

This is a letter to you, my loving mother.

A letter that I have put into music, starting when I could no longer travel to see you during the Covid-19 pandemic and finishing two years later, after you left me for eternity.

It is a letter to thank you for the love you gave me, for the beautiful childhood filled with music, for your education combining East and West, and for the splendid landscapes of our homeland.

You have urged me to master both the piano and the đàn-tranh; I now play both for you, with glimpses of Bach, Vivaldi and Ravel here and there, and with the ancient techniques of the đàn-tranh that, like you said, I am among the last to possess.

This is a letter to tell you how much I miss you.

Words cannot express what I feel.

I hope my music will.

Goodbye, Mân chérie

xxx



Mãn chérie,

People often ask me why I call you “Mãn”. I tell them that it’s the diminutive of the word “maman” in French, pronounced “Mãn” in families that were brought up in French schools at that time. It’s a mixture of Vietnamese and French. You and Papa, who both went abroad for your studies, brought us up in both cultures, and I have to thank you for having allowed me to master both worlds, ancient and modern, Western and Asian.

I started the piano at the early age of five and a half; do you remember? I was ambidextrous but used my left hand more often, until I broke my left arm. I think my brain was mixed up at some point, and I started to stammer after the accident, so Papa sent me off to take piano lessons right after the doctors sawed away the plaster cast in order to balance things, and it worked! A few years later, two to be precise, you invited one of the last đàn-tranh masters of the old school to accept me as his disciple. And here I am. You have given me this education that I’m proud of, and your insistence that I immerse in the most authentic knowledges of the Four Major Arts; Music, Chess, Poetry and Painting, has given me enough luggage to navigate with ease between two cultural identities, two musical universes.

This album is the story of my childhood souvenirs, of beautiful landscapes from Vietnam, of our house in Saigon, all rushing back during times of turmoil that the world went through due to Covid-19. It is the story of my past and present anguishes and fears, of moments of my loneliness, of my longings, of my worries about you, and of my love for you and Papa. This is the story of how you brought me up, on your own, after Papa’s death. This is the story of my grief and pain from losing you, forever. This is an album I composed for you, my dear Mãn.

I started to hear the first notes in my head a few days after the first lockdown in Paris, France, in March 2020. It was a week after I had just returned from Saigon, Vietnam, where you lived. You had decided to go back to the country of your birth for your ‘old days’. I know Paris was too cold and life was too stressful, and your cosy apartment in the 16th arrondissement, filled with antiques and distant memories of our lineage, no longer brought you comfort, far away from the warm climate and the closeness of the people around.

Since your re-settling in Saigon, despite the heavy schedule of my work as a musician, I travelled back and forth between Paris and Saigon as often as I could to visit you, to spend time with you.

The last time before the entire planet sank into a state of stupor due to Covid-19, was in February 2020, do you remember? I already missed you. A week later, France and the rest of the world announced the first complete lockdown, which would last for 45 days.

I then started to compose this album. I no longer had other musicians to perform with me. I was alone in my apartment with this gigantic lacquer painting that you and Papa had commissioned from one of the best artists in Vietnam. I often gaze at it for hours; the shimmering gold leaves the Master used to layer the still afternoon sky overlooking the peasants planting rice sprouts, with a nearby bamboo shroud giving them occasional shelter from the blazing sun. The painting is on the wall just behind the piano, and the đàn-tranh not far away. I heard the notes of these two instruments binding together in perfect harmony and started to write this music. Music with the piano and the đàn-tranh, in duality. Duos that I would play, alone. It took me two and a half years, and two major lockdowns, to finish the pieces. I have put all my emotions, all my memories, and all my pains and hopes into this album. Your leaving us for the Heavens in March 2022 has given new life to other pieces that showcase my love for you.

These duos are for you, Mãn chérie, duos that I will play alone, for you.



I. WEeping MANGO LEAVES

It has been more than a week since the lockdown began. I am allowed to leave the apartment for 45 minutes, within a radius of one kilometer, for essentials only. Strangely, there are mangos at the supermarket, a rarity during times when even toilet paper, flour, sugar, etc., are scarce. I buy some for Papa's altar.

