

Modern Chinese Art Songs: Historical Transformation, Stylistic Diversification, and Industry Promotion

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Abstract: This study explores the historical trajectory, stylistic evolution, and industrial significance of modern Chinese art songs. Beginning with their early formation under the influence of Western art song traditions, it traces how the genre has adapted to China's unique sociopolitical and cultural contexts across different historical periods. Emphasis is placed on the stylistic diversification that has emerged in recent decades, including the incorporation of regional musical idioms, contemporary compositional techniques, and experimental forms. Furthermore, the paper investigates how these artistic developments have extended the genre's reach into music education, cultural identity formation, and the broader music industry. By situating Chinese art songs within both national and global frameworks, the study underscores their role as dynamic agents in cultural transmission and industry innovation.

1. Introduction

Art song in Chinese musicology refers to vocal music developed during the Romantic period of nineteenth-century European (mainly German and Austrian) music culture [1]. Composers in Germany, France, Italy, and other countries developed distinctive national styles. Over time, art songs spread around the world, enriching the connotation and expressive power of this musical form. Modern Chinese art songs have undergone rich historical changes, from the old democratic revolutionary period to the new socialist period, with continuous innovation and development of musical styles and creative techniques. These changes have brought diversified impetus to the prosperity of the music industry, thus forming a vibrant music market. This paper will explore the historical evolution and stylistic diversity of modern Chinese art songs, as well as their role in promoting the music industry.

2. The Historical Evolution of Modern Chinese Art Songs

The development of Chinese art song was influenced by the chamber music traditions of Western Europe. In the 1920s, as a result of cultural reflection on the changes in the country's political, economic, and social life, art song emerged in China as an independent branch of vocal music. As a result, the development of the Chinese art song genre is now more than 100 years old.

2.1 Early attempts (early 1900s to 1920s)

At the beginning of the 20th century, with exposure to foreign (primarily Western European) musical culture, a group of talented Chinese young people emerged, such as Xiao Youmei, Li Shutong and others. They traveled to Western countries to study foreign music education concepts and compositional techniques. Upon their return to their homeland, they set about reforming the then-outdated forms of musical practice. Namely, they created a new type of song known as the School song. Some of the most famous authors in this genre are Li Shutong and Shen Xingong. Scholar Qilong Shi believes that their songs were rich in subject matter and varied in form, not only reflecting the spirit of the people at the time but also propagating the idea of independence and promoting the spirit of patriotism [2].

It was the works of these musicians that laid the foundation for the development of Chinese art songs.

The melodies of most of the songs in the School Songs series are directly adopted from the melodies of the songs of Western countries, with the Chinese lyrics rewritten and recorded in digital notation.

Chinese researcher Zeng Qiang makes an important observation about school song compositions: "In the schools in question, new songs are written by filling in old melodies with new words. The number of melodies written by the author himself is minimal. This phenomenon is attributed to the fact that in the past, it was customary in China to compose such song compositions. Ready-made melodies were matched with various song lyrics and poetry" [3].

In parallel with the development of school songs genres and the gradual penetration of foreign compositional techniques into China, there was a desire for scientific reflection and comprehension of historical processes within Chinese national academic and folk music. Chinese musicians began to conduct systematic research in many areas of national musical culture, among which Chinese national art song occupied a special place. At the same time, the development of Chinese art song in this period (early twentieth century) was in its infancy.

2.2 Development and growth (1920s-1940s)

In 1920, musician Qing zhu created one of the earliest examples of a modern Chinese art song. The text was borrowed from the Chinese poet Su Shi's famous work "The Great River Goes East". In terms of composition, the song employs advanced (for the Chinese musical culture of the time) foreign compositional methods. The work draws on Western operatic compositional techniques [4]. In particular, the combination of the Bel Canto style with chanting, and the texture uses alternating arpeggiated and harmonic chord sounds. Scholar Chaloupkov á Lenka. argues that Qingzhu's song "The Great River Goes East" is the first successful experience of combining Chinese national and Western European musical traditions, which made it a landmark work [5].

