A Research on Kuo Chih-Yuan’s Ancient Poetry and Art Song “Liangzhou Ci”

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ABSTRACT

Kuo Chih-Yuan was a famous composer in China Taiwan. He was the pioneer of modern music in China Taiwan and was highly recognized in the music industry. His had written a number of art songs, Hokkien songs, children’s songs, and folk songs adapted with vocal works, as well as instrumental works, including piano music, embodying them with strong local characteristics of orchestral suites, operas, musicals, and choral. From the perspective of “Liangzhou Ci,” a creative ancient poetry and art song, this paper expounds Kuo Chih-Yuan’s creative rules and aesthetic principles by sorting out and collecting relevant materials, analyzing the tonality of his works, and making a comparative study of the changes in intervals, rhythm, and musical structure. This paper further refines the characteristics of ancient poetry and art songs in terms of singing, as well as the humanistic characteristics and historical implications that need to be highlighted when interpreting ancient poetry and art songs, in hope to provide useful reference for vocal music teaching and performance.

KEYWORDS: Kuo Chih-Yuan; Ancient poetry and art songs; Interpretation and analysis; Vocal music teaching

1. Kuo Chih-Yuan’s creative career

1.1. Historical background

Kuo Chih-Yuan (December 5, 1921, to April 12, 2013) was born in Yuanli Town, Miaoli County, China Taiwan Province. During his life, he witnessed and participated in most of the music activities in China Taiwan since the Japanese era. His dedication to music creation made him a pioneer of China Taiwan’s local music and modern folk music. His creative career traversed the development of modern music in China Taiwan, in which diversity and variation are evident in his creation [1].

In 1935, he travelled to Japan to study music theory and harmonica under Professor Toyo Fukushima at Kamseong Middle School in Tokyo. He then debuted as a harmonica player. In 1941, he was accepted into the Oriental Conservatory of Music, where he majored in violin under the tutelage of violinist Zhangyang Shimizu. Later, he changed his major to music theory and composition owing to a congenital curvature of his left little finger [2]. In 1942, he joined the Music Composition Department of Nihon University, where he learned harmony and counterpoint from a composer, Jiro Ikeuchi. He began to learn the writing techniques of classical music, Chinese folk music, and folk music. He was influenced by
composers such as Ixun Bu Zhao, Fumio Hayaka, and Jiang Wenya. He was determined to create modern Chinese folk music. He graduated in 1943 and returned to China Taiwan in October 1946 [3].

After the Second World War, art and culture in China Taiwan were desolate, and artists returning from abroad were apprehensive. The lack of music ensued Kuo Chih-Yuan’s devotion to casting off the shackles and seeking his spiritual home. In 1950, he participated in the China Taiwan Provincial Music Competition, sponsored by the China Taiwan Cultural Association, where he won second prize (the first place was vacant), from which he garnered widespread attention from the music circle in China Taiwan [4]. In 1955, he published his first orchestral composition, “Symphonic Variations on Taiwanese Local Style,” by a Taiwanese composer. In 1961, he successively published three works with strong nationalistic characteristics, which were “Fantasia of China Taiwan Ancient Music,” “Village Dance,” and “Oriental Dance.” In the following year, “Piano Sonata” and “Green Blood,” an art song, were published. In 1966, he returned to the Music Department of Tokyo National University of the Arts for further studies and completed the grand Orchestral march “Grand Taipei” in 1969 [5]. In 1986, he wrote the opera “Cowherd and Weaver Girl.” In 1987, he won the Golden Triad Award for his composition “Concerto for Piano and String Orchestra.” This work was selected as the 20th Century Chinese Classic in mainland China in 1992. His 1992 orchestral suite “Memories” was performed at China Taiwan Concert Hall, and he was awarded the Wu Sanlian Music Award in 1993. In 1999, he was presented with an Honorary Doctorate in Taiwanese Culture. He was honored with the Special Contribution Award at the 13th Golden Melody Award ceremony in 2002 and the “Executive Yuan Literary Award” of Taiwan in 2006. In 2013, he died of illness. His contribution to China Taiwan’s folk music and the practice of China’s modern music thought has become a milestone of the times [6].