You have both taught me that respecting and remembering the departed, our ancestors, is part of our legacy, and even if we live abroad, traditions have to be perpetuated. I am perhaps the only one among my siblings to follow those teachings with conviction and piety. When one masters one's own traditions and culture, one can embrace other customs and civilizations with ease and thoroughness. What Papa and you have taught me has been a blessing for me and my music.

Back home with the mangos, I place them on the altar and burn three sticks of incense, join my hands in prayer, and ask Papa to look after you, to keep you in good health until I can travel again. I lower my joined hands and body four times. You taught me that four is for the Ancestors' altar, since the number represents the four generations venerated, and the fifth generation onwards would be placed on the tablet of the clan. Three prostrations would be for the Buddhist altar since we worship and follow the three Treasures of Buddhism.

The room is filled with the fragrance of incense, and I am suddenly struck by memories of our villa in Saigon. My bedroom on the first floor overlooked the garden around the French colonial house that Papa and you had bought, restored and extended. There was a tall, century-old mango tree just outside the window. I could almost touch one of the branches. I kept looking at this particular branch with a bunch of leaves diving towards the ground. When it rained, droplets gathered at the tip of each leaf, gently dripping down in slow motion. I am seized with this immense sadness, and this heartbreaking longing to see you again, wondering if you are eating enough and if you sleep well.

I can hear a distant sigh from those weeping mango leaves. Their tears haltingly reaching for the soil beneath in a steady legato, the faint sunshine shyly piercing through each drop, turning them into little golden stars, interrupted from time to time by the feathery wind, hurrying them towards the ground. The mango leaves miss you, and so do I. I weep with them.



2. RAINFALL

Rain has always been a source of inspiration for me. Rain in Saigon is like a silvery screen of pure silk dropping down from the Heavens. There was one particular corner in our old house where I loved to be when it rained: on the large terrace filled with Papa's orchids, just under the enormous fig tree, overlooking the long entrance that was bordered with flower shrubs and trees from the gate to our house. I used to sit on the balcony barrier and watch the pouring rain for hours. The most beautiful sight would be when there was *mưa nắng* – light rain under the sun. Glittering silver, it would turn into shining gold when the two opposite elements of nature bound together in transcendent harmony.

Lưu Thủy Đoán, a piece from the Ancient School of the North that I have already restructured in one of my previous albums, comes to mind again. The piano passages, at times virtuosic with their sparkling arpeggios, at other times grave and andante, would always paint the beauty of falling rain in regular patterns to underline the pure watery sound of the đàn-tranh. I miss that rain.

3. SCENT OF THE RIVER

I am still locked in my apartment in Paris. The situation worldwide has gotten worse. People are dying by the thousands, everywhere. The news on the TV is not encouraging. Hospitals are overcrowded and can barely cope with the new cases they are receiving every single day. They have not yet found a vaccine for this disease.

I am going crazy. I am worried, I am sad. Sad like the Perfume River that crosses the Ancient Imperial City of Huế in central Vietnam. There is a certain melancholy when you look at this river. I had never been there until recently. You and Papa loved this river, with ancient pagodas and imperial tombs along its banks. You told me how majestic the Huế Imperial Palace was. Alas, when I finally visited Huế, not much of her past splendour was left. Wars and unsettling times have destroyed countless irreplaceable monuments and treasures.

I long to go there again, I long to look at the river from my hotel room at night, with floating lanterns wandering aimlessly down the dark, silent water. Silent water that flows endlessly, sending from time-to-time little waves to the shallow banks, or suddenly swirling up into motion, ending its course in harmonious rhythm. I hear the đàn-tranh playing a short prelude typical of the Huế speaking accent, subtle and mysterious. I can breathe the scent of the river, plaintive yet serene.

4. BETWEEN WALLS

Alone with Hélios and Phoebus, our beloved cats. You do remember them, don't you? Hélios was the first to become part of our family. You were with me at the country house when he lost his way in the countryside, probably running after a female cat. How miserable was I then! I waited and waited for him to find his way back, to no avail. I then said to myself that what really counted was his well-being – that he would be able to feed himself, get shelter from the pouring summer rain and to be able to defend himself from nightly predators. I had heard stories about crazy people capturing cats and locking them up in cages, just for fun. I just wanted him to be safe and happy, even if he wasn't with me. That is true, selfless love.