2.3 Prosperity (1940s-1960s)

By the early 1940s, the art songs of the previous decades could no longer adapt to the development

process of Chinese society at that time. After the victory in the Anti-Japanese War (the anti-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945), the Chinese people needed more cultural products to satisfy their growing spiritual needs [6]. As a result, the creation and promotion of art songs entered a new climax. Based on preserving the folk songs, composers collated and processed them and created some art songs with high appreciation value, such as Ding Shande's "When Will the Sophora Blossom Bloom" and Sun Yunyan's "Shepherding Five Brothers".

The musical style of this era was characterised by stylistic unity. There was a gradual increase in the number of songs expressing strong emotions - Tan Xiaolin's 1945 art song "Since You Left". Harmonies, accompaniments, and textures became more affluent, and the compositional skills of national composers improved significantly over the previous period. Chinese folk songs became the primary material for young ethnic writers to create their art songs, injecting the latter with a solid ethnic impetus.

2.4 Difficult exploration (1960s-1970s)

During the Cultural Revolution of the 1966-1976s, songwriting went through three phases: the early phase - songs with Mao Zedong's quotations as lyrics; the middle phase - the banning of art songwriting; and the later phase - a new wave of interest in the genre by domestic writers. In the preface to Huang Zi's Collected Works, he mentions a remark made by Huang Zi: "Music reflects an era." Songs written during the Cultural Revolution more or less reflected the atmosphere of the time: social life, social mood, and ideological particularities. Early masterpieces include "I Stand Guard for the Motherland" by Zhao Bang in 1972 and "The Party's Sunshine Shines on the Motherland" by Yang Zhizhong in 1974.

Since the songs of this period were written under special socio-political and cultural conditions, these songs were characterised by emotional expression. During this period, the creation of songs on other subjects was severely restricted and controlled by the state. However, musicians still made bold attempts in the field of composition, such as the song "Back to Yan'an" composed by Yan Ke. These songs reflect the resilience of musicians under challenging times and their dedication to the art of music.

2.5 Renewal and diversification (1980s-early twenty-first century)

Since the reform and opening up, China's art songwriting has flourished. There has been a substantial increase in both the total number of compositions and lyrics, as well as in design style and writing skills. Art song creation in this period was characterised by independent innovation and progress, with various themes and styles, and bold innovations and reforms compared with the previous period [7]. The musical works of this period included both exploratory and creative works based on modern compositional techniques, such as Zhou Leru's "The Seed"; Shi Guangnan's "On the Fields of Hope", as well as more traditional works favouring the audibility and melodiousness of music, such as Luo Zhongrong's "Song of Autumn" and Lai Yinghai's "Spring Dawn". During this period, great importance was attached to the development of art songs, and all kinds of art song competitions were widely held throughout society, training several well-known musicians.

2.6 Integration and innovation (early twenty-first century to present)

At the beginning of the 21st century, modern Chinese art songs, while continuing to carry national traditions, started to integrate musical elements from all over the world, forming a more diverse musical form. On the one hand, many composers began to try to combine traditional Chinese music with musical elements from all over the world, breaking the traditional musical boundaries and

bringing new inspirations to the creation of art songs; on the other hand, some young composers injected new vitality into art songs with innovative gestures, for example, combining modern music forms such as pop music and electronic music with traditional art songs, which made the art songs more colourful. On the other hand, some young composers have injected new vitality into art songs with innovative gestures, such as combining pop music, electronic music, and other modern music forms with traditional art songs, making art songs more colourful.

3. Styles and Creative Diversity of Modern Chinese Art Songs

The stylistic diversity of modern Chinese art songs is one of its essential features. Due to the diversity of China's history, geography, and national culture, as well as the influence of Western culture, modern Chinese art songs present a plurality of stylistic features.

3.1 Ethnic style

In modern art songs, many works integrate national characteristics. The ethnic style of art songs is mainly reflected in lyrics and music composition [8]. For lyrics, the songs usually adopt metrical poems and Chinese poems with rhymes. The rhyming feature emphasizes the rhythmic sense of the lyrics, which is conducive to the consistency of the melody and the artistic sense of the lyrics. In terms of musical composition, Chinese art songs incorporate traditional Chinese musical elements based on Western compositional techniques. Composers such as Qing Zhu, Xiao Youmei, and Huang Zi applied pentatonic modulation to art song composition, forming a unique artistic style [9].

