-pollination between musical traditions has always served as a vital catalyst driving the innovation of artistic language. Jazz, with its open nature, improvisational spirit, and capacity to absorb diverse musical materials, has demonstrated that the meeting of distinct musical cultures can forge novel, highly vibrant forms of expression.

While the Bebop movement emphasized harmonic thinking and rapid chord movement to organize improvisational language, Modal Jazz opens up a different approach: reducing reliance on continuously shifting chord sequences and focusing instead on exploiting modal colors and tonal centers to develop musical ideas, thereby creating a relatively stable sonic space. This shift involves not only harmonic technique

but also reflects a distinct perspective on melody and the capacity to construct musical imagery.

In Vietnam, folk music constitutes an indispensable part of the nation's musical heritage. From Quan ho folk songs of Bac Ninh, folk melodies of the Northern Delta, Vi Giam singing of Nghe Tinh, and Central regional folk songs to Southern Ly melodies and Central Highlands folk traditions, every region has developed unique characteristics regarding scales, inflections, ornamentations, rhythms, and modes of emotional expression. These characteristics not only reflect the living environment and spiritual life of local communities but also provide a rich reservoir of materials for artistic creation.

Therefore, for folk materials to enter the Jazz improvisational space without losing their inherent regional intonations, stylistic nuances, and cultural spirit, the issue extends far beyond merely selecting scales or layering chord progressions. More crucially, it requires establishing a meaningful dialogue between two musical mindsets: on one side, the improvisational spirit, flexibility, and spatial development capabilities of Jazz; on the other side, the melodic tradition, intonation, and expressive modes forged within Vietnam's cultural life.

From this perspective, studying the relationship between Modal Jazz and Vietnamese folk music holds both theoretical and practical significance, particularly for Jazz composition, education, and performance in Vietnam today.

1. MODAL JAZZ: THE SHIFT IN HARMONIC THINKING AND IMPROVISATION

1.1. Modal Jazz, or modal-based Jazz, is a major development in modern Jazz where modes play a central role in organizing melody, harmony, and improvisation. Instead of relying primarily on the continuous movement of functional chords, performers can develop musical ideas anchored around a tonal center or a specific mode over extended periods.

Several landmark works exemplify this movement, including Miles Davis's 1958 recording of 'Milestones' and, most notably, the 1959 album Kind of Blue. In Kind of Blue, compositions such as 'So What' and 'Flamenco Sketches' demonstrate musical structures where modal color and the evolution of improvisational ideas take center stage.

While traditional Jazz standards require players to react continuously to rapid chord changes, Modal Jazz provides a modal space sustained long enough for artists to explore diverse expressive possibilities within a unified sound set. This does not mean Modal Jazz completely eliminates functional harmony; rather, it expands musical organization possibilities, allowing performers to choose the degree of harmonic movement that best serves their artistic vision.

1.2. Core Features of Modal Improvisation and Organization:

First, artists do not view notes merely as components of a specific chord, but evaluate their positions, relationships, and expressive tension within the entire modal space.

Second, a short motif can be repeated, rhythmically varied, transposed in pitch, or intervallically expanded or contracted, creating continuous thematic development without requiring numerous new chord changes.

Third, instead of focusing strictly on resolution to the next chord, artists can utilize open intervals, quartal harmony (stacked fourths), pedal points, sustained tones, or evoke evocative sonic textures.

Fourth, a musical phrase does not need to fill every space continuously. Pauses, repetition, inter-instrumental dialogue, and the deliberate use of silence all contribute significantly to artistic structure.

Finally, Modal Jazz encourages performers to explore the depth of an idea rather than seeking a high volume of new ideas. The value of improvisation lies not merely in speed or note density, but in building a coherent, climax-driven, and expressively directed narrative.

These characteristics establish a fertile foundation for examining the relationship between Modal Jazz and musical traditions with prominent melodic qualities, including Vietnamese folk music.

2. VIETNAMESE FOLK MUSIC FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MODES AND INTONATION

2.1. Diversity of Folk Traditions:

Vietnamese folk music developed across diverse cultural, linguistic, and community contexts. Consequently, it cannot be categorized as a single uniform scale or modal system.

Many folk songs utilize five-tone sound sets that can be described as pentatonic; however, pitch organization, the structural role of cadence tones, ornamental notes, and vocal inflection styles vary substantially across genres. Furthermore, there are musical forms employing richer sound systems or structural organizations that cannot be fully explained merely by reduction to a standard pentatonic scale.