Love is not only wishing to be happy with your loved ones, it is also caring for their happiness. And he was all alone out there. I waited for four long weeks before adopting Phoebus, the exact image of his now brother. You instantly held him in affection and hoped that Phoebus would somehow ease my pain over the loss of Hélios. Then a person from the neighbouring village found Hélios in a hamlet five miles away from our house. I was overjoyed to have my two treasures with me once again. They were both constantly by my side. When I practised my instruments, one would be on the piano bench with me and the other on the sofa; when I wrote music, Hélios was always on the desk beside the computer keyboard, sometimes hitting on the keys to create unconventional notes on the scores – Phoebus would try to do the same, but there was not enough space for both.

I am now alone with them both in Paris, locked up. I imagine how it would have been had Hélios been caught and locked up in a cage – how horrible that would have felt. I am, like billions of other people around the globe, now caught up in a cage, not knowing if the key has been thrown away or not.

I hear sounds travelling between the four walls of my Parisian apartment, bouncing back and forth in aimless and heavy agitation, echoing through space in deep harmonious vibrations, modulating at times with the stillness of the air. Sounds that the 160-year-old đàn-tranh, with its powerful bass notes, and the lower registers of the piano would render with perfection and gravity. I can almost see these sounds drifting around us, caressing each object, each surface. And I hope that you are well and that you are not sad because I know that you too are between four walls, far from where I am.



5. DRUNK (based on Vivaldi's The Four Seasons 'Autumn/Adagio' violin concerto)


November 2020. I am at my old country house in France, that you loved so much, with the immense park filled with fruit trees. Apples, plums, figs, grapes, olives, flower shrubs, roses, hydrangeas, daisies, wisteria, dahlias, lavender... all are plentiful in the summertime. You said you felt restored each time you spent time there. It's also my haven of peace, a refuge I go to whenever possible, fleeing the noise and the crowds of Paris.

Autumn is less abundant, yet there's a certain tranquility that amplifies my seclusion. But this time, this tranquility is burdened by my longing to see you, not knowing when it would be possible to travel again. It is a few days after my arrival here in the countryside, the second lockdown has been announced. I usually spend two weeks recharging my batteries; this time, it will be for 45 days, again. I am trapped here. And with the endless days and nights, not knowing what tomorrow will bring, I start to drink, a little too much at times.

This evening, I am drunk. I am listening to the *Four Seasons* by Vivaldi. The *IMusici* renditions are my favourites. Then comes the Adagio from the third concerto 'Autumn'. The simple basso continuo governed by the harpsichord and the double bass, with the strings floating on top, send me to another world. I am in a kind of trance; I see myself leaving my body, dancing in midair around the music room, overlooking the piano, caressing the đàn-tranh on my way out of the house into the vast garden, flying over the trees to the stars above. I do not feel the autumn cold, I look around me and see the huge stone house beneath me, then I turn to the southeast, where you are thousands of miles away, trying to reach Saigon... I suddenly crash back into the music room, staring at the piano; the movement had only lasted for less than three minutes.

I immediately sit in front of the baby grand and copy down the exact bass continuo structure of the Adagio. The đàn-tranh will replace the strings, with that feeling of uncertainty and loneliness, of longing and sadness.

I wish I could reach you, Mãn chérie.



6. FADED ROSE

Your French name is Rosie, assigned to you by your French teachers when you were at school. You used both your Vietnamese name, Huệ, which means lily in English, and Rosie. Your foreign friends called you Rosie, whereas the Vietnamese ones would call you Huệ.

For some reason, I love roses among all flowers. Orchids too. Father was an amateur orchid grower; I still see the thousands of orchids he grew on our terraces at home in Saigon. He had all the varieties: Cattleyas, Phalaenopsis, Vandas, Dendrobiums, Oncidiums, Cymbidiums... But orchids, despite their beauty and longevity, are a little too stiff; they do not have the grace and fragility of roses.

