

# Brief Analysis of the Singing Skills and Artistic Treatment of Choral Works with Chinese Traditional Opera Style

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## **Abstract:**

Choral works with Chinese traditional opera style in our country is a kind of special chorus works with distinctive features among the various kinds of choral works. Its singing bears the commonality of common choral works as well as its uniqueness. Taking choral works with Chinese opera style as the subject and combing the literature analysis and the own singing practice, this paper extends the analysis of the theory and practice of the choral works with Chinese opera style around the singing skills such as breathing, articulation, use of tune, ornamental tune, which has positive theoretical significance and application value for further understanding the singing essentials of the choral works with Chinese opera style and improving the artistic connotation of these works.

**Keywords:** *opera style; chorus works; singing skill; artistic connotation.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Marx once said: "People create their own history, but they do not create at will, not under the conditions of their choice, but directly create their history under established conditions and through inheriting from the past." [1] Although the history of choral works with Chinese opera style is not very long, many excellent and multi-style chorus works have been created by several generations of Chinese composers who have made active exploration and innovation on the integration of national art treasures and western traditional music choral forms. From 1950s and 1960s to 1980s, the main theme of creation works is revolutionary war. Among them, there are choral works of modern Peking Opera excerpts such as *Shedding Blood for a Peaceful Homeland*, *Anyuan-My Homeland* and there are also some choral works with the ancient poems as the lyric such as *Memories of Qin' e - Loushan Pass*. From the 1980s to the end of the 20th century, the genre of creation has been broadened continuously, and there appears the choral works song by children with popular elements such as such *Singing about the Opera Faces*. Entering the 21st century, with the deepening of cultural exchange between China and the West and the improvement of artistic creation level, the chorus of opera style is developing towards the direction of pluralism with in-depth level. China has adapted and created a large number of chorus works with different opera styles, such as *Mulan* arranged according to the folk songs of Henan opera style, *Dancing against the Sad Moonlight* arranged according to the traditional Peking opera *Farewell My Concubine*, and the *Ice Wheel of the Sea Island* which combines traditional opera and modern composing techniques. In recent years,

composers have continued to explore large-scale genres, including the Peking song symphony chorus Liang Hongyu, and the cantata Mu Guiying Takes Command of Troops, created by the Polish composer Beata Wróblewska and myself. It can be said that the development of Chinese opera style chorus for decades is an enterprising way of constantly exploring the integration of national character and cosmopolitan character. Through the chorus of opera style, the audience of the world can appreciate the profound Chinese traditional opera culture, and at the same time develop and enrich the spreading power of Chinese opera culture. In view of the commonness and uniqueness of the chorus of opera style, this paper, based on the literature analysis and singing practice, extends a theoretical and practical analysis around the singing skills of the chorus works with Chinese opera style.

## II. BREATHING AND USE OF QI IN CHORUS WORKS WITH OPERA STYLE

“Qi” means the breath of singing and is an important link of singing vocalization. No matter what kind of singing form, whether or not to have the right breath is one of the most critical factors to determine a singer's success or failure. There are many detailed records of singing breath at home and abroad. Yuefu Miscellany, created by Duan Anjie in the late Tang Dynasty, record that “A good singer must adjust his Qi first. With its technique, he can wonderfully achieve the effect of making his voice pass through the cloud and echo in the valley” [2]. Early European singer Pacchierotti once said “Who knows how to breathe, who knows how to sing.” With the establishment of the scientific system of singing in modern times, a large number of works on singing breathing have emerged. All of the above shows that proper breathing training is a priority for all singers. So what is the correct breathing of the choral works with Chinese opera style and how to train breathing? The author consults a large number of literatures and summarizes the following points in combination with my own learning and teaching experience:

### 2.1 Types of singing breathing

At present, the vocal music circle holds that there are three categories of singing breathing: the first is Chest Breathing, also known as Thoracic Breathing. This type of breathing mainly depends on the lateral expansion of the ribs and the elevation of external intercostal muscles to expand the space of the lung to expand the lung space, so as to drive the inspiration and reverse movement for expiration. The second is Abdominal breathing, in which the active outward expansion of the abdomen drives the diaphragm to descend and squeeze the sub-organs of the diaphragm, thus driving the upper lung to expand outwards to inhale. In the same way, when the abdomen contracts and relaxes, the diaphragm exhales upward. The third is the Combine with Chest and Abdominal Breathing, a more scientific way of singing breathing.

