



The Direction of Chinese Contemporary Music Composition Based on the Vision of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

Guodong Yang(✉)

Library at Xi'an Conservatory of Music, No. 108, Mid Chang'an Road, Yanta District, Xi'an,
China

86245623@qq.com

Abstract. The grand vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind proposed by President Xi Jinping is inspired by his concern over the future development of all human civilizations. The concept has its roots in Chinese people's pursuit of harmony and the traditional doctrine of the unity of man and nature. As an inseparable part of traditional Chinese culture, Chinese people's perception of harmony is closely intertwined with Chinese music. Entering a new era, Chinese musicians should be clear about what music they should compose to help build a community with a shared future for mankind.

Keywords: A community with a shared future for mankind · the perception of harmony · the unity of man and nature

1 Introduction

In the great cause of building a community with a shared future for mankind, music culture should play the role of building a bridge of communication and understanding. Chinese musicians should correctly deal with and use the excellent musical cultural heritage and experience of “ancient, modern, middle and foreign”, and strive to create the “music of Great Harmony” with Chinese charm.

2 The Connection Between Music and the Vision of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

On January 18, 2017, at the high-level conference “Jointly Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind” held at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech titled “Working Together to Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind”, stating that “we should build an open and inclusive world through exchanges and mutual learning” and that “we should make exchanges among civilizations a source of inspirations for advancing human society and

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a bond that keeps the world in peace” [1]. From the speech, it can be seen that exchanges between civilizations are an important source of momentum for building a community with a shared future for mankind. Cultural exchanges can not only help people from different social and cultural backgrounds know each other better but create new cultural branches and boost economic growth. As one of the most important parts of human civilization, music should play an active role in the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

As an academic studying the history of music, I used to wonder how music can contribute to the progress of human civilization. Music has a history of more than a thousand years in both China and western countries. What I wanted to find out was the connection between Chinese and Western music behind their morphological differences. Now I believe that among the various forms of art, music can be most easily appreciated and is thus the most effective tool in the cultural exchanges based on the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind. There are two main reasons for this. First, music is a cultural phenomenon common to all civilizations as each nation has its own styles of music. Second, music serves a universal aesthetic function as it provides people speaking different languages with the same sensory experience. Thus music can be seen as a bridge for communication.

For Western philosophers in ancient times, music is the key to the door of the universe. Pythagoras, the ancient Greek philosopher, believed that music can not only represent the orderly system of the universe but exert an effect on it. This is where the miracle-working musicians in western mythology come from. While exploring the relationship between music and the universe, Pythagoras discovered the law of musical harmony (the fourth, the fifth, and the octaves), which contributed greatly to the development of ancient Western music. Pythagoras’ view was echoed by philosophers including Plato. Plato believed that some modes and pitches in music are linked with specific planets, and when the planets move, they produce “celestial music” that cannot be heard by human beings. In *The Republic*, Plato conveyed the wonders of “celestial music” to his readers through poetry. Paul Henry Lang, a renowned contemporary American musicologist, questioned himself when he explored the significance of music history: What does music history mean for human history? [2] The ultimate focus of music history is “humanity”. Later, Lang said, “It (music) is not just a way for human beings to express themselves—it represents human beings. Music provides a picture of the universal human ideal.” (Paul Henry Lang, *Musicology and Musical Performance*, 2017:39) Lang’s incisive remarks reveal Western scholars’ profound understanding of the relationship between music and the humanities.

Comments on the relationship between music and the universe, as well as between nature and human beings abound in traditional Chinese writings with some remarks echoing the ideas of Western musical philosophy. Chinese people’s understanding of “concord” and “harmony”, for example, comes from musical activities. *The Book of History—The Canon of Yao*, a historical classic written in the Warring States period, records what Emperor Yao said when he appointed Kui as the official in charge of music in the court: “We write poems to convey our feelings, and we make songs to sing our feelings out. The songs we sing should be consistent with our feelings, and the music we make should follow the law of musical harmony. The eight types of instruments should

