

Study on the Imitative Polyphony in the Gaoqiang Music of Sichuan Opera*

Chenghong Wang

Mianyang Teachers' College
Mianyang, China 621000

Abstract—Gaoqiang is the most representative tune among the arts of five tunes, namely kun, gao, hu, tan and deng in Sichuan Opera. It takes the form of "acapella", and features one singing with others taking up the refrain, accompanied by gong and drum without using any orchestral instruments. In the gaoqiang music of Sichuan Opera, there are a lot of simple and fresh imitative polyphonies with unique flavor. This paper, after analyzing and studying the gaoqiang music in traditional Sichuan Opera, sorts out and summarizes the phenomenon of imitative polyphony.

Keywords—Sichuan Opera; music in Sichuan Opera; gaoqiang; polyphony; imitative polyphony

I. INTRODUCTION

Sichuan opera is a bright pearl in Chinese opera art and a typical representative of Ba-Shu civilization. "Embracing and learning from others, she has absorbed the nutrition of the major sound cavity systems of operas across the country, integrates with the local language, sound and rhyme and music of Sichuan, and evolved into a large-scale local opera art with diverse forms, rich Qupai, various plays and operas, precise structure and different styles, which integrates five kinds of tune arts: gaoqiang opera, kunqiang opera, huqin opera, tanxi opera and dengxi opera."¹

The gaoqiang of Sichuan Opera originated in "Yiyang Opera" of Jiangxi and were introduced to Sichuan in the Ming Dynasty. In the "Night Talk of Yucun" by Li Diaoyuan, an opera theorist and talent of Shu (Sichuan) in Qing Dynasty, it is recorded, "the 'Yiqiang Opera (弋腔)' stemmed from Yiyang, which is gaoqiang opera today, and all sung in the southern opera are southern opera. It is also called 'yangqiang opera(秧腔)', in which 'yang (秧)' is a sound transformed from 'yi (弋)' through phonetic alternation; it is called 'Jingqiang opera' in Beijing, 'Gaoqiang opera' in Guangzhou and 'qingxi' in the region of Hubei, Hunan and

Sichuan. With no music scores, its tunes have been being adapted to local features; one sings and others take up the refrain; and it can also be divided into rapid beat and slow beat."² After being spread to Sichuan, the Yiqiang opera has been influenced by the local language, customs and folk music in the development process of hundreds of years, constantly honing, polishing and creating on the stage by artists in the past dynasties, finally forming a unique and distinctive style of Sichuan gaoqiang.

Accompanied by gong and drum, it takes the form of "acapella", in which one sings and others take up the refrain, without using any orchestral instruments. It is the most characteristic, the most developed and the most representative of the five vocal cavity arts of Sichuan Opera: kun, gao, hu, tan and deng.

Polyphony is a kind of multi-part music form formed by vertical combination of relatively independent lines according to special logic rules on the basis of lateral thinking³. According to texture characteristics, it can be divided into three types: contrastive polyphony, imitative polyphony and heterophonic polyphony. In gaoqiang music of Sichuan Opera, there are intriguing and unique imitative polyphony between vocal music and accompany, vocal accompaniment and vocal music and between vocal accompaniment and vocal music. The study of these polyphonic phenomena will help to understand the technical principles of delicate polyphonies in Chinese traditional music, enrich the Chinese traditional polyphonic music theory, and provide some contrast and reference for the national music, opera music and the contemporary music creation with Chinese spirit in the new era.

II. IMITATIVE POLYPHONY IN GAOQIANG MUSIC IN SICHUAN OPERA

Imitative polyphony mainly refers to the combination of repeated main melody (or theme) in different parts in a certain order. The imitative polyphony is divided into imitation of fixed form and imitation of variable form according to the change scope of the beginning part and the

*Fund: This paper is the phased result of General Project in Humanities and Social Sciences Research of the Education Department of Sichuan Province — Research on Creation, Teaching and Performance of Piano Music Based on Local Cultural Inheritance (Project No.:18SB0254) and the project for teaching reform of Mianyang Teachers' College — Research on the Application of Local Traditional Music (Sichuan Opera) in Piano Lessons (Project No.: Mnu-JY18085).

¹ Wang Chenghong. Study on Comparative Polyphony in Gaoqiang Music in Sichuan Opera. Trans-loaded from "Sichuan Drama", Issue 5, page 53, 2015. (in Chinese)

² Zhong Shanxiang. "On Music in Sichuan Opera". Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1st edition, p.2, December 1989. (in Chinese)

³ Yu Suxian. Chinese Traditional Polyphonic Music. People's Music Publishing House, page 2, December 2006. (in Chinese)

imitation part. The imitation of fixed form refers to the imitation of the direction, interval relation and rhythm form of the melody of the beginning part without any change. The imitation of variable form refers to the imitation of the beginning part of the voice, changing the form of two (or several) parts in the structure of imitation according to a certain principle. The imitative polyphony features an integration of "centrality of horizontal material, difference of vertical combination and echo of oblique relation"⁴. The highly contrasting and unified material relationship and effective polyphonic effect are widely used by composers in all kinds of music works.

