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Chinese Jiangnan Erhu Music Style

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Abstract

This thesis examines the genesis and evolution of the Jiangnan Erhu style, an artistic tradition deeply rooted in the region's geographical, cultural, and linguistic milieu, which underscores the refined and aesthetically pleasing characteristics, distinguished by its employment of various techniques, including embellishments and vibrato, resulting in a distinctive tonal quality. The development of the Jiangnan Erhu style is intricately linked to the region's traditional stringed and woodwind instruments music and indigenous opera, with notable figures such as Liu Tianhua exerting a profound influence on its maturation. Jiangnan style is also celebrated for its extensive compositions, which exhibit numerous melodic development strategies and a consistent rhythmic tempo, encapsulating the "light, fine and elegant" essence of Jiangnan music.

Keywords

Jiangnan Erhu music style; artistic style; performance technique.

1. Introduction

Different regions have formed different music styles, influenced by different geography, dialects, living customs and other elements. In modern China, the erhu has flourished since it was improved by Liu Tianhua, which became a leading instrument and not only as an accompaniment, applied in a wide range of folk music. During the rapid development of erhu, different styles of erhu playing schools were formed, among which the most outstanding ones that combined local folk music were the Qin School and the Jiangnan School. Unlike the former, influenced by strong and bold Shaanxi folk music, Jiangnan folk music prefers light, bright, delicate and soft. Jiangnan Erhu is nurtured and formed by the local environment, various dialects and particular culture, even the locals' certain way of life, which to some extent reflects the aesthetic standard of the people in this region. Elegant and beautiful could be its main characteristics, and the techniques of fill, vibrato, trembling, **brio** and portamento are widely used in Jiangnan Erhu, adding unique phonetic beauty and artistic charm to this style. The unique techniques of traditional stringed and woodwind instruments laid the basis for the performance style of Jiangnan erhu and the essence of the erhu playing techniques in southern China.

2. The Formation of Jiangnan Style of Erhu

Music culture and economy are in a symbiotic relationship. A prosperous economy promotes the development of culture and contributes to the formation of music styles. Due to the superiority of the geographical location and features of the Jiangnan area, since the Chinese Song Dynasty, especially since the Ming and Qing dynasties, driven by the commodity economy, the rise of Jiangnan towns and the prosperity of commercial trade, cultural and educational undertakings, folklore activities, and music and art varieties, etc. promoted the survival and development of this instrument. Jiangnan area has been affluent since ancient times when people's cultural and recreational life were rich and colorful. The wealth and mild climate have

nurtured the gentle and sentimental local people. At the same time, the prosperous economy also made the Jiangnan area a gathering place for the integration and development of many kinds of opera arts. The music culture deposited in Jiangnan laid a solid foundation for the development of the erhu art during the change of Jiangnan's economic and cultural environment. Erhu, used as an opera accompaniment and ensemble instrument in the past, gradually developed into a solo instrument form. In the early process, the abundant opera art was its important dependent carrier, also an important creation source for the erhu performance works during the change of its performance form and laid an important foundation for erhu's development in the future.

The folk instrumental ensemble form also promoted the development of Jiangnan erhu. Traditional stringed and woodwind instruments in Jiangnan have a long history and have absorbed and carried the essence of many Jiangnan operas, songs, and music types, thus gradually becoming a type of folk music with typical style, deep cultural heritage and high level of performance, which also supplied the nutrition for erhu [1]. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Jiangnan area was popularized with music played by traditional stringed and woodwind instruments, and erhu played an important role in the orchestra. Some music parts could even be used for solo performance, thus gradually over time, a new form of erhu performance was established, that is, Jiangnan Erhu solo, which also indicates that the erhu performance has been developed to quite a high artistic level.

