Old Soul with A New Look: Gong Lina's Cover Version of the Chinese Folk Song Xiao He Tang Shui (The Flowing Creek)

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Abstract. *Xiao He Tang Shui* (*The Flowing Creek*) stands as one of the masterpieces of Chinese folk songs with simple lyrics and beautiful melodies. Gong Linna, recognized as one of the representatives of China's emerging music, presents a new style of song and a unique vocal approach. This paper delves into the adaptation of Gong Linna's rendition of *Xiao He Tang Shui*, exploring her distinctive singing style and the fresh elements she infuses into the song. Through analyzing these aspects, we can perceive the charm that her rendition brings to the song.

Keywords: Gong Linna, Xiao He Tang Shui, chinese traditional music.

1. Introduction

Today, the developing Chinese traditional music radiates its lustre not only in China but also worldwide. As time passes, the age-old Chinese traditional music has started to be covered repeatedly by the descendants. In addition to commemorative and tribute significance, the renovation of the songs has brought life to the traditional music and allowed it to take on a new look. This has led to a renewed perception of music and aesthetics, which has led to the development of both new and old music. Gong Linna is one of the leaders in this endeavour. She and her husband, German composer Robert Zollitsch, have created and adapted many traditional Chinese music pieces, with Gong's new version of *Xiao He Tang Shui* (*Xiao*) being one of the most outstanding. *Xiao* is a classic Yunnan folk song that has been widely circulated and was used as a song in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. It is undoubtedly an outstanding piece of work. Gong Lina has made it a hit internationally. The song itself is a work of music that balances the "old soul" with the "new look". It retains the folk melody but overthrows the old arrangement. This paper will focus on the song and the interpretation of Gong, in order to investigate the significance of Gong Lina's cover version has had on traditional Chinese music.

2. The Development of Gong Linna's Singing Style

Gong Lina has been singing since she was 5 years old. After graduating from the China Conservatory of Music by 1999, she started her career as a singer. Gong Lina believes that a true and sincere voice moves people the most. In traditional Chinese music, the situation of "one voice for a thousand people" is well known, and she believes that she will be drowned in the music market if she continues this way. She needed to be remembered.[1] Later, she met German composer Robert Zollitsch, and the two of them hit it off, sharing a similar understanding of music and its pursuit.

After Gong Lina settled in Germany with Robert Zollitsch, they began to work together on developing new Chinese art. At first, Gong Lina found that the way she performed was not well accepted by the local Germans. Then she realized that she couldn't use the same cookie-cutter approach that was inherent in Chinese performances. The Germans did not understand Chinese, they did not understand the subtleties and the emotions. Therefore, they could not appreciate her performances.[1] After Gong Lina received some criticism, she felt that she needed to do more than sing, to tell stories and convey feelings, to be a perfect and dedicated communicator. She borrowed classical Chinese poems to express her optimistic mood of being indifferent to fame and fortune and laughing at life, and in some cases she used humorous tunes and easy-to-understand lyrics to exhort

the world to understand and communicate with each other.[2] Gong Lina is no longer confined to the traditional and inherent ways of performing Chinese music. She breaks free from the framework of the academy and breaks the mould to create "New Chinese Music".

In Gong Lina's once hotly debated piece *Tan Te* (*Perturbed*), she makes this new music that incorporates a variety of elements. Her inspiration for Tan Te came from her teething son, whose slurred pronunciation gave her the idea for the song. In the content of the song, she uses elements of Peking Opera, changing the different tones of Lao Sheng and Heitou back and forth through distinctive melodic colours. The full tune is in traditional Chinese five-tone mode, non-traditional two-part and three-part modes, and is an amalgamation of fused three-part modes and complex variation structures.[3] Her stage performance conforms to the stage performance of Peking Opera, with the rhythmic movement of the song,[4] but also with the content of the song to add her own charismatic characteristics of the movement, the word "apprehensive" is interpreted to the fullest extent, and the stage is more vivid and dynamic. The posture of a musical performance plays a crucial role in the performance, and the movement affects the organization of the music and makes the audience understand the meaning of the music itself.[5] Therefore, her more modern performance style is more accessible to a younger audience than the traditional and old-fashioned Peking Opera performance.

