

# Deng Yun: The Opera Disseminator across Borders

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**Abstract:** *Deng Yun is a distinguished Chinese opera artist who has achieved significant international success with her unique artistic style and exceptional vocal skills. She is the first Chinese singer to sign with the New York Metropolitan Opera, where her compelling performances in classic operas like "Madama Butterfly," "Carmen," and "Rigoletto" have garnered high acclaim from audiences and critics worldwide. Deng Yun has tirelessly worked to foster cultural exchanges between the East and West, earning support and praise from various sectors. After returning to China, she established the Guangzhou Opera Society and the Guangzhou Trout Opera Company with a commitment to promoting opera and nurturing young talent. She actively organizes concerts, lectures, and charity events to enhance opera's popularity in China and to facilitate the exchange and integration of musical cultures between East and West. It can be said that Deng Yun's art not only brought Chinese opera to a new level of international recognition but also paved the way for future interaction and integration between Chinese and other cultures in the field of art. In this article, the author focuses on Deng Yun and her role in developing the relations between the Chinese and the American musical cultures.*

**Keywords:** *Deng Yun, Opera Art, Sino-Western Musical Exchange, Guangzhou Opera Society*

## 1. Introduction

Deng Yun was born in Guangzhou, China, in 1953 and had showed a strong interest in music since she was young. Initially, she wanted to become an engineer, but family pressurized her to be a musician. Deng Yun joined the Guangzhou Military Region Soldiers' Dance Troupe in 1965, where she received systematic artistic training. In 1973, she achieved national recognition by winning the first prize at a military performance. However, facing vocal folds issues, she sought the expertise of Professor Guo Shuzhen at the Central Conservatory of Music, who assisted her in transitioning her vocal range from soprano to mezzo-soprano, marking a pivotal moment in her artistic life.

In 1980, as a member of a visiting Chinese musicians' group, Deng Yun travelled to Europe and was profoundly influenced by European opera culture. She subsequently moved to the United States to study opera performance at the American Opera Center at Juilliard School. Her performances at New York Metropolitan Opera House made her a know personality internationally, The New York Times tag her an 'Echo of Puccini'. Deng Yun not only undertook significant roles at the Metropolitan Opera but also performed at several prestigious international opera houses, becoming a global ambassador for Chinese vocal arts.

Deng Yun's international success is matched by her commitment to her homeland. In 2003, she founded the Guangzhou Opera Society, and in 2009, she established the Guangzhou Trout Opera Company, aiming to popularize and promote opera and cultivate the next generation of vocal artists. She produced and performed both classical world operas and modern Chinese operas, including her own directorial projects like "The Marriage of Figaro," "The Fighting of Wildfire and Spring Wind in the Ancient City," and "Cavalleria Rusticana." In 2015, Deng Yun led her opera troupe in creating the innovative "Book of Songs · Music Map" suite, a project supported by the National Art Fund. This suite was successfully staged at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing and Carnegie Hall in New York, receiving widespread acclaim. Since 2013, Deng Yun has partnered with Yuexiu District in Guangzhou to run the "Cantonese Opera Salon." From 2016, she has co-hosted the "Weekend Opera" series with the Guangzhou Grand Theater and the Guangzhou Municipal Culture, Radio, Film, and Television Publishing Bureau, introducing over 20 Chinese and foreign classic operas. To advance the appreciation of excellent traditional culture, Deng Yun led a creative team to Tianmen, the hometown of tea sage Lu Yu, to immerse in and draw inspiration from local life, culminating in the production of the operatic drama "Tea Sage Lu Yu." Following the "Book of Songs · Music Map," this production is another

of Deng Yun's endeavours to innovate Chinese national opera and honour China's rich traditional culture [1].

In conclusion, Deng Yun's illustrious career not only demonstrates her outstanding artistic talent but also emphasizes her vital role in cross-cultural musical exchanges. By examining Deng Yun's life and career, this article offers an in-depth analysis of her contributions to promoting opera and her influence on the global music scene.

## **2. Early Life and Musical Enlightenment**

### ***2.1 Family Background and Musical Initiation***

Deng Yun, originally named Deng Yun'er, was born in 1953 in Guangzhou, with ancestral roots in Kaiping, Guangdong. She is affectionately known as a genuine "Xiguan Miss" of Guangzhou. Her father, a lawyer in Hong Kong with a profound appreciation for literature and calligraphy, especially the character "Yun," deeply influenced her cultural environment.

