

A Summary and Comment on the Study of National Opera Canal Ballads

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Keywords: Canal ballads; National opera; Research review; National stories

Abstract. Director Liao Xianghong's national opera *Canal Ballads* has aroused the touching and affection of many domestic music researchers, singers and performers since the debut of National Grand Theater in 2012. The drama is based on the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal which is comparable to the Great Wall. It depicts the Chinese story of the joys and sorrows of the two sides of the canal during Wanli of Ming Dynasty. In addition to the successful singers such as Lei Jia, Wang Hongwei, Wang Zhe and Wang Zenan who have successfully performed Yin Qing's vocal music works, the drama is also astonishing because of its strong creative team and its nationalized, localized and just opera conception, guiding the correct contemporary aesthetic direction and values of life. By collecting and studying the researches of others in recent years, this dissertation makes a more comprehensive assessment of the play and hopes to make theoretical explanations for furthering "Chinese story" and spreading "China's good voice".

Since its debut in June 2012, Chinese opera *Canal Ballads* has aroused widespread concern of many critics, researchers and music lovers. So far, a great deal of research achievements has appeared. The author enters the key word "canal ballad" in the periodical network. There are 42 articles directly related to it, including 15 master's theses, accounting for 36% of the existing achievements. This shows that the opera *Canal Ballads* has had widespread influence in recent years. At the same time, it highlights the opera's rich musical features and dramatic conception, which provides vast space for researchers. In this article, the author chooses several representative ones to sort out greatness, and to carry on the author's interpretation and thinking to strive to stand on the predecessors and continue to do some bedding of the future study of *Canal Ballads*. According to combing and analysis, in recent years, the relevant scholars' research on *Canal Ballads* focuses on the following aspects:

Post-watch Comments

The post-reviewing essay is also one of the earliest forms of study and the most important part of the opera *Canal Ballads*. Such article is the sense of concept. These commentators are good at using a variety of narrative techniques, such as analogy, lyric, etc., and insert some wonderful stills, so this kind of articles gives the audience a refined, illustrated, easy-to-understand and readable taste.

Among them, there are some typical examples of Analysis of National Opera *Canal Ballads*, Shui Hong Lian of National Opera - View of *Canal Ballads*, Appreciating the Water, Listening to *Canal Ballads*, Beautiful New Opera - The Impression of the Premiere of *Canal Ballads*, The Night Song of a Thousand Years of Intimacy - Listening to the Opera *Canal Ballads*, Touch the Heart of People - Comment on the Original Opera *Canal Ballads*, Post-essay on Chinese National Opera and *Canal Ballads*, and Wonderful National Opera *Canal Ballads*. The above eight articles cover the primary purpose first, which mainly introduce the creation team (script creation, music creation, stage design, etc.), plot content, music language and so on of *Canal Ballads*, in which Analysis of National Opera *Canal Ballads* talks about its advantages and disadvantages through the comparison with the operas of Xi Shi, Female Teacher in the Mountain Village and Orphan of the Zhao Family, which considered to be objective and fair. In the end, the author writes: "The nationalization of the rhymes of National Opera *Canal Ballads* is not only about national stories, national figures, ethnic melodies and national singing styles, but also the themes, forms and contents of operas together with the traditional Chinese culture. The atmosphere of opera. The opera praises the courageous and

heroic civilian hero rather than the emperor, which is the embodiment of people's characters of stage art; to celebrate the people's great love is also an important theme of the opera stage." [1]58

This kind of articles focuses on the introduction of cast and stage scenery, highlighting the author's own intuitive feeling and understanding. In addition, there is one thing in common with this type of article, the purpose of this kind of article are mostly appreciation of the production team, introduction and praise of the theater. As a researcher, their function and enlightenment meaning cannot be neglected, because they are the most intuitionistic evaluation made by the viewer after watching on the spot, combined with knowledge, life experience, ideology and relevant music professional knowledge. From time to time, the authors talk about performers' performances and stage settings according to the story line of the opera, from time to time, they express their understanding of characters in connection to performers' performances. This kind of multi-directional, multi-sided or even "stereoscopic" interpretation is particularly worth our study and is of a strong role for our true interpretation of the opera.

