The artistic characteristics of the "Major Aria" in the Chinese tragic opera -- Take the aria "I will love you in the afterlife" from the opera "Canal Ballad" as an example

Mengping Ye[1], Chutima Maneewattana[1, *], Lingling Liu[2]

[1]Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Bangkok, Thailand

[2]Guangxi Arts University, Nanning, Guangxi, China

Abstract. "Major Aria" is the last aria before the end of the tragic fate of the main character of the opera, as one of the most important aria of the whole opera, its emergence of the fate of the characters to explain the direction, predicted the sad end of the drama, the most representative embodiment of the work of the "sadness" and the artistic charm of the work. and the artistic charm of the work. In this paper, we take the "Major Aria" of Shui Honglian's role in the excellent representative opera "Canal Ballad" as the object of study, and explore its artistic characteristics, so as to provide some reference for opera workers.

Keywords: Chinese tragic opera; "Major Aria" ; Artistic characteristics.

1. Introduction

Opera is a highly integrated theatrical art, which involves elements of music, literature, drama, dance, stage art and many other artistic fields. The art of opera originated in Italy, in which the dramatic story serves as a script for music creation, and the music serves as a means to express the dramatic story, maximizing the performer's exquisite skills while bringing the music into the conflict of dramatic contradictions, producing a unique artistic aesthetic. Chinese tragic opera, refers to the dramatic story contains the tragic fate of the main character to die, the tragic theme of the emphasis and prominence of the main characters rely on the "Major Aria", in which the main character's death " Major Aria" before the death of the tragic performance has played a role in the performance of the tragedy of the fullest. The "Major Aria" reveals the tragic direction of the character's destiny through profound dramatic contradictions, thus emphasizing the sadness and deepening and sublimating the tragic theme of the whole opera, which is one of the "most important" aria.

In the development of Chinese opera, the tragic opera has always played the "protagonist". Mr. Li Shiyuan, an expert in the field of Chinese opera and a doctoral supervisor, mentioned in the Chinese Opera Yearbook that since ancient times, the dichotomy of "life" and "death" has been an eternal theme of drama, and that if there is no death in drama, there seems to be no "opera" at all. If there is no death in the theater, then it seems that there is no more "theater".The Chinese tragic operas can be divided into two categories: the first one is Chinese national opera, which is mainly created with elements of Chinese opera and folk songs, and mainly focuses on war in terms of subject matter, reacting to the conflict between the enemy and us, with representative works such as "Jiang Zhu Jun" (1964), "The party's daughter" (2004), "The ancient city of wild fire" (2005), etc. The other category is Chinese national opera, which is not based on Chinese opera. The other category is the operas other than the type of Chinese national operas, in which the positive operas are taken as the representative archetypes, such as "Regret for the past" (1981), "Wild" (1989), and "Cang Yuan" (1995). The Chinese tragic opera "Canal Ballad" discussed in this paper favors the first type of Chinese national opera above in terms of creative style, but it is different in terms of dramatic themes and musical performance, and has unique artistic characteristics. As the first original opera launched by the National Grand Theater of China (NCPA), "Canal Ballad" is of great significance, and moreover, it is the representative of excellent Chinese operas in the new period.

The National Grand Theater of China (NCPA) was completed in December 2007. As the largest theater complex in Asia and the highest hall of China's national performing arts, it provides a professional platform for China's outstanding opera works in terms of creation, performance and

promotion. Against this background, the premiere of "Canal Ballad" at the NCPA in June 2012 was of great significance. The opera "Canal Ballad" gathered China's most powerful first-line creative team, and took two years to create. Its creation and premiere were highly praised by opera librettists, songwriters, directors, performers, and critics, and it has been rehearsed, re-enacted, and toured across the country several times in the past five years. In the 2022 National Grand Theater Opera Festival, "Canal Ballad" will return to the stage with its original creative and performing team to commemorate the 10th anniversary of its premiere.

