

The Composition and Performance Analysis of *Spring Nostalgia* by Huang Tzu

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Abstract: “Spring Nostalgia” is a classic piece among Huang Tzu’s art songs. The refined lyrics and beautiful melody demonstrate Huang Tzu’s skillful integration of Western compositional techniques with elements of traditional Chinese music. This paper analyzes the song’s lyrical imagery, musical form structure, and piano accompaniment. Additionally, it compares the live performance by Liao Changyong, baritone singer, with the studio recording by Dilber Yunus, soprano singer, offering insights for singers to perform the piece better.

Keywords: Spring Nostalgia; Composition Analysis; Performance Analysis; Comparison of Different Performance Versions.

1. Creation Background

Huang Tzu was a modern Chinese composer, music theorist and educator. He was born in Chuansha, Jiangsu Province, in 1904. Having a passion for music from an early age, Huang studied at Oberlin College and Yale University. During his study abroad, he actively immersed himself in modern Western music theory and techniques while conducting in-depth research into the essence and characteristics of traditional Chinese music. His compositions covered symphonies, chamber music, oratorios, solos, and choruses. Huang Tzu strongly advocated that music composition be deeply rooted in Chinese national music, aiming to develop a distinctive national style. This approach helped shape his unique compositional style, greatly enriching Chinese art songs’ creation methods and expressiveness during that period [1].

The rise and flourishing of Chinese art songs were greatly influenced by the New Culture Movement. “School Songs”, an essential outcome of this movement in music education, shone brightly on the development path of modern Chinese music. These songs reflected the surging ideological tides during social change and historical transformation [2].

With lyrics by poet Harold H.T. Wei contemporary with Huang Tzu, *Spring Nostalgia* was composed in 1932 when China was in a period of turmoil. The Chinese revolutionary war was in full swing, and the clash between new and old cultures constantly evolved, inspiring Huang Tzu’s artistic creation. The song, portraying a young woman longing for her distant lover, conveys a broader desire for a better life amid an unstable era.

2. Musical Composition

(1) Expression of the Lyrical Imagery

With its fresh and delicate lyrics paired with a graceful and elegant melody, the song vividly captures a young woman’s feelings of longing. Through subtle and lively emotional depiction, the skillful use of symbolism and metaphor, and a carefully structured rise and fall of emotions, the song successfully creates a deep and captivating atmosphere [3] that lingers in the listener’s mind.

The song opens with “Raindrops on the steps, the night

drizzled. Cold and alone in bed, as time trickled”, depicting a chilly, rainy night. This setting hints at the protagonist’s loneliness as she could not sleep due to her longing for her distant lover. This introduction highlights the song’s theme—the girl’s longing for love in spring—while laying a deeply emotional foundation for the rest of the piece.

In the lines “Should I look in the mirror, my face would be smile dimpled. Languid hair unbound, jade petals unjeweled”, the poet uses delicate and vivid language to paint a picture of the protagonist’s disinterest in grooming, emphasizing her deep sense of yearning. This is followed by the line “leaning over the terrace, can’t stop thinking, the willows sweeping, this time of spring”, which pushes the protagonist’s sense of loneliness and longing to its peak. She leans alone on the terrace, unwilling to see the green willows reflected by the window, knowing they would only deepen her thoughts of her faraway lover.

Symbolism and metaphor are cleverly woven throughout the lyrics. For instance, “the innocent swallows” symbolizes the distant lover, while “a cuckoo” metaphorically represents the protagonist’s longing and expectation. These symbolic elements enrich the lyrical content, making the expression of emotion more subtle and profound.

The song’s emotional expression fluctuates and climaxes. In the first section, the music outlines the image of a young woman who, consumed by longing for her distant lover, cannot sleep and appears physically worn. In the second section, frequent shifts between major and minor keys, along with a melody that sharply contrasts in tone, reveal the woman’s continuously shifting emotions. The final section reaches the emotional peak, fully expressing the intense yearning for her distant lover. As the coda approaches, the vocal part gradually fades, and the piano reintroduces the thematic element of “raindrops on the steps, the night drizzled”, echoing the song’s beginning and creating a lingering, profound mood.

