



The Contemporary Dilemma, Opportunity Andcountermeasure of Chinese Traditional Qin Song

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the resistance, opportunities and countermeasures faced by traditional Chinese Qin song 琴歌 (Singing poems accompanied by the Guqin 古琴) in contemporary times. The author looks at tradition from a developmental perspective, viewing the past and the present as a whole, rather than as two opposites. The article mainly uses documentary and comparative methods to conduct research, and discusses the current changes in the audience of Qin song, the limitations of Qin song's creative form and singing method, the feasibility of Qin song absorbing Western music experience, and the necessity of integrating into contemporary aesthetics. The author believes that only by fully taking into account the aesthetic needs and cultural climate of contemporary society, and realizing the positive significance of both in developing the tradition of Qin song, can Qin song get out of the current predicament it faces. The results of this study will help readers re-examine the contemporary revival and development of traditional Chinese Qin song from a more comprehensive perspective.

Keywords: Guqin; Qin song; Qin players; Tradition; Contemporary aesthetics

Introduction

Qin song is a form of poetry chanting accompanied by the guqin. Its musical style is simple and unadorned, with singers often improvising and adding personal touches to the melodic lines based on their dialectal tone. Traditionally, Qin song was an artistic way for scholars to express their emotions, thoughts, and moods. It was mainly performed by self-playing and singing, and sometimes appeared at cultural gatherings of literati, offering both enjoyment and personal cultivation. However, its simple style of creation and performance has become a limiting factor in today's diverse and evolving cultural landscape. Qin song is now considered an important part of guqin culture, with its performance seen as a way to preserve and promote ancient Chinese music, language, and literature. Reflecting on the contemporary challenges of Qin song and exploring ways to address these challenges is therefore of great significance.

This article takes into account both the historical and contemporary context of Qin song, that is, relying on the historical understanding of Qin song to examine the contemporary dilemma of Qin song in order to seek countermeasures. In other words, the author will examine the development of Qin song from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives. The diachronic perspective refers to placing the plight of Qin song in the context of dynamic historical development to reveal the differences between ancient and modern audiences and the resulting changes in aesthetic vision; the synchronic perspective refers to a "slicing" observation of the plight of Qin song (which means taking it out of its historical context) in order to reveal the limitations of its own creative form and performance style.

Such a research perspective allows us to thoroughly examine the deep roots of Qin song's current predicament in order to remove the obstacles facing Qin song's development.

Research Objectives

This article aims to explore the contemporary challenges of Qin song, its underlying causes, and propose feasible solutions.

Research Methodology

This study primarily employs literature research, analyzing relevant books, journal articles, theses, and conference papers from platforms such as CADAL (China Academic Digital Associative Library) and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). Using inductive and deductive methods, it synthesizes the findings to draw conclusions.

Research Results and Suggestions

1. Dilemma and its causes

The Qin (Guqin) is the earliest plucked string instrument of the Han nation, with a history of more than 3,000 years. It is a treasure of Han culture. It was the musical instrument with the highest cultural status in ancient China and was regarded by literati as a symbol of elegant sentiment. Traditional Qin music mainly has three performance forms: Guqin solo, ensemble of the Qin and the vertical bamboo flute 琴箫合奏, and Qin song. As an important performance form of Qin art, the Qin song has gone through several ups and downs in its historical development and was on the verge of being lost by the end of the 19th century. Fortunately, it has been preserved and passed on with the joint efforts of modern Qin masters such as Zha Fuxi 查阜西 and Wang Di 王迪. However, it still faces the problems of slow development and low public acceptance.

Wei Xiaoyuan 韦晓远 the scholar mentioned in the article “Analysis of the Development Current Situation and Communication Strategies of Contemporary Qin song” that when he listened to a special concert of Qin song at the Shenzhen Grand Theater, he found that many people started chatting or falling asleep after a few songs, which made him realize that Qin song has its own special audience. This phenomenon also confirms Jin Wei 金蔚's point of view: without the corresponding cultural context, it is impossible to appreciate Qin songs. (Wei Xiaoyuan, 2019, 8) The author also agrees with this. Cultural context is crucial to appreciating any art. So, should we allow modern people to return to the traditional cultural context, or should we allow traditional art to enter the contemporary cultural context? Such a question is worthy of our deep thought. The reasons that hinder the development of Qin song must be complicated. To solve this problem, we not only need to distinguish the priorities, but also need to seize the opportunities provided by the current era. Before discussing the current opportunities, it is best to examine several issues facing contemporary Qin song.