When *Tan Te* came out a few years ago, people had mixed feelings about Gong Linna. Many thought her singing voice was too jumpy and completely different from people's perception of previous Chinese folk songs.[6] Her song genres have gradually diversified in recent years as her body of work has grown. For example, one of her other original compositions, *Di Jiang Hun Dun*, was written in 2021, in which it begins with a traditional instrument, the pipa, mixed with electronic sound effects as an intro, and the song includes many bird calls to echo the theme of the song's content: the two animals, *Di Jiang and Hun Dun* , who are two divine beasts in the Chinese myth of *Shan Hai Jing* (*The Classic of* Mountains *and Seas*). The form of the song uses elements of rap; her song *Kuafu Chasing The Sun*, also from 2021, is inspired by the Chinese mythological story *Kuafu Chasing The Sun*, which uses the traditional Chinese instrument pipa sans percussion as the main accompaniment for the first and second verses of the song, and then switches to electronic music as the accompaniment after the end of the second verse, with the addition of the drum kit. The singing style also changes from normal Chinese folk singing to a rock style with real vocal cords and hissing. At the end of the third verse, the final verse returns to ethnic singing, but the accompaniment is still electronic.All of these songs show that Gong Lina has innovated on the basis of traditional Chinese music, and she and Robert Zollitsch have even composed and sung songs about ancient Chinese myths, which breaks away from the traditional themes and contents of the songs. Through this, people gradually see the essence of the music and the attitude she wants to express. Her work is classical Chinese, but with a touch of novelty. She has done a good job with the word "convey". The word "communication" is very well done. Today she is known as a "soul artist", and Chinese artist Li Xi'an praises her work as "elegant and avant-garde".[7]

3. Xiao He Tang Shui in the context of traditional Chinese music

For thousands of years, Chinese people have adopted their own ways, to create their music. The traditional Chinese music is generally devided into two catagories: the,court music and the the folk music.[8] Traditional music varies from region to region depending on the local culture, geography, habits and climate.[8] The traditional music of different regions is based on culture, geography, living habits, and climate. For example, in the case of Chinese folk songs, the Qinling Mountains-Huai River Line serves as an important geographic demarcation line, dividing China into north and south. In the north, the area is vast and the people are open and simple, so the folk songs in the north are bold and cheerful; in the south, there are more mountains and beautiful scenery, and the people's character is soft, so the folk songs in the south are delicate and gentle. [9] The local humanities and environment have a certain influence on the formation of traditional music, and traditional Chinese music has an

important role to play in the aesthetics, values, culture and life of the Chinese people.[10] The people and the music are mutual, thus contributing to the dynamic and breathing traditional Chinese music.

The song *Xiao* is originated from the folk music of Yunnan. After the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1636-1912) dynasties, the government mobilised a group of people from the south of China's Jiangnan region to go south in order to stimulate the development of the border areas. Therefore, this song has the boldness of the Southwest region and the tenderness of the Jiangnan (Southern) region.[11]

The song tells the story of a Yunnanese girl who misses her lover under the moonlight. [12]There are many theories about the origin of the tune of the song *Xiao*. One view is that this song is a folk song that Yin Yigong composed again in 1947 after collecting and organising Yunnan folk song material. There is also a view that it is derived from *Gao Liang's Da Tian Cha Yang Yang Lian Yang*. The song caused a lengthy copyright dispute. Later, it was verified with an article in the journal People's Music, "Is 'Sheep-herding Tune' the Source of Xiao He Tang Shui? --Discussion with Mr Yin Yigong", the article compared and discussed its source. The conclusion is that the prototype of *Xiao* is *Gao Liang's Da Tian Cha Yang Yang Lian Yang*. Therefore, Yin Yigong's claim was denied. The article also stated that after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the song *Xiao* was indeed collated and artistically processed by Messrs. Huang Hong and Lin Zhiyin with a second verse before the song was formally shaped and quickly spread all over the country and abroad.[11] The song was indeed released after a second compilation by Huang Hong and the voice of Lin Zhiyin. However, in the author's opinion, if it is proved that the real source of *Xiao*, both of the above views are not well prepared in the literature, so both of them are unconvincing. This paper will focus therefore only into the songs which exist as they are today.

4. Gong Linna's interpretation of Xiao He Tang Shui

The original version of this song was recorded and sung by Huang Hong in 1953. Huang Hong's *Xiao* is arranged for electric piano and yangqin with a single chord. The first line of the song, "la, do, re, mi" and "re, do, la", is played on the electric piano as the intro, with the yangqin filling in the gaps in the accompaniment by mimicking the flow of water from the high to the low notes. The backing track remains almost unchanged throughout the song and continues in this manner until the end. Huang Hong uses Chinese folk singing in this song. The entire song consists of alternating four-four and four-three beats, and it is during the second and fifth verses of the song that the beats are exchanged.[13] Huang Hong designed the song to be sung freely throughout these two verses. During the last few words of the second and fifth lines, she disrupted the original notes of these words and finished the two lines within the beat count stipulations of the score. This makes the song sound more free, both in terms of singing and arranging, and the whole song is more calm. 1989 Huang Hong also won China's first Golden Record Award for this song.

