

The Study of Singing Techniques and Performance of the Aria “Look at Your Loved Ones Again” in the Opera Yimeng Mountain

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Abstract

This study had two main objectives: (1) to examine and analyze the singing techniques and performance of the aria “Look at Your Loved Ones Again” from the opera Yimeng Mountain; and (2) to examine the practice guidelines for singing and performing the aria “Look at Your Loved Ones Again” in the opera Yimeng Mountain. The research involved four professional voice instructors and opera performers with expertise in Chinese national opera. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, expert evaluations, and performance observations, using interview protocols, expert evaluation forms, and a performance analysis rubric. Thematic content analysis and cross-case comparison were employed to identify recurring patterns and insights.

The findings revealed that the aria requires advanced vocal techniques, including smooth register transitions, breath support, and tonal modulation. A distinctive stylistic feature is the integration of Chinese folk singing elements with Western bel canto. The character’s emotional journey from nostalgia and sorrow to internal conflict and heroic determination demands expressive vocal coloring, dynamic phrasing, and dramatic contrast. Structurally, the aria unfolds through lyrical and dramatic phases shaped by tempo, rhythm, and orchestration. Based on expert perspectives, performance guidelines were proposed, focusing on resonance adjustment, diction clarity, emotional pacing, coordinated movement, and facial expression. Stage elements such as lighting, props, and chorus interaction were also emphasized. These results provide a framework for singers, educators, and directors to achieve both technical precision and emotional depth.

Keywords

Aria Performance Techniques, Vocal Modulation, Chinese National Opera, Expressive Interpretation



Statement and Significance of the Problems

The aria “Look at Your Loved Ones Again” is part of the 2018 Chinese National Opera Development Project, a key initiative supported by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Zhan, 2022). Yimeng Mountain, composed by the Shandong Song and Dance Theatre and co-created by Wang Xiaoling, Luan Kai, and colleagues, has been performed over 170 times nationwide in forms such as national tours, university productions, choral adaptations, and concert versions, attracting more than 300,000 audience members since its premiere in December 2018. In July 2021, the opera was adapted into a film version and received widespread acclaim. The People’s Daily praised it as “a new pursuit in national opera creation” and “a spiritual cornerstone of contemporary culture and art” (Zhan, 2022).

The storyline centers on the revolutionary base at Yimeng Mountain during the Anti-Japanese War, highlighting the strong bonds between local villagers and Eighth Route Army soldiers. Through depictions of courageous sacrifices and “ordinary heroes,” the opera vividly expresses the Yimeng spirit. The aria “Look at Your Loved Ones Again”, taken from the opera’s third scene, represents Sun Jiulong’s most significant musical moment, portraying his inner emotional struggle when the enemy threatens hidden civilians and wounded soldiers. In an act of valor, Sun Jiulong prepares to sacrifice his life in defense of his beliefs, making this aria a central moment within the opera (Zhan, 2022).

Among various forms of artistic expression, Chinese national opera holds a prominent place as it reflects the cultural ethos and worldview of the nation (Luo, 2019). In recent years, both the Central Committee of the Communist Party and wider society have increased their attention to the development of original Chinese operas. Yimeng Mountain, as an original national opera, exemplifies the spiritual core of the Chinese people. Luo Shugang, Minister of Culture and Tourism, described it as “an opera of profound ideological significance and exceptional artistic merit. It is compelling, emotionally engaging, and deeply moving. It is a work that inspires reflection and conveys spiritual transformation” (Luo, 2019, p. 12). Recognized for its impact, Yimeng Mountain was selected as a key repertoire item in the 2018 National Opera Inheritance and Development Project, one of only five works chosen nationwide. The opera’s portrayal of revolutionary camaraderie, unity between military and civilians, and the Yimeng spirit represents an invaluable contribution to contemporary Chinese cultural heritage (Zhan, 2022).