### 2.2 Uniqueness of chorus breathing

The breathing method of chorus bears the commonness with the most of the works while it has its uniqueness. At the 2009 ACDA National Convention, famous conductor Duane Cottrell and his colleague

Brian Galante jointly made a report entitled “Tension in the Balance and Common Voice Science Issues for Choral Conductor” for the participants [3]. In that report, the two experts proposed detailed modern chorus breathing methods: The size and flow of breath are controlled by the muscle tissue of the ribs and abdomen, and the effectiveness of breathing is closely related to the Subglottal pressure. If there is not enough resistance to increase the Subglottic pressure, the increase in air flow has little effect. In order to control the Subglottic pressure and breathing volume, the singer must learn to control Expiratory Force and Glottal Resistance. Expiratory Force means the combination of breathing from the lungs and through the vocal cords. In most vocal music teaching systems in the 20th century, the emphasis is mainly on Abdominal Breathing, which focuses only on the support of abdominal and diaphragm movements to respiration, and neglects the role of chest organs. The scientific Chest Breathing controls the lung's gas storage volume through the expansion and contraction of external intercostal muscles. The lung wall attached to external intercostal muscles and diaphragm moves along with these muscles, so that the lungs can undergo large-capacity breath exchange in its inspiration and expiration. It should also be mentioned that Thoracic Breathing is different from Clavicular Breathing. Thoracic Breathing enlarges the volume by enlarging the chest wall, not including the shoulders and clavicles. Choir members should avoid the unnecessary tension caused by shrugging their shoulders when using Thoracic Breathing. Choir members must not cause unnecessary tension when using Chest Breathing. Glottic Resistance, as the most critical sound support factor, must be accompanied by the correct resistance from the vocal cords. But in the past chorus teaching system it is often ignored. Without the correct vocal cord configuration, even good breath support can make the sound feeble. The Glottic Resistance mainly comes from vocal cord closure, i. e. a joint result of the laryngeal muscle interarticular ligament and the lateral annular ligament. These two ligaments drive the articular cartilage to close and retain about three fifths of vocal cord vibration. Engaging only one set of muscles will result in a loose vocal fold structure or posterior fissure of the vocal fold. Failure to use both sets will result in a weak voice.

The above are common chorus singing breathing methods. Of course, according to my own actual choir rehearsal and singing practice, I find that singing breath also needs to use different breath according to different music, such as pitch change, dynamic change, long tone, legato, staccato, tenuto and so on. These different sound characteristics need different breath volume, different respiratory support, and different respiratory organ tissue coordination to shape. At the same time, chorus has its own uniqueness in breathing compared with solo singing, which is mainly manifested in the coordination of unified air inlet and circle breathing. The unified air inlet is mainly for all choristers who need to carry out phase change between phases (most chorus works especially polyphony works have different breath points of each voice part due to different voice parts in and out) to change their breathing, and the speed of the breath changing, respiratory volume, respiratory intensity and other aspects are need to be highly unified so as to create a unified musical image together. At the same time, we often use Circle Breathing in chorus. Of course, the two methods applied in chorus circle breathing and wind instrument play are different. The circle breathing of wind instrument play is a very difficult breathing method. The players need to use their nose to inhale the air while exhaling during the play so as to achieve the synchronization of inspiration and expiration to make sure the play can be performed consistently with coherent breathing. And the chorus is relatively simple. The chorus also needs to achieve the effect of the consistent performance. In the internal phase,

usually the long tone part at the end of the phase, the chorister can change their breathing slightly at different beat point to ensure the continuity of the long tone and the quality.

