

Application of Contemporary Piano Melody in Local Chinese Opera

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Abstract

The study examines the implications and outcomes of the artistic fusion between Chinese opera and Western piano. The investigation specifically highlights the local significance of such fusions, underscoring their role in regional cultural identity and development. Using both historical references and a practical case study, 'The Canal Ballad,' the paper advocates for the propagation and conservation of Chinese opera within modern cultural and performance studies and explores innovative pathways for compositions that integrate various regional opera forms. This fusion not only preserves the traditional art form but also acts as a cultural landmark, enhancing local heritage and attracting cultural tourism, thus supporting sustainable local development.

Keywords: Composition, Hybridity, Opera

Introduction

In the late Qing Dynasty, the Treaty Ports became hubs for cultural exchange where Chinese musicians first encountered Western operatic and orchestral traditions. The early 20th century saw further acceleration of this exchange as musicians like Xiao Youmei, who studied in Germany, returned to China and established institutions such as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1927, which became a focal point for the blending of Eastern and Western musical traditions. The evolution was characterized by the infusion of traditional Chinese musical forms into Western opera styles. Many seminal works that emerged during the 1930s, such as Aaron Avshalomov's 'Guanyin' and Cai Bingbai's 'World Song', sparked a transition from traditional opera to a modern form.

The progression of modern Chinese opera has distinct stages, beginning from the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 through the New Opera Symposium in 1957 (Haili, 2016). This era marked the first phase of contemporary opera development, where composers sought new grounds in Chinese opera, following the path defined by 'The White-Haired Girl' by Yan Jinxuan (Mittler, 1997). By the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic in 1959, more mature and influential operas surfaced, the prime example being the 'Honghu Red Guards'. Similarly, 'Sister Jiang' drew upon opera music, paving the way for a methodological shift in opera creation. Modern Chinese opera is an important fusion of ancient Chinese culture and modern Western sounds, leading to the evolution of new styles and genres (Lei, 2011). Despite initial hurdles and slow development, it has significantly contributed to the rich tapestry of Chinese music. This paper seeks to delve

into the development of contemporary Chinese opera, focusing on the application of piano melodies in the opera narratives.

The purposes

1. To analyze the intricate relationship between the application of contemporary piano melodies and local Chinese opera
2. To explore the unique contributions of local opera and contemporary piano melodies in promoting regional cultural identity and development
3. To assess how these musical fusions can serve as cultural landmarks, enhancing local heritage and attracting cultural tourism

Literary Review

Matteo Ricci is often regarded as one of the first significant bridges between Eastern and Western culture in the early stages of intercultural communication. Zhang (2006) pays homage to Ricci's contributions and highlights his patience. The influence of these early voyagers was cemented during the 18th century as Western musical traditions permeated the Chinese royal court via missionaries who had been appointed to administrative roles (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006). Once trade ports were established in the aftermath of China's defeats to Western powers this influence spread and by the early 20th century, cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin saw the rise of military bands and orchestras (Han, 1995).

With the New Culture Movement in 1919, Western music gained popularity in urban China, especially among the educated elite (Yang & Saffle, 2017). The return of overseas-educated Chinese scholars, the introduction of Western music curricula in universities, and the foundation of the National Conservatory of Music in Shanghai in 1927 paved the way for a widespread embrace of Western musical influences (Yang, 2012). Prominent figures like Shen Gongxin, Xiao Youmei, and Ma Sicong played pivotal roles in laying the foundational framework for Western music in China (Lu & Wu, 1989). Furthermore, foreign musicians, such as Alexander Tcherepnin and Aaron Avshalomov, influenced the evolution of Western-styled music in the country (Yang, Mikkonen & Winzenburg, 2020).