Structurally, the aria follows a bipartite musical form with a prelude, Section A, and Section B. Measures 1–7 of the prelude feature varied musical textures, including

broken chords, arpeggios, and octaves, establishing a somber atmosphere while setting the foundation for the character's emotional struggle. Dynamic shifts throughout Sections A and B further express intensity and dramatic depth, drawing the singer into the unfolding conflict (Geng, 2021)

Despite its significance, many Chinese vocal students lack an understanding of the opera's creative background and narrative, and encounter technical difficulties in performance. Common challenges include unsteady breathing, limited dynamic range in the lower register, and insufficient control in the upper register, which reduce expressive integrity (Li, 2020). In addition, the absence of detailed musical analysis often leads to performances dominated by excessive loudness rather than nuanced interpretation. These issues highlight the urgent need to strengthen vocal training that integrates technical mastery with interpretive and cultural understanding.

Research on vocal pedagogy has long emphasized the importance of breath management, resonance, and register balance in developing consistent vocal production (McKinney, 2005; Sundberg, 1987). These technical foundations are highly relevant to the aria "Look at Your Loved Ones Again" from Yimeng Mountain, which requires advanced tonal modulation, vibrato control, and dynamic phrasing. Within the Chinese context, scholars highlight the integration of folk aesthetics with Western Bel Canto methods. Zhan (2022) views Yimeng Mountain as a milestone in national opera, which fuses pentatonic scales and ornamentation with Western harmonic frameworks, while Geng (2021) provides a detailed musical analysis of its bipartite structure and dramatic contrasts. Pedagogical studies further reveal that Chinese vocal students often struggle with unstable breathing, weak lower-register dynamics, and limited interpretive depth, pointing to the need for training that combines technique with cultural understanding (Li, 2020; Chen, 2019). From an international perspective, performance theory emphasizes that practical interpretation involves not only technical accuracy but also expressive embodiment through gesture, timing, and emotional pacing (Sloboda, 2000; Davidson, 2001). Taken together, these studies establish the significance of analyzing Yimeng Mountain as both a cultural artifact and a pedagogical model, while also justifying the present study's dual focus on technical analysis and practice guidelines.

Ultimately, this study aims to analyze the vocal techniques and performance strategies employed in Yimeng Mountain, with a specific focus on the aria "Look at Your Loved Ones Again." By engaging with the opera's historical and narrative context, students can enhance their aesthetic awareness and apply appropriate techniques in practice. This aria, which represents



Sun Jiulong's core dramatic expression, involves complex vocal demands and intricate emotional transitions that significantly elevate its difficulty level, making it especially suitable for focused study by baritone students. Moreover, the study is significant because it addresses existing deficiencies in vocal pedagogy, supports the preservation of Chinese operatic culture, and offers a framework for integrating Chinese folk elements with Western Bel Canto practice (Geng, 2021; Zhan, 2022). In doing so, it contributes not only to the refinement of technical and interpretive skills but also to sustaining the artistic and cultural value of contemporary Chinese opera.

Research Objectives

1. To study and analyze the singing techniques and performance practices of the aria "Look at Your Loved Ones Again" in the opera Yimeng Mountain.
2. To examine the practice guidelines for singing and performing the aria "Look at Your Loved Ones Again" in the opera Yimeng Mountain.

Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative research project. It focused on analyzing the current situation and challenges Chinese vocal students face when performing operatic selections. By examining the vocal techniques and character interpretation in the aria, the study aims to enhance performers' understanding of rhythmic and dynamic nuances, enabling a more expressive and accurate portrayal of the character Sun Jiulong. Hopefully, this research will benefit scholars and students aspiring to master this repertoire. In the future, more skilled performers are expected to emerge, enriching the portrayal of Sun Jiulong, particularly in his iconic aria "Look at Your Loved Ones Again". This work is especially suited for baritone singers and holds great potential for further interpretative exploration.

Key Informants

The key informants in this study consisted of four vocal music professors selected through purposive sampling. They were chosen based on their academic reputation, professional expertise, and extensive experience in Chinese opera singing techniques, particularly in performing the Yimeng Mountain. The selection process emphasized ensuring that the participants possessed both scholarly and practical backgrounds in vocal performance and pedagogy.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in person and online. Each session focused on exploring technical aspects of vocal production, interpretive strategies, and performance practices relevant to the aria "Look at Your Loved Ones Again."