In Quan ho, the fluidity of melodic lines, vocal resonance, articulation of lyrics, and stanza structure contribute to its romantic, conversational character. In Nghe Tinh Vi Giam singing, the relationship between language, tonal inflections, and melody plays a critical role in conveying narrative and lyrical emotional content. Central folk songs exhibit distinct nuances in pitch treatment and ornamentation, while Southern Ly melodies offer a familiar, flexible, and colloquial feel.

Regarding Central Highlands folk music, several vocal and instrumental traditions tied to community performances feature rhythms and repetitive structures that offer compelling musical development potential. However, each community and genre must be studied specifically, avoiding overgeneralized blanket statements about Central Highlands music as a single uniform entity.

This rich diversity demonstrates that folk material resides not merely in a set of musical notes, but within melodic organization, vocal pronunciation, performance context, text-music relationships, and cultural background.

2.2. Text-Melody Relationship and Linguistic Intonation:

A vital characteristic of Vietnamese folk music is the intimate relationship between melody and the tonal nature of the Vietnamese language. Linguistic tones significantly influence melodic contours, accentuation, duration, and expressive nuances of vocal phrases.

However, this relationship is not entirely uniform across all genres. In some folk forms, melody closely tracks speech intonation; in others, musical rules, modal structures, and performance styles may transform or expand upon natural speech tones.

For Jazz researchers and practitioners, this highlights a key requirement: when translating folk material onto instruments such as the Jazz Piano, one must identify not

only primary pitches but also pitch-bend directions, accents, sustain durations, rhythmic delays, lead-ins, and phrase endings. Merely taking a folk melody line and placing new harmony underneath may create a new arrangement, but it fails to capture the depth of the traditional musical language.

Conversely, by understanding melody as a dynamic process with its own unique intonation and character, artists can discover creative development methods while maintaining a deep connection to the original source material.

2.3. Repetition and Structural Development:

Many folk genres utilize the repetition of motifs, melodic phrases, or rhythmic patterns. This repetition does not create monotony, as each recurrence can be subtly varied through lyrics, accentuation, dynamics, ornamentation, or call-and-response interaction between singers.

This represents a striking point of convergence with Modal Jazz. In both traditions, a musical idea can be sustained long enough to reveal diverse nuances. However, structural similarities do not imply identical origins or theoretical frameworks.

In Vietnamese folk music, repetition is tied to song structures, lyrical poetry, and community performance settings. In Modal Jazz, repetition serves as a foundation for exploring modal colors, developing motifs, and facilitating improvisational dialogue among musicians.

At this intersection, composers and performers can construct meaningful artistic dialogues between national traditions and modern Jazz language.

3. POINTS OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE BETWEEN MODAL JAZZ AND VIETNAMESE FOLK MUSIC

3.1. Pitch Organization and Modal Conceptions:

A major point of convergence between Modal Jazz and Vietnamese folk music is the capacity to organize music around relatively stable pitch sets. In Modal Jazz, a mode serves as the foundation for melody, harmony, and improvisation. In Vietnamese folk music, characteristic sound sets of each genre define its unique tonal color and musical identity.

However, a clear distinction must be drawn between modal theory in Western Jazz and pitch systems in Vietnamese folk traditions. The fact that a folk song uses five pitches

does not mean it can be fully explained by an equivalent Western pentatonic scale. Structural pillar tones, pitch inflections, inter-tonal relationships, and vocal micro-ornamentations create nuances that transcend standard Western notation.

Therefore, instead of imposing predefined Jazz modes onto folk melodies, researchers and composers must analyze the folk melody itself—identifying pillar tones, decorative notes, and cadential points. Based on this analysis, one can construct compatible harmonic spaces to expand the material.

This approach allows Modal Jazz to serve as a tool for exploring the inherent structure of folk music, rather than acting as a superficial harmonic coating over traditional melodies.

3.2. Motif Development and Improvisation:

Both Modal Jazz and Vietnamese folk music effectively utilize short motifs. When extracted from its original context for study, a folk motif can be developed using various techniques: rhythmic transformation, register transposition, intervallic expansion, directional inversion, or motivic synthesis.

In Modal Jazz improvisation, an artist can begin with a simple motif and evolve it over multiple chorus cycles. Variations appear through accent shifts, note density, dynamics, spatial textures, or hand-to-hand interaction.

When applied to Vietnamese folk music, artists must distinguish between creative variation and alterations that destroy the song's essential character. Not every folk phrase lends itself to arbitrary fragmentation or pitch modification. Certain motifs retain their true meaning only within complete phrases or specific linguistic intonations.

Identifying core elements versus flexible elements provides the foundation for an improvisational language that balances personal creativity with respect for tradition.

3.3. Harmonic Space and Color:

A hallmark contribution of Modal Jazz is creating harmonic spaces that are stable yet sonically rich. Over a pedal point or tonal center, artists can alter chord voicings, use open intervals, quartal harmonies, or contrasting textural layers.

