

Reflection on the Singing Skills and Stylistic Grasp of Ancient Chinese Poetry Art Songs

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Abstract: China's rich and diverse traditional culture boasts a wealth of literary masterpieces, and among them, ancient poetry holds a special place of honor. From the *The Book of Poetry* and *Elegies of The South* to Tang-Song poetry, as well as Ming and Qing ditties, they are the gems of Chinese culture. As the times change and culture develops, the fusion of ancient Chinese poetry and Western composition has given rise to a fresh and innovative art form: "ancient Chinese poetry art songs". This unique combination has proven to be highly effective, with each form of expression complementing and enlivening the other. The resulting synergy between Eastern and Western culture is both exciting and inspiring. Based on this background, this paper starts from the characteristics of ancient Chinese poetry art songs, and further analyzes the singing skills of them from the following aspects: control of emotional connotation, control of breath and volume, Control of Articulation and Vocalization, and control of rhythm and tempo. This aims to provide some ideas for grasping the singing style of ancient Chinese poetry art songs, and reference for vocal learners.

Keywords: Singing skills; Ancient poetry art; Stylistic characteristics

Introduction:

Ancient Chinese poetry art songs had its beginnings in China around the 1920s. This style combines the content of ancient Chinese poetry with Western music composition, giving rise to beloved masterpieces such as *River of No Return* and *Bright Moon How Many Time Have*. The genre of vocal music not only features a strong cultural charm of the Chinese nation, but also highlights the techniques of Western compositions. Therefore, it has a high artistic and literary value as a new theme in the history of composition, and plays an important role in China's music development. The lyrics of ancient Chinese poetry art songs are usually poems written by some renowned ancient poets and lyricists, with elegant dictions and rich and profound connotations. As the essence of traditional Chinese culture, the lyrics add the beauty of artistic conception to the literariness of music. In addition, by combining with music techniques, Chinese poetry is endowed with unique artistic charm and value. The complementary relationship between the two has contributed to the development of ancient Chinese poetry art songs, making an important contribution to the promotion and inheritance of Chinese traditional culture.

1. Analysis of the Characteristics of Ancient Chinese Poetry Art Songs

1.1 Write poems Before Adding Music

In ancient times, it was common for people to add music and sing poetry after creating poems. *The Book of Poetry*, which was mainly the product of laboring people's artistic creations, collected a total of 311 poems from the Western Zhou Dynasty to the mid-Spring and Autumn Period. Most of them were transmitted through the oral tradition of the laboring people, both from the aristocratic class and from the lower classes. People in ancient times enjoyed expressing and releasing their emotions through singing poetry, which led to the development of the song form. During the Yuan and Song Dynasties, notably in the Song Dynasty, there was a pinnacle period for the development of traditional culture. The music notation and styles of songs were standardized and codified, while the variability in length in Yuan drama and Song Ci (Ci is a type of classical Chinese poetry, originating in the Tang Dynasty and fully developed in the Song Dynasty) reflected their advantage in easy memorization and singing. Consequently, ancient Chinese poetry art songs underwent further development during this era.

Due to the practice of writings poems before composing music, poets strictly followed established norms and standards when composing their poems. Composers then set the poems to music by following one-note-to-one-word, leading to a clear and straightforward tonality. Furthermore, both the structure and variation in rhythm of the music were centered around the poetic meaning and ideorealm, so that the poems and music became an integrated whole.

1.2 Elegant Language

One of the foremost focuses of artistic creation in ancient Chinese poetry art songs is the elegant language. Leveraging the traditional advantages of ancient Chinese, ancient poets paid great attention to both the diction and syntax of their works. The reasons behind this are twofold. Firstly, whether in the pre-Qin period or the Ming and Qing dynasties, there were strict requirements on the forms of ancient Chinese poetry art songs, such as fixed word counts, sentence structure, number of sentences, and rhyme schemes. As a consequence, ancient poetry already had a high standard of language and content. Secondly, the composer would often select poems that were rich in meaning, and characterized by an elegant style and beautiful language when crafting their own works. This practice laid the groundwork for the highbrow and refined style that is a hallmark of ancient Chinese poetry art songs.

1.3 The Melody is Rich in Rhythm

Ancient Chinese Poetry art songs feature rich and distinct rhythms in the melodic structure of tune. Unlike the folk songs of ethnic minorities such as Tibetans, Bais, and Miaos in China, they are inherently meticulous in metre, level and oblique tone, and rhyme.

Ancient Chinese characters are classified into four tone categories: rising tone, level tone, falling tone, and entering tone, which roughly correspond to the four main tones of modern Mandarin Chinese. The level tone is also known as Yang tone and Yin tone, which is unique. These tones are cadenced. Composers must take into account the suitability of tones and pitches, as well as the pronunciation of words and phrases when creating. Rhyming is a crucial aspect, and the melody should follow the cadence of the poem or verse. Moreover, due to the strong chanting feature of ancient poetry, composers must adhere to this characteristic, and adjust the melody based on the variations in metre and rhyme. It can be said that the music melody of ancient poetry songs is determined by the tone of the poem.