1. Expansion of audience groups and diversification of aesthetic styles

Historically, the Qin song were mainly circulated among the literati class. They were an intimate form of chamber music used to express personal emotions and cultivate the sentiments of literati. They were either played and sung by the Qin players themselves without an audience, or one person played the Qin and another person chanted. The cooperative method of singing was appreciated by a small group of people who were familiar with each other in the literati gathering. The Qin was a status symbol of ancient literati, so it was known as “a scholar who would not withdraw his Qin without any reason” (from “Book of Rites: Qu Li Xia 《礼记·曲礼下》”). The audience of Qin

song is naturally mainly composed of the literati class, and they are mainly male. In contemporary times, the audience for Qin has expanded. Although it is still mainly spread among the intellectual class, this group is already a large and heterogeneous group with highly diverse aesthetic orientations. Its notable characteristics include:

First, professional Qin players appear. The majority of ancient Qin players were literati. They were usually either public officials serving in the officialdom, elegant scholars living in seclusion, or scholars seeking fame. They were not professionals. Playing the Qin and singing were just their leisure entertainment. In modern times, professional Qin players have appeared. They take Qin as their major and career, working in higher art colleges or professional performing arts groups, or making a living teaching private students. Such professional behavior will inevitably have an impact on the creation and spread of the Qin song.

Second, the number of Qin players who are proficient in poetry and poetry has decreased significantly. Ancient literati often recited poems and composed poems. Communication activities using Qin songs were of literary interest to a large extent and was an important way for literati to exchange poetry skills. With the modern subject system completely dividing literature and music into two disciplines, many Qin players who are proficient in music are not good at poetry creation, and the meaning of Qin song to them is naturally different from before.

Third, there are more and more female Qin players. In ancient times, only women from well-off families had the opportunity to receive education. Women from ordinary families were often not literate, and naturally did not have the opportunity to get close to literary genres such as Qin song and Qin music. In modern times, women's social status and family status have been significantly improved, and they have already entered the intellectual class. Therefore, the number of female Qin players has naturally increased sharply.

Fourth, passive consumer groups among Qin song audiences are becoming more and more common. Ancient Qin songs were circulated for self-pleasure or appreciation at gatherings, and the cultural and artistic levels of their audience groups were relatively similar. The singing and listening of Qin songs were an equal exchange. However, many audiences of modern Qin song are pure consumers who cannot play the Qin and are not good at singing, and cannot participate in communication activities like previous audiences.

The expansion of the audience for Qin music will inevitably lead to the diversification of the aesthetic style of Qin music. Many potential audiences of Qin song today, such as passive consumers, are unaware of its tradition. It is undeniable that the current survival situation of Qin song depends on the overall acceptance of the above groups of people, rather than the preferences of any one of them.

1.2. Monotony in creative form

Traditional Chinese music advocates “monophonic” thinking. Affected by this, although traditional Qin song include both Qin and Song, the vocal melody often fits the instrumental melody. The two are generally in a synchronous and repetitive relationship, and there is a lack of change in texture. Especially when compared with Western Lute Songs, which are known for their polyphonic textures, this characteristic is very obvious. Comparing a set of musical examples, one can intuitively see the difference in texture between a monophonic Qin song and a polyphonic Lute Song. Ex. 1 is the famous traditional Chinese Qin song Yang Guan San Die 《阳关三叠》. There is only one melody part, which is played by the Qin and sung by the human voice. The two overlap and have no priority, which will weaken each other in sound effects, result in each having no independent space of its own, and the sparse



rhythm cannot provide more dynamic factors for the emotional development of the song, making it sound rather monotonous.

