

Exploring the Music Psychology in the Aria “A Peach Blossom” from the Opera “Farewell to Cambridge”

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Abstract: This paper explores the music psychology behind the vocal performance of Lin Huiyin, the core character in China’s first Chamber opera “Farewell to Cambridge”, with a focus on analyzing Lin Huiyin’s aria “A Peach Blossom.” Lin Huiyin, portrayed by the renowned Chinese singer Lei Jia, serves as an entry point for an in-depth exploration of the psychological dimensions of opera music. Utilizing music psychology as the theoretical framework, this study interprets the emotional expression and psychological connotations behind the performance from the perspectives of musical characteristics such as melodic progression, rhythmic variation, and musical expression. The research reveals that musical features are closely related to character psychology and audience aesthetic experience. Music can accurately convey the inner world of characters and evoke emotional resonance in the audience. This study not only enriches the theoretical content of opera music psychology but also provides psychological references for opera performance practice, thereby enhancing the expressiveness and appeal of opera art.

Keywords: Music psychology; Vocal performance; Emotional expression; Musical expression

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1. Introduction

Music psychology is a science that applies psychological methods and theories to study the interrelationships between music and various psychological phenomena in humans, while also exploring their underlying principles^[1]. Its scope is wide-ranging, encompassing music perception, cognition, emotional response, creative psychology, performance psychology, and the psychology of musical appreciation^[1]. The music psychology emphasizes the interaction between music and human psychology. Music can evoke emotions and influence psychological states, which in turn shape perception and understanding of music^[2]. In 1883, the British music psychologist Percival Buckley published *The Psychology of Musicians*, a seminal work that drew upon psychology, physiology, physics, genetics, anthropology, and aesthetics. Employing experimental psychological methods, Buckley explored

auditory perception, memory, musical imagination, skill development, and the psychological states associated with performance. His research suggested that mental states directly influence the effectiveness of musical performance^[3].

This article takes the musical expression of Lin Huiyin, a character in the Chinese chamber music “Farewell to Cambridge”, as the research object, with Lin Huiyin’s aria “A Peach Blossom” as the case study. The author analyzes the musical expression characteristics of the aria “A Peach Blossom” from the perspective of music psychology. Using music psychology as the theoretical framework, the author interprets the emotional expression and psychological connotation behind the performance from the perspectives of melodic progression, rhythmic variation, and emotional expression, providing psychological references for opera performance practice, thereby enhancing the expressiveness and appeal of opera art.

2. Statement of problem

Applying the principles of music psychology to enhance artistic expression in opera singing presents a valuable research opportunity. This study takes the aria of Lin Huiyin from the Chinese chamber opera Farewell to Cambridge as a case study to explore the application and significance of music psychology in vocal performance.

The research is guided by the following questions:

- 1) In what specific ways are the principles of music psychology reflected in the singing techniques and performance outcomes of A Peach Blossom of Lin Huiyin in Farewell to Cambridge?
- 2) How can psychological knowledge be applied to enhance artistic expression and overall effectiveness in vocal performance, with particular reference to Lin Huiyin’s interpretation of Farewell to Cambridge?

3. Synopsis of the opera “Farewell to Cambridge”

The chamber opera “Farewell to Cambridge” is widely recognized as China’s first chamber opera, written by Chen Wei and composed by Zhou Xueshi. The title of the opera, “Farewell to Cambridge”, is derived from a poem of the same name by the renowned Chinese poet Xu Zhimo. The opera primarily tells the love story of Lin Huiyin, a famous Chinese female architect, depicting the emotional bonds and friendship among a group of patriotic youths during China’s turbulent period. The opera premiered at the Beijing People’s Art Theatre on December 1, 2001, with Lei Jia, a renowned Chinese singer, portraying Lin Huiyin. In his music review article “Let Poetic Sentiment and Love Fluctuate in Polyphony: Zhou Xueshi and His Little Theater Opera ‘Farewell to Cambridge’”, Qian Renping mentioned: “On December 5, 2001, the first report about the opera published in the 44th issue of Music Weekly pointed out that ‘Farewell to Cambridge’ was indeed the first chamber opera performed on the domestic stage”^[4]. Since its premiere, the opera has been deeply loved by Chinese audiences, with the character of Lin Huiyin particularly gaining popularity. Lin Huiyin’s aria “A Peach Blossom” has been used as a teaching piece by vocal teachers in many colleges and universities. Reflecting on the music composition process, Qian Renping noted, “On December 5, 2001, the first report about the play published in the 44th issue of Music Weekly stated that Farewell to Cambridge was indeed the first chamber opera performed on the domestic stage”^[4].

