

Study on the Artistic Aesthetics of the Erhu Song "Reflections on the Great Wall"

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Abstract: *"Reflections on the Great Wall" is a large-scale erhu concerto composed by Mr. Liu Wenjin in the early 1980s. The work takes the ancient Great Wall as the background and expresses the author's feelings of patriotism. The article mainly discusses three aspects of the work, namely, melodic characteristics, compositional structure and mood expression, and focuses on analyzing the aesthetic value embodied in the work.*

Keywords: *Erhu; Reflections on the Great Wall; artistic aesthetics*

1. Introduction

The Erhu Concerto "Reflections on the Great Wall" composed by Mr. Liu Wenjin, as an outstanding piece of music today, has achieved organic unity in both content and form, inheriting traditional Chinese music culture as well as borrowing and absorbing western music in the appropriate way. Obviously, Liu Wenjin utilized the concept of fusing Chinese and Western music, combining "tradition" with "modernity". The concerto "Reflections on the Great Wall" has had a profound influence on the development of the erhu art today in terms of its theme, technique and genre. Mr. Liu Wenjin took the musical elements of the traditional erhu art as the basis, and at the same time, he combined the compositional methods and structure of the western music culture, so that the erhu has broken through its original limitations, and reached a perfect unity of form and content at a higher level. His achievements are mainly reflected in the erhu playing techniques and expressiveness, but most importantly, he has made the erhu art closer to the traditional cultural heritage and origin, that is, in the context of multicultural development, he has embodied the aesthetic value of the erhu art from a wider perspective and a larger territory.

2. Profile of the Composer

Liu Wenjin was born on May 5, 1937 in Tangshan City, Hebei Province, and is originally from Anyang County, Henan Province. Liu Wenjin followed his parents to his ancestral home of Anyang County, Henan Province, where he spent his childhood and teenage years in the countryside. As a child, he was already influenced by the local opera of his hometown, i.e., Henan Opera, Gaohu, and Siguxian, etc. Under the inculcation of these local operas as well as the raps, which was inadvertently injected into Liu Wenjin's mind, invisibly providing him with a rich element of folk music, laying down a solid foundation of traditional music and culture for the great achievements that he would make in the future in the cause of erhu composition.

At a very young age, Liu Wenjin was able to play a variety of musical instruments, such as the erhu, bamboo flute, accordion, moon harp, and organ. At the same time, he also participated in the marching band and conducted the chorus in school, and was always the main force of the band. At that time, he possessed superb musical talent, and every performance was recognized by everyone, all of these were Liu Wenjin's performances before he received professional music education. It can be seen that these musical lives have laid a solid foundation for his future development in music.

Until 1956, Liu Wenjin was admitted to the Central Conservatory of Music with excellent grades, majoring in composition, and from then on, he began to receive formal professional music education. During his time at the school, he followed many teachers to get their academic guidance, and through his own continuous hard work and research, he had already composed two world-class classics during his junior and senior years of college, i.e., "Narrative of North Henan" and "Imagination of Sanmenxia". The release of these two works soon caused a sensation in the music industry, and Liu Wenjin was known as

a "gifted composer" in the school at that time. ^[1]After graduation, Liu Wenjin deeply studied about large-scale folk orchestral music, and laid a solid foundation for another classic large-scale work he composed afterward, "The Great Wall Fantasy", as a large-scale erhu concerto work, which played an important role in promoting the development of the art of the erhu.

