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Vietnamese politics and music

Mai Khoi's dissenting voice

The musician and activist—sometimes referred to as “Vietnam’s Pussy Riot”—is challenging a “self-censoring” society



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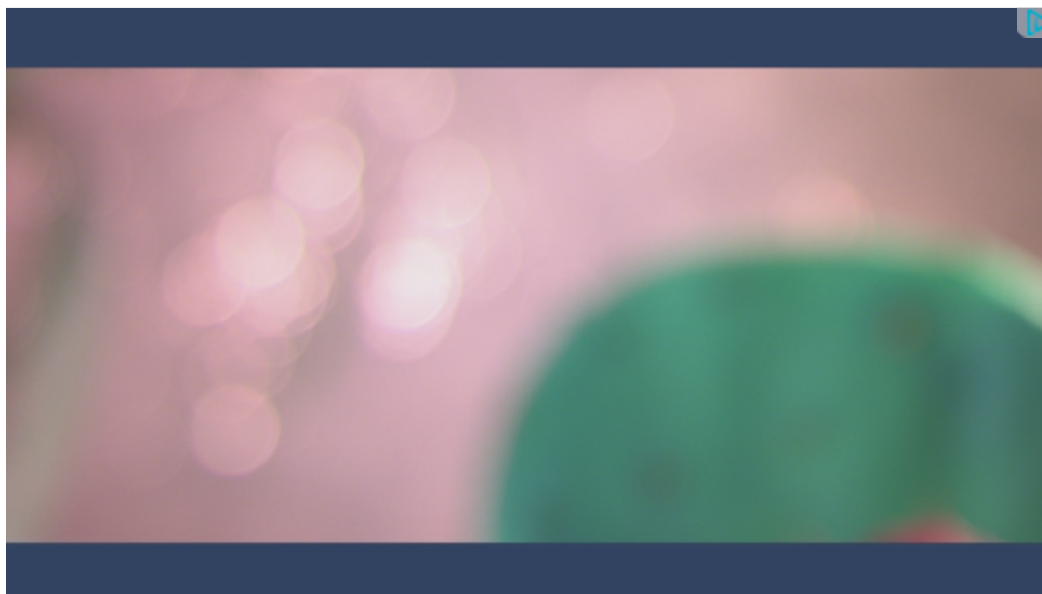
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IN THE dying days of February, an audience gathered in the foyer of the Phu Sa Lab performing-arts space in Hanoi's Tay Ho District. Representatives from the American embassy and other members of the diplomatic corps rubbed shoulders with activists, musicians, artists and a small but excitable handful of journalists.

Foreigners and Vietnamese alike, they were there to witness the launch of “Dissent”, Mai Khoi’s aptly and bluntly-titled new album. Many wondered aloud whether the police, too, may make an appearance. It wouldn’t be the first time that one of the dissident-musician’s concerts has been raided.

The American entourage, in particular, was well aware of Mai Khoi. In 2016 she was blocked—along with hundreds of other independent candidates—from running in Vietnam’s National Assembly elections and was among a small group of activists invited to meet then-president Barack Obama. In November, as President Donald Trump visited for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, she and her Australian husband, Benjamin Swanton, were evicted from their Hanoi apartment by men she believes were agents from the secret police. As the presidential motorcade passed, she had held up a sign reading: “Peace Piss On You Trump”. “I protested Trump because he is a racist,” Mai Khoi says. “He came to Vietnam, didn’t recognise civil society, and did nothing to promote human rights. I wanted to stop talking about freedom of expression and start practising it.”

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obstructed—the vote was dominated by Communist Party functionaries—Mai Khoi said she would do everything in her power to inspire young people to run in the 2021 election. “Our campaigns have changed the way people think about political participation,” she said at the time. Simply

running in the first place was a meaningful form of activism.

But unlike Pussy Riot, the Russian outfit to whom Mai Khoi has occasionally been compared, the music still—has always—mattered. On the basis of her new songs (accompanied by her two-man band, suitably named The Dissidents) Mai Khoi might just as easily be described as Vietnam’s Björk or Laurie Anderson. Her voice runs the gamut from whispered intrigue to full-bodied yearning. Her saxophonist channels John Coltrane at his most untethered, his most desperate. The music is designed to, and does, have a physical effect, hitting not one but several nerves. It aims to assault, unafraid to be difficult or jarring or ugly. If music alone could break chains, this would be the music to do it.

Her lyrics are equally bold. The first song on the album, “Xin ong” (“Please, Sir”), is addressed to a Communist-Party leader: “Please, sir, let us sing / let us exhibit our art / let us fall in love.” “Trai phuc hoi nhan pham” (“Re-education Camp”) takes a similar approach: “Inside, you’ll have time to think / you’ll have time to repent / to regret / to slap yourself on the face / for being so cruel / for suppressing the truth / for being traitors to the people.”

This is sedition served ice cold, but Mai Khoi maintains that the album is as important musically as it is politically. “It’s a new direction [for me],” she says. “It has traditional and ethnic influences, but it’s not traditional or ethnic music. Also, it isn’t



imported from the West or South Korea, like much music in Vietnam.”

After the show, there was a short question-and-answer session. An American asked the question that has been on everyone’s minds: “Why haven’t the police come tonight?” Mai Khoi laughed, translated the question for her Vietnamese listeners, and said they were invited but had to send their apologies. In reality, she said later, she wasn’t sure why they hadn’t come, but suspected that the presence of so many Westerners, including a documentary crew that has been following her for several months, played a role. She and her lawyer had also made sure that everything was entirely in order before going ahead with the launch. They didn't want to leave any bureaucratic loopholes for the authorities to exploit.

That they left her alone on this of all nights came as something of a relief. During the production of “Dissent”, Mai Khoi’s producer was fined on dubious grounds. Her saxophonist was told by his father that the family would disown him if he continued to work with her. A number of personal friendships ended on political grounds. “We paid a price for this music,” she says.

The Trump protest caused animosity, too. Even former supporters thought she had gone too far. “What surprised me most was the extent to which people in Vietnam have authoritarian ways of thinking,” she says, pointing to modes of thought that have been absorbed over time and which have ossified within society itself. It is the goal of every authoritarian government: to create a self-censoring, self-policing populace. “The protest sparked a healthy debate about freedom of expression in Vietnam,” Mai Khoi says, and she highlights the disruptive and essential role music and art can play. “For me, it’s about opening new ways of thinking and acting, making the unthinkable thinkable and the unspeakable speakable.”

A few days after the album launch, Mai Khoi travelled to Europe on tour. Arriving back in Hanoi last week, she was detained at the airport for eight hours and copies of “Dissent” were confiscated. It was difficult not to hear the news and be reminded once again of “Xin ong”: “Please, sir, let us sing.”