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants were invited to review and confirm the accuracy of the transcripts. To maintain confidentiality, the names of the informants are not disclosed; instead, their insights were synthesized and analyzed to identify recurring themes and expert perspectives that informed the study's findings.

Research Instruments

The instruments employed in this study included in-depth interviews, structured observations, and document analysis. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the collected data, observation checklists, interview protocols, and audio/video recording devices were utilized.

Data Collection

The data collection process was conducted as follows:

1. The researcher sought official permission to validate the research instruments.
2. Approval was obtained for data collection from the relevant authorities.
3. Data were collected on-site at Xi'an Conservatory of Music through interviews, observations, and document reviews.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process consisted of several systematic steps. First, all interview transcripts and video recordings were carefully reviewed and categorized according to data type (verbal responses, observational notes, and performance excerpts). A qualitative content analysis approach was employed to identify recurring concepts, patterns, and themes. Coding was conducted iteratively, using both inductive and deductive strategies, to ensure that the emerging categories reflected the empirical data while also aligning with established theoretical frameworks.

In analyzing singing techniques, the study drew upon principles from vocal pedagogy (McKinney's "Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults"), voice science (the Source-Filter Theory of voice production), and breath management theories (Appoggio and costal-diaphragmatic breathing models). These frameworks were applied to evaluate aspects such as breath support, resonance adjustment, register transition, diction clarity, and tonal modulation. Additionally, Bel Canto principles (including *chiaroscuro* balance and *legato* phrasing) and Chinese folk vocal aesthetics (emphasis on *timbre*, *ornamentation*, and *narrative expressiveness*) were integrated into the analysis to account for the fusion of Western and Chinese techniques in the aria.



Performance practices were further examined through the lens of expressive performance theory (Sloboda, 2000) and musical semiotics, with a focus on how phrasing, dynamics, and stage movement convey character emotions and dramatic context. Triangulation was achieved by cross-comparing interview insights, expert evaluations, and live performance observations, which strengthened the validity of the findings. The synthesized results highlighted not only the technical demands of the aria “Look at Your Loved Ones Again” but also the interpretive strategies necessary to achieve authenticity and dramatic depth.

Results

The analysis of the aria “Look at Your Loved Ones Again” from the opera Yimeng Mountain demonstrated that successful performance requires a sophisticated integration of vocal technique, stylistic awareness, dramatic interpretation, and stagecraft. The findings can be presented under four interrelated domains:

Objective 1: Study and analyze the singing techniques and performance practices of the aria “Look at Your Loved Ones Again.” The analysis revealed that this aria demands a high level of vocal sophistication, as it integrates technical mastery with deep cultural and dramatic expression.

In Advanced Vocal Techniques, the aria requires seamless register transitions, particularly across the baritone passaggio, to maintain timbral consistency and avoid tonal breaks. Breath support, anchored in costal-diaphragmatic control (appoggio), is essential for sustaining extended legato lines and delivering climactic phrases with resonance and power. Singers must demonstrate control over tonal modulation subtle crescendos and decrescendos that mirror the character’s emotional shifts from nostalgia to heroic resolve. Additionally, precise vibrato management and stylistic ornamentation (grace notes, portamento, trills) enhance musical detail and provide expressive nuance.

Stylistic Integration, A key characteristic of the aria lies in the fusion of Chinese folk vocal aesthetics with Western Bel Canto traditions. Folk techniques such as glottal stops, flexible portamento slides, and pentatonic melodic patterns are combined with Western practices of chiaroscuro balance, legato phrasing, and robust breath projection. This synthesis illustrates the dual artistic goals of national opera: to preserve cultural heritage while advancing operatic technique. For vocal pedagogy, this hybrid model underscores the importance of training students in both Western technical foundations and culturally specific interpretive styles.