3. Background of the Composition

Throughout the ages, the Great Wall has attracted many people to sing for it, it is like a huge dragon winding up in the east of the world, and is the fruit of the wisdom, blood and sweat of the working people, one of the landmarks of our country. The Great Wall was built during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, when the feudal lords fought for the land and had wars every year, and the Great Wall was built to resist the invasion of other countries. After the later generations of the Great Wall repeatedly built, today's Great Wall has such a brilliant, majestic momentum, looks particularly magnificent, as the saying goes, "not to the Great Wall is not a good man".^[2]

The Great Wall is the pride of the Chinese people. From ancient times to the present, we find that most of the praises for the majestic Great Wall are embodied in poems and paintings, while the works that directly express the majesty and grandeur of the Great Wall in music are negligible. Based on Mr. Liu Wenjin's love and pursuit of art, in 1978, when he visited the United States with the Chinese Art Troupe, just as he felt unfamiliar and lonely, an unusually majestic and magnificent treasure - the picture of the Great Wall of China - was presented in front of his eyes, which was so gorgeous and colorful that he felt immensely affectionate and proud of it, thus, it was at this moment that he developed a strong desire and impulse. The erhu concerto "Reflections on the Great Wall" was born under such background conditions.

It took Mr. Liu four years to create this work, and it was premiered by the famous erhu player Min Huiifen at the 10th Shanghai Spring Festival in 1982, accompanied by the Shanghai National Orchestra, and was widely praised by the audience. The concerto "Reflections on the Great Wall" is divided into four chapters, i.e. "Tour to Guanshan", "Beacon Fire", "Loyalty Sacrifice" and "Remote Viewing". The concerto draws heavily on the characteristics of traditional music other than the erhu, appropriately incorporating opera, guqin, pipa and other musical characteristics into the performance, containing a strong traditional musical style and distinctive characteristics of the times.

4. The Artistic Aesthetic Embodiment of "Reflections on the Great Wall"

4.1. The "Melodic Beauty" of the Music

Erhu is one of the most characteristic traditional stringed instruments in China. The sound of erhu is similar to human voice, and its soft tone depends on its singability, as well as its strong artistic expression and infectious power. The development of music cannot be separated from the development of melody. It can be said that melody is the root of the development of music, and it is the whole of music, and whether the music is beautiful or not depends on whether the melody is beautiful or not, and the two are complementary to each other and develop together. Since the twentieth century, the diversified cultures of the world have penetrated into each other and fused together, and with the continuous introduction of western music and culture, China's traditional music culture has had a significant impact, and through continuous reference and innovation, the melodic system of China's traditional music culture has been further developed. The life of erhu music originates from the soft and smooth melody, which is the root of the creation of erhu works, and is the highest realm of composers' pursuit of artistic beauty.

The erhu composition "Reflections on the Great Wall" is a large-scale concerto, in which the melody is used very flexibly. In order to adapt to the needs of the large-scale theme, Mr. Liu Wenjin broke through the traditional erhu melodic expression mode of "ballad" with small range, and made full use of the melodic progression method of large intervals and the conversion method of the sound area, which greatly broadened the range of the sound area, and made the instrumental nature of the erhu melody more prominent.

In the first chapter of the piece, "Tour to Guanshan", the erhu melody has a strong momentum, firmly playing a deep melody that imitates the guqin's playing style. In this heavy and far-reaching tone, among the tones, there are the rhythmic sense of "strong beat", the sense of embellishment of Peking Opera, and the residual rhythm of guqin's "chuo" and "zhu". Erhu sought the complementarity of different things and the unity of diversity by borrowing from sister musical arts, which made the piece more rich in

ancient and elegant style, and at the same time reflected the aesthetic experience of erhu art.^[3]

The decorative notes and finger glissandos in this section are used appropriately, fully utilizing the "strong beat and weak beat" of the erhu, which makes the piece have a calm and deep sorrow. In the writing of the theme melody, the melodic approach of intervals is fully utilized, widening the range and making the instrumental nature of the erhu melody more prominent, and the theme of its staid stroll is unfolded in a meandering upward linear melodic approach, expanding the amplitude of the melody to thirteen octaves, which figuratively shows that the composer's thoughts are extended with the Great Wall's sinuous ups and downs to the historical space-time and thus leads to the emotion of the country's long civilization history.