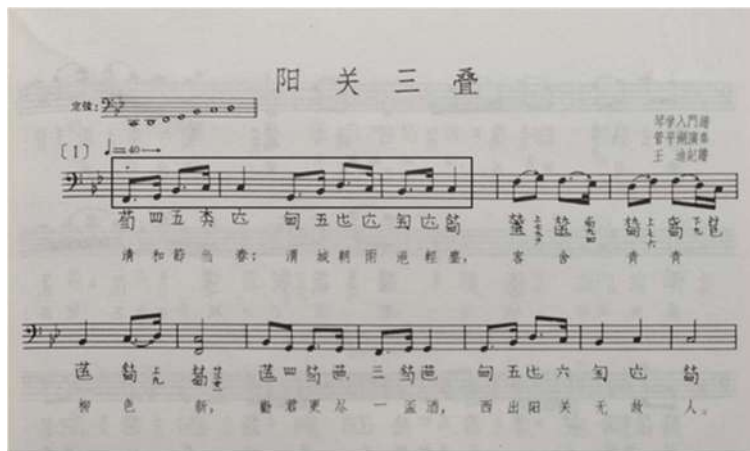


Figure 1 Traditional Qin Song Yang Guan San Die (Excerpt) Showing that the voice and the instrument share a single melody.

Source: Author

Ex. 2 is a lute song from the Western Renaissance. The melody above the lyrics (see the oval part) is sung by the human voice, and the melody below is played by the lute (see the box part). There is a clear difference between the instrumental music and the vocal music here, and the harmony can set it off well. The human voice is rich in color and thickness, and the contrast between vocal and instrumental music in range, timbre, and rhythm makes the entire music sound rich and smart.



Figure 2 Lied Isbruck, ich muss dich lassen by Heinrich Isaac (1450—1517) performed in the form of lute song (Excerpts)

Source: Author

In terms of the relationship between words and music, traditional Chinese Qin song also suffer from the same monotony. According to Tao Ran 陶冉's research, the concept of “one word, one note” “一字一音” is reflected in the Qin songs of the Ming Dynasty, which is the Ming people's persistence in the tradition of Qin song. (Tao Ran, 2022, 128, 130) It can be seen from this that in the Ming Dynasty and before, the relationship between words and music in Qin songs basically used the “one word, one note” method (see Ex. 3). It can be seen from the music scores from the Ming Dynasty to modern times that although there are sometimes “one word for multiple notes”, most of



these notes are still limited to one beat position and have not fundamentally broken away from the traditional mode of relationship between words and music. (Ex. 3).

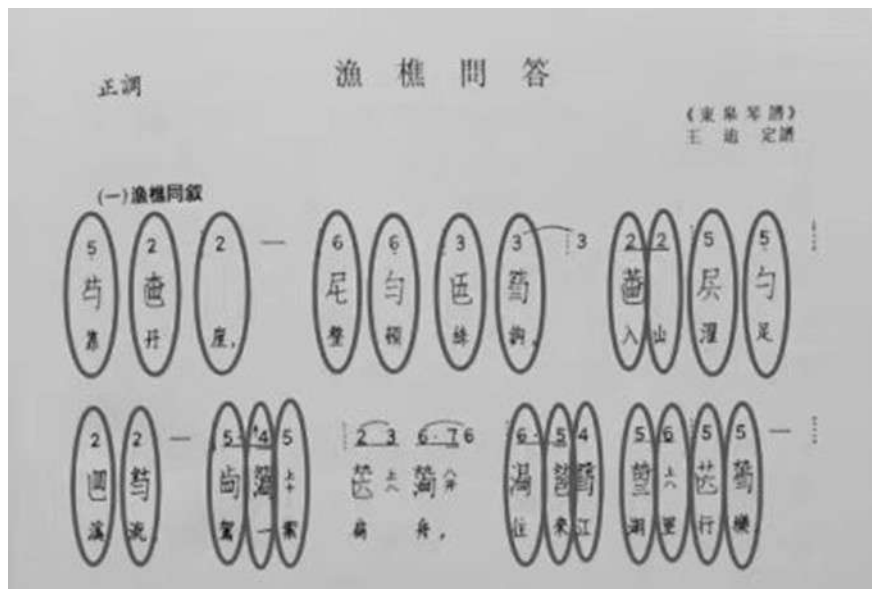


Figure 3 Example of the words-music relationship “one word, one note”, excerpt from the traditional Qin song Yu Qiao Wen Da 《渔樵问答》

Source: Wang Di.

