

The Sound Of Heritage: An Analysis Of Beiqiang Music In Yangxin Tea-Picking Opera Of China

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Abstract

Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, a traditional form from Hubei Province, China, features Beiqiang music with distinctive cultural value. This paper analyzes Beiqiang music's modes, rhythms, melodies, and tonal expressions, highlighting its role in enhancing dramatic depth and emotional force. By integrating ethnomusicological theories with fieldwork, the study reveals how Beiqiang music enriches traditional Chinese aesthetics through harmonic treatment and rhythmic variations. It also highlights the aesthetic of traditional Chinese music, offering richness in simplicity. The findings contribute to ethnomusicology and support the preservation of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera as an intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Beiqiang music, Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, ethnomusicological theory, Chinese traditional music*

Introduction

Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, a unique form of traditional Opera from Yangxin County in Hubei Province, China, has a history spanning over 200 years. This opera originated from the work songs sung by tea farmers in the tea gardens and gradually evolved into an art form rich in expressiveness and cultural connotations. Tea-picking Opera is not only widely popular in the Yangxin region but also attracts a broader audience with its distinctive music and performance style. The performances typically combine singing, dancing, and theatrical elements, making it a comprehensive performing art (COMI, 1998).

Beiqiang is one of the core musical elements in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, distinguished by its unique melodic and rhythmic characteristics that hold a significant position in the opera (YXCC, 1993). Beiqiang is divided into female and male categories, each exhibiting different emotional expressions and structural features. Female Beiqiang is renowned for its high-pitched intensity and delicate beauty, while male Beiqiang is characterized by its deep strength and bold straightforwardness. Beiqiang music not only exhibits innovation in its musical aspects but also plays a crucial role in conveying the emotions of dramatic characters and advancing the plot.

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This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the musical characteristics and cultural significance of Beiqiang music in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera. Utilizing musicological analysis and integrating ethnomusicological theories, this paper will explore the modes, rhythms, melodic structures, and tonal expressions of Beiqiang music, as well as how these elements deeply integrate with dramatic roles, plotlines, and musical forms. This research not only contributes to enriching the theoretical framework of ethnomusicology but also provides academic support for the preservation and transmission of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera as an intangible cultural heritage.

Literature review

In the academic realm, research on Beiqiang music has a certain foundation, but existing literature mostly remains at a superficial level of description, lacking systematic exploration of its deep musicological structure and cultural implications.

In the field of musicology, analyses of Beiqiang music often focus on its musical form and performance practices. For example, Li Jiagao pointed out that the origin, development, and current status of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, highlighting its musical structure composed of Zhengqiang, Caiqiang, and percussion. Zhengqiang includes Beiqiang, Hanqiang, Tanqiang, and Siping, with a general introduction to Beiqiang music (Li , 2002).

Furthermore, in "The Musical Integration of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera" co-authored by Li Jiagao and Yu Changshi, a detailed introduction to the overview, origin, evolution, traditional repertoires, and vocal styles of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera is provided. The book includes sections on Zhengqiang, including Beiqiang, folk tunes, qupai, and percussion (Li & Yu , 2012).

In the development of Yangxin tea-picking opera, the development method of its vocal voice is very important. Xu Xiaoyan pointed out the development method of Yangxin tea-picking opera, and the music of Yangxin tea-picking opera belongs to the plate-type variant body in the gong-playing opera system (Xu,2007). Similarly, Li Jiagao believes that although the four traditional vocals of Yangxin tea-picking opera ("Beiqiang, Han Qiang, Tanqiang and Siping) have different functions, they have great limitations, and they are often weak and unable to express the complex feelings of characters and set off the atmosphere. (Li, 2004).

However, there is still a lack of systematic analysis of Beiqiang music's structure, melodic development, and rhythmic changes in the existing literature. Additionally, the evolution of Beiqiang music in contemporary society and its status within Yangxin Tea-picking Opera have not been adequately studied. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gaps in current research by conducting an in-depth musicological analysis to explore the intrinsic mechanisms and cultural value of Beiqiang music, providing new perspectives and theoretical contributions to this academic field.

Research Objectives and Significance

This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the musical characteristics and cultural significance of Beiqiang music in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera. Utilizing musicological analysis

and integrating ethnomusicological theories, this paper will explore the modes, rhythms, melodic structures, and tonal expressions of Beiqiang music, as well as how these elements deeply integrate with dramatic roles, plotlines, and musical forms. This research not only contributes to enriching the theoretical framework of ethnomusicology but also provides academic support for the preservation and transmission of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera as an intangible cultural heritage.

