

OPINION

by Prof Milena Shushulova-Pavlova, PhD, New Bulgarian University
on the dissertation work of **Xiao Lei**, full-time doctoral student at
Faculty of Music Pedagogy, Department of Classical and Pop and Jazz Performing Arts, Academy of
Music, Dance and Fine Arts "Prof. Asen Diamandiev", Plovdiv
Academic supervisor: Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak, PhD

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

for awarding educational and scientific degree Doctor
in Professional field 8.3. Music and dance art

Brief biographical data:

Xiao Lei is born in 1987 in the city of Wuhan in China. He completed his vocal training at the Wuhan Conservatory of Music and received Master's degree at Anhui Pedagogical University Conservatory. He is an assistant dean in the Department of Music at Wuhu University, head of the Musicology major and vice director of the Vocal Teaching and Research Section. During his regular doctoral studies at AMDFA, under the scientific guidance of Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak, he was actively involved in a number of artistic events, took part in concert projects: a staging of *L'elisir d'amore* in the role of Dulcamara; the Made at Academy event at the Ancient Roman Theater in Plovdiv, etc. He is the leader of the projects: "Research on the aesthetic function and value of Dangtu folk songs" in the field of humanities and social sciences, "Research on the way to build a music professional program for higher education in civic education and politics" of the Ministry of Education, in Anhui Province. He also participated in the project "Research on the use of the Kodaly method of teaching music in the music education of pre-school students" of Anhui Provincial Ministry of Education. He has published articles in major Chinese academic journals. He received a number of awards for his work: Silver medal in the bel canto category at the Ninth Golden Bell of Chinese Music Vocal Competition in Anhui, China; Silver Medal of the 10th Anhui Provincial Arts Festival Vocal Competition, China; Third prize in the 3rd National Vocal Competition for Music Education in Colleges and Universities; Gold Medal at the 6th Song of China National Vocal Competition, Anhui; Silver medal at the Teresa Belloc International Vocal Competition, Italy (2016); Hariclea Darclee Romanian International Vocal Competition Finalist Award; Outstanding Performance Award at the Renato Bruson International Vocal Competition in China; First prize for baritone at the Omega Concert Project in Sofia (2022); Gold medal in the vocal category of the European Metallophone Music Competition (2022).

Content of the dissertation

The dissertation contains 5 chapters (the first is introductory)¹, a conclusion, contributions, a

¹ First chapter. Introduction. Second chapter. General Overview of the European Art Song. Section One. Historical development of the European art song: 1. Brief presentation of the European art song; Second section. Styles and trends in European art song (1. The dominance of German and Austrian art songs; 2. The aesthetic world of French art song; 3. The sincere and temperamental Russian art songs; 4. The exquisite Italian art songs). Third chapter. Outline of the Chinese Art Songs. Section One. Historical Development of Chinese Art Song (1. Brief Introduction of Chinese Art Song; 2. Initial Stage of Chinese Art Song; 3. Transition Stage of Chinese Art Song; 4. Flowering Stage of Chinese Art Song); Second Section. Compositional and performance features of Chinese art songs (1. School song period; 2. Influence of the ideas of the "May 4th Movement" on Chinese art songs; 3. Anti-Japanese War period (1937-1945); 4. Post-foundation period of the People's Republic; 4.2. Performance features; 5. Period from the beginning of the reform policy to the present day; 5.3. Chinese art songs in the 1990s; 5.4. Features of Chinese Art Songs in the New Century). Fourth chapter. A Comparative Analysis between German-Austrian and Chinese Art Song; First Section. Differences in the socio-historical setting (1. Historical setting during the emergence of the German-Austrian art song; 2. Historical setting during the emergence of the Chinese art song; 3. Differences); Second section. Differences in literary characteristics and themes (1. Literary features; 2. Analysis of the themes); Third section. Comparative analysis of musical styles (1. Perfect combination of poetry and music; 2. Comprehensive development of dramatic tension; 3. Breaking up the musical structure; 4. Distribution of tonalities; 5. Harmonic techniques). Chapter five. A Comparative Analysis of German-Austrian and Chinese Art Songs from the Performance Point Of View. First section. Differences between the performance of art songs and opera arias (1. Genre-stylistic differences; 2. Technical and emotional differences) Second section. Analysis and expression of art song. Third section. Differences between German-Austrian and Chinese art songs in terms of performance (1. Features of performance in

bibliography of 45 sources in Chinese only (which implies the impossibility of checking them by the scientific jury), with a total volume of 188 pages.

