

REVIEW

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

Xiao Lei

– 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:

A Comparative Study of Aesthetic and Interpretive Problems in the Performance of Chinese, German and Austrian Art Songs

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 17.04.2024, to open a procedure for the defense of the dissertation work of Xiao Lei, 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 data for the candidate:

Xiao Lei is born in 1987 in Wuhan, China. He graduated from the Department of Vocal Music of the Wuhan Conservatory of Music and obtained a Master's degree from the Conservatory of Anhui Pedagogical University. He is currently the Assistant Dean of the Department of Music at Wuhu University, the Head of the Musicology Department, and the Deputy Director of the Vocal Teaching and Research Section. Xiao Lei is a teacher of vocal music and singing.

Xiao Lei is a teacher of vocal music and singing. During his studies at Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts Plovdiv, he has participated as a baritone in numerous artistic projects, in the production of *Love Elixir*, in the role of Dulcamara, as well as in the Made at Academy concert in the Ancient Roman Theater. As a singer, Xiao Lei has won a number of awards from competitions, I will mention only a few: Silver medal in bel canto category at the Ninth Golden Bell of Chinese Music Vocal Competition in Anhui City, China; Gold Medal at the 6th National Song of China Vocal Competition, Anhui; Silver medal from the Italian International Vocal Competition "Teresa Belloc", 2016; finalist of the Romanian International Vocal Competition "Hariclea Darcee". He also participates in a number of research projects in Anhui Province and has more than ten publications in major Chinese academic journals.

The dissertation work *A Comparative Study of Aesthetic and Interpretive Problems in the Performance of Chinese, German and Austrian Art Songs* is very relevant with its subject, aimed at performance practices in the field of German-language art song in comparison with Chinese art songs, since interest in this repertoire is constantly increasing, as are the number of students from China attending European music academies. It is structured in an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, literature including 45 titles, mostly by Chinese authors. The total volume is 188 pages.

The research methods include a historical-comparative study of the development of the art song genre in Europe and in China, under the influence of the Western European musical culture, based on an in-depth study of the existing literature on the subject in China, which includes both fundamental monographic studies and numerous scholarly publications testifying to the great interest in the art of art song. Another research method is musical analysis, the subject of which are components such as musical form, harmony, melody, rhythm, orchestration, composition, etc.

In the **introduction** –first chapter, the main purpose, reasons for choosing the topic, methods, structure and expected results of the research are indicated.

In the **second chapter**, the author provides a historical overview and analysis of the emergence and development of art song in Europe. It begins with the appearance of the genre in the twelfth century in the

art of the troubadours and bards of southern France and their love songs and ballads. It passes through the German Minnesingers and Mastersingers of the 14th-16th centuries and reaches the era of classicism and its great representatives - Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. The author notes that their "*wonderful works testify that song creativity in the period of classicism represents a stage when the sprouts of a new musical genre appeared: the art song*" (p.23). The era of Romanticism, which is a climax in the development of the genre, is examined by the candidate in great detail, dividing the individual national schools of composers – German-Austrian, French, Russian and Italian. The most significant composers are listed with a brief overview of their song creations, and in a separate subsection "Styles and trends in the European art song", the author tries to formulate some stylistic features, analyzing individual songs by Schubert, Schumann, Fauré.

In the **third chapter**, the author examines the development of art song in China. It appeared in the 1920s "*as a vocal form that borrowed from the composer's approach in German-Austrian songs for unity between poetry, singing and piano accompaniment, and gradually began to mature as a genre*" (p.62). According to Xiao Lei three stages can be distinguished in the development of the art song in China. The initial stage includes the period from the 1920s to the 1940s and has a particular historical significance for the formation of the genre.

Characteristic of this period are the so-called "school songs", which appeared in China together with the appearance of the Western-type schools. According to the author, a transitional stage is the time from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the beginning of the so-called Cultural Revolution (1966), in which talented composers such as Ding Shandu, Li Yinghai, Li Jiefu, Shu Wanchuan, etc. create numerous art songs. The time from the 1980s to the present is defined by Xiao Lei as a period of prosperity in which the art song genre experienced a rapid development, in which "*...in terms of quantity, quality, conceptual-thematic scope and originality, the songs created during these years far exceeded the achievements of the previous two periods*" (p. 71).