Research Methodology

The data collection for this study primarily involved fieldwork and participant observation. The author personally traveled to the Yangxin region, participating in local Tea-picking Opera performances to record live Beiqiang music. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with local musicians, actors, and scholars to gather background information, performance practices, and personal insights regarding Beiqiang music. These primary sources provide a rich cultural and musical context for the research.

The collected musical data were meticulously transcribed to ensure the accuracy and analyzability of the musical elements. Special attention was paid to melodic lines, rhythmic patterns, and modal changes during the transcription process to capture the core characteristics of Beiqiang music. The transcribed musical materials were then subjected to detailed analysis, including melodic structure, rhythmic features, and harmonic progression.

This study employs two theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis process. First, the Norms of Musical Style Theory provides a set of analytical tools to identify and interpret the norms and conventions within musical styles (Hood,1971). Through this theory, the research reveals how the melodies and rhythms in Beiqiang music adhere to specific stylistic norms while showcasing their uniqueness.

Secondly, the Chinese Musical Form System Theory is employed to dissect the structure and organization of the music. According to Professor Liu Chenghua, this theory emphasizes four formal system characteristics of Chinese music: vocal quality in music, pentatonic tonality, horizontal texture, and non-uniform rhythm(Liu ,1998).

These characteristics guide the analysis of the structured expressive forms in Beiqiang music, exploring how these structural features enhance its narrative and dramatic qualities.

In the analysis process, these two theories are combined to comprehensively understand the artistic characteristics and cultural significance of Beiqiang music. The Norms of Musical Style Theory helps identify specific stylistic elements within the music, while the Chinese Musical Form System Theory provides profound insights into how these elements are organized and expressed within the context of traditional Chinese music. This multi-faceted theoretical application enables the research to delve deeply into the intrinsic logic and external expression of Beiqiang music.

Musicological analysis of Beiqiang

Modes and scales

The modes structure of Beiqiang music is one of its most notable characteristics. It not only reflects the uniqueness of Chinese music but also profoundly influences the expressiveness and emotional depth of the melody.

When female Beiqiang first appears, it employs the G QingYue Zhi mode, a seven-note scale based on the pentatonic scale. By introducing the biangong (altered note) and qingjiao (secondary altered note), this mode extends the traditional pentatonic scale to form a complete seven-note scale. This not only highlights the uniqueness of the seven-note system in Chinese music but also enriches the basic pentatonic melody through the decoration of altered notes.

As shown in Table 1, the three occurrences of female Beiqiang utilize the G Qing Yue Zhi mode, a G Zhi hexatonic scale with biangong, and a G Zhi pentatonic scale. Figure1(a), Figure1(b), Figure1(c) illustrates that each mode is composed of four musical phrases separately, all ending on the note G, demonstrating the diverse application of the G Zhi pentatonic scale.

Table 1: Beiqiang duet for male and female of the repertoire of Yangxin tea-picking

No.	Beiqiang duet for male&female	Phrases	Final notes	Mode	Scale
No. 1	female <u>Beiqiang</u>	8	G	G <u>Qingyue Zhi</u> mode	G-A-B-C-D-E-F
No. 2	male <u>Beiqiang</u>	4	C	D Gong pentatonic mode	D-E-#F-A-B
No. 3	female <u>Beiqiang</u>	4	G	G <u>Zhi Hexatonic</u> scale with <u>Biangong</u>	G-A-B-D-E-F
No. 4	male <u>Beiqiang</u>	4	C	D Gong pentatonic mode	D-E-#F-A-B
No. 5	female <u>Beiqiang</u>	4	G	G <u>Zhi</u> pentatonic mode	G-A-B-D-E
No. 6	male <u>Beiqiang</u>	3	C	D Gong pentatonic mode	D-E-#F-A-B



Figure1(a) : G Zhi pentatonic mode



Figure1(b) : G Zhi Hexatonic scale with Biangong

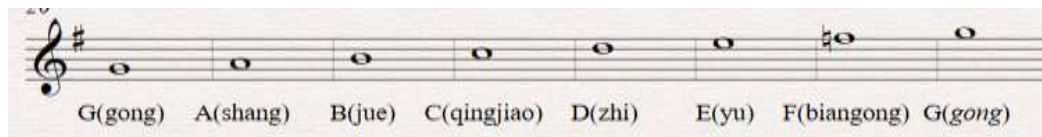


Figure1(c) : G Qingyue Zhi mode

In contrast, the modes structure of male Beiqiang is more straightforward, primarily utilizing the D Gong pentatonic scale and consisting of four musical phrases. This pentatonic scale exhibits the basic characteristics and clear structure of the five-note system, with the interval arrangement as follows: D (gong) to E (shang) as a whole tone (major second), E (shang) to F# (jue) as a whole tone, F# (jue) to A (zhi) as a whole tone, and A (zhi) to B (yu) as a minor third, as illustrated in the Figure 2.



