

Research on Chinese opera and chorus art: the integration path of traditional opera and modern chorus

Shuting Yang

School of Art, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing, China

2381502953@qq.com

Abstract. This paper takes the emergence, development, and integration of Chinese xige (opera song) into choral art as its main research focus. As an artistic form that merges traditional Chinese opera with modern popular music, xige demonstrates a unique trajectory of evolution and aesthetic features in the contemporary musical context. The study first analyzes the socio-cultural background of xige's origin and its developmental characteristics across different historical stages. It then outlines the creative paths, structural integration methods, and vocal techniques involved in xige choral works, with particular emphasis on the expressive mechanisms and aesthetic values of operatic elements within choral formats. The research concludes that while xige inherits the essence of traditional Chinese art, it also expands the expressive scope of modern choral music, showcasing strong artistic vitality amid multicultural exchange. This paper aims to provide theoretical support for the academic study and creative practice of xige, promoting the contemporary expression and transmission of traditional Chinese opera.

Keywords: xige, choral art, operatic elements, musical integration, artistic inheritance

1. Introduction: analysis of the reasons for the emergence of Chinese xige

Traditional Chinese opera boasts a long and profound history. It was formally established during the Song Dynasty and reached remarkable prosperity during the Yuan and Ming Dynasties. By the Qing Dynasty, a competitive landscape among the four major vocal styles had gradually taken shape, leading to the development of highly sophisticated vocal performance techniques. One of the most crucial aspects of opera is its stylization—using standardized, codified expressions to shape musical character portrayals. This approach has long been an integral compositional method in opera, evolving over time rather than being formed overnight. Like a brilliant star, it radiates lasting artistic charm and continues to captivate audiences.

However, as the economy grows and society progresses, public aesthetics also undergo constant change. People's understanding of traditional opera has, in some ways, become problematic or detached. This demands that opera, as a traditional art form, must keep pace with the times and evolve accordingly. Compared with opera, popular music—characterized by its accessibility and alignment with modern life—is more appealing to contemporary audiences. Its forms are more diverse, its content more colorful, and it possesses a universality and fluidity that traditional opera struggles to match. Today, music can be easily accessed through mobile phones, MP3 players, KTV, and other direct playback devices, placing traditional opera at a distinct disadvantage in terms of dissemination and popularity.

The emergence of xige effectively addresses this shortcoming. The creation of xige must follow not only certain rules and conventions of traditional opera but also the compositional norms of contemporary songs. Only through the organic fusion of these two elements can a piece of music truly be called xige.

2. The development of Chinese xige

2.1. Early stage: operatic elements dominant over pop elements

The musical form known as xige first emerged in mainland China during the 1989 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, where the performance of “*Rap on Facial Makeup*” captivated audiences with its distinctive operatic style [1]. Although rooted in traditional opera, the piece was performed with a popular rhythm, deeply resonating with the hearts of Chinese viewers. During this initial stage, xige works were closely associated with the flavor of Peking Opera, not only in vocal performance but also in stage presentation and artistic style.

The song's composer, Yan Su, once stated that the motivation behind "*Rap on Facial Makeup*" was to help young people understand and appreciate the ancient art of opera, aiming to immerse a new generation in operatic aesthetics. This was part of a broader cultural aspiration: to promote and revitalize traditional Chinese opera in the context of national rejuvenation. While the operatic essence remained strong in these early works, they did not strictly follow traditional singing conventions. For instance, many pieces employed orchestral accompaniment instead of the conventional ensemble of opera instruments.

Other early xige songs such as "*My Hometown is Beijing*" and "*Qianmen Teahouse Memories*" were either based on Peking Opera melodies or composed in folk opera tones. As a result, these works were often referred to as "*Jing-ge*" (Beijing-style songs) [2], reflecting their deep-rooted "Peking flavor." As xige gradually spread to Hong Kong and Taiwan, it began to blend with local musical styles, creating distinct regional differences.

Take "*Beijing at Night*" by Bobby Chen as an example: it was not created for political or commercial purposes, but simply to tell a sorrowful and touching love story. The song lacks ornate decoration or rigid adherence to opera form. Instead, it flows naturally with personal emotion, creating a pop music atmosphere that aligns with modern tastes.

An important shift in the evolution of xige was the change in accompaniment. With the advent of China's reform and opening-up, Western instruments flooded the domestic music scene. Traditional opera rarely used Western instruments, but xige began incorporating them in arrangements, thereby aligning more closely with contemporary aesthetic preferences.