In the early twentieth century, the melding of Western and Eastern musical styles in China took on a distinctive identity, which Barbara Mittler (1997) aptly termed as 'New Chinese Music'. Mittler postulates that this modern era was characterized by Chinese musicians innovatively weaving their traditions into the fabric of Western musical forms. The resultant fusion was a conscious effort to craft a genre that resonated with its dual heritage and signals the fading of cultural boundaries (White, 2012). This echoes Nettl's (1985) observation of the world's musical cultures converging. One of the most significant forms of this contact is exoticism (Bellman, 1998). Over time, the range of exoticism has broadened to envelop popular music genres, highlighting the absorption of Western musical elements by non-Western cultures (Hayward, 1999). However, it has historically been tethered to the narratives of colonialism and imperialism. In music, this often translates to a

condescending representation, echoing the sentiment of dominators over the dominated (Li, 2021). Orientalism, closely aligned with exoticism, offers a similar lens to understand these musical interactions (Said, 1978). Orientalism often depicts the East through a Western lens, yet in the context of Chinese opera, we witness an intriguing inversion: rather than a passive absorption of Western motifs, Chinese musicians (and foreign composers focused on Chinese themes) actively adopt and reinterpret Western sounds, challenging traditional power dynamics.

Postcolonial critiques further illuminate the intricacies of power relations and hegemonic structures inherent in Western musical practices (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000). The application of postcolonial theory to every musical interchange in our globalized world, however, is not without its detractors. Bellman (2011), for instance, contests this approach, pushing scholars to consider the tapestry of intercultural music that may exist beyond - or even in defiance of - established hegemonies. In today's interconnected world, widespread interconnectedness has accelerated the spread of music and engendered a global market for world music (White, 2012). It is fascinating how this world music often embodies a hybrid essence - somewhere between the completely unfamiliar and the already known. In this way, the global spread of music is sometimes perceived as an extension of American culture - a form of cultural imperialism (Taylor, 2014). Nevertheless, this has not deterred the proliferation of varied popular music forms in non-Western territories, underlining the interplay between globalization, national identity, and resistance (Hong, 2021).

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research design. Drawing on academic documents and field data, the study aims to unravel the relationships between contemporary piano melodies and Chinese opera. For this purpose, a variety of research techniques were utilized, including document review, surveys, interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. The research period spanned August 2022 to March 2023, with a geographic focus on Futian Province, China, purposely chosen for its fusion of Chinese opera and piano.

The population for this study encompassed a range of groups connected to the piano, including groups of experts in music and performing arts, practitioners from the Mei Li Art School in Futian Province, and general audiences of opera performances. Experts in dance and piano acted as key informants for the research. Each of these individuals has consented to being named in this paper.

Data was collected using survey, interview, and observational forms for both participant and non-participant observations. Forms were also used to gather data during focus group discussions. Additional data was collected from relevant documents from sources such as Mahasarakham University Academic Resources Center and internet research databases, supplemented by field data collection. After collection, data underwent a classification and validation process by means of source and methodological triangulation. Data analysis entailed examination, categorization, summarization, and qualitative analysis of each group of data.

The information was then organized according to the research aims, culminating in this descriptive analysis of the results.

Results

Chinese opera has evolved from three principal art forms: folk dance, singing, and burlesque. These stage arts, with roots in traditional culture, have matured over the eras of the Han, Tang, Song, and Jin Dynasties to comprise a comprehensive representation of literature, music, dance, art, martial arts, acrobatics, and performing arts. This form of performance, which often draws inspiration from historical events, folklore, and religious beliefs, includes over 300 distinct styles of local and national opera such as Peking Opera, Shaoxing Opera, Henan Opera, and Cantonese Opera. Of these, Peking Opera, considered a symbol of Chinese national opera, Kunqu Opera and Cantonese Opera have been recognized as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2001, 2009, and 2010, respectively.

Chinese opera offers a standardized portrayal of characters, which requires an externalization of the characters' thoughts and emotions. The cyclical, continuous process of building and refining has led to the formation of the performance system. Puxian opera, with its simple, elegant, and unique artistic style, has become the representative form, characterized by its rich and delicate operational language. This distinctive character, compared to other forms of Chinese opera and masculine movements in contemporary Chinese classical dances, underscores the traditional artistic value and cultural value of Chinese opera.

