

REVIEW

by **Velislav Zaimov**

part-time Professor of Composition and Reading of Scores in the
Department of Conducting and Composition at the Faculty of Theory, Composition and Conducting
of

the National Academy of Music "Prof Pancho Vladigerov",

member of the scientific jury appointed by order of the Rector of the AMDFA, RD – 27 – 095/

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Yang Zhiyu, titled *Folk Features and Conductor Interpretations in the Chinese Choral Works*

in the Professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Art

Yang Zhiyu is a Chinese pianist. He comes from a family of musicians. He began studying piano at a very young age. He studied at Xiamen University and the Central Conservatory of Music. His teachers were Professors Yang Ming, Zhang Peili, and Zhu Yafen. He graduated with Master's degree in piano and choral conducting from the Polish Conservatory of Music in Gdansk. He also studied at the Polish Conservatory of Music in Krakow and the Frederic Chopin University of Music.

Yang Zhiyu works as a conductor and manager of the Ximen Siming Music Association Choir, as well as a piano teacher. He has been a member of various juries in piano competitions.

He is currently a professor at Ximen Huatian College, which is located in South China.

The presented dissertation work *Folk Features and Conductor Interpretations in the Chinese Choral Works* consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, a list of contributions and a list of used literature, including twenty-three titles from Chinese sources translated into Bulgarian.

The **Introduction** states the object, purpose and significance of the study. The origin of multi-part Chinese choral music from ancient court ritual music is also indicated. The comparison of the Chinese choral music with the European music is successful, and the most significant differences are found.

A significant place in the Introduction is devoted to the chronological development of the Chinese choral music, indicating the main four stages through which it passes – from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day.

The introduction establishes the guidelines on which the entire work will be built with several areas of analysis:

- Historiography of Chinese music
- Analysis of the included works
- Theory of choirs and choral conducting
- Historiography of Chinese choral music

Chapter One, “**Folk Styles and Conductor Interpretations of Chinese Choral Works**,” is devoted to the different regions of China from the perspective of the characteristics of their musical

language. The author identifies five such regions: Northwest China, Southeast China, Northeast China, and Inner Mongolia Province. There is also a separate section on operatic elements in Chinese choir. For each region, the most typical characteristics are given in terms of mode features, melody, and rhythm.

For each region the author gives an example of a choral song which is examined according to the following three indicators:

- Text content
- Structure from the point of view of musical form
- Conductor's interpretation

At the end of each section, after the abovementioned characteristics, brief biographical data about the composer of the analyzed choral work are also given.

Arranged in this way, the points in the sections of this chapter, although they may seem a bit schematic, provide maximum clarity about the examined choral works.

In Chapter Two, “Categories and Artistic Characteristics of Chinese Choral Works,” the author makes a classification into four categories of works:

- Choral works in their authentic state in the form of folk songs
- Choral works with a local ethnic character
- Choral works based on traditional Western compositional methods
- Choral works based on ancient Chinese songs

For each of these categories, an example is provided, which is analyzed in terms of the mode basis, the melody, the divisions in the song structure, and the texture with the distribution of the roles performed by the individual voices – female choir parts, male choir parts, and soloists.

In the category “*Choral Works Based on Traditional Western Compositional Methods*”, where the song “The Rhythm of the Waves” by Zhao Yuanren, based on a text by Xu Zhimo for solo soprano and mixed four-part choir, is analyzed, the author finds an influence of techniques from European opera and oratorio, namely the use of recitatives and arias. Since the songs in this category also pose new problems for the performers, the dissertation offers some guidelines for them, as well as guidelines for the conductor. Similar requirements for the performers are also proposed for the work for mixed choir “Sunny Triplet”, which is analyzed in the last category “*Choral Works Based on Ancient Chinese Songs*”.

The author has found that the songs included in the last two categories require more special preparation and more professional skills on the part of the performers.