At that time, Zhou Shaomei, a master of the erhu, improved the instrument by lengthening the body, and in his performance of “Song Of Southerly Breeze”, he expanded the **handles** to three, with various playing techniques for both hands, which allowed the erhu music to convey much more feelings and made this traditional instrument stand out from the other bowed stringed instruments. Traditional stringed and woodwind music continued to develop its unique characteristics, sweet and attractive in performance, melodic, refreshing and changing in melody. It also adhered to the elegant musical style of Kunqu art, loved by the literati favored the rhyme of “elegant and moderation” in the aesthetic interest. Accordingly, the Jiangnan stringed and woodwind music, as the origin of Jiangnan Erhu, was bound to transmit its artistic style to the erhu art performance creation. As a result, the humanistic and geographic environment of Jiangnan, opera and other folk arts prompted erhu to an independent artistic performance form, and gradually evolved into the source of the Chinese southern erhu artistic performance style, which also laid the foundation of the modern erhu development.

With the accumulation and metamorphosis of erhu in traditional music, by the beginning of the 20th century, Liu Tianhua, based on the former artistic foundation, greatly improved the performance and the musical creation of this instrument. Liu was also inextricably linked with the Jiangnan erhu art. As a native of Jiangsu Province, he was surrounded by traditional stringed and woodwind music in childhood, so he was familiar with the music style and applied his special aesthetic characteristics to his composition, which provided this solo instrument with rich playing techniques and an elegant and delicate playing style. Nurtured by the unique culture of the Jiangnan area, some excellent performers and educators sprang up at that time, including the famous erhu artists, Ah Bing and Sun Wenming, who pioneered the erhu development. In addition, Gan Tao, Qu Anhua, Shen Zhenglu, Wang Yi, Xiang Zuhua, Min Huifen, Ma Youde, Zhang Rui, Chen Yaoxing, Zhu Changyao, Cao Yuande, Qian Zhihe, Ou Jingxing, Yang Yihe, Yu Han, Deng Jiandong, Yu Huisheng, Xu Ke, Zhao Hanyang, Feng Zhihao, Gao Yang, and Bian Liunian etc., were the representatives of the Jiangnan school of erhu, and their comprehension and perception about Jiangnan culture was formed due to the unique regional humanistic environment and Jiangnan style music. And their specific interpretation of this regional style laid the foundation for its artistic characteristics.

There is a rich accumulation of Jiangnan Erhu compositions, from the erhu sketch *Pastoral Spring Scenery* of Chen Zhenduo in the 1920s and 1930s, to the *Bouncing Music* of Sun Wenming

and the *Changing of the Village* of Mr. Zeng Jiaqing in the 1950s and 1960s, to the *Jiangnan Spring Scene* of Zhu Changyao and *Gusu Spring Dawn* of Deng Jiandong in the 1980s, and then to the *Peach Blossom Dock* of Li Bochen, which have greatly enriched the erhu works, and provided the necessary means and carrier for the inheritance and dissemination of Jiangnan Erhu [1]. These representative artists have not only created numerous erhu works of Jiangnan style but have also endeavored to disseminate and promote this artistic style in their stage performances and teaching practices, playing an important role in the inheritance and innovation of the erhu art. Among them, Zhu Changyao is the representative figure of the Jinling School. His *Jiangnan Spring Scene* has been spreading rapidly since the Chinese National Instrumental Solo Competition in 1982, regarded as a must-play to express the style of Jiangnan Erhu. Besides, there are large amounts of representative pieces, such as *Pastoral Spring Scenery, Changing of the Village*, ***Bouncing Music***, *Songs of the Canal Town*, *Scenes of the Mountain Village*, *Gusu Spring Dawn*, *Joyful Drums and Gongs*, *A Song of the South of Jiangsu Province*, *Mooring at Night by the Maple Bridge*, *Yangzhou Minor*, *Country Party*, *Love in Gusu*, *Peach Blossom Dock*, *Erhu Concerto No. 2*, *The Scent of the Taihu Lake* and so on [2], which all exhibit the elegant, soft, mellow and delicate style characteristics of Jiangnan music culture.

