

A Vocal Performance Analysis of the Art Song “Xiangjian Huan: Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded”

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Abstract: The art songs of ancient poetry have produced numerous excellent works in contemporary music creation. With the advancement of creative ideas, higher requirements have been put forward for singing techniques and artistic expression. This paper takes “Xiangjian Huan: Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded” as an example, from the perspective of the integration of words and songs, combs through the emotional core and creative intention of the original words, explores the artistic conception construction and musical language of the work, and then makes a deep analysis of the articulation, breath application, intensity processing, and emotional expression in singing, aiming to accurately grasp the singing skills and style characteristics of the works in the singing of ancient poetry and art songs.

Keywords: Art songs; “Xiangjian Huan”; Singing skills

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1. Introduction

As a treasure of Chinese culture, composing new music for ancient poetry in the contemporary context is an important way to reinterpret classical essence. “Xiangjian Huan: Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded” is an art song created by modern composer Guanyu Cao based on the poems of Yu Li. This work condenses the deep sorrow after experiencing major life changes into a short length, using late spring scenery to express the reluctance of fleeting beauty. Guowei Wang, a master of Chinese studies, regarded Yu Li as “having the intention of Shakyamuni Buddha and Christ bearing the burden of human sin,” believing that he had elevated his personal distress to sympathy for the common suffering of humanity^[1]. Guanyu Cao integrated her insights gained from studying abroad and reflections on the roots of ethnic music into the creation of this work. Through music, she reproduces the deep and mournful emotions in the original lyrics, giving a new interpretation of the creation of this work. Currently, most studies of this work focus on analysis of the poetic conception or the work itself, without providing a clear method for performers to turn the artistic conception

of the words into tangible and perceptible sounds. Guanyu Cao centered on the emotional connotations expressed by words and combined the aesthetic interest of modern creative skills with classic poems, enhancing the creation of “Ancient words, Modern songs.” This article not only deepens the understanding of the relationship between poems and lyrics, but also provides performers with ideas from technique usage to imagery creation. It provides a valuable reference for the singing practice of similar themed works.

2. The fusion of words and songs of “Xiangjian Huan: Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded”

2.1. Intentional construction in the text

From the perspective of the words, Yu Li’s words rose in late spring and integrated the sadness of personal destiny into the natural scene. “Spring’s red blossoms have faded, too hasty,” so that the past “waiting for the snow hoof to clear the moon at night” issued a sad cry of “Life is but a long, long regret, as the river flows eastward,” which is unprecedented in his early court pleasure words ^[2]. The question of “when can repeat” is a desperate cry for the end of the motherland and the end of time. The closing sentence “Life is but a long, long regret, as the river flows eastward,” shows a strong personal tragedy color, and the eternal reflection of the east flow of the river reflects the endless regret of life. The whole poem is praised as a model work of Yu Li’s later poems because of its flower metaphor, scenery and emotion, concise language, and profound meaning.

2.2. Echoes of melody and meaning

From the perspective of melody, Guanyu Cao uses the techniques of melodic lines, sound area layout, and rhythmic relaxation to transform the emotional tension intertwined with restraint and outbreak in the words into musical language, so that the words and sentences echo the music in the structure.

The melody at the beginning of the last part fits the sadness and helplessness in Yu Li’s poems, and the melodic line at the beginning of the sentence shows a downward trend, like falling flowers. The two fonts of “Wu nai” show the melancholy that rises in the heart of the poet when he stares at the ruined scene. It is followed by the repetition of “Tai cong cong” and the frequent occurrence of triads and stops in the melody; it breaks the steady rhythm, as if the passage of time strengthens the sense of hurry ^[3]. Then the melody of “helpless towards the cold rain and evening wind” (“Wu nai zhao lai han yu wan lai feng”) further uses the rhythm of three continuous sounds, and repeats “Wan lai feng” again to create a sad and beautiful artistic conception for singing with a short and roundabout rhythm and downward tone. The lower part of the melody tends to be gentle and lingering. Subsequently, “Ji shi chong” is repeated three times consecutively, and each repetition is accompanied by slight fluctuations in tone. Meanwhile, the piano accompaniment adopts dense six-note patterns, which resemble the effect of an anxious inquiry from the heart, and strengthens the complex emotion of helpless expectation. Then the melodic lines first rise and then fall, and the sound area increases. The three-character melody of “Shui chang dong” slowly goes down and repeats again, and the tone gradually falls and stretches continuously. Just as the river flows eastward, there is no complex decoration here, and a simple downward scale is used to match the long tone. On the whole, the repeated descending melody and rhythm are heart-wrenching.