2. Singing Skills of Ancient Chinese Poetry Art Songs

2.1 Control of Emotional Connotation of Ancient Poetry

Ancient Chinese poetry art songs are created by poetry, which demands singers to comprehend and evaluate the emotional and artistic tenor of the poem and the poet. The primary task is to understand the meaning, imagery and language, followed by an examination of the poetic techniques and stylistic elements. To fully appreciate the emotional connotation of poetry, these aspects must be integrated to form a comprehensive interpretation.

Therefore, this requires singers of ancient poetry art songs to have literary competence and an appreciation of the poet's historical context, emotional and aesthetic connotations, the poet's life, and artistic conception of the poem. Only by reaching a state where their emotions and thoughts merge seamlessly with those of the ancient poets can singers fully utilize their singing skills and convey the authenticity of poetry effectively.

2.2 Control of Breath and Volume

Breath control is a crucial skill for singers, serving as a foundation for stable and effective vocal performance. Ancient Chinese poetry art songs differ from modern songs in that they require precise breath control based on chanting characteristic of lyrics and using the "one sings and the other three join in" form to express emotions. For low-pitched songs, such as the first half of Riverside Town, which evokes a profound sense of sadness for lost loved ones, singers should focus on breathing and pauses for effective expression. Additionally, singers must control their volume, open their upper register, and gradually advance their singing to effectively convey the heavy and mournful emotions through their breath. In the second half of the song, they should focus on breath control, avoiding singing too loudly, and leaving adequate space to create a softer performance.

2.3 Control of Articulation and Vocalization

Based on the tonal and metrical features of "rising tone, level tone falling tone, and entering tone" in ancient Chinese characters, singers must pay close attention to their articulation and vocalization. In the high register, they should avoid overly aggressive or strained high notes, striking a balance between strength and delicacy. In the low register, the emphasis should be on subtlety and stability to achieve a natural-sounding tone. The song, Phonetic Hairpin, evokes powerful emotions of separation and parting, with a variety of rhymes, such as the words "teng", "qing", and "li". Singers must enunciate clearly, creating a precise rhyme. Their mouth should remain partially open to ensure a natural transition. The voice should not rely solely on being pushed too far back, in order to

achieve a delicate and melancholic tone that conveys emotion correctly.

2.4 Control of Rhythm and Tempo

Ancient Chinese poetry art songs differ from modern music in that they prioritize naturalness and coherence above a strong and varied sense of rhythm. Given the chanting characteristics of ancient poetry, singers need to chant, and sing while maintaining a deep understanding of the original rhythm. For instance, the song, *The Moon over the West River*, has a typical classical style, featuring a 4/4 beats and slow tempo. During the performance, singers should convey a relaxed feeling. In the line “startled by magpies leaving the branch in moonlight,” the first four words call for a soft and gentle rhythm, while the final two words should follow a normal rhythm. At the song’s end, singers should utilize a scattered beat and slow tempo to echo the beginning, reinforcing the primary melody and rhythm of the piece.

3. Grasp of the Singing Style of Ancient Chinese Poetry Art Songs

3.1 Pay attention to integrating the Emotional Connotation of Ancient Poetry

Drawing from the analysis of the singing skills of ancient Chinese poetry art songs, it is pivotal for singers to capture the emotional connotation of the ancient poetry when singing. Therefore, the primary consideration in grasping the singing style of ancient Chinese poetry art songs is to pay attention to the emotional connotation.

Due to the elegant and profound features of ancient poetry, singers must avoid affectation and extravagance when singing, and instead exhibit diverse singing styles that correspond with the various styles of poetry. For poetry characterized by its gentle and implicit content, singers should convey the emotions of “hesitation to speak”; for poetry that is bold and unrestrained, singers should sing with the heroic feeling, conveying the genuine emotional connotation of songs.

3.2 Pay Attention to Appreciating the Rhythm of Ancient Poetry

Ancient poetry relies on concise language and forms of metre and rhyme to convey meaning. To capture the singing style accurately, it is crucial to appreciate the rhythm of poetry. Rhyme is a fundamental element of poetic structure, where identical sounds are used for rhyming, with a repeated pattern. For example, in the song, *Spring Morning*, the majority of the rhymes are the sound “o”. Additionally, there are many instances where there are fewer syllables but more sounds, which singers need to handle with care. They should be mindful of the final sounds of the words, prevent the sound “o” from becoming too similar to the sound “a”, and emphasize smooth and accurate pronunciation. It is essential for singers to connect the relationships between sounds, rhyme, and tone cohesively, without dragging out tones or pitches excessively.

Conclusion:

To sum up, ancient Chinese poetry art songs have made indelible marks on the history of both art and culture. Using poetry as its vehicle, this unique and diverse form of music has created a new art form and propelled the development of human art and culture. For one thing, ancient Chinese poetry art songs have undergone continuous innovation and integration, resulting in a voice art form with national characteristics. For another, their lyrics provide a complete and vivid portrayal of our country’s ancient history and traditional culture. As they are sung and passed down, they not only shape people’s thoughts and morality but also preserve and promote the profound essence and traditional culture of the Chinese nation. Therefore, a thorough analysis of the characteristic features, exploration of singing skills, and understanding of the unique styles of ancient Chinese poetry art songs are necessary to fully appreciate the beauty of classical culture and the significance of inheriting our traditional culture.

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