The words of Qin songs are mostly derived from poetry. The actual effect of singing Qin songs is “one word, one note”, which is more like recitation. The advantage is that it highlights the linguistic nature of poetry and can better convey the message of the words; the disadvantage is that there is less space for music to be displayed and the musicality is weak. In an era when scholars composed and recited poems as their daily routine, this kind of Qin song could help people find a balance between the two interests of poetry appreciation and music appreciation, so as to play a role in cultivating sentiment. However, today, composing and reciting poems is no longer generally available to the intellectual class (which is the main audience group of contemporary Qin songs). The audience's ability to appreciate the taste of poetry has obviously declined; at the same time, people's musical “taste buds” have been blended by various “flavors” such as Western music, world music, and popular music., etc. Therefore, the traditional Qin song “one word, one note” can no longer enable the listener to find a balance between the two interests of appreciating poetry and appreciating music. People generally feel “insufficient in musicality”, and this “insufficiency” is difficult to make up for (for the above reasons) by experiencing the interest from “appraising poems”, so it has become an important obstacle to the development of the Qin song.

1. 3. Limitations of singing methods

The singing method of traditional Qin song still mainly relies on the exploration and understanding of the original appearance of ancient tunes, and adheres to the concepts of some modern Qin song masters. Wang Di believes that “the Qin song is a combination of ancient Qin music and poetry that is played and sung at the same time. It is different from the bel canto singing method of Western vocal music, and also different from folk singing. The ancient rhyme and the natural sound of Qin music can best reflect the charm of the art of Qin song.” (Wang Wenzhang) , 2007, 3) Zha Fuxi emphasizes that the traditional singing of Qin song adheres to the concept of “nuance in native

dialect” “乡谈折字”, that is, during the singing process, the melodic line recorded on the Qin score is slightly altered to match the tonal characteristics of the singer's native dialect. (Shen Dehao, 1986, 7-8)

Whether it is “ancient rhymes” or “nuance in native dialect”, they are valuable experiences and achievements of predecessors in exploring and studying the singing methods of traditional Qin songs. They are important references for future generations to learn Qin songs and understand their traditions. We should respect them. At the same time, we should also interpret and apply these concepts objectively and dialectically based on the cultural context of the times, and should not over-interpret or even misinterpret. Some modern scholars have misinterpreted Wang Di's view that the singing style of Qin song is different from Western bel canto singing and folk singing, and believe that neither bel canto nor folk singing is suitable for singing Qin song. (Chen Yao, 2018, 80) The author believes that this interpretation of the original document is not rigorous and will mislead readers.

Wang Di's two daughters believe that their mother is not limited to ancient musical notation and makes necessary corrections and additions to some problems discovered during the notation process to make it easier to perform, sing and pass on. In addition, some of Wang Di's original Qin songs are also her artistic innovations and attempts to create new sounds of ancient rhymes and new Qin songs. (Deng Ying, Deng Hong, 2007, 266)

2. Opportunities

Today, the degree of cultural diversity, integration, and coercion, the enrichment of musical genres, forms, languages, and techniques, as well as the rapidity, multimedia, and time-traveling of music dissemination are all unprecedented. The above factors can bring unprecedented benefits to Qin song.

The Qin art was included in the second batch of the World's Representative List of Human Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2003, and was included in the first batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage by the People's Republic of China in 2006. Being selected into the world's “intangible cultural heritage” list further confirms the superiority of Qin music as an advanced representative of human culture and its iconic status as an important representative of Chinese traditional culture. As a result, this musical instrument has a greater appeal in the hearts of Chinese people. This is due to the relevant national policy support and the strong help from relevant people in society. Many wealthy and ambitious people have invested in the Qin industry to run schools, providing basic conditions for the spread of Qin music. In addition, the innovation in teaching methods of contemporary Qin music has also provided favorable factors for the development of Qin music. With the assistance of modern communication media, the situation of Qin music on the verge of extinction has been greatly improved, and Qin songs also began to enter the public eye with the development of Qin music.

