ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 4| April 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691|| ISI Value: 1.188

STUDY ON THE APPLICATION CHARACTERISTICS AND AESTHETIC TRENDS OF OPERA ELEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE CHAMBER MUSIC

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra21122
DOI No: 10.36713/epra21122

ABSTRACT

This paper examines selected contemporary Chinese chamber music works that incorporate elements of traditional Chinese opera. It conducts an in-depth study of the musical theme development, melodic material elaboration, and structural composition techniques in these opera-infused chamber pieces. The aesthetic orientation of such works reflects contemporary Chinese composers' steadfast cultural confidence in carrying forward traditional Chinese culture, while demonstrating the unique artistic value of modern chamber music. By seamlessly integrating traditional Chinese opera culture into the framework of Western chamber music, these compositions not only expand the artistic possibilities of the genre but also breathe new life into traditional opera culture – preserving its classical essence while infusing it with modern vitality.

KEY WORDS: *Chinese Chamber Music Works ; Dramatic Elements ; Aesthetic preference*

Chamber music originated in Italy in the 16th century and is renowned worldwide for its diverse performance forms and changing musical styles. With the introduction and promotion of chamber music art in China, many Chinese composers have ingeniously extended the theme motifs, rhythms, and structural elements of traditional Chinese opera into their chamber music works, injecting them distinctive national cultural characteristics and diverse forms and styles. Contemporary composers consciously attach significance to the integration of traditional elements and modern composition techniques, inheriting the charm of traditional opera and embodying the characteristics of contemporary music, making chamber music works richer and more expressive, and deeply showcasing traditional Chinese culture.

I. OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE CHAMBER MUSIC WORKS INCORPORATING DRAMATIC ELEMENTS

Chinese piano chamber music originated in the 1930s. During the past nine decades of creative process, it has gone through the budding stage of using foreign elements for Chinese purposes from 1933 to 1978, the booming stage of integrating Chinese and Western elements from 1979 to 1999, and the maturing stage of modern individuality from 2000 to 2024. Chamber music works with elements of opera have presented a diverse range of forms, and composers have not only borrowed traditional themes from ethnic music materials and poetry, but also continuously expanded the traditional expression boundaries of Chinese chamber music through the aesthetic care of opera. In recent years[1], chamber music works such as Tan Dun's string quartet *Feng(Ballad), Ya(Court Hymn) and Song(Eulogy)*, Cao Guangping's piano quintet *Fugue Poetry*, and Jiang Wantong's trio *Opera Rhyme* have adopted innovative chamber music language expressions. Composers are not limited to Western major and minor key systems and 12 tone sequences, as well as Chinese pentatonic and sextone modes, but have always pursued personalized and colorful modes and tones in their compositions. The sound layout, structural arrangement, and timbre construction are intertwined with traditional Chinese opera, retaining the progressive and random narrative of Chinese music works, as well as the rhythmic sense of traditional opera's drum playing from slow to fast, while also incorporating the advantages of Western style presentation, unfolding, and reproduction. [2] *Rhyme of Sichuan* is a chamber piece created by Jia Daqun, which has a strong Sichuan opera sound effect. The composer uses snare drums, vibraphones, timpani, flat drums to express the rhythm and drum beats of Sichuan opera. The piano employs an innovative playing method of silent key pressing and free choice of bass, as well as special techniques for performers to perform according to the approximate frequency of vibrato determined by the composer; when the violin is played, finger joints are employed to strike the body, forcefully press the bowstring, and slide without a fixed pitch. The melody has a distinct Sichuan opera flavor and line sense, accompanied by frequent beat changes, making the two artistic forms of Sichuan opera and chamber music more dynamic. In the *Yuefu New Voice* ethnic chamber music series concert held at the Central Conservatory of Music in 2017, the *Cold Spring Chamber Orchestra* from the School of Arts of North China University brought the *Jin Opera New Rhyme* created based on traditional Jin opera music. This work has a strong flavor of Shanxi local opera music, expressing the spiritual style of Jin style loess culture roots, people's emotions running through the Yellow River, and Shanxi traditional folk customs; the pipa ensemble piece *Pink Ink* created by Li Nixia draws inspiration from stage art images such as speech,song,dance and combat in movements in Chinese opera. It uses modern composition techniques, pipa playing techniques such as picking, chanting, kneading, dribbling, picking, and sliding, as well as traditional Chinese