### 2.3 Uniqueness of breathing in chorus works with opera style

The singing style of Chinese opera chorus on the basis singing style of western traditional chorus and the Chinese traditional opera. At the same time, there is commonness in both of the singing breathing as well as uniqueness required in the Chinese opera. The Qi in Chinese opera performance includes three links: using Qi, storing Qi and changing Qi. Each link should be well used; otherwise it will affect the singing effect [4]. Chinese opera artists have summed up a lot of singing skills and valuable experiences in their long-term study, practice and performance, such as the singing skills and precious experiences like “Dantian Qi (deep breath)”, “Stealing Qi”, “Relieving Qi”, “Lifting Qi” and “In-taking Qi” and so on. These skills are important elements in the performance of the opera style, and are often used for reference and integration in the singing of modern opera-style chorus works. For example, Stealing Qi is commonly used in the composition Liang Hongyu.

“Stealing Qi” means the process of inspiration through nose without taking a deep breath to meet the need of emotion, drama and singing style. The performer needs to be in the state of lifting singing with lightly and little inspiration. The lifting state means the process to avoid the established breathing, resonance cavity losing. In the inspiration process, the performers need to try not to let the audience see them changing breathing, and make sure the audience can't detect the air inlet breathing so as to making them feel the effect of consistent singing. “Stealing” means hiding here. Inspiration breathing should be changed according to the situation, to be agile, not to show traces. The breath of the “Stealing Qi” is shallow. Therefore, this kind of way is only a temporary supplement of breath, the use of time cannot be long, and inspiratory volume is shallow. However, this method can make the throat, pharynx muscle soothing so that the performers can get breath supplement during their singing so as to making their performance performed in a more relaxing, lively way. “Stealing Qi” is usually used in the following places, such as syncopated beats and dotted notes. This kind of “Stealing Qi” is especially short, and occupies the time value of the latter note. It is skillfully used in the singing of the soprano in the 20th bar of *Liang Hongyu* (case one), as is shown in fig 1, and the actual rhythm of singing should be as shown in the case two. The goal of this treatment is to cut off the tension expressed by the syncopation and relax the emotion through a small pause so as to make the phrase have obvious mood change and color contrast, and prepare for the next accent. This kind of artistic form is closely related to the traditional Chinese aesthetic. The “intonation” of Chinese poetry, the “coherent connotation” of Chinese traditional painting and “consistent emotion expression” of Chinese traditional songs are all concerned with this kind of artistic conception, which embodies the beauty of Chinese art.



Fig 1: Case 1: 17th-20th bar of *Liang Hongyu*  
Case 2: 20th bar of *Liang Hongyu*

### III. ARTICULATION AND USE OF TUNE IN CHORAL WORKS WITH TRADITIONAL OPERA STYLE

#### 3.1 The relationship between “word” and “tone”

The “word” and “tone” in singing are a whole supplementing each other. “Word” refers to clear pronunciation and articulation, which is the most direct and most important form of expression in a song. Usually the pronunciation of a “word” consists of two parts—vowel and consonant. The vocal music teaching system in ancient and modern times and at home and abroad emphasizes “clear vowel” very much. It is the key point of vocalization training to produce clear and distinguishable vowels through the perfect cooperation of “mouth, tongue, teeth and throat”. The author finds that many domestic vowel training models based on Bel canto emphasize the transition and connection among the five Italian vowels: “a, e, i, o, u”, which often ignores that the connection of “ü” and other vowel or consonant are often applied in Chinese and the languages in many other countries in the world and they usually only trains the pronunciation of this sound alone. The pronunciation of consonant is more complicated because of the diversity and particularity of consonant system in the world. Although there is an International Phonetic Alphabet for reference, each language has its own special pronunciation rules, which cannot be copied in singing. For example, the production law of dual consonants in Italian is different from that of poly-consonants in most countries. However, in the system of Putonghua used in China, consonants mainly embody the initial consonants and the pre-nasal vowels and post-nasal vowels of “an, in, en, un, ün, ang, ing, eng, ong”. All these require us to have a clear understanding of the pronunciation of various languages and the characteristics of vocalization, and to establish a correct singing vocal training system.

