

The Spread and Influence of Oratorio “Messiah” by Handel in China

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Abstract: Handel’s “Messiah” is the most famous oratorio in the history of western music. It enjoys tremendous popularity since its birth in 1742 and is regarded as the most excellent oratorio in the history. Since the beginning of the last century, in China, all or partial parts of the oratorio are being staged increasingly. However, the performance history in China is not paid close attention. This paper attempts to describe and analyze the performance situation and acceptance process of this piece in China from the perspective of history, so as to provide a case reference for the study and spread of the western religious music in China. It is well known that George Friedrich Handel (from 1685 to 1759) is regarded as one of the music masters who enjoys the equal popularity with J. S. Bach by the later generations. He is also one of the representatives for the most prominent western Baroque composer. He is the composer of “Messiah”, which is taken as an oratorio to be played by maximum times (including the versions in English and other languages). It is also regarded as a sacred music which is known well by the Christians. The playscript of this piece is mainly drawn the materials from the Bible to display the process of crucifixion, resurrection and ascension experienced by Jesus who was sent by God from the heaven to the earth. According to the records, Handel only spent 24 days to complete this classic works, which is divided into three parts, namely overture, aria, recitative, duets, chorus, interlude and other music forms, totally 53 tracks. The oratorio “Messiah” is the pinnacle of Handel’s music creation, which gives full play to Handel’s vibrant and brilliant chorus drama style with charming colors of epic. Among these works, the passionate aria, the dramatic recitative and chorus have reached Baroque’s vertex with magnificent style. The whole works is bright, positive and is full of passionate loud. Thus, it was deeply loved by the audiences. Among these works, the “Alleluia”, “For unto us a child is born” and other chorus arias are even adopted frequently and known well by many large and small chorus and chant team for rehearsal and performance purposes. Besides, it has also become a treasure in chorus literature. From the historical development point of view, the period that the western music was introduced to China is not long, as this is closely related with the political and cultural conservatism of the Chinese society and the differences between eastern and western countries in religious music. Till today, “Messiah”, as a oratorio with western religion as the theme to be staged repeatedly and accepted by the majority of Chinese audiences, this is a very interesting music phenomenon under the situations of the differences between Chinese and western cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

The specific time for introduction of the oratorio “Messiah” to China has been unable to be confirmed from the historical musical research. From the introduction history of the western music in China, the western “music sage”, Beethoven’s music performance in China was shown earliest in 1906, and Li Shutong, who was the first person to introduce Beethoven’s music to China. At the

same time, with the end of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China, the new schools have been rapidly developed, and the western humanism education thought has also been further introduced. [1] We can infer that, along with the strong influence of the western civilization, the oratorio “Messiah” and other excellent music works may be introduced to China at the beginning of the 20th century, the period when the Qing Dynasty is about to come to its end. Then, in view of this, the performance history of this works in China is about one hundred years and it can be roughly divided into the following four stages:

The earliest record for the performance of “Messiah” is in 1919, which was shown in the annals of history for Yenching University that was co-established by four American and British Christian Churches in Beijing, China. It was said that there are the traditions for the performance of “Messiah” inside the university or the public performance in Beijing Hotel. After that, in Beijing, Shanghai and other major cities in 1920’s and 1930’s, this works has also been successively staged. For example, the chorus established by teachers and students from Yenching University has one hundred and fifty people, who were led by Doctor Bliss Wiant, Bliss Wiant (1895-1975) was educated at Wittenberg College and Ohio Wesleyan University (B.A. 1920), Boston University (M.A. 1936), and Peabody College (Ph.D. 1946). He also studied at Harvard University and Union Theological Seminary, New York City After ordination (1923), Wiant became head of the music department at Yenching University, Peking (1923-1951). He was pastor of St. Paul’s Church, Delaware, Ohio (1953-1955), then minister of music at Mahoning Methodist Church, Youngstown, Ohio. After serving with the Methodist Board of Education, he became director of music at Scarritt College. He is the director of the musical department for multiple performance (generally, it is performed as an excerpt of a complete concert and done in English with piano accompaniment, with Chinese and foreign singers as the vocal solo). This is maintained till 1941, the time the Pacific War was broke out and the performance was interrupted as well. The “Messiah” with Bliss Wiant as the bandmaster chose mostly Mrs. Wilson, professor of the vocal music department as the alto solo. The famous scholar Mei Yibao and musician and linguist Li Baochen also acted as bass part of choir in singing “Messiah” when they were studying in Yenching University. [2] In the late 1930’s, the “Messiah” performance in China has been gradually familiar and accepted by Chinese audiences. For example, On December 22, 1935, one of the Chinese most professional orchestras with highest expertise and completest formation, the municipal orchestra of the Republic of China cooperated with Shanghai singing club to give a special concert performance of “Messiah”. [3] at the Lyceum Theater to celebrate Jesus’s birthday.

