

Teaching Exploration of Ma Shuilong's Ancient Chinese Poetry Art Songs – “Spring Silkworms are Dead,” “Loneliness,” and “Falling Flowers”

Li Yue^{1,2*}

¹Nanjing Xiaozhuang University, Nanjing 210000, Jiangsu Province, China

²National Taiwan University of Arts, New Taipei 22058, Taiwan Province, China

*Corresponding author: Li Yue, 365170933@qq.com

Abstract: Ma Shuilong was a famous composer in Taiwan, both at home and abroad. In 1986, the publication of his concerto, *Bangdi*, made him the first Chinese composer to have a full performance at the Lincoln Arts Center in New York. In the field of vocal music production, “Ma Shuilong Songs Collection” reflected the mutual infiltration and integration of Chinese and Western elements, especially the combination of modern techniques and classical poetry so that Chinese ancient poetry art songs would emit unique artistic conception. In view of his three works, this article elaborates the oriental connotation in their creation through the study of the poetries involved and further extracts the characteristics of the creation and singing of ancient poetry art songs in order to provide significant references for the teaching of Chinese art songs.

Keywords: Ma Shuilong; Ancient poetry art songs; Creative connotation; Singing characteristics

Publication date: September 2021; **Online publication:** September 30, 2021

1. Introduction

During the period of Ma Shuilong, Taiwan's contemporary composer groups almost without exception received the learning and training system of western composing techniques. However, the desire to carry the genes of traditional music culture, working on them, and creating compositions comes as a surprise to the outside world, showing the traditional philosophizing national style and local flavor. The composer transformed Western elements without leaving any trace, broke the stereotype of “the creation by oriental composers is based on the pentatonic scale,” and achieved an individualized style of “the more national the more global” along with the spirit of oriental poetry and music as well as national feelings.

2. Introduction to Ma Shuilong

Ma Shuilong (1939-2015) was born in Keelung, Taiwan Province. He was keen in music and painting since he was young. The wide mountains and seas as well as rich folk music such as Beiguan and Gezi Opera became important inspirations for his creations. In 1959, he started off at Taipei Art Academy, where he studied with Lu Yan, Hsiao Chee-Hua, Hsu Chang-Hui, and other composers. In 1971, his “Nostalgia Song” (soprano and piano) won the Taiwan's “Huang Zi Song Awards.” In 1972, he received a scholarship from Regensburg Conservatory of Music in West Germany to study composition under Professor Dro Singmand for three years, during which he established his solid Western composition skills and demonstrated his deep knowledge of traditional music. After returning to Taiwan in 1975, he became a professor at the Department of Music in Soochow University. In 1980, the dance-drama music, *Dou E Yuan* (voice, suona, and percussion), commissioned by the “Neoclassical” dance troupe, won the third Wu San Lian Literary Award.

In 1991, he became the president of Taipei National University of the Arts and from 1999 to 2002, he was the vice president of the Asian Composers' League.

3. Analysis of works

3.1. "Spring Silkworms are Dead"

3.1.1. Interpretation of poetry

This song was derived from the famous poem, "Untitled, It's Hard to Say Goodbye When You Meet," written by Li Shangyin, a famous poet during the late Tang Dynasty. The title of the song is a reference to the first half of the poem, "Spring silkworms will weave until they die; wax torches turn to ashes before tears dry up." The whole poem is strong and sentimental. "Spring silkworm will weave until they die" and "wax torches turn into ashes" express lovers who are lovesick, longing to meet one another.

3.1.2. Music analysis

The whole song is divided into three parts with a total of 32 bars, at a 4/4 beat, andante, in the key of G minor from the beginning to the end. The song starts with two consecutive weak triplets, "When You Meet" and "Dongfeng Wu," which then form progressive pitches and continuously stack emotions. Non-western traditional techniques are used in the texture of accompaniment, without directly defining the tonality of G minor. From the eleventh bar onwards, the tonality is gradually clarified, and two symmetrical musical lines are outlined by a decomposed chord of six consecutive notes in nine bars, which is a metaphor for the melodious "spring silkworms" and "wax torches" in the title. After two bars of interlude, the music weakens, and the mood becomes sad and helpless. Then, the song reaches its climax and finally, a series of triplet decomposition chord set off a sad mood.

3.1.3. Suggestions during singing

This song spans 12 degrees of register, having an old-style and being well-structured. The progression of the first two consecutive pitches requires singers to pay attention to the ups and downs of the melody lines in processing the musical phrases as well as expressing the meaning of pain and melancholy; especially when "difficult" and "power" have high pitches, breathing needs to be stable. In the second sentence, "The east wind is powerless, and flowers are gone," there is a need to create a sad and cool artistic conception. In the third sentence regarding "moonlight cold," the word "cold" carries the highest note of the whole song, which requires the support of a full breath to express the sadness of the heart. It forms a strong contrast with the deep mood of the last sentence of "hope but not to see."

3.2. "Loneliness"

3.2.1. Interpretation of poetry

"Loneliness" was derived from the peak of the Tang Dynasty pastoral landscape school representative, Meng Haoran, who made a five-word short story, "Leaving Wang Wei." The title of the song was chosen from the word, "loneliness" in the last line of the poem, "We should keep loneliness, and close the gates of the old garden," which expresses the poet's cynical sigh when he was defeated by the government as well as his loneliness when he retired and had to bid farewell to his friend before leaving Beijing.

