Analysis of the Creation Characteristics and Singing Art of Chinese Classical Poetry Song "A Spring Morning"

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Abstract

Meng Haoran, a great poet in Chinese Tang Dynasty, his poem "A Spring Morning" is almost a household name, "This spring morning in bed I'm lying, Not to awake till the birds are singing. As sounded the wind and rain overnight, I wonder how many blooms alight". With only four short lines, it is peaceful, natural and profound, revealing a very thought-provoking scene. In the 1980s, Mr. Li Yinghai, a well-known contemporary Chinese composer, national music theorist, and music educator, composed this famous poetry into an artistic song with high aesthetic value by combining it with music. In this article, I analyze the creation characteristics and singing of "A Spring Morning", an artistic song adapted from ancient poetry, hoping to help people to have a deep understanding of the artistic characteristics of this song so as to perform better.

Keywords

Artistic song; "A Spring Morning"; Creation characteristics; Singing analysis.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, the first batch of Chinese Artistic Songs were born as overseas students returned to China with modern Western composition techniques. Qing Zhu composed China's first classical poetry Song "Eastward Flows the Great River" when he was studying in Germany. From then on, ancient poems began to be favored by musicians, and a number of classical poetry songs were created. In the song-cycles "Three Tang Poems" by Mr. Li Yinghai, "A Spring Morning" is a perfect combination of Tang poetry and modern composition techniques (the three poetries are: Zhang Ji's "Mooring by Maple Bridge At Night", Wang Zhihuan's "Ascending the Stork Tower", Meng Haoran's "A Spring Morning").

2. Composer of the Song “A Spring Morning” and its Creation Background

2.1. Mr. Li Yinghai and His Music Creation

Mr. Li Yinghai is a well-known contemporary composer, music theorist, and music educator in China, as well as one of the most influential musicians in the Chinese music industry. Influenced by his father, Li Yinghai loved music very much although he was from a poor family. The hardships of life did not stop him from learning music. In 1943, he was admitted to the National Conservatory of Music in Qingmuguan, Chongqing, where he began to pursue professional music learning. After the liberation of Nanjing in 1949, he was engaged in creative work at the Nanjing Cultural Troupe, and worked in the Shanghai Conservatory of Music from 1952 to 1964. Mr. Li Yinghai’s study and work experience laid a solid foundation for his creation. His music creation is involved in vocal music, piano, theoretical research and other fields: his piano works include "Parting tune with a Thrice-repeated Refrain", "Flute And Drum At Sunset" and "Fifty Folk Songs", etc.; in theoretical research, he is the author of "Modes and Harmony of Han Nationality", which is one of his most important contributions; in terms of vocal creation, his song cycles of "Three Tang Poems" are classic and unfailing masterpieces among Chinese classical poetry artistic songs.
2.2. Development of Classical Poetry Artistic Songs

Originated and developed in Europe, artistic songs were introduced to China during the New Culture Movement, and were quickly accepted and loved by Chinese intellectuals because of their romantic features that fit perfectly with the romantic sentiments of Chinese literati. In addition, as artistic songs focused on the expression of personal emotions, which was highly compatible with the individual consciousness of the May Fourth Movement, making artistic songs more widely spread in China. Since then, artistic songs have taken root in China. For more than 100 years, the creation of artistic songs has been loved by many composers, who have provided a large number of excellent art songs for Chinese vocal art.

In 1920, when Qing Zhu was studying in Germany, he combined the "Tune: Charm of a Maiden Singer-Memories of the Past at Red Cliff" written by the Northern Song Dynasty poet Su Shi with the western composition techniques, and created the pioneering work of classical Chinese poetry songs "Eastward Flows the Great River", which opened the prelude to the development of Chinese art songs. During the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement, professional musicians such as Mr. Huang Zi who created "A Flower in the Haze" and "Rouged Lips" also made outstanding contributions to the development of art songs. However, the composition techniques were not mature enough, and the creation of classical poetry artistic songs was not flourish during this period because the development of classical poetry artistic songs was just starting.

