

Musical Style and Performance Analysis of Huang Zi's Art Song Homesickness

Junzao Chen, Heidi Chen

Shanghai Northcross, Shanghai, China

Abstract: During the social turmoil in China during the 1930s, Mr. Huang Zi wielded the sword of music to pierce the heart of the enemy, showcasing his profound patriotism. His representative work, *Homesickness*, expresses his longing for home and reflects the deep affection and anticipation of countless overseas Chinese for their homeland. With its well-structured composition, elegant style, and meticulous craftsmanship, the song has left an indelible mark on the history of Chinese music. With “*Homesickness*” as an example, this paper delves into the musical characteristics and vocal techniques of Huang Zi's art songs, aiming to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the artistic value of this work.

Keywords: Art Song; Music Analysis; Song Performance; Homesickness; Huang Zi.

1. Introduction

I knew *Homesickness* at a concert by chance. The soprano singer Huang Ying's moving performance sparked my deep interest in this emotionally rich song. Her voice seemed to transcend time and space, bringing me back to that tumultuous era and allowing me to feel the intense patriotism Mr. Huang Zi conveyed through his music. Since then, I have been determined to study and research this work. *Homesickness* is a masterpiece by Mr. Huang Zi and a shining gem in the history of modern Chinese music. With its unique artistic style and profound emotional content, it holds an irreplaceable position in art songs.

2. Melodious Version by Huang Ying

(I) First Impressions

When I first heard Huang Ying's soprano rendition live, I was profoundly moved by the rich emotion she conveyed through her singing. As an outstanding soprano, Huang Ying infused new life into this song with her exceptional musical talent. Her voice, clear and bright, flowed like a mountain stream, carrying a sense of purity and elegance. Her command of each note was exquisite throughout her performance, with natural and smooth transitions between high and low registers and full and sincere emotions. Particularly during the song's climax, Huang Ying's remarkable musical expressiveness vividly depicted the homesickness of overseas Chinese. Her performance showcased the beauty and strength of the soprano voice and revealed a profound and delicate dramatic tension in the rises and falls of her voice and emotions. This interpretation gave me a deeper understanding and resonance with the song's themes [1].

3. Deep and Rich Version by Shen Yang

Shen Yang's bass version opened a new musical world for me. His deep, resonant voice seemed to echo from ancient times, imbued with the weight of ages and profound emotion. During his performance, Shen Yang employed the classical singing technique of “music for voice directed by the words, and the melody follows the words”, precisely controlling each syllable and delivering it clearly and powerfully to the

audience. Like ancient strings being plucked, his bass voice was deep and melodic, with each note carrying a profound history and story. Shen Yang's rendition made me envision a weary traveler who, after many long years, finally returns to his homeland, with deep-seated emotions and longing perfectly conveyed. His performance, which imbues the song with a greater sense of depth, deepened my appreciation for the timbre and expressiveness of the bass voice.

4. Clean and Smooth Version by Shi Yijie

Listening to this version for the first time, I was deeply drawn to his voice, like a refreshing breeze guiding me into the deep emotions of a wanderer's longing for home. His tenor voice was clear and ethereal, like a scholar traveling far from home, conveying endless homesickness. Each note, like a crystal-clear drop of dew, precisely touched the hearts of listeners, evoking a resonant response. Technically, Shi Yijie used his signature Rossini-style tenor voice to interpret each lyric of this song with meticulous detail and sincere emotion. Especially during the song's climax, his use of closed high notes provided a bright and penetrating timbre, akin to sunlight piercing through the clouds, showcasing the unique allure of the tenor voice. This performance highlighted the wanderer's deep desire for home and revealed a poignant loneliness, making it deeply moving.

5. Warm and Affectionate Version by Liao Changyong

This version presented a unique depth of emotion. His baritone voice is rich and resonant, akin to a seasoned old friend returning to a long-missed homeland, carrying with it stories and memories. Each note exuded a mature man's deep and tender emotions, allowing the audience to feel the accumulation of years and sentiments. From a technical perspective, Liao Changyong demonstrated exquisite skill in his performance. His precise articulation of the song's lyrics makes each syllable as clear and pleasant as pearls falling on a jade plate. Especially in the song's final section, his voice flows like a long river from his homeland, with deep and enduring emotions that captivate the listener. This performance highlights the baritone voice's unique charm and

vividly conveys the music's emotional essence, allowing the audience to find a long-lost sense of belonging and nostalgia [2].