2.3. The common presentation of the fusion of words and songs

In the first sentence of “Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded, too hurried” (“Lin hua xie le chun hong, tai cong cong”), the “Xie le” has pointed to the end of the good things, and the line tone below the music melody line has been written down to imitate the feeling of petals withering. Then, two “Tai cong cong” are used to emphasize the hurry of time, and the normal rhythm is broken by using triads and pauses, so that the audience can produce the feeling of time flying in hearing. When singing “helpless towards the cold rain and evening wind” (“Wu nai zhao lai han yu wan lai feng”), it is necessary to pay attention to the emotional tension of the word “Wu nai” in the fluctuation of the melody. “Wan lai feng” continues to use triads to simulate the endless cold rain, so that the “Wu nai” in the word and the “inability to stop” in the song confirm each other. The “Ji shi chong” of the lower part is asked three times in a row, and each repetition means a lot. The uniform speed of the six continuous sounds in the accompaniment texture is in contrast to the pause and repetition of the human voice. Under the superposition of the two, the image of “Shui chang dong” is presented. In the last sentence of “Life is but a long, long regret, as the river flows eastward” (“Zi shi ren sheng chang hen shui chang dong”), the melody slowly descends and falls on the long tone, and the words “Chang hen” merge into one. The composer resonates the two art forms of language and sound at the level of emotional expression, and finally makes the work show a unified emotional tone.

3. Singing treatment of “Xiangjian Huan: Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded”

3.1. Diction and articulation

When performing art songs based on classical Chinese poetry, the accuracy of articulation directly affects the singer’s ability to precisely convey the song’s emotions. The principles of performing art songs based on classical Chinese poetry can be summarized as follows: “Characters follow the notes; sounds enter the melody; the melody is articulated and embellished by the lips.” “Characters follow the notes” emphasizes that singing must adhere to the musical score and prioritize pitch accuracy; “Let the sound enter the vocal cavity”; and “articulate in the pharyngeal cavity and refine with the lips,” which emphasizes that vowels should be articulated within the pharyngeal cavity, while consonants should be shaped and refined by the lips, thereby achieving accurate, clear, complete, and full-bodied pronunciation of Chinese characters in song ^[4]. This principle requires us, building upon the foundation of “let the sound enter the vocal cavity,” to prepare the pharyngeal cavity for articulation and word transitions, to carefully study the requirements on the score, and to pay attention to resolving the conflict between sound and words through lip refinement and correction, thereby achieving a unified singing state.

“Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded, too hurried” (“Lin hua xie le chun hong, tai cong cong”) is the beginning of the whole word emotion, which is particularly critical in the processing of pronunciation details. The word “Le,” as an auxiliary word, is almost passed over during singing, while the word “Tai cong cong” is formed in three words, and each word needs to be short and powerful during singing. The word “Wu nai” should be sung in a weak voice when singing. The word “Wu” is slowly sent out by the breath, as if to stop; then the volume of the word “Nai” increases, forming a sense of a sigh. The word “Feng” at the end of the sentence should be rhymed and slowly closed. The emotion of “rouge tears, leaving people drunk” (“Yan zhi lei, liu ren zui”) is delicate. The word “Lei” can be added with a slight vibrato. The vocal delivery of the character “Liu” should adopt a slow, arched glissando. “Life is but a long, long regret, as the river flows eastward” (“Zi shi ren sheng chang hen shui chang dong”) is the emotional climax and philosophical

sublimation of the whole song. When singing the word “Hen,” the high position and light cavity should be used to achieve an implicit ethereal effect. The word “Dong,” as the closing, goes from strong to weak; when the sound enters the cavity, it goes from open to closed, and the breath slowly recovers, achieving a singing effect where the sound is subtly restrained, yet the meaning is endless.

3.2. Breath management

“Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded” is rich in emotional levels, and the emotions are euphemistic grief, indignation, and euphemistic ups and downs, which have extremely high requirements for the singer’s breath control ability. Therefore, it requires the singer to have delicate and stable breath control to achieve the artistic effect of relaxation.

In terms of breath support and volume control, “Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded too hurried” (“Lin hua xie le chun hong, tai cong cong”) begins, and the word “Lin” is sounded with breath. When singing, the breath remains stable and should not be too large, creating a hazy atmosphere, and the volume control is between weak (*p*) and medium-weak (*mp*); when singing “Tai cong cong,” the flow rate of breath needs to be slightly accelerated to enhance the sense of promotion and provide support for the maintenance of the volume of long sentences. Singing the phrase “helpless to the cold rain and late wind” (“Wu nai zhao lai han yu wan lai feng”), the singer can change their breath after “Han yu” to ensure that the voice is full and penetrating when singing the words “late wind.”

