



A comparative study of Chinese and American sight singing and ear training Materials

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Abstract. For music learners, the foundational courses of sight singing and ear training are essential. In China, these subjects were first introduced in 1937 when Chen Hong began teaching them at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (Liu, 2009)⁵. Since then, China has made significant advancements in this field and has published numerous textbooks, contributing to the growth of these subjects. However, there are still some limitations in the current Chinese teaching system.

Upon examining American solfeggio textbooks, it becomes evident that some of them can address the shortcomings in the existing Chinese curriculum.

Keywords: Sight singing and ear training, textbooks, musicianship, music theory pedagogy

1 Introduction

Sight singing and ear training is a compulsory course for every music student and is important for improving students' musical memory, musical sense and musical literacy. Since the founding of New China (1949-2022), China has published many high-quality learning materials for sight singing and ear training, and these play an important role in teaching (Wang, 2017).⁹ As the largest developed country in the world, the USA has advanced music education concepts, and there is no shortage of excellent teaching materials and teaching concepts that we should learn from. However, the author only found a few works in the relevant literature that examine American teaching materials for sight singing and ear training: “*An Analytical Study of Three American Sight Singing Textbooks*” by Wang Ge(2017)⁸; “*A Study of Three Ear Training Textbooks*” by Min Sisi(2018)⁶; “*Research on Ear Training—a technique for listening*” by Yang(2018)¹³; and a study by Xia (2014)¹² on the teaching materials used in Vicky’s “*A study on the teaching method of Vicky’s Advanced Sight-Singing and Ear Training materials*”. As such, there is a lot of potential for research in this field.

Although a large number of textbooks on sight singing and ear training have been published in China, and some extremely high-quality teaching materials are also available, there are still some problems with the materials on offer. For example, sight singing is based mainly on the treble clef or bass clef, with very little training in the C

clef, and sight singing exercises with multiple clef conversions are even more scarce (Wang, 2015).¹⁰ In addition, the types of materials for ear training are not diverse enough, and there is not enough interaction with other subjects (Lang, 2021).⁴ For instance, there are almost no questions on music correction in textbooks. In contrast, in the USA, there are many textbooks that focus on these areas. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold: fill the gaps in the development of domestic textbooks by learning from the strengths of American textbooks; and make the discipline of sight singing and ear training more applicable to whatever profession a music student has in mind.

2 The strengths and weaknesses of local Chinese teaching materials

In recent years, with the vigorous development of economy and culture, the discipline of sight singing and ear training in China has also made great progress, and a large number of excellent teaching materials have emerged. The author browsed through various types of textbooks and came to the following conclusions.

2.1 The strengths of Chinese teaching materials

1. A wide variety of teaching materials and a high degree of specialization

Sight singing and ear training textbooks are generally divided into two categories: sight singing and ear training. Within these two categories, they can be subdivided again. Sight singing textbooks can be divided into monophonic sight singing, polyphonic sight singing and sight singing with accompaniment, and ear training textbooks can be divided into the categories of melodic dictation, harmonic dictation and rhythmic dictation (Wang, 2017).⁹ These two major categories and the six subcategories appear in the published textbooks, the content of which is highly specialized. For example, the *Modern Music Sight Singing Course* by Zheng Min covers a variety of different types of modern music such as tonal expansion, atonalism and pantonality. It has a detailed introduction and many exercises in each section. The *Rhythm Training Course for Sight Singing* by Peng Shiduan is an easy-to-follow guide to each type of rhythm, ranging from simple dot and line to complex rhythm patterns (three-against-four, complex legato, etc.), and it has greatly improved the efficiency of teaching rhythm. There are also many excellent teaching materials that amplify certain points of knowledge, providing reference value for the development of the discipline of sight singing and ear training.

2. The textbook is written in a reasonable order, with obvious grading features

Textbook writing needs to follow certain principles: basic; holistic; developmental; contemporary; and scientific. These are well reflected in the textbooks on sight singing and ear training that are currently available in China. In these, the content is arranged from basic to detailed, from easy to difficult, in accordance with the students' cognitive development (Wang, 2016).¹¹ Because this is a compulsory course for all music students, students studying different majors have different needs in relation to it. In this context, graded tutorials have been created. Each textbook in a

series teaches a different area or divides the same area into different levels of difficulty, thereby meeting the needs of both students and instructors, and retaining the comprehensive and focused nature of the material. For example, the *Practical Ear Training Course* by Jiang Weimin and Zhou Wenyu, professors in the Department of Composition and Conducting at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, consists of six volumes focusing on training in melodic and harmonic listening. The difficulty rises with each volume, from intervals in Book 1 to high stacked chords in Book 6, and from traditional tonal modulations to tuneless modern music. The series covers different styles of music, making it suitable for students of all majors. For majors with relatively simple music theory requirements, such as singing majors, the melodies and common chords in traditional tonalities can be taken as the focus of teaching, whereas for composition and conducting majors, students need to master the ability to analyse modern music, which has a greater relevance for their studies. As can be seen, the development of graded textbooks greatly helps both students and teachers. They contain more content than a single book, which not only helps students to expand their horizons, but also allows them to focus on a particular training item with a greater number of exercises.