From her childhood, Deng Yun exhibited a strong passion for music, frequently singing loudly at home and using towels as makeshift water sleeves to imitate opera performances. During her studies at Guangzhou No. 4 Middle School, she excelled academically, particularly in chemistry and physics. She initially aspired to enter the South China Institute of Technology to study radio engineering. However, during a rural outreach initiative, her voluntary performance for her class revealed her exceptional vocal talent, convincing everyone that her future lay in music. Subsequently, she joined the Guangdong Radio Amateur Broadcasting Choir. Under the mentorship of Shao Hanwen, a blind teacher, she progressed from chorus member to lead singer, culminating in her early musical education.

### ***2.2 Joining the Guangzhou Military Region Soldiers' Dance Troupe***

In 1965, Deng Yun enlisted and joined the Guangzhou Military Region Soldiers' Dance Troupe, marking the start of her military career. Dressed in the uniform, Deng Yun received comprehensive artistic training, including lessons in piano, pipa, music theory, physique, dance, and Mandarin. Despite the Cultural Revolution crushing her dreams of university, she found her stage in military songs and relentlessly honed her skills.

During her military tenure, her collaboration with composer Zheng Qiufeng was particularly pivotal. They mutually enhanced each other's careers, and Deng Yun gradually developed her distinct singing style. Her debut performances with the Soldiers' Dance Troupe, "Chairman Mao Cares for Us Mountain People," and "Beautiful Peacock River," became nationwide favourites [2].

## **3. Turning Point in Musical Career**

### ***3.1 Vocal Cord Issues and Voice Part Transition***

Deng Yun's musical prowess became evident in 1970 during her first solo performance. In 1973, she starred in a performance during the "Asia-Africa-Latin America Ping Pong Invitational" in Beijing. Her exceptional showcase there, coupled with the highest award at the military troupe's national performance, marked her as a promising operatic talent amidst widespread acclaim. However, Professor Guo Shuzhen observed, "This girl has a good sense of music, but unfortunately, she won't be able to sing for long." Moved not by the critique but by finding someone who understood her, Deng Yun was inspired. She was the only one who knew how much pressure she had when singing. The incorrect approaches to singing the coloratura led her vocal cords to be damaged and her voice felt sore only after singing the first few songs. Therefore, Deng Yun asked Guo Shuzhen to take her as disciple. At last, after a series of challenges, she was accepted by Professor Guo Shuzhen.

Under Professor Guo's tutelage, Deng Yun had to firstly undergo the nearly impossible task of transforming her voice from soprano to mezzo-soprano. Desiring to regain her singing ability, she was determined to overcome this barrier. Professor Guo guided Deng Yun to train her voice to be stronger, and she began to be able to sing songs without getting tired. Besides, Professor Guo also familiarized her with a number of highly dramatic pieces which included the 'Complaint of the Yellow River.' Even though Deng Yun sang the song religiously, she was not fully conversant with the dramatic elements in the song.

### ***3.2 Advanced Studies in the US: Experience at Juilliard School of Music***

In 1980, as part of a group of Chinese musicians visiting Europe, Deng Yun was captivated by European opera. Although usually articulate, the beauty of opera left her speechless, embedding a profound passion for opera in her heart. This visit sparked her interest in opera and fueled her desire to pursue higher artistic levels. After returning from Europe, Deng Yun planned a family visit to the US. During her departure, the former commander of the Soldiers' Dance Troupe, Cha Lie, whispered advice that would impact her life, "Deng, if you get the chance, learn something there." Grateful for this guidance, Deng Yun first enrolled in a language program and, in 1981, entered the prestigious American Opera Center at the Juilliard School to further her opera studies <sup>[3]</sup>.

At the Juilliard School, 32-year-old Deng Yun faced fresh challenges, starting anew and adopting a "start from zero" mentality. Unknown to her teachers and peers, Deng Yun, an already-established singer, immersed herself in her studies with humility. She secured a full scholarship and received systematic opera training, learning extensive opera arias and performance techniques. Always maintaining a beginner's mindset, Deng Yun refrained from boasting about her past achievements, focusing solely on reshaping her musical skills.