2. The opera "Canal Ballad"

2.1. Storyline of "Canal Ballad"

Based on the humanistic background of China's Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, the opera "Canal Ballad" presents a simple and fresh artistic style to the audience through an epic aesthetic perspective. The opera tells a story:

During the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty in China, a scholar, Qin Xiaosheng, exposes official corruption, which leads him to be pursued by the magistrates. On the way to escape from arrest, he meets Shui Honglian, a singer, who also flees along the banks of the Canal as she resists becoming a concubine. The two of them pretend to be performers of the colorful dragon boat at a song and dance competition dedicated to the canal. In order to escape arrest, Qin Xiaosheng puts on the clothes of sailor Li Xiaoguan in a hurry and pretends to be him, and the two of them board the boat of Zhang Shuiyao, and make their way to the north. Qin Xiaosheng and Shui Honglian fell in love with each other in times of trouble. Then, the bully shipowner Zhang Shuiyao coveted Shui Honglian's beauty and also hit on her.

When the ship passes by the pier in Suzhou, they meet Guan Yanyan, who has been seduced by the popular sailor Li Xiaoguan, got pregnant and gave birth to a child, and cried her eyes out. Zhang Shuiyao testifies that Qin Xiaosheng is Li Xiaoguan and Qin Xiaosheng is forced to live with Guan Yan Yan as he has no way to defend himself. Zhang Shuiyao discovered the real identity of Qin Xiaosheng recruited government officials to arrest him.In order to make the lover Qin Xiaosheng not fall into the trap, Shui Honglian kicked down the oil lamp burning boat, She was transformed into a blaze on the canal .....

2.2. Theater Design of Opera "Canal Ballad"

In the past Chinese tragic opera, Chinese national opera this type is mainly biased towards revolutionary themes, shaping the proletarian heroes who died for the revolution, such as the heroine in the opera "Zhu Jiang Jun", "The party's daughter" in the heroine Tian Yumei, etc., in the characterization of the character is often reflected in the "three prominent" principle: that is, in the characters highlight positive characters, in the positive characters highlight heroic characters, in the heroic characters highlight the main heroes. The principle of "three prominent" is often embodied in the characterization: namely, highlighting the positive characters among the characters, highlighting the heroic characters among the positive characters, and highlighting the main heroic characters among the heroic characters[1].The opera "Canal Ballad" brings us a change in the characterization of the tragic subject matter, from the proletarian warriors to the ordinary people of the marketplace, there is a new creation on the subject matter, there is no more talk about the "hero of the revolution", "sacrificing their lives for the country". Instead of talking about "revolutionary heroes" and "sacrificing one's life for the country", the theme was sublimated by "dying for love" in the role of minor characters, which triggered people's thinking about human nature and love.

The dramatic design of this opera is very ingenious. The conflicts and contradictions in the opera unfold because of the role of "Li Xiaoguan", which is a very special role and the key to the artistic realization of the conflicts in the drama. The main characters in the opera are Qin Xiaosheng, Shui Honglian, Guan Yanyan, and Zhang Shuiyao. The characters and their relationships are as follows:
Qin Xiaosheng: a scholar who has to disguise himself as "Li Xiaotuan" to escape arrest because he

has reported the corruption of officials, and falls in love with Shui Honglian, who is unable to tell the truth to Guan Yanyan.

Shui Honglian: a singer who loves Qin Xiaosheng and wants him to continue his life with Guan Yanyan by pretending to be Li Xiaoguan and suing corrupt officials, willing to sacrifice herself.
Guan Yanyan: A girl who was seduced and abandoned by Li Xiaoguan and had no choice but to give birth to a child. She cried herself blind and searched for Li Xiaoguan everywhere.

Zhang Shuiyao: a sinister ship owner who covets Shui Hong Lian's beauty and exposes Qin Xiaosheng as "Li Xiaotou" of escaping from arrest, which attracts officials and soldiers to arrest Qin.

It can be seen that although Li Xiaoguan is a "fictional character" in the opera, the development of the drama is closely related to him, and there are certain conflicts between each character and Li Xiaoguan in the drama. For example, if Qin Xiaosheng reveals to Guan Yanyan that he is pretending to be "Li Xiaotou", the real Li Xiaoguan has already abandoned her, so Guan Yanyan will not be able to withstand the blow, which reflects the contradiction of Qin Xiaosheng's deception of Guan Yanyan; for example, Shui Honglian is the one who knows about the situation; on the one hand, she is deeply in love with Qin Xiaosheng, on the other hand, she kindly hopes that Qin Xiaosheng will continue to play the role of "Li Xiaotou", which is a "fictional character". Here there is the "contradiction" of Shui Honglian's inner choice.