People often said that you were beautiful like the freshest rose, and your complexion was that of the whitest lily. Yes, you were once the fairest of all the ladies in Saigon, the most “chic”. They would often say, with a hint of jealousy, that whatever you wore, be it couture or just a plain “áo dài” with no lavishing embroideries, you always looked regal: “She might wear a rice bag, but looks like she’s wearing Chanel.”

I remember it was March 2022 and I could finally fly back to Saigon to visit you after two years of countless lockdowns and travel restrictions. I landed at nighttime, and you had already gone to bed, so the next day, I raced to your apartment to finally be able to tell you that I’m here and that you should not worry.

I nearly burst out crying seeing you again, but I had to hold back my tears for your sake so you would not be saddened by my grief. You had lost so much weight; you looked faded and withered. You could barely talk anymore, except for the word “con” – “my child.” You laid there on the sofa in the living room. The lady who nursed you, chị Hoa, made sure that you were comfortable.



My second nephew Tuán, and his wife, Tãm, came whenever they could to see that you were OK and if there was anything you needed. I am forever in their debt for the care and love they had for you when I was not there.

I sat down beside you but did not dare hold you in my arms. Covid-19 was still present, and I had to sanitize my hands and clothes, and wear a mask when I stepped into the apartment. We looked at each other, so happy that we could see each other again. I could not speak; I dared not open my mouth; it was impossible for me to utter a single word. Minutes passed, we just looked at each other, your eyes bright and still with that authority that inspired respect wherever you went. Yet they were kind; they were filled with love and joy. It had been two years since I had looked into those eyes. I finally opened my mouth and said “I’m here, Mãn, I’m back”. I fought with all my strength to hold my composure and to look cheerful and happy. Minutes passed again, and you reached out your hand from under the blanket to seize mine, took it to your heart, and held it firmly there, for a very long time.

I sat there, my hand in yours, tears pouring out of my eyes in silent torrents. I looked at you through eyes blurred with pain, and I saw a faded rose, fragile and withered. Inside, I was a wreck; it was like a storm was rushing through my heart, with winds whirling and tearing everything apart in constant motion.

I’m writing this piece now, thinking of that silent tempest in my heart, with you as a delicate and fragile rose amidst the pouring rain. Do you remember this old song *Nam Ai - Sadness of the South*? I played it for my first album. You said that it’s one of the saddest songs you’ve ever heard. Every song from the ancient repertoire has an instrumental part and a singing part. I’m using that singing part for the đàn-tranh, and as usual, I’ve allowed myself to restructure certain notes. On the piano, hours and days of hard labour will paint this hurricane that went through me at that moment.

I saw a faded rose, but you will always be the most beautiful of them all, ma Mãn chérie.



7. INNOCENCE LOST

Papa died when I was barely a teenager. My brother and sisters were already in France, so I only had you left in Vietnam. I was a strong-willed, proud and precocious child. You and Papa had always pushed me to do better, to concentrate more on my extracurricular studies, on top of my school work. I must admit that I hated the countless hours spent studying subjects and disciplines I had to master; the đàn-tranh, the piano, music theory, chess, ancient poetry, etiquettes, good manners, ancient rituals, languages... Indeed, you and Papa said that I was gifted, so I must not waste what the Heavens bestowed upon me. But I was still young, an innocent kid. I wanted to go out and play with the other children. I wanted to ride my bicycle around our neighbourhood, with its beautiful streets flanked by centennial trees and imposing villas. Of

course, I had Praying Mantis martial arts, badminton, and swimming lessons to strengthen my slim body, but I wanted spare time; I wanted to be like all the other kids.

Then Papa passed away.

I had to grow up fast, to stop being the proud and gifted little devil. Because I had to start taking care of you as well. I was the man of the family now, and I had to take responsibility.

We fought a lot, you and I. We both have the same character; we can be vain and imposing; we can be subtle but directive, even dictatorial, because we are aware of our bright minds and incisive insights. But we are kind and loving, we care.

I lost my innocence the morning Papa left us. I only had you left.



Handwritten Chinese characters on a piece of paper, likely a page from a notebook or diary. The text is written in a cursive style and includes several lines of characters, some of which are underlined. The paper is aged and yellowed, with some stains and a small tear at the top right.