(2) The performance status in the middle stage (from the postwar period to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China)

On December 20, 22 and 23, 1947, namely the post-victory of Anti-Japanese War, Nanjing Union ST. Orchestra gave three performances of “Messiah” in Jinling university’s auditorium, which is the biggest performance in the Chinese modern history. At that time, Nanjing Union ST. Orchestra is co-established by more than 200 students from the National Academy of Music, the National Central University, the Capital Choir, the Nanking Theological Seminary, Jinling Women’s College of Arts and Sciences and Jinling Women’s University. After months of preparatory training and with Chinese Orchestra having double compilation (include more than 40 musicians), the performance was completed successfully. The performance was donated by the

celebrities such as Song Meiling, Chen Lifu, Zhang Daofan, Zhang Qun, Wu Bochao, Wu Yifang, Zhu Jiahua, Lang Yuxiu and others. Besides, Sun Ke also served as the master of ceremonies in the performance. From the lineup at that time, they are all talented personnel and prestigious. The baton was Lin Shengxi, composer, music educator and professor from Hong Kong; the vocal solo was Zhou Xiaoyan, soprano singer for coloratura who was considered as the “golden oriole in China”, she made prominent contribution to the development of vocal music in China (she was also awarded as the lifetime tenured professor in Shanghai Conservatory of Music). Besides, Sun Jiasheng, Zheng Xiuling, Zheng Xiaoying, Zang Yuyan, Wen Kezheng, Wei Qixian and others have all become the well-known figures in the Chinese music scene afterwards. Li Guoquan, served as concertmaster in the past, has also become the famous musician in 1950's and 1960's.

On December 28, 1947, St. John's university student choir, for the purpose of celebrating the Christmas, sung Handel's Messiah in the afternoon in Wuyuan Road Church, with Chen Renbing as the command. [3]

In December 1948, Messiah was officially premiered in Taiwan for the first time in Taipei Zhongshan Hall. Although the scale was not large, the show was not discontinued after that. Before 1957, the joint chorus was established by various church's choirs in Taipei; after 1957, it was led by the newly established youth association in Taipei. Lin Heyin and Wang Peilun, the band commanders for the first Messiah performance in Taiwan; Sun Shaoru, the vocal solo of this performance; Zhu Yongzhen, the bass of this performance (he is also the father of Zhu Taili, the soprano). Among them, the soprano Zheng Xiuling had the opportunity to sing in two historical events which was held at the same time in Nanjing as chorus member in the previous day and soprano in Taipei in the second day.

After the founding of new China, in 1953, the Chinese translation of the full text of chorus [4]score for “Messiah” was firstly published. Later, due to the blind resistance caused by the Chinese culture revolution, the performance of Messiah in China has been almost disappeared from the mid of 1960s to the 1990s. However, the show was still continued in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

In Hongkong's performance records, the relatively famous one is Hongkong Oratorio Society, which was established in 1956 and was considered as the first chorus to perform this oratorio in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Chinese Mainland. In the October of the year of establishment, the oratorio was performed and shown with Huang Dongming as the band conductor. During Huang Feiran's term as the conductor (from 1959 to 1975), Hongkong Oratorio Society has ever performed in public this works respectively in 1960, 1966, 1967, 1970 and 1971 for five times. Among these, the first command of “Messiah” in Hong Kong is the performance with the Congregational Church Choir at the beginning of 1950s. Besides the singing perform for the “Messiah” in Hong Kong, the Hongkong Oratorio Society also visited Shanghai in 1981 (Huang Yongxi as the command) and 1994 (Huang Feiran as the command). In 1992, under the command of Chen Yonghua and with the Hongkong Symphony Orchestra's visit to Xiamen, this masterpiece has all been performed. In addition, Hongkong Oratorio Society staged in Taiwan in December 1997 and made tour performances with Taiwan Symphony Orchestra in Keelung, Ilan, Chiayi and Taichung respectively with Chen Chengxiong as the conductor for the “Messiah”. After that, great appraisals have been achieved for their performances. According to the statistics, the Hongkong Oratorio Society, from 1956 to 1998, has made more than 33 public performances for the “Messiah”.

