

On the Aesthetic Practice of the Creation of Chinese Folk Music

LIU Ziyin^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Music, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.
*Corresponding author.

Received 16 September 2015; accepted 22 November 2015
Published online 26 December 2015

Abstract

In the long history of the development, Chinese folk music has formed the cultural spirit of folk music which takes “harmony” as its core, and reflects an inclusive aesthetic feature. This aesthetic feature not only reflects the artistic theoretical innovation of music, but also has long-term impact on the artistic practice of our folk music.

Key words: Chinese folk music; Aesthetic feature; Artistic practice

Liu, Z. Y. (2015). On the Aesthetic Practice of the Creation of Chinese Folk Music. *Studies in Sociology of Science*, 6(6), 83-87. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sss/article/view/7871>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7871>

INTRODUCTION

“Harmony” is the core idea of the five thousand years of splendid Chinese cultural heritage and guides the creation and practice of people in all spheres of culture. Culture guides music and music impregnates culture, which makes the outcomes of the practice of Chinese folk music skillfully present the ideological content and spiritual feature of “harmony”. “Harmony” is not only the core cultural spirit of folk music art, but also the fundamental principle of the artistic aesthetics of folk music. In the artistic practice of Chinese folk music, the demonstration of inclusiveness and stark aesthetic feature are reflected in music theory and music practice.

1. THE INCLUSIVENESS AND AESTHETIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THEORETICAL CREATION PRACTICE OF CHINESE FOLK MUSIC

The inclusiveness and aesthetic characteristics in the theoretical creation practice of Chinese folk music, the harmonious but different pluralistic performance characteristics, a variety of folk music types with rich flavor of life and various singing and playing forms show the unique aesthetic function and effects of the creation practice of Chinese folk music and have become a source of aesthetic rules of the art of folk music in China.

1.1 Inclusiveness: Rich Practice With Prosperity of the Nation

The inclusiveness in the theoretical creation practice of Chinese folk music is reflected in two aspects. First, it is reflected in the coexistence of the unique cultural phenomenon of multi-ethnic music creation practice. For thousands of years, all the Chinese ethnic groups live in different regions, resulting in different regional music, different humanities customs, different styles and different types of music culture. Whether wars or dynasty changes, they do not limit or abandon music culture; on the contrary, they have promoted the mutual integration, mutual absorption and nourishing of different regions, different humanities customs, different styles and different types of music cultures, thus forming the development history of the pluralistic coexistence of theory creation practice of Chinese folk music. The achievements of the theoretical creation practice of folk music which shows the spirit of ethnical groups have not only been recognized by all Chinese ethnical groups, but also won the respect of peoples all over the world. In the Tang Dynasty, it culturally respected Taoism, Buddha and Confucius and implemented the enlightened policy

of three religions living side by side, plus the opening of the Silk Road, the music culture of other regions passed to the central China and formed a brilliant climax of music culture. Various exotic melodies and musical instruments such as Qiuci music, Tianzhu music, Xiliang music and Gaochang music and so on, were introduced into central China, integrated with the local traditional “elegant music” and “ancient music” and presented an unprecedented blend of innovation. For example, it is said that the *Rainbow and Feather Garments Dance* (《霓裳羽衣舞》) composed by Emperor Xuanzong has learned from the content of India *Brahmin Song*; more examples include musical dances, *Huxuan Dance* and *Tuozhi Dance*, from the Western Regions as well as the folk dance, *Hutten Dance*, originating in Tashkent region in Central Asia. From the integration of the Han ethnic music, ethnically minority music and outland music and their artistic effect, we can get some evidence from the delicate descriptions of poets in Tang Dynasty, such as Du Fu’s *Watching the Sword Dance of a Disciple of Gongsun*, Bai Juyi’s *Huxuan Girl* and *The Song of Pipa* and Li Bai’s *Listening to the Playing of A Monk in Sichuan*, *Walking in the Spring* and *Quiet Jian Spring* and so on. From these poems, we can see that the Tang Dynasty music and dance and instrumental music at the time have formed superb performance skills and very civilian performances. It is this inclusiveness that triggers the vitality produced from multi-ethnic music to penetrate the various kinds of art of the Tang Dynasty, becoming the soul of its beauty. They all inclusively are called the voice of the prosperous Tang. Such loose and free thinking environment created a grand, diverse musical culture of the Tang Dynasty and formed the unique culture of the prosperous Tang Dynasty in the Chinese history.