Aria and Its Performance Studies

This type of research mainly focuses on the graduation paper of graduates of vocal music major of China. After selecting and analyzing some aria of Canal Ballads in a certain academic level, combining with their own learning experience and performance experience, researchers talk about the specific concert and performance of the deep experience, which has some practical significance. The main representative article is Features and singing analysis of Afterlife to Love You of Canal Ballads. In the introduction of the entire opera, the author selects one of the most important arias as the research object. Firstly, the author analyzes the creative features of the aria Afterlife to love you in terms of the features of spin and musical tonality. Furthermore, the author talks about his own understanding of this soprano aria in singing from "story features in singing and articulation" and "dramatic musical emotion and expression of intent of aria", and points out that "this aria puts forward a very high demand on the singer in biting, articulation, emotional expression and plot character keen and image shaping, because this song is at the peak of the whole opera and the concert is very large scale. The singer has to complete this aria while performance the show. Therefore, it is a great test to the physical strength, perseverance and expressiveness to the singer." [2] I

The article The Creation of "Shui Hong Lian" and the artistic treatment of singing in opera Canal Ballads first confesses the creative background, plot content and creative style of Canal Ballads. Then the author carries out all-round and multi-level analysis to the musical image of the heroine Shui Hong Lian. On the basis of the first two aspects, the author explains the aria Afterlife to love you from three aspects: breathing, emotional expression and body language interpretation. Finally, she pointed out: "In my opinion, the aria is the most profound part of the opera that reveals the inner world of the heroine. Before singing this song, the singer must deeply understand the thoughts and feelings through the inner association. Different performance approaches should be used to reflect the tension of the sound and enhance the appeal of music." [3]24

The article that Creation and Concert of Shui Hong Lian in the Opera Canal Ballads- Taking the Selection of Its Main Aria as an Example has three chapters. The first chapter is an overall introduction of the creative background, basic plot and performance summary of Canal Ballads, the second chapter summarizes the character traits of the heroine from "sweet and witty, shrewd and alert, obscene kindness and sacrificial justice". The third chapter analyzes Canal Ballads, Moonlight in the night and Afterlife to love you from the music and singing and strives to grasp the basic meaning of these three arias based on singing and performing. As the author wrote in conclusion: "Canal Ballads is graceful and far-reaching; Moonlight in the night is ingenuity with ups and downs; and Afterlife to love you is magnificent. Therefore, when singing these arias, we do not only need to grasp the style characteristics of each one, but also need to really touch the soul of the character, accurately characterize the character and psychological changes, taking "all the technology serves the art" as the purpose, interpret the charming of the work content and character". [4]22

The article that Chinese National Opera - Study on the Solemn Acting of Heroine of Canal Ballads is divided in three chapters which mainly focuses on the first two chapters. The author chooses the six airs (including three pieces of solo that Canal Ballads, Qinsheng, How are you doing? and Afterlife to love you and three pieces of ensembles that I am a cloud floating in the sky, It's difficult to act after many years, Try to find an easy to go) of the heroine as the objects of study. First of all, the author makes a detailed analysis of the six anagrams, and then from the perspective of singing, combined with practical learning and experience, talks about the singing understanding with a strong practical significance.

In addition, several articles are also concerned about this aspect of research. Looking at the above research results, it is not difficult to find, first of all, the analysis is mainly focused on the aria of the heroine, especially Afterlife to Love You aria, there is almost no other arias than the heroine aria. Secondly, these aria analysis is only limited to the study of aria itself, such as music ontology analysis, singing experience, etc., and do not place the aria in the whole opera, such as how these arias promote the development of the story, highlight the drama connotation, reveal the character, pave the theater atmosphere, etc., in other words, there is a lack of deeper digging the deeper theoretical understanding.

Creative Techniques and Musical Characteristics

Based on the general introduction to the entire opera itself, this type of article focuses on the creative techniques and the musical language features of Canal Ballads. Representative results are as follows:

Aesthetic Characteristics of Canal Ballads is mainly from the four aspects to explore the value of Canal Ballads, which are “the organic combination of dramatic and musicality, the perfect coordination of band and vocal music, the close integration of artistic and popular nature, the perfect fusion of Western techniques and ethnic elements”. As the final conclusion: “In short, the creation of Canal Ballads embodies the creators’ full respect and integration of traditional Chinese and Western music culture. The author deeply understands and accurately handles the idea of ‘neutralization’, and she has made a balanced grasp of the contradiction between dramatic and musical nature, band and vocal music, artistic and popular nature, western techniques and ethnic elements, which coordinates and explores a feasible way for the creation of Chinese opera.” [5]77