2.2. Later stage: pop elements dominant over operatic elements

The rapid development of modern society has accelerated the spread and diversification of music. Xige has thus been influenced not only by the music of Hong Kong and Taiwan, but also by Western pop and classical traditions. New musical styles and personalities have entered the public eye, shaping the direction of musical evolution.

Compared with earlier decades, contemporary xige differs greatly in both purpose and technique. The influence of popular music has been particularly significant, as it exerts the strongest impact on xige's development. Yet Chinese opera, with its millennia of cultural depth, remains an essential creative resource—one that increasingly resonates with younger generations.

Some innovative artists have integrated operatic elements into their musical creations, producing a wealth of Chinese-style pop music. Take Jay Chou, for example. In his performance of "*My Territory*," he wears Peking Opera costumes while performing hip-hop, creating a highly theatrical and dramatic effect. In other works like "*In the Name of the Father*" and "*Dragon Fist*," Peking Opera performances and vocal styles are also featured. These works exemplify a growing trend in which popular music incorporates traditional operatic aesthetics.

Although xige has seen fewer groundbreaking works in mainland China in recent years, its overall development remains promising and full of artistic potential.

3. Emergence and development of xige choral works

If folk songs are considered universally shared across cultures, then opera embodies a uniquely "otherworldly" charm that distinctly represents Chinese aesthetics. Since the formation of the four major vocal styles in Chinese opera, these traditions have continued to blend, intersect, and influence one another. Over centuries, they have branched into dozens of local opera genres, significantly inspiring composers' creativity.

With the flourishing of choral music in China and a growing emphasis on traditional opera culture, some composers began to incorporate operatic elements into choral works. Examples include adaptations of Peking Opera pieces such as "*Lihua Song*," "*Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*," "*Island Moonlight*," "*Farewell, King of Chu*," and "*Home in Anyuan*" [3]; Henan Opera's "*Chaoyanggou*"; and the Yue Opera-based female chorus "*Parting Sorrow*." [4] These compositions have not only rejuvenated traditional opera but also infused choral art with a uniquely Chinese charm.

3.1. Forms of xige expression in chorus

Xige choral works can be categorized into three types based on their compositional origins:

1. Adaptations of existing opera excerpts into choral works;
2. Choral rearrangements of solo xige pieces;
3. Original choral compositions that integrate operatic elements.

From a stylistic perspective, these can be expressed through unison singing, canon (rounds), or multi-part choral arrangements.

For example:

"*Dingjun Mountain*," originally a classic Peking Opera piece, retains its signature vocal lines in choral form while adding harmonic depth and layered texture. The interplay among voice parts imitates various operatic roles, blending operatic expressiveness with choral harmony.

·“*Rap on Facial Makeup*,” originally a solo xige, gains vitality in its choral version through differentiated melodic lines assigned to various parts. Rhythmic variations further enhance its liveliness and drive.

·“*Light*,” adapted into a multi-part chorus, maintains the original spoken-word segments and adds layers of harmony in the chorus sections, like the poem “*Calm in the Face of Storm*” (Ding Feng Bo), progressing from unison to part-singing for dramatic contrast.

·“*Mountain Moon*,” based on Xu Zhimo’s poem “In the Mountains,” blends opera melodies and rhythms with Kunqu-style recitation. The contrasting vocal parts enrich the artistic texture and lend the work a unique charm.

3.2. Structural integration and musical fusion

Opera music is typically constructed horizontally, focusing on linear melodic development. It may also include harmonic textures between vocal lines and accompaniment. In contrast, choral music emphasizes vertical, multi-layered structures. When integrating operatic elements into choral works, composers must retain stylistic integrity while restructuring the music for clarity and balance. This ensures that operatic flavor is preserved while enhancing dramatic conflict and musical expressiveness [5].

Examples include:

·In the children’s choir “*Singing Facial Makeup*,” three bars of accompaniment are inserted between fast-paced sections. Rhythmic alternation of repeated notes enhances musical pulse while preserving operatic flavor.

·The mixed-voice chorus “*Island Moonlight*,” adapted from *The Drunken Concubine* (a Peking Opera masterpiece by Mei Lanfang), is arranged by composer Zhang Jian. Rather than piano or traditional accompaniment, it uses purely vocal harmonies to portray the moonlit setting. Four sections reflect key plot developments using voice color and vertical harmony, intensifying characterization.

