

## **REVIEW**

by  
Prof Ermila Schweitzer, PhD  
NMA „Prof Pancho Vladigerov”  
on the dissertation of

**Zhang Yuen**

– full-time doctoral student  
in Professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Art  
at the Department of Classical, Pop and Jazz Performing Arts  
at AMDFA, “Prof Asen Diamandiev” - Plovdiv,  
Academic supervisor: Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak  
on topic:

***Influence and References of the European Classical Art Songs on the Chinese Vocal Works***

for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"  
in Professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Art

On the grounds of a decision of the Faculty Council at the Faculty of Music Pedagogy dated 26.06.2024, to open a procedure for the defense of the dissertation work of Zhang Yuen, I was provided with the following materials: CV of the candidate, dissertation work, abstract, a reference to the contribution nature of the dissertation, list of publications on the topic.

**Brief biographical information:** Zhang Yuen is a mezzo-soprano, a vocal music teacher, deputy director of the Middle School of Shenyang Academy of Music, and a visiting professor at Hebei University of Ethnic Minorities. In 2010, she received a master's degree from Shenyang Academy of Music and remains at the same academy as a teacher. She has participated in numerous national and international vocal competitions, from which she has won the following awards: gold medal of the Liaoning Provincial Television Young Singers Competition; first prize in the teacher category of the Pattaya International Vocal Competition, Thailand; first prize in the teacher category of the China-Korea International Vocal Competition; third prize in the bel canto teacher category of the Second National Competition for Teachers and Doctoral Students of Vocal Music from Higher Education Institutions. Her students have also won awards in international and national vocal competitions on many occasions. Zhang Yuen has been invited to perform in music concerts in Singapore, South Korea, the United States, etc. She compiled and published the collection "Selected Songs of Aaron Copland." She has published two monographs and over ten articles in well-known national magazines.

The dissertation work *Influence and References of the European Classical Art Songs on the Chinese Vocal Works* is relevant with its topic, focused on the influence of the characteristics and achievements of the European art songs on the development of the Chinese vocal music and singing training. It is structured in an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography including 46 titles, and appendices - sheet music examples. The total volume is 162 pages.

The author has used methods of comparison, analysis and in-depth study of the facts – the existing literature on the subject in China, which includes both fundamental monographic studies and numerous scientific publications, testifying to the great interest in the art of artistic song, were used. Forecasts were made for the development of future trends in international cultural exchange.

The **introduction** presents the subject of the study, the main objective, the reasons for choosing the topic, methods, structure and expected results of the study.

The author begins the **first chapter** with a definition of the concept of art song: "...a type of vocal music characteristic of the Western chamber music. It usually refers to solo songs that can be composed independently and are not folk ballads" (p.5). According to her, there are the following types of art songs - arranged and composed on the basis of folk songs; composed on poems and narrative art songs. A brief historical overview of the development of the art song genre in the individual national composition schools - Austria and Germany, Italy, France and Russia is made. The most significant composers are listed with a brief description of their song work.

**Chapter two** is entitled Overview of the Development of Chinese Vocal Music. The author emphasizes the diversity of the vocal works in the different ethnicities of the Chinese musical culture. "*The various branches of the Chinese national vocal music, such as traditional folk songs, operas, folk and folklore works, are in the process of mutual development, penetrating and influencing each other*" (p.26). The author also makes a brief historical overview of the development of the Chinese vocal music, from the music of the ancient dynasties Qing, Han, Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, to the music at the beginning of the 20th century, when the influence of the Western culture and development after the founding of the PRC began to enter China. The author also presents a classification of the individual genres in the Chinese vocal music: folk songs, Chinese opera with all its branches, varieties, and ethnic characteristics.

In the **third chapter**, the doctoral candidate explores the influence of the German art songs on the Chinese vocal works. According to her, "...the main characteristics of the German art songs are: first, the music contains a lot of church music and hymns; second, the German music is rational, not emotional" (p. 66). To illustrate the influence of the German art songs on the Chinese songs, the author makes a comparative analysis of several pairs of songs: *The Young Nun* by Schubert and *Spring Symphony* by Huang Tzu and Wei Hangzhan; *Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel* by Schubert and *I Live at the Shore of the Yangtze River* by Qinq Zhu. In a separate subsection, Zhang Yuen focuses on the importance of Schubert's songs in teaching classical singing in China, analyzing several very famous songs – *The Trout*, *To Music*, *Forest King* etc., and from the perspective of a vocal pedagogue analyzes some difficulties and tasks that novice singers encounter when learning this repertoire.