With China's reform and opening to the public and rapid economic development, the western music has been gradually accepted by the Chinese audiences. Starting from the late stage of the 1990s, the oratorio "Messiah" has once again been widely welcomed, with the premiere number gradually increased. For example, from 2002 onward, Beijing Festival Chorus and Festival Orchestra hold singing performances for the "Messiah" in English version in the first week of every December in Beijing Zhongshan Music Hall. Most chorus members are the foreign personnel who are working in China and the cantor Nick Smith is from the England. Chinese famous cantor Chen Yixin and Wu Lingfen have also repeatedly performed "Messiah", of which Professor Wu Lingfen has led Qingdao Song and Dance theater Chorus to go to Korea to successfully perform the "Messiah". In 21st century, China's music industry is not satisfied with the interpretation of the traditional English version of the "Messiah" anymore. The young cantor Su Wenxing has been committed to the promotion and dissemination of "Messiah" in Chinese version. From 2001 to 2006 only, Su Wenxing commanded the full Chinese version of "Messiah" and cooperated with the chorus of the China National Symphony Orchestra and China Film Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra to successively performed in Beijing, Shandong, Hunan, Guangdong, Yunnan and other places for 11 sessions. In July 2015, he worked with Qingdao Song and Dance Theater, Tiantai Symphony Orchestra, Mike Meigo Chorus again to show successful performance of the Chinese version of "Messiah" in Qingdao City Hall . It is worth mentioning that this version is translated from English to Chinese by the professors of Yenching University in 1944, which have not only retained the spirit of the original work, but also brought with the consistencies for Chinese audience's appreciation in words and rhythm. In October 2003, "Messiah" performed and commanded by him and the Chinese National Symphony Orchestra Chorus has been made by China Record Corporation as the CD, VCD, DVD and sold at both home and abroad.

In recent years, the various performance by the foreign chorus in China has become more and more frequent, with the oratorio show for Handel's "Messiah" at most. In 2003, the international famous orchestra and chorus of French flowers came to Hongkong and performed "Messiah", which has acquired high appraisals from the local audiences. Followed by Handel's performance mode, this orchestra adopted small band and ancient instruments or replicas of ancient music. The chorus includes 25 people (9 for soprano, 5 for countertenor, 5 for tenor and 6 for bass), with high tenor as the replacement of a contralto part among them. The show is very delicate with high style and poetic beauty. It is smooth, flexible and clear with ancient antique. [5] on September 10, 2006, in celebrating the 50th anniversary of the founding of Shanghai Opera Institute, the national famous cantor John Nelson cooperated with Shanghai Opera Orchestra, Shanghai Opera House Chorus and Shanghai Conservatory of Music to perform the "Messiah". The singing group included 130 people. In recent years, although the Messiah performances was mainly concentrated in Beijing and Shanghai, many local music groups also tried for the local show for "Messiah". On December 20, 2012, Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra successfully performed it in Shenzhen Concert Hall; On December 13, 2014, cantor Nick Smith worked together with Tianjin Philharmonic Orchestra and Beijing International Festival Chorus performed Messiah in Tianjin Concert Hall. In order to have "Messiah" better played and introduced, some local church groups play it with brave adaptation and innovation in performance. Xita Church created in the past three months to change this oratorio into an hour long performance and combined with solo, chorus, ballet, modern dance, drama and

readings of performances as a large-scale song and dance drama, so as to display the expectation of the people in Israel and Jesus Christ's birth, death and resurrection. In September 26 and 27, 2015, the performance was also played in Chongwenmen Hall of Beijing Christian Church and Haidian Hall of Beijing Christian Church respectively.

The influence of Oratorio "Messiah" in China

According to the historical data, when "Messiah" was introduced with the invasion of western culture in China, the recipients were mainly the foreign residents in China and people who recognized the western culture. However, these people are considered very limited. Till the middle age when the National Government advocated the "Three People's Principles, namely the nationalism, democracy and livelihood), the acceptance for the culture and music has become enhanced, the oratorio "Messiah" has attracted interests of more people. Later, after the founding of new China, especially the destruction of the cultural revolution, China mainland posted strong political label to the music, and the spread of "Messiah" and other western music in China experienced a low period. With the in-depth development of China's reform and opening up and the increasing activities for the western cultural exchange in China, people's understanding on Chinese and western music had a deeper improvement and tolerance, and all kinds of western music including Messiah have re-gained the wider acceptance. Of course, as a listener, the main reason to accept the oratorio "Messiah" is due to its wider acknowledgment by the world as a superb artistry, especially its characteristics of chorus which has acquired appraisals from various countries for praising the poems. It has not only the seriousness in Germany, the deep in thought in United Kingdom, the sound-sweet feel in Italy and magnificence in France, which helps it to be quickly accepted by all the people in different countries.

In addition to the performance on the stage, many arias of "Messiah" was included in the teaching class of musical colleges and universities in China, of which Handel's famous oratorio aria anthology (treble version, alto and bass version), translated by Jia Diran and Wang Hongmin and revised by Zhou Xiaoyan, has been published in 2011 by Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House. In this anthology, partial classical arias of the "Messiah" was included. Unfortunately, in China, there have been no complete original text of orchestral score and piano score for "Messiah" to be officially published. In addition, in Chinese domestic vocal competitions with high degree, there are contestants who often sing the partial arias of "Messiah", such as the difficult soprano arias called "rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion" and others. In recent years, with the spread of "Messiah", the vocal music teachers and graduate students in universities also conducted research and analysis on the singing method of "Messiah" and published the related papers in journals.