6. Musical Analysis

(1) Melodic Tones with "Chinese Flavor"

This song's melody leaves a lasting impression with its distinct Chinese style. While the entire piece is based on the key of E-flat major, it ingeniously incorporates pentatonic elements into its melodic structure. This integration blends the Western major scale framework and the subtle charm of traditional Chinese music. In particular, the intro and primary melody use thoughtfully designed sequences of notes, such as "F#-G-Bb", clearly revealing the elegance of the pentatonic melody when the initial notes are omitted. This clever arrangement preserves the major scale's structural integrity while integrating the essence of Chinese traditional music. Furthermore, the core motif runs through the entire piece. The melody concludes with a reverse second interval after a leap, further highlighting the prominent characteristics of the theme and the musical charm with Chinese style. This sophisticated arrangement allows listeners to deeply feel the rich "Chinese flavor" of the melody.

7. Lyrical Expression with "Classical Charm"

The lyrics exude a profound classical charm, distinct from the straightforward nature of modern lyrics, focusing more on subtlety and indirect expression. Starting from the opening lines "The willows are turning green, and Qingming has just passed", the lyrics vividly paint a picture of early spring, contrasting it with the solitary figure leaning on the railing. This technique of contrasting scenery with emotion, common in classical poetry, is particularly apt here. The line "How can one endure the cuckoo's cry beyond the wall, each call says, better to return" skillfully employs personification, interpreting the bird's call as a symbolic call to return home. This profound metaphor deepens the longing and nostalgia for one's homeland. In the chorus, "Ask the falling flowers, drifting with the waves, whether they flow southward, I wish to go with them", the lyrics engage in a dialogue with the fallen flowers, which symbolize not only the natural scenery but also the passage of time and the distant homeland. This dialogue elevates the expression of homesickness to its climax, showcasing the song's restrained yet profound emotional quality. The entire lyric structure transitions from descriptive imagery to emotional expression and then to a profound yearning for home, creating a rich and far-reaching poetic atmosphere. This layered approach allows listeners to deeply experience the strong sense of homesickness through the classical charm of the lyrics.

8. "Chromatic" Harmonic Accompaniment

The harmonic accompaniment of *Homesickness* demonstrates highly professional use of "chromatic" techniques. Chromatic harmonies create a tense and colorful musical atmosphere in the chorus section. This nuanced chromatic progression not only significantly enhances the music's internal drive and dynamic tension but also adds a richer emotional hue to the piece. The piano accompaniment plays a crucial role in this composition. It meticulously shapes

the overall musical texture and forms a sophisticated contrapuntal structure with the main melody, highlighting the indispensable role of the piano in the music. Particularly in the chorus, the piano accompaniment introduces captivating melodic motives before the main melody enters, creating a striking contrast. This arrangement cleverly adds layers and depth to the music, providing the audience with a profound and unique artistic experience. Through the masterful use of chromatic harmonies and the clever application of piano accompaniment, this piece successfully expresses the emotion of longing for home in a musical form [3].

9. Considerations for Soprano Singers Performing Homesickness

(1) Mastering Dynamics

When performing this song, a soprano singer must accurately control the dynamics to ensure proper transitions between soft and loud passages, capturing the song's rich emotional layers. In phrase a, as the lyrics "The willows are turning green, and Qingming has just passed" unfold, the singer should use a gentle and flexible dynamic, almost like a whisper, delicately portraying the serene scene of early spring rain nourishing everything. Moving into phrase b, with the lyrics "Arousing countless idle thoughts, full of farewell sentiments", the singer should gradually increase the dynamic, allowing the emotions to build and elevate within the melody, conveying deeper emotional tones. As the song reaches its climax with "Ask the falling flowers, drifting with the waves, whether they flow southward", the dynamic should peak, with the tension and fullness of the voice profoundly expressing the intense longing for a distant homeland. Throughout the performance, the singer must use dynamic changes to accurately express the song's theme, guiding the audience into the poetic and emotional world. During this process, the soprano singer should use techniques such as breathy and soft voice and adjust resonance chambers to achieve precise dynamic control, thereby attaining the best singing effect [4].