By the 1940s, Chinese musicians studying in Europe and the United States returned to their homeland with advanced composing techniques full of creative passion. They introduced fresh techniques of composition into Chinese music creation, and created "Song of Love Peas", "Since Your Leaving" and other representative works. The first "Classical Poetry Concert" held by "Voice of China" directly promoted the development and creation of classical poetry artistic songs. At this concert, Mr. Li Yinghai demonstrated his classical poetry artistic song cycles "Three Tang Poems", which was one of the representative works of Mr. Li Yinghai’s music creation career, and had a profound influence on the composers' creation later, and became a model of classical poetry music creation at that time.

3. Musical Characteristics of the Artistic Song “A Spring Morning”

3.1. Rhythm of the Lyrics

In the long history of Chinese culture, ancient poetry is definitely the most dazzling pearl. Chinese poetry originated in the pre-Qin period and flourished in the Tang Dynasty. The literati in the Tang Dynasty paid more attention to the choice of subject matter, the expression of emotion and the harmonious beauty of rhythm, so the poems created during this period were more suitable for composing into artistic songs as lyrics. Tang poems can be roughly divided into three types: quatrain, metrical verse, and pre-Tang poetry. Among them, quatrains are a kind of poetry containing a certain number of lines, with strict requirement in tonal pattern, rhyme scheme, antithesis, and have a certain regularity, which are more conducive to singing as lyrics. As a five-character quatrain, Meng Haoran’s “A Spring Morning” is not gorgeous in terms of rhetoric, the simple expressions described the poet's loneliness for having no opportunity for serving the country. In terms of words, flower was used as a metaphor for people to express the poet's aspirations, and the withered flowers were used to express the sadness of his unappreciated talents.

"This spring morning in bed I'm lying, Not to awake till the birds are singing." the poet woke up in a spring morning, the beautiful scenery of spring came into his eyes, birds were singing and flowers were scented, everything was thriving. He was overjoyed to hear the birdsong near or far away. The tonal pattern of the upper couplet of this poem is "level level oblique level level,
oblique oblique level level oblique." The character "Xiao"(morning) is falling-rising tone, the third tone in modern Mandarin. In the song, the melody here first shows an ascending scale, and then a continuous descending, which not only reflects the upscaling in the melody of falling-rising tone, but also depicts a circumlocutory and hazy beauty, which expresses the poet's yearning and love for spring, and also paves the way for the reversal of emotions in the later lines. If the downward melody behind the word "Xiao" is removed and changed into a single long tone, it will sound less tactful, the malleability of the melody will be changed and poet's sadness wouldn't be reflect so well. So, no matter it is from the perspective of the poet's emotions or the trend of the song's melody, the downward melody behind the word "Xiao" cannot be omitted. The sound of the two characters "Ti Niao" is "trochaic". Mr. Li Yinghai designed the melody here from high to low. In this way, the melody not only greatly matches and maintains the phonology of Chinese characters, but also increases the recitation of the song and retains the rhythm of the poem to the greatest extent.

"As sounded the wind and rain overnight, I wonder how many blooms alight." Good times always fly quickly, and the delicate flowers can not withstand the ravages of storm. When the poet woke up to see the withered flowers on the ground, he couldn't help but sigh with compassion flowing slowly from his heart, thinking the fact that he was full of talents but unappreciated, and he didn't know when he could serve the country. This sentence is in sharp contrast with the beautiful scenes created above, highlighting the helplessness and sorrow of the poet who had super talent no opportunity to carry out his ideals, and providing the singer with an emotional tone of gloomy mood in the beautiful scene. The tonal pattern of the second couplet of this poem is "oblique level level oblique level, level oblique level level oblique." In order to better reflect the unique rhythm of classical Chinese poems, the singer should be careful not to rhyme quickly like Italian songs when singing the characters "Sheng" and "Shao", otherwise the spirituality of the work will be reduced.

3.2. Artistic Characteristics of the Melody

The ingenious combination of poetry and tone produced a wonderful song. During his second creation, Mr. Li Yinghai created a special melody based on the phonological characteristics of the poem “A Spring Morning”. He has always believed that the piano should be treated as an independent musical element rather than merely an accompaniment, considering that the melody and accompaniment of a song are inseparable, how to balance the pros and cons between the two is particularly important. Considering the relationship between tone and intonation, Mr. Li Yinghai not only adopted traditional Chinese music creation techniques, but also combined advanced Western composition techniques.

