

REVIEW

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Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts

“Prof. Asen Diamandiev” – Plovdiv

With order No RD-27-091 dated 25.06.2024 of the Rector of AMDFA “Prof Asen Diamandiev”, Plovdiv, I have been appointed a member of the scientific jury to supervise a procedure for the defense of a dissertation work titled *A Comparative Study of Aesthetic and Interpretive Problems in the Performance of Chinese, German and Austrian Art Songs*, for acquisition of the educational and scientific degree **Doctor** in Higher education field 8. Arts, Professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Art, doctoral program Music Studies and Music Art. The author of the dissertation is Xiao Lei – full-time doctoral student at the Department of Classical, Pop and Jazz Performing Arts, Faculty of Music Pedagogy, with academic supervisor Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak from AMDFA “Prof Asen Diamandiev” – Plovdiv.

The materials presented to me include the following documents:

- CV;
- dissertation work;
- abstract;
- list of scientific publications.

Xiao Lei is a baritone singer developing an active artistic, pedagogical, scientific research and administrative activity.

He graduated from the Conservatory of Music in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, with a degree in vocal music, and subsequently graduated with a Master's degree from the Conservatory of Anhui Normal University.

Doctoral student at AMDFA "Prof. Asen Diamandiev", Plovdiv, with scientific supervisor Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak. During his studies, he was an active participant in a number of artistic events. He performed in numerous concert projects, including the production of the opera *Elixir of Love* by Gaetano Donizetti, staged in the Academic Opera Theater, participated in the festival of the Academy under the title Made at Academy, the Ancient Theater in Plovdiv.

The doctoral student develops an active research activity. Research projects implemented in Anhui Province, China:

- leader of a key project in the field of humanities and social sciences - "Research on the Aesthetic Function and Value of Dangtu Folk Songs";
- project manager of the Ministry of Education - "Exploring the way to build a music professional program for higher education in civic education and politics";
- team member in the project of the Ministry of Education – “Research on the use of the Kodaly method of teaching music in the music education of pre-school students”.

He has published numerous research papers related to his professional competence in major Chinese academic journals.

In his career development, the doctoral student has been awarded a number of prizes from international vocal competitions held in China, Italy, Romania and Bulgaria.

Xiao Lei is currently the Assistant Dean of the Faculty of Music in Wuhu University,

Anhui Province, East China, Head of the Musicology Department, and Deputy Director of the Vocal Teaching and Research Section.

His teaching work is related to vocal performance art.

The candidate's interest in the researched topic was provoked by his professional orientation and the understanding that the art song carries significant cultural messages. In this context, the influence of socio-cultural features on the development of the Chinese art song is noted. Attention has been drawn to the need for the Chinese art song to use leading Western compositional concepts, but combining them with the tradition of the Chinese culture, to achieve the development of the Chinese vocal music and national identity. Xiao Lei argues that in order to achieve continuity and development of the Chinese art songs, along with the traditional knowledge, it is necessary to use up-to-date theoretical knowledge and practices to help the artistic growth of the Chinese song.

Of essential importance to the dissertation are the lyrics of the songs, which, in combination with the music, enable the audience to feel the depth of the classical Chinese literature. Poetry and music in art song are organically connected, which is also the starting point of the research.

The subject of research is the German-Austrian and the Chinese art songs - comparative analysis, cultural context, evolution, historical setting, artistic characteristics and musical style. Options for synthesis between German-Austrian art song and Chinese classical music culture are explored.

The tasks set by the doctoral student are caused by questions, the goals of which are to borrow the most valuable from the German-Austrian art songs, which would help unfold the potential of the Chinese traditional music, as well as to popularize the Chinese art songs on a global scale:

- paying particular attention to avoiding a total European influence and losing the national identity of the Chinese music;
- finding an accurate approach and inclusion of the traditional Chinese culture in the creative process of the art songs;
- preserving and developing the unique spirituality of the Chinese musical culture;
- combining the peculiarities of the native musical language with traditional Western compositional techniques, etc.

The author shares the opinion that the art song embodies the unique cultural qualities of the respective country, educates the aesthetic taste and enhances the general culture, and is also an important part of the methodology of vocal training in music institutes and universities.

The objective of the doctoral student, in his capacity as a vocal pedagogue, is to achieve a deeper and more detailed knowledge of the genre through a comparative study of the German-Austrian and the Chinese art songs.