Through the design of the virtual character "Li Xiaoguan", the characters of "Canal Ballad" are intricately related and the plot is more exciting. This kind of drama design contrasts with the conflict between enemy and self in previous Chinese tragic operas, and the main theme of the art changes from the glorification of heroism in the early stage to the truth, goodness and beauty in the world.

3. The Artistic Characteristics of the "Major Aria" -"I will love you in the afterlife".

3.1. Artistic characteristics of the dramatic part of the "Major Aria".

Shui Honglian is a singer, she is beautiful and kind, passionate and spirited, love and hatred, she loved Qin Xiaosheng, but when she saw Guan Yanyan's attachment about "Li Xiaoguan", she dared to sacrifice for the sake of love on earth, showing a kind of love for Qin Xiaosheng and Guan Yanyan; and at the same time, she has a strong sense of justice, she supported Qin Xiaosheng to expose corrupt officials, encouraged him to go to the capital to report the case, in the face of possible danger, she was willing to die to cover him. At the same time, she has a strong sense of justice and mission. She supports Qin Xiaosheng in exposing the corrupt officials and encourages him to go to the capital to report to the imperial court. The "Major Aria" "I will love you in the afterlife" is the "last aria" of Shui Honglian, who "died a thousand deaths in her life, and her heart will not change in the nine springs" for the sake of her beloved Qin Xiaosheng.

This "Major Aria" is a drama that goes like this: The sinister boater Zhang Shuiyao found out the real identity of Qin Xiaosheng, and stole the magistrate to come to arrest him, and Shui Honglian stayed behind in order to let Qin Xiaosheng take Guan Yanyan and escape first, and was caught by Zhang Shuiyao accidentally.In order to lure Qin Xiaosheng back, Zhang Shuiyao tied Shui Honglian in the boat.In order to not let Xiaosheng fall into the trap, Shui Honglian resolutely kicked over the boat's oil lamps lit the boat, see themselves also about to be buried in the fire, Shui Honglian's heart full of love and reluctance to give up, with the last strength to sing "in the next life, in the next life to love you". The poem of the aria is as follows:

"Ah! The flames are flying for me, the rapids are surging for me, I'm going to follow the flames and rapids, happy and sad.

Happiness is that Qin Xiaosheng will not walk into the trap, his departure like dragon swims back to the sea.I die a thousand life for you, the nine springs of the heart will not change, people say there are two lives of marriage, I would like for you to start again. The sad thing is that this is growing apart, alone you years hard to bear, an untried scholar, your departure who will you care.

You take Guan Yanyan and her child, how to cope with so many difficulties ahead? I hope to get the pity of God, you have no disease, no doom, no disaster.

I have to go, the heart never change, Qin Xiaosheng , in this life and the next life I will love you forever ,I will love you in the afterlife."

The researcher believes that the role of Shui Honglian shows three levels of "love" in this aria: firstly, Shui Honglian's personal love, which is gradually developed with Qin Xiaosheng; secondly, her love for the blind girl Guan Yanyan's sympathy and concern, which is human nature and goodness; and thirdly, her love for the people and the world. Secondly, it is the love of sympathy and concern for the blind girl Guan Yanyan, which is the "goodness" of human nature and also reflects the kindness of the Chinese female; thirdly, it is the love for the people and the world, she supports Qin Xiaosheng to lodge a complaint against the government and hopes that the corrupt officials will be caught and that the people beside the canal will live in peace and work in contentment.The third level of "love" is enlarged from a minor one to a large one,and the poem unfolds the imminent parting of life and death with "happy" and "sad". The dual perspective of "I" (Shui Honglian) and "you" (Qin Xiaosheng) is used to show that the character of Shui Honglian follows the flames and expresses her love in this life and in the next life, reflecting a kind of a girl's personal love.

The expression of love in the next life and the next life, further, embodies the value of a young daughter who exchanges her personal love for a "small love". In this aria, as the ship is about to sink, the bow of the ship is tilted at an angle, so Shui Honglian is tied diagonally to the pole of the bow of the ship, and this tilted performance is very real for the story, which brings the distance between the story and the audience closer, and captures the audience.