However, external opportunities seem to promote Qin song more at the symbolic level. That is, although many people regard Qin song as a symbol of traditional Chinese elegant art, they do not really love this art. The reason is that on the one hand, the Qin song has shifted from the literati class to a larger and more diverse group. Before its original profound cultural connotation was understood by the public, it was difficult to appreciate Qin songs; On the other hand, Qin song did not take contemporary aesthetics into full consideration during its development. Therefore, in order to make Qin song bloom with vitality in the new era rather than continue rigidly, it is also crucial to explore the inherent opportunities it faces from the ontological level of music. This requires Qin players to expand

their artistic horizons and actively seek inspiration from more artistic musical forms to enrich their textural interest, rhythmic vitality and relationship between words and music.

3. Countermeasures

The modern transformation and revival of traditional music is an important cultural topic that contemporary Chinese people are exploring. The effective advancement of this topic cannot be separated from the joint effects of concepts and practice. It also requires us to view “the traditional” and “the contemporary” from a dialectical and unified perspective. “Tradition” has had “contemporary” attributes in every period it has experienced in its development process, and what is now called “contemporary” will one day be classified as “traditional”, Therefore, we should not regard “the traditional” and “the contemporary” as separate opposites, but as two interacting elements in a development process. The dialectical and unified relationship between the two helps us think about how to solve the problems of inheritance and development of Chinese traditional music in contemporary times. As far as the appreciation and understanding of traditional Chinese Qin song are concerned, it is equally important to be familiar with the traditional cultural context and to examine the contemporary cultural context. The former helps to understand why traditional Qin song became classics in their era and what artistic value they have. The latter helps to make the Qin song tradition better adapt to the aesthetic needs of contemporary society, and develop while rejuvenating it with new vitality.

When examining the contemporary cultural context, we must pay attention to the fact that Western art music has penetrated and spread widely in modern China. As a strong foreign culture, Western music not only poses a challenge to traditional Chinese music (including the Qin song), but also provides experience and inspiration for the development of the latter - in particular, it is good at absorbing external supplies and integrating contemporary aesthetics to develop its own tradition. When discussing this characteristic of Western music, scholar Sun Hongjie 孙红杰 said, “Strong foreign culture can become an effective supply for local music traditions to strengthen themselves”, “Maintaining and developing local traditions requires a generous and inclusive open gesture and the independent attitude of self-examination”, “The revitalization and development of local music traditions should be combined with the current cultural context, value system and practical needs”, “The advantageous recognition and potential exploration of foreign cultures and local traditions are favorable conditions for creating music classics”, “The relationship between strong foreign culture and local music tradition is in the process of dynamic evolution and needs to be viewed from a developmental perspective.” (Sun Hongjie, 2022, 28-33) While inheriting the tradition, Chinese traditional Qin songs should also actively absorb high-quality foreign music experience to strengthen themselves in order to achieve more substantial development.

3. 1. Introduce Western music experience into the creation of traditional Qin songs

Western classical music is oriented toward artistry, rationality, and systematization, and part of this is reflected in counterpoint, harmony and other texture elements. Texture is an important technique that reflects the artistic ingenuity of musical works. Just like weaving works of art, through clever weaving combinations, composers can process the Qin, human voice and other instrumental parts into colorful musical works. In Western music, homophonic and polyphonic are the most representative texture types. Both of them can be used in the creation of Qin songs to solve the problem of this traditional genre. The use of polyphonic textures eliminates the monotony problem, thus improving the musicality of the music.

Counterpoint techniques can enable music to maintain the independence of multiple parts in the horizontal dimension, as well as the contrast and connection between the parts, and can also produce harmonious effects in the vertical dimension. Introducing it into the creation of Qin songs can make the Qin and the human voice independent, and at the same time can set off each other to increase the contrast, change and layering in the music.