Chapter Three, “Inheritance and Development of Folklore Traditions in Chinese Large-Scale Choral Works,” begins with a detailed exposition of the concepts of the Chinese musical styles based on the pentatonic scale. Here is the significance the Chinese musicology attaches to this scale: “*It is impossible to understand the Chinese musical style without understanding the pentatonic scale as a national scale. It is not just a scale, but one of the important symbols of the Chinese music as a*

whole. Its basic principle consists in constructing five ascending perfect fifths or five descending perfect fourths of a certain tone.” The five tonalities that are obtained on each of the tones of the pentatonic scale are shown, with this tone becoming the basis for a separate tonality or five tonalities on the five tones obtained from five ascending fifths or, respectively, on five descending fourths. I would say that these are rather different modes based on the pentatonic scale, since the pentatonic scale can be built on any of the twelve tones of the chromatic scale. However, in European musicology it is accepted that the main tones of pentatonic scales can only be those tones of the pentatonic scale on which a major or minor triad can be built. So, in each pentatonic scale, modes can only be built on the tones obtained from the first and fourth ascending fifths or, respectively, descending fourths.

The main topic of this chapter is *“large-scale vocal musical works of China”*. As an example is given the “Yellow River Cantata” by the composer Xian Xinghai, which is analyzed according to several indicators: modes, compositional technique, contrapuntal technique. Here, the principles of formation of Chinese modes are presented, based on the so-called tritone series, hexatonic mode and heptatonic mode. According to the theory of vertical construction, the tritone series should be defined not as *“two major seconds or one major second and one minor third, forming a series of three tones”*, but as a major second and a major third and, respectively, as a major second and a perfect fourth, since each interval is calculated from the lowest tone upwards.

The principles of forming hexatonic and heptatonic modes by adding tones filling the intervals of minor thirds in the pentatonic scale with an interval of a minor or major second from the lower tone are interesting. In fact, this is how all diatonic modes in European music are obtained. In Chinese music, however, the names are different. These added to tones of a minor and major second have an unstable character - like passing foreign tones. Obtaining these modes can be made much easier by adding two more ascending fifths or two descending fourths to the pentatonic scale. This is how the European diatonic modes are obtained (as discussed above), which also have stable and unstable degrees.

The “Yellow River Cantata” by Xian Xinghai itself is analyzed in detail from a performance perspective, with guidelines for the conductor given for each of the eight movements of the work.

In **Chapter Four, “Heritage in Contemporary Concepts for Creating Choral Works,”** Yang Zhiyu selects three significant Chinese choral works composed in developed large forms: “Ode to the Eight Horses” by Ser Enkhbayar, the vocal-instrumental cycle “Hu Jia Ying” by Li Huangzhi, and “The Big Fish” by Wen Yuchuan. They present contemporary Chinese choral music in various aspects and provide an opportunity to reach generalizations. Each work is examined in terms of both musical form and mode, tonality, and harmonic language. For each work, the difficulties in performance are shown and advice is offered for overcoming them. They are addressed both to the conductor and to the choristers themselves.

This dissertation shows a very good knowledge of the contemporary Chinese choral music, as well as the Chinese way of composing – in itself with its peculiarities, but also compared with the European musical traditions. The best quality of the work is the clear thought in presenting the problems and their correct arrangement and grading. This enables choral figures to easily become familiar with and improve their work with the entrusted choral ensembles. Moreover, the author firmly believes that *“the Chinese choir performers should be committed to serving the aesthetic needs of the Chinese people, be closely connected with their aesthetic values, seek paths for development, and achieve innovative breakthroughs from the perspective of the Chinese national culture.”* In this sense, he also sees one of the main contributions of his doctorate.

After all the above, I give a positive assessment of the **dissertation *Folk Features and Conductor Interpretations in the Chinese Choral Works*** by Yang Zhiyu and propose to the esteemed scientific jury that the author be awarded the educational and scientific degree "**Doctor**" in professional field 8.3 - Music and Dance Art.

Sofia, 24.07.2024

Prof Velislav Zaimov