“A Spring Morning” progresses slowly under a smooth melodic line, with the phrases aligned neatly. The whole song adopts a regular tempo alla breve, largo, and a simple sectional binary form of A-B. In terms of mode, Mr. Li Yinghai followed the traditional Chinese mode. The music starts with a B-flat Yu-note, and the fifth and octave superimposed chords with B-flat as the bass are placed in the low voice as support to clarify the mode. Then color chords appear in the fifth bar, creating a picture of spring, which gives the listeners a feeling as if they were intoxicated with the quiet beauty of nature, and further experiencing the mood of the poet at this scene. At the end of the first section, the last two sentences, together with the first and second sentences, form an upward pure fifth modulus to promote the development of the melody and deepen the theme. In the sixteenth bar, the progression of cadence from dominant to supertonic is completed from F to B-flat, and then the melody moves into the second stage, which is a flat-D Yu-note. "Oh...", as the lyrics of the transition section, although it looks simple, it is the highlight of the whole song, only one word, it’s both like lamenting and thinking, giving people a feeling that can only be understood but not expressed in words. There are many changes of the third degree in the melody, adding a touch of liveliness and mystery. In order to
increase the sense of chanting, staccato and seven-level chromatic tone are added in the melody. The beginning of the B section is continuously modeled on the basis of the A section, and the second couplet is sung twice in succession, deepening the poet's helplessness and melancholy in tone, which is slightly weaker than the A section.

4. Singing Analysis of the Artistic Song “A Spring Morning”

4.1. Analysis and Study of the Connotation of Poem

4.1.1. Text Explanation

The first sentence of “A Spring Morning” - "This spring morning in bed I’m lying" intuitively reflects that this poem was written in the early morning of a late spring, and the languid tone shows that the poet slept very comfortably last night and woke up naturally in the morning, "Not to awake till the birds are singing", with the graceful and tactful birdsong reverberating in the woods, everywhere was full of vitality, accompanied by a little bit of coldness in the morning, and the poet woke up completely at this time, refreshed. "As sounded the wind and rain overnight," remembered that "I" was half awakened by the sound of wind and rain last night, and then fell into a deep sleep until "This spring morning in bed I’m lying", looking at the courtyard with withered flowers on the ground, "I wonder how many blooms alight", the poet couldn't help but sigh for the delicate and charming flowers, which had fallen in pieces after a night of wind and rain.

4.1.2. Emotional Sustenance

The first reading of this poem just gives you a feeling of simple, leisure, and straightforward, but if you read it carefully, you can taste its beauty of twists and turns. In the first two lines, the beautiful scene of spring morning, the sweetness of a good sleep, and the beautiful birdsong, trigger the reader's imagination with hearing, and feeling the poet's cherishment of the beautiful spring. And after the turning point of "As sounded the wind and rain overnight," is "I wonder how many blooms alight” really just regretting the delicate petals damaged by the wind and rain? This may be a pity for a night of wind and rain caused me to miss the beauty of a feast of blossoming flowers. It is more likely that the poet sighed at his disappointment and helplessness in finding no ways to serve the country with his talent unappreciated. The poet used the falling flowers to lament the passage of time and his dull life.

4.2. Full Preparation Before Singing

4.2.1. Chant the Poem to Grasp the Emotional Tone

For artistic songs of classical Chinese poems, recitation is a very good practice method. Poems are literary works that chanted by poets when they drink, compose couplets or when they are touched by the scenery. Returning to the chant itself is the most direct way to feel the poem. The square characters can be transformed into a voiced language through chanting, and the basis of singing a vocal work is the grasp of the color of the words in the lyrics. When chanting, we can have an intuitive feeling and processing of our own timbre, tone, and intonation, and it is easier to promote emotional resonance. It is on this basis that we perform melody singing, that is, to shape the sound in a 3D way and color the sound further according to the emotional response obtained from chanting.