The forms of imitative polyphony in the gaoqiang music in Sichuan Opera are flexible and diverse. In terms of the composition of the imitation, although the gaoqiang music in Sichuan Opera is nontechnical and inornate compared with the technical and elaborate western polyphony, the thinking foundation and technical principle between them are common. Compared with the technology of western imitative polyphony which has been standardized and trained and features rational logical thinking, the techniques and phenomena of imitative polyphony created and presented by the musicians and artists of Sichuan Opera, which are full of folk life, are less restricted by the technical rules, but show great flexibility and potential vitality. The following are examples of imitative polyphony in the gaoqiang music of Sichuan Opera.

A. The Imitative Polyphony Between Vocal Music and Accompaniment

Setting vocal accompaniment, percussion music (gong and drum) and singing as one, the gaoqiang in Sichuan Opera features "one singing with others taking up the refrain, accompanied by gong and drum without using any orchestral instruments. Percussion music plays an important role in Sichuan Opera performance. In this industry, sayings like "Sichuan Opera performance relies 30% on singing and 70% on percussion" and "a performance is half gong and drum and half drama" are used to summarize its significance. "The performance of gong and drum in Sichuan Opera is very rich. It can not only show the weather conditions of wind, cloud and thunder, but also convey the personal emotions of joy, anger, sadness and happiness by singing music."⁵ In the traditional drama of gaoqiang opera 'Red Plum Affair' (as can be seen in "Fig. 1"), as the heroine Li Huiniang incurred a fatal disaster for her praise for a young scholar, 'what a beautiful boy' and became a ferocious ghost then, in the chapter of 'Defence of a Ghost' on the occasion of revenge, the sonorous and powerful singing in the qu named 'Four Pieces of Jade' expresses the knots in Huiniang's heart and the percussion music carries on her grief and renders it.



Fig. 1. Example of music score 01.

In the above example, the upper part shows the rhythm of the singing and the lower part shows the score of percussion music in Sichuan Opera. In the second beat of the fourth bar, the percussion music of Sichuan Opera imitates the rhythm of some parts of the singing part in two beats, and then continues to develop and form a contrast with the singing. The use of rhythm imitation in the example renders Li Huiniang's grief mood and enhances the vitality of music.

In the gaoqiang music of Sichuan Opera, sometimes there can be imitation of accompaniment by singing, which usually appears in the beginning of an aria. At the beginning of the aria "Death Comes to All Men" (as can be seen in "Fig. 2") at the end of the curtain scene "Ban Zhao", the singing and accompaniment form the unisonous imitation. The band first play the prelude of four bars, followed by a simple imitation of the singing style, and then play freely after two bars. Here, the accompaniment of the first four bars prompts the style and speed of the music, which plays a guiding role in the entrance of the singing voice. The imitation of the singing voice on the accompaniment also saves music materials and strengthens the inherent unity of music.



Fig. 2. Example of music score 02.

B. The Imitative Polyphony Between Vocal Accompaniments

Vocal accompaniments are an important part and characteristic of gaoqiang music in Sichuan Opera. It can not only set the tone and enhance the atmosphere of music, but also express the content of lines independently, such as introducing the objective environment, expressing the inner world of characters and so on. With the development of the art of Sichuan Opera, the forms of vocal accompaniment have also become rich and diverse. There is not only the traditional echoing style, but also multiple forms such as the repetitive style, the by-turn style and the joint style, etc. The phenomenon of imitative polyphony also exists between different vocal accompaniments.

⁴ Zhang yunxuan. Analysis of Polyphonic Music. Shanghai Music Publishing House, page 54, 2003. (in Chinese)

⁵ Wang Chenghong. Study on Comparative Polyphony in Gaoqiang Music in Sichuan Opera. Translated from "Sichuan Drama", Issue 5, page 54, 2015. (in Chinese)



Fig. 3. Example of music score 03.

The above example is excerpted from "Rosy Clouds" (as can be seen in "Fig. 3"), a gaoqiang opera in Sichuan Opera. The melody in the example has the characteristics of the qu named "Shua Haier". The first sentence is the upper female part, and the second sentence is the lower male part. The imitation time span of the two parts is one bar apart, and the interval degree is the same. The male basso makes the simple fixed imitation to the female treble, in order to represent joy of being born again. As far as the function of the vocal accompaniment here is concerned, it belongs to the expression of inner emotions. After imitating the four bars of the female part, the male part develops freely and forms a contrastive polyphony with the female part. They sing in the same degree at two parts in the antepenultimate bar and end simultaneously on the tonic.

There are examples of simple imitation between male and female vocal accompaniments in the traditional gaoqiang drama of Sichuan Opera "Xiu Ru Ji". On his road to the Capital for the imperial examinations, Zheng Yuanhe, a child from an official family came across the geisha named Li Yxian. They cast amorous glances at each other and pledge to marry without parental consent and took a piece of embroidered pad as a love token. The road of their love was not smooth, but they got married after many hardships. The following example is an excerpt from this play (as can be seen in "Fig. 4"), performed by male and female vocal accompaniments. The two parts set up in an interval of a bar in the same degree and develop freely after four bars and end together. Singing the imitative polyphony, the male and female vocal accompaniments eulogize the undying love between Zheng Yuanhe and Li Yaxin's.