The “tone” usually refers to the timbre characteristics formed by the combination of cavity tissue skills for the accurate and clear pronunciation. The often common saying likes “smooth, bright and clear tone or flat and deflated tone” are the descriptions of the characteristics of the singing voice. The scientific sound production of Chinese opera is also based on the cooperation of breath, articulation and resonance cavity. The uniqueness of opera sound is mainly reflected in the different timbre caused by the use of resonance cavity. In China, the voice of opera pursues “clear articulation, high voice, bright and powerful voice”. This first requires deep, strong breath support. Second requires the use of resonance cavity. “The



resonance cavity of human body includes the cavity of all vocal system, which can be divided into thoracic cavity, oral cavity (including laryngeal cavity and pharyngeal cavity) and head cavity (including nasal cavity). Thoracic cavity resonance makes the sound firm, thick and powerful; oral cavity resonance makes the sound bright and clear, soft; the head cavity resonance makes the sound full, rich in metal color, with penetrating power. The resonance is the result of the coordinated action of all parts of vocal organs, so we can't emphasize one kind of resonance in isolation. Mixed resonance is the general principle of vocalization.”

It is emphasized in the sound production of Chinese opera that “the sound goes through the top”, which vividly describes the sound shall pour into the container like liquid and fill the container. The “top” is the high position of the sound. The high position requires the singer to focus on the resonance of the head cavity when he sings every sound and word in all the vocal zones to achieve the effect of rich resonance. At the same time, there is also the saying of “back-brain sound” in the opera world. It is a high-position sound-producing method, making the sound go through and has a good mixed resonance effect. For example, *Mulan is arranged* from the national vocal music songs with Henan opera style. The word “Ye (night)” by the soprano part (case three) is a high pitch (f#) to be achieved after a big interval after the change of voice area, as is shown in fig 2, which requires that the singing of the whole voice part not only ensure the unity and harmony of the great resonance, but also maintain the bright features of the opera. This requires the singers to ensure the deep breath of the chorus and the resonance of the chest and oral cavity as the support, and make their voice “flung out” like a parabola from the back of the head to the front so as to ensure the accuracy intonation of the chorus, and avoid the portamento.



Fig 2: *Mulan is arranged*

There are some differences in the articulation and pronunciation of lyrics in different opera styles. Our country boasts rich kinds of operas. Influenced by its development and evolution process and regional characteristics, various operas have formed their own pronunciation and articulation style, which is also an important manifestation of the diversity of opera styles. When singing chorus works of various styles, we should pay close attention to the original pronunciation characteristics. For example, the most familiar Peking Opera has the characteristic of "Huguang sound, Zhongzhou rhyme", which is formed after the Peking opera absorbing the dialect characteristic in original Hubei area during its evolution process. The chorus Dancing against the Sad Moonlight is based on the selected section of *Looking the King Sleeping with Full Clothes* (case four) in *Farewell My Concubine*, as is shown in fig 3, In this section, there is a lyric which meaning goes like “out of the tent to dissipate my sadness”. In that lyric, the Chinese character

“chu”, influenced by Huguang sound, does not pronounce “chu” but “chü” instead so as to ensure the singing style of the original song.



Case 4.

Fig 3: Looking the King Sleeping with Full Clothes

### 3.2 The “tone” in the lyrics of chorus works with opera style

Chinese characters are one of the few languages with tones in the world, which emphasize the “tonal pattern antithesis and tone unity in poetry, opera and so on. In Putonghua, we use the four tones of “high-level tone, rising tone, falling-rising tone and falling tone” and even more tones appear in local dialects. For example, there is “entry tone” in Fuzhou dialect of Min dialect. Therefore, operas based on different language families should follow the tone law of mother tongue. Conductors and singers must be familiar with and follow this rule when dealing with the negative pronunciation of the lyrics; otherwise it will make the audience confused about the word meaning and lyric sound and rhyme. For example, in the early stage of rehearsal of *Liang Hongyu* (case five), as is shown in fig 4, when singing the lyric with the Chinese characters “yuan and yang”, the choir is used to adding an appoggiatura when singing “E” of the fourth beat of the Chinese character “yuan” and singing the line into “G-B” with portamento; also the choir is used to adding an appoggiatura before the Chinese character “yang” and singing it into “B-A”, resulting in “lubricating tone” in the opera. Later, Professor Hou Lianna, who has been engaged in the research of national vocal music and opera singing for a long time, puts forward valuable suggestions: “yuan” in yuanyang is the first tone, the high-level tone, and “yuan” is a light tone. If adding an appoggiatura to “yuan”, the audience might mistakenly think the “yuan” the third tone, the falling-rising tone, resulting in “inverted Chinese characters”. Therefore, when we deal with the choir with opera style, we must deeply study the vocalization rule of each language, and achieve the reaching of both “rhyme” and “meaning”.