Professor Peng Zhimin from Wuhan Conservatory of Music commented on the opera in his paper Exploring, Choosing, and Thinking: A Brief Discussion on the Music Creation of the Chamber Opera Farewell to Cambridge^[5]. The intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s in China seemed to possess broad and profound inner sentiment and a transcendent personality charm. They possess knowledge and artistic talent from both Chinese and Western cultures, setting a high-quality example for modern people. They are romantic and elegant, cherish

friendship, and advocate love. These examples and aspirations are real, and their pursuit of them has gained widespread recognition and high universality.”

The opera “Farewell to Cambridge” is a chamber music. Compared to grand opera, chamber opera features fewer actors, a smaller stage, simpler stage design, and no distance between the audience and the actors. Regarding chamber opera, Professor Peng Zhimin from Wuhan Conservatory of Music stated in his paper Exploring, Choosing, and Thinking: A Brief Discussion on the Music Creation of the Chamber Opera Farewell to Cambridge that chamber opera is an opera style that emerged in the first half of the 20th century^[5]. Compared with traditional grand opera, chamber opera is relatively small and flexible in scale and performance style^[5].

4. The application of music psychology in the musical expression of the aria “A Peach Blossom”

The lyrics of A Peach Blossom are taken from Lin Huiyin’s poem of the same name and set to music by composer Zhou Xueshi. The aria appears in the fifth act of the opera. In this scene, Lin Huiyin, having contracted pneumonia from overwork, is recuperating in Xiangshan, Beijing, when Xu Zhimo comes to visit. Reflecting on her time at Cambridge, Lin Huiyin channels her emotions into the poem, which is expressed on stage through her passionate singing, conveying both her personal sentiment and artistic elegance.

The first half of the poem emphasizes the static beauty of peach blossoms, while the second half highlights their dynamic beauty, metaphorically portraying the shy posture of a young girl. The lyrics capture her inner emotions through expressions such as “the crimson of a tree”, “the delicate beauty of dew”, and “the longing of life.”

The song A Peach Blossom follows a two-part structure, divided into sections A and B. Section A is recitative, and section B is an aria.

From the perspective of music psychology, the musical expression of the character Lin Huiyin in the opera Farewell to Cambridge can be analyzed along four dimensions: Timbre and Personality Attribution, Melodic Emotional Induction, Text Setting and Schemata Activation, and Performance and Empathy Pathways. The following is a detailed analysis of the first dimension:

4.1. Text setting and schemata activation

In Lin Huiyin’s singing, the repetitive structure of the lyrics strengthens the audience’s memory. For example, the song A Peach Blossom is based on Lin Huiyin’s own poem of the same name, which many viewers are familiar with before watching the opera Farewell to Cambridge. When performed, the song evokes the audience’s prior memories of the poem, enhancing emotional engagement. Employ the psychological principle of auditory memory rehearsal to reinforce understanding of the character. American psychologist Ulric Neisser explains: “Echoic memory rehearsal refers to the process of maintaining or transferring auditory information in echoic memory to higher-level memory systems (such as working memory or long-term memory) through active repetition. Its core function is to maintain auditory information, support working memory, promote understanding and learning, and enhance long-term memory”^[6].

4.2. Melodic emotional induction

Linear melody and reduced cognitive load: The first line of the song goes, “桃花 (Tao Hua), 桃花 (Tao Hua), 那一树的嫣红, 像是春说的一句话 (Na Yi Shu De Yan Hong, Xiang Shi Chun Shuo De Yi Ju Hua)” (**Figure 1**). When Le Jia sings it, her voice is loud and steady, carrying a narrative quality of sharing beautiful scenery with friends,

without excessive emotional embellishment. In this section, the melody and pitch gradually progress upwards.



Figure 1. The A section of “A Peach Blossom” (13th bar–16th bar)

Note: The meaning of the lyrics: Peach blossoms, ah peach blossoms, that tree of rosy red is like a sentence spoken by spring

In the 18th measure, “朵朵露凝的娇艳，是一些玲珑的字眼 (Duo Duo Lu Ning De JjiaoYan, Shi Yi Xie Lling Long De Zi Yan)” (**Figure 2**), the accompaniment music begins to fluctuate, enriching Lin Huiyin’s musical portrayal. Le Jia adopts an open yet controllable tone, vividly expressing the emotional fluctuations of the character through octave jumps, elevating the atmosphere to a new climax. There is a brief pause in this phrase, but the continuity and smoothness of her breathing are carefully maintained. The melody line in this section is simple, and the emotional expression is direct. David Huron, a musicologist and psychologist at Ohio State University, notes in his 2006 book *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* that “listeners predict stepwise melodies more accurately, resulting in a pleasurable ‘prediction effect’ and reduced cognitive stress”^[7]. This progressive melodic direction makes the musical expression of Lin Huiyin’s character more easily accepted by the audience.