Precisely formulated objectives and tasks of the dissertation

Around the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the Western civilization and the traditional Chinese culture came into fierce conflict, as a result of which the Chinese musicians became closely acquainted with the musical ideas, theoretical principles and compositional techniques of the Western music. The "May Fourth Movement" and the "New Culture Movement" gave impetus to a boom in modern Chinese music. The first examples of Chinese art song appeared. The doctoral student explains the reasons for the gradually waning interest in this type of art: "*the art songs increasingly lack freshness and genuine feeling and tend to be stuffy, pretentious and lack substance; authors often treat the art song as an ordinary song, unconcerned with such things as poetic allusion, national flavor, artistic style, or professional technique*" (quote). How to avoid the "westernization" of the Chinese music; how to integrate the traditional Chinese culture into the creative process of art songs; how to preserve and develop the unique spirituality of the Chinese musical culture; how to combine the peculiarities of the native musical language with the traditional Western compositional techniques, etc.: these emerging questions set the direction of this scientific study, the aim of which is to summarize and extract the most valuable from the successful experience of the German-Austrian art songs, so as to unleash the potential of the Chinese traditional music and enhance the influence of the Chinese art songs worldwide. The art song is a wonderful combination of music and poetry, embodying the unique cultural qualities of the respective country and people. They reveal strong emotions, cultivate sensibility, strengthen love for one's homeland and people, cultivate aesthetic taste and enhance general culture. Art song has an irreplaceable role and importance as a major component of vocal music training in professional music institutes and universities. Through the comparative study of German-Austrian and Chinese art songs, a deeper understanding and knowledge of this genre can be reached. Through the complex objective analysis and research of the compositional features and vocal style of the German-Austrian art songs, the theoretical understanding of the art song is supplemented so that the Chinese samples are in line with international standards and current trends. In this way, new perspectives are revealed for the development of the art song with Chinese specificity. The European vocal art is a musical system with significant influence on China. The doctoral student is convinced that in order to overcome the obstacles in the creation of high-quality art songs, a true Chinese style must be achieved through modern composing techniques, to overcome the situation of a too weak or completely removed national sound and Chinese individuality. Research methods: **Analysis of written evidence**, which is collected and distributed into eight categories: development, compositional features, aesthetics and performance of German-Austrian and Chinese art songs, respectively. Musical analysis of songs in terms of musical form, harmony, melody, rhythm, orchestration, composition, etc. For the purposes of this doctoral work, the most representative works have been selected and subjected to scientific analysis. The comparative method of research professes the principle "to look for differences in similarity and similarities in difference".

Significance of the researched problem and relevance

The main directions of this scientific research are the study of German-Austrian art songs, the discovery of their aesthetic essence, their scientific comparison with Chinese art songs, the study of the options for synthesis between the German-Austrian art song and Chinese classical music culture, and the successful presentation of this synthesis at the world stage. The art song genre, which originated in the Western Europe, is today among the significant carriers of cultural information. In the past one-hundred years, the Chinese art song has consistently followed a correct direction of development, taking into account the reactions of the public and achieving successes that give hope for the future. The study of Chinese art song must keep up with modernity and the rapid social progress. "*In the process of the continuous development and modification of the Chinese art song from the pre-modern era to the present day, the poems of the great ancient Chinese poets are increasingly used as song lyrics. In this way, along with the enjoyment of the music, the audience has the opportunity to feel*

German-Austrian art songs; 2. Analysis of the performance of German-Austrian art songs; 4. Analysis of the performance of Chinese art songs; 5. Differences).

the depth and the unique charm of the classical Chinese literature. Art songs are often referred to as verses in song form. "From the point of view of art form, poetry and art song are in terms of an inseparable organic unity, and the relationship between text and melody has always been a starting point in the study and analysis of art songs" (quote from the dissertation). This is as true for today's Europe and the United States as it was for China in the first half of the 20th century. As a kingdom of poetry with an ancient history and culture, China has a unique opportunity to take art song to new, glamorous heights.

The tasks of the research are related to the following aspects: through a comparative analysis of the Chinese and the Western cultural contexts and musical elements of art songs and through an in-depth comparative study of texts, harmony, musical structure, melodic line, the doctoral student offers new aspects of knowledge and understanding of this genre; in-depth analysis of hitherto unexplored areas in the specific examples of art songs by representative composers; through a precise analysis of individual components of the German-Austrian art song, ideas are proposed for the development of the Chinese art songs, both within the boundaries of the Chinese national music and on a global scale, so that they, carrying their national flavor, can more convincingly represent Chinese music culture to the world.