The Soundtrack of Chinese Opera

There is an array of different melodic rules that characterizes traditional Chinese opera. In the northwest, melodies akin to the minor scale are common, whereas a seven-tone scale dominates the northeast, creating a vibrant, leaping rhythm. Eastern and Central China lean towards a five-tone scale, characterized by a smoother, less jumpy melody, accompanied by a precise timing. Unusual rhythmic patterns, such as those produced by the qin (zither) and the coexisting duple and triple rhythms in Peking opera, contribute to the uniqueness of Chinese opera. Singing usually employs a unilateral chorus style, with interactive choruses in Sichuan repertoire and organum-like choruses in Guangxi. The evolution of Chinese opera reflects the influence of the social environment, personal experiences, and advancements in singing technology. Starting with a straightforward style, it gradually assimilated traditional operatic singing methods, incorporating elements of national singing, Western bel canto singing, and modern pop. This continual evolution and amalgamation of styles allowed Chinese opera to diversify and grow.

While traditional Chinese opera compositions are often backed by full symphony orchestras, there is a growing trend towards the inclusion of piano accompaniments. This shift not only streamlines rehearsals and vocal performances but also allows the piano to simulate the diverse sounds of an orchestra. Consequently, the piano is increasingly recognized as an essential tool in opera productions, enhancing the nuances of

performances and offering a holistic musical narrative that intertwines seamlessly with the vibrant tapestry of Chinese opera.

An Original Chinese Opera Composition with Piano Accompaniment

Building upon the intricacies and resonant capabilities of the piano as an accompanying instrument, the researchers created a novel opera composition, offering an exploration of narrative integration. The researchers incorporated elements from the narrative 'Qin Sheng, How Are You?' with the objective of resonating the deep-seated emotions of its characters and plot, drawing inspiration from the melodic undertones of The Canal Ballad.

The Canal Ballad is divided into six acts according to its structure. Qin Sheng exposes government corruption but is wanted in return. While fleeing, he meets Shui Honglian, a singer who is on the run because a wealthy family forced her to be an entertainer in a music and dance festival. To avoid government pursuit, they board the cargo ship of Li Xiaoguan to head to the capital seeking justice. Their days and nights together on the ship gradually nurture a mutual love. One day, when the boat docks, she meets Guan Yanyan, a lonely blind woman with her child. Honglian firmly abandons her love for Qin Sheng and asks him to take care of them. The boat's helmsman, Shuiyao, lusts after Honglian's beauty, discovers Qin Sheng's fake identity, and threatens Honglian to marry him. Considering the overall situation, she's prepared to sacrifice herself. However, Zhang Suiyao tries to sue the government, so Honglian decides to tip an oil lamp, setting the cargo ship on fire, and dies with it, ultimately letting Guan Yanyan, her child, and Qin Sheng escape smoothly. In the end, Qin Sheng successfully reaches the capital to report the corrupt officials, and Honglian's death was not in vain.

'Qin Sheng, where are you?' is a score selected from the fourth scene of The Canal Ballad. It depicts the struggle of Honglian on the skyline of a cargo ship at night. In the end, she chose to let Qin Sheng, her lover, take care of Guan Yanyan's mother and son to prevent Guan Yanyan from worrying. Historically, Qin Sheng is depicted as entrapped in the responsibility of tending to Guan Yan's visually impaired mother and child throughout the night. In contrast, Honglian remains outside the premises, her anticipation underscored by distant murmurs of merchant vessels (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Extract: 'Qin Sheng, are you in good spirits? Musical Notation (Source: Researchers, 2023)

The interweaving of the vocalist's timbre resonates with an underlying fragility. This recurrent motif offers a window into their uncertainty. Subsequently, the verses act as a reverberation of the aforementioned sentiments (Figures 2,3).