2.2 Shortcomings of Chinese teaching materials

1. Lack of sight singing training in the C clef and multiple clef conversions

Although a large number of quality textbooks have been published in China, their content is still not comprehensive enough. In studying these, the author found that China's sight singing textbooks rarely contain the C clef, and are dominated by the treble and bass clefs (Wang, 2015).¹⁰ For example, in the *Monophonic Sight Singing Course* by the Sight Singing and Ear Training Department at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, there are 1109 exercises; only the last chapter of the book (Chapter 9) contains exercises in the C clef, 35 in all, accounting for a mere 3% of all exercises in the book, and there are only 3 exercises focusing on conversion between different clefs. In the vast majority of sight reading textbooks, the C clef does not even figure, which can affect students' ability to read the complete score. For composition and conducting majors, students often need to create compositions or rehearse various instruments, so mastering the conversion of various clefs is an indispensable professional ability. As far as performance majors are concerned, students inevitably need to browse the master score when rehearsing with the orchestra to understand the characteristics and timbre of other instruments so that their relationship with the orchestra is constructive. Therefore, it is clear that this gap in the content of the sight singing and ear training course is not conducive to students' professional development. Thus, when writing future materials, sight singing and ear training teachers need to create or adapt more scores for learners to practise with.

2. Lack of diversification and no application of ear training theory to practice

Ear training examines the music student's pitch and rhythmic acuity, that is, the process of reducing a given melody or harmony to the actual acoustics, both within a certain time frame. However, this course is very challenging for students with a weak foundation. It is particularly difficult for them to identify pitch because their auditory

training is limited. In addition, because of their learning level, they are unable to recognize the applied value of this course and are more likely to consider it mechanical, because teachers only ask students to identify pitch and rhythm, but rarely analyse them in terms of other aspects (e.g. compositional motivation, melodic development), making it more difficult for students to clarify the internal dynamics of music (Chen & Liang, 2020).³ Most of the ear training exercises available in China require notation of exact pitch and rhythm, but rarely involve correction of the actual piece, in which a melody is provided and the listener is asked to correct the part that is wrong. In my opinion, this type of question better reflects the applied value of the discipline, although very few majors use practical activities in ear training to explain music. On the contrary, if students are able to master the elements of sight reading and ear training, giving them the ability to distinguish between different pitches and various rhythmic patterns, mistakes in an orchestral rehearsal can be corrected in a timely manner, reflecting the applied value of the discipline.

3 What can be learned from American teaching materials?

Compared with Chinese textbooks, American textbooks have a wider range of questions, with a wide variety of exercises including many C-score and multiscore conversion exercises.

1. Rich in questions, with a preference for applicability

The author had the privilege of browsing through *Ear Training* by Benward and Kolosick (2009)¹. Each chapter is divided into five parts: preparatory exercises; melody; harmony; rhythm; and listening to actual works. The content is extensive, the types of exercises are rich and the degree of synthesis is high (Min, 2018).⁶ For example, the authors give the rhythms of established melodies, labelling each rhythmic pattern with a serial number students require to work out the chord changes. As the difficulty of learning progresses, the authors ask students to identify the harmonic categories (choosing the type of chord extrapolation, labelling the termination), structures (single two-part, single three-part) or compositional techniques (modal progression, repetition, variation repetition) in the melody. These exercises are highly applied and require a thorough mastery of the various musical elements. In addition, American textbooks contain many questions involving correction, which are more applied and practical than simply dictating pitch and rhythm. Therefore, students can truly learn how to “understand” music.

2. C clef and multiple clef transposition exercises are abundant

Although there are very few exercises of this type in Chinese textbooks, American textbooks contain many. For example, *Music for Sight Singing* by Rogers and Ottman (2014)⁷ has a chapter devoted to this type of exercise and the thread continues throughout the subsequent chapters, allowing students to refresh their knowledge and reinforce their familiarity with the C clef. Another example is *Sight Singing Complete* by Carr and Benward (2014)², in which the C clef figures in the first chapter. In China, C clef training is often neglected by teachers, although this notation is especially

important for composition and conducting majors, because it provides a solid foundation for score recognition and general score reading.

3. Integrating expressions and tempo terms into instruction on rhythm

Chinese students tend to ignore expression and tempo terms on the score in their musical performances, which results in a lack of layering. The book *Progressive Sight Singing* by Carol Krueger contains creative writing exercises for reading rhythms based on expression terms, prompting students to devise different intensity contrasts when reading rhythms. The author also incorporates common repetition notation and tempo terminology into exercises on rhythm so that students fully grasp and address all dimensions of the music, allowing them to pay better attention to spectral terminology in their performances, making the music rich with a sense of variation and layering.

4 Conclusion

The rich variety of questions and the many C-score sight singing exercises in American sight singing and ear training materials can help to fill the gaps in similar materials in China. Teachers should select the most relevant parts of American textbooks as additional training, so as to broaden students' horizons. As far as students are concerned, the supplementary materials can further enhance their understanding, for example, listening to and identifying the relationship between harmonic extra vocals, compositional structure and syntax, to help them clarify the various elements of music and analyse the works properly, thus speeding up the memorization of scores. In addition to composition and conducting, learning multispectral sight reading can also improve the professionalism of students studying music performance majors. Thus, when they work with an orchestra and perform large works such as symphonies and concertos, they can identify and listen competently to the various sections of the ensemble and collaborate with others more effectively. Therefore, teachers should seek to use American materials to provide extended training in the classroom.

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