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Carrying Forward the Musical Legacy, Harnessing the Power of Innovation

-- Reflections on the protection of musical intangible cultural heritage

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Abstract: In today's era of cultural diversity, intangible cultural heritage stands as a treasure of human civilization, increasingly revealing its vital significance. China has achieved remarkable success in safeguarding musical intangible cultural heritage. The successful inscription of Kunqu Opera, Peking Opera, Xinjiang Uyghur Muqam Art, and Mongolian Long Melody Folk Songs demonstrates the profound history and rich diversity of China's musical heritage. However, with the passage of time, the proliferation of diverse musical forms, shifting public tastes, and the rise of new music dissemination platforms, the protection and transmission of musical intangible cultural heritage face significant challenges. The scarcity of inheritors has placed many precious musical skills at risk of extinction; the significant loss of audience has led to a gradual narrowing of its dissemination scope; and the loss of market competitiveness has made its development increasingly difficult. Therefore, strengthening the protection of musical intangible cultural heritage is an urgent task.

Keywords: Traditional Music, Preservation and Transmission, Intangible Cultural Heritage.

1. Introduction

China has successfully inscribed various folk music forms onto the intangible cultural heritage list, including Kunqu Opera, Peking Opera, Xinjiang Uyghur Muqam Art, and Mongolian Long Melody Folk Songs. This achievement vividly demonstrates the profound history and rich diversity of China's musical intangible cultural heritage. However, influenced by factors such as the diversification of musical forms, evolving public aesthetic perceptions, and the prevalence of new music dissemination media, the protection and transmission of musical intangible cultural heritage face numerous challenges. These include a scarcity of inheritors, a significant loss of audience, and diminished market competitiveness. Therefore, strengthening the protection of musical intangible cultural heritage is urgent and cannot be delayed. This paper therefore proposes to elaborate on the author's perspectives regarding the protection of musical intangible cultural heritage from two aspects: First, all sectors of society should correctly recognize the historical significance and precious value of musical intangible cultural heritage, which has been passed down through generations for thousands of years. Beyond this, the preservation of musical intangible cultural heritage should not be confined to the concept of protection and transmission alone. It must be rooted in the soil of real life, seeking innovation in the ordinary and uniqueness in human relationships. Only then can the true preservation of musical intangible cultural heritage be achieved.

2. The Value Perception of Musical Non-Heritage

To gain a deeper understanding of musical intangible cultural heritage, we must begin by defining what constitutes “musical intangible cultural heritage.” In my view, musical intangible cultural heritage is a form of intangible culture that employs sound, imagery, and technical skills as its means of expression, relying on human existence and transmitted through oral tradition and heart-to-heart instruction. The reason musical intangible cultural heritage has endured for millennia as a unique form of intangible culture is determined by its inherent “people-centered” nature. Therefore, throughout its long historical evolution, it has only been through the living human carriers that various forms of intangible musical culture have been passed down. Take Kunqu opera, once widely popular, as an example. Although literati participated in its creation and some melodies were recorded in gongche notation, its transmission has always relied on oral composition and oral transmission. This is because the gongche notation of Kunqu merely captures the skeletal notes, and its markings for rhythm and tempo provide only a skeletal framework. Singing strictly by the notation alone cannot capture the essence of Kunqu's charm; it requires the performer's oral embellishment of the melody to fully recreate the unique artistic appeal of Kunqu's musical style.

How then can we recognize the value and significance of preserving musical intangible cultural heritage? Examining the present reveals its profound influence as an intangible force across all aspects of social development. First, it plays a vital role in promoting national spirit and strengthening ethnic cohesion. Once formed, intangible culture becomes a fundamental force that shapes people's behavior, language, and mindset, while also serving as a crucial means for the public to acquire, transmit, accumulate, and create cultural achievements. Musical intangible cultural heritage enables people's understanding of traditional culture to be built upon a solid foundation that is observable, tangible, learnable, and applicable. Thus, through its dynamic revitalization, musical intangible cultural heritage manifests the collective nature of people's lives on a broader scale. Consequently, by engaging in the revitalization practices of musical intangible cultural heritage, people can strengthen their collective consciousness and foster a spirit of cooperation.[1-3]

Secondly, musical intangible cultural heritage possesses a long history and distinct regional characteristics. Developing

musical culture can generate higher economic value, transforming cultural resources into cultural capital. For instance, the Mongolian horsehead fiddle music, as part of China's intangible musical heritage, serves as a key driver for Inner Mongolia's tourism economy. Positioned at China's northern frontier, Inner Mongolia boasts a unique geographical advantage. The Mongolian people, as the indigenous ethnic group of the autonomous region, possess distinctive cultural customs and lifestyles, which have significantly contributed to the region's tourism development. In recent years, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has fully recognized its tourism resource advantages and actively developed experiential tourism. This involves close interaction with Mongolians, experiencing their daily lives, and understanding their cultural customs. The horsehead fiddle, as one of the cultural hallmarks of the Mongolian people, has become an important way for people to learn about traditional Mongolian culture.

Finally, cultural heritage is an important symbol of a nation's development. As a vital component of a country's cultural heritage, musical intangible cultural heritage also holds significant meaning for national development. It is widely acknowledged that in today's era of globalization, a nation's international competitiveness can no longer be measured solely by economic development. Instead, emphasis must be placed on comprehensive national strength, which encompasses not only economic and political power but also cultural soft power. Enhancing cultural strength is intrinsically linked to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, safeguarding and transmitting musical intangible cultural heritage not only aligns with the tide of historical development but also elevates China's standing and comprehensive competitiveness in international discourse.