In terms of the development of the music, the theme motive of the introduction "the strong character of the Great Wall" is developed through the second free modal progression, and the added flower decoration on the third and fourth beats of the theme motive directly leads to the contrasting theme tone "praising the spirit of the Great Wall". The melody becomes as smooth as flowing water, which makes a feeling like walking on the Great Wall.

In terms of playing technique, the performer can use gentle, light, stretching vibrato to reach a soft tone to make the melodic line more fluent and more singable. Obviously, the simple and elegant, smooth and singing melodic characteristics embodied in this movement are also the "melodic beauty" embodied in the work.

4.2. The "Structural Beauty" of the Music

The creation of modern erhu music has been marked from the very beginning with the artistic imprint of the intermingling of Chinese and Western musical cultures, and the difference between them, reflecting the charm of our traditional culture. In the context of modern art and culture, the cause of erhu music in China should not only have development, but also inherit the traditional folk music characteristics, and more in line with the aesthetic interests of the general public. Therefore, as the heir to the development of our country's music and cultural undertakings, we should always adhere to the traditional music ideas in the process of its creation, and then innovate and develop on the basis of maintaining the essence of traditional music and culture. When Liu Wenjin composed the erhu concerto "Reflections on the Great Wall", he put forward the fusion of East and West according to this idea, combining the "traditional" and "modern" creative techniques, and making breakthroughs in the traditional creative mode, emphasizing on inheriting the traditional Chinese creative techniques and the pursuit of mood.

In the theme writing, Mr. Liu Wenjin contrasted the theme of "strong character" of the Great Wall and the theme of "glorifying the spirit of the Great Wall" of rigidity and softness, motion and static, successfully showing that over the past 5,000 years in our country, Chinese children have been fighting for independence and freedom and have been heroic and unyielding in character and spirit.

In terms of musical genre, "The Great Wall Rhapsody" breaks with the single-movement suite structure of western rhapsody in its compositional structure, and presents the spiritual connotation of the Great Wall from different perspectives in the form of a symphonic four-movement suite. The first chapter of the piece, "Tour to Guanshan", begins with a slow and solemn overture, in which the main purpose is to present a thematic musical structure, with majestic thematic elements running through the whole piece. The second chapter, "Beacon Fire", according to the rhythmic strength and intensity of the music, is an unfolding of the theme of the first movement, which expresses the composer's retrospection of history and his feelings. The third chapter, "Loyalty Sacrifice", consists of prelude, adagio, waltz and orchestral performance, which expresses the tribute to the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the defense of the country. The fourth chapter, "Remote Viewing", can be interpreted as a reproduction of the whole piece, expressing the lofty spirit of the Chinese people and their pursuit and yearning for a better future.

In this way, the four chapters are not only independent but also closely interrelated with each other, thus forming a four-part sonorous repertoire structure in the sense of a first-class composition, and the compositional structure of each movement distinctly embodies the speed gradual structural thinking characteristic of traditional Chinese music. From Liu Wenjin's compositions, we can find that whether it is "Reflections on the Great Wall", "Narrative of North Henan", "Imagination of Sanmenxia", and a large number of later works, all of them adopt the creative method of fusion of East and West, and the innovation and development of the music can never be separated from its own roots, mother body and soul.

4.3. *The "Artistic Conception Beauty" of the Music*

Reflections on the Great Wall is an erhu concerto composed by Mr. Liu Wenjin in the early 1980s. The work takes the ancient Great Wall as the background for its composition, but does not emphasize on the depiction of the shape and scenery of the Great Wall itself, nor does it specifically review a specific war in history, but rather expresses patriotic feelings through the scenery in a specific context. Liu Wenjin once wrote, "I do not try to use a musical work to depict the magnificent appearance of the Great Wall. This is not the strength of the music, not to mention the traditional instrumental music; but rather, I expect to use the framework structure similar to the suite, and use the erhu and orchestra concert form which is good at lyricism and singing to express the feelings of people when they visit the Great Wall from different sides".^[4]

The pursuit of artistic conception requires the performer to have rich imagination and emotional expression, and the work "The Great Wall Concerto" is different from previous works, it is a large-scale concerto composed of four movements, each movement embodies the content and expression of different emotions. Therefore, in order to successfully complete this work, the performer must be true and natural in both the emotional treatment of each movement and the grasp of the musical flavor.