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percussion music timbre changes, to express the tension characteristics and rich expressive power of pipa instruments. The Tanbo Group(plucked-string instruments) orchestra of the Central Conservatory of Music performed Wang Yunfei's creation *Wusheng*(a martial male role). The work draws inspiration from Peking Opera, with the stage performance of the Wusheng profession as the theme and the depiction of martial arts as the core. Multiple performance techniques are used to imitate the percussion music of opera, and representative melodies and tones from Peking Opera are interspersed to vividly depict the image and inner monologue of Wusheng. In December 2020, China's first Peking Opera version of chamber music, *Farewell My Concubine,* premiered in Shanghai center, broke the barrier between Chinese traditional opera and western chamber music forms, adhered to the concept of starting from the role, highlighted the femininity of Concubine Yu, retained the tenacity of the overlord, and opened up a new path for the development of Chinese traditional drama culture. The chamber music works summarized in this article are only a part of many chamber music works that integrate elements of traditional Chinese opera. These works expand and innovate traditional Chinese opera elements and materials, and integrate them into the creative practice of Chinese chamber music. This creative concept of combining Chinese and Western elements has promoted the development of Chinese chamber music creation.

II. THE APPLICATION CHARACTERISTICS OF OPERA ELEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE CHAMBER MUSIC WORKS

1. Use of Theme and Motivation in Traditional Chinese Opera Has Increased the Charm of the Work.

Since the 20th century, contemporary chamber music creation has weakened the melodic music form of classical music, presenting a diversified sound form mainly based on rhythm, texture, and timbre. The core element of opera music is the voice, which can depict the inner emotions of characters and drive the development of the plot. The melody and chorus are the main components of opera singing, complementing each other. In August 2014, Liang Hongqi created *Voice of Chin*, which is rooted in the high pitched and exciting music materials of Qin Opera. Qin Opera, otherwise known as Bangzi Opera, is one of the traditional operas with the longest history in China. The work uses two pianos and a zither to present a new form of chamber music performance. The loud and clear piano and the simple timbre of the zither form a sharp contrast. Along with the bold and unconstrained voice of Qin Opera, the composer skillfully integrates western composition techniques such as impressionist harmony, jazz rhythm, modernist tonal scale, and so on. The alternation of functional and color tones, the surrounding of backbone tones, and modulation make the music mood constantly "tune", showing the bold and heroic character of the Qin people, which endows the work with a unique regional style of Shaanxi [3].

The *Huqin Suite* created by Chen Yi is a chamber music work that combines the erhu, zhonghu, jinghu, and Western string instruments. The zhonghu simulates the human voice tone of reciting ancient poems, the erhu displays the soft and continuous sound quality, and the jinghu and violin simulate the vigorous and elegant sound quality. The third movement of the whole piece *Dance* features the melody of the Beijing Opera tune *Deep Night*. Chen Yi's chamber music *Two Poems of Dreaming Like a Dream* is composed for soprano, cello, and violin. Based on two poems by female poets in the Southern Song Dynasty, The entire work uses atonal and twelve tone creative techniques and imitates the playing methods of pipa and guqin with cello and violin respectively. The soprano singing part incorporates the recitation style of modernist composer Schoenberg in the 20th century, while also blending the declarative tone of Beijing opera singing, creating a sharp contrast between the atonal background and the melodic tone. In the third movement of *Huqin Suite*, the main melody of the entire piece is a Xipi vocal style with a strong Huqin flavor. During the creation process, the tone shifting method was constantly used, and there was never a recognizable central tone in the third movement, breaking the traditional Beijing opera's usual technique of setting a single string or tone when completing a singing section. Chen Yi has a distinct modern compositional mindset, incorporating elements of Peking Opera into the musical medium of chamber music to form new melodic compositions, which is her unique interpretation of the musical language in chamber music creation.

2. Use of Traditional Chinese Opera Rhythm Enhances the Emotions and Artistic Conception of the Work.

Plate rhythm is the beat and rhythm form in traditional Chinese opera music. In ancient music and folk music terminology, strong beats were referred to as *ban*, while weak beats or subsidiary strong beats were collectively referred to as *yan*, collectively known as *banyan*. Therefore, *banyan*, known as the beat form includes *sanyanban* (four beat), *yiyanban* (two beat), *youbanwuyan* (one beat), and *sanban* (free beat). The rhythmic patterns in Chinese opera are very rich, and the use of different patterns reflects the different styles of opera genres and singing styles. A single singing style can use multiple rhythmic patterns alternately. Especially the use of panel rhythm in chamber music can not only express the emotional fluctuations in the music, but also enhance the atmosphere of the music. *Qin Sang Opera*, created by Zhou Yanjia, the founder of the Qin Opera, in 1983, shows the timbre characteristics of Qinzheng, the most representative instrument in Shaanxi local operas. The tune originates from the Meihu and Wanwanqiang(two local operas) in the tone of the Qin Opera. It vividly applies the plate rhythm of the Qin Opera to the creation. The structure of loose plate - adagio - rapid plate - flashboard- loose plate, the sudden change of rhythm and speed, the combination of jump and progression, and the conversion of the bitter sound and happy sound in the Qin Opera Opera in different modes, especially in the adagio Wanwanqiang tune, it tells the hearts and minds of the Qin people, showing the simplicity of Qin Opera reflected in local language characteristics.

