

The Cultural Content and Singing Skills of the National Vocal Music *Chang Xiang Zhi*

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Abstract

The national vocal music *Chang Xiang Zhi* is a piece of highly valued work in both educational and practical singing. It originated from the collection of Yuefu songs of Han Dynasty and has abundant historical and cultural contents. How to deal with this kind of work that has a close relation with Chinese traditional culture? The singer needs to not only understand its cultural background and characteristics, but also find its origin and grasp the spiritual nature of the work. In respect of singing skills, the singer needs to show the characteristics of natural and pure, simple and elegant, translucent and transparent, light and graceful of the work in the use of acoustic methods and processing techniques, and also needs to carefully study and experience its cultural contents, making his or her voice abound in the lingering charm of the traditional folk music culture aesthetics.

Key words: *Chang Xiang Zhi*; Cultural contents; Singing skills; Folk music

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INTRODUCTION

The national vocal music *Chang Xiang Zhi* is a piece of highly valued work in both educational and practical

singing. It has been selected both as the professional vocal teaching song and concert repertoire. This song received a lot of attention from both professional and amateur musicians and music lovers especially after the performance of the teacher of China Conservatory of Music, China's young singer Wu Bixia, during the Asian tour of Solo Concert, Concert of Chinese Works and the publication of its CD.

1. METHODS AND KEY POINTS OF THE EXPRESSION OF NATIONAL VOCAL MUSIC ART

The national vocal music *Chang Xiang Zhi* originated from the collection of Yuefu songs of Han Dynasty and has abundant historical and cultural contents. How to deal with this kind of work that has a close relation with Chinese traditional culture? We cannot be confined to the work itself; on the other hand, we should trace back to its origin and grasp the spiritual nature of the work.

In the process of teaching, we need to not only learn about the singing skills, but also study and research the background information, contents and emotional expression of the work, especially with respects of the traditional Chinese music cultural aesthetic taste and the unique style of the singing charm of this piece of work. This paper explores on how to integrate the singing skills of national vocal music with the humanistic features, style and charm of the songs in order to express the spiritual connotation of the work as much as possible and achieve the ideal artistic realm.

Chang Xiang Zhi is a piece of national vocal music work.

The national vocal music is a singing art that uses Chinese cultural as its background, Chinese as its base language, with features of tunes and charms, and standards of clear articulation and full tune and vivid expression, and corresponds brilliantly

with emotion, voice, word, and tune. (Encyclopedia of China
General Editorial Board, para.10, 1989, p.587)

Therefore, in respect of singing skills, we focus our teaching around these essential concepts and regulate practice with respects to voice, emotion, word, taste, performance, accomplishment, and stage image.

Voice: One needs to sing with emotions; word: one needs to sing with clear articulation; taste: One needs to accurately grasp the style of the music; performance: One needs to act and sing coordinately; accomplishment: One needs to improve his or her cultural accomplishment in order to accurately grasp the connotation of the work; stage image: One's stage image, temperament and demeanor need to be consistent with the work. These aspects are not independent of each other; on the other hand, they are interrelated and mutually promoting. None of them can be omitted, and all of them should be fully mastered in the training and singing of the national vocal music *Chang Xiang Zhi*.

2. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CULTURAL CONTENT OF *CHANG XIANG ZHI*

Chang Xiang Zhi is a poem from Yuefu Poetry of Han Dynasty. It is formerly known as Shang Ye, selected from the 16th Vol. of Yuefu Poetry. The original poem is read in Chinese as following: "Shang ye, wo yu jun xiang zhi, chang ming wu jue cui. Shan wu ling, jiang shui wei jie, dong lei zhen zhen, xia yu xue, tian di he, nai gan yu jun jue." The author of this song, Shi Fu, had added, "Chang xiang zhi a chang xiang zhi, chang xiang zhi" at the end of the original poem for music creation. This a love song full of warm affections. It means,

God! You and I will not stop loving each other unless all the mountains and rivers disappear, unless the seasons change, unless the heaven falls and the earth crumbles, unless the heaven and earth collapse together. I will never stop loving you even after I die.

In respect of emotion of this work, in addition to show the romantic love between the lovers, we need to protrude "unless all of the mountains disappear, unless all of the rivers exhaust, unless thunder rumbles in the winter, unless snows in the summer, unless the heaven and earth collapse together do I dare to stop loving you." During the practice and performance, we need to highlight this kind of faith, which is as firm as a rock, in loving each other forever in order to precisely establish the emotional element of *Chang Xiang Zhi*.

While singing *Chang Xiang Zhi*, it is not quite enough for the students to express the cultural connotation if they only understand the literal content of the work. It is a song of Yuefu Poetry of Han Dynasty, and it is very important for us to understand the cultural background of

this piece of work if we want to trace back to its origin. The development of music culture in China had reached a peak during Han Dynasty. The music institution during Han Dynasty did not include "Taiyueshu" or "Yuefu". Taiyueshu was in charge of "gagaku" (ritual music and party music), and Xiahou Kuan was the head of it; Yuefu was in charge of "folk music", and commander Li Yannian was the head of it. As for the establishment of Yuefu, Guo Maoqian had described it like this,

the name of Yuefu was from Han and Wei Dynasties. Xiahou Kuan was appointed as the Leader of Yuefu since Emperor Hui, and this was the origin of its formal name. Yuefu, this department, was not established until Emperor Wu. They collected poems and ballads first and changed them into songs to fit the rules and regulations!