Figure 2: D-gong pentatonic mode

The modes variations in Beiqiang music deeply integrate with dramatic roles, storylines, and musical forms, highlighting its importance in theatrical expression. The three modal variations in female Beiqiang emphasize different pitches and emotional colors, aligning with the complex emotional changes of female characters. Conversely, the straightforward pentatonic scale of male Beiqiang enhances the decisiveness and strength of male characters. These modal variations are closely tied to the plot's development, musically foreshadowing climaxes or turning points in the story.

The harmonic treatment in Beiqiang music reflects its modal characteristics. The simplicity of the pentatonic scale translates into clear harmonic progressions, while the addition of altered notes introduces extra color and tension to the harmony. Melodic lines vary within the modal framework, creating a musical language that is both structured and free. This not only showcases melodic innovation but also embodies the Chinese musical aesthetic principle of "achieving richness through simplicity."

Rhythm

The rhythmic characteristics of Beiqiang music are crucial factors in its expressiveness and dynamic variation. These rhythms are closely intertwined with melody and mode, together shaping the music's style and emotional impact.

Beiqiang music primarily features a regular 2/4 time signature, providing a stable and balanced rhythmic foundation. At the ends of musical phrases, a 3/4 time signature is cleverly introduced as a supplement, enhancing the completeness of the melodic lines and adding vividness to the expression. The transition in rhythm, such as shifting from 2/4 to 3/4 time, not only enriches the musical structure but also effectively conveys the emotional changes of the characters. For instance, during climactic or pivotal moments in the opera, changes in rhythm can heighten the tension and anticipation, drawing the audience further into the performance.

The rhythmic flexibility and its integration with other musical elements showcase the sophisticated design of Beiqiang music, enhancing both its structural complexity and emotional depth. As shown in Excerpt 1.



Excerpt 1: The rhythm from Beiqiang of the repertoire of Yangxin tea-picking opera, "Celebrating longevity with "QiaoMaimo".

In Beiqiang music, the combination of eighth notes and tied sixteenth notes forms the foundational elements of its rhythmic patterns. These basic rhythmic units are combined into various complex rhythmic modes, such as two-beat syncopation and one-beat syncopation, as well as dotted eighth notes followed by sixteenth notes, and sixteenth notes followed by eighth notes. These combinations create expressive rhythmic textures, enriching the music's rhythmic layers and providing momentum and direction for the melody.

The use of these rhythmic elements adds to the dynamic complexity and emotional expressiveness of Beiqiang music, making it not only structurally intricate but also deeply engaging for the audience. As shown in Excerpt 2.

Musical notation for Excerpt 2. It consists of two staves in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 60 Larghetto. The first staff is labeled 'Zhuhu' and has measure numbers 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39. The second staff is also labeled 'Zhuhu' and has measure numbers 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48. Red boxes highlight specific rhythmic patterns in both staves. The lyrics are: '自 那 年 进 徐 门' (under the first staff) and '寒 窑 哇 苦 守' (under the second staff).

Excerpt 2: The rhythm patterns from Beiqiang of the repertoire of Yangxin tea-picking opera, "Celebrating longevity with "QiaoMaimo".

The timely use of whole notes introduces necessary pauses and breathing spaces within the

rhythmic flow, adding variation and contrast to the overall rhythmic structure, making it more three-dimensional and multi-layered. This rhythmic dynamism and diversity are crucial means by which Beiqiang music captivates the audience and conveys the emotions of the opera.

The rhythm of Beiqiang music not only functions on a musical level but also synchronizes closely with theatrical actions. The actors' physical movements, stage positioning, and performance tempo often match the music's rhythm, creating a harmonious unity between the visual and auditory elements. This synchronization enhances the overall dramatic effect, ensuring that the rhythm not only supports but also amplifies the narrative and emotional depth of the performance.