Another new version of Kunqu Opera, the world's first is titled *Peony Pavilion: A Dream in the Garden - Written for Vocal, Piano, Violin, and Cello*. Young composer Lin Moqiao reinterpreted this classic Chinese masterpiece that has been passed down for hundreds of years in China through innovative

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fusion of Western chamber music and modernist techniques. Composers eliminate the use of instruments such as Qudi(a bamboo flute) and Sanxian(a three-stringed musical instrument) as the main accompaniment in orchestration, or use drums and boards to control rhythm and sound effects. Following the authentic style of Kunqu opera, some singing and recitation voices are preserved, and the colorful harmonies and ensemble forms commonly found in Western chamber music are brought to the stage. The advantage of this combination of Chinese and Western lies in the preservation of the original melody characteristics, allowing the audience to fully focus on the singer. Therefore, artists with profound performance skills are needed to skillfully combine the formulaic body movements and delicate performances of the opera with contemporary aesthetic emotions, presenting a perfect and poetic new artistic conception. The musical phrases in the selected sections of the play are based on the extension of Kunqu opera's vocal style. Some phrases have longer dragging tones, while boldly adding some high pitched chords, which are rich in Kunqu opera's rhythm and melody characteristics, while retaining the ancient and elegant charm of Kunqu opera.

Jia Daqun, a renowned young composer in contemporary China and professor at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, has created many chamber music works that are well-known in the national music industry. In the first movement *Xiyun*(Opera Rhyme) of his 2000 chamber music work *Qiusanque*, the composer played the dotted rhythm of traditional Chinese opera music with traditional Chinese instruments such as the Beijing gong and minor gong in the first 1-4 bars of the piece. At the beginning of the piece, a strong Sichuan Opera style was presented. In the later zither performance section, the composer used various playing methods such as atonal scraping, short vibrato, and sliding to switch and the sound rhythm showed a tense and relaxed tension change. The use of chromatic scales, ascending glissandos, irregular rhythms, and other techniques vividly portrays the uncertain pitch, rhyme, and white tones in Sichuan dialect, presenting a "strange and bizarre" background accompaniment effect.

3. Use of Musical Structure Makes the Creation of Musical Forms More Diverse.

The first *Shadow Play* in the *Five Concert Etudes* by Russian American composer Zilpin draws on the musical elements of the ancient Chinese folk art "Shadow Play". This work adopts a typical structure in traditional shadow puppetry - the "free structure". The characteristics of shadow puppetry are humor and the alternation of reality and virtuality. The composer uses a large number of palace tone transitions and rich weaving forms for repeated statements, and the theme melody is cheerful and clear, adding interest to the music; by utilizing the visual characteristics of “virtual and real alternation" in shadow puppetry, we present the characteristics of "theme concealment" and "tone wandering", depicting vivid images and distinct character traits of the characters in shadow puppetry.

Yang Guifei's Love Elegy - Nishang Li Ge is a chamber music piece created by Mr. Chen Gang in 2018 for violin, Kunqu opera, and piano. The piece is based on Kunqu opera scores, singing style, and rhyme, and the structure of the piece belongs to the free form. There are more than 30 changes in speed and beat throughout the work. For example, in the *Dance Banquet* section, the tempo section changes 10 times within 20 bars from the 158th bar to the 177th bar. The composer's design here is designed to adapt to the flexible tempo of the performance. The overall structure and layout of the piece also reflect the principles of continuity and three parts. In terms of music content, it also includes two clues of "inside the play" and "outside the play". Although the outside part does not have a specific plot, it still has a clear narrative logic. The *Magpie Bridge Immortal Theme* of the work echoes the ending and presents the main theme of the work. In the small ending of the work, the music shifts to a minor key style, vividly depicting the dramatic scene of Yang Guifei's death through continuous downward tones. The work quietly ends with the sound of death, and at the end of the whole work, it returns to the clue of "inside the play" again. In short, in the transition between inside and outside the play, the composer endows this work with multi-level and multi-dimensional aesthetic effects.