8. SLIPPING AWAY

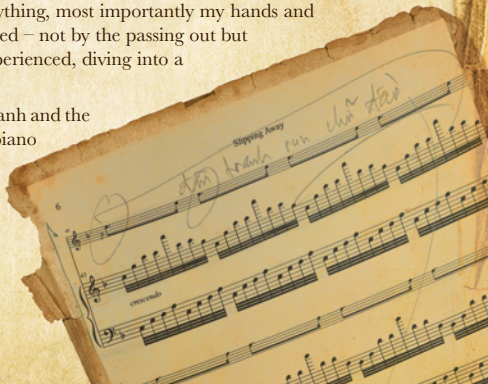
My Parisian home is a one-of-a-kind apartment. It used to be a shop, then it was renovated into a small loft with a living room big enough to hold my baby grand, a rarity in Paris given the typically small residences in the city. A staircase leads to the bedroom in the basement, where I feel secure and protected. When you came to visit me, you often joked that this staircase was a danger and a descent to the netherworlds.

During these lockdowns, I run up and down the stairs to exercise. I used to go to the gym three times a week, but this is no longer possible. Amidst one of these back-and-forth seances, whilst halfway down, I suddenly see an opening on the wall opposite the stairway. The small crater opens itself and becomes larger and larger, deeper and deeper, becoming a dark tunnel with its walls consisting of blue and light grey swirling water, with souvenir objects floating around within the increasing speed of the water, gradually sucking me into its center. I see faces I know, elements I'm familiar with but not recognizing who or what. At the far end of the water passage, I see the moon, shimmering with majesty. I am sucked towards it, wanting to reach out and touch this beautiful aster, but at the same time, I have the feeling that I am slipping way and not able to come back. I look in front of me, then back. There is a closed wall of pearly clouds behind me. I look ahead again and catch a glimpse of the full moon before it vanishes. I close my eyes.

When I open them again, I am lying at the bottom of the stairs. I must have fainted while exercising. Luckily, I have not broken anything, most importantly my hands and arms. I sit there for a few minutes, numbed – not by the passing out but by that slipping away sensation I had experienced, diving into a voidness I could not control.

I am putting this into music for the đàn-tranh and the piano – only using four chords for the piano to illustrate this terrifying water passage, while the đàn-tranh will represent the objects and the faces that I saw.

If only I had been able to see yours then.



9. SIGH OF SORROW (based on Bach's Aria, the Goldberg Variations)

You often said that you preferred my playing Chopin to that of Bach. It's true that my temperament honours more the delicacy and intensity of Chopin's works, or the overwhelming virtuosity of Rachmaninov. Bach, like Mozart, is extremely difficult to play with perfect balance and taste. One has to disregard one's "I" to embrace the profoundness of each phrase, each note.

Over the years, I have tried to achieve more serenity and detachment when I play Bach, and one of the pieces that has brought me much comfort during these times of psychological hardship is the *Aria* from *The Goldberg Variations*. The instrumental part of *Nam Ai - Sadness of the South*, a treasure in ancient Vietnamese music, comes to mind again.

I was playing this profoundly sorrowful piece on the đàn-tranh one day and thought of Bach's masterpiece. I should blend these two treasures together, I told myself. I shall not modify anything that Bach has written here, perhaps remove the right hand from time to time to leave space for *Nam Ai* and let the piano carry the perfect harmonies; then I shall unite the two instruments with their respective melodies in plaintive consonance. A sigh of sorrow.



10. THAT BICYCLE RIDE (feat. patterns from Mozart's Fantasias and Sonatas)

You and Papa never allowed me to ride the bicycle on the streets. Even though the residential area we lived in was calm and not overcrowded like most of the quarters in Saigon, you said it was too dangerous, and the garden surrounding our home was big enough for that, not to mention the vast land we had at the beach house. So, no bicycle rides. But I wanted to go out! I wanted to explore the beautiful streets bordered with tamarind and hopea trees. Tamarind leaves looked like lace fans knitted together into a light green canvas, and the winged seeds of hopea trees were little helicopters by the thousands, flying through the morning air in chaotic formation before landing softly on the ground. I loved to watch these little miracles from the back seat of our car and wished I could feel the warm air racing through my body whilst riding my bicycle – free and alive!

