

A Study on the Adjustment between the Eastward Spread of Western Music and the Creation of Opera Music in the First Half of the 20th Century

Yu Han

School of Fine Arts, Chinese National Academy of Arts, Beijing 100029, China

Abstract. In the first half of the 20th century, with the wave of Western music spreading eastward, the creation of opera music underwent a complex and profound process of adjustment. The gradual introduction of Western music not only brought new music theories, composition techniques, and teaching systems, but also changes in urban cultural environment and citizens' aesthetic consciousness. In response to this, practitioners of traditional Chinese opera music have made creative transformations in terms of musical form, subject matter, content, and expression. Firstly, they have absorbed the nutrients of Western music; The second is to adhere to the nationalization direction of traditional Chinese opera. In short, the adjustment work during this stage has a certain enlightening effect on how Chinese music can achieve modernization in the future, and has a positive significance for the history of the integration of Chinese and Western music. Below, the author will analyze the changes that have occurred in the creation of traditional Chinese opera music during this stage, focusing on adjustments in dissemination methods, music genres, and content.

Keywords: Western music spreading eastward, Opera music, Creative adaptation, Modernization of music, East-West fusion.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the last century, China was a society that shifted from traditional to modern. Against this backdrop, with the introduction of Western music, this phenomenon of Western music spreading eastward had an impact on traditional Chinese opera art. And opera was one of the most popular art forms among the people in that era [1]. So the development of traditional Chinese opera music will naturally be influenced by Western music.

Adaptation is not simply copying or mechanically transplanting, but a process of selective and targeted integration and innovation. Traditional Chinese opera music practitioners, on the premise of not violating the rules of the opera genre itself, incorporate Western music elements into opera music to keep up with the pace of the times. This process involves not only pitch materials, textures, and accompaniment techniques in music. Similarly, in the context of material selection, methods, and aesthetic concepts, reviewing the historical process of this period can help people understand the attitudes and strategies adopted by Chinese music after the entry of Western music. It has a certain reference value for how Chinese music can shine in the current global trend.

2. The Dissemination Path of Western Music Spreading Eastward and Its Impact on the Ecology of Traditional Chinese Opera

2.1 Introduction and Dissemination of New-Style School Music and Western Music Theory

The large-scale introduction of Western music into China began with the singing of hymns in church schools during the late Qing Dynasty, but the music movement that flourished in new-style schools in the early 20th century had a significant impact on society [2]. In 1903, the Qing government promulgated the "Regulations of the Imperial Academy", which officially included music classes as a teaching subject in modern schools. Afterwards, some students studying in Japan brought singing lessons from Japanese schools and Western music knowledge, which began to spread among urban intellectuals.

The melodies of school music songs mostly come from Japanese, European and American songs, and are sung with Chinese lyrics. This choral form allowed Chinese people to experience for the first time the Western system of major and minor keys, functional tones, and simplified notation. And music educators such as Shen Xingong and Li Shutong used these music collections as school songs, which not only spread Western music knowledge but also cultivated a group of audiences and creators with Western music literacy. In addition, the translation of Western music treatises began to emerge, providing new technical references for opera composers.

2.2 The Rise of Urban Culture and Changes in Citizens' Aesthetic Taste

At the beginning of the last century, with the rise of big cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, commerce flourished in the cities, followed by the development of the entertainment industry, with theaters scattered throughout the streets and alleys. Traditional Chinese opera is facing a fierce competitive environment and a shift in audience aesthetics.

The aesthetic taste of citizens has undergone significant changes. On the one hand, young people who have received school music education are more familiar with the scales and beats in Western music, and hope to see some new things from opera; On the other hand, the pace of urban life is constantly accelerating, and people have higher demands for the plot, lyrics, and music of drama [3]. These changes in the market are reflected in the box office, which has led artists like Mei Lanfang to consciously incorporate new factors into their works. Win more audience groups.

2.3 Updating the Knowledge Structure of Opera Practitioners and the Differentiation of Audience Groups

Western music gradually changed the knowledge structure of opera practitioners. A group of opera artists also began to be exposed to Western music. Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, and others collaborated with qin players and composers, trying to add new elements in vocal design and band arrangement; More meaningfully, a group of composers who have received professional music training have entered the field of opera creation, and they graduated from Shanghai National Conservatory of Music and other institutions [4]. Having received systematic training in Western composition techniques and having a passion for traditional Chinese opera. Liu Tianhua's interest in the study of Peking Opera music, as well as later attention to Chinese opera music by figures such as Xian Xinghai and Nie Er, are a combination of this knowledge.