Here, the author mainly elaborates on the "beauty of artistic conception" embodied in the first chapter of "Reflections on the Great Wall".

The solemn and majestic first chapter, "Tour to Guanshan", consists of a prelude, five sections and an epilogue. The prelude mainly expresses the excitement of walking on Guanshan Mountain and looking out from afar. The 27th-32nd bars are the first section, a slow broadside, the section adopts the traditional music of free extension, slowly advancing the development of music, the internal tone of the structure is similar, and to "close the tail" syntax unity and coordination, the composer for the expression of nostalgia for the ancient feelings, especially the erhu fixed string lowered by a big two degrees, in order to highlight the fullness, firm timbre, melodic line is smooth and meandering, the melody line is smooth and meandering. The melodic lines are smooth and meandering, and all the strings are played with the inner strings, so the bow should be operated smoothly and freely, making full use of the strength of the forearm.

The theme of the music fully embodies the realm of "emotion" and "momentum". The use of timbre in this section should be rigid and soft, with rigid as the main theme, which fits perfectly with Zhuang Zi's idea of "keeping the nature without modification", revealing the beauty of simplicity. "Rhyme" and "meaning" are the deepest expression of traditional Chinese music culture. The work "Reflections on the Great Wall" uses the erhu to draw on the rhythmic beauty of "rising and falling" in the opera, the sense of rhythm among the tones, the sense like the Peking Opera, and the sense of residual rhyme like guqin, which can be felt at all times in the elegant and rhythmic style of the piece. To imitate the sound of the guqin with the erhu, not only should the form be similar, but also the rhythm should be comparable. In order to imitate the flavor of the guqin, the erhu uses techniques such as glissando, and the timbre is more delicate. The highlight of the work is the figurative imitation of the timbre and flavor unique to the guqin. The tone combines illusion and reality, bringing together the most characteristic and skillful expression methods of guqin, Peking Opera, Chinese opera and erhu, further enriching the expressive power of erhu, thus making the content of the piece even more touching and deeper in its connotation. When playing, the player needs to forget all the restraints of the mind, such as: fingers, big arms, vibrato, fast bowing and other techniques, the music with the player's intention to present the corresponding changes, in order to achieve the unity effect of the instrument and the human spirit correspondingly.^[5]

In the final coda, the erhu melody, after a few ups and downs, begins to weaken at m.145, and the music gradually turns into an aria of infinite depth. From m. 151, the tempo slows down, and the two octave jumps do not seem to have any trace of "jumping" at all, but are completed in a very coherent, soft line, and as the range increases, the tone becomes more and more ethereal and the conception becomes more and more far-reaching. The last two measures are very slow, so that the first chapter ends in a reverie full of fantasies, which seems to make people unconsciously integrate into the five-thousand-year historical and cultural context in their memories and reveries. In conclusion, the musical beauty embodied in this chapter "Tour to Guanshan" is worth exploring at a deeper level, both in terms of its artistic value and aesthetic value.

5. Conclusions

As a classic Erhu masterpiece, "Reflections on the Great Wall" plays an important role in the innovation and development of modern Erhu art. The article elaborates on the aesthetic ideas embodied

in the erhu piece "Reflections on the Great Wall", i.e., the "melodic beauty", "structural beauty" and "artistic conception beauty" embodied in the piece. It is of vital importance for the performers to better understand the piece, interpret the piece, and profoundly express the thoughts, emotions and contents of the piece.

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