·“*Spring Returns to the World*,” by the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, reimagines operatic pacing with choral techniques. Onomatopoeic sounds and shifting tempos create dramatic scenes and highlight the protagonist Yang Zirong’s spirit. Male and female parts alternate and overlap, emphasizing his heroism and reinforcing the narrative.

3.3. Vocal techniques and expressive fusion

(1) Diction

Both opera and choral singing aim to convey emotion through precise vocal expression, emphasizing accurate pronunciation and vocal tone [6]. “Clear articulation and rounded tone” is essential. In Peking Opera, the technique of “singing according to the word” adjusts vocal modulation based on syllables, tone, and semantics. Three key components—initial sound, nucleus, and ending—determine clarity and meaning.

“Pengkou” (explosive consonants), such as those used by Mei Lanfang in the phrase “*Island Moonlight Rising*” (hai-dao bing-lun), reflect anger or determination. This technique is similarly applied in choruses like “*Spring Returns to the World*,” where words like “insert” or “strike” are delivered with emphatic bursts to convey the protagonist’s resolve.

(2) Dragged Tones (Tuoqiang)

Dragged tones are extended vocal phrases often used at the ends of lines to enhance lyrical tension [7]. They may also include filler syllables for expressive effect. Properly executed, they reflect character psychology and narrative depth. These tones require variations in pitch, tempo, and emotional shading—emphasizing “rising and falling, inhaling and releasing, density and contrast.”

“Rising and falling” reflect pitch flow; “pauses” allow emotional pacing; “inhaling and releasing” align vocal production with tonal quality. As scholar Lu Wenqin put it: “High phrases need inhalation; low ones require projection. Subtle emotion prefers inhalation; dramatic flair needs projection—all must follow emotional contour.”

(3) Ornamentation (Runchang)

Runchang (vocal embellishment) enriches phrasing and musical nuance. Common techniques include souyin (vocal tremble), portamento (glide tones), and grace notes. Each opera school or performer handles these differently. In choral contexts—especially those mimicking opera or folk styles—ornamentation prevents vocal lines from sounding stiff or dull.

Examples include:

·“*Prosperous Pear Garden*,” performed by the Nankai University Chorus, incorporates runchang techniques like delayed resolution and melodic turns, vividly conveying opera’s expressive essence.

·“*Cailing Stage*,” by the Beiyang Choir, uses operatic motifs and mimics actor movement and vocal patterns through sliding tones and call-and-response structures, evoking a vivid scene of operatic training and rehearsal.

4. Conclusion

As a unique musical form that blends traditional Chinese opera with modern musical language, xige embodies the innovative reinterpretation of traditional culture within a contemporary context. This paper has systematically reviewed the origins, developmental trajectory, expressive forms in choral works, structural integration, and vocal techniques of xige, revealing its multifaceted artistic value and communicative potential [8].

The fusion of operatic elements with choral art not only promotes the modern transformation and expression of traditional opera, but also expands the creative boundaries and aesthetic forms of Chinese choral music. While challenges remain in terms of audience reception and performance practice, xige choruses, in the broader context of global cultural diversity, hold significant cultural value and artistic potential.

Therefore, xige deserves continued in-depth research and active promotion as a means to facilitate the creative transformation and innovative development of outstanding traditional Chinese arts.

References

- [1] Lv, S. J., & Hong, Y. (2023). A review and reflection on the definition and diversified derivation of "Xige" (Chinese opera-song). *Voice of the Yellow River*, (2), 16-19.
- [2] Tian, T. H. (2022). On Jingge—A branch of Chinese Xige [Master's thesis, Harbin Conservatory of Music]. Supervisor: Li Y.
- [3] Wang, J. (2010). Perfect integration and exquisite expression: Insights from analyzing the chorus "Living in Anyuan". *New Voices of Yuefu (Journal of Shenyang Conservatory of Music)*, 28(2), 12-20+1.
- [4] Liu, Y. (2021). Research on the integration of Peking Opera elements in Chinese choral works [Master's thesis, Liaoning Normal University]. Supervisor: Liu S. H.
- [5] Liu, C. N. (2013). A brief analysis of choral music works adapted from traditional Chinese opera. *Voice of the Yellow River*, (3), 56.
- [6] Sun, W. (2005). A comparison between Chinese opera vocal music and choral art. *Drama Literature*, (9), 91-94.
- [7] Zhang, Q. (2010). Research on the application of Chinese opera music elements in contemporary Chinese music creation [Master's thesis, Shanghai Conservatory of Music].
- [8] Peng, C. S. (2016). On the application of chorus in traditional Chinese opera. *Voice of the Yellow River*, (15), 89.