In addition, in terms of audience, some people like to watch old plays, while more people, especially young students, like to watch improved plays. This creates a condition for musical adaptation: any form of work can be appreciated by the audience.

3. Adjustment of Music Form in Opera Music Creation

3.1 Melody and Harmony: The Penetration of Western Composition Techniques into Traditional Singing Styles

The most direct influence of Western music on the melody of opera is reflected in the scale and melody direction. Traditional Chinese opera is based on the pentatonic scale. In some newly composed plays in the first half of the 20th century, more use of the heptatonic scale began to appear, and semitones were added to the melody to make the music more colorful.

The second is the introduction of the concept of harmony. Traditional opera music originally belonged to monophonic music. After the 1920s, some composers began to incorporate harmony into the singing of traditional Chinese opera. Initially, they only added simple chords at doorsteps or interludes. However, after the 1930s, some new plays began to attempt the use of harmonic thinking in the singing process. These composers realized that they could not simply copy Western paradigms and attempted to use harmony methods suitable for the tone of traditional Chinese opera, which paved the way for the later development of opera harmony [5].

3.2 Band and Orchestration: A Mix of Chinese And Western Instruments And Rich Accompaniment Fabrics

The composition of traditional opera bands is relatively fixed. In the first half of the 20th century, some newly composed plays began to attempt to expand the band composition and introduce Western instruments. When Western instruments were introduced to opera bands, the violin and piano were the first to appear. After the 1930s, some larger opera troupes gradually adopted the arrangement of Chinese and Western ensemble, adding cello and double bass to enhance the bass part, and configuring woodwind parts to enrich the tone hierarchy.

Secondly, there are also various techniques for matching equipment. After joining Western musical instruments, composers also began to experiment with division of labor and cooperation, with different instruments playing different roles. This multi part accompaniment texture makes opera music more full-bodied and greatly enhances its expressive power. Of course, the mixed use of Chinese and Western instruments can also lead to some problems of inconsistent melodies. During this period, various methods were used to adjust them, which also accumulated a lot of experience for the development of ethnic orchestras in the future.

3.3 Structure and Plate Style: Innovating the Overall Layout of Traditional Chinese Opera by Drawing on Western Style

Traditional Chinese opera music is based on the basic structural form of panel changes, and the development of a play in music is often a process of layered progression from scattered board to slow board to medium board, fast board to scattered board, which is largely formulaic and inevitably gives people a feeling of repetition. In the 1930s and 1940s, some musicians began to learn Western structural methods and attempted to change the structural patterns of traditional Chinese opera.

The most obvious application is the use of thematic coherence. In some newly composed plays, the protagonist's singing style has a fixed thematic melody, which is repeated multiple times throughout the play and expanded with changes in the plot, similar to the dominant motivation in Western opera, which is conducive to strengthening the coherence and dramatic effect of the music. Some newly composed plays performed by Mei Lanfang, such as "Daiyu Burial Flowers" and "Heavenly Maiden Scattering Flowers", have traces of this theme running through their music design.

There have also been references to Western musical structures, such as the insertion of independent instrumental pieces as transitions between vocal sections in some plays, similar to the interludes in Western operas; Some plays have large instrumental sections at the beginning or end, similar to overtures and finales [6]. This form breaks through the traditional mode of traditional Chinese opera music, which is dominated by vocal music and subordinate to instrumental music, and increases the independent expressive significance of instrumental music itself.

In terms of panel usage, some newly composed plays no longer adhere to the traditional progressive rules of panel, and freely combine between panels. The contrast between fast and slow panels is greater, and even the speed symbol in Western music has appeared, which has clearer requirements for the speed of singers and accompanists. This plate processing method allows the music rhythm to blend more closely with the dramatic rhythm.

3.4 Genealogy and Dissemination: The Influence of the Use of Simplified Genealogy and Five line Genealogy on Creative Methods

The change in notation is also an important aspect of adapting to traditional Chinese opera music. Traditional Chinese opera is recorded through oral transmission, body teaching, and gongchi notation, which ensures the purity of the genre but also hinders the accurate recording and dissemination of music. In the early 20th century, simplified music became popular along with school songs. Simplified sheet music is easy to use, with precise recording of pitch and beat, and was quickly adopted by the Chinese opera industry.

