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A Review of Research on the Opera The Wilderness

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Abstract: The opera The Wilderness was adapted by Wan Fang, daughter of Cao Yu, from her father's play of the same name, with music composed by Jin Xiang. This work has been performed in several countries abroad, achieving great success each time, and has received high praise both domestically and internationally. This opera is also hailed as "the first Chinese opera to knock on the doors of Western opera houses." Academic research on The Wilderness has reached considerable depth and breadth. Building upon prior studies and compiling relevant scholarly materials, this paper synthesizes current research into four main areas: critical reviews, musical composition analysis, creative philosophy and aesthetic analysis, and character development.

Keywords: The Wilderness, Character Development, Creative Philosophy, Aesthetics, Musical Analysis.

1. Introduction

Composed in the 1980s, the opera The Wilderness is a four-act work adapted from the play of the same name and set to music by composer Jin Xiang. This opera stands as a landmark in the history of Chinese opera development, marking a milestone in the revival of Chinese national opera. It provided a solid foundation and direction for the development of national opera in China's new era. It holds significant status domestically and has garnered high praise in international performances. Currently, academia has conducted relatively in-depth and comprehensive research on the opera "The Wilderness," yielding rich scholarly outcomes across multiple dimensions[1].

Regarding the creation of The Wilderness, Jin Xiang noted in "My Experience Writing the Opera The Wilderness: Reflections on the 20th Anniversary of Its Premiere": "The central theme of The Wilderness is the struggle against feudalism!" [Jin Xiang. My Experience Writing the Opera The Wilderness: Reflections on the 20th Anniversary of Its Premiere [J]. Opera, 2009(02):55-58.] Liang Maochun observes: "In 1987, the China National Opera and Dance Theatre premiered the opera The Wilderness (libretto adapted from Cao Yu's play of the same name by Wan Fang, music by Jin Xiang), which portrays the tragic story of a peasant seeking revenge against a local tyrant in the old society."

2. Critical Reception

Upon its premiere, the opera The Wilderness garnered significant acclaim. Academic circles also published their perspectives and commentary on this outstanding opera in journals and reports. Newspapers like The New York Times also lavished praise on The Wilderness, declaring it "the first Chinese opera destined to secure a place in the international repertoire." [2-3]

In 2005, Zhan Qiaoling published the article "A Brief Discussion on the Development of Chinese Opera in the 20th Century" in music research journals. In this piece, she argued: The opera The Wilderness stands as the most outstanding masterpiece born during the third developmental phase of Chinese opera. Its successful overseas performances signaled the beginning of Chinese opera's journey onto the world stage, undoubtedly marking a milestone in Chinese opera history and signifying the attainment of a third peak in its development."

In 2010, Ju Qihong published "Operatic Thinking and Its Practice in The Wilderness" in Chinese Musicology. In this article, he contends: The libretto, musical composition, stage direction, and overall aesthetic realization of The Wilderness represent Jin Xiang's finest achievement in opera creation. It stands as the most accomplished work in the realm of serious opera since the new era began, and throughout the history of Chinese opera. Moreover, it embodies the highest level of Jin Xiang's 'opera thinking' in his entire operatic oeuvre." (The article also mentions certain shortcomings in The Wilderness.)

At the People's Music Symposium on the opera The Wilderness, Wang Ningyi asserted that The Wilderness is a true grand opera, embodying the musicality of operatic artistry at a remarkably high level. Wang Shiguang noted that The Wilderness breaks down boundaries between arias and recitatives, using the flow of emotion to create its symphonic musicality, setting a valuable precedent for future works. Zheng Xiaoying described The Wilderness as a symphonic grand opera. In this article, several key figures interviewed offered balanced assessments of The Wilderness while also pointing out its shortcomings.

Additionally, several studies have regarded the opera The Wilderness as a landmark in China's opera history. Currently, there is no shortage of critical reviews of The Wilderness. with most scholars offering high praise for its creative aspects and affirming its pivotal place in China's opera history. However, some scholars, while commending the work, have also pointed out certain shortcomings, which provide important guidance for future research and creation related to this opera.