Emotional and Dramatic Expression, Dramatically, Sun Jiulong's aria represents a turning point in the opera, requiring the singer to embody multiple emotional states in rapid succession. The music alternates between reflective, lyrical passages and forceful, declamatory sections. Performers are challenged to vary timbre shifting from a warm, introspective tone to a brighter, more penetrating sound while adjusting dynamics to express the character's inner struggle and eventual heroic determination. Emotional pacing becomes central: singers must sustain tension across long phrases, release it strategically at climaxes, and shape transitions in a way that mirrors the dramatic narrative.

Stage Presence and Performance Dynamics, the study found that vocal technique alone does not guarantee an effective performance. Performers who combined expressive singing with symbolic gestures, controlled movement, and chorus interaction produced the most substantial dramatic impact. The integration of stagecraft, including facial expression, spatial awareness, lighting, and props, enriched the storytelling and provided the audience with a multi-sensory experience. These findings reinforce the operatic principle that singing is inseparable from acting, and highlight the necessity of developing singers as complete stage artists.

Objective 2: Examine the practice guidelines for singing and performing the aria "Look at Your Loved Ones Again." Drawing on expert evaluations and thematic analysis, the study formulated a set of practical guidelines that address both technical challenges and interpretive demands of the aria:

Breath Management and Resonance Adjustment, Singers should practice sustained legato passages using appoggio breathing, focusing on resonance balance across registers to achieve smooth transitions through the passaggio. Specific exercises include sustained scales, messa di voce, and vowel modification drills. Diction and Textual Clarity: Training should emphasize the precise articulation of Mandarin vowels and consonants, supported by IPA-based practice. Clear diction ensures that the narrative content remains intelligible while preserving musical line. Stylistic Integration Training, Rehearsals should balance Chinese folk ornamentation such as glottal attacks, pentatonic inflections, and portamento with Bel Canto methods of phrasing and dynamic control. Comparative practice between Western art songs and Chinese folk-inspired passages can help students internalize this dual stylistic approach. Emotional Phrasing and Vocal Coloring, Students should be trained to shape dynamics, vary timbre, and use expressive phrasing to reflect Sun Jiulong's psychological development. Role-play exercises and dramatic reading of the text before singing may enhance interpretive depth.



Stage and Dramatic Training, Practical guidelines include integrating symbolic gestures, movement, and chorus interaction into rehearsal routines. Performers should coordinate vocal and physical expression to achieve a cohesive theatrical presentation. Rehearsals that simulate stage conditions (lighting, props, spatial arrangement) are recommended.

Pedagogical Application and Cross-Cultural Perspective, Instructors are encouraged to frame the aria as a model of cultural hybridity. Students should be guided to analyze how Chinese folk idioms and Western operatic practices converge, fostering adaptability and interpretive authenticity. This contributes to a broader understanding of national opera as a vehicle for cultural identity and innovation.

Finally, the study demonstrates that the aria “Look at Your Loved Ones Again” is both technically demanding and pedagogically significant. The findings not only provide a detailed analysis of the vocal techniques and performance practices required but also establish practical guidelines for training singers. By highlighting the integration of Chinese folk traditions with Western operatic methods, the results contribute to the preservation and advancement of Chinese national opera. For educators, these insights offer a framework for designing curriculum and rehearsal strategies that promote technical precision, cultural literacy, and dramatic authenticity, ensuring that future generations of singers can perform this repertoire with both artistic depth and interpretive integrity.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the profound impact that breathing techniques and cultural synthesis have on vocal performance in Chinese national opera, particularly in the aria Look at Your Loved Ones Again from Yimeng Mountain. The research revealed that mastery of advanced vocal techniques, such as smooth register transitions, breath control, and tonal modulation, is essential for achieving the expressive depth required in operatic storytelling.