1.2. Songwriting
Kuo Chih-Yuan is a prolific composer. Throughout his lifetime, he composed more than 100 vocal music works, including 24 art songs, 12 choral songs, 13 children’s songs, 41 Taiwanese folk songs, 13 ballads, and 21 pop songs [7]. Among them, the representative ancient poetry and art songs include “Liangzhou Ci,” “Yu Meiren” (“Spring Flowers and Autumn Moon”), “Fisherman,” “Night Mooring at Maple Bridge,” “Lotus Song,” and “Drunken in Spring to Express Their Aspirations”; the representative lyrical art songs include “Red Rose”, “Moonlight Night in Praise City,” and “Green Countryside”; the representative Hokkien songs include “Hope You Come Home Early,” “Night in the Southern Capital,” “Bitter Love Songs,” and “Moonlight in a Foreign Land” [8]; the representative children’s songs include “Happy Days,” “Birds,” and “Rain”; the representative choral songs include “Broken Mountain Temple After the Zen Courtyard” and “Spring to the Song”; the representative folk songs include “Yilan Diao,” “Hengchun Diao,” “Baijia Chun,” and “Tilan Song.” These vocal music works have not only attracted the attention of the academy, where they are now used as teaching materials, but also categorized as classical pop music [9].

His art songs can be divided into two categories: ancient poetry and contemporary poetry. Local feelings and national spirit had always been the emotional inspirations for his creations. He had a strong awareness of China Taiwan’s local culture, and at the same time, he was infatuated with the national culture of different regions. His love for folk music was also reflected in his creative ideas. “When I think about my ideal composition, I think of national flavor, modernism, and musicality (music and sound are different). I aim to make music that can move music lovers by developing traditional techniques belonging to classical music. It is not the avant-garde music that only a few people enjoy [10,11].”

2. Analysis of poetry
As mentioned above, Kuo Chih-Yuan’s art songs can be divided into two categories: ancient poetry and contemporary poetry. “Liangzhou Ci” is one of the most representative art songs based on ancient poetry.
“Liangzhou Ci,” also known as “Liangzhou Song,” was a popular tune in the heyday of Tang Dynasty. Many poets in the Tang Dynasty were enamored with the tune and added new words to it, as epitomized by the renowned versions of Wang Zhihuan, Wang Han, Zhang Ji, Lu You, and Meng Haoran, all of which carry the same title but with varying contents [12].

Kuo Chih-Yuan presented his version of “Liangzhou Ci” based on Wang Han’s “Liangzhou Ci No. 2.” This poem is considered a frontier fortress poem, without having any pleasant description of the war scene throughout the entire poem, but rather the smell of smoke from war flames encompassing it, revealing the poet’s war-weary and anti-war feelings. After World War II, Kuo Chih-Yuan returned to China Taiwan, when the political parties were struggling with chaos all around. By composing the music for the ancient poem “Liangzhou Ci,” he empathized with the poet’s situation and the profound connotation of the poem, as well as expressed his hatred for the war.

3. Analysis of music and interpretation

This song has two versions: a G major version for sopranos, and a F major version for baritones or mezzos. This paper discusses the G major version, with 4/4 beat, at Larghetto (63 bpm), and two stages (A+B) + (A+B). Figure 1 shows the prelude to the whole song, in which the top melody of the right hand in bars 1–2 is the motif. The left hand comprises of column chords decomposition in arpeggios to heighten the sense of balance and stability. In the third bar, the changing sounds of C# and D# appear. The second interval is used to reflect a sense of disharmony in the music. The left hand holds the column chords, and triplets appear to promote the development of emotions in the music. The fourth bar continues to maintain this sense of disharmony, and then complements with ascending scales and triplets, in order to create a sense of modernity, which delivers the musical mood for singing.

![Image of Figure 1: Prelude (bars 1–4)]

The melody of bars 5–6 in Figure 2 is exactly the same, but with a stronger implication. There are changes in bars 7–8. The left-hand accompaniment is still the same, which is composed of evenly decomposed chord arpeggios. It is stable and dynamic as well as maintains the soft sense of music lines, while establishing a three-dimensional sound effect.

In bar 10, the crossing of left and right hands ascending arpeggios drives the music into a climax. The first indication of mp appears in the first sentence of the singing part of the melody and slowly progresses from two intervals up and down. The stable middle part will raise a glass and murmur “luminous grape wine glass,” and the song will be sung in harmony. The second melody begins from the fifth descending interval, implying the fall of emotions, and at the same time, the sound changes from strong to weak, highlighting the delicacy and texture of the music.
Figure 3 shows the interlude between the first and second parts. Here, the term *poco poco cresc.* (gradually getting louder) appears for the first time, followed by *accel.* (gradually faster). The short four-bar continuous and detailed description hints not only at the piano accompaniment, but also the maintenance of musical unity. Special attention to the emotional expression of the interlude is required for careful processing. The smooth and gentle transition of the column chords and monophonic melody lines of the right hand, along with the continuous triplets of the left hand drive the music forward while simultaneously accumulating emotions for subsequent interpretation.