Fig. 4. Example of music score 04.

C. The Imitative Polyphony Between Vocal Accompaniment and Vocal music

In the gaoqiang music of Sichuan Opera, there are countless imitative polyphony formed by the vocal accompaniment and vocal music. There is Canon imitation as well as simple imitation. In the curtain play "Xiu Ru Ji" of gaoqiang drama of Sichuan Opera, when Li Yaxian heard Zheng Yuanhe fainted after being beaten by his father, was thrown out of the house and disappeared on the street, she

was very sad and sang the touching aria "When the Day Comes When We Are Out of Trouble" in her boudoir.



Fig. 5. Example of music score 05.

The name of this aria is "A Spray of Flowers"(as can be seen in "Fig. 5"), in which Li Yaxian pours out her missing feelings for Zheng Yuanhe in the lyrical second-rate board style. The initiating sentence is sung by Li Yaxian and the responding sentence is sung by the female vocal accompaniment. The accompaniment part makes a Canon imitation of the singing of the heroine in the same degree with the time distance of a bar. When two parts are combined, interval relation is in concord and one rhythm rises as another falls. The use of imitation technology makes the musical emotion goes forward layer by layer continuously. The responsory lasting for thirteen bars rendered the stage atmosphere to a great deal, pushing the fervent emotion of Li Yaxian for Zheng Yuanhe to the climax.

D. The Imitative Polyphony Between Different Parts of the Vocal Music

The imitative polyphony between different parts of the vocal music is also very common. It is often used to account for the plot and depict the inner activities of the characters. The "Yuan Yang Pu" is a famous large-scale comedy in Sichuan Opera. It tells the funny story of four young men and women who met their loved one when they offered incense to Buddha in a temple fair but sent their love tokens to the wrong person in a hurry. In the sixth scene of the whole play, "the Opportune Match", the leading role Sun Run cross-dressed himself and met Liu Huiniang in her boudoir. In the communication, they got to know the truth that they sent the tokens to the wrong person. And the answer to the riddle is revealed by the aria "Mistaken Identity in hurry" (as can be seen in "Fig. 6") by using the technique of imitative polyphony. In the example, the imitation time distance of two parts is two bars, and the degree of imitation is octave. At this time, the use of imitative polyphony shortens the time for plot explanation, so that the structure is compact and a good artistic effect is produced.



Fig. 6. Example of music score 06.

The traditional drama "The Romance of a Hairpin" in Sichuan Opera is also a story of bizarre twists and turns. Childhood sweethearts Wang Shipeng and Qian Yulian became man and wife with a Hairpin as the token but were separated apart because of the hindrance of an influential official, and they finally got back to each other with the help of Qian Zai. The following example is from the scene of "Farewell"(as can be seen in "Fig. 7"). In this example, there is an antiphonal singing of Qian Liuxing, Wang Shiming, the mother of Wang and Qian Yulian in the scene. And the melody of "Jiang Tou Gui" is used mainly in this scene. The melody of "Jiang Tou Gui" is long and novel because of its deviation of seven tones, which is suitable for the scene of parting and pain. In the example, the voices of Qian Liuxing, Wang Shiming, the mother of Wang and Qian Yulian are from low to high respectively. Although the antiphonal singing of the four is not a strict four-part Canon, it contains the basic relationship of four-part imitation, and there is a double-part Canon thinking in it. In the singing, Wang Shipeng makes a varied octave imitation of Qian Liuxing, and Qian Yulian makes an upper fourth-degree imitation of the mother of Wang. The interval of the two is both 4 bars. The singing of four people expresses the feelings of separation of loved ones incisively and vividly.



Fig. 7. Example of music score 07.

III. CONCLUSION

Through the above analysis, it is not difficult to find that there are a lot of imitative polyphonies with unique flavor in the gaoqiang music of Sichuan Opera. Such thought of imitating polyphony exists not just between vocal music and accompaniment, but also between vocal accompaniments, between vocal accompaniment and vocal music and between different parts of vocal music. Through the analysis above it can be seen that there is the commonality of thinking foundation, and technical principle as well as the difference of application of technology between the imitative polyphony in gaoqiang music of Sichuan Opera and that of Western countries. In contrast with the technology of western imitative polyphony which has been standardized and trained and features rational logical thinking, the techniques and phenomena of imitative polyphony created and presented by the musicians and artists of Sichuan Opera, which are full of folk life, are less restricted by the technical rules, but show great flexibility and potential vitality. The application of the vivid and simple imitative polyphony in gaoqiang music plays an active role in depicting the singing tunes, rendering the atmosphere and promoting the plot and developing the conflicts in the play. It not only strengthens the inherent unity of music and makes the chorus music coherent and dynamic, but also enhances the artistic

expression of Sichuan Opera and expands the performance range of music, thus receiving good artistic effects. The simple and vivid imitative polyphony in the gaoqiang music in Sichuan Opera deserves study, analysis and research, and inheritance and development of related practitioners and researchers in the current music creation.

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