Simplified sheet music has a huge driving effect on the creation of traditional Chinese opera music: firstly, in terms of recording singing style, it is more accurate than Gongchi character sheet music,

avoiding variations that may occur during oral transmission; Musicians and actors can learn new tunes based on the score to improve rehearsal speed; Secondly, simplified sheet music is easy to spread, and newly created singing styles can be quickly disseminated to various places through publishing logistics, no longer limited to a certain place or genre; Thirdly, the use of simplified scores has brought about a separation between composers and performers, allowing professional composers to create without actors, which has to some extent promoted the professionalization process of opera music creation.

The usage rate of staff notation is not high, and it only appears more frequently in the works of professionally trained musicians. It is more accurate in notation with more voices, especially in accompaniment notation in some mixed works of Chinese and Western instruments [7]. Some newly composed plays use sheet music to write the overall score, making the band's performance more unified.

In addition, the changes in notation have also brought about many thought-provoking issues. The traditional way of oral transmission is not only to teach musical notes, but also to impart taste, tone, and improvisation space. Overreliance on sheet music may lead to rigidity in musical expression, and how to balance precise notation with maintaining flavor is a noteworthy issue.

4. Adjustment of Content and Expression Form in Opera Music Creation

4.1 Theme Expansion: Localized Interpretation of Modern Life Content and Foreign Themes

Western music has not only influenced China in terms of genre and form, but also had a certain impact on Chinese drama in terms of subject matter and content. At the beginning of the last century, a group of scriptural works depicting modern life emerged in the Chinese opera industry. These types of works are often set against the backdrop of real life, depicting people's current lives and psychological activities. Compared to historical dramas, they have significant differences.

The fashion drama is a typical example of this period. Fashion plays wear modern costumes and tell modern stories, with corresponding changes in music. To express the emotions of modern people, vocal design emphasizes lyricism, personalization, and even directly uses or adapts the melody of school music songs. For example, Mei Lanfang's performances in fashion dramas such as "A wisp of hemp" and "Deng Xiagu" have had many new attempts, including in music.

The introduction of foreign themes is bolder. Some plays are based on foreign literary works or directly adapted from foreign dramas, and then recreated and transplanted onto the stage of traditional Chinese opera. For example, the Beijing opera "The Prince's Revenge" is adapted from Shakespeare's "Hamlet", while "Resurrection" is a Yue opera interpretation of Tolstoy's short story "Resurrection", and so on. The difficulty of creating music for this type of drama will be greater. How to reflect the exotic atmosphere in music without losing the original characteristics of traditional Chinese opera? Composers generally have two methods: one is to maintain the basic singing style and add some Western flavor to the accompanying music; The second is to create some new tunes based on the emotional needs of the characters in the plot, which are beyond the scope of the progra [8].

The expansion of themes will inevitably bring about changes in musical techniques. The various people, events, and emotional contents in modern life and foreign themes cannot be fully expressed using the traditional singing style of traditional opera. This forces the authors to break through the boundaries of different professions, blend the characteristics of each profession, and even absorb some folk songs or creative elements, thus greatly expanding the scope of expression of opera music.

4.2 Performance Form: Breakthrough in Programming and Integration of Realistic Elements in Newly Compiled Plays

The program changes are also reflected in the singing style. Traditional Chinese opera performances are very formulaic, with strict rules for singing, reciting, acting, and hitting. In the newly composed plays of the first half of the 20th century, the formulaic performance has loosened and some realistic elements have been mixed in.

The realistic tendency is first reflected in the stage scenery and costume design. New stage designs use realistic scenery, and lighting technology has also begun to be applied, which has put forward some new requirements for music. The original traditional opera music was completely subordinate to singing and performing arts, and did not involve the stage environment. After having realistic scenery, it is necessary to match a certain atmosphere of the scene, which leads to scene music, atmosphere music, and so on. For example, in portraying a scene at night, the band may play some soft and slow melodies; To depict war scenes, some exciting long instrument ensembles may be inserted.

In addition, due to the breaking of performance routines, some newly composed plays have more lifelike body movements and are not completely done according to traditional routines, which also puts forward new requirements for music. The gongs and drums originally written for programmatic movements are difficult to adapt to this lifestyle of performance, so some plays have reduced the use of gongs and drums and instead used orchestral music to complement the movements and emotions. This to some extent weakens the strong sense of speed in traditional Chinese opera, but also makes the music accompaniment and vocal performance more harmonious.

The second is the change in singing style. Traditional Chinese opera singing emphasizes the accuracy of words and intonation, paying attention to the charm and decoration of lines[9]. In some newly composed plays, actors begin to learn the recitation style singing in drama, which is closer to the language form of speech and has a more direct emotional color. These adjustments in singing techniques have made the connection between music, characters' personalities, and dramatic situations even closer.