(2) Setting the Scene

Before performing, the singer must have a deep understanding and an overall vision of the entire song to construct a complete and captivating musical scene. The song begins with a gentle piano accompaniment, its melody like a breeze of early spring, softly touching the listener's heart. At this moment, the singer must quickly immerse into this specific musical atmosphere with a keen musical sense and rich expressiveness. Using a gentle tone and delicate emotional handling, the singer should convey the solitude and melancholy embedded in the lyrics "silently leaning on the railing alone". As the melody and lyrics unfold, the singer must precisely grasp every detail, gradually deepening emotional involvement. When the song reaches its climax with "Ask the falling flowers, drifting with the waves, whether they flow southward", the singer should display a fuller emotional expression and more robust vocal performance, showcasing an intense longing and affection for the homeland. This requires the singer to possess solid vocal techniques and a profound understanding and expressive ability of the song. By carefully presetting and constructing the entire musical scene, the singer can accurately convey the song's intended emotional message, leading the audience into the musical world to share the deep longing and affection for the homeland.

(3) Coordinating with Accompaniment

The singer must meticulously control her breath to ensure harmonious resonance with the accompaniment. The song's winding and graceful melody demands exceptional breath control from the soprano singer. To maintain vocal continuity and stability, the singer needs to flexibly adjust her breathing according to the phrases' length and the melody's rise and fall. Especially during the song's climax, such as at the emotional peak "I wish to go with them", the singer must use ample breath support to demonstrate the tension and depth of the voice. At this point, professional breath control techniques like diaphragmatic breathing and combined chest-abdominal breathing become crucial. Additionally, close coordination with the piano accompaniment is indispensable. The singer needs to ensure a perfect blend between the vocals and the accompaniment through precise breath control and delicate tonal adjustments, creating a unique, deep emotional atmosphere. Accurate breath control and keen attention to musical details are essential throughout this process, reflecting the soprano singer's professional expertise.

(4) Expressing Lyrical and Rich Emotions

The song is imbued with deep emotions, requiring the soprano singer to masterfully control her feelings and deliver the theme and emotional core through a full and lyrical performance. An in-depth understanding of the lyrics is crucial, as the singer needs to convey the sense of homesickness through delicate tonal adjustments and appropriate emotional engagement. When interpreting descriptive lyrics such as "The willows are turning green, and Qingming has just passed", the singer should use a gentle tone infused with a touch of melancholy to express the lingering longing for home subtly. As the song progresses to its climax with "Ask the falling flowers, drifting with the waves, whether they flow southward, I wish to go with them", the singer should increase the volume, enhance the resonance, and deepen the emotional investment to fully convey the intense longing and the sense of helplessness of parting from home. During this process, proficient use of vocal techniques such as breathy singing and soft voice, along with keen perception and accurate expression of emotional shifts, are

essential professional qualities for the singer. By perfectly combining these professional techniques with personal emotions, the singer can profoundly communicate this song's deep affection and longing, resonating with and touching the audience's hearts.

10. Conclusion:

Huang Zi's art song *Homesickness* is a treasured gem in the Chinese music repertoire, distinguished by its unique musical charm and profound cultural significance. A detailed analysis reveals how its melodic tone reflects "Chinese flavor", its lyrical expression embodies "classical charm", and its harmonic accompaniment employs "chromatic" techniques, collectively crafting the song's distinctive artistic style. In soprano performance, elements such as the precise handling of dynamics, the thoughtful construction of musical context, meticulous breath control, and accurate emotional expression are essential for a perfect song rendition. This analysis and exploration of *Homesickness* aim to provide insights for singers who, like myself, deeply appreciate this work, helping them better understand and perform it. Looking forward, I hope more singers and researchers will delve into and preserve Huang Zi's musical legacy, allowing these classic works to shine even brighter in contemporary times.

References

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