1.2 Inclusive Music Creation Practice Forms Unique Aesthetic Characteristics of Folk Music

The aesthetic characteristics of folk music are the essence of the spirit of thousands of years of traditional culture of the Chinese nation. About the theory of Chinese folk music from the perspective of the art itself in folk music, the most representative and comprehensive works were written by the famous music expert at the end of Ming Dynasty and the early Qing Dynasty, Xu Shangying (also named Gong or Qingshan). In his books, *Xi Shan Qin Kuang* (《溪山琴况》) (hereinafter referred to as *Qin Kuang*), he provided very insightful statements on the “harmony”-cored aesthetic rules of Chinese folk music. He summarized the aesthetic characteristics and the performance skills of Chinese Qin into 24 conditions including harmony, quietness, clearness, distance, age and lightness and so on. Among the 24 conditions, “harmony” is the first one and the core of them, passing throughout them all. In his statements on “harmony”, he divided “harmony” into several levels. First, for Chinese Qin, “the most important feature is harmony. To get this

harmony, we first need to adjust the Qin to sense the harmony and respond to the harmony”. He said that “the superb harmony is disperse harmony; pressing harmony is the next. In dispersing harmony, without pressing the player gets the tune. This is the superb realm of harmony.” That is to say, in the performance of Chinese Qin, the player needs to have the aesthetic sense of “harmony” in getting accurate tune and in the way of reaching the tune and then with the skills and techniques of playing reach the performance effects of “harmony” in aesthetic sense. In this way, that is the integration of art and skulls. This harmony is full of artistic imagination like what’s expressed in “lofty mountains and flowing water (高山流水) (Chinese Qin) and “ambush on all sides (十面埋伏) (Pipa). The flowing music and the mind of people combine into one, making people’s inner spiritual elements submit, moving with the sound of Qin to reach the unprecedented filling and giving people an unprecedented emotional experience and spiritual fulfillment. That’s how the praise of “buzzing three days in the house without stopping” comes out. These music masterpieces spreading for thousands of years with artistic appeal reflect the cultural spirit, cultural connotation and customs heritage of Chinese nation for generations, are the cultural heritage and internal cohesion of the Chinese nation, have a high degree of aesthetic value and appreciate value, and are indispensable spiritual nourishment for the Chinese nation.

2. HARMONIOUS BUT DIFFERENT PLURALISTIC PERFORMANCE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THEORETICAL CREATION PRACTICE OF CHINESE FOLK MUSIC

In the thousands of years’ long history of the development process of China, music of each ethnic group exists with its unique charm and form. With the collision between blood and fire, body and soul, strength and weakness, it has formed harmonious but different performance characteristics with its unique ethnic characteristics and different ethnic styles.

2.1 Theoretical Practice

The “introduction, elucidation, transition and summary” in traditional Chinese folk music theory are the results of understanding and application of natural rules and natural laws. “Introduction, elucidation, transition and summary” format comes from *Poetry Grid* (《诗格》) written by Fan Deji in Yuan Dynasty: “There are four steps to compose a poem: straight introduction, rich elucidation, changeable transition and insightful summary”. The “introduction, elucidation, transition and summary” format has become one of the basic principles of Chinese ethnic

musical structure. Introduction: That is the beginning and first statement of the themes or motives of the music. Elucidation: That is the consolidation, through duplicate or changes to consolidate the theme or motives of music. Transition: that is the development, the full development of the themes of music and it is of greater instability; summary: That is the end, reproducing the theme of music and ending the whole piece of music. There is another description: Introduction should be steady; elucidation is the development; transition is the climax, and summary is the end. Our ancestors applied the harmony-centered essence of traditional Chinese culture and ideology to the study of the creation of national music theory, with traditional humanistic ideas to fully and vividly elaborate the development rules of music. It is full of unique cultural connotations of Chinese culture and charm.

2.2 Creation Practice

The generation, application, enriching and improvement of folk tuning can most embody the cultural and spiritual traits and ideological connotations of harmony. The most universal and the most unique folk tuning is the pentatonic scale which constitutes the basis of all other ethnic tone style. The pentatonic scale is several sounds arranged according to the pure five-degree relationship. The five sounds, Gong, Hui, Shang, Yu and Jiao form the folk tune. Its basic feature is the five sounds, Gong, Shang, Jiao, Hui and Yu (i.e. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6) can be used as the main sound of tuning so as to form five different tuning: Gong tuning, Shang tuning, Jiao tuning, Hui tuning and Yu tuning. These five sounds are also referred to as standard sounds in music, which is the backbone sound of music composition. The interval relations of pentatonic scale are dominated by major seconds and minor thirds and assistant with perfect fourths and perfect fifths, occasionally applying tritone in the music, so the music can achieve dynamics on the basis of steadiness. The purpose of steadiness is to maintain the fluency of the music. The purpose of tritone is to make the music full of changes and dynamics. Based on folk pentatonic scale, six-tone style, seven-tone style, etc. are derived. The application of folk tuning highlights the ingenuity and creativity of the Chinese nation and makes folk music practice of Chinese nation has become more colorful.