be put in the right order and work harmoniously together. Only this way the music they produce can be pleasant to both Gods and humans.” Emperor Yao’s view on music is thus the earliest source of the notions of “concord” and “harmony” in traditional Chinese culture [3]. *Discourses of the States—the Record of Zhou (the second volume)*, also a historical classic written in the Warring State period, further explores the relationship between music and the governance of a country. Zhoujiu Ling, a court musician serving Emperor Jing of the Zhou Dynasty, said that “governing a country resembles playing music. Music should create a sense of harmony, and harmony requires balance. The notes serve to make a harmonious tune, and the modes serve to balance the pitches... Harmony is achieved when there isn’t discordant note in a piece of music, and balance is achieved when different pitches complement each other... Harmonious and balanced music can increase the wealth of a country” [4]. Zhoujiu Ling’s words not only reveal that the notions of “harmony” and “balance” have their roots in music but restate the connection between music and politics—that is, when the notes and musical instruments are harmoniously organized, the right music can be produced. Then the country will be wealthy, the people will be united, and the gods will be worshipped. Almost all of the most important philosophical schools in the pre-Qin period have left insightful remarks on music. Confucianism and Taoism are the best representatives. For Confucius, music is one of the “six arts” that he had incorporated into the educational system of the Zhou Dynasty. Confucius’ ideas on musical aesthetics include “music is the most effective tool to change the social climate and old customs”, “music of the Zheng State should be forbidden as one should stay away from sneaky guys”, and “a good work of art should be good in both form and content just as a gentleman should have both strong moral character and artistic literacy”. These ideas of Confucius left a far-reaching impact on people’s perception of music in the following dynasties. The Taoist view on music is different from that of Confucius. Laozi and Zhuangzi put forward the notion of “heavenly music” and the idea that “the greatest music cannot be heard”. They believed that the most beautiful music is the voice of nature rather than man-made auditory works. The Taoist idea of “admiring the natural” and “the unity of emotions and temperament” also influenced Chinese people’s perception of music.

From the above-mentioned examples, it can be seen that as two distinctive parties in world politics, China, representing Asian civilization, and European and American countries, representing Western civilization, have much in common in musical philosophy and aesthetics. People’s understanding of harmony comes from music in both Asian and Western civilizations; eastern and western people have similar views on the role music plays in a country’s governance, social economy, education, and the humanities. In the history of human civilization, music is viewed as an inseparable part of a nation’s cultural heritage in both Asian and Western countries. The above-mentioned historical facts may explain why NASA attached the “Golden Record” which contained music from multiple countries and at different times (including the Chinese Guqin song *The Flowing Water*) to Voyager when it launched the space probe in 1977. Here the music is seen as a language with which human beings can communicate with alien beings. Chinese and western people’s similar conceptions of music provide indispensable common ground between the two civilizations which will facilitate cultural exchanges in the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. In a new era that features

integrated development of the global economy and media technology, taking music as a tool for communication to facilitate the building of a community with a shared future for mankind is something worth serious consideration. As an emerging socialist country, China can not only export its brilliant musical culture to help with its diplomacy and enables foreigners to know better about China but introduce the musical culture of other countries into China to advance its cultural industry and broaden the horizon of Chinese musicians. More importantly, musical exchanges with China playing the main role can serve as a platform for countries to exhibit their musical cultures to the world. This way people around the world can know better about the significance of building a community with a shared future for mankind in a joyful and harmonious cultural atmosphere.

3 The Direction of Chinese Contemporary Music Composition Based on the Vision of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

In the joint efforts to build a community with a shared future for mankind, contemporary Chinese musicians should give full play to the role of music as a bridge for cultural exchanges by composing the right music and facilitating its dissemination. Musicians should not only have strong cultural confidence and follow the idea of music composition with traditional Chinese culture as its core but learn actively from the achievements of other cultures and make China's voice heard and appreciated by people around the world.

At the Symposium on Literature and Art in 2014, President Xi Jinping pointed out that "the fine traditional Chinese culture sustains Chinese people spiritually. It is an important source of the core socialist values and enables us to gain a firm foothold amid the ever-changing world culture. Thus, it is necessary to pass down and promote the fine traditional Chinese culture and Chinese aesthetics while taking into consideration the social condition of the new era" ("President Xi Jinping's Speech at the Symposium on Literature and Art (full text)" on Xinhuanet, January 15, 2014). The speech reflects President Xi Jinping's profound insights into the development of Chinese literature and art in the past century and communicates two main ideas: First, we should follow the spirit of the fine traditional Chinese culture as it is our national lifeline. Second, we should promote the aesthetics with distinctive Chinese features while keeping up with the social progress of the new era.