Melody

The melody of Beiqiang music is renowned for its smoothness and expressiveness. The melodic lines predominantly feature stepwise movements of minor seconds, major thirds, and perfect fourths, forming the fundamental framework of the melody, as shown in Excerpt 3. Additionally, the melody skillfully incorporates leaps of perfect fifths and major sixths as auxiliary elements, introducing variation and tension.

The image shows a musical score for the instrument 'Zhuhu' in G major. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff starts at measure 36 and contains the lyrics '自 那 年 进 徐 门'. The second staff starts at measure 36 and contains the lyrics '寒 窑 哇 苦 守'. The third staff starts at measure 42 and contains the lyrics '早 无 柴'. Red boxes are drawn around several notes in the score, highlighting specific melodic leaps: a perfect fifth leap in the first staff, a major sixth leap in the second staff, and a perfect fifth leap in the third staff.

Excerpt 3: The melody from Beiqiang of the repertoire of Yangxin tea-picking opera, "Celebrating longevity with "QiaoMaimo".

These stepwise movements provide a stable and coherent melodic foundation, while the occasional leaps add dynamic contrast and emotional depth. This combination creates a melody that is both structured and flexible, capable of conveying a wide range of emotions and dramatic nuances.

In the progression of the melody, the transition from conjunct motion to disjunct motion not only enriches the melodic structure but also reflects the composer's intricate design, as shown in Excerpt 4, the red colour is conjunct motion and the disjunct motion is black color. Conjunct motion imparts a smooth and coherent quality to the melody, while disjunct motion, by introducing contrast and tension, enhances the expressiveness and dynamic variation of the music..

32 $\text{♩} = 60$ Larghetto 3

Zhuhu
自那年进徐门 寒窑哇

Daluo

Xiaoluo

Naobo
Shuicha

Shouban
iaotanggu

Excerpt 4: The melody contour from Beiqiang of the repertoire of Yangxin tea-picking opera, "Celebrating longevity with "QiaoMaimo".

The melodic design skillfully conveys the inner world of the characters in the drama. For instance, in scenes depicting differing viewpoints, inner turmoil, and heated arguments among characters, the leaps and changes in tension within the melody effectively communicate complex emotions and dramatic conflicts.

The melodic lines of Beiqiang music embody the characteristics of traditional Chinese music, seeking richness and variation within simplicity. Through careful selection and combination of melodic intervals, Beiqiang music's melody demonstrates complexity within its simplicity. This not only reflects a profound understanding of melodic lines and emotional expression but also showcases an innovative spirit in musical creation.

Conclusion

As a core element of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, Beiqiang music not only possesses unique artistic value on a musical level but also plays a crucial role in shaping the plot and characters of the opera. Through an in-depth analysis of the melody, rhythm, and mode of Beiqiang music, we can see how its distinctive musical characteristics enhance the expressiveness and emotional depth of the opera.

Firstly, the modes structure of Beiqiang music showcases its unique musical aesthetics and cultural connotations. By analyzing the male and female Beiqiang, we can observe how Beiqiang music employs different modes variations to convey the emotional changes of characters and the development of the plot. These modal changes not only enhance the diversity and expressiveness of the music but also enrich the emotional layers of the opera through musical tension and color changes.

Secondly, the rhythmic characteristics of Beiqiang music provide a stable yet varied foundation for the entire drama. The alternation between 2/4 and 3/4 time signatures not only enriches the structure of the music but also conveys the emotional changes of the characters through rhythmic variations. For instance, at the climax or turning points of the plot, rhythmic changes

can intensify the tension and anticipation in the music, thereby drawing the audience deeper into the performance.

The melodic design of Beiqiang music exemplifies the pursuit of richness and variation within simplicity, a hallmark of traditional Chinese music. By utilizing stepwise movements of minor seconds, major thirds, and perfect fourths, along with the strategic inclusion of perfect fifths and major sixths, Beiqiang melodies achieve a smooth and coherent quality while introducing contrast and tension through leaps. This melodic design not only enhances the expressiveness of the music but also effectively conveys the inner world of the characters and the dramatic conflicts.

In summary, the significance of Beiqiang music in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera lies not only in its musical characteristics but also in its contribution to the dramatic expressiveness and emotional conveyance of the opera. Through a comprehensive analysis of Beiqiang music, we not only deepen our understanding of traditional Chinese music but also provide academic support for the preservation and inheritance of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, an intangible cultural heritage.

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