Case 5.

Fig 4: Liang Hongyu

#### IV. ORNAMENTAL TONE AND CONNOTATION IN CHORAL WORKS WITH OPERA STYLE

Ornamental tone is an important means to express emotion and perform the characteristics of music in Chinese opera and traditional songs. The discussion on the variety and skill of ornamental tone has been extremely rich and detailed, so the author will not repeat it here. The key point this paper wants to illustrate is that “improvisation and unity” is a key principle that needs to be pay attention to when the ornamental tone sill is adopted during the singing of the choral works with opera style. Chinese opera has the saying of “the use of tone and the use of cavity can be flexible even though the score and the clapper are fixed”, that is, the singer can perform improvisational singing according to personal experience, singing habit, and actual scene on the basis of established music score and clapper to express emotion and meaning. However, chorus is the art of expressing unified emotion by many people, which pursues high unity, and requires high consistency in rhythm, speed, accuracy and timbre, otherwise the performance can be in a mess. How do you strike a balance between improvisation and unity? Conductor then plays a vital role. The conductor must be familiar with the skill of ornamental tone and rules of the chorus and Chinese opera, and design the skill of using the ornamental tone before rehearsal according to his own experience. So that the choir can uniformly use the designed skill during the rehearsal. In brief, the conductor needs to focus on the balance of improvisation and unity, making the audience feel both the connotation of the Chinese traditional opera and the unity and harmony of chorus.

For example, in *Dancing against the Sad Moonlight* (case 6), as is shown in fig 5, the use of the “ornamental tone” on the Chinese character “Qing” can be very rich. First, the rhythm of the first beat of the first section goes up. In this case, we will use the upper portamento from the former via the dotted notes to the latter sound. In the rehearsal process, the conductor has to stipulate that the entire chorister in the same voice part use the same tone color, dynamic change and portamento rate to decorate this rhythm. Otherwise, if each choir member performs improvised according to their own singing experience, it will inevitably lead to chaos in rhythm. The problem of timbre conflict and accuracy deviation can also appear in the performance. Second, the up beat of the second beat can use upper mordent to enhance the swings of the mood. The last one is the appoggiatura used in the fourth beat of the first bar and the long tone of the second bar. The function of these two places is very different. The first part is the weak beat of the bar, and the addition of the appoggiatura is to enhance the sadness mood, so it should not be particularly clear and should be vague and implicit instead. The long tone of the next bar is the “falling note” of the phase, which emphasizes the tonality of the mode and the return of emotion so the appoggiatura here is a powerful auxiliary to the topic and should be made clearer.





Fig 5: *Dancing against the Sad Moonlight*

## V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Chinese opera singing style and Chinese choral art belong to the category of national vocal music, which are closely related and have many similar aesthetic characteristics. However, there are many different aesthetic characteristics. First, in the aspect of breathing and using Qi, the singing of the chorus works with opera style pay attention to such skills as “Dantian Qi”, “Stealing Qi”, “Relieving Qi”, “Lifting Qi” and “In-taking Qi”. Second, the singing of the chorus works with opera style emphasizes on “the sound goes through the top” in the articulation and use of tone. That is, the singers shall focus on the resonance of the head cavity when they are singing every sound and every word in all of the vocal area. Third, from the aspect of the ornamental tone, the singing of the chorus works with opera style requires the singer to perform improvisation singing on the basis of the established music score and clapper so as to using ornamental tone to express emotion and connotation in the opera.

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