3.2. Artistic characteristics of the musical part of the "Major Aria".

This aria is full of strong dramaturgy. The aria adopts the folk vocal singing method and the Chinese folk tuning with many transpositions, and the structure of the piece is large, which consists of four relatively independent parts. It consists of four relatively independent parts. Through the changes of the musical elements in each part, it reflects different musical levels and expresses the richness of the inner emotions of the character of Shui Honglian before her death. The researcher analyzed the parts, the number of starting and ending bars, and the main musical elements to form the following table(see table1), which shows the artistic characteristics of the four parts of this aria in terms of vocal range, tempo, rhythm, and melody and other musical parts.

Table 1. The main musical elements of "I'll Love You in the Afterlife"

Music section (Number of bars)	Part I (1-22)	Part II (23-43)	Part III (44-60)	Part IV (61-113)
Harmonic scale (Chinese scale)	D Shang	$^{\flat}$E Gong	$^{\flat}$B Gong	$^{\flat}$E Gong
Vocal register	f^1 - $^{\flat}b^2$	c^1 -e^2	f^1 -f^2	f^1 - $^{\flat}b^2$
Tempo	♩=74	♩=68	♩=74	♩=152
Beats	freer	Attachment point rhythmic propulsion dominates, with 4/4-2/4 meter change.	Attachment point, tangent, rest	Accompanied voices are rhythmically dense, sung voices, are rhythmically sparse, with a back turn ♩ = 64, varying beats,and freer.
Melodic	Undulating. Stirring,narrative	gentle melody	Slightly faster parallel phrases, half terminated	Broad phrases, melodic ups and downs, big octave jumps
Poetic expression	Expressing the determination to die for a loved one	Expresses the joy that Qin Sheng will not throw himself into the net and the sadness that he will grow apart now.	Expressing care and wishes for future Qin Sheng and Guan's mother and son.	To express my love for Qin Sheng in the next life and the next.

In the first part, the music in the scale of F shang(Chinese scale) directly upward melodic drive to unfold, the first note directly in the pitch of the f^2 accented singing "ah", lyrical strong (see Figure 1) to show the heart-breaking cry; this part of the overall range of high, while the use of rests, accompanied by points, syncopated and other rhythmic patterns, the speed of the freer, by the change of intensity to streng then the expression of Shui Honglian role,it strengthens the emotion of the expression of the character of the role.This is both a musical melody and a narrative action. The difficulty of singing this part is extremely high, as the "Shui Honglian" is tied diagonally to the bow of the boat, so it is very much a test of the singer's control, and the singer is required to create a second degree of expression of the character's emotions.

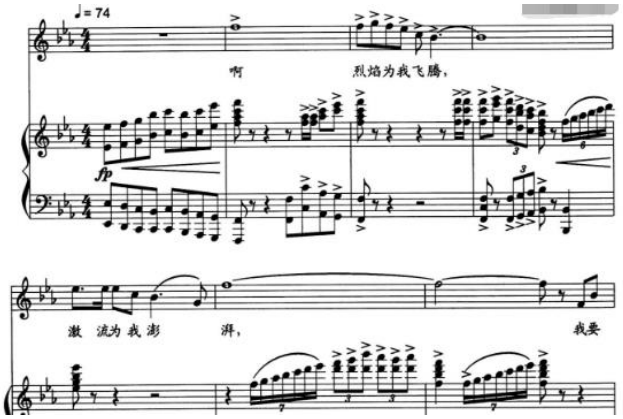


Figure 1. Excerpts from Part I of aria "I'll Love You in the Afterlife"

In the second an d third parts, the music is propelled forward mainly through contrasting changes in register, tonality, and accompanying weave. The unfolding of the music reflects the artistic feature of parallel phrases proceeding in contrast. The second part is in the scale of $^{\flat}$E Gong(Chinese scale), mainly in the middle and lower registers, with a change in meter from 4/4 to 2/4, breaking the squareness of the phrases (see Figure 2), and expressing Shui Honglian's love for Qin Xiaosheng through the two phrases of her "happy" and "sad". The third part is in the genitive direction of the$^{\flat}$B Gong scale , with a faster tempo than the second part, and ends with a semi-termination.