4.3 Aesthetic Integration: Exploring the Balance between Traditional Charm and Contemporary Atmosphere

The adjustment of traditional Chinese opera music requires both innovation and preservation of its distinctive features. The experience of the first half of the 20th century shows that in the adjustment of opera music, these two can be unified.

Adhering to tradition and innovation involves multiple aspects. Firstly, the basic style of singing cannot be changed, regardless of how many new elements are absorbed, whether it is Peking Opera or Yue Opera. Secondly, the essential feature that sets traditional Chinese opera music apart from other forms of music is the unchanged use of moistening and pronunciation methods. Thirdly, the relationship between music and language remains unchanged. Opera music must conform to the tone rules of Chinese, otherwise it will lose its flavor.

The embodiment of the era's atmosphere refers to the addition of new emotional colors. In the first half of the 20th century, China's social environment was complex and ever-changing, and people's mentality and aesthetic requirements underwent significant changes. If opera music could not express the emotions of this new era, it would be difficult to attract the current audience. The selection of harmony, changes in orchestral arrangement, and innovations in structural form ultimately aim to enhance the expressive power of music, in order to accommodate richer and more complex emotional content.

In practice, different artists of different genres have taken different paths of adaptation. Beijing Opera is relatively conservative, with a small pace of reform, and focuses on building on the old foundation; However, emerging genres such as Yueju and Pingju are more open and absorb more new things. Artists such as Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu followed a path of gradual improvement, boldly innovating without losing the essence of the genre. Their successful practice tells us that tradition is not opposed to modernization, the key is to find the intersection between the two.

5. Conclusion

Looking back at the adjustment path in the creation of opera music in the early 20th century, it is not difficult to find that it was a continuous process of exploration [10]. Western music gradually

brought impact to traditional Chinese opera and also provided an opportunity for its development. When faced with foreign cultures, opera workers do not blindly reject or simply copy them. Instead, they selectively learn the advantages of Western music based on their own development and introduce them into traditional opera. The adaptive adjustments made to traditional Chinese opera music in the first half of the 20th century were still at a relatively low level, and many efforts were still immature.

How to maintain ethnic characteristics while absorbing external factors? How to inherit excellent traditions on the basis of innovation? These issues have not been fully resolved during this period, and they still need to be further explored today. However, regardless, the efforts and contributions made by this generation of artists and musicians are indelible. Their exploratory spirit and the numerous achievements they have created during the adjustment process are worth learning from.

References

- [1] Wang, H. T., Deng, T. T., & Sun, R. J. (2024). Musical composition and artistic expression of contemporary Cantonese songs with ancient poetry — An example of the works of Guangdong musician Chen Huiquan. *Scientific and Social Research*, 6(12), 241-249. <https://doi.org/10.36922/ssr.v6.12.27>
- [2] Tomić, S. (2021). Three string quartets by Ivana Stefanović—Three aspects of Serbian music in the second half of the twentieth century. *Contemporary Music Review*, 40(5-6), 699-719. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2021.1944339>
- [3] Jeong, Y. C. (2016). The impact of Western popular music in Korea: The development of "jazz song" in the first half of the twentieth century. *Korea Observer*, 47(3), 651-673.
- [4] Li, L. (2020). Research on the application of opera elements in Chinese contemporary music creation. *Basic & Clinical Pharmacology & Toxicology*, 127, 166. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bcpt.13471>
- [5] Chirceev, E. (2020). Church music as reflected in the journal Biserica Ortodoxă Română (Romanian Orthodox Church) in the second half of the twentieth century. *Artes. Journal of Musicology*, 22(1), 336-355.
- [6] Inoue, T. (2018). Western classical music in a non-Western culture: The repertoires of Japanese professional orchestras in the twentieth century. *Poetics*, 67, 13-25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2018.09.002>
- [7] Nicholas, T. (2015). Book-review: Musicality in theatre: Music as model, method and metaphor in theatre-making. *Ashgate interdisciplinary studies in opera. Music & Letters*, 96(2), 304-306. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcv034>
- [8] Morey, J., & McIntyre, P. (2014). The creative studio practice of contemporary dance music sampling composers. *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture*, 6(1), 41-60.
- [9] Carrión,-García, M. (2014). Spain on the big screen: Regional imaginary, popular culture and national identity in the Spanish cinema of the first half of the twentieth century. *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, 6(1), 115-131. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs.6.1.115_1
- [10] van Oostrum, V. A. (2012). Arabic music in Western ears: An account of the music of the Hejaz at the turn of the twentieth century. *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 7, 127-144.