The task of Yuefu was to adapt to the needs of the palace and carefully select folk music; to create and write lyrics, create and change tunes; to allocate musical instruments; to sing and perform, and so on. The Han government had collected famous folk songs in order to consolidate its ruling, viewing it from the political and ideological aspect. In addition to try to extract information about people's lives through collecting folk music, the Han government had also processed and polished the folk music for its use in two ways: One was for the cultural activities of the emperor's family and their entertainment; the other one was for propaganda and making influence among people. Nevertheless, we have to admit its brilliant achievement in the art of music. Only because of the hard work of Yuefu of Han Dynasty can we save such a large number of outstanding folk songs and poems for the future generations, such as "Mulan", "Jiao Zhongqing's Wife", "Chang Xiang Zhi", and so on. They are regarded as classic national music and passed on to the next generation by the Chinese.

3. THE SINGING FEATURE AND STYLE CHARACTERISTIC OF *CHANG XIANG ZHI*

The national vocal music is a singing art that uses Chinese cultural as its background, Chinese as its base language, with features of tunes and charms, and standards of clear articulation and full tune and vivid expression, and expresses the meaning of the song through emotion, voice, word, performance and stage image. Therefore, "learning and singing Chinese national vocal music art needs not only a good voice and a scientific method of making vocal sound, but also a deep understanding and mastery of Chinese language and culture" (Guo, 2010).

Since the theme of this song is a Han Yuefu classical poem and in Chinese history, the creation and appreciation of classical poem happened mostly during the recitation, the singing aspect of this song relies heavily on the style characteristics of an ancient poetry recitation.

Recitation' is an oral art style of classical Chinese literary works that is between reading and singing. It reads classical poems, words and texts in the form of singing. its tone is based on the tone of the poem reading, and its rhythm is based on the rhythm of the poem reading. And on the basis of reading, it can help to express feelings and words by singing. (Qin, 2001)

Chang Xiang Zhi is a piece of typical chanting style work. For example, "shang ye" and "wo yu yu jun chang xiang zhi" are typical use of the technique of first chanting then singing.

Chanting music is a traditional Chinese literati music element. Just like opera, quyi, folk music and even folk orthotics, it had been born as a kind of art under the background of Chinese traditional culture. Chanting, 'which is like reading, but different than reading; it is like singing, but also different than singing. It is a kind of "free singing" without any fixed tunes. 'Recitation' has a history of more than 1000 years. "Reading" is a language performing art developed in the past century. It does not include music or tone, and it is different from "recitation". "Chinese classical poems and songs" have fixed tunes and must be sung according to the music written in advance. "Recitation" and "Chinese classical poems and songs" are conducted in Mandarin, while "chanting" is performed in dialects." (Qin, 2009)

The art of recitation has always been passed on from place to place, from ear to ear, and from generation to generation. It has undergone various changes, developments and innovations during the course of inheritance. Thus, the music content is rich and colorful nationwide in the history of inheritance. However, due to the rise of the "new learning" and the downfall of the old learning" at the end of 19th Century and early 20th Century, the old style poetry, eight-party essays and other forms gradually disappeared, followed by the extinction of the form of reciting poetry and lyrics, which was solely dependent on the old style poetry. Until now, less and less people are familiar with reciting poetry. Therefore, learning and mastering the singing feature and style characteristics of *Chang Xiang Zhi* is undoubtedly of great significance to the inheritance of the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation.

4. RELATION BETWEEN "WORD AND VOICE" AND ITS PROCESSING TECHNIQUE IN *CHANG XIANG ZHI*

After understanding the cultural background and style characteristics of *Chang Xiang Zhi*, in respect of voice,

it needs a voice which is natural and pure, simple and elegant, translucent and transparent, light and graceful. Those rough, heavy, unclear or too bright voices are obviously not suitable for singing this song. In order to achieve such a standard, it is necessary for the singer to properly adjust his or her breath, vocal cords, resonance and a series of details, and the techniques always need to coordinate well between the word and voice. Since language is a part of the style and also a carrier of the content of the song and singing skills, one needs to pay attention on all of them.

After all, this is a song which requires the singer to have a high humanistic quality and excellent singing skills. When singing this song, the singer needs to have good scientific training on his or her singing and also makes his or her voice abound in the lingering charm of the traditional folk music culture aesthetics. In addition, the singer needs to have artistic accomplishment, which gets rid of the bounds from vocal techniques, has plenty of energy to devote to the singing style, and thinks deeply about the artistic conception.

Chinese traditional national vocal music art has a long history, and our ancestors had summarized valuable experience for us during the long-term artistic practice. As long as we carefully study it, inherit it, summarize it and improve it, making it more scientific, more national, more artistic, and more contemporary, and gradually enriching and perfecting it, it will be welcomed by all Chinese people, which accounts for 1/4 of the world's population, and it will also be accepted and loved by the world. "Only when it belongs to the nation, does it belong to the world." (Jin, 2007, p.1)

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