(2) Musical Form Structure

Spring Nostalgia follows a modified ternary form (“A-B-A”), with F major as its principal key. The piece alternates between compound meters of 12/8 and 9/8, showcasing a clear structure and distinct layers. The entire composition can be divided into three periods, each with its unique artistic features and expressive techniques. The first period (measures

1-10) begins in D natural minor before transitioning to D harmonic minor, with a soft, slow melody that sets a gentle tone. In the seventh measure, the key modulates to F minor. These key changes vividly depict the imagery of a light, drizzling night rain. The descending melody, accompanied by the bass line in the left hand of the piano, profoundly conveys the young woman's inner sorrow and helplessness.

The second period (measures 11-17) features frequent modulations and forms the song's emotional climax. Through changes in rhythm and intensifying dynamics, the emotions are fully expressed. On the word "willow" in the line "can't stop thinking, the willows sweeping", the key modulates from F major to F minor, and the chords shift from a major triad to a melancholy minor triad. After sustaining F minor for a single measure, the key then modulates to E major, representing the girl's passionate outpouring of her emotions, enhancing the song's dramatic effect. The word "chirping" in the line "passing by the rails, chirping" returns to F major, completing this intense emotional journey.

The third period (measures 18-25) remains in F major, with the piano accompaniment shifting from broken to block chords. In this recapitulation section, Huang Tzu masterfully uses thematic repetition to elevate the emotional depth of the song. By returning to a melody and harmonic progression reminiscent of the opening, the girl's emotions are both revisited and deepened. Additionally, through variations in dynamics and rhythm, the emotional intensity of the entire song becomes higher and more tension-filled, leading to a poignant conclusion.

(3) Piano Accompaniment

In the introduction of the first section, the piano begins softly with an upbeat, using triplet rhythms that flow like a gentle stream, gradually leading into the main theme. Throughout this section, up until the end of part A, the right-hand piano accompaniment maintains a consistent triplet block chord pattern, resembling a continuous spring drizzle. This steady rhythm creates a hazy, mysterious atmosphere, while the left hand closely follows the main melody, producing a flowing and lyrical melody that mirrors the emotional depth of a girl's longing for her lover.

As the song transitions to its emotional climax, marked by frequent key changes, the piano accompaniment shifts from monophonic accompaniment to broken chords. This change not only enriches the musical expression but also vividly illustrates a new scene and mood, pushing the music forward. At the same time, the left-hand part takes on a more nuanced role. Instead of merely following the main melody, it adopts an arpeggiated texture, adding new layers to the piece. This design enhances the depth and dimensionality of the music while highlighting the evolving characteristics of the melody [4]. The piano accompaniment in this section subtly underscores the protagonist's sense of loneliness amidst the lively spring setting, reflecting the constant emotional turbulence.

In the second section, the composer skillfully contrasts the intense tremolo in the left hand with the vocal melody, intensifying the song's climax. The piano accompaniment alternates between strong and soft dynamics throughout the performance, intricately portraying the protagonist's unspeakable solitude and longing. The tension between her desire for love and the harsh reality is powerfully conveyed through this dynamic contrast. In the final two measures, the left and right hands return to the theme introduced in the beginning, creating a clear symmetry and structure that ties

the entire piece together.

3. Performance Techniques

Spring Nostalgia is set to the poetry of Harold H.T. Wei, whose delicate and tender verses are enriched by his profound literary background, imbuing the lyrics with deep emotional resonance and musical beauty. ¹Therefore, performers must pay careful attention to several aspects when interpreting this song, such as lyric handling, breath control, and emotional expression.