At the same time, we also found that this works is different from Beethoven's 9th Symphony and 5th Symphony, which, together with the following works, have drawn widespread attentions right after they were introduced to China. For "Messiah", although it has also been familiar by many people, the influence is not the same, as the main reason is due to the differences between Chinese and western culture. The oratorio is mostly with the religious theme, thus, its influence in China is relatively limited. Therefore, the oratorio with music genre has not been able to become the mainstream on the stage of Chinese classical music like western symphony and opera.

The reason why the oratorio “Messiah” can be accepted in China

With the blend of Chinese and western culture, Chinese people has been gradually understanding and accepting the music with different cultural characteristics and beyond the religious significance. The oratorio “Messiah” is a very good example. The acceptance by the Chinese audiences for such works with non-musical element is actually to accept the cultural barriers during this process.

The “Messiah” lyrics are wholly from the Bible verses, which is about Christ Jesus’s crucifixion and his outflow of blood for saving the world and bringing the eternal life for the human being. Although its subject matter is not widely familiar by the people in oriental countries for the Christian themes, Jesus Christ, as a human sacrificing his own lofty sentiment just for saving the human being, has become a lofty moral example, as his behavior has surpassed the religious significance, which shall be admired as the highest virtue by all the mankind. Such information from the works made people conciliative, and the noble quality appraised by the works for sacrificing himself to protect others impressed deeply by the others. Such spirit happens to coincide with the spirit of “giving up one’s life for righteousness” and “benevolence”. Confucius has ever said, “man of benevolence and lofty ideals should not, at the expense of benevolence, cling cravenly to life instead of braving death. He will, on the contrary, lay down his life for the accomplishment of benevolence.” (From the Analects of Confucius - the duke Ling of Wei). Similarly, the Buddhism, the most influential thought to the Chinese traditional culture, also include the story like “flesh cutting for feeding eagle”, which is about the spirit of self-sacrifice.

China, after thousands of years of cultural fusion, has formed its own Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism confluence. The traditional culture dominated by Confucian traditional culture showed a belief diversification, pan-deification and services for the social leading value in religions and belief systems. It showed a more tolerant attitude on the various religions and foreign cultures. China is still a secular state with multi-religious coexistence. Therefore, to accept the “Messiah”, a music product with pure religion as the theme, is also to hold a tolerant attitude. In addition, due to the strong invasion of the western culture, Chinese people have a certain understanding and have a certain sense of freshness on the western culture which is rooted on the Christian culture. Hence, this brings the aesthetic distance caused by the different cultural barriers.

Chinese art is full of strong impressionistic manner, which has its own set of corresponding forms and techniques to achieve its freehand brushwork. Its typical symbol is the scatter perspective and the use of line shape. For Handel’s Messiah, although it has the characteristics of western art realism, it does also include the the scatter perspective and line shape which are acknowledged and accepted by the Chinese people. “Messiah” is made and connected from the Bible by a section of the scripture clusters and is also composed of relatively independent song arias, with no narrator, plot or any of a character. However, it consists of the monologues by a series of different characters, which constitutes the characteristics that Chinese people are more likely to accept. Similarly, for Handel’s Messiah, he adopted extensive homophonic and polyphonic music combination, which the music is presented with the obvious melodic lines and beautiful harmonies that are greatly in line with the Chinese aesthetic standard.

According to the western tradition, the play itself is a kind of poetry and is a category of literature. The traditional Chinese literature is centered with lyrical performance and paid attention to the affection expression. However, the western literary is put much emphasis on the objective

reality. From the traditional perspective of poetry, the Chinese poetry is put emphasis on the “lyrical” emotion, while the western is more emphasized on the narrative and epic. For “Messiah”, a very special feature is that it reflects a story through a series of lyrical expression, although the narrative may only be lyrical. The emotion has always been an important breakthrough for the art to conquer those who appreciate such lyrical temperament formed with a strong emotional meaning, so as to constitute an important channel between audiences’ inner world and the play. This is also one of the reasons why it can be accepted by the Chinese people.

Conclusion

From the spread and influence of Handel’s cantata “Messiah”, together with the description and reason analysis for the acceptance process, it requires a long term to accept an excellent musical product, whatever for the artistic acceptance or the non-musical factor. To accept a musical product is not only to reflect the differences in regional aesthetic views, but also to reflect the acceptance and blending of regional differences in culture.

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