3. Musical Composition of The Wilderness

Academic research on the musical composition of The Wilderness has yielded findings from various perspectives. Playwright Jin Xiang, in his 2003 monograph Confusion and Quest: Reflections of a Composer (published by Shanghai Music Publishing House), discussed the musical composition of The Wilderness: "In addressing the relationship between musical structure and dramatic structure, he employed three compositional techniques: the thematic transformation throughout, the pivotal and chain-link structural relationships, and the characteristics of non-rectilinear, open structures."

In their 1988 article “An Exploration of the Music in the Opera The Wilderness,” published in Chinese Musicology, researchers Chen Yixin and Li Daosong analyzed the musical composition from multiple perspectives. They concluded that the opera achieved: First, it achieves a significant breakthrough in expressing dramatic conflict through music. The creative approach of The Wilderness seeks to streamline the libretto by focusing on the main plot and avoiding intricate details and verbal sparring between characters, thereby creating ample space for the music to soar. Second, its musical-dramatic structure is logically rigorous, well-organized, and clearly articulated, possessing a strong sense of unity. Finally, the fusion of diverse stylistic techniques stands as a defining feature of The Wilderness's musical composition.“ This article provides a comprehensive musical analysis of The Wilderness, acknowledging its musical excellence while also identifying shortcomings: ” The underworld sequence in Act IV feels overly drawn out; the prolonged duration of orchestral passages induces auditory fatigue and makes them difficult for the audience to accept. The integration of music and dialogue still requires refinement, and some character portrayals remain slightly underdeveloped."[4]

In his 1987 article “Revelations from The Wilderness” published in People's Music, Shi Wanchun analyzed the opera's musical composition through four dimensions: temporal-spatial tension, character-driven tension, rhythmic tension, and symphonic tension in sound layers. He concluded: " Jin Xiang's The Wilderness is moving. His success lies in accurately grasping the work's essence, grounding it in its inherent tension field, drawing on Western operatic techniques, inheriting the essence of traditional Chinese opera, and synthesizing diverse compositional methods to achieve a multidimensional conception."[5]

In his 2021 article “Gains and Losses in Chinese Western-Style Opera Composition” published in Chinese Musicology, Li Jiti discussed the musical creation of The Wilderness, noting: "First, music dominates The Wilderness, developing in accordance with the plot. The opera's primary narrative, content, and central conflicts are all expressed through musical means, uniting music and drama into a unified whole. Second, the ‘thematic’ material in The Wilderness possesses distinct individuality or symbolic characteristics. Finally, in mobilizing the diverse genres of Western-style opera music, Jin Xiang multi-dimensionally conveys the dramatic content required by the opera, employing a relatively varied range of compositional techniques."

In summary, it is evident that not only composer Jin Xiang has engaged in discussions about the musical creation of the opera The Wilderness, but other scholars in the academic community have also analyzed the musical composition of this opera from different angles and levels, examining its distinctive creative features. However, some scholars have also explicitly pointed out shortcomings in the musical composition of The Wilderness in their writings. Research on the musical composition of this opera predominantly analyzes it from the perspective of music and drama, while comprehensive evaluations of the work as a whole remain relatively scarce.

4. Creative Concept of the Opera “The Wilderness”

The creation of the opera “The Wilderness” represents an advanced creative concept in the history of Chinese opera. Playwright Jin Xiang incorporated diverse creative techniques into this work, endowing the opera with distinctive artistic beauty.