Harmony is often likened to the composer's palette. For major, minor, augmented, and diminished chords can help express emotional colors and make the music full of personality. Although the harmonic expressiveness of the Qin is relatively limited, it is not entirely unfeasible. In addition, it can also be combined with the human voice or other instruments to build rich harmonies, so that the Qin songs can present more diverse colors.

Take the modern Qin song written by the Host of Yue Yi Zhai 乐颐斋 as an example, the composer added a contrapuntal vocal part to the traditional Qin song “Canghai Longyin” 《沧海龙吟》. The vocal melody is almost completely independent of the Qin part (see Ex. 4):

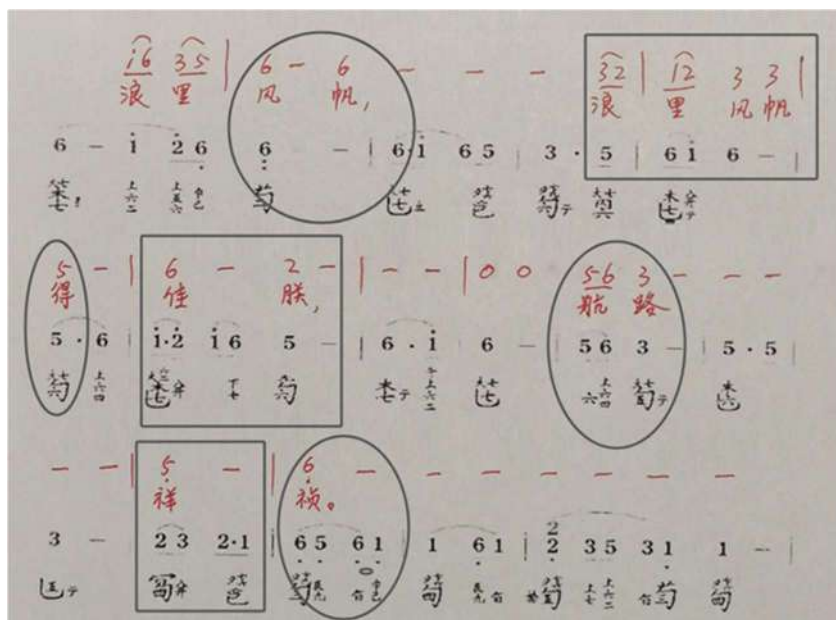


Figure 4 A modern Qin song composed by the Host of Yue Yi Zhai 乐颐斋主 in contrapuntal texture to the traditional Qin song Cang Hai Long Yin (2022) 《沧海龙吟》 The music is based on the Qin Qu Xie Sheng 《琴曲谐声》 (1820), Wang Di noted the score according to Yue Ying 乐瑛’s playing

Source: Author

As shown in the box in the music example, the two voices form a sharp contrast in pitch, range and rhythm; minor thirds, perfect fifths, perfect fourths, etc. also appear many times in the example. In the harmonic interval, there are even three sounds sounding at the same time in the last bar (an octave on the Qin plus a long sustained tone in the human voice); and in the part shown in the oval, there is a sound between the two parts. It also reflects a certain overlap in pitch, paying tribute to the monophonic texture of traditional Chinese Qin songs. It can be seen that it is feasible to integrate Western counterpoint techniques and Chinese tradition in Qin songs.

3. 2. Adapt the singing style of Qin song to contemporary aesthetics

Although the concept of ancient rhyme and opera dominates the singing of Qin song, some scholars have put forward different views. Wu Wenguang 吴文光 believes that there has always been no set rules for the singing method of Qin songs. It can be sung loudly or lowly, and looking at today, traditional Chinese or western vocal style is also suitable for people and passed down from time to time. (Wu Wenguang, 2021, 38) Some scholars believe that “so far there has been no signs of the ancients' discussion of how Qin song should be performed.” (Yao Lan, 2005, 178) Objectively speaking, our understanding of the original appearance of traditional music is based on the study of texts, and there is no intuitive sound data for reference. Although there is an oral tradition of inheritance among Qin players, it seems difficult to define what the original form is in the long historical evolution.