2.3 Harmonious but Different Music Performance Features

The Chinese nation has fifty-six ethnicities and each ethnicity has its own colorful music. Even with the same music tuning, because of the differences in physical geography, customs, dialects, etc.. the music of each ethnicity shows different styles and because of the differences in model structure, direction, interval melody and emotion expression, they have formed individual musical characteristics. For northern nomadic ethnicities, their objective geographic living environment is relatively harsh and in the long hore they have formed rough,

sturdy, simple and bold characters. When they sing, whether Xintianyou or Bangzi tuning, they are mostly high-pitched, long, intense and unrestrained. Southern ethnicities live along mountains and rivers and they do farming with relatively stable living and accommodations, so they have developed a delicate, quiet personality. whether folk songs or small tunes, they are mostly mildly, circuitous, lingering and soft. For example, *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* (《阳关三叠》) is a classic ancient poetry song, a Qin composition based on a poem by Tang Dynasty poet, Wang Wei, *Send Yuan'er to Anxi*. The song uses “co-head” and “co-end” sentences. The musical structure, system redeployment same with the Gong tuning, rhythm writing forms have strong ethnic style. The poetic lyrics perfectly express the poet’s infinite pity to a departing friend. The whole song is divided into three sections, with a melody for change repeatedly, stacked sing for three times, so it is called “thrice”. Although it uses seven Shang tuning, Qing Gong 4 and Bian Gong 7 appear rarely (because it is recorded by singing, some compositions have Qing Gong 4 and Bian Gong 7, but some only have Qing Jiao 4). The *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* collected in the selection of vocal music teaching music library published by People’s Music Publishing House in 2007 only has Qing Jiao 4. It appears on the sentence “to persuade you to drink one more glass of wine”. In the first repetition, this sentence does not have Qing Jiao 4, but in the second and third repetitions it appears. The skillful application of Qing Jiao 4 brings subtle changes on the pitch, showing that the poet’s emotions when saying farewell by drinking are becoming increasingly strong. This is a touching ancient classical composition and also a rare boutique in China’s folk music. For thousands of years it has been widely sung and has a strong artistic vitality. The composition of *A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain* was already lost in the Song Dynasty, and the first spectral script appeared in *Zhe Yin Shi Zi Sheet Music* compiled by Gu Jigu in the Fourth Year of Emperor Hongzhi in Ming Dynasty (1491). This song has more than 30 versions, a total of six types. The present widely sung one was originally recorded in *Fa Ming Qin Pu* (1530) in Ming Dynasty. After Adaptation, it was included in *Getting Started Learning Chinese Qin* edited by Zhang He in the Qing Dynasty (1876). In 1950s, contemporary composer, Wang Zhenya adapted it into mixed chorus composition from the playing script of modern artist, Xia Yifeng (1882-1963). In addition to songs, there are a variety of instrumental ensembles such as ancient Qin composition, piano composition, dulcimer composition, koto composition, Chi composition and Tao Xun composition and etc.. Although it has experienced vicissitudes of changes and the performance forms vary, its basic melody and quaint charm has not changed and become a classic song in traditional Chinese folk music treasure.

3. WITH THE AESTHETIC FEATURES OF “HARMONY” AS THE VALUE SCALE TO CONDUCT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF MUSIC CREATION PRACTICE

The artistic creation process of Chinese folk music is a dynamic system. In this parent system, there are in general three subsystems: the first subsystem is the writer → life → works and this is called the First Creation; the second sub-system is works → performers and this is called the Second Creation; the third subsystem is works → performer → appreciator and is called the Third Creation. Throughout the parent system and subsystems, they include two core factors. One is the philosophical idea that “(things are) harmonious but different; if they are the same, they can’t be developed” (Zhou Shibo) and “different sounds cooperate with each other to create harmony” (Liu Xie) and is the core cultural thought in the parent and system and the subsystems, the soul constituting the system, and the aesthetic law that Chinese folk music art must comply with. Second, each of the three subsystems in this system has their own emphasis with distinct levels. They are interrelated and complement each other, constituting the overall harmony-centered cultural spirit of Chinese folk music.

3.1 “Harmony” and the First Creation of Music

“Harmony” in the First creation is reflected in three aspects. First, with extraordinary artistic thinking ability and unique aesthetic vision, composers go deep into life for rich experience to get a lot of different or similar materials; second, on this basis, with the artistic mental set and the creation framework they start their artistic design and create artistic images surpassing themselves and others; third, according to their talent, musicians use sound, rhythm, melody, harmony and other musical elements to materialize the artistic images in their minds into music. The three sectors in the first creation of music art are the product of “harmony”. They are interrelated with harmony as the core, blending miscellaneous into one to constitute the first creation of music art.