In addition to the accumulation of works created in the profound regional humanistic environment and the excellent group of artists, reams of academic studies are also the necessary foundation for the formation of Jiangnan Erhu, which is now a school of erhu performance in China today. There is a vast scope of theoretical information based on the deep study of Jiangnan Erhu and querying CNKI, there are more than 200 academic journals about this school.

3. The Artistic Style of Jiangnan Erhu

Jiangnan area has picturesque scenes, where the unique water culture creates a dynamic and vibrant natural landscape, and the long history deposits its unique traditional culture. No matter the unstrained whitewashed buildings like ink paintings, or the poems and songs praising the beauty of the region, all of them reflect the thick historical background and rich cultural atmosphere. Jiangnan Erhu mainly draws on traditional Jiangnan stringed and woodwind music, local folk songs and operas. Influenced by the local humanistic and geographical environment, Jiangnan Erhu is unique in its elegant, soft, delicate and refined artistic style, which is inextricably shaped by the local dialect.

Jiangnan Erhu is homogeneous with the cultural character of Jiangnan music, and the flexible geographical environment of the Jiangnan area has formed the so-called Wu Nong soft language which is famous for its soft, waxy, sweet and charming characteristics, and Suzhou dialect is the most typical. The language has a direct influence on the music style of the Jiangnan area. The language is either soothing or accelerating, flat or curved, ascending or descending, and the changes in tone have added to the softness and gentleness of the Wu language [3], which could be another significant factor that contributes to the graceful and delicate artistic style of Jiangnan music.

Elegance is another main artistic characteristic of Jiangnan music culture. Elegant music, with its harmonious and beautiful tones, was always respected by the emperors and rulers, who hoped to reconcile class conflicts through music with the function of “harmony”. The ruling class's advocacy of elegant music also had a subtle effect on the people's aesthetic concepts in the Jiangnan area at that time. In China, since the Tang and Song dynasties, under the influence of Confucianism, the musical concepts in the Jiangnan area have become increasingly elegant. While appreciating the music originating from the Jiangnan area, like Kunqu and traditional stringed and woodwind music, we can vividly touch the elegant temperament.

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The sources of the tunes of Jiangnan Erhu mainly come from the following two aspects: first, folk instrumental music, opera, and song tunes. In the early development of erhu art, Liu Tianhua, Hua Yanjun and other famous artists lived in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China when stringed and woodwind music and folk opera were prevalent in the Jiangnan area. Therefore, the use of this music material in their compositions was particularly prominent. Liu Tianhua utilized the tunes of Suzhou Pingtan in *The Song of Birds on the Empty Mountain* and *Idyllic Tune*. In the 1980s, Deng Jiandong's typical erhu compositions, the *Wu Ballads* and *Gusu Spring Dawn*, also applied a rich variety of accompaniment and singing tones from Suzhou Pingtan. In addition, the ***Mo Woman Fantasia*** of He Zhanhao and the *Joyful Drums and Gongs* and *Tune of Southern Jiangsu* of Zhu Changyao also used a variety of Chinese opera materials.

Besides, Jiangnan folk songs are also the main source, which not only became the direct and indirect musical materials for Jiangnan operas but also contributed to the creation of Jiangnan Erhu music after the erhu art was primarily formed. In the 1950s and 1960s, folk songs were very popular among the public for their relatively simple art form. The thriving of folk songs also promoted the development of Jiangnan Erhu, and there appeared ample works with folk songs as the tonal materials. For example, the *Spring Poem* was created according to the folk song ***Xiao Ban Xiao***, and the *Jiangnan Spring Scene* was created according to the *Gusu Scenery*, etc. The above two aspects are the main composition source and tune basis of Jiangnan Erhu.