III. A STUDY ON THE AESTHETIC TENDENCY OF CHAMBER MUSIC WORKS INCORPORATING TRADITIONAL CHINESE OPERA ELEMENTS

In the creation of contemporary chamber music, the integration of Chinese theatrical elements with contemporary chamber music works not only preserves the essence of the works, but also brings out the unique charm of traditional Chinese opera art. This not only enhances the expressive power of the works and makes their expression more innovative, but also diversifies the creation of chamber music. After a long history of over a hundred years, Chinese opera music has inherited Chinese theatrical culture and conveyed the charm of theatrical art and its musical spirit through chamber music as a musical carrier. The perfect presentation of traditional Chinese ethnic culture in the form of Western chamber music not only expands the artistic space of chamber music, but also gives new artistic life to traditional opera culture, inheriting the charm of traditional art and full of modern atmosphere. Contemporary chamber music has already shown distinct Chinese characteristics. Contemporary composers have integrated Western compositional techniques such as atonality and artificial sound into Chinese chamber music works, combined with new performance techniques of Chinese ethnic instruments, opening up another dimension of Chinese chamber music. For example, in Mr. Liu Dehai's *Terracotta Warriors*, the composer greatly expanded the expressive power of twisted strings, "twisted according to the quality", "twisted according to tension", "twisted according to the division of strings". This refined classification of twisted strings makes the pipa emit unique sounds. The sound of contemporary chamber music requires the listener to have a Chinese style modern aesthetic, able to keenly capture the liberation of sound and the innovation of sound in contemporary chamber music.

Due to changes in the singing style and rhythm of traditional Chinese opera, the melody and rhythm of chamber music are influenced, and the connotation, artistic conception, and aesthetic taste of chamber music directly affect the title and

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expression of the work. Whether it is traditional Chinese opera in chamber music or chamber music in traditional Chinese opera, contemporary Chinese chamber music creation and traditional Chinese opera elements have been interacting and colliding in parallel. The core value of contemporary Chinese chamber music works that integrate elements of traditional Chinese opera is a deep interpretation of the Chinese traditional opera culture, regional style, and folk customs contained in the music.

"Only by mastering the roots of their ancient culture and learning from the achievements of western modern culture can we create their own modern culture and their own modern music[4]." Any music has its own national character. Chinese contemporary chamber music composers should absorb the essence of Chinese opera culture, blend Chinese opera music elements into more chamber music works, create more excellent modern music works with Chinese characteristics, and let the world understand Chinese opera music culture in an all-round way. Contemporary chamber music works in China are perfectly integrated with the profound and extensive traditional Chinese opera culture. These works do not directly reference a specific opera singing style or imitate the "tight pull &slow singing" rhythm of opera to reflect the style of opera, but rather abstract and refine the core characteristics of opera, making them rich in opera flavor. These works demonstrate the firm confidence of contemporary Chinese composers in the development of traditional Chinese culture, showcase the unique artistic aesthetic value of contemporary chamber music works, and establish cultural confidence in traditional Chinese culture. The creation of Chinese chamber music should still be based on the development of nationalization, and explore materials that reflect the essence of opera culture in terms of themes for chamber music creation. Although current Chinese chamber music is a combination of Western instruments, the core of expression is still the aesthetics, rhythm, and breathing of Chinese music, reflecting the mutual integration of Chinese folk opera culture and chamber music works, and highlighting the diversity and modernity of contemporary music. We look forward to more composers paying attention to the creation of Chinese chamber music works, promoting the further deepening and development of contemporary Chinese chamber music, and playing a leading role in chamber music creation and performance, so that Chinese chamber music can establish itself in the world with its distinct national attributes and cultural characteristics.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article analyzes the overview of contemporary Chinese chamber music works that partially integrate theatrical elements, and conducts in-depth research on the shaping of musical themes and motivations, the development and integration of melodic materials, and the creative techniques for constructing the entire piece of chamber music that integrates theatrical elements. The composer's skillful handling of contemporary composition techniques and Chinese opera elements demonstrates the personalized approach of contemporary composers, which integrates the national, traditional, and modern characteristics of chamber music. Exploring the artistic value of traditional Chinese opera elements in Chinese chamber music works is also a presentation of the aesthetic style of Chinese opera elements in chamber music. Composers strive to resonate with Eastern and Western music cultures in the creation of chamber music, and make very beneficial explorations and attempts in the dialogue between Western music composition and traditional Chinese opera, which has epoch-making significance for the inheritance and development of traditional opera culture.

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***[Note]:**This paper is the partial research result of the Local Historical and Cultural Characteristics Project of the Philosophy and Social Sciences 2024 Plan in Zhaoqing City. Project number: 24DF-03*