The article The integration of tradition - the local style perspective in the opera Canal Ballads (Wang Xiaoxia, Literary Contestation, No. 3, 2014) mainly explores the creative methods and innovations in the tradition of Canal Ballads, highlights the composition and techniques of local music, explores the concept of music creation from three aspects: local musical function, musical form, musical concept and thinking, and finally concludes: “The integration of tradition... reflects out of a more concise, simple concept of cultural development, and the integration of modern factors reveals the profound historical traditions and endless growth of culture and the law of art.” [6]179

Learning from, Inheriting and Innovating - A Study on the New Ballad of the National Opera Canal Ballads is divided into four chapters. The first chapter mainly introduces the basic information of the creative team, plot contents and performance team of Canal Ballads. The second chapter discusses the European idea in the creation of Canal Ballads. The author thinks it is embodied in three aspects: the orchestra runs through from beginning to end; the continuous alternation of solo, chorus and chorus; and the application of dominant motivation. The third chapter analyzes the characteristics of Chinese nation in the creation of Canal Ballads, mainly from two aspects: the nationality of the script and the nationality of the musical element. The fourth chapter mainly focuses on the dramatic conception of Canal Ballads and some innovations. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the author of this article interviewed Yin Qing, the songwriter of Canal Ballads, and conducted interviews with his research content, for example, in terms of musical elements, drama connotation, creative techniques and stage design. In other words, this article is based on “first-hand information”, thus highlighting the reliability of the research, collecting the most credible research materials and theoretical basis for the study of latecomers.

There are three chapters in “Nationality” and “Times” in Opera Canal Ballads, with the emphasis on Chapter Two and Three. The main contents are as follows. The second chapter explores the ethnic elements revealed from the music structure, musical features and music aesthetic of Canal Ballads. At the same time, the author also briefly refers to the stage arrangement, costumes, even the conductor of the band which has made its due contribution to the nationality of the opera. The third chapter emphasizes the epoch in Canal Ballads. The author has expounded it from three aspects: the structure of music, the characteristics of music and the aesthetic of music. There are also such articles as See big things through small ones - The Creation Tactics of the National Opera Canal Ballads and Analysis of National Characteristics of the Grand Rapture - The Opera Canal Ballads and will not be repeated here.

Paying attention to the creative features of Canal Ballads, emphasizing the nationality (including the nationality of the opera, of the melody, of the style, of the material, of the creative method, of the value orientation, etc.), it seems to seize the core features of this opera. As Liao Xianghong, the general director of the opera, said: “Canal Ballads locate the theme of the opera on the symbol of Chinese civilization - the Grand Canal. The first is that the creation of this opera can be deeply rooted in the profound humanistic background of the canal, get the nourishment of the canal civilized and contains the national charm and characteristics, to lay the opera ‘nationality’ basis. Secondly, the contemporary audience is expected to watch the opera at the same time to appreciate this splendid and magnificent canal which stretches from south to north and understand the merit and significance of the canal to the Chinese civilization of the thousands of years can then ponder over how to make canal civilization -- the symbol of the Chinese civilization not to be lost along with the modernization process.” [5]15

Insufficient and Thinking

Through the above simple combing, analysis and classification, the author thinks that there are mainly two aspects of the achievements that have truly academic levels. One is the analysis of the main aria of the opera, especially the singing of the heroine; the second is the analysis of “nationality” in the opera, highlighting the limited scope of the study of this opera. There are many aspects to be excavated, such as the analysis of the male characters, the instrumental fragments, the relationship between the true dramatic idea and the musical language, etc. The research results about the above aspects are less.

The above led to the author’s deep interest in how to explore an opera. Coleman once said: “The reason why opera differs from drama or poetry or dance and other kinds of drama is that its central medium of art is not dialogue, poetry or dance, but music. Dramatic works of art in which music does not play a central role in it should be given a different name, not opera.” [7]5 In other words, opera is opera not only because of its integrated art of music, literature, painting, dance and theater, but more importantly, its unique wealth comes from music. Coleman then remarked that drama “conception” is “vision”, “idea” or “conception” of the artist and whether the “conception” is fulfilled. Whether an opera poses a profound theatrical proposition, whether it explores mysterious truths in human nature, whether it reflects the unidentified aspect of life, or whether it reveals deep psychological activities in people's minds, and whether all is reflects the proper music? [7]7 In other words, an excellent opera is to use excellent musical language to express excellent drama conception, only the perfect combination of the two is one of the importance for the success of an opera. So how to interpret an opera, that is to explore how the musical language in the play shows a deep sense of drama.

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