The professional training at Juilliard significantly improved Deng Yun's vocal ability, and the artistry of the school enriched her performances. She soon gained a foothold in the American operatic scene and then became the first Chinese singer to be invited to join the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1985. Throughout her time at the Metropolitan, Deng Yun performed in such staples of the operatic repertoire as "Madam Butterfly," "Carmen," and "Rigoletto," the appearances of which secured her place on the world stage of opera and reignited her career <sup>[4]</sup>.

Afterwards Deng Yun finally established her position on the international opera stage. Her singing career reached new heights, and she functioned as a great cultural ambassador between the East and the West musical genres.

## **4. International Achievements and Vocal Art Influence**

### ***4.1 Professional Development and Achievements in the United States***

Deng Yun spent four years in Juilliard School of Music, one of the most prestigious educational establishments in the world, and she was an excellent musician and a hard-working student. She not only obtained the full scholarship, but also memorized the part of Romeo fifteen days before Christmas and got the comprehensive scholarship. In 1985, Deng Yun became the first Chinese singer to sign with the New York Metropolitan Opera, where she performed for 11 opera seasons. Her repertoire included over twenty classic operas such as "The Savage Land," "Eugene Onegin," "Il Trovatore," "Rigoletto," "Madama Butterfly," "Carmen," "Aida," "Samson et Dalila," "Norma," and she remained active across major global opera houses <sup>[5]</sup>.

### ***4.2 Classic Role Portrayal and Performance Art***

During her tenure at the New York Metropolitan Opera, Deng Yun portrayed significant roles in numerous classic operas. For example, in "Madama Butterfly," she played Suzuki, and she specifically studied the gestures and movements of Japanese women to deliver an authentic performance. In "Carmen," she incorporated Spanish dance to enrich the role with more cultural depth and dynamism.

Not only did Deng Yun excel in Western classic operas, but she also participated in the 1993 performance of the Chinese opera "The Savage Land" at the Kennedy Center in Washington. As a foreigner, Deng Yun's passion for China was fully expressed in 1993 when Chinese opera made its world stage debut. The show had 11 successive sales, and The New York Times described the show as an "Echo of Puccini," a complimentary praise for Deng Yun's personal accomplishment and Chinese opera art. The curtain went down, and Deng Yun wept. Then she thought about how the American director wrote Chinese words with international phonetic symbols and how she sang her first operatic line in Chinese when she left China 13 years ago. Indeed, opera is for the world as it brings different theatre arts and artists closer.

### ***4.3 Media Reviews and International Recognition***

The international media has applauded Deng Yun's amazing performances. In 1994, she received the highest award, the "New York Outstanding Women Star Award". It is equally important to note that

besides opera shows, Deng Yun has been equally involved in the advancement of Chinese musicals across the globe. In 2000, she performed Verdi's "Requiem" at Carnegie Hall, and the world witnessed once again her strong artistic roots with strong international influence.

## **5. Contributions to Music after Returning to China**

### ***5.1 Important Performances after Returning to China***

In 1994, Deng Yun returned to China and did her first major performance, the "Deng Yun Opera Essence Solo Concert," in Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. The Central Orchestra provided accompaniment without a fee, demonstrating the fusion of Eastern and Western musical essences and Deng Yun's deep love for her homeland. In 2001, she returned to Guangzhou to host the "Hometown, Kinship, Friendship - Deng Yun, Hu Songhua, Liu Xufeng Trio Concert" at the Xinghai Concert Hall, drawing the attention of many local citizens [6].

### ***5.2 Founding the Guangzhou Opera Society: Intentions and Practices***

In 2003, with the support of the Guangzhou Municipal Propaganda Department, the Municipal Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and various social figures, Deng Yun founded the Guangzhou Opera Society and held the "Sunshine of Love" performance at Xinghai Concert Hall. Her goal in establishing the opera society was to make opera accessible to the people of Guangzhou, gradually dispelling the notion that opera was an elusive art form and truly embedding opera in the hearts of the people of Guangzhou.

After the establishment of the Guangzhou Opera Society, Deng Yun worked tirelessly, organizing annual opera concerts to train and showcase the talents of local young opera performers. She also hosted various lectures on opera knowledge, supplemented by demonstrations of opera excerpts, which attracted a large number of opera and music enthusiasts.

