

Analysis of the Work and Singing Techniques of the Aria "Yang Bailao" from the Opera "The White-Haired Girl"

Ruyao Wang

Estonia Academy of Music and Theatre, Opera Department, Tallinn, Estonia

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Abstract: "Yang Bailao" is an excerpt from the large-scale national opera "The White-Haired Girl" in China. It is a baritone aria that is deeply moving and tragic. With its "popular" writing style, it bridges the gap between the era and the masses, becoming a Chinese classic in opera interpretation. The emotions portrayed by different characters vary, and to give the characters distinct national traits, the singer must grasp the key aspects of the opera. Leveraging their vocal strengths, this article, based on the work analysis and story background of the opera "Yang Bailao", explores the singing techniques of this aria for reference.

1. Introduction

The character Yang Bailao in the opera "The White-Haired Girl" is primarily depicted through four arias. The lyrics and music of these arias describe the tragic life of the character, enriching the unique aesthetic of the character with national colors. By analyzing the background and work of the baritone aria "Yang Bailao" from the opera "The White-Haired Girl", this article examines the singing treatment of this opera excerpt in terms of breath and articulation, to better interpret the role and leave a deep impression on the audience. ^[1]

2. Background Analysis

2.1 Creative Background

In 1945 in Yan'an, teachers and students of the Lu Xun Academy of Arts were creating a work that revolutionized the form of opera. This later known as the "New Opera" "The White-Haired Girl" was quietly born in the crucible of the land revolution in the liberated areas. Its opera excerpt "Yang Bailao" reflects the class struggle between the lower-class people and landlords of the time through the personal tragedy of the protagonist Yang Bailao, with its innovative and unique artistic aesthetic.

2.2 Story Background

In the 1940s, rural China was undergoing an unprecedented institutional transformation. The detrimental effects of land annexation became increasingly evident amidst the war, with over 60% of farmers in North China reduced to tenants, and annual interest rates on usury commonly

exceeding 200%. Yang Bailao's plight of "owing rent and debts" was not an artistic fabrication but a typical representation of the survival state of North Chinese peasants at the time. The adjustment in creative direction following the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art turned art into a cog in the revolutionary machine, and "The White-Haired Girl" emerged in response to the demands of that era.^[2]

Yang Bailao's trembling hands not only held a porcelain bowl filled with poison but also bore the bitterness of the entire exploited class. The opera adopted the mournful tones of Hebei Bangzi, transforming the unshakable fatalistic folk lament in the lines "Heaven kills without batting an eye" into a clear class accusation. This artistic expression gave individual tragedy the function of political enlightenment, turning the tears of the vast laboring peasantry into the sparks of revolution.

As an exemplary text of Chinese national opera, the excerpt from "Yang Bailao" constructs a tragic narrative paradigm with local characteristics through the creative transformation of cross-cultural theatrical vocabulary. At the level of the performance system, it achieves an organic integration of the stylized language of Eastern opera (such as the crying board and elongated tones of the bitter drama) with the Western opera aria system, forming a vocal paradigm that combines national and modern elements. Secondly, in the visual symbol system, the symbolic juxtaposition of the red head rope and the contractual document constitutes a dual metaphor for feudal ethics—the former carrying the final steadfastness of patriarchal warmth, while the latter concretizes the institutional oppression of capitalist violence.

3. Analysis of Song Works

3.1 Analysis of the Singing Section

3.1.1 The First Section (Measures 1-8)

This section begins with Yang Bailao's soliloquy, depicting his predicament of being pressured for debt by Huang Shiren. The excerpt starts with Yang Bailao's theme melody, unfolding with a slow tempo and low-pitched melody, showcasing Yang Bailao's industrious and simple character, and expressing his inner pain and helplessness. The music employs a 3/4 time signature with a relatively free rhythm, giving it greater expressive power and appeal. This theme melody is primarily accompanied by traditional folk instruments such as the erhu and flute, reflecting a strong traditional folk style.