3.2.2. Music analysis

The whole song is divided into two parts with a total of 35 bars. The speed transitions from *adagio* to a

moderate one at 4/4 beat in the first half and 2/4 beat in the second half, forming an obvious contrast. The use of dissonant intervals of seconds and triads in the prelude creates a cool atmosphere. The first two antithetical verses have the same structure; there is a repeated emphasis on the first tonic of the sentence with a grace note, slowly outlining the traditional artistic conception. For the two phrases in bars 20 to 31, the texture adopts column chords, the speed is accelerated, and there is full of bounce. The final note enters the tonic chord with a slight crescendo. In the last 4 bars, it returns to the original speed and forms an echo with the beginning, ending with a dissonant interval of seconds.

3.2.3. Suggestions during singing

The song range spans nine degrees. It expresses the poet's inner doubts and loneliness. The blank of the first two accompanying syllables provides an opportunity for the singer to use opera style and intonations, such as articulations. The sonorous and powerful words set off the feeling of "sparse" in the last sentence and "bosom friend is rare in the world" after the shallow intonation of the first two sentences. It renders the tremor and the impact in the depths of the poet's heart. The last sentence seems to be out of tune, thus deepening the meaning of "loneliness." Finally, singers should sing softly to complement the mood of the poet as he retired to the countryside.

3.3. "Falling Flowers"

3.3.1. Interpretation of poetry

"Falling flowers" was derived from the famous Tang Dynasty poet, Li Shangyin. The poem being titled, "Falling Flowers," is the poet's own portraiture, borrowing the nature of how flowers fade and are perishable. He expressed how precious flowers are but still remained as remnants that have a defeated ending. The poem indicated the poet's desire to retain spring and his sorrows, which expressed his own misfortune.

3.3.2. Music analysis

The whole song is divided into three parts with a total of 37 bars. Its speed is *adagio* and slightly *andante*, alternately. The mode and tonality shift from ^bB *shang* tone to ^bE *gong* tone. In the prelude, thirty-two notes are continuous used to express the artistic conception of flowers falling with a flowing texture. The melody of the first sentence – "The guests in the penthouse have all left" sets the tone for the whole work. The mood extends up to the fifteenth and sixteenth bars, where the accompaniment creates an impression of "flowers hovering everywhere." In the middle part, the accompaniment begins with five blank bars as the melody moves downwards and becomes deeper; the two-sentence ending exists in different tonalities, which enhances the sense of confusion. With two bars of triplets and arpeggios, the music moves into the third part, where its strength gradually weakens. There is an accompaniment part again at bar 32 with a relatively free speed, and some of the materials are reproduced. It ends with a calm arpeggio, lamenting the bitterness of a "tear-stained robe."

3.3.3. Suggestions during singing

The vocal range of this song is twelve degrees. The freedom of its rhythm is the key to grasp while singing. "Gao," in the first sentence has the highest pitch in the whole song; thus, it is necessary to ensure the stability of the word with a long breath and good tone. The end of the second sentence falls on the long sound. The accompaniment part of the second section is left blank twice, which provides room for the expression of tension of sound. It requires coherence and uniformity of breath as well as full embellishment,

cadence, and eloquence. The third section moves from sadness to a sense of calmness, along with the mood of singing, from the climax to the lowest, bearing the feelings of sorrow and vulnerability.

4. Conclusion

The three Chinese ancient poetry art songs by Ma Shuilong embody the aesthetic norms of Chinese ancient poetry art songs, combine the profound culture of poetry and modern Western creation techniques, break the shackles of traditional Western techniques in terms of the structural layout and harmony. The bold use of dissonant intervals and atonal music creation techniques to depict musical images, create vast atmospheres, and prime artistic temperaments can be seen in his works. In the teaching of singing, special attention should be paid to the modern style of his works. The sections with weak melody and rapid harmony change should be carefully polished from the angle of rhythm and intonation. In addition, the recitation and chanting of traditional Chinese opera should also be absorbed in order to be in conformity with the composer's soul as well as to achieve a higher integration of poetry and music.

Funding

This work was supported by grants from Jiangsu University Student Scientific Research Innovation Project 2021, Key Subject Backbone Teacher of Nanjing Xiaozhuang University 2019-2023, Pre-Research Plan of Nanjing Xiaozhuang University 2021-2022.

Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no financial or commercial conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Li S, 2004, Chinese Modern Music: Dialogue between Local and Western, Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press, Shanghai.
- [2] Yao H, 2003, Modern Music Analysis Method Tutorial, Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, Changsha.
- [3] Yue L, 2017, Research on the Inheritance and development of Chinese Traditional Culture gene by Chinese Art Songs. *Hundred Schools of Art*, (4): 212-213.
- [4] Liang C, 2012, Singing of Ancient Poetry Art Songs and Modern Creative Art Songs in Chinese Art Songs, China Conservatory of Music, Beijing.
- [5] Guan X, 2005, The Combination of Folk Music and Modern Techniques, Northeast Normal University, Jilin.
- [6] Zhang J, 2009, Taiwan New Music (1945-1960), Central Conservatory of Music, Beijing.