### ***5.3 Guangzhou Trout Opera Company***

Founded in September 2010, the Guangzhou Trout Opera Company is the first professional opera performance art group in Southern China. Deng Yun serves as the artistic director, with the award-winning singer Wu Zheming as the leader, and Song Yulong, a two-time winner of the American ABC Outstanding Stage Art Emmy Award, as the stage art director. The troupe focuses on Chinese and foreign opera, musical theatre, and concert performances, actively promoting original Chinese works.

As for this performance group, the Guangzhou Trout Opera Company has been performing on different domestic and international artistic scenes including Guangzhou Grand Theater, Xinghai Concert Hall, National Grand Theater, Carnegie Hall in New York and Shenzhen Grand Theater since its creation. In 2016, the troupe contributed to the launch of "Weekend Opera" brand and in promoting it with Guangzhou Grand Theatre, and in 2018, it actively joined the signal annual Guangzhou Arts Festival, in which a total of 28 productions and 47 performances ranging from the Guangzhou Grand Theatre. Troupe has performed four masterpieces of the Chinese opera, thirteen masterpieces of the foreign opera, four Sino-foreign musicals, three premiered original works and several theme concerts.

The troupe is committed to serving the public, conducting nearly a hundred varied public welfare activities and art lectures. For example, in 2013, Trout collaborated with Yuexiu District to establish the "Cantonese Opera Salon" and initiatives like "Love in the World" concerts at the Panyu Zhong Village Youth Center, the "Youth's Sails" concert at a high school, lectures on Chinese opera art in the community, and the "Meeting Book of Songs" lecture series during the Guangzhou Citizens' Cultural Festival, as well as the "Grand View of Art" public welfare performance series at the Shenzhen Grand Theater.

### ***5.4 Cultivating the Next Generation of Vocal Talents***

Deng Yun understands the daunting task of popularizing opera from scratch but remains confident in her mission. She organizes opera performances to bring shows to various colleges, businesses, provincial and municipal government agencies, and public venues in places like Dongguan. To better train young actors, Deng Yun spent three months translating a vocal textbook and personally taught American scientific methods during summer voice classes. She also invited an old classmate from Italy to teach Italian in Guangzhou and conducted intensive training sessions to help students broaden their horizons and master basic techniques. Deng Yun's efforts have made the Guangzhou Opera Society and the Guangzhou Trout Opera Company important platforms for popularizing opera art, training a group of

local young singing actors who have demonstrated exceptional talent in various performances, receiving acclaim and praise from a wide audience.

Through detailed descriptions of her important performances after returning to China, the founding intentions and practices of the Guangzhou Opera Society, the establishment and development of the Guangzhou Trout Opera Company, and the cultivation of the next generation of vocal talents, this section highlights Deng Yun's significant contributions to promoting and developing Chinese opera art. She has not only made outstanding contributions to the development of Chinese vocal art but also built a bridge for musical and cultural exchange between the East and West through her efforts and talent.

## **6. Artistic Style and Music Philosophy**

### ***6.1 Unique Artistic Style and Technique***

Deng Yun's artistic style is distinctive, blending Eastern and Western vocal genres and performance techniques. She extensively studies and adapts her performance to suit different vocal genres and the specific content and plot of pieces, using internal emotions as the driving force combined with static and dynamic rule changes to shape the external beauty of the human form. This unique performance art is known as "Yiyun." In her performance of "Carmen," she specifically learned Spanish dance to better embody the character; in "Madama Butterfly," she studied the gestures and movements of Japanese women to lend a more authentic and dynamic portrayal of her role.

### ***6.2 Analysis of Representative Musical Works***

Deng Yun's representative musical works encompass both Chinese and international classics, such as China's "Sister Jiang," "The Fighting of Wildfire and Spring Wind in the Ancient City," "The Savage Land," "Sorrow for the Departed," and foreign operas "The Marriage of Figaro," "Suor Angelica," "Cavalleria Rusticana," "Romeo and Juliet," "The Troubadour," "The Consul," "Madama Butterfly," "Rigoletto," "Werther," "Faust," "Pikovaya Dama," "Eugene Onegin," and "Die Fledermaus." Among these, her favourite Chinese song to perform is "Pamir—My Beautiful Homeland," a song from the vocal suite "Four Seasons of the Homeland," created specifically for a recital concert after her graduation from the Central Conservatory of Music. This song, highly expressive and emotive, is a testament to Deng Yun's powerful vocal expression<sup>[6]</sup>.