Exploring the singing styles used in traditional Qin songs in history has its indisputable academic value; however, from the perspective of developing and disseminating Qin songs, the auditory aesthetic preferences of the contemporary audience are also an important factor worthy of consideration. It is of practical significance to explore the singing style which accords with the contemporary aesthetic and the natural quality of Qin music. As mentioned above, if a tradition is to be developed, it needs to keep pace with the times, and it must be good at facing the needs of contemporary society, absorbing supplies from contemporary society, integrating them with the tradition, and enriching this tradition. The author believes that modern Mandarin (the standard common Chinese that has been promoted nationwide since the middle of the last century) should be used to sing Qin songs in contemporary times. This is one of the important ways to keep the tradition of Qin songs advancing with the times and taking into account contemporary aesthetics. Of course, when singing traditional poems in Mandarin, sometimes you will encounter problems that do not conform to the traditional pronunciation rules. In this case, one can follow the concept of “nuance” “折字” in the tradition of Qin song to try to achieve a balance between the melody and the lyrics.

As mentioned earlier, the contemporary diversified audience of Qin song, which means, the development of Qin song can no longer rely solely on a single group, but needs to adapt to diversified aesthetic needs. Since ancient times, Qin song has been characterized by its beauty of honest, genuine, and natural expressions. Calling for a diversified aesthetic of Qin song is not to deviate from this tradition, but to say that those musical audiences who have great differences in career type, knowledge structure, and musical interest may be different from each other in the recognition of honest, genuine and natural expression. In other words, such identifications are “self-adaptive” rather than “universal”. Therefore, it is not appropriate to use a fixed singing style to frame all Qin songs. Only diverse singing styles can meet the needs of contemporary aesthetics.

Conclusions

The expansion of the audience, the diversification of aesthetic styles, the monotony of creative forms, and the limitations of singing methods are the main reasons why traditional Chinese Qin songs are facing difficulties in the contemporary era. All these call for conceptual innovation, especially the awareness of the dialectical unified relationship between the traditional and the contemporary, as well as persistence and transformation. Bai Juyi 白居易, a representative of ancient Chinese literati and a poet of the Tang Dynasty, believed that the Qin had no lowbrow charm and was different from other popular instruments. The literati class regarded the Qin as a spiritual sustenance because of its noble sentiments. (Bo Keli, 2013, 86) However, if we look at it from a developmental perspective, the exchanges and influences between refined and popular culture have never been cut off. The separation and rejection of the two are temporary phenomena, and their mutual absorption, reference and fusion is the eternal norm.

“To suit both the refined and the popular” is a common pursuit of Chinese and foreign artists of all ages. However, how to make the two compatible at what scale is an opportunity for artists to show their talents. The author believes that as of the specific genre of Qin song, it is best to take “elegance” as the basis to accommodate “vulgar” elements, rather than the other way around. There are many such cases in Western classical music. Classical music masters represented by Joseph Haydn (1732—1809) did not reduce the elegant character of their own music, while incorporating some streetwise or rural music elements (e.g., folk tunes, rhythms of folk dances, sound effects of characteristic folk instruments, etc.) guide the public to move closer to them, thus achieving the stylistic achievement of “appreciation for both refined and popular people”. Taking this as a lesson, adapting traditional music to the current cultural context will not pose a threat to this tradition.

Qin song not only has the charm of elegant style, but also is an excellent way to show personal free will. The player resonates with the lyrics and melody to express his or her inner feelings. It can be seen from this that Qin song should have the character of detachment rather than restraint. However, can the singing style of ancient tunes express the inner emotions of modern people and arouse resonance? It is not difficult to find the answer from the difficulties faced by Qin song in contemporary times. Music is valuable in stimulating spiritual resonance. Rigid copying of traditional elements can easily cause Qin songs to lose their spirituality. Only by breaking through traditional concepts, absorbing external resources, and adapting to contemporary aesthetics can Qin song be guided out of its predicament and reborn.

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