Figure 2. The A section of “A Peach Blossom” (17th bar–20th bar)

Note: The meaning of the lyrics: Each petal of dew-kissed beauty is a delicate word

Creating “Expectation—Solution” through rubato: Music’s emotional power often arises not merely from sounds themselves but from the interplay between expectation and reality. David Huron emphasizes: “It is in the violation, fulfillment, or deferral of expectations that music gains its affective potency”^[7]. In the song *A Peach Blossom*, in the singing of the B section, Lei Jia employed fast inhalation and slow, restrained exhalation to achieve precise breath control. For instance, the opening word “看 (Kan)” required a stronger breath to support the changes in intensity, ensuring clarity and projection. In contrast, the final line, “一瞥、一瞥、一瞥多情的痕迹 (Yi Pie Yi Pie Yi Pie Duo Qing De Hen Ji)” (**Figure 3**), demanded a much softer vocal delivery, which is technically more challenging to master. Lei Jia handled this transition with remarkable finesse, maintaining both stability and expressiveness. Her nuanced control not only conveyed the delicate emotions of Lin Huiyin but also elevated the overall dramatic impact of the aria, allowing the character’s inner world to resonate profoundly with the audience.



Figure 3. The B section of “A Peach Blossom” (27th bar–33rd bar)

Note: The meaning of the lyrics: Look, that quiver in the breeze, she left a faint trace on the thin lips of March, a glimpse of love. Look, that quiver in the wind, she left a faint trace on the thin lips of March, a glimpse, a glimpse, a glimpse of love

4.3. Timbre and personality attribution

Advantages of high-frequency overtones: In the opera “Farewell to Cambridge”, Lin Huiyin is portrayed by Lei Jia, a renowned Chinese soprano. According to a Baidu search, Lei Jia is hailed as a leading figure in Chinese national vocal music, with a bright and clear tone. In a 2007 paper Research on the Characteristics of Singer Resonance Peaks in Bel Canto and Ethnic Singing Techniques, Chinese vocal educator Yu Shanying noted that “singer resonance peaks” are commonly present in the voices of excellent ethnic singing technique performers^[8]. For sopranos, the resonance peak occurs around 2,900 Hz, while the bass intensity is approximately 500 Hz. The overall sound intensity reaches about 78 dB, producing a tone that is clear, round, pure, and beautiful. This bright timbre naturally triggers pleasurable associations in the audience. As Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda point out in Handbook of Music and Emotion, “bright, resonant tones are more likely to trigger feelings of happiness or excitement”^[9].

4.4. Performance and empathy pathways

The opera Farewell to Cambridge is a chamber opera, performed in a small venue with closely connected viewing areas. In an intimate setting, spectators can clearly perceive the subtle facial expressions and body language of the singers during performance. Yang Chennan of the Yunnan Academy of Arts notes in his paper A Brief Analysis of the Relationship between Watching and Performing in Chamber Operas that the “homogenization” of the viewing area in small theaters brings the audience closer to the performers, enhancing direct communication, increasing intimacy, and facilitating mutual influence between actors and audience^[10]. This proximity makes it easier for viewers to develop emotional empathy for the characters in the drama.

5. Conclusion

Opera is a comprehensive art form that demands not only excellent vocal skills from performers but also a

profound understanding of the inner world of characters to convey rich emotions. The research reveals that musical features are closely related to character psychology and audience aesthetic experience. Music psychology is a relatively new yet highly valuable discipline. Active study of this field helps address many challenges encountered in learning vocal techniques and in musical performance, thereby making both learning and practice more efficient while fostering healthy habits of vocal study and musical thinking. Music psychology provides scientific theoretical guidance for opera interpretation. By applying the principles and methods of music psychology, singers can better understand the psychological state of characters, grasp the correspondence between music and emotion, and thus express the emotions of characters more accurately during performance. Furthermore, music psychology also aids singers in analyzing the aesthetic psychology of the audience, adjusting their performance style according to the audience's needs and expectations, and enhancing the relevance and appeal of their performance.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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