The relevance of the topic of the dissertation *A Comparative Study of Aesthetic and Interpretive Problems in the Performance of Chinese, German and Austrian Art Songs* is conditioned by the dynamics in the development of the modern musical art, the need for adequacy to the current requirements, leading to examination, analysis, insight into the compositional features and the vocal style of the German-Austrian art songs. This will contribute to the enrichment of theoretical knowledge of the genre, familiarization with

international standards and current trends, which will reveal new perspectives for the development of the Chinese art song, as well as renewal of approaches in teaching methodology and its application in performing practice.

The research methods are: theoretical – study and analysis of written sources, musical-aesthetic analysis (musical form, harmony, melody, rhythm, orchestration, composition, etc.), comparative and empirical analysis conducted in a complex approach.

The reference for the scientific publications shows that they are three in number and they are directly related to the topic of the dissertation work.

The thesis contains five chapters, with the first chapter actually being an introduction.

Chapter One – *Introduction* is structured in three sections. In the first, the reasons for choosing the topic, the tasks and the importance of the issue under consideration are presented. In the second section, the current state of the existing studies on the chosen topic and its significance is outlined, and in the third section, research methods and research tools are described.

The second chapter - *Overview of the European art song* consists of two sections, in the first of which the author examines the historical development of the European art song. He offers a brief chronological overview of its evolution during the era of Classicism, early, middle and late Romanticism. The second section describes styles and trends in the European art song in a national aspect. The dominance of the German and Austrian art songs is noted. Xiao Lei points to the 1930s as the golden period of the German and Austrian art song. Iconic composers are represented: Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and others. The French art song called *chanson* by the French, the temperamental Russian art songs – *romance*, as well as the original Italian art songs, characterized by their creative aesthetics, melodiousness and amazing vocal technique, are examined.

Chapter Three, *Overview of the Chinese Art Songs* is divided into two sections.

In the first section, the doctoral student analyzes step by step the emergence and development of the Chinese art song:

- initial stage – origin, the 1920s to 1940s with particular historical significance for the formation of the art song. The socio-cultural prerequisites, the years after the success of the "May 4th Movement" in 1919, are defined by the author as one of the most beneficial for the vocal art. The strong influence of the school songs that appeared in the quest for musical education of the Western-type schools (European composition technique) in modern China is indicated. Iconic figures who contributed with their active creative work are presented, such as Li Shutong, Xiao Youmei, Zhao Yuenzhen, Qing Zhu, Huang Tzu;

- a transitional stage in which, during the 17 years from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966), the Chinese art songs continued their development. A period in which a number of prominent composers appeared: Ding Shande, Li Yinghai, Li Jiefu, Shu Wanchuan, etc.;

- the heyday period of the Chinese art song - from the 1980s to today, which Xiao Lei qualifies as the "second golden age" of the Chinese art songs. A period during which the artistic features of the Chinese national song finally crystallized. Based on the European compositional techniques, the authors creatively transform the Chinese melody and stylistics to create vocal works that carry the national identity and Chinese charm.

The second section examines compositional, performance and textual features of the

Chinese art songs, outlining five periods: school songs, influenced by the ideas of the May 4th Movement, the Anti-Japanese War, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, in which attention is focused also to the stylistic and thematic diversity and a period after the beginning of the reform policy of opening up to the world (from the beginning of the reform policy to the present day), where the socio-cultural prerequisites and the development of the Chinese art songs from the late 1970s to their peculiarities in the new century are analyzed. The maxim that creative ideas should reflect the achievements of socialist spirituality and the goal of building a strong and modern state was reported. Thus, art songs become a major factor in raising the level of the Chinese culture and the national self-awareness.