Second, the type of work and the composer’s personality are harmonious but different. It is precisely because of “harmony” that we have different ethnicities, different styles and creative personality and different musical arts categories of colorful Chinese folk music. That is why we have different genres and different styles of folk music, musicians and singers. That is why we have high-pitched beautiful melodies as Guo Lanying, real simple, lively ones as Wang Kun, loud strong vibrant ones as Ma Wangtao, healthy enthusiastic ones as Xian Xinghai and delicate ones as He Luting. That is why we have energetic and gorgeous Mei school Chinese opera, delicate and detailed Cheng school Chinese opera, lightweight, beautiful, funny Sichuan opera and colorful

and grand Beijing opera; that is why we have cheerful, pungent, soulful Uighur music and resounding, clear, moving Tibetan music and we have Beijing, Sichuan, Yue and other opera music as well as a combination of Chinese and Western violin concerto of *Butterfly Lovers* with the same theme of *Butterfly Lovers* story.

3.2 “Harmony” and the Second Creation of Music

In the Second Creation, “harmony” involves many aspects, which I am going to discuss from two aspects: first, homogeneous, simultaneous and isomorphic creation. In the preparation stage of the performance, “harmony” is reflected through the performer’s experience of the emotions and personalities of the composers. All their emotions and movements require synchronization to accurately perceive the work and experience a harmony with the work, in line with the objective prescriptive of the work. The second aspect is homogeneous creation with different sounds and monographs. After the performers are familiar with the work, they have to have personalized and exceptional performance. According to their understanding and perception of the work, they fully use their own conditions and artistic skills to vividly show the style and mood of the original work, to achieve “harmonious but different” artistic effects. For the same song, *Qingzang Plateau*, Han Hong and Peng Liyuan sing with different styles. From this we can see that, only when harmony runs through the Second Creation can we compose unique Chinese folk vocal music.

3.3 “Harmony” and the Third Creation of Music

In the third creation, the “harmony” is among the work, the performers and the appreciators. Here we talk about this in two aspects. First, the nature of music appreciation is the re-creation of appreciators for the work and performers. In the process of listening to music, according to their own life experiences, special situations, emotional experience, cultural enrichment, appreciators will have imagination and association of the musical work and the performer’s performance, processing and supplementing, recreating the work and performer’s sound, melody, rhythm and other artistic languages into artistic images or artistic conceptions in their own minds through imagination and association. For example, when the Tang Dynasty poet, Han Yu, wrote his poem, *Listening to the Qin*, he recreated the imagination of the lingering sound of Qin into the intimacy between a young man and young woman in love and he created the picture of their intimate talking. He recreated the magnificent high sound into warrior going against the enemy field, the light and elegant sound into cloud and catkins without pedicle, the crisp high-pitched sound into noisy birds finding solitary phoenix. We can see that when Han Yu listened to music, he constantly

put his own experiences, feelings, knowledge and the sound, melody, rhythm from Qin together to continuously re-create the whole picture, making the music images and music mood become the image and mood of language art to achieve highly optimized combination of harmony.

Second, the other manifestation of “harmony” in the third creation is subjective differences and objective similarities. Since subjects have to conduct recreation based on their cultural knowledge, emotions and experiences while listening to music and therefore, there are differences in music appreciation in terms of different times, different ethnicities and different personalities of the appreciators. That is why there is such a saying that “there are one thousand Hamlets when one thousand readers read Hamlet”. Similarly, there are a thousand images when a thousand people appreciate *The Moon over the Spring*. No matter what the ethnicity or which country the appreciators belong to or what kind of personality they have, there is no way they can image *The Moon over the Spring* as *Roar of the Yellow River*. This is the objectiveness of the work and cannot be recreated randomly. This objective prescription and subjective difference is the manifestation of “harmony” in the third creation of the art of music.

CONCLUSION

Chinese folk music in the long history of the development has formed a harmony-cored cultural spirit of folk music and reflects the characteristics of an inclusive aesthetic feature. This aesthetic feature not only shows in music and art theory innovation, but also has a long-term impact on the art practice of folk music. The development of Chinese folk music will continue to follow the aesthetic principles of “harmony”, adhere to inclusiveness and actively learn various artistic techniques to promote a more sustainable prosperity of Chinese folk music arts.

REFERENCES

- Cai, Z. D. (21003). *History of Chinese music aesthetics* (pp.31-387). Beijing: People’s Music Publishing House.
- Pu, Y. H. (2002). *Aesthetics in Chinese studies* (pp.125-135). Beijing: China Economic Publishing House.
- Xiu, H. L., & Luo, X. P. (2002). *The general theory of music aesthetics* (pp.42-83). Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing.
- Zhao, F. (1994). Pay attention to Chinese folk music and improve national self-confidence. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Sciences)*, 22-24.