

Chapter Three Arts

Introduction

China has a long and influential musical tradition based on the philosophy and culture of ancient China. Confucius and the Confucian school after him espoused the correct use and form of music according to their sociological and cosmological conceptions, so to appreciate the music, it helps to understand their ideals of music and their purpose.

Lesson 2 Chinese Music and Opera

Part 1 Chinese Music

China's Foremost Philosopher of Music



Confucius, China's foremost philosopher of music

Confucius is said to have lived about 2,500 or so years ago. He is credited for setting the tone for much traditional Chinese music for thousands of years.

His influence was profound. It is thought that he was a prominent music teacher and a talented musician who was able to play several instruments expertly. He also was China's foremost social philosopher. In Confucian teachings, the purpose and role of music are laid out and the qualities of "good music" are defined.

Confucian teachings about how music was meant to be used and performed is expressed in several of the main Confucian books: *Analects* (论语 Lún Yǔ), *The Classic of Poetry* (诗经 Shī Jīng), and *The Classic of Rites* (礼记 Lǐjì). The teachings are seminal for understanding traditional music. Confucius taught that: "To educate somebody, you should start with poems, emphasize ceremonies, and finish with music."

Musical knowledge was a matter of higher learning. It is said that he thought that of the six most important subjects to study, studying music was second in importance only to the study of ritual or public ceremonies.

He ranked music higher than the other four necessary subjects that were archery, chariot-riding, calligraphy or writing, and computation or mathematics.

Rite and Ritual

Music was so important because the ideal society was to be governed by rites, ritual and ceremonial functions, but not by law or raw power. In a culture where

people function according to ritual and ceremony, music is used to help conduct and govern them.

So music wasn't really entertainment, but a means for musicians to accomplish political and social goals. Music was ultimately a means for optimizing social utility or happiness.

General Traits of Traditional Music

Grand Entry

In general, traditional musicians follow the Confucian doctrine. In order to perform the grand and "magnificent" entry of musical pieces advocated by Confucius, musicians in an orchestra or ensemble often begin their pieces with a grand flourish of all of them playing their instruments simultaneously for a few seconds or by loudly sounding a gong or drum. This signals that the piece has begun and gets the audience's attention.

In the beginning flourish, you can hear which instruments will participate in the piece. An instrumental musician performing solo will often play a sudden loud note or notes at the beginning.

Technical Finesse



In a group ensemble, after the grand opening of the piece, the musicians will generally tone the volume down towards the middle. This enables the audience to appreciate the technical finesse of the individual musicians. At the conclusion of a piece, the volume generally increases again for the finale.

Traditional music emphasizes the precise elucidation of each note of an instrument, but there isn't an emphasis on rhythm or Western-style harmony.

Pentatonic Scale

Most of the traditional music of the elites used the ancient Chinese pentatonic scale. The scale lends to making simple harmonies, but perhaps to maintain the Confucian norms of simplicity and clarity, harmony isn't emphasized. In contrast, Western-style music uses the heptatonic scale that lends to producing complex harmonies among various instruments in tension.

Perhaps most pleasing to Westerners is a single instrument such as a flute or an erhu played with the traditional emphasis on precise articulation and inflection. Westerners often find such music tranquil or meditative.

Traditional musicians playing a variety of instruments in large ensembles or orchestras tend to sound discordant because Westerners expect more harmony in such performances. The Chinese pentatonic scale itself has sound frequencies that seem a little cacophonous to Westerners.

Smoothly Continuous

Unlike Western or African music, there is no emphasis on rhythm or beat. Traditional Chinese music isn't meant to be danced or moved to. That would tend to orient people toward bodily sensual and sexual drives. As Confucius taught, beautiful and appropriate music is meant to promote social tranquility.

If the music is a part of an official ceremonial function, the music is meant to regulate the behavior of the people so that they perform the ritual appropriately and obey authority.

Grand Finale

In accord with Confucius' idea of music being "smoothly continuous," traditional music generally doesn't have sharp breaks in tempo.