In terms of harmony, Chinese composers devoted themselves to the nationalization of harmonic techniques. In terms of accompaniment, although early Chinese art songs were also mainly accompanied by piano, the compositions paid more attention to reflecting the mood and sound of Chinese music and culture. The accompaniment aims to present the unique rhythmic and metrical beauty of Chinese poetry, thus giving Chinese art songs a robust national character.

3.2 Poetry and song

Modern Chinese art songs show a wide variety of characteristics in terms of lyrics, and poetry songs and fugues are some of the notable features. Many works use ancient and modern poems as the source of lyrics, and these songs have high literary value and deep historical background. In these works, the use of poems and songs not only inherits the excellent tradition of Chinese classical literature but also reflects the aesthetic interest of modern music.

Chinese researcher Zhe Hu believes that after thousands of years of development, China's modern art songs combine literature, art, and music, precipitating the cultural connotations of the Chinese nation for thousands of years and embodying the spiritual emotions of people over the centuries.

Take "The Great River Goes East," for example, a Chinese art song by the famous musician Qing Zhu in 1920. The lyrics are taken from the Northern Song poet Su Shi's *Nian Nujiao*. Qing Zhu cleverly combined Western compositional techniques with classical poetry, showing Su Shi's bold personality and nostalgia for the Battle of Red Cliff. The work combines a simple and broad atmosphere, a stretching and dashing style, and a fantastical romanticism, fully demonstrating the charm of the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. The song has become a representative work of modern Chinese art songs, which inherits and develops the long-lasting cultural tradition of the Chinese nation.

By choosing poems and songs as lyrics, modern Chinese art songs have reached a higher level in combining music and literature, giving the music a richer connotation and unique flavor. These songs have not only become the treasures of Chinese music but also inherited the long cultural tradition of

the Chinese nation.

3.3 Western Music Elements

With the spread of Western music and culture in China, modern Chinese art songs have gradually incorporated many Western musical elements, giving new vigour to the works. In this process, musicians adopted Western musical features such as harmonic treatment, counterpoint techniques, and varied tunes and rhythms, combining them with Chinese musical traditions so that the art songs, while retaining their national characteristics, display an international outlook [10].

Taking Mr Huang Zi's art song "Homesickness" as an example, it can be seen that it incorporates Western musical elements. First, the song is in two-part form, containing an introduction, a passage, and a small ending. The first section mainly depicts the spring scenery to pave the way for the emotional expression in the second section. The second section expresses the feeling of homesickness, and the music is gradually agitated, with the accompaniment thickened and reversed to form a crescendo effect. The song's end uses the reproduction factor to enhance the unity of the overall structure.

In the harmonic treatment, Mr. Huang Zi used the Western traditional harmonic technique, taking the primary chords as the core, the harmony chords as the main framework, and the dissonant chords and unstable chords show the dependence and the tendency that must be solved. His successive seventh chords, including the genitive seventh chord, form a chromatic reverse progression between the high and low voices, making the mood even more exciting, powerfully matching the lyrics, and climaxing the work. The use of these Western musical elements makes "Homesickness" display an international outlook while retaining its national character.

4. The role of modern art songs in promoting the music industry

4.1 Promoting diversification of the music industry

Diversity of styles brings more choices to the music market. Modern art songs cover various genres, such as ethnic styles, poems, songs, experimental music, etc. Such richness allows listeners of different ages, backgrounds, and interests to find their favourite works in the music market. This diversity helps to expand the music consumption market and satisfy the needs of different consumers.

The richness of compositional techniques promotes innovation in the music industry. In modern art songs, composers have extensively used different elements such as folk music, Western classical music, and contemporary music, as well as a variety of expressive techniques, such as harmonic treatment and counterpoint techniques. This diversity of creative techniques has provided the music industry with a steady stream of innovative impetus, further enhancing the artistic value and market competitiveness of musical works.

Integrating national characteristics helps to pass on and carry forward national culture. Modern art songs have absorbed Western musical elements while retaining national styles, making the works more innovative based on traditional culture [11]. This fusion helps to pass on and carry forward the national music culture and provides a solid foundation for the diversified development of the music industry.

