



Abstract of Dissertation

Vocal, Dramatic, and Stylistic Features of the Interpretation of Leading Female Roles in "Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot" by Puccini. A Comparative Analysis with Leading Female Characters in Chinese Opera

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Abstract

Eastern-themed operas often carry an alluring layer of mystery, primarily stemming from the Eastern traditions, historical legacies, religious customs, and the unique cultures of diverse ethnicities. Whether it's Puccini's "Turandot" on a Chinese story, the "Madama Butterfly" as a Japanese plot, or Xu Zhanhai's Chinese work "Cang Yuan," all of them are based on their respective cultures. They incorporate captivating Eastern elements in various aspects, including characters, music, and the corresponding societal backgrounds. These operas skillfully blend Western operatic techniques with unique Eastern ethnic styles, resulting in a diverse collection of Oriental-themed opera works.

Comparing these three operas, we can see that in terms of culture and ethnicity Puccini tends to incorporate various horizontal aspects of a given country's culture and characteristics into his operas to enrich their regional features. This is done to pique the interest of Western audiences in Eastern cultures. On the other hand, Xu Zhanhai excels at using the historical culture and ethnic plotlines of a specific era as a foundation. He expands the script and creates music content centered around the cultural characteristics of his own nationality. Artistically, Puccini's operas often use character traits and experiences, with love as the eternal theme. In reality, this serves as a metaphor to reveal the true cruelty of society. His works engage audiences through emotional storytelling, gradually prompting them to contemplate deeper meanings. In contrast, Xu Zhanhai directly bases his work on real and brutal historical events. It diverges to show a rich fusion of emotions, including family, love, friendship and national pride, allowing the audience to more directly experience and understand different emotional needs. Therefore, although both of them created their works in the interplay of emotions and reality, their methods of expression can be said to differ to some extent. These approaches provide fundamental starting points for the stylistic positioning and character

portrayal of the female roles in their works. Through the tragic experiences and outcomes of several female protagonists (with the exception of Puccini's unfinished Turandot character), they touch the nerves and emotions of the resonant audience, achieving the philosophical and symbolic themes that the entire opera aims to convey and elevate.

For the performers, on one hand, the in-depth study of character traits in the drama plays a crucial role in the overall opera, as their formation is rooted in the historical and societal context, leading to the inevitable development of their story arc. On the other hand, an emphasis on interpreting the musical style is essential. This style serves as an impression that helps the audience intuitively understand the character's inner thoughts and emotional tone. Moreover, incorporating distinctive ethnic characteristics in the music can highlight the character's unique flavor, allowing the audience to sense their personality traits through the musical style.

By combining the elements of drama and musicality in this way, one can unearth vibrant and dynamic characters. Through the overall structure of the opera, it becomes possible to reflect the prominent spiritual themes and real-life significance required of the female protagonist. This approach goes beyond the surface-level storytelling and one-dimensional character portrayals, aiming to bring out the rich and mysterious aspects of Eastern women formed by their cultural and historical backgrounds. By comparing their commonalities and individual traits, one can summarize multiple approaches and perspectives for interpreting their roles. This will ultimately help in future endeavors to accurately portray Eastern female protagonists in a more comprehensive manner when creating similar characters.

Keywords: Opera, Eastern female characters, compare, "Madama Butterfly", "Turandot", "Cang Yuan".

Introduction

I. Choice of Research Topic

1. Reasons and Purpose of the Research

The dissertation is on "Vocal, dramatic and stylistic features of the interpretation of the leading female roles in 'Madama Butterfly' and 'Turandot' by Puccini". A Comparative Analysis of the Leading Female Characters in Chinese Opera". My goal is to explore relevant aspects of the interpretation of leading female oriental characters in opera. I chose this topic because the interaction, collision, fusion, and shared development of Eastern and Western cultures have been a lengthy process. Particularly in performing art such as opera, there were many stages and many elements to its spread from Europe eastwards. For example, although opera was first introduced to China at the end of the 19th century, it didn't become widely popular until the early 20th century when it was embraced by a new generation of Chinese intellectuals and artists. At the beginning of China's modern history, European culture and ideas had an impact on the country. Simultaneously, Chinese nationalism was on the rise. During the development of modernization and industrialization in China, many intellectuals and artists sought inspiration from Europe; at that time opera as a genre became an integral part of the cultural exchange. This was especially true for young, educated urban elites who were eager to embrace new cultural forms and saw opera as a symbol of modernity and maturity. Despite facing numerous challenges and cultural collisions in the early 20th century, opera's popularity and influence continued to grow in China. In the country, where the society has rich history and unique cultural characteristics, opera evolved and adapted to changing times, gradually developing libretti and vocal style with distinctive Chinese characteristics. This enriched the genre and made opera unique. Many Eastern operas also sought to develop music styles that

suited their respective cultural systems, gradually forming similar dual characteristics.

In this process, one of the most influential figures was the renowned composer Puccini, who is considered one of the greatest composers of the 19th and early 20th century. Throughout his lifetime, he composed several enduring operas, among which the most imbued with Eastern influences are "Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot". These two operas not only shaped Western impressions of Japan and China but also provided Eastern audiences with a new understanding of how their cultures could be conveyed to the world. This led to deeper research and gradual development. By the late 20th