In terms of melodic development, repetition is one of the most common techniques in the music composition of Jiangnan Erhu, which can be divided into complete repetition and incomplete repetition. The former includes ostinato repetition and phrase repetition, while the latter consists of head repetition and tail repetition. Contrast is another common melodic development technique. Commonly used contrasting techniques include register contrast, rhythmic contrast and tonal contrast [3]. The register contrast is often established through the contrast of octave, which is shown in the ***Bouncing Music*** of Sun Wenming with a lively and interesting melody. The melodic development of yuyaowei (connected head to tail) is also common in Jiangnan Erhu's works, which means in the connected two phrases, the note at the end of the former phrase is the same as the note at the beginning of the latter. This kind of melodic development is tightly logical and interlocked, giving the audience a sense of continuity.

What's more, some common compositional techniques such as modal progression and **transpositional variation** are also used in Jiangnan Erhu. The traditional music of the Jiangnan area features gradual progression instead of sudden and huge change, with its colorful musical motives of zigzag progression. The melodic development often repeats, molds into and derives similar musical phrases to form a kind of penetrating tone, which develops the melody through free diffusion. For example, the *Gusu Spring Dawn*, *A Song of the South of Jiangsu Province,* and *Peach Blossom Dock* all depict the picturesque scenery of the canal towns in the Jiangnan area. The composition of these pieces mainly draws on the folk tunes of the Jiangnan area and forms new melodic expressions by transplanting, shifting, and filling tones to them.

Jiangnan Erhu, to some extent, is derived from the most typical representative music of the region, the Jiangnan traditional stringed and woodwind music, the style and artistic aesthetic characteristics of which are thus inherited into the Jiangnan Erhu. "Small, light, fine, and elegant" are important features of traditional stringed and woodwind music. "Small" focuses on the number of players, which cannot be reflected in Erhu's performance. The rest three features perform well in Jiangnan Erhu. "Light" is to make the performer physically and mentally happy, and to make the appreciator's mind relaxed, which is well reflected in the representative works of the Jiangnan Erhu, no matter the previous *Jiangnan Spring Scene* and *Gusu Spring Dawn*, or the *Peach Blossom Dock* in the recent years. "Fine", from the perspective of acoustic effect, refers to the smaller volume and lighter sound quality, unlike the loud, thick and heavy performance style of outdoor instruments such as suona, pipes and gongs. Jiangnan Erhu pursues a delicate and mellow tone in the process of playing. For example, in the *Jiangnan Spring Scene*, the

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requirements for various types of glissandi, ornamentation, and bowing all reflect the delicate and refined melody, not powerful and shocking, but crooning softly, meant to savor the subtlety. And “elegant” refers to the beautiful and gentle tune. The gorgeous and delicate melody of the adagio and the bright and simple melody of the allegro can be expressed by performers of Jiangnan Erhu invisibly. The staggered melody, changeable rhythm, and the appropriate stop are viewed as the standard of good music material, which could attract the hearts of the audience [4].

The works of Jiangnan Erhu are usually smooth in rhythm, with even beats and insignificant contrasts and changes in speed. The four-sentence structure of “starting, carrying on, turning, and merging” is most commonly applied in Jiangnan Erhu. The masterpiece *Jiangnan Spring Scene* just adopts this typical structure to be clear and bright in musical construction.

4. Conclusion

the Jiangnan Erhu music style has developed within the culturally rich environment of the Jiangnan region. This specific artistic style has been influenced by local musical forms, including traditional stringed and woodwind instruments, folk songs, and opera. The compositions have inherited the soft, waxy, sweet and charming qualities of the Jiangnan dialect as well as the small, light, refined, and elegant melodic characteristics of traditional stringed and woodwind instruments in Jiangnan. These qualities contribute to the elegance, softness, delicacy and intricacy of the music. Furthermore, thanks to the continuous efforts of numerous extraordinary musicians, this school has also preserved a wealth of outstanding works in the Jiangnan Erhu music style.

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