In Figure 4, the parts marked in bars 17 and 19 signify the highest notes in the entire song; the appearance of *f* and *ff* successively indicates loud to very loud. *Vibrato* often occurs in the left-hand piano part, while the right hand is performed in column and rotation, indicating that this is the climax of the whole song. The tragic and stirring emotions in the lyrics can be fully expressed with the high pitch and the use
of a piano. In bars 21–24, there are three strength indicators, *mf, mp, and p*, which indicate a transition from moderately loud to moderately soft, and then to soft. It requires both the piano accompanist and the singer to have good control and delicately present these changes to clearly express the sense of musical hierarchy. In bar 25, the melody of bar 23 is repeated to connect bars 26 and 27, and the sense of an ending is conveyed when the main chord is reinstated. In bar 26, the vertical chord arpeggio clearly demonstrates the Chinese national pentatonic mode, and the upward running note drives the music forward for the second time. Although the column chord and arpeggios move upward in bar 27, the chord arpeggios appear at the same time in both, left and right hands at the end of the melody.

Figure 4. Bars 17–27
When singing and interpreting, the first thing is to divide the words clearly and determine the rhyming sound of each word and each short sentence. This song is very unique, wherein each word has two beats. The beauty of rhyming is one of the significant features of this song. “Luminous grape wine glass” is to rhyme in u, ao, ei, ou, e, ang, and ei; “To drink immediately pipa rush” is to rhyme in u, and i, in a, a, ang, and ei; “Mo Xiao Zui Wo battle-hardened king” is to rhyme in ui, o, a, ang, un, o, and ao; “For a few people back to the gaumata” is to rhyme in u, ai, eng, the an, i, en, and iu. For a select few, including western bel canto vowel finals, such as head cavity, nasal cavity, pharynx, throat, chest cavity, and joints, it is necessary to pay attention the words, in order to rhyme to every word, while singing or listening. Phrases are connected by a full character, but unlike the cohesive nature of Italian and other Latin languages, especially referring to Chinese opera style characters with head, belly, and tail, the word should be formal and round in accordance with the style of the character while maintaining the integrity of the phrase.

The smooth melody of the two verses – “Grape wine lying in the jade cup, good and ready, but there was not enough time to send it to your mouth as the departure song by lute started playing already” – evokes a sense of loneliness, befitting the actual scenario. During singing, when approaching the letter “u” in “pu” (“pu” means grape in the stanza), the voice should be powerful and transparent, with no extra expression in mood, presenting the narrative bit by bit as if overlooking a frontier fortress. With rising pitch, excitement builds, reaching the highest note, which is the two-lined G. In Figure 4, the parts marked in bars 17 and 19 indicate that the pitch for the word “drunk” is from the two-lined D to the two-lined G. Although the G note is only half of a beat, it is not easy to reach the note. It is necessary to relax the body, open the pharynx cavity and chest cavity, as well as support the lower abdomen while singing the D note, in order to pull off a smooth G. In bar 19, accompanying the term “gentleman” marks ff across two durations, which is usually stressed in western opera singing. It requires the singer to have a strong control over the sound produced, in order to ensure that the sound is not produced in an abrupt manner and to highlight the emotional climax in an accurate manner.

4. Conclusion
Kuo Chih-Yuan, a musician from China Taiwan, was a pioneer of modern music in China Taiwan. His art songs have a distinct Chinese cultural flavor to them. Through western harmony ideas and its composition methods, he integrated the mode and tonality of folk music and included the features of regional music. The combination of Chinese and western techniques and music vocabulary formed a unique national style of ancient poetry and art songs. His ideas of music creation have deeply influenced generations of composers.

In the interpretation of classic poetry and art songs as well as vocal music teaching, it is necessary to analyze traditional national vocal music works and heed the characteristics of ancient poetry and art songs, the language used in poetry, as well as the music vocabulary embodying Chinese and western characteristics. In terms of singing skills, the use of western vocalization methods and the integration of Chinese characteristics deliver the unique charm of ancient poetry and art songs. By studying Kuo Chih-Yuan’s works, the literary and national characteristics of the creation and singing of ancient poetry and art songs are explored.

Poems are considered diamonds in the realm of art songs. They have high research value to Taiwanese composers of specific historical periods and education in the context of vocal music creation. They are also considered important components in Chinese art songs, reflecting distinctive styles of individuals in their own creative way of thinking. In terms of interpretation, it is necessary to integrate national characteristics into traditional art songs, so that in the articulation of ancient poetry and art songs, their profound charm may be expressed with precise meaning.
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