(1) Lyrical Interpretation

The melody and lyrics of an art song are mutually reinforcing; to truly convey the emotion and imagery of a piece, these two elements must be perfectly integrated. In the interpretation of Chinese art songs, understanding and expressing the meaning of the lyrics is a critical focus for performers. Singers often encounter issues with misinterpreting the lyrics, which highlights the importance of analyzing the text before singing. This involves not only aligning the pronunciation of each word with vocal resonance in a more scientific manner but also grasping the emotional significance of the lyrics [5].

Beyond diction, the interpretation of the lyrics is crucial in conveying the essence of the piece. The lyrics of *Spring Nostalgia* depict a woman's longing for her lover, a common sentiment in love songs. However, given the social context of the time—marked by turmoil and the clash of old and new cultural ideas—this longing also symbolizes nostalgia for one's hometown and a yearning for peace in a chaotic era [6].

(2) Breath Control

In singing, breath support is crucial to completing a song. Proper breathing enables performers to align with the rhythm of the piece and helps create an effective resonant chamber, allowing for a complete interpretation of the work.

The phrases in *Spring Nostalgia* are predominantly long, which raises the demand for breath control. The overall tempo of the song is slow and lyrical, requiring singers to maintain a sense of rhythmic flow throughout to convey the song's intended imagery.

For instance, the first line of the song begins softly, with the first note being "fa" in the two-lined octave. A soft high note requires the singer to keep their breath flowing smoothly, using the breath to envelop the sound. This involves blending the airflow with a high resonance placement to produce the tone. Achieving this will enhance the fluidity of the voice and evoke the sense of yearning that the song seeks to express.

(3) Emotional Expression

Spring Nostalgia conveys a young woman's longing for her beloved, subtly alluding to a hope for the future. The melancholic emotional tone of the piece requires performers to avoid expressing the voice too strongly or brightly; instead, the expression should be restrained. The singer must balance rational thought with emotional expression to accurately convey the song's feelings and imagery to the audience.

The song does not overtly express one's feelings at the outset. Instead, it begins by imbuing emotions into the imagery through environmental descriptions like "raindrops" and "alone in bed", crafting a portrait of a solitary and sorrowful female figure. Therefore, when starting to sing, it is essential to control emotions and avoid exaggeration. As the piece progresses into the second section, the emotional intensity of the melody gradually builds, requiring performers to enhance both emotion and expression [7] incrementally. By the latter half of the song, particularly in the line "for my love

bid me farewell, all these years of longing”, the suppressed emotions begin to surge forth. The combination of increased tempo and dynamic intensity propels the song toward its emotional climax. Ultimately, the piece concludes with a return to a subdued emotional state, as the voice gradually diminishes until it fades away.

4. Comparison of Different Performance Versions

In this section, I attempt to compare the live performance of baritone singer Liao Changyong and the studio recording of soprano singer Dilber Yunus to appreciate their respective vocal effects, providing references for performers seeking to interpret the piece more effectively.

