



SEE CULINARY MAGIC BEFORE YOUR EYES AT **TABLES** AT THE HYATT ERRAWAN 110



A VISITOR listening to tribal music.



TRIBAL MUSICIANS performing their age-old melodies.



Nurtured in notes

An American music instructor and researcher captures the traditional sounds of the Golden Triangle

MANITO TRIPATHI
THE NATION ON SUNDAY
Chiang Mai

To former violinist and music instructor Victoria Vorelter, the best place to savour the sounds of Southeast Asia is not in the pubs of Chiang Mai, but in the tribal villages perched high in the mountains of the Golden Triangle, an area that encompasses Thailand, Laos, China and Burma.

Over the past five years, the Chiang Mai-based American researcher, filmmaker and curator has trekked to remote villages in Thailand, Burma, Laos and Southern China in search of these ancient mountain melodies. A specialist in the Suzuki Method of music instruction, Vorelter finds an Akha mother's lullaby and a Mien family's funeral dirge more spiritually uplifting than Mozart. She constantly revisits and documents the rich cultural heritage of

these diverse multi-tribal communities, who are either marginalised or becoming eroded by 21st century conveniences.

Whatever the threats to these ethnic groups, Vorelter wants to ensure that their musical heritage prevails. These concerns are at the heart of her current multimedia exhibition titled "Songs of Memory: Traditional Music of the Golden Triangle" on view at the Chiang Mai City Arts and Culture Centre. The show focuses on the musical

culture of six hill tribes - Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, and Lisu - and features an impressive collection of rarely seen musical instruments and traditional garb as well as photographs, music recordings and video montages of traditional vocal and instrumental music. Many of these instruments are likely to disappear for good as development comes to the villages.

Vorelter can listen to the music through videos that also serve to illustrate the whole spectrum of tribal rites from birth to death, including healing, baby naming, blessing the hunt, labouring in the fields, courtship, weddings, soul calling, ancestor worship and funerals. Vorelter is completely at ease with the music, explaining that it transcends both cultural and ethnic boundaries.

"I'm trying to highlight the musical life of each group with photos that show the different musicians. Instruments are impor-



VICTORIA Vorelter on one of her field trips.

tant to them. For each group, I also created an hour-long documentary film about aspects of life that are music," she says.

The material on show is the result of five years research. About 40 per cent of Vorelter's material comes from Burma, home to the most traditional tribal peoples. With 250 hours of footage and thousands of photographs, her ambition is to produce a one-hour documentary film, books and exhibitions and set up a folk museum about the hilltribes she has encountered as a way to preserve their fast disappearing cultural heritage.

Her research has taken her up and down the hills of the Golden Triangle, travelling with a guide/interpreter hired at the local market to each town. Lasting between two and five weeks, each trip has been a physical challenge. Vorelter says that music plays a primal role in everyday rituals. "To

these people, music is not just for recreation or entertainment, but for ancestral and religious worship. They don't take music lightly. Music is a way of attaining some kind of grace with the spirit."

At a Hmong funeral, for instance, music and musicians play their part in leading the spirit of the deceased to the ancestral world. Without music, the spirit would continue wandering the earth forever.

Last year, she studied and recorded a Lahu She Leh shaman playing the *nu kum* in the remote Chiang Mai jungle. The reed pipes, she explains, play a primal role in everyday Lahu life and are part of a tradition that dates back hundreds of years.

Vorelter hopes that the exhibition will help raise awareness of the need to preserve tribal communities and their rich culture. She says only tribal groups in Laos and Burma remain truly traditional

and their counterparts in China and Thailand are increasingly threatened by economic development.

"I think by coming to 'Songs and Memory', people will begin to realise how diverse the human race is. It's important to remember that human beings are highly creative, and their culture is rich."

"We should be honoured to be able to communicate with this diversity. We must also honour different traditions and not think that one tradition is more important than another. People of the mountains cannot read and write, but they have wonderful memories. They can repeat songs and stories for hours. And their wisdom is about to be forgotten," she says.

The writer travelled to Chiang Mai as a guest of Tamarind Village Hotel. Special thanks are due to the hotel's communications and marketing director Claudine Troilo.



A Mien instrument



AN Akha stringed instrument A Lahu instrument



AN Akha stacked bronze drum



AN Akha drum



AN Akha stringed instrument



AN Akha horn



A Mien horn



A Lisu gourd wind instrument

SEE IT, HEAR IT

► Sponsored by Tamarind Village Hotel, "Songs of Memory" is on view until the end of April at Chiang Mai City Arts and Culture Centre.

► Vorelter's other exhibition "Patterns, Passages & Prayers: Traditional Cultures of the Golden Triangle" continues at Tamarind Village Hotel through July. Visit www.tribalAsia.com.

► Tamarind Village Chiang Mai, a Larnti-style boutique property in the heart of historic Chiang Mai, is at 50/1, Tadmaonee Road, Sri Phoom, Muang district. Call (053) 438 896-9 or www.tamarindvillage.com