**Chapter four** discusses the French art songs and their influence on the development of the Chinese vocal art. The dissertation lists some of the most famous French composers – chansonniers, as well as famous performers of the French song repertoire – Joan Bartoli, Claire Crois, Charlie Panzera, etc. An attempt is made to define the style of the French songs, with the caveat that it is very specific

to each composer. According to Zhang Yuen, "...the French art songs are actually a type of musical literature that is a product of the heart, and its poetry and music are rational, objective and beautiful art, associated with infinite sensitivity and wisdom." (p. 104) Special attention is paid to the song work of Gabriel Fauré and its importance in the training of young singers. I quote: "*Studying Fauré's art songs is of great benefit for shaping the timbre and cultivating the ability to control the voice.*" (p. 112)

**Chapter five** analyzes the influence of the Italian art songs on vocal education in China. The author begins with the Renaissance, moves through the Baroque, and reaches the emergence of opera and bel canto. Special attention is paid to the Italian language, as the most suitable for singing. "*Compared to the difficult pronunciation of the Chinese single syllables, Italian is suitable for opening the oral cavity, which corresponds to the resonant singing method of bel canto, helps to unify the timbre, and forms a more scientific and reasonable singing method.*" (p. 126) Some popular songs suitable for the repertoire of novice singers are analyzed, with the author giving recommendations on breathing technique, evenness of sound, position of the larynx, and other elements of vocal technique.

In **chapter six**, the doctoral candidate explores the influence of the European classical art songs on the Chinese vocal works and comes to the conclusion: "*The combination of Chinese and Western creativity in the creation of Chinese vocal music corresponds to the people's aesthetic orientation towards art and polyphonic music based on national culture.*" (p.135) The great influence exerted by the Western vocal art is undeniable, but the author pleads for the preservation of the national character and colour. She addresses directly to the creators of musical works – "*make Chinese vocal works more musical and cultural, more national, more polyphonic*" (these are the sub-points of this chapter). According to the author, there are currently two trends in China – on the one hand, there is an active connection with the rest of the world and the strengthening of cultural and economic exchanges, on the other hand, the importance of the traditional Chinese culture is increasing, while strengthening cultural construction. In her opinion, these two trends should be combined so as to create favourable conditions for the development of new Chinese vocal music. Composers of art songs in China should strive to skillfully combine European and Chinese musical cultures and boldly experiment with melody, harmonies, the texture of instrumental accompaniment, musical form and structure of works.

The **conclusion** confirms some of the conclusions drawn: the European art songs, "*...as shining pearls in the treasury of world music, with their deep historical heritage, refined artistic expression and rich musical styles, have had a profound impact on Chinese vocal music*" (p. 144); this influence is manifested not only in compositional techniques, but also in a much broader scope – renewed aesthetic criteria, comprehensive educational changes and a tendency towards increased cultural exchange.

The author points out six contributions of the dissertation work, the main one being that such study create conditions for building a bridge for cultural exchange between China and Europe. Also,

the performance and dissemination of European art songs in itself is a contribution to better understanding and cooperation between the two cultures. The deepening and improvement of knowledge about the origin, history, development of the European art songs and their influence on vocal art in China is also a contributing moment of the dissertation.

The abstract, with a volume of 47 pages, corresponds to the content of the dissertation. The candidate presents four publications on the topic, one of which is the monograph "Research on Vocal Singing Skills and Performing Arts" (IC Jiuzhou, 2021), which proves accumulated professional experience and a strong research interest.

Zhang Yuen's dissertation is a historical-comparative scientific study, with a strong practical focus, a serious attitude to the discussed problems, detailed analyses and logically formulated conclusions. I congratulate the author and her scientific supervisor – Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak and propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award Zhang Yuen the scientific educational degree "Doctor" in professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Art.

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Prof Ermila Schweitzer