Finally, one day, it was you – I'm sure of that – who persuaded Papa to give me some liberty. As I was gifted and studious with my numerous lessons, at home and at school, that would be my reward. I was overjoyed. I would not miss a single opportunity to get on that bicycle and roam the city. I started on our street, then on to Hồ Con Rùa (Turtle Lake), Nhà Thờ Đức Bà (the Cathedral of Notre Dame) – on its left, Dinh Độc Lập (the Palace of Independence), and on its right, the Saigon Bưu Điện – said to be the largest post office in the world, built by the French in the 19th century. Then came the most famous of all Saigon downtown streets, previously called Rue Catinat which led to the Sông Sài Gòn (Saigon River) with its harbour and floating restaurants. The list of places and streets goes on and on.

Thank you for those moments, Papa, Mẫn. Thank you for that first bicycle ride.



II. THE WAIT ... TO THE OTHER SIDE

March 2022. Yes, that dreadful month that still haunts me. I had spent nearly two weeks with you since first arriving back, you had regained some weight and seemed happier.

It was a Sunday, I arrived in the afternoon at your apartment. The lady who took care of you looked worried and anxious. You had a slight fever and a cough... The doctors performed tests and the results were devastating; you had tested positive for Covid-19.

I can still vividly picture myself in the ambulance with you, on the way to the hospital. The pulse oximeter indicated a regular rate of 85 beats/minute. I kept looking at the numbers, holding your hand in mine. As we approached the Emergency Department, your pulse suddenly raced up to 125. I gently squeezed your hand, saying that all would be OK, that I'm here for you, that the doctors will take care of you, and that you should not worry. Your pulse descended back to 85.

I held your hand until the medical staff transferred you to the ICU, hoping that this would not be the last time I see you, telling you that I'd come visit and that all would be fine. You'll be home soon... In Covid-19 cases, patients are isolated from the rest of the world; no one comes in or out.

I went home and waited and waited. Every day the hospital would call to update your situation, which was not good. I waited again, until Wednesday evening. The doctors called and said I should prepare myself for the worst. Thanks to a cousin who worked at the hospital as a doctor, I was smuggled into the ICU, all dressed up in PPE, to see you for the last time. You were barely conscious, but when I took your hand and softly said that it's all right and that you should let go when you are ready, you squeezed my hand. Our hands were locked together for an eternity, I looked intently at you, then at the intravenous drip, almost hearing the steady release of each droplet; the ECG machine indicated a pulse of 85.

The hospital called a few hours later, on Thursday morning, at 2:18 AM, to announce your death. After hanging up, I thought I heard the last beeps of your heartbeat racing up for the last time, then stopping for eternity. A faint fragrance floated in the air; *Femme de Rochas*, your favourite perfume. You have passed to the other side.

I am writing this piece at a metronomic tempo of 85.



12. OUR LAST WALTZ (feat. passages from Ravel's Piano Concerto in G)

You have just left me. I am all alone in the apartment I recently bought in Saigon. You were so happy when I announced that I had signed the deeds, just two years earlier, so it would be more practical whenever I flew back to Vietnam.

I feel abandoned and empty in this brand-new apartment. I turn on the speakers and listen to Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G*. I've never played this work, but I admire it intensely. Listening to this masterpiece soothes my pain somehow. Then comes the second movement, the Adagio, a slow waltz.

You taught me how to dance, ballroom dance, when I was about ten, I think. You said that every 'gentleman' had to be able to lead a lady with deftness around the ballroom during social evenings. When I had friends over in our Saigon home for a 'ball', you would appear just once to greet the guests and to dance the tango or a waltz with me. Everyone would stop to gasp with amazement at your precise and graceful steps, pacing with precision every single beat. These were your two favourite dances: the tango and the waltz.

Now, I listen to this slow waltz composed with perfection, and I see myself slowly spinning around the room with you – your right hand gently posed on my left hand, your feet drifting back and forth to the three beats with elegance. I close my eyes and imagine the structure of this new piece of music. I meticulously keep the rhythmic structure of the first eighteen measures completely intact for the piano. I repeat that three times over, like the three beats of a waltz.