4.1. “Operatic Thinking” in The Wilderness

Composer Jin Xiang himself stands as the foremost advocate of “operatic thinking” in The Wilderness, weaving this creative philosophy throughout the entire work.In his 2010 article “Operatic Thinking and Its Practice in The Wilderness” published in Chinese Musicology, Ju Qihong discussed the “operatic thinking” in The Wilderness: "The essence of Jin Xiang's advocated ‘operatic thinking’ resonates with Wagner's operatic philosophy. His ‘Operatic Thinking’ manifests in the libretto's rich dramatic and musical qualities, which he not only keenly perceives, comprehends, captures, and unearths, but also mobilizes through diverse musical means and forms. Employing masterful musical-dramatic techniques, it undertakes the mission of depicting scenes, advancing plot development, portraying character personalities, and unfolding conflicts, thereby becoming the primary vehicle for realizing his ‘Operatic Thinking.’"

In his 2015 article “The Significance of ‘Operatic Thinking’ in Adapting the Script of The Wilderness” published in Chinese Musicology, Wen Huiming argued: “The adaptation of The Wilderness from a play into an opera libretto stands as a successful ‘case study’ of ‘operatic thinking’ in action.” The prologue of the play The Wilderness was transformed into the first act of the opera version, and the three-act play became a four-act opera. This transformation was not merely a superficial change in form but a result of the application of ‘opera thinking.’"[6-9]

In 2009, Man Xinying published “The Background, Essence, and Value of Jin Xiang's Theory of ‘Operatic Thinking’” in Huang Zhong, stating: "First, the most compelling evidence for Jin Xiang's ‘operatic thinking’ is The Wilderness among his nine operas. Second, Jin Xiang's ‘operatic thinking’ prioritizes and adheres to the universal principles of opera-one of the world's most outstanding cultural forms. Finally, the core of operatic creative thinking lies in the creative concept, and ‘Operatic Thinking’ places the utmost importance on ‘holistic awareness.’"

In summary, the creative philosophy behind the opera The Wilderness is precisely Jin Xiang's own “Operatic Thinking,” which he fully implemented in this work. Academic research on Jin Xiang's creative philosophy for The Wilderness generally frames discussions around the keyword “Operatic Thinking.” Most scholars build upon Jin Xiang's proposed “Operatic Thinking” framework to explore what this concept entails and how it was implemented in The Wilderness. Specific interpretations of “Operatic Thinking” remain contentious, with some scholars noting that conceptual definitions vary due to individual perspectives. Nevertheless, “Operatic Thinking” holds significant importance for the development of Chinese opera composition.

4.2. Aesthetic Analysis of the Opera The Wilderness

The Wilderness garnered immense acclaim upon its premiere, indirectly demonstrating that this opera resonated with contemporary audiences' aesthetic sensibilities. Its continued revival to this day reflects the timeless beauty of The Wilderness.

In Confusion and Quest: Reflections of a Composer, Jin

Xiang addressed the aesthetic dimensions of The Wilderness: "Art cannot exist without form. I never shy away from pursuing formal beauty. The formal beauty of any art form cannot replace another art or be replaced by another. What I seek is precisely this inherent beauty of opera itself-the pursuit of formal beauty. In The Wilderness, I sought to create a stark contrast between the suppressed beauty of humanity's innocence and wildness-buried in the depths of society, history, and the soul-and the grotesque beauty of distorted appearances: the gloomy wilderness, bizarre hallucinations, and ugly hearts." [Jin Xiang. Confusion and Quest: Reflections of a Composer [M]. 2003.]

In 2013, Wu Kewei published "Reconstructing Simplicity Through 'Stylistic Polyphony': Cross-Cultural Aesthetic Reflections on the 2012 Version of the Opera The Wilderness" in People's Music, discussing the opera's aesthetics: "The new version of The Wilderness retains every note of the original score, yet its sonic style still radiates a rich aesthetic of its era. There is not the slightest sense that Jin Xiang's creative expression from 25 years ago feels out of place or outdated in the present day."[10-13]

Li Shu published the article "Opera in the Realm of Receptive Aesthetics: The Wilderness" in Music Exploration in 2009. She argued that the artistic beauty of the opera The Wilderness resonates with the aesthetic sensibilities of the Chinese people. Moreover, the artistic beauty of The Wilderness transcends its era, embodying rich aesthetic connotations and significant value. The playwright himself paid attention to the aesthetic consciousness of different regions, which contributed to the creation of this opera.