However, instead of a regular tempo throughout, many pieces feature a regular but smoothly accelerating tempo. The tempo slowly increases towards a finale at the end. This connotes a river gaining speed as it cascades downwards, and this is often the rhythmic feature of traditional Chinese music.

Three Kinds of Traditional Music



Beijing Opera theater and other traditional operatic plays are where traditional classical music is most often performed nowadays.

Over the centuries, three main styles of classical performance developed that you can enjoy while on your trip to China. The three general kinds of traditional music that people are most like to hear nowadays are:

- Chinese opera music meant for theatrical performances,
- ensemble or orchestra music for cultured audiences
- solo instrumental performance.

Chinese opera music is meant to augment the operatic story, the actors, and the visual effects, but the traditional Chinese ensemble and instrumental solo pieces are generally meant to calm the passions and dispel unrest.

Chinese Opera Music



Peking Opera

Despite the Chinese belief that music is meant not to amuse, but to purify one's thoughts, modern Chinese opera music is meant for entertainment. There are now several major types of Chinese opera, but the favorites are probably Beijing opera and Sichuan opera.

In general, a small ensemble of about seven musicians play at one end of the stage. Experienced musicians know the score so well that they can perform from memory.

The instruments include the erhu and other stringed instruments, wood clappers, gongs, cymbals, and wind instruments. The main function of the string instruments is to accompany the singing, but they are used to make special effects sounds such as animal sounds too.

Traditional Music Ensembles and Orchestras

Many works of traditional music are still played by ensembles and large orchestras. Nowadays, Chinese musicians in a traditional ensemble incorporate Western and modern musical styles. Even the instruments may be redesigned to play according to Western musical styles and are made from modern materials.



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The pipa is a popular classical musical instrument used for both solo and group performances.

Non-traditional instruments such as a piano may also perform traditional music. So the music doesn't sound exactly like the music played 200 years ago, but Western audiences will be intrigued by the differences in style and sound compared to Western orchestral music.

Solo Instrumental Performance

Instrumental performance has long been preeminent in Chinese art. Scholars were generally expected to be proficient performers. Solo instrumental performance is a serious musical discipline. The performances are subtle like a poetic recitation. The music itself is abstract.

Part 2 Chinese Opera

Beijing Opera

Beijing Opera is a synthesis of stylized action, singing, dialogue, mime, acrobatic fighting and dancing to represent a story or depict different characters and their feelings of gladness, anger, sorrow, happiness, surprise, fear and sadness. The characters may be loyal or treacherous, beautiful or ugly, good or bad. Their images are always vividly manifested in bright costumes that show the styles of ancient China.

There are currently four main role categories in Beijing Opera sheng, dan, jing, and chou, each of which has its own modeling feature and acting system. Sheng means male characters, mainly including laosheng, xiaosheng and wusheng. Dan represents female characters, mainly including laodan, qingyi, huadan and wudan. Jing mans male characters with distinct personality and tough badies such as hero, general and god. Chou is a comical role which is the mostly funny or negative character. Among these roles, the jings facial make-up is the most well-known and called lianpu. Any role in these categories or sub-categories can be the leading role in a play. Except the second category - Dan (旦), the other three categories are for male characters.

The reason the role categories take the names of Sheng, Dan, Jing and Chou is that it is said that they were chosen to mean the opposite.

- Sheng in Chinese may mean "strange" or "rare", but the chief male is a character of most seen.



• *Sheng*

- Dan, which means "morning", "masculine", is in contrary with the feminine nature of the characters.
- Jing means "clean". In fact, the paintings on face make the characters look like unclean but colorful.
- Chou in Chinese sometime represents the animal "Cow", which, in some aspects, is slow and tardy. In contrast, Chou characters are usually active and quick.



• *Chou*

A popular song goes like this "Foreigners call jingxi Beijing opera." In fact, Beijing Opera is different from opera, the latter telling the story and expressing the thoughts by singing instead of speaking while the former stresses chang, nian, zuo, da. Chang refers to singing, nian refers to musical spoken parts, zuo refers to dance movements and da refers to martial skills. Therefore, Beijing Opera is a comprehensive art.