In terms of breath support and strength regulation, “Life is but a long, long regret, as the river flows eastward” (“Zi shi ren sheng chang hen shui chang dong”) is the climax sentence, and it is necessary to fully inhale before singing, and the diaphragm sinks to increase the breath pressure at the “Chang hen” to make the sound explosive. The three-character breath of “Shui chang dong” changes from promotion to leisure, creating a sense of continuous river water. The whole song’s breath layout needs to take into account the strength of the treatment.

3.3. Dynamic Shaping

The intensity of the whole song of this work goes from weak (*p*) to strong (*f*) and finally quickly falls back to very weak (*pp*) to end. The singing sentence “Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded, too hurried” (“Lin hua xie le chun hong, tai cong cong”) should use weak (*p*) strength in order to maintain the stability of the breath; the word “Lin hua” can be slightly extended when singing, so that the sound has a sense of space; when singing “Xie le,” the intensity can be slightly increased; the word “Chun hong” returns smoothly, ends in weakness, and completes the first emotional ups and downs. The three words of “Tai cong cong” are gradually strengthened in strength and strengthened in tone expression. The intensity of the “Wu nai” lyric in the line “helpless towards the cold rain and evening wind” (“Wu nai zhao lai han yu wan lai feng”) gradually decreases, which forms a stark contrast to the compact treatment of the preceding phrase. The two iterations of “Wan lai feng” form a clear hierarchy in terms of performance intensity: the first starts at a medium-weak (*mp*) volume, and the second gradually builds to transition into the next sentence.

The sentence “rouge tears, stay drunk, when can repeat” (“Yan zhi lei, liu ren zui, ji shi chong”) appeared twice in the spectrum, which constituted the turning point of the emotional core of the whole song. When it first appears, the singing can adopt the strength of medium strength (*mf*) to strong strength (*f*); when it appears for the second time, the intensity gradually increases and reaches the climax of the whole song’s intensity and emotion when singing “Ji shi chong,” reflecting the intoxicated and sober ambivalence

contained in the work. The last sentence “Life is but a long, long regret, as the river flows eastward” (“Zi shi ren sheng chang hen shui chang dong”) is the structural end of the whole word and the commanding point of emotion. It is necessary to achieve emotional summary and sublimation through changes in intensity during singing. The strength of this sentence is gradually pushed from medium (*mf*) to strong (*ff*) for artistic expression. Among them, the four words “Zi shi ren sheng” should be entered with medium strength (*mf*), reflecting the struggling mood; the word “Chang hen” is the key point for the rise of the whole sentence. The word “long” can be appropriately extended, and the intensity can be from medium-strong (*mf*) to gradually strong (*f*). Subsequently, the three words of “Shui chang dong” gradually fell back to the middle and weak (*mp*), and the speed was gradually slowed. The two words of “Chang dong” let the breath stretch in the gradual weakening, showing the river away with the disappearance of sound. The mood of sorrow is endless.

3.4. Emotional expression

In terms of artistic conception, Yu Li used “Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded” to express his sadness for spring, which was actually a lament for his own life experience. Therefore, the word “Wu nai” in “helpless towards the cold rain and evening wind” (“Wu nai zhao lai han yu wan lai feng”) is a summary of the whole word’s emotion. “Life is but a long, long regret, as the river flows eastward” makes the emotional pattern of the word move from personal encounter to universal life philosophy. Singers need to deeply understand the tragic beauty of the scene in the poem, in order to grasp the emotional core of the work.

In terms of the blending of sound and emotion, Guanyu Cao’s music accurately captures and deepens this emotional context in Yu Li’s *ci*. In place of “helpless towards the cold rain and evening wind” (“Wu nai zhao lai han yu wan lai feng”), the word “Wu nai” is placed in a higher sound area and matched with a longer time value, so that the depressed emotion can be musically vented. In the end, the part of “Life is but a long, long regret, as the river flows eastward” is repeated twice. When singing, the voice should be combined with the actual situation and express the feelings of the heart implicitly and profoundly^[5]. It not only conveys the emotion of the word by singing, but also sublimates this resonance in musical expression.

4. Conclusion

This paper takes the art song “Xiangjian Huan: Spring’s Red Blossoms Have Faded” by Guanyu Cao as the research object and analyzes it from two dimensions: lyrics fusion and singing processing. The work deeply combines the sad artistic conception of Yu Li’s lyrics with modern composition techniques, so as to soothe the melody and fit the implicit and sad literary connotation, and realize the high unity of classical lyrics and music rhythm. Singing should be based on stable breathing, with moderate ups and downs, to fit the emotional core of the words, so as to achieve the unity of sound and emotion. From the perspective of modern interpretation of ancient poetry, this paper discusses the deep integration of literary artistic conception and musical expression in vocal music interpretation, and at the same time encourages singers to seek the resonance between traditional implication and modern aesthetics in the second creation, so as to endow ancient poetry with new artistic vitality.

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