The development of Chinese music has been a tortuous journey since the early modern period. In 1840, the rumbling cannons of the Western colonists blasted open the gate of the weak and corrupt Qing Dynasty. While selling opium and forcing China to sign unequal treaties, the colonists brought to China Western musical cultures which exerted a subversive effect on China's musical tradition that had formed early in the pre-Qin period. From the beginning of the twentieth century to the May Fourth period, under the influence of the Westernization Movement and the New Culture Movement, some pioneering musicians who had returned from abroad started modernizing Chinese music by embracing Western musical cultures. Academic musicians including Xingong Shen, Shutong Li, Zhixin Zeng, Youmei Xiao, Zi Huang, Zhu Qing, and Xiaolin Tan started to compose music using Western techniques and produced a large number of modern musical works which represent an important landmark in the history of Chinese music.

Amid the efforts for modernization, some national masters of music including Jinwen Zheng and Lu Wang carried on the tradition of ancient Chinese music. They tasked themselves with passing down and promoting the quintessence of Chinese culture and made a collection of ancient Chinese musical works. Musicians including Tianhua Liu, Yinliu Yang, and Anhe Cao, however, tried to explore the possibility of fusing Chinese and Western musical cultures and carried out wild experimentation with Chinese music. For a time, there were huge divisions among Chinese musicians over where Chinese music should go, and views including full westernization, preserving the quintessence of Chinese culture, and reforming the traditional Chinese music coexisted in China's music world.

After the 1940s, a group of composers, music theorists, and performance artists who were determined to serve the country with music gathered together under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. By drawing inspiration from ethnic and folk music and learning actively from the fine parts of Western musical cultures, the musicians invented new forms of music composition including New Yangko Opera and New Ethnic Opera and composed a series of musical works including *The Yellow River Cantata* and *The White-Haired Girl*. New Music, a new style of music composition with distinctive Chinese characteristics, has since been created. As the influence of Western cultures poured in following the reform and opening up, however, music composition in China started to drift away from China's cultural traditions as well as the life and aesthetic needs of Chinese people. Some social elites saw Western classical music as superior to traditional Chinese music and extolled vigorously the merits of Western music. Young adults regarded American rap music as fashionable and accepted indiscriminately the obscene language and thoughts in it. Some domestic media, driven by profits, kept introducing into China music programs from Western countries to gratify people's entertainment needs amid the prevailing "fast-food culture". As Chinese music was being corrupted, President Xi Jinping's speech at the Symposium on Literature and Art helped greatly to eliminate the problems that had plagued contemporary Chinese music for a long time and provided a direction for the future development of Chinese music [5].

To better promote traditional Chinese culture, Chinese musicians should incorporate into their works the spirit of China's splendid cultural tradition as well as the ideas and elements of traditional Chinese music. Xiaoyong Chen, a renowned contemporary Chinese composer, said, "Our great cultural tradition should be our treasure, not our burden. Chinese culture boasts a long history and has its special significance. As professional musicians, we shouldn't confine our efforts to entertaining the public. We should establish a musical culture that epitomizes the spirit of our age and improve the artistic literacy of our people." (Xiaoyong Chen, 2018: 26) Chen used to live in Germany for many years. Interaction with Western culture gives him a deep understanding of the development of Chinese music in the contemporary age. Chen's view represents the attitudes of overseas Chinese academic composers toward the music composition in contemporary China and serves as an important guide for music professionals [6].

4 Conclusion

To sum up, the vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind proposed by President Xi Jinping is a huge project to complete, and music, as an inseparable part

of human civilization, serves to facilitate cultural exchanges and mutual understanding between countries. Chinese musicians should combine President Xi Jinping's great goal of building a community with a shared future for mankind with the message he delivered in his speech at the Symposium on Literature and Art. For one thing, the spirit of the fine traditional Chinese culture should be conveyed in contemporary Chinese musical works to demonstrate the unique style of Chinese music; for another, Chinese musicians should adopt an inclusive attitude towards world music and learn actively from the musical cultures of other countries to have contemporary Chinese music and better understood and appreciated by the world.

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