

ARTS

Hither and zither on errand of love

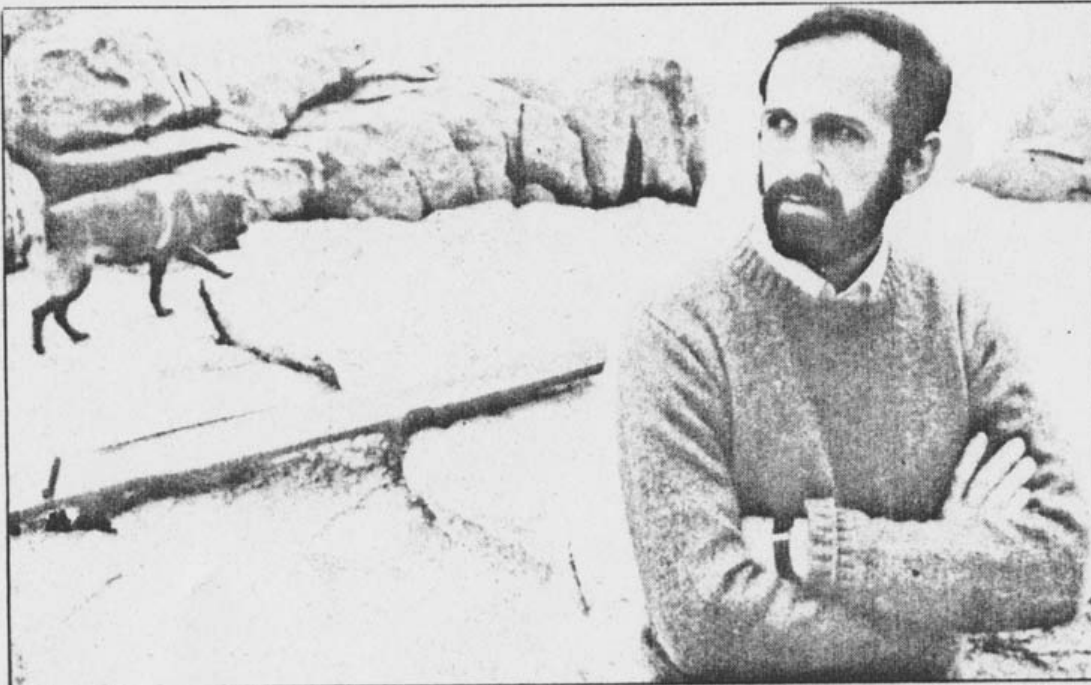
By NIGEL ROSSER

THOUGH by his own admission "dragged kicking and screaming into a career in music," John Thompson, a rare Western exponent of the seven-string zither, and artistic co-ordinator of the Asian Arts Festival, has spent the last six years scouring Southeast Asia for ethnically diverse musical groups on behalf of the Urban Council.

Thoughtful, intelligent and enthusiastic, ironically enough it was in Vietnam, where he served with American Military Intelligence, that he first began to grasp the essence of Asian music and folklore, and unwittingly embarked on a path that has led him all over the region.

Combining "an intellectual and intuitive approach," to his work, he remains firmly committed to the concept of promoting ethnic Asian art.

Introduced to traditional music and Oriental culture in Vietnam in the 1960s, where he felt "Western materialism was the only influence we had on the locals," he was initially dumbfounded by the differences between East and West.



John Thompson, who has been scouring Southeast Asia for diverse musical groups.

"I was suddenly forced to confront something I knew nothing about, nothing I had ever done had prepared me for the culture shock when I arrived in Asia," he recalls, adding that "I was embarrassed by the fact that here I

was, saving the world for democracy and truth, and I knew nothing at all about the culture."

Despite the demands of his job in Military Intelligence ("I sat around correcting reports all day," and be-

ing wounded "chasing a puppy into a barbed wire fence") he gradually mastered the Guqin, or seven string zither, after studying intensively in Taiwan for two years.

The instrument has an im-

portant role in the development of Chinese music, being the chosen instrument of ancient scholars, and unswervingly approved, unusually, by both Taoist and Confucian philosophers and priests.

Embracing a completely alien culture had its pitfalls, however. Chinese by tradition have constantly eschewed an analytical, scientific approach to their music, preferring simply to rely on the weight of history and remain content to shroud their artistic roots in the past.

As a result books were scarce, and Thompson found that written transcriptions of ancient songs and melodies had mainly been passed down by word of mouth.

Perseverance breeds its own rewards and he eventually unearthed a rare copy of *Shen qi mi pu*, roughly translated as "The secret handbook of spiritual things," a collection of 65 melodies published in 1425, which he painstakingly translated and learnt to perform.

Born in 1945, he arrived in Hongkong 10 years ago, and, after a brief spell as an RTHK programmer, became involved in the selection of groups for the newly-instigated Festival of Asian Arts.

Though a task he relishes, in recent years this has entailed rushing all over Asia recruiting groups, often stopping over in a country for only a matter of hours, living close to the breadline as he travelled, and combating the bureaucracy that inevitably barred his path.

However with the Urban Council's imminent move to a biennial festival, a format which will effectively render him unemployed on alternate years, he is turning his attention towards a wider stage.

Feeling that too many groups who perform in the Festival appear in Hongkong, then disappear back into the relative obscurity of their own homelands, he is planning to introduce Asian arts to major centres in the region such as Japan or Korea, as well as further afield.