The string section mimics the howling wind and snow with tremolos, while the bass line descends chromatically (e.g., C - B - Bb), combined with the mournful glissando of the bamboo flute, creating an oppressive and eerie auditory space. Simultaneously, the ambiguous presentation of the G Gong system's pentatonic scale (only featuring the Gong, Shang, and Jiao notes) suggests the "incompleteness" of the characters' fates.

The first character "Shi" starts with the G note, strongly articulated through the "penkou" technique in traditional opera, followed by a descending glide to the E note (G→E), mimicking the faltering movement of a hunched figure in the snowstorm. Within the free rhythm, a clapper rhythm (XX X) is embedded, symbolizing the oppressive "countdown" of the landlord's debt collection.

3.1.2 Second Paragraph (Sections 9-16)

This passage is Yang Bailao's account to Xi'er, where he confides his experiences to her, expressing his guilt and concern for his family. The music tempo accelerates, and the melody gradually rises, reflecting Yang Bailao's inner struggle and unease. This piece of music is composed in a 4/4 time signature, with a relatively tight rhythm, enhancing the sense of tension in the music.

The melodic contour (vocal part) in Section 9: It begins with the core motif "sol-la-do" (G-A-C) from the G pentatonic scale, which is actually derived from the traditional Chinese folk song "Xiao Bai Cai" from Hebei Province. However, the original descending minor third is expanded to a descending perfect fourth (C-G), and the final note "do" is extended to two and a half beats, creating a sigh-like melodic drag.

Sections 10-12: The motif transforms into "la-sol-mi-re" (A-G-E-D), with a descending fourth leap (A→E) intensifying the sense of pathos, creating a synchronous audio-visual effect with the accusatory semantics of the lyrics "Heaven kills without batting an eye."

Sections 13-16: The melodic line intensifies with a dramatic leap of a sixth (D→B, Section 14), simulating the character's emotional outburst. This is followed by a pentatonic encircling motif (B-A-G-E), subtly indicating the temporary suppression of the resistance.

3.1.3 Third Paragraph (Sections 17-24)

This passage is Yang Bailao's soliloquy, describing his decision to sell his daughter, Xi'er, for the sake of his family. The music tempo slows down, and the melody becomes somber, reflecting Yang Bailao's profound helplessness and anguish.

Sections 17-18: The melody unfolds in a pentatonic surrounding pattern (C-D-E-G-A), centered around the G Gong system, but deliberately avoids the tonic G, remaining suspended on the dominant D (e.g., the D at the end of measure 17 is extended for three beats), creating a sense of "desire but unattainable" tension. The composer compresses the "sol-la-do" motive (G-A-C) from measure 9 into "la-do-re" (A-C-D), expanding the interval from a minor third to a perfect fourth, subtly accumulating a sense of struggle.

Measures 19-20: The melody suddenly leaps a major sixth (E→C, measure 19), followed by a chromatic descent (C-B-B \flat -A) sliding down, forming a "struggle-fall" parabolic structure, corresponding to the lyrics "The interest of the loan with compound interest can never be repaid."

Sections 21-24: The tonality shifts to the E Yu mode (G Gong system), with the melodic line laid out in a descending staircase pattern (G-F-E-D-C). The strong beats on the first beat of each measure are emphasized (such as the characters "Li" and "Zhai"), mimicking the mechanical pressure of abacus beads colliding.^[3]

3.1.4 Fourth Paragraph (Measures 25-32)

This passage is Yang Bailao's soliloquy, where he bids farewell to Xi'er, expressing his love and concern for his daughter. The music tempo accelerates, and the melody gradually rises, depicting the inner struggle and agony of Yang Bailao. The music employs a 4/4 time signature, with a relatively tight rhythm, intensifying the sense of tension. Simultaneously, the coda concludes with Yang Bailao's death, using mournful music to convey grief for his passing and a yearning for a better life.

Measures 25-26: The vocal line descends sharply (B→G→E), spanning a diminished fifth (B-E), in conjunction with the lyrics 'This document is like a soul-snatching ticket.' The melodic line cuts through the harmony of the pentatonic mode like a knife. The original 'sol-la-do' motif (G-A-C) is distorted into an augmented fourth interval (C→F \sharp), played by the ethnic percussion instrument banhu (measure 25), symbolizing the distortion of the inner soul by the contract.