4.2.2. Grasp the Breath and Timbre Word by Word and Line by Line

Mr. Li Yinghai used fluid tonal materials in the prelude of the song “A Spring Morning”, as if a picture of residual rain slowly dripping from the eaves is created at the fingertips, and the dotted rhythmic notes behind the weakly marked triads imitate the birdsong vividly. The speed of this song is marked as Largo, which is relatively slow. Therefore, the singer's breath is more demanding when singing this song, a long breath is required as a support, which is to express
the love of spring without being too hard, so as not to be pretentious. The first eight bars of the lyrics are marked as "mezzo piano", with multiple tones in one word, and the dragging tone has a hint of the euphemism and grace of Kunqu Opera. The tone processing should be graceful and elegant. In section 17, the vocal melody of "oh" is added to simulate the recitation of classical poems, which leads to changes in the mood of the song, and turns the original excitement into a bit sentimental and pity. The vocal chanting tune is graceful and melodious, and the timbre should be balanced properly like reeling silk from cocoons. The gradual slowing down and free extension of the last "rit" is the expression of the poet’s emotional transformation from excitement to sentimental. At the beginning of the 21st bar, "As sounded the wind and rain overnight, I wonder how many blooms alight." is chanted twice at the mark (p), with a little chanting, the processing of crescendo and fading strengthens the emotional color, here it’s very necessary for the singer to have a strong control and stable support of breath. Here repeated processing is used to strengthen the poet’s deep feeling about the falling flowers on the ground, and the mark of weak processing creates the mood of sighing secretly: transforming from the joy of meeting the thriving spring garden to loneliness and disappointment. Here the processing of the timbre can be slightly adjusted and changed to strengthen the sense of sigh and express the pity and helplessness of the poet, so that the audience is more likely to resonate. At this time, the piano accompaniment is synchronized with the main melody, which strengthens the sense of melody. At the end, the processing strength of the last word of "I wonder how many blooms alight." should be moderate or even weaker, and the tone should be slightly sad, creating an atmosphere of indescribable melancholy in the heart.

4.2.3. Find Emotional Resonance in Life

Poems are from landscape and pastoral, and creation comes from life. The first element for singing a song beautifully is to experience it personally and to empathize with it from the bottom of your heart. The first two lines of this poem are to express the poet's love for spring, and to describe a picture of late spring morning when he woke up comfortably hearing the birds singing. You'd better imagine the beautiful scene of spring breeze blowing willows and everything coming back to life, and sing this song with such vigorous and beautiful emotion in your heart. The last two lines express the regret from the depths of the heart of the poet after seeing the withered flowers on the ground, the regret for the passing, and the regret for his unrequited talents. When singing, you can imagine the sad scene of west wind or cold tea, and combine such resonance of being left out into singing.

4.2.4. Accurately Grasp the Changes in Emotional Levels

From cherishing spring at the beginning of being awakened by the birds singing to see the spring scene, to the sighing for spring at the scene of the withered flowers, the poet’s emotion had undergone at least three stages of subtle changes, from shallow to deep, back and forth. If the melody goes all the way prosaically, it is too simple; if it is too surging and mourning, it is discrete. Therefore, you should sing with some ups and downs following the changes in the melody and the lines of the poem, and should not switch, emphasize and weaken at will, which will destroys the original long-lasting charm of the whole song and the poetry.

5. Conclusion

Classical Chinese poetry artistic songs are a beautiful combination of poetry and music, a perfect fusion of thought and artistry. Poets should have extremely high ideological and literary attainments, and composers should also have strict restrictions and certain requirements on the contents and skills of artistic creation. In the development and inheritance, combination and collision of culture, it is these priceless works of art that attract generations of literary and art workers to be excited, fascinated and even crazy about them, by constantly trying, hitting walls, breaking through, they finally left indelible marks. As a singer, in order to show the
artistic value of a song as much as possible, in addition to constantly improving the processing and expression effects of the song, so that the melody of the artistic song and the classical poetry are more closely connected, the audience can enter the context of the poem design to resonate, and the artistic conception of the work can be sublimated; you should also continuously improve our cultural heritage and cultivation, carefully study the creation background, methods, and skills of each song, so that you can understand the creation intention of the work more deeply and perfect your singing.

References