From a detailed perspective, in Liao’s opening line, “Xiao xiao ye yu di jie qian” (raindrops on the steps, the night drizzled), the vocal tension transitions from strong to soft, primarily resonating in the chest and mask areas, effectively connecting emotionally with the audience and establishing the song’s emotional tone right from the start. In the phrase “Han qin gu zhen wei cheng mian” (cold and alone in bed, as time trickled), he maintains the same treatment on the word “Han” as with “Xiao”, using breath support. The volume gradually increases on “Gu”, presenting a dynamic arc of weak-strong-weak throughout the phrase. In the line “Jin zhao lan jing, ying shi li wo qian” (should I look in the mirror, my face would be smile dimpled), the first three words retain a strong vocal projection, but the intensity drops significantly on “jing”, while maintaining the same placement. In “Lan tie hua dian” (jade petals unjeweled), Liao enlarges his mouth shape on “Hua”, causing the resonance to shift from the oral cavity to the chest and mask, resulting in a crescendo from a smaller to a larger sound. As he sings “Xiao lou du yi, pa du mo tou yang liu, fen se shang lian bian” (leaning over the terrace, can’t stop thinking, the willows sweeping, this time of spring), the tempo noticeably accelerates. The strength increases on the word “Yang”, releasing pent-up emotions. Notably, he incorporates a sense of phrasing on “Fen”, with a clear break between “Fen” and “Se”, allowing emotional shifts and enhancing the expressiveness. In the climactic section, “Yi ge lang yuan bie yi jing nian, hen zhi hen, bu hua cheng du yu, huan ta kuai zheng gui bian” (For my love bid me farewell, all these years of longing. I long to be a cuckoo; Come back, I will be calling), Liao fully releases his emotions, reaching a peak on “Lang”. The word “Yu” is initially elongated before suddenly softening, while on “Ta”, he articulates the beginning clearly, allowing the volume to decrease before gradually building again. Just before “Gui bian”, he incorporates noticeable breath control and pauses, artificially halting the emotion before slowly releasing it, leaving a lingering impression on the audience.

In Dilber’s performance, each syllable in the line “Xiao xiao ye yu di jie qian” (raindrops on the steps, the night drizzled) is articulated with a full, crisp resonance. The clarity of both the onset and the ending of each syllable can be distinctly heard, with a granular texture. Despite the precision of each word, there is no interruption in the flow, and the connection between words remains seamless and smooth. In “Han qin gu zhen wei cheng mian” (cold and alone in bed, as time trickled), the word “Gu” is shaped by a vocal contour that moves up and back before directing forward into the head voice. The vocal line remains forward-focused, and the contrast in dynamics across phrases is evident, with rich

emotional depth. In “Lan tie hua dian” (jade petals unjeweled), she creates a deep resonance in the chest for the word “Lan”, then transitions into the head voice with a slight vibrato on “Hua”, adding a textured contrast between the chest and head resonance, enhancing the song’s emotional layers. After “Xiao lou du yi” (Leaning over the terrace), the emotional intensity elevates to a new level. In “Hen zhi hen”, there is a subtle sense of pause between each word, yet the emotional flow remains uninterrupted. Her delivery maintains fluidity, deeply expressing the meaning of the lyrics. The breath-led singing on the first “Hen” captures the emotional weight of the word, giving it an almost heart-wrenching quality. In the phrase “Bu hua cheng du yu” (I long to be a cuckoo), the word “Yu” is sustained with an intense onset, followed by a sudden soft release, quickly transitioning into the following line. This enables an emotional crescendo to peak and swiftly move forward, maintaining the tension and momentum throughout the performance.

Both Liao Changyong and Dilber maintain a similar tempo, with noticeable emotional rises and falls and a rich, powerful vocal presence. In their phrase treatment, both artists emphasize a dynamic contrast between strong and soft, often employing a technique of leading with breath, creating a pattern of crescendo followed by decrescendo. Liao tends to adopt a more restrained vocal style, with less overt vocal tension, presenting a unified and flowing overall tone that is long and subtle in expression. Dilber’s performance feels ethereal and natural, with richly layered emotions throughout the piece. Whether it’s Liao’s full and intense approach or Dilber’s delicate and fluid interpretation, both performances are compelling and evocative.

5. Conclusion

Spring Nostalgia is a versatile piece that transcends gender and voice type, allowing for various interpretations. Huang Tzu’s composition blends national characteristics with emotional depth, showcasing a unique interpretation of traditional Chinese music. He adheres to the principle of “adapting foreign things for Chinese use”, skillfully integrating elements of modern Western music with traditional Chinese styles. To truly excel in performing this piece, understanding its melody and lyrics is fundamental, but it is even more crucial to delve into the composer’s creative background and grasp the meanings expressed in the work. Only by conveying the profound emotions embedded in the melody can performers effectively showcase the intricate artistry and depth of this art song.

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