Every single note I keep at the exact value that Ravel had given it, and every single harmony of the left hand would be respected to its fullest. Of course, I will have to transpose the piano part for the đàn-tranh, still respecting the intervals that Ravel had placed. I will use the 160-year-old đàn-tranh from Imperial Huế to take the lead at first, but it will finish the piece supporting the piano with a light and graceful counterpoint.

And I will place another melody, a melody I will compose for you. The famous theme Ravel wrote will only appear for three measures. Three again, like the number of the beats. My feet move around counting three, opposite yours, in silk-like unison. My eyes are closed; I can feel your hand on mine and the beautiful music lulling our movements. Then I open my eyes, and you are no longer there. You have just left me, with our last waltz.

14. YOUR FLIGHT TO HEAVEN

You left this world on a sacred day, on the full moon of the second month of the Lunar calendar. The day the Shakyamuni Buddha reached Nirvana.

Sutras were recited at praying ceremonies at the pagoda every seventh day for seven weeks, after which your soul would leave this dimension to join Papa in the Heavens.

You are of noble descent, and you have always lived your earthly life with dignity and honour. You and Papa have taught me the Five Virtues of Confucius: humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity (Nhân, Nghĩa, Lễ, Trí, Tín); the Three Treasures of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (Phật, Pháp, Tăng); the Five Elements of Taoism that constitute the Universe: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth (Kim, Mộc, Thủy, Hỏa, Thổ).

I imagine your flight to Heaven in the glorious company of dragons and phoenixes roaring through golden clouds in circular motion – graceful and imperial.

You see, the piano part I'm writing for this ode is a constant series of arpeggios mainly structured by I, III, V and VII degrees: first for Excellence, third for the 3 Treasures of Buddha, fifth for the 5 Taoist Elements and the 5 Confucian Virtues, seventh for the 7x7 days after which you will reach Nirvana. I'm using the 160-year-old đàn-tranh to announce your flight, plucking the strings nine times to symbolize the powerful clangs of gongs. Nine because it is the number of Kings and Emperors. You deserve no less.

Safe journey Mãn bien aimée.



DEDICATION

In memory of my beloved Mãn.
For L, the wind beneath my wings.

L, Luna, Hélios and Phoebus: You are my life, my raison d'être. I love you.

CẢM ƠN, THANK YOU

Papa and Mãn: For making me the person I am today. Mãn chérie, you have continued to raise me after Papa's passing; he would be so happy to see that you have pursued, alone, what both of you started together.

Master Hai BIỂU: You have left this world too soon, but with your strict and profound musical education, I have been able to receive the true essence of our country's music. I promise I will always do my best to perpetuate these centennial traditions and show the world how beautiful authentic ancestral Vietnamese music can be.

Mr. Ramzi Yassa: You have enlightened my pianistic horizons with the great Russian school. I am forever in your debt.

Thomas Vingtrinier: Putting together, in perfect harmony, two completely different instruments, the đàn-tranh and the piano, was a first and no easy task. You have done miracles behind the control panel, you have given precious advice with your profound insight, and for that, my compositions and I are deeply honoured.

François Bibonne: Your patience behind the camera during the recording sessions was pure friendship. Your support, in times when my emotions were impossible to bear, has allowed me to continue playing my instruments.

Chris Ferensson: For this mystical cover art. You have captured every essence of my "état d'être" during the process of music writing.

Tung and Thieu-ZenFuto: For these photos captured in Saigon. We have braved the blazing sun, the thick smoke of incense to honour memories I hold dear to my heart.

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You give me faith.



Đàn tranh (Vietnamese Zither) and piano: Tri Nguyen

Art director: Tri Nguyen

Music composed by: Tri Nguyen

Sound engineer, mixing, mastering: Thomas Vingtrinier at Studio Sequenza, France

Liner notes: Tri Nguyen

Cover photo and design: Chris Ferensson

Booklet photos: Tung Nguyen and Tri Nguyen

Assistant photographer to Tung Nguyen: Thieu-ZenFuto

Product design: Sarah Wanstall

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DUOS – ALONE

ĐÀN-TRANH AND PIANO

TRI NGUYEN