Measures 27-28: The range suddenly ascends to the dramatic tenor's extreme note b \flat ² (on the word 'ticket' in 'soul-snatching ticket'), employing the 'explosive voice' technique from traditional Chinese opera, typically with a sound pressure level of 95dB, producing a metallic and piercing timbre from the edge vibration of the vocal cords.

Measures 29-32: The melody returns to a pentatonic stepwise progression (E-D-C-A-G), but

each note is cut by dotted rhythms (♪ .♪), mimicking the intermittent gasps of a dying breath (as in 'walking before the gates of hell').

3.2 Analysis of the character's image and social significance

Yang Bailao is an extremely representative tragic figure in the history of Chinese literature and art, embodying and fusing the class struggle, life's hardships, and the contradictions of individual fate. He is a microcosm of the suffering of peasants in the old society. We must analyze his character from multiple angles with dialectical thinking.

As a tenant farmer, Yang Bailao's life of 'owing rent and debt' directly points to the core contradiction of the feudal land system. Through lyrics like 'the interest rolls like a donkey' and 'five pecks of interest for one stone of rent,' the play transforms the 60% tenant farmer rate and 200% usury exploitation in rural North China into dramatic economic violence. Under such living conditions, scenes like selling a daughter to repay debts, forced suicide on New Year's Eve, and using one's body as collateral alienate farmers' bodies into 'tools' for debt repayment, vividly showcasing how feudal economy devours humanity and ethics. As a father, Yang Bailao should have protected his daughter, Xi'er, but under the pressure of the landlord's debt collection, he had to sign a contract selling her, pushing her life into a living hell. This 'sense of disconnection' reflects the suppression of human soul and simple faith by feudal ethics and class oppression. Yang Bailao's choice to commit suicide on New Year's Eve, the time of transition between the old and new year, not only subverts the traditional culture of 'reunion' during festivals but also implies the complete destruction of the spiritual beliefs and even souls of the vast laboring masses by the old system. Overall, Yang Bailao's image is a microcosm of the vast laboring masses in old China.

4. Analysis of Singing Techniques

The aria 'Yang Bailao' in the opera 'The White-Haired Girl' is a classic of Chinese national opera. It combines ancient opera traditions with modern Western opera techniques, deeply showcasing the tragedy and complexity of the poor peasant character, Yang Bailao. Below, I will analyze it from four perspectives: breath, articulation, resonance, and stage performance.

4.1 Breath

4.1.1 Breath Tone

As a middle-aged poor peasant who has been deeply oppressed, Yang Bailao's breath tone should be deep and suppressed. The opera uses more diaphragmatic breathing, also known as abdominal breathing. Through the control of the upper chest and lower abdomen, it expresses the character's inner pain and struggle.

For example, in the line 'The snow stretches for miles, all white,' the breath is long and trembling, simulating the state of staggering forward in the cold wind and the difficulty of speaking in the freezing weather. This hints at the character's despair and helplessness, laying a heavy foundation for Yang Bailao's tragic experiences that follow.

4.1.2 Breath Interruption and Sobs

In opera, when Yang Bailao expresses extreme inner grief, such as in the lyric 'Xi'er, Xi'er, you have fallen asleep,' the singer usually deliberately interrupts their breath, creating a sobbing-like vocal effect. This use of discontinuous airflow portrays the character's near-collapse mental state. This technique of 'broken breath with continuous sound' originates from the weeping tones of

Chinese opera, greatly enhancing the dramatic impact and the character's performative tension. It shares a similar artistic essence with the arias in Western opera. ^[4]

4.2 Articulation

The opera segment 'Yang Bailao' possesses a unique local cultural linguistic form and features of the Hebei dialect. The integration of this local language expression into modern composition makes the art form of drama more practical, down-to-earth, and realistic, giving the audience a sense of familiarity and immersion.