Chapter Four - *A Comparative Analysis between German-Austrian and Chinese Art Song*. In the first section, the doctoral student analyzes the differences in the socio-historical situation in the emergence of the German-Austrian art song, and then the Chinese art song. The differences are noted in terms of the historical and artistic context of their emergence. In the second section, the differences in the literary characteristics are examined and an analysis of the themes of the songs is made. In the third section, a comparative analysis of the musical styles is implemented. The importance of the organic unity between poetry and music, the essence of artistic song, is indicated. The musical structure is analyzed. Attention is paid to the continuity and renewal of the traditional structures of the musical form, the peculiarities of the structure and the overall arrangement in the vocal cycles (Analyses of the cycles: *The Fair Maid of the Mill* by Schubert - symmetry and coherence of the musical form as an expression of the national spirit, vocal cycle *Six Poems of Li Bai* by the composer Ma Sicong – melody development, tonality distribution, structural shaping and instrumental accompaniment construction approach - striving to combine Chinese and Western music, but emphasizing Chinese national style based on ancient traditional culture to achieve a bright Chinese complexion, etc.). Deepening the synthesis between Chinese and Western vocal styles. Deepening the synthesis between the Chinese and the Western vocal styles. The use of tonality as a means of expression and a technical method, harmony as a means of emphasizing form formation – in a historical aspect, technical features of the harmonic language in the European composers of Romanticism and also in the Chinese artists are examined.

Chapter Five – *Comparative Analysis of German-Austrian and Chinese Art Songs from the Perspective of Performance*. The first section analyzes the differences in performance aspect between art songs and opera arias – genre-stylistic features, technical and emotional aspects. The second section examines the artistic-interpretive nature of the song. Section three presents the performance differences between German-Austrian and Chinese art songs. Features of performance based on language, emotional expressiveness, stage performance.

In the Conclusion, the author make conclusions revealing the essence of the research and the results achieved. He argues that the socio-cultural climate determines the creative direction of the art song and that its future development is related to diversity. Similarities and differences are noted.

Similarities building the understanding of the creative concept of art song: both European and Chinese works contain the essential features of their national culture, satisfy the spiritual and cultural needs of different layers of society, reflect the creative concept of art song as "*seeking changes in the common, seeking common in the changes*", reveal the pursuit

of life's beauty and romance.

Differences: the German-Austrian and the Chinese art songs are oriented towards different spiritual values due to the specific historical context of emergence, there are differences in terms of themes and creative techniques, the latest Chinese art songs are developed according to the model of pluralism.

All this will contribute to enriching the theoretical-practical skills of the performing singers and will contribute to the achievement of a valuable professional interpretation, and will also expand the competences of music educators. The above determines the contribution nature of the study.

The work meets the requirements for creating a dissertation. The significant information is laid out in a total of 188 pages. The explanations are substantiated with appropriate musical examples – 19 in number and two photos, contributing to creating an even clearer idea of the object under consideration. The bibliography contains 45 sources, of which 2 are internet pages.

The contributions of the work are expressed in a theoretical and practical aspect:

- the first systematic comparative study devoted to German-Austrian and Chinese art songs;
- the works are examined in the context of the relevant era, historical review, tracing the development process, differences between cultures, etc.;
- an in-depth comparative analysis of musical and expressive means, as well as literary text, stage performance, etc., is made.
- based on previous research on considered problems, the research is further developed, analyzing the musical style of German-Austrian and Chinese art songs;
- works of great masters in the genre are presented;
- through an in-depth analysis of the various elements, the essence of the German-Austrian art song has been reached and a methodology has been proposed to achieve the development of the Chinese art song, namely: combining the modern Western compositional technique with Chinese cultural features and traditions and creating a certain theoretical basis to achieve a high artistic level in performing practice, of new quality works, adequate to modern requirements, meeting the spiritual needs of the audience.

The theoretical development of the candidate has practical applicability and is oriented towards both academic work and artistic activity. Each examined problem is theoretically argued and comprehensively explained. This determines the contribution nature of the dissertation.

I will allow myself to make a recommendation that the introduction of the work should not be included in the numbering of the chapters, i.e. the first chapter to be 'Overview of European Art Song' and the others to be renumbered, whereby the structure should be an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion.

The abstract is prepared according to the requirements and reflects the main results achieved in the dissertation.

In conclusion, I will point out that Xiao Lei's dissertation work titled *A Comparative Study of Aesthetic and Interpretive Problems in the Performance of Chinese, German and Austrian Art Songs* impressed me with the depth of the discussed themes, the analyzes and the scientific-theoretical justification, written in a professional language. It is apparent from what

is presented in the work that Xiao Lei is a musician with extensive practice and solid music-theoretical knowledge. I believe that the theoretical development fully meets the requirements for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree **Doctor** stipulated by the Law for the Development of the Academic Staff and the Regulations for its application. This gives me the reason to propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award Xiao Lei an educational and scientific degree Doctor.

23.08.2024

Plovdiv

Reviewer:

(Prof Borislav Yasenov)