3. The Inheritance Dilemma of Musical Non-Heritage

However, in recent years, amid rapid global informatization and technological advancement, the preservation and transmission of musical intangible cultural heritage face severe challenges. First, the highly developed modern pop music, rap, electronic music, and other genres have become a dominant force in China's youth music culture, widely embraced by the younger generation. In this context, traditional music is facing neglect and is on the verge of being lost, having long since lost the environment and space necessary for its survival and development. Second, the loss of market competitiveness has directly led many folk inheritors to abandon the preservation and development of traditional music in favor of other industries. This has created a situation where elderly folk artists possessing unique skills face declining health and physical strength, yet have no one to carry on their legacy. As Maxim Gorky once stated, “The death of a folk artist is equivalent to the destruction of a small museum.” To ensure the enduring existence of these “museums” of traditional musical heritage, and to prevent the lifeblood of Chinese musical culture—which has flowed through millennia—from drying up in our generation and beyond, the urgent task is to protect, preserve, develop, and innovate.

The preservation of musical intangible cultural heritage requires not only the continuation of the lineage by musical inheritors but also the active participation of all sectors of society to infuse new vitality and radiance into these traditions. Governments should actively advocate for the protection of “musical intangible cultural heritage,” with cultural administrative departments and relevant agencies collaborating to strengthen conservation efforts. For the vast majority of ordinary inheritors, while the government often provides some financial support and ensures the transmission of certain unique traditional skills, the rapid development of the modern economy and the rise of the internet have diminished demand for traditional music. Faced with economic pressures and other factors, many inheritors have either abandoned the transmission of musical culture altogether or altered its original form to cater to popular tastes, causing traditional music to lose its “authenticity.” Furthermore, many folk music practitioners are now elderly, urgently requiring the next generation to carry on the tradition. Therefore, while the government continues to advance the protection of intangible cultural heritage music, it should also prioritize this “people-centered” approach to transmission.

Contemporary artists and cultural workers bear the noble mission of developing advanced culture and promoting traditional musical heritage, as entrusted by our era. Therefore, practitioners dedicated to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage music must actively engage in grassroots communities through hands-on, earnest efforts—not merely pay lip service with superficial, perfunctory participation. It is essential to mention that Mr. Yang Yinliu, a modern Chinese ethnomusicologist, visited the folk artist Abing in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, on multiple occasions. It was precisely through his meticulous documentation of Abing's music and his relentless efforts to bring it to the masses that Abing's erhu piece “Moon over Second Spring” gained worldwide recognition, exerting a profound and lasting influence on the development of traditional Chinese folk music. Simultaneously, he embodied the mission and responsibility of an artist and cultural worker. His example instructs us today that in safeguarding and managing numerous musical intangible cultural heritage assets, practitioners must prioritize field investigations alongside social research—not merely spouting empty ideals from an office. Only thus can one truly become a driving force in preserving musical intangible cultural heritage.[4-5]

4. The Living Inheritance of Musical Non-Heritage

Amid the widespread promotion of music aesthetic education, the development and direction of musical appreciation should “break free from professional circles.” This does not merely refer to popularizing technical skills, performance methods, or vocal techniques, but rather signifies a spiritual and cultural elevation. As the ancient saying goes, “Cultivate oneself, regulate one's family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world.” Cultivating oneself is the fundamental root. Regardless of circumstances, enhancing self-cultivation must always be prioritized. This is especially true for those who will implement music aesthetic education in the future; educators should be particularly strict with themselves, always placing the improvement of inner cultivation first. Enhancing inner cultivation involves not only behavioral aspects but also cultural knowledge. Strictly speaking, beyond music itself, numerous other disciplines represent ongoing learning paths for practitioners. Basic qualities for educators include proper teaching demeanor, fluent and rigorous instructional language, and a confident,

composed teaching presence. Only when educators attain a certain level of cultivation can learners truly absorb nourishment, enabling aesthetic education to be implemented more profoundly.

5. Conclusion

Moreover, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage music extends beyond mere "preservation." It requires drawing greater momentum for development and innovation while continuously protecting and transmitting the musical lineage, ensuring Chinese traditional music remains vibrant and dynamic. As Li Yu noted in his Ming Dynasty treatise Leisurely Thoughts on the Arts, regarding the development of opera music: First, he advocated that artistic works should "pursue innovation, avoid repeating predecessors' ideas, refrain from plagiarizing stale expressions, and eschew merely compiling old collections"-constantly surpassing both predecessors and oneself. Second, he maintained that innovation must be rooted in reality, never detached from substance to merely satisfy superficial artifice. In my view, this principle equally applies to the broader development of traditional music. Amidst the current challenges facing traditional music, a one-sided emphasis on preservation and inheritance alone cannot sustain its enduring vitality. Instead, we must ground ourselves in the artistic works themselves, drawing innovative strength from their developmental processes. Only then can traditional music tap into an inexhaustible wellspring throughout its long historical evolution. Clearly, innovation and development are equally essential conditions for traditional music to find new life in adversity.

Given this, as an integral part of China's outstanding traditional culture, the protection of intangible musical heritage requires not only preservation and transmission by all sectors of society but also the continuous absorption of innovative forces to propel its advancement while sustaining its musical lineage. Only in this way can we truly and consciously shoulder the historical responsibility of inheriting and developing China's outstanding traditional musical culture. Only then can we preserve the enduring historical memory of Chinese musical culture, allowing traditional Chinese musical culture to radiate its timeless charm and contemporary elegance!

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