The traditional operas consist of mainly tales of preceding dynasties, important historical events, emperors and empresses, ministers and generals, geniuses and great beauties. They represent stories from the ancient times to Yao, Shun, Yu, the Spring and Autumn Period, the Warring States Period and the dynasties of Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing.

Some of the newer operas were adopted from literature and classical novels during the rise of communism. These are all very well known among the public but may not be an accurate account of history, as with art styles around the world. Some of the popular Stories during the history are Orphan of Zhao Family, Fifteen Strings of Coppers, The Ruse of Empty City, Story of the White Snake, The Drunken Concubine and Unicorn-Trapping Purse.

The melodies have harmonious rhythms and are described as graceful and pleasing to the ears. The melody may be classified into two groups: "Xipi" and "erhong."

Often the most recognizable feature of Beijing Opera, the costumes are graceful, elegant, and brilliant in color and design. They are mostly made using hand sewing and embroidery. As the traditional Chinese patterns are adopted, the costumes are of a high aesthetic value.

Make-up and sometimes masks are very important to the aesthetic of Beijing Opera. The colors are rich and depict different characters using symbolism of color. Black will often represent intelligent characters, while white indicate wickedness.

The performance is accompanied by a tune played on wind instruments, percussion instruments, and stringed instruments. The chief musical instruments being jinghu (a two-stringed bowed instrument with a high register), yueqin (a four-stringed plucked instrument with a full-moon-shaped sound box), Sanxian (a three-stringed plucked instrument), Suona horn, flute drum, big-gong, cymbals, small-gong, etc.

In Beijing Opera performance, the interaction between the performers and the audience is also one of the charms of this art. In the past, the stage is often set within the audience. The performers act on stage and the audience cheer off stage, forming a scene of bustle and excitement. Today, Beijing Opera has become the quintessence and the sign of Chinese culture, directly reflecting the rich and profound Chinese culture from one perspective.

Beijing Opera vs Western Opera

1. Performing Style

Western operas focus on powerful singing and emotional expression during the performances. The acting is self-explanatory, fluid, and life-like.

In Beijing opera, as well as the more stylized singing, each performer's actions are important ways to tell the story.

The performance style is more of a rigid, symbolic visual show. For example, a performer will tie a horsewhip on their wrist and when they wave the horsewhip it means they are riding a horse.

2. Stage Setup

Beijing opera's stage is normally a simple platform that only has one side exposed to the audience. A Western opera's stage setup is more complicated. The stage normally has vivid and various props.

3. Makeup

A Beijing opera performer's makeup is more difficult and complicated than that of a performer in a Western opera. A Western opera performer's makeup is closer to real life, while makeup for Beijing opera is thick, unnatural, and heavy in colors, which symbolize character roles.

4. Musical Instruments

In Western operas, often a full orchestra is used, while only traditional Chinese percussion instruments, such as drums and gongs, are used in Beijing opera

5. Vocal Acrobatics

Wang Guowei, a Chinese scholar, has said that Beijing opera uses singing and dancing to express stories. The story plots emerge as the performers use intoned dialogue and actions.

In Beijing opera, each role requires a unique singing technique. These can seem quite unnatural and artificial, with crooning and droning, violin-like rendition of syllables, and startling variations in pitch.

In Western operas, the vocals are strong and clear and include arias (sung melodies). Each performer's vocal range and singing style decides his or her role.

6. Social Class

Beijing opera originated from different folk troupes. It caters to the masses.

Western operas originated during the late 16th century in Italy. Performances were reserved for nobles.

Exercise After Reading

Part 1. Completion

(1) In China, writing brushes, ink sticks, paper and ink stones are called _____

(2) In Chinese calligraphy, the five general styles are _____

(3) What are the traits of Chinese traditional music _____

Part 2. Questions to Discuss

(1) What are the differences between the sheng, dan, jing and chou in Peking Opera?

(2) What are the traits of fine brushwork and freehand brushwork?

Suggested Reading:

Book to Read: