

Some Features of the Divine songs of the Protestant Church in Vietnam

MÃ PHÚC THANH TUÔI*

ABSTRACT: After introduces a short history of hymn performance in Christian churches, the author discusses on the process of formation of the book of Divine songs of the Protestant Church in Vietnam. He concludes that the Divine songs has in last century played a significant role in deepening and developing spiritual life of Vietnamese Protestants.

Primitive music has been often used in cult rites. In the cult of Christian Church in Vietnam, music creates a lively solemnity with the participation of dignitaries and believers, and expresses the unity and community spirit. In their life, religious persons singing religious hymns bring out enthusiasm, joy and efficacy in nurturing the virtuous spirit. A research on the development history of the church music is very useful, because though being religious this music has nevertheless contributed to the development history of the music of humanity. However, there has existed a long process of religious debate on the choice to make of this music a necessary part in the service of Christian churches. Within the limits of this article, the writer introduces a short history of hymn performance in Christian churches and the process of formation of the book of Divine songs of the Protestant Church in Vietnam.

Protestantism was propagated in Vietnam since 1911, The Christian and Missionary of Alliance (CMA) had translated and published both the Bible and Divine songs. The clergyman Wm C. Cadman had translated the widespread and famous Divine songs of the world from English into Vietnamese. The Vietnamese word for Divine song did not exist in Vietnam at that time, the musical notation being not popular in Vietnam, the words in Divine songs were translated into poetic

*. Pastor, Vice-Director of the Protestant Church, Assistant of the Theological Bible Institute.

rimes, therefore Wm. C. Cadman called the first book of *Divine Songs* "Sacred Poetry". This book was published in about 1917-1918. After a short time, the *Sacred poems and note of music* with about 200 songs was published. "This book marked an important step in the Vietnamese cultural life."¹ At that time, there existed only the old music, few people were conscious of the new music and this book of *Sacred poetry of the Protestant Church* was the first one on the new music printed and published in Vietnam. While clergymen and chorus of the Catholic church sang chorus in Latin, Protestant believers in Vietnam "sang praises to God in their native language."²

The clergyman Wm. C. Cadman had many difficulties in translating the Divine Songs because the Vietnamese language has tones belonging to the marks and is not like French or English. The preface of the *Book of Divine Songs* states that "sometimes a beautiful word and meaning has an unadapted tone. Therefore, it seems not only understandable but also ridiculous."³ The new Vietnamese believers being familiar with the five tones of the classical pentatonic scale when hearing these songs in the Western classical music could not understand them. The clergyman Paul E. Carlson on hearing this music when he came to Vietnam had grumbled and lamented: "Too awful... it is unbearable. Something should be done to change the situation."⁴ Pastor I. R. Stebbins wrote in his memory this challenge: "How can we find a way to teach the believers to sing the Divine Songs that are sung in all the Churches over the world."⁵

Then, the clergyman Paul Carrlson had cooperated with the clergyman Wm. C. Cadman to study and retranslate the *Sacred Poetry*. This time the two clergymen also paid attention to the words so that they followed closely the original and were adapted to the rimes of Vietnamese songs. At the same time, the clergyman also set in music sentences in the Bible into the Divine Songs having the sounds of Vietnamese folk songs.

In 1940 the *Sacred Poetry* had in addition 250 songs and 21 short songs and this book was issued and sent to the churches. In 1948 the clergyman John D. Olsen together with the revision section the *Sacred Poems* had revised the *Divine Songs*. Two years after the *Divine Songs of the Protestant Church* was published. It was of great size and heavy. Believers all around seemed not enthusiastic with new songs because they were familiar with the *Sacred Poems* they had sung. Ten years later, the Church again revised the book and published the book of *Divine Songs* in small size with 509 songs and this book has been used up to now. When analyzing the book of

Divine Songs, Đỗ Hữu Nghiêm who had made a research on Protestantism in the context of the national culture wrote "The important position of the *Divine Songs* on the predication and religious activities has been clearly asserted."⁶

The utility of *Divine Songs* was expressed by the clergyman Wm. C. Cadman in the Bible magazine in 1938. Herebelow, are some sentences from the text: "*Sacred Poems* full of deep meaning, have a very great influence. They often highten and sometimes are more grateful to the soul than an elequent lecture."