Applied to Vietnamese folk music, these methods create fresh sonic environments for traditional melodies. A lyrical folk phrase can be set over sparse, wide-interval, slow-

tempo chordal textures; a lively melody can be developed with flexible rhythms, conversational polyrhythms, and shifting harmonic density.

However, greater harmonic complexity does not automatically yield a more modern work. In many instances, a simple chord—chosen with precise register placement, timing, and voicings—allows the folk melody's authentic character to shine through most vividly.

The true challenge lies in harmonizing new harmonic colors with inherent melodic traits so that both elements reinforce rather than compete with each other.

4. APPLYING MODAL JAZZ TO CREATIVE MUSIC MAKING FROM VIETNAMESE FOLK MUSIC

4.1. Selecting and Analyzing Folk Materials:

The creative process should begin with selecting a specific folk song from authenticated recordings or transcriptions. Researchers should identify regional origin, genre, performance context, and melodic characteristics.

Next, analyze melodic contours, pillar tones, prominent motifs, rhythms, phrase breaks, and ornamentation treatments. Listening to multiple renditions by traditional master artisans helps differentiate stable structural elements from performance-based improvisations.

For Jazz Piano, it is advisable to play the melody as a single line before adding harmony, assessing whether the essential traits of the folk melody are preserved.

4.2. Establishing Tonal Centers and Pitch Sets:

Following melodic analysis, establish tonal centers suitable for the instrument's range and expressive goals.

From the actual pitches of the melody, define a pitch set to serve as the harmonic and improvisational foundation. If the material does not correspond directly to a standard Jazz mode, construct a customized pitch set or use restricted chordal structures to prevent clashes with signature folk intervals.

Pay careful attention to structural pillar notes in the folk phrase, preserving, sustaining, or highlighting them within the arrangement. Conversely, microtonal inflections should be handled through expressive articulation rather than forced rigid pitch quantization.

4.3. Constructing Harmonic Frameworks:

With tonal centers established, experiment with various harmonic approaches:

• Approach 1: Sustained pedal points in the bass while upper-register chord voicings shift color, maintaining tonal focus while creating internal movement.

• Approach 2: Open-structure voicings (quartal harmonies, wide intervals), selecting pitches carefully to avoid distorting the folk melody's character.

• Approach 3: Sparse, minimal chord voicings, leaving ample space for melody and improvisation—a technique well-suited for Jazz Piano, where the pianist simultaneously manages melody, harmony, and rhythm.

Crucially, harmony must serve the expressive structure of the folk music rather than falling back on routine Jazz chord clichés.

4.4. Structural Design and Ensemble Interaction:

Works combining Modal Jazz and Vietnamese folk music can follow various structural formats. For example: an intro presenting the folk motif on a monophonic instrument; introducing the harmonic space; an improvisational section developing the motif; and a final restatement of the theme in a new expressive light.

During improvisation, musicians should retain recognizable features of the original material—melodic direction, rhythmic motifs, or signature tone groups—while expanding register, varying rhythm, utilizing space, or constructing contrapuntal dialogues between hands on the piano.

In an ensemble setting, the Bass can maintain the tonal center or construct complementary rhythmic lines. Drums can transition from subtle timekeeping to dynamic polyphonic patterns. Other solo instruments can enter with conversational responses, promoting interactive dialogue rather than dense sound layering.

Thus, the piece transforms from a simple Jazz arrangement of a folk tune into an original musical work where traditional material actively drives the improvisational development.

Illustrative Case Studies:

A primary landmark in this integrative direction is the album Tales from Viet-Nam (1996) by international French-Vietnamese guitarist Nguyen Le. This seminal album

received widespread international acclaim, earning prestigious awards such as Diapason d'Or, Choc du Monde de la Musique, and Choc de l'annee Jazzman.

The album exemplifies the synthesis of Vietnamese folk materials with modern Jazz language. Nguyen Le does not merely use folk tunes as background melody; he utilizes electric guitar, guitar synthesizer, Jazz harmony, improvisation, and traditional instruments to forge new expressions. This combination preserves the lyrical intimacy of Vietnamese music while expanding expressive horizons through contemporary Jazz. Instruments like electric guitar and synth create modern sonic textures, while dan tranh, dan bau, and bamboo flutes bring authentic Vietnamese timbres, with trumpet, flugelhorn, and saxophone broadening the improvisational dialogue.

Similarly, Hanoi Duo (2017)—a collaboration between Nguyen Le and traditional musician Ngo Hong Quang—represents a direct dialogue between contemporary Jazz and traditional Vietnamese music, combining Le's Jazz guitar mindset with Quang's traditional vocals and instruments.