Figure 2 Verse - 'Chi Soup, Soup Remedy, Guard Against Scalding' (Source: Researchers, 2023)



Figure 3 Verse - 'As Chill Winds Resurge, Amplify Your Attire' (Source: Researchers, 2023)

The stage performance encapsulates the ambiance during Honglian's rendition. The accompanying musical arrangement, with minimalist bass chords, captures the melancholy and gravitas of Honglian's psyche. In the presented composition, the primary melodic structure has been crafted to synchronize with the lyrical content, predominantly emphasizing singular phonetic nuances. The research team employed rest rhythms within the score, specifically substituting the inaugural rhythm of each measure. This deliberate modulation interrupts the song's linear progression, attenuates the abrupt cessation effect, and amplifies the intricate emotional transitions experienced by the protagonist. Given that the foundational song employs traditional Chinese vocal techniques, the demands on the vocalist remain relatively consistent, retaining the soloist style characteristic of the national soprano. This piece serves as a conduit for the profound internal sentiments of the lead character.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated the relationship between contemporary piano melodies and Chinese opera, shedding light on how this fusion strengthens cultural identity and local development. The integration of contemporary piano into Chinese opera is a potent tool for cultural preservation and innovation. Furthermore, the emphasis on local traditions in the opera promotes regional development through cultural tourism, showcasing how local art forms can contribute to socio-economic objectives. The findings underscore the dual value of such musical fusions: enriching the artistic landscape and bolstering local cultural heritage, proving essential for sustained cultural and economic vitality.

Discussion

The composition created in this investigation fuses Chinese opera's narrative depth with the versatile sounds of the Western piano, which mirrors Mittler's (1997) observation of Chinese musicians integrating traditional elements into Western musical forms. However, the discussion proposed by Chan (2002), on the depth of Chinese identity retained within such fusion, becomes pertinent here. In 'The Canal Ballad', the intent was not merely to layer traditional Chinese elements onto Western modalities but to intertwine them.

Bellman's (2011) emphasis on moving beyond the fixed boundaries of established hegemonies serves as a poignant reminder of the multifaceted nature of musical compositions and interactions. Historically, music

has often been studied within the frameworks of dominant powers, cultural dominance, and overarching societal narratives. However, Bellman challenges this paradigm, encouraging scholars, musicians, and enthusiasts to delve deeper and uncover layers that might not be immediately visible within these hegemonic confines. This understanding closely aligns with our compositional approach in 'The Canal Ballad.' Rather than being a mere amalgamation of distinct musical traditions or a superficial representation of East meets West, the composition seeks to transcend stereotypical boundaries. Furthermore, its essence lies in its ability to resonate with universal human emotions and experiences.

The essence of transculturation and cultural hybridity also emerges as central to our composition's ethos (Yang & Saffle, 2017). The juxtaposition of Chinese opera's historical and cultural depth with the Western piano's tonality represents transcultural evolution, fusing two potent musical heritages. As the global musical landscape continues to evolve with the forces of globalization, cultural resistance, and national identity (Hong, 2021), compositions like 'The Canal Ballad' represent a conscious effort to embrace both the familiar and the foreign. The original composition in this investigation offers an exploration of musical hybridity. It pays homage to the rich legacies of Chinese opera and Western piano traditions, and contributes a fresh voice to the dialogue between these two rich musical cultures.

Discoveries or New Knowledge

This investigation analyzes the intricate relationship between the application of contemporary piano melodies and local Chinese opera. The results demonstrate that musical fusions can serve as cultural landmarks, enhancing local heritage and attracting cultural tourism.

Suggestions

The authors acknowledge certain methodological limitations. Notably, the study did not employ quantitative techniques such as visitor observation forms or extensive sampling of opera audiences, which could provide data on audience perceptions, which are crucial for understanding the reception of intercultural music compositions on a broader scale. Consequently, future research could benefit from integrating quantitative methods alongside qualitative approaches.

Local Chinese opera requires both propagation and conservation to ensure its continued presence as a cornerstone of Chinese cultural heritage. As such, the researchers recommend its incorporation within the domains of cultural and performance studies. Building upon this foundation, future research endeavors might consider exploring the confluence of various opera forms to craft contemporary creative works that resonate with the context of a modern China.

The third objective of this research aimed to assess how the fusion of Chinese opera with Western piano could act as a cultural landmark to attract tourism and foster sustainable local development. While the study highlighted potential pathways for cultural preservation and innovation, the direct impact on tourism remains

less defined. This suggests a need for a clearer operational framework that connects musical collaborations with tangible tourism outcomes.

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