4.2 Promoting the popularisation and improvement of music education

Modern art songs have profoundly impacted the popularisation and improvement of music education. As a rich resource of teaching materials, these songs cover various styles and creative techniques, making music education teaching materials richer and more diverse [12]. Teachers can

choose different types of art songs for teaching according to student's interests and needs, which helps to stimulate students' learning interests and cultivate their musical aesthetic ability. At the same time, modern art songs integrate national music with Western music elements, allowing students to learn about diverse music cultures. Through studying these works, students can better understand and appreciate different musical styles and creative techniques, thus improving their musical literacy.

In addition, applying modern art songs in music education helps improve teaching quality. Teachers can use these works for practical teaching so that students can master music knowledge and skills in actual practice. In appreciating and analysing these works, students can deepen their understanding of music theory knowledge and improve their music appreciation ability. Therefore, modern art songs have an essential value in music education and have significantly contributed to the popularisation and improvement of music education.

4.3 Enhancing the competitiveness of the music market

The development of modern art songs has played an essential role in enhancing the competitiveness of the music market. These songs have enriched the genres and styles of the music market, providing more choices for different consumers. As a result of the diversification of the music market, creators have been motivated to experiment with a variety of novel compositional techniques and expressive skills to meet a wide range of market demands. Such a market environment encourages more musicians to engage in music creation, resulting in a more active music industry chain.

Against this background, the competition for musical works has become increasingly fierce. To stand out in the market, creators need not only to remain innovative but also to improve the quality of their works. Such a competitive environment positively affects the level and market competitiveness of the entire music industry. At the same time, the diversified music market also brings richer music experiences to consumers and satisfies people's multiple demands for music. Therefore, the development of modern art songs has injected vitality into the prosperity of the music market and played a positive role in improving the competitiveness of the music market.

4.4 Providing a source and impetus for music industry innovation

The diversified styles and rich creative techniques of modern art songs have inspired musicians to give full play to their imagination in the creative process and to try new art forms and expression techniques. This spirit of exploration has driven the continuous development and progress of the music industry and injected vitality into the industry as a whole. Composers, singers, and music producers often draw inspiration from various aspects of ethnic music, Western music, poems, and songs during the creative process, blending them to create musical works with unique charms. Such innovative attempts bring new elements and possibilities to the music industry but also help to enhance the artistic value and influence of musical works.

The innovation and development of the music industry cannot be separated from the promotion of modern art songs. It is these innovative musical works that provide the source and impetus for the prosperity and diversification of the music industry, making the music market more energetic and better able to meet the aesthetic needs of different groups [13].

4.5 Enhancing international music and cultural exchanges and co-operation

Modern art songs have absorbed Western musical elements while retaining national characteristics, which has given Chinese music a higher status on the international stage. The innovation of Chinese art songs based on tradition and the borrowing of Western music make it an essential carrier of

cultural exchange between the East and the West.

With the advancement of globalization, music, as a borderless art form, has become increasingly widespread internationally. The innovation and development of China's modern art songs have drawn the world's attention to Chinese music, prompting international musicians and scholars to study and appreciate traditional Chinese music and contemporary works. This has helped to promote music and cultural exchanges on a global scale, allowing the musical elements of different countries and regions to merge and prosper together.

In addition, the internationalization trend of Chinese art songs has also provided domestic musicians with a broader space for development. They have the opportunity to showcase their talents on the world stage and work together with international musicians to create works with cross-cultural characteristics. Such cooperation is not only conducive to enriching the international music market but also further enhances the global influence of Chinese music.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, Chinese art songs have experienced continuous exploration and development in their long history, from ancient poems and songs operatic singing books to modern art songs, constantly integrated and innovated, showing a unique artistic style. Chinese art songs not only have a deep historical and cultural heritage but also continue to expand and innovate in terms of art forms, expression methods, and musical elements. It is not only an essential part of China's music culture but also an important manifestation of China's cultural soft power. These art songs not only promote the diversified development of the music industry and the popularisation and improvement of music education but also enhance the competitiveness of the music market, provide the source and impetus for the innovation of the music industry, and international music and cultural exchanges and co-operation. In the future, Chinese art songs will continue to maintain their unique national style, mingle with the world's music cultures, and push the music industry forward.

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