Degree of knowledge of the candidate

The current research on the German-Austrian art songs mainly focus on the vocal performance, analysis of piano accompaniment, artistic style, etc. The doctoral student divides the research on Chinese art songs into three categories: **First type** – dedicated to the emergence, development and stylistic features of the Chinese art song in the first half of the 20th century. The first art songs, early forms and the first mature works appeared at that time. A **second type** of research is devoted to the development and stylistic characteristics of the Chinese art songs after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. A **third type** of research focuses on the development of Chinese art song in the 20th century. A **fourth type** of research presents the views of respected specialists on the problems faced by the Chinese art song in the new era with its complex and dynamic economic and cultural environment. In the course of the comparative study, Xiao Lei came to the following important dissertationable conclusions: 1). *"Both the German-Austrian and the Chinese art songs contain the essential features of their national culture; both groups of songs satisfy the spiritual and cultural needs of different strata of society; both reflect the creative conception of the art song as seeking changes in the common, seeking common in the changes"and both reflect the attempt to achieve artistic justice and the spiritual longing in depicting a beautiful, romantic life"*. The above similarities build a new understanding of the creative concept of the art song, unfolding the spiritual qualities and inner meaning of the text as well. 2). *"The German-Austrian and the Chinese art songs are oriented towards different spiritual values. Due to the different historical contexts of their origin, at the heart of the German-Austrian art songs lies the longing to live truly, and the composer expresses his overall attitude through the scenes and experiences of the characters in the song. While the lyrics of the Chinese art songs are mostly from the ancient Chinese poetry, and accordingly, to one degree or another, reflect and express the overall perception of the ancient Chinese literati on their own being. At the same time, the interpretation of the texts is subject to adjustment depending on the continuous course of social development"*. 3). *"There are differences in the subject matter and creative techniques between the German-Austrian and the Chinese art songs. In the Chinese art songs, the main theme is the development of society based on the Chinese reality in different eras, so the art songs to a higher degree interpret the sentiments of the Chinese people. The German-Austrian art songs mainly praise and sing the beauty of life. In the process of its development, the Chinese art songs continuously adopt creative techniques and approaches from the German-Austrian art songs, further developing them by combining them with Chinese pentatonic scales. In this way, the songs as a whole take on a more characteristically Chinese sound"*. 4). *"The latest Chinese art songs are developing according to the model of pluralism. The different types and styles of art songs during this period are the result of the transition of composers from borrowing and imitation to complete mastery and from search and generalization to experimental innovation. Composers show unwavering creativity and daring drive in deploying various aspects of modern art song stylistics, whether they use pantonality, polytonality, atonality and the principle of dodecaphony, or traditional techniques based on functional systems and tonalities, or apply the principle of combination between tonal and atonal composing"*.

Correctness in citation

Xiao Lei is correct in his citations.

Assessment of the compliance of the abstract with the main points and contributions of the dissertation work

The abstract corresponds to the dissertation work.

Publications on the topic of the dissertation

The candidate has 3 publications on the topic of the dissertation:

Xiao Lei. *A Comparative Analysis of Early Chinese Art Songs and German-Austrian Art Songs*. In: Yearbook of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv, 2022, 213-222. ISSN:1313-6526 (print), ISSN:2738-7712 (online).

Xiao Lei. *Characteristics and development of early Chinese art songs*. In: Spring Scientific Readings of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv, 2023, 135-143. ISSN:1314-7005 (print), ISSN:2738-7720 (online).

Xiao Lei. *Historical development of the European art song*. In: Yearbook of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv, 2023, 213-222. ISSN:1313-6526 (print), ISSN:2738-7712 (online).

Contributions of the Doctoral Dissertation

Theoretical Contributions: This work is a systematic comparative study in micro- and macro perspective on the German-Austrian and the Chinese art songs. The macro-perspective includes the context of the relevant era, historical overview, tracing the development process, differences between cultures, etc.; and the micro-perspective is related to a thorough comparative study of musical elements, including the literary text itself, tonalities and modes, harmony, musical structure, horizontal melody, stage performance, etc. The author argues that the socio-cultural climate determines the creative direction of the art song and that its future development is related to diversity.

Practical Contributions: The present study builds on the achievements of previous generations of researchers and further develops them by analyzing the musical style of German-Austrian art songs on the one hand and Chinese art songs on the other. Examined and illustrated with examples are representative works of the great masters of the genre. By subjecting the various elements to a thorough analysis, the essence of the German-Austrian art song is arrived at, and a path for the development of the Chinese art songs, adequate for the future, is proposed: combining the modern Western compositional technique with the Chinese cultural characteristics and working out a certain theoretical basis to create more quality works at the height of the modern age that meet the spiritual needs of the public.

The comparative study of German-Austrian and Chinese art songs will help, based on the successful attempts so far, to find new ways to combine the Western and the Chinese musical culture to bring the vocal art to a new level, as well as help to promote even more successfully the centuries-old traditions of Chinese national music culture based on the absorption of the most valuable of the world's musical treasury.

In conclusion of this Opinion I will end with the following assessment: The work of the doctoral student corresponds to the scientometric indicators for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", according to the Law on the development of the academic staff of Republic of Bulgaria. The dissertation of **Xiao Lei**, doctoral student at AMDFA, titled: *A Comparative Study of Aesthetic and Interpretive Problems in the Performance of Chinese, German and Austrian Art Songs*, together with his contributions with scientific and applied qualities, as well as the publications on the topic, I consider it sufficient to give my **positive assessment** and to propose to the esteemed scientific jury to **award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"** in professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Art, to **Xiao Lei**, according to the requirements of the Law for development of the academic staff in Republic Bulgaria.

21.07.2024, Sofia

Prof Milena Shushulova-Pavlova, PhD