Drawing on the above scholarly analyses of The Wilderness's aesthetics, most scholars base their discussions on composer Jin Xiang's monograph Confusion and Quest: Reflections of a Composer, exploring the composer's own research into the opera's essential beauty. Numerous articles focus on the formal and content-based beauty, examining the aesthetic value and consciousness of The Wilderness's humanistic or musical beauty. Undoubtedly tragic in nature, the opera radiates sorrow and poignant beauty throughout. The protagonists' fates elevate the work to a higher plane. Thus, the multifaceted beauty of The Wilderness continues to be explored and unearthed, reflecting its rich layers of meaning-a subject worthy of ongoing contemplation and discussion among opera creators.[14-16]

5. Character Development in the Opera

The principal characters central to the plot of The Wilderness-Jinzi, Qiu Hu, Daxing, and Jiao's Mother-possess complex roles within the narrative.

In his 2010 article "Operatic Thinking and Its Practice in The Wilderness," published in Chinese Musicology, Ju Qihong addressed the character development in the opera, stating: The highest mission of artistic creation lies in shaping archetypal artistic images. The four principal characters in The Wildernes-Jinzi, Qiu Hu, Daxing, and Jiao Mu-each embody distinct archetypal qualities, originality, and uniqueness."

In her 2009 article "Exploring the 'Wilderness' of Drama Through Music" published in Symphony, Liu Rong described the character portrayals in The Wilderness as follows: The composer primarily employed two methods for character development. First, characters were gradually shaped and refined through the progression of the drama. As the central figure throughout the opera, Chou Hu's every appearance in the plot served to establish elements and manifestations of his character, while simultaneously shaping Jinzi's character within the dramatic development. Second, in shaping the character of Jiao Mu, the composer employed specific tonal patterns and timbres."[17-20]

Hu Bo and Tang Jianmei published "Qiu Hu's 'Love' and 'Revenge': Analyzing the Characterization of 'Qiu Hu' in The Wilderness" in Opera in 2009. The article analyzes Qiu Hu's character from four perspectives: Views on revenge, character traits, Chou Hu's stage presence, and interpersonal dynamics. It vividly portrays Chou Hu's psychological conflict upon returning from hell to confront the landlord Jiao Yanyang's family-who had devastated his household-alongside his former friend Da Xing and his past lover Jinzi.

Summarizing academic research on character development in the opera The Wilderness, it is evident that most scholars focus on analyzing the complexity and contradictions of specific protagonists through their arias. While numerous articles examine the characterization of Qiu Hu and Jinzi, relatively few explore the portrayal of Jiao's mother and Daxing-other central figures with more negative roles. As a four-act opera, The Wilderness demonstrates composer Jin Xiang's remarkable ability to craft each character with striking authenticity and naturalism, reflecting his profound understanding of the characters and his mastery of composition. Every character constitutes an essential element of this work, and how to vividly portray these characters in the creative process warrants further scholarly exploration.

6. Conclusion

In summary, scholarly research on the opera The Wilderness has seen considerable depth in recent years, with achievements extending beyond those outlined above. Academic articles on The Wilderness often use its creative concepts, character development, and aesthetic analysis as starting points for in-depth analysis of the work. Most scholars adopt an objective stance, analyzing both the strengths and weaknesses of The Wilderness. However, some studies lack innovative perspectives and share similar angles, building primarily on prior research. In essence, the creative concept serves as the "pillar" of the work. Jin Xiang's advocated "opera thinking" is fully realized in The Wilderness, offering a creative approach worthy of study by opera creators. Furthermore, the musical techniques employed, the aesthetic transcendence of its era, and the nuanced character development in this work all demand that creators build upon these foundations while pursuing innovation. This opera stands as an internationally renowned masterpiece, occupying a pivotal position in China's operatic music history and offering profound insights for opera creation and beyond.

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