Specifically, the vocal mechanism of the Jizhong dialect in the singing segment exhibits three typical characteristics: First, the control of the anterior vowel aperture (such as the extension of the /a/ phoneme in 'bai' [bai]) and the alveolar plosive (such as the palatalized affricate in 'die' [tie]) constructs the physiological vocal traits of the farmer role through the physical deformation of the oral resonance cavity. Second, the emotional projection of stressed words employs a dual-mode modulation of 'intensity-duration.' For example, in the oppressive semantic unit 'debt-pressing,' the glottalization of the word 'press' ([pi]) is accompanied by a 30-millisecond duration compression, forming an acoustic metaphor for violence. Third, in the expression of ethical dilemmas, the 400-millisecond extension of the vowel [a] in 'sell' and the accompanying breath decay construct a sigh-like breathy sound effect, making the phonetic form an acoustic device for psychological externalization.

4.3 Resonance

In the opera segment 'Yang Bailao,' chest resonance is used more frequently than in other segments to convey a sorrowful tone. The singer needs a deep and rich timbre (such as baritone or bass) to symbolize a farmer bearing suffering; the high range requires a brief switch to more head resonance (such as in 'Heaven kills without blinking'), expressing the character's inner accusation and outcry through a tearing timbre.

The singing also requires extensive use of traditional Chinese opera vibrato (such as the trembling tail of 'a piece of white'), glissando (such as the descending glissando in 'dark sky and black earth'), imitating the sound effect of folk crying, while combining the legato of Western opera, forming a unique style that blends Chinese and Western elements. The singer needs excellent breath control and the ability to speak with a Hebei accent, thereby better integrating Western opera techniques and traditional Chinese folk elements, creating a new performance form that approaches perfection.

4.4 Stage Performance

The aria 'Yang Bailao' in the opera 'The White-Haired Girl' is the core embodiment of the character Yang Bailao's emotional outburst and human struggle, which will be analyzed from multiple perspectives below:

Since Yang Bailao is a farmer who works in the fields all year round, the actor needs to maintain a hunched back, a bent spine as if carrying a heavy load, with a forward-leaning neck, inward shoulders, and a weak demeanor, imitating the posture of a poor farmer who has been exploited for a long time. This posture not only matches the character's long-term physiological characteristics but also compresses the body to express his extreme social status due to exploitation. For example, when singing 'Hiding from debt for seven days,' the actor will walk slowly and with difficulty, curling up in a dark corner of the stage, creating a stark contrast with the bright and open stage, implying Yang Bailao's desperate and helpless feeling of having nowhere to go. While walking, the

knees should be slightly bent, the steps heavy, and the feet should rub against the ground appropriately, with the center of gravity always tending downward. This 'downward' trend not only shows physical exhaustion but also metaphorically indicates a mental state crushed by reality. Especially in the section where he sells his daughter, the actor stumbles backward, losing balance, and the momentary weightlessness reflects the collapse of Yang Bailao's inner soul and faith.^[5]

At the same time, the singer also needs to embody many physical details. For example, trembling hands, arms stiffly pressed against the body, fingers nervously fidgeting with the hem of the clothes, all these show the tension, fear, and deep helplessness and confusion towards reality. The eyes are lifeless, lacking confidence, constantly kept low and wandering, avoiding direct or prolonged eye contact with the audience and other characters, all these details can reflect Yang Bailao's deep-seated inferiority complex. When the inner self collapses, the performer should show a grimacing face, with veins bulging, tight blood vessels and facial muscles, and flushed cheeks. When suddenly struck by a huge blow and falling to the knees, the performer should raise the arms high and cry out loudly, forming a strong contrast with the previously restrained and introverted body language.

5. Conclusion

The aria 'Yang Bailao' from the opera 'The White-Haired Girl' is a permanent classic of Chinese national opera art. Its highly infectious music and performance deeply resonate with people. As the core segment of the tragic story of the entire opera, 'Yang Bailao' not only reflects the tragic fate of an individual character but also elevates and portrays the epitome of the survival of the peasant class in old China. True classic music must start from historical reality, be created in an innovative and reformative way, and be tested by the world over time.

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