### ***6.3 Expression of Patriotic Sentiments in Music***

Deng Yun's singing art is imbued with profound patriotic sentiment. Her voice carries her emotions for her country and hometown, and she expresses all her homesickness into her songs. Whenever Deng Yun meets other Chinese people, she sings Chinese songs and tells the camera that she has a lot of love for her homeland and sings 'Three Variations on Yang Pass'. Her deep patriotism is well depicted in her solo dance in the 'Ah, the Land of China'. The voice brings out the emotional connotation of each tone powerfully and presents her strong love for her homeland.

Deng Yun's artistic style and music philosophy has created a distinct artistic profile by integrating the Eastern and Western performance approaches; her representative compositions signify her proficiency in both Chinese and international music; the patriotic emotions of her music have not only touched the hearts of the people both domestically and internationally but also won international acclamation for China's vocal art.

## **7. Personal Life and Artistic Pursuits**

### ***7.1 Marital Life and Family Support***

Deng Yun's marriage is portrayed as a journey of companionship and achievement with Song Yulong. They knew each other while performing in the Guangzhou Military Region Soldiers' Dance Troupe; Song worked as a stage designer, while Deng Yun was seen as a political ballast because of her family background. Song did not consider Deng's background of higher social class a big issue, and he looked for an opportunity to be with Deng Yun. The two went on a date, then became lovers and later got married. When they moved to the United States, Song signed a lifetime contract with an American television broadcasting company based on his training at China's Central Academy of Drama and his practical experience.

## 7.2 *The Impact of Personal Life on Her Music Career*

Deng Yun's life experience has impacted her music. In 2001, Deng Yun purchased a house in Hawaii, intending to live a quiet life with Song Yulong. Yet, the plans of the woman changed when she saw her former teacher, Professor Guo Shuzhen, who insisted that she should continue to practice music. Deng Yun was touched by Guo's passion for learning and teaching during Guo's lectures in her home area.

With Song Yulong's support, Deng Yun formally started teaching at the Xinghai Conservatory of Music, translating vocal textbooks and organizing materials for various opera concerts and performances so that young singers in Guangzhou can perform. In 2002, she invited the original crew from the New York Metropolitan Opera to perform a "World Classic Opera Concert" in Guangzhou thus the local people could feel the charm of a world-class opera.

Thus, it is possible to pinpoint that Deng Yun's personal experience has enriched her performances and compositions and led to meaningful contributions to the popularity of opera. Knowing the big challenges when it comes to marketing opera in her native country, she keeps on pushing the agenda and is always on the lookout for young talents. She integrates modern opera art with Chinese traditional elements; she has made the opera business in Guangzhou and in China to continuously improve.

## 8. Conclusion

Deng Yun is a famous opera singer whose music performance has gained extensive coverage in China, and her accomplishments have been noticed internationally. She is the first Chinese singer who became the contracted singer at the New York Metropolitan Opera; her excellent performances in the "Madama Butterfly," "Carmen," and "Rigoletto" have widely impressed global audiences and media.

Deng Yun's audiovisual performance style is quite distinctive due to the techniques she adopted in her singing and dancing. She aims at perfecting the techniques of singing and playing and pays much attention to the emotions and characterization of the characters she performs. Therefore, her performances appeal to the audience. For example, her outstanding performances in the operas, including "The Savage Land", demonstrate the beauty of Chinese opera and the excellent performing art of Chinese vocal music but also raise Chinese performing art to a higher level internationally.

Deng Yun has made a lot of efforts to promote music exchange between the East and West. By arranging concerts at home and aboard, publishing the Guangzhou Opera Society, and creating the Guangzhou Trout Opera Company, she has actively participated in the development of opera and trained many young singers. By exposing Chinese traditional culture to western audiences, she has also contributed to the internationalization of Chinese opera. Furthermore, her various public welfare activities and lectures within China have provided many local audiences with opportunities to engage with and appreciate opera, greatly enhancing the popularization and development of opera art in China.

With her voice and actions, Deng Yun has crafted a musical legend that transcends boundaries. Her artistic achievements and contributions to musical exchanges between the East and West will forever be remembered in the annals of international music history and continue to inspire future artists to boldly pursue their artistic dreams.

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