Furthermore, integrating Chinese folk elements with Western Bel Canto methods highlights a unique cross-cultural approach that preserves the traditional beauty of Chinese melodic phrasing and elevates vocal performance through enhanced breath control and dynamic expression. In practice, singers were found to employ glottal stops, pentatonic inflections, and flexible portamento to emphasize folk vocal color, while simultaneously applying Bel Canto principles such as legato phrasing, chiaroscuro resonance balance, *mezza voce*, and controlled vibrato to achieve tonal stability and projection. Ornamentation, including grace

notes and trills, was strategically applied to intensify emotional storytelling, while precise Mandarin diction and vowel alignment ensured clarity of text without sacrificing vocal line. This synthesis of techniques enriches the performer's capacity to convey complex emotional narratives with authenticity and power, offering a model of how national opera integrates tradition with universal operatic standards. The study also emphasizes the importance of stage presence and dramatic interpretation, where vocal prowess is complemented by compelling stagecraft, coordinated movements, and symbolic gestures that deepen the audience's engagement. Such holistic training encourages vocalists to master technical precision and embrace theatrical expression as part of their artistic delivery.

Discussion

The findings from the analysis of the aria "Look at Your Loved Ones Again" in Yimeng Mountain underscore the intricate relationship between vocal technique, dramatic expression, and cultural integration. The aria demonstrates how Chinese national opera effectively blends Western Bel Canto techniques with Chinese folk elements, creating a hybrid that is both technically demanding and emotionally compelling (Zhan, 2022; Geng, 2021). A central aspect is the mastery of breath support and tonal control, which is consistent with McKinney's (2005) emphasis on breath management and resonance balance as foundations of vocal pedagogy, and Sundberg's (1987) discussion of the physiological basis of tonal modulation. Performers in this study relied on sustained diaphragmatic engagement to maintain legato phrasing and dynamic flexibility, particularly in passages requiring smooth transitions between registers. Equally important is the cultural synthesis in vocal techniques, where Chinese folk devices such as glottal stops, portamento, and ornamentation intersect with Bel Canto's connected phrasing and chiaroscuro resonance. This reflects earlier scholarship that identifies Yimeng Mountain as a model of cultural hybridity, uniting national identity with universal operatic aesthetics (Zhan, 2022; Chen, 2019). Such integration enhances vocal texture and storytelling, ensuring that performances preserve traditional Chinese color while benefiting from the clarity and technical stability of Western operatic training.

The findings also highlight the role of expressive phrasing and dramatic realism, where performers manipulated timbre, resonance placement, and dynamic shifts to convey Sun Jiulong's emotional arc from nostalgia to heroic determination. This aligns with Sloboda's (2000) theory that musical performance is a process of meaning-making through dynamics and timing, and with Davidson's (2001) insights into the role of the body and gesture in expressive singing. In this

context, vocal coloration, diction precision, and nuanced crescendo–decrescendo patterns became critical tools for embodying the character’s psychological depth. Finally, the study affirms the significance of stagecraft and performance dynamics, where coordinated movement, symbolic gesture, and chorus interaction enhanced dramatic intensity. As Chen (2019) and Li (2020) noted, many Chinese vocal students lack integrated training in both technique and performance context; the present findings suggest that incorporating stage presence, lighting, and spatial awareness into pedagogy can directly address these deficiencies. Taken together, the results advocate for a holistic pedagogical model that unites vocal technique, emotional interpretation, and theatrical expression. In doing so, this study contributes to both the refinement of vocal pedagogy and the preservation of Chinese national opera as a living cultural form.

Suggestions

1. Implications of research findings

1) Singers/Students: Gain clearer training models that combine Chinese folk techniques with Bel Canto, improving technique and expressiveness.

2) Teachers: Can design curricula emphasizing breath support, diction, and emotional phrasing.

3) Stage Directors: Benefit from insights on movement, gesture, and chorus interaction to enhance dramatic effect.

4) Scholars: Obtain a framework for studying cross-cultural vocal pedagogy in Chinese opera.

2. Recommendation for Further Studies

1) Because the sample was small, future research should include more participants and use longitudinal methods.

2) Because this study focused on the baritone voice, further work should analyze other voice types.

3) Comparative research between Chinese and Western opera could identify the best pedagogical practices.

4) Explore technological tools (e.g., breath analysis, acoustic feedback) to support vocal training.

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