"God wants that a pure life in this polluting world would be less harsh owing to the joyous source coming from the ever resounding *Divine Songs*."

The singing *Divine Songs* not only expresses the joy of the believers, it also communicates the joy to a place without joy, to make the suffering goal happy and it opens the heart to accept bliss from heaven.

The *Sacred Songs* adds solemnity to the cult. A finest song would lose it sacred character if people only thought of the song, of the music.

Persons with a special talent in music should strive to compose new and *Divine Songs* in accord with the special spirit of the Vietnamese people. This is also a very effective way to serve God"⁷.

Despite these initial achievements, the *Divine Songs* still has many points requiring a concern . Pastor Lê Hoàng Phu remarked as follows on the *Divine Songs*:

"The Protestant Church of Vietnam still has not its own book of *Divine Songs*, most of these songs have been greatly influenced by Anglo – Saxon and United States Church music, partly because it is difficult to translate the text into a language with five tones. The singer is also conscious of this state and leaves it to the hearers, therefore the words are not attractive to non-Christians. On this area, many initiatives are needed as well as a further development especially in the action on the mentality of Vietnamese with the Gospel hidden in Vietnamese music."⁸

With the above-said spirit and stimulation, in the past decades, Vietnamese musicians began to create many hymns transmitted everywhere in the world by Vietnamese Protestant Church Broadcast, especially the Far East Broadcast Congregation (FEBC). The author of these songs included both Catholic and Protestant musicians like Thành Tâm, Hoàng Đức, Vũ Đức Nghiêm, Hoàng Trọng,

Vĩnh Phúc, Lê Ngọc Vinh, Nguyễn Hữu Ái, Hoàng Bích, Đặng Ngọc Quốc, Trần Huy Khanh, Trần Lưu Hoàng, Vũ Ngọc Quang, Phương Thảo, Lê Phước Thiên, Trần Quốc Bảo, etc. These authors also translated hundreds of praise songs from English into Vietnamese. Though their songs were not included in the Sacred Songs but everywhere in world, when Vietnamese believers are grouped, these songs are used for the cult and predication. All these songs lead to the formation of song books like New Songs, Everlasting Songs, Songs of Protestant Youths, and Gospel Songs.

On the side of the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council has shown much openness and liberality. The instruction *De Musica in Sacra Liturgia* from the number 31 on 5 March 1967 was issued to encourage "each congregation in accordance with its ready means can easily organize a more solemn mass with music and songs." In the past, singing in churches had been often reserved to officials and priests, but now "believers will always be encouraged to participate fully to the singing."⁹ In Vietnam, there are many song books recently published by Vietnamese Catholic musicians. The characteristic feature of these songs is that they made little use of theologian terms, they are easily understandable and near to the Vietnamese spirit with some national musical influence.

Conclusion

The singing of divine song and the use of musical instrument to serve religion have to endure a long development because of differences in the theological conceptions. But in general, both Catholic and Protestant Churches in Vietnam seem to have many basic similarities in music in the service when we compare the documents.

Sacred music "is created to serve God, it contains holy features and a highly artistic degree."¹⁰

"The divine songs should be appropriate to the solemn aspect of the sacred place and of the service, not only in their words but also in their sounds their rhythms and in the use of musical instruments."¹¹

The Second Vatican Council stimulates everybody "not to refuse to make use of his talent to serve God and His truth."¹²

Believers may actively participate to praise God in their tongue "The whole community expresses its faith and virtue by its songs and it no longer acts as "Silent and motionless spectators (Pi-o XI *Dinivi Cultus* No. 9)."¹³

At present, the Vietnamese Protestant Church in both the North and the South respects and makes use of the book of Sacred Songs published half century ago. The musician Vũ Đức Nghiêm in an article on the Bible Magazine in the 60 decade asked the permission of the Church to translate again the songs in the *Sacred Songs* into a more refined language.¹⁴ This is also the common desire of Protestant believers to agree with the development of the society, the people's standard of culture and language.