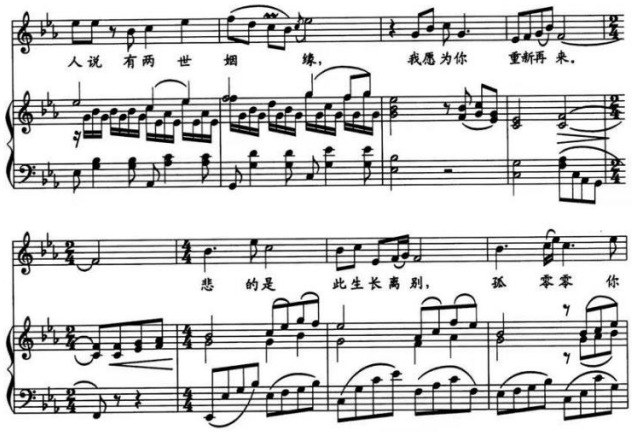


Figure 2. Excerpts from Part II of aria "I'll Love You in the Afterlife"

In the fourth part, the whole aria enters a climax, first of all, the tempo is suddenly fastened to 152, and it can be found that the lyrics of the previous part are sung directly to the transposed key, including the transposed chords for a total of seven beats, which reflects the artistic characteristic of "carrying on from above and starting from below".The harmonize is shifted to the $^{\flat}$E Gong key, and through the contrast between the denser accompaniment patterns and the long lines of the vocal voices, it presents the common Chinese traditional opera style of "tightly pulling and slowing down",which was commonly used in Chinese traditiona opera, the accompaniment rhythm is twice as fast as the vocal melody, generally to express excitement, joy and grief, can be narrative or lyrical.The artistic characteristics of "tightly pulling and slowing down" (see Figure 3) ,which is the melodic pattern is dominated by long tones, while the accompanying pattern is a dense eighth-note rush, and at the same time there is a chordal inversion of the accompaniment to promote after the end of each phrase.This "cavity with many words and few words" artistic characteristic creates a fiery and sinister picture of the burning flames, which makes the dramatic atmosphere very tense, and provides a good opportunity for Shui Honglian to express the emotions of the farewell before the character's death.This part makes the atmosphere of the drama very tense, rendering the farewells, cries, and determination before the character's death. The musical range of this part is wide, the phrases are broad, the melody has great ups and downs, and there is a big jump of octaves, especially the last note

in ♭e2 key, and then in ♭b2 key, which is prolonged for 4 beats, which is a test of the singer's singing skills, and it fully embodies the unforgettable love of Shui Honglian.

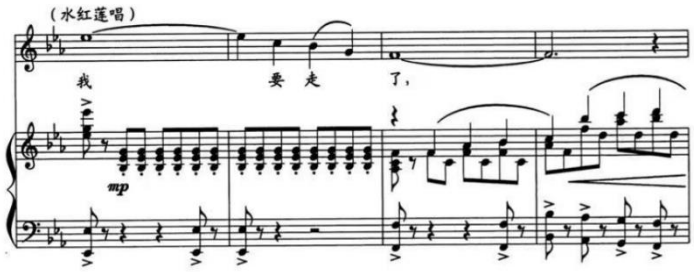


Figure 3. Excerpts from Par t IV of aria "I'll Love You in the Afterlife"

4. Conclusion

Through analysis, it can be found that the "Major Aria" of Chinese tragic opera, for example, "Love You in the Afterlife", has unique artistic characteristics in the dramatic part and the music part. In the dramatic part, the character traits of the city characters with great love are laid out in each part of the poems, and the theatrical image of the characters is restored through the choreography design of the Shui Honglian tied to the bow of the boat diagonally. In the musical part, the typical artistic techniques of Chinese opera and folk songs are incorporated, with a large structure and a wide range of vocal, while drawing on Western compositional techniques, applying transpositions to the music part, adopting Chinese folk song singing methods and opera drag elements, with a strong space for second degree creation, and injecting e**lements of modernity.**

References

[1] Ge Xiaoyi.Chinese Opera Literary Characteristics [M].Hefei: Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House, 2014: 326.

[2] Ju Qihong, Zhi yan.General History of Chinese Opera and Musical Theater [M].Hefei: Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House, 2014: 10.

[3] Dong Xuewen.Introduction to Aesthetics [M].Beijing: Peking University Press, 2003: 138.

[4] Fei Xiao.Stage Image Shaping of Characters in Opera--Taking Shui Honglian in "Canal Ballad" as an Example [J]. Contemporary Music, 2021(11):192-194.