The cover version of Gong Lina is different from the original. The version of *Xiao* that she sings has been reworked by German composer Robert Zollitsch. Instead of using exclusively Chinese instruments, the accompaniment includes unused Western instruments: cello, accordion, etc. The second half of the song is also played on the cello and accordion. The second half of the song also uses Chinese drums and drum kit, which were not used in the original song. In terms of details, Robert Zollitsch uses a vocal instrumental crescendo effect in the beginning of the song. The first verse is purely vocal, with the keyboards slowly coming in during the second verse. This allows people to get a more intuitive feel for the true nature of Nina's voice. It also allows the instruments to work more naturally and harmoniously with the vocals. The whole song will unfold like a picture for people, adding a layer of emotional colour to the song. Halfway through the song, harmonies are added to the arrangement, and the layers of the song become even richer. This gradually intensifying popular accompaniment design is not used in the accompaniment of most Chinese folk songs.Since the late Qing Dynasty, when Chinese folk songs absorbed Western music and began to be accompanied by piano, the expressive power of folk songs has been greatly enhanced, and the accompaniment of folk

songs has basically been divided into an intro, an interlude, and an outro.[14] Until now, academics basically accompany folk songs in this way. Robert Zollitsch did not accompany the song with an intro, but began the song with Gong Lina's clean singing. Robert Zollitsch did not set an intro for this song, but started it with Gong Linna's clean singing, and then used a keyboard crescendo and Chinese drums for the harmonies, which is a novel adaptation of a traditional folk song.

Anyone who has heard Gong Linna sing knows that she sings in a variety of styles, Chinese traditional music singing, bel canto, pop, Chinese opera, and so on. She combines these styles and singing styles to form her unique singing style. Her voice is sometimes as clear as a child's, sometimes as gentle as water, and sometimes as rough. The versatility of her singing voice is the quality of Gong Linna's singing. She adjusts her singing style according to the content of the song. In this song *Xiao*, Gong Linna sings the whole song in ethnic singing style, telling the love story of the hero and heroine of the song with her soft voice. In the first verse she starts the song with a cappella vocals, and then the instruments gradually join the song. The melody and beat are slow and gentle throughout the first verse. The song gets richer with the addition of keyboards and Chinese drums at the beginning of the second verse. At the end of the second verse of the song, Gong Linna sings more. She begins to include a wordless chanting section, accompanied by harmonies and surging Chinese drums. This chant begins with a one-octave jump from F4# to F5#, and then stays focused on the upper register, with the highest note reaching D6 and repeating it twice. This cross-octave design will bring a strong emotional shift to the hearing, like a stream accelerating into the sea, like climbing from a foggy mountain to the top. This part of the song takes the song to a higher level and the love affair between the two to another level.

She manages to be not just a perfect conveyor but also a perfect lyricist of emotions in this song *Xiao*. The small details in the song's design are also unusual. Before the second verse, the harmony singing in the background utilises a mix of Americana and pop. At the end of the second verse, when the wordless chanting begins, the harmonies change to a mix of ethnic and pop, and instead of a single "a", the lyrics of the harmonies become "ya hei, ya ho". This adds more layers.

Gong Lina's *Xiao* is a traditional Chinese folk song tune with pop and American elements in the arrangement. It weaves together traditional Chinese folk songs and pop music, creating a brilliant piece that appears contradictory but breaks the mold. Xiao is regareded as an "Oriental Serenade". The main theme of Xiao is longing,[15] and she pushes longing to the highest level, as well as her intention. Xiao sings about love stories, it also sings about the damage caused by the war in the era of the background of that song, and it sings even more about the spirit of people who have not given up on life, and still manage to create great songs. Nina uses her voice to express her emotions and her prayers.

5. Conclusion

Music itself is a channel to express or confide in the combination of feelings and thoughts. Chinese traditional music conveys the culture and ideas of China from the past to the present, influencing the descendants from generation to generation. It continues to absorb new elements on the way of development. None of Gong Lina's music is not traditional Chinese music, yet none of it remains the same old traditional Chinese music. Gong Lina's music jumps out of the framework of traditional Chinese music. Most of her songs use a combination of Chinese traditional music singing and pop. Her cover version of *Xiao* utilises ethnic singing and pop arrangements. She and Robert Zollitsch adapted modern elements for ancient folk songs, which was a breakthrough in song production. Their production of songs based on Chinese mythology marked a breakthrough in song themes and content. In *Xiao* she uses a chant that spans an octave and then goes straight to D6, which is a highlight in the song. Gong Lina and Robert Zollitsch's Chinese contemporary music breaks away from traditional perceptions, combining elements from both China and the West to open up a new path for the Chinese traditional music. Improvements in the singing style and innovations in the arrangements highlight their dedication to Chinese contemporary music. Chinese traditional music needs to be passed on,

and Chinese traditional music needs to be improved. The popularity of Gong Lina's *Xiao* has brought more young people closer to traditional Chinese music. And her adaptation has led to more people in the industry making innovations and changes in traditional Chinese music. Chinese traditional music needs to be inherited by future generations, as well as forerunners like Gong Linna. Only by absorbing more diverse elements into traditional Chinese music, pushing the boundaries and keeping up with the times, will traditional Chinese music be able to flourish and better.

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