In the service of Protestant Churches in Vietnam, organs or pianos are often used, a number of churches also make use of different Western musical instruments, but traditional Vietnamese musical instruments are not used, because "the traditional rites do not allow the use of these musical instruments in the church."¹⁵ In the viewpoint on the relations between problems in relation to Christianity and the Vietnamese culture, Pastor Doctor Lê Văn Thiên¹⁶ wrote that believers "should be stimulated to compose divine songs which can communicate the Christian message in modern melodies so that they can express their feeling in national tones" and "can make use their abilities to praise and congratulate God with local instruments like the sixteen chord zither, the flute, the monochord."¹⁷

Besides, in the cult of the Protestant Church, there exists also the need of a general and god education of sacred music for both pastors and believers though the sacred songs linked to the words in the Bible are expressed in the sacred rites of the Vietnamese Protestant Church, there still does not exist a musical school to form a professional personnel to aid the local churches in making use of music in their service with proper results.

Up to now, the special feature of Protestant believers has been to sing to praise God with no differentiation of age, sex, in the love of sacred music. The *Sacred Song* has contributed to the formation and development of the spiritual life of Protestant believers in the past century. Sacred music is not limited to the religious cult, it also has positive influence on the society because the formation of sacred music is "to pay God honor and to sanctify the believers."

Reference:

¹. Nguyễn Hữu Ái. *An introduce to Sacred Hymns*, Textbook of Union College of California, 1999, p. 17.

-
- ². *Sacred Poems*. Protestant Publishing House, Hanoi 1917.
 - ³. *Sacred songs*. Preface by the Revision Group. Protestant Publishing House, Hanoi 1948, p. 1-3.
 - ⁴. I. R. Stebbins. *41 years of service to God with Vietnamese Protestant Church*. Spiritual Light Magazine, Akron, Ohio, 2005, p. 176.
 - ⁵. See above.
 - ⁶. Đỗ Hữu Nghiêm. *The predication Method of Protestantism* (Unpublished master thesis submitted to the University Of Saigon Faculty of Letters) 1968, p. 260.
 - ⁷. Wm. C. Cadman. *The song coming from heaven*. Bible magazine, No. 87, 1938, Hanoi, p. 1.
 - ⁸. Lê Hoàng Phu. "A short history of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam 1911 -1965" (Ph. D. Diss, New York University 1972), p. 507- 371.
 - ⁹. Priest Andre Đỗ Xuân Quế. *The Religious Service and Life*, Religious Publishing House, 2006, p. 19.
 - ¹⁰. Priest Andre Đỗ Xuân Quế. *On the Sacred Music*, Religious Publishing House, 2006, p. 84.
 - ¹¹. Instruction "To carry out the Religious Service", 1970, No. 3, Priest Andre Đỗ Xuân Quế.
 - ¹². Priest Andre Đỗ Xuân Quế. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
 - ¹³. Priest Andre Đỗ Xuân Quế. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
 - ¹⁴. The Bible magazine No. 335 Protestant Publishing House, Saigon 1966, p. 13-21.
 - ¹⁵. Lê Văn Thiên. *The Word becomae Flesh*, The University of Birmingham 2001. The Translation of *The Gosple and Culture*, The Bible Theology Institute Delta Press, 2006, p. 256.
 - ¹⁶. Secretary General of managing committee of Vietnamese Protestantism Church.
 - ¹⁷. Lê Văn Thiên. *Ibid.*, p. 256.