4.5. Pedagogical Framework for Jazz Piano:

From a performance and educational standpoint, a four-step pedagogical workflow is proposed:

Step 1: Master and Perform the Original. Students listen to, sing, or play the original folk melody, paying close attention to phrasing, accents, and ornamentations. Reading notation without understanding performance context leads to rigid execution.

Step 2: Construct Minimalist Accompaniment. Experiment with bass notes, open intervals, and sparse modal voicings to clarify the melody before introducing complex harmonies.

Step 3: Motivic Improvisation Development. Select a short motif, practicing rhythmic variations, transposition, phrase length modifications, and strategic use of silence. Improvisation should begin with clear constraints before broadening pitch and rhythmic scope.

Step 4: Build Complete Performance Architecture. Organize introductions, thematic statements, solos, climaxes, and conclusions intentionally. Performers must know when to exercise restraint, when to increase density, and when to return to the theme to create unity.

This workflow is suitable for university-level Jazz Piano curricula, helping students understand that improvisation is an intentional process of organizing ideas, building structure, and telling an authentic musical story.

4.6. Challenges and Considerations:

• Avoiding Systemic Homogenization: Identifying pitch similarities is only the first step; deep understanding requires studying melodic movement, tonal functions, and performance context within cultural settings.

• Preserving Melodic Identity: Translating folk melodies to piano or Jazz ensemble risks diluting subtle inflections and language-tone relationships. Theoretical analysis must be paired with active listening to master traditional recordings.

• Balancing Creative Innovation and Cultural Authenticity: Artists have the right to innovate, but should remain aware of cultural origins and meanings, consulting traditional master musicians when appropriate.

• Educational Reform: Developing a Vietnamese Jazz identity requires incorporating folk music into Jazz curricula through listening, singing, transcription, and arrangement practice alongside Western Jazz theory.

CONCLUSION

Modal Jazz and Vietnamese folk music belong to distinct musical traditions with different histories, cultural contexts, and theoretical frameworks. However, meaningful points of convergence exist between them, opening up compelling creative directions in pitch color exploration, motivic development, spatial organization, and expressive structure.

The core value of Modal Jazz for Vietnamese folk music lies not in providing fixed harmonic formulas, but in offering a creative mindset: probing deep into the essence of traditional materials, discovering latent expressive possibilities, and evolving them through contemporary musical language.

Conversely, Vietnamese folk music enriches Jazz artists with distinct melodic contours, intonations, rhythms, and structural concepts. When approached thoughtfully, these elements expand the artistic vocabulary of Jazz while forging a unique signature for Vietnamese Jazz composition and performance.

For Jazz Piano, this approach is particularly relevant, as the piano enables the artist to unify melody, harmony, bass, rhythm, and improvisation. This provides ideal conditions for experimenting with integrative models between folk music and Modal Jazz in both solo and ensemble formats.

Over the long term, building a Vietnamese Jazz identity demands interdisciplinary research linking music theory, ethnomusicology, performance practice, and composition. The goal is not to turn folk music into a simple Jazz cover, nor to restrict Jazz to merely illustrating traditional tunes, but to foster an equal artistic dialogue between two musical worlds.

Ultimately, when folk materials are approached through the creative mindset of Modal Jazz, tradition is no longer merely an object of static preservation, but becomes a living resource for contemporary creation. And as Jazz absorbs the expressive depth of Vietnamese music, integration ceases to be passive technical reception, becoming instead the active pursuit of an authentic artistic voice—one that opens out to the world while remaining deeply rooted in national cultural identity.

REFERENCES

Pham Duy (1972). Special Inquiry into Folk Music in Vietnam [Đặc khảo về dân nhạc ở Việt Nam]. Saigon: Modern Publishing House [Nhà xuất bản Hiện Đại].

Nguyen Tien Manh (2016). Professional Vietnamese Jazz Piano Art [Nghệ thuật Piano Jazz chuyên nghiệp Việt Nam]. Doctoral dissertation in Musicology, Vietnam National Academy of Music.

Levine, Mark (1995). The Jazz Theory Book. Sher Music Co.

Miles Davis (1959). Kind of Blue. Columbia Records. Album of seminal historical importance for the development of Modal Jazz.

Nguyen Le (1996). Tales from Việt Nam. ACT Music, CD, Catalog ACT 9225-2. Landmark recording demonstrating the integration of Vietnamese folk materials into contemporary Jazz.

Nguyen Le & Ngo Hong Quang (2017). Hanoi Duo. ACT Music, CD, Catalog ACT 9828-2. Recorded at Studio Louxor, Barbès, Paris, France, April–August 2016.