Chapter four is central to the study and is an in-depth comparative analysis between the German-Austrian and the Chinese art song. As the first basis for comparison, the dissertation uses the socio-historical circumstances. For the German-Austrian song, it is the romantic literary movement Sturm und Drang from the end of the 18th century, which Xiao Lei defines as the first sprouts of romanticism. The birth of such poetic giants as Goethe, Schiller, and Heine led to the flowering of romantic lyricism, which inspired a number of composers of art songs. The emergence of the genre in China is a consequence of the emergence of the Western-type schools and the so-called "westernization" of education. In 1872-1875 the Qing government sent 120 students to study abroad. Music gradually acquired an important place in school education, school songs appeared, which were the forerunners of the Chinese art song. "*In most cases, the school songs are Western songs whose original lyrics have been replaced with Chinese*" (p.99).

The second comparative criterion is the literary characteristics and themes in the songs. The poetic text is the source of inspiration for the composer, so the poems are the driving force behind the creative impulse. According to the author, the Chinese art song composers prefer ancient Chinese poetry for their songs. "*These classic literary masterpieces, full of imagination and fantasy, expansive natural landscapes and rich imagery, proved to be the most suitable source of themes for the early Chinese art songs*" (p.102). Xiao Lei finds a striking similarity between the artistic style of the Western romantic literature and the classical Chinese poetry such as the *Book of Songs* (c. 6th century BC). In terms of subject matter, the author concludes that while Romanticism bows to the feelings of the individual, the contemplation of natural pictures and praise of the motherland predominates in the Chinese art songs.

The next criterion for comparison is musical styles. German-Austrian art songs were born in the spirit of national musical traditions. The composers of art songs in China strive to skillfully combine European and Chinese musical cultures and boldly experiment in terms of melody, harmonies, texture of instrumental accompaniment, musical form and structure, etc. The perfect combination of poetry and music is a major characteristic of the genre. As an interesting example of a perfect fusion between Western and Eastern culture, Xiao Lei gives Gustav Mahler's *The Song of the Earth* cycle, based on poems by ancient Chinese poets: "*The performance of ancient Chinese poetry in the German language and its musical re-creation by combining elements of Western and Eastern culture and by means of the compositional techniques of the Western music of the 20th century give the work an extraordinary impact, striking to the depths of the human soul*" (p. 111).

In terms of musical structure, the author finds that both European and Chinese art songs have a variety of forms. The traditional couplet, couplet-variation, two-part and three-part forms are most often used, and the structures developed through variations on these traditional forms throughout the composition open the way to innovative solutions.

In a separate subsection (3.2), the candidate compares the musical forms and tonal construction in vocal cycles of Schubert, Schumann and Brahms and the cycle "Six Poems of Li Bai" by the Chinese composer Ma Sicong.

In the **fifth chapter**, the author makes a comparison between German-Austrian and Chinese art songs from the point of view of performance. Special attention is paid to language differences, differences in emotional expressiveness and stage performance.

The conclusion synthesizes some of the insights: both the German-Austrian and the Chinese art songs contain the essential features of their national culture; the German-Austrian and the Chinese art songs are oriented towards different spiritual values due to the different historical contexts; there are differences in subject matter and creative techniques; the European vocal art is the only musical system with a significant influence on China in the last century.

The points of contribution of the dissertation work are divided into those of theoretical value and practical value, and I find them completely reasonable. The practical analyses are especially valuable, as the author refers to his singing practice.

The abstract corresponds to the content of the dissertation and the author's publications on the subject are sufficient and prove accumulated professional experience and a prominent research interest.

Xiao Lei's dissertation is a historical-comparative scientific study, with an in-depth approach to the issues under consideration, detailed analyses and logically formulated conclusions. I congratulate the author and his scientific supervisor - Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak, and I confidently propose to the respected Scientific Jury to award Xiao Lei the scientific educational degree "Doctor" in professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Art.

Sofia, 22.08.2024

Prof Ermila Schweitzer