

## Analysis of Youmei Xiao's Art Song 'Ask'

Yang Yue

School of Physical Education and Music, Qilu University of Technology, Jinan, Shandong,  
250300, China

### Abstract

**In the course of their creation, development and widespread dissemination, solo vocal works of the Republican period made an outstanding contribution to the development of a new musical culture, which also became the mainstream of modern Chinese music. Xiao Youmei made a remarkable contribution to the composition of solo art songs by combining Western compositional techniques. Through a brief analysis of the work, this paper enables myself and other performers to have a more accurate understanding and grasp of the work's song profile, artistic characteristics and singing style; when performing the relevant work, I can better understand the characteristics of the piece, the technical play, and take advantage of the strengths to improve my own performance and singing.**

### Keywords

**Xiao Youmei; Ask; Art song; Singing analysis.**

### 1. Introduction to Youmei Xiao

Born in 1884 in Xiangshan, Guangdong, Youmei Xiao moved to Macao with his father at the age of five and studied at the Faculty of Education of the Imperial University of Tokyo and the Leipzig Conservatory of Music in Germany, before returning to China and being employed to teach at Peking University. When the new school system was introduced in 1922, music was made a compulsory subject in primary schools and the first professional music school in China was founded in Shanghai. Throughout his life, Youmei Xiao was committed to the development of Chinese music, not only compiling a large number of music textbooks and treatises, but also composing many musical works and books on music. He also devoted much energy to traditional Chinese music while studying Western music theory. He advocated that "music from both the past and the present should be studied," and that "the backbone of music is the nationality of a people", and his views laid a good ideological foundation for the future development of Chinese art songs.

### 2. Characteristics of Art Songs Composed by Youmei Xiao

In the long history of Chinese music, the Republican period occupies an important place. Solo art songs began to be composed around the May Fourth period, and the works that were composed in combination with Western compositional techniques largely represented the level of modern songwriting, with Youmei Xiao, Yuanren Zhao and others playing a leading role in their development.

Most of Youmei Xiao's art songs are short, rigorously structured and written using Western compositional techniques, and in his works we can visually and graphically feel the influence of German classical music on the style of his works.

In order to facilitate the singing of his works, he considered that they should not be too long and that the lyrics should be easier to understand and more rhythmic. The new cultural movement reached its peak during the May Fourth period, and the new style of poetry that

followed laid a good foundation for the success of Youmei Xiao's art songs, making his works distinctive for the times and more lyrical and narrative in nature.

In this period, Youmei Xiao also began to think more deeply about our traditional music theory, actively promoted the music theory he had studied in the West, and made an outstanding contribution to professional music education. At the same time, he also composed a large number of school songs, changing the situation in which school music songs were mainly composed by selecting songs and filling in lyrics.

Youmei Xiao's compositions are concerned with reality, and the concise length of his works and the simplicity of his lyrics make them more resonant with all walks of life, with no great limitations in terms of audience.

### 3. The Emotional Analysis of the Lyrics of 'Ask'

The Question, written in 1922, is one of the earliest pioneering works of Chinese art song. The song originated from Youmei Xiao's sorrow and pain at the time of the national tragedy and the daily disruption of the country. The lyrics of the song contain a few subtle questions that are philosophical in nature: Do you know who you are? Do you know how many tears of misery there are in the country today? ..... The lyrics of the song are a reminder of China's internal and external troubles and the suffering of its people.

### 4. Musical Analysis of 'The Question'

The musical score for 'Ask' is presented in two systems. The first system features two vocal lines and piano accompaniment. The lyrics for the first line are: "1. 你 知 道 你 是 谁? 你 知 道 华 年 如" and for the second line: "2. 你 知 道 你 是 谁? 你 知 道 人 生 如". The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand. The second system continues the vocal lines with lyrics: "水? 你 知 道 秋 声 添 得 几 分 憔" and "蕊? 你 知 道 秋 花 开 得 为 何 沉". The piano accompaniment continues with similar rhythmic patterns. Dynamics are marked as *p* and *mf*.

Figure 1. Example of the score for the song 'Ask'

This piece is written in the key of G natural major, and is a single two-part song in the form of a stanza. The A section (Fig. 1) begins with the two lines "Do you know...?" The two "know" rhythms are both dotted eighth notes, and the short dotted eighth note with the question "know" is supposed to be sung as a progression from weak to strong, as if in question, but I think it is an attempt to evoke The third phrase, "You know...!" is changed to an exclamation, where "know" becomes a dotted quarter note, and the third phrase is a crescendo as it moves up the scale "d<sup>1</sup>-g<sup>1</sup>-b<sup>1</sup>-c<sup>2</sup>-d<sup>2</sup>-e<sup>2</sup>", returning to "d<sup>2</sup> The lyrics suggest that the crescendo is used

to increase the volume of the song, and by extending the duration of the word "know", it serves as a certain emotional impetus, while lamenting "haggard" and "intoxicated". "It is as if the song is a heartbreaking warning to the people, but at the same time it is too sad to tell them.

In the following B section, the two lamented superimposed words "hang" and "blow" appear for the first time in two beats each, and for the second time in one beat each, from strong to weak, ending with a quarter rest. The chords of the chorus are changed from decomposing chords to open-ended waved chords, which together with the melody form a T-T 4-6-T harmonic progression, and the timings are played in harmony with the lyrics, just like a lament from the depths of one's heart, helpless to change the situation but helpless to do so; in the next questioning phrase, the rhythmic pattern of triplets is cleverly used to promote the rhythm, and the "rivers and mountains" and "waves" are brought together. "The second half of the line ends the question with a three-beat chant in a slow and fading treatment, cleverly using the triplets to push the melody and emotion forward, and then gradually retracting the emotion through slowing and fading, intended to The last phrase returns to the original tempo for a fade, and ends with the two superimposed words "right" and "crisp" sung at their weakest, the first two occurrences using dotted quarter notes The last two occurrences are separated by an eighth rest, which sounds like a very definite, yet unspoken, reminder of the importance of taking up one's responsibility to resist in a time of national crisis!

The song's concise structure and language, its deft use of tonal and concise harmonic progressions, and its expression of deep affection for the motherland have made this art song highly popular to this day.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

"Do you know how many tears of desolation there are in today's rivers and mountains? Youmei Xiao uses his art song to call on people to reflect on the fact that they should bravely take up the burden of the rise and fall of the world at a critical moment when mountains and rivers are shattered and the country is in trouble. Nowadays, living in the good old days, it is all the more important for us to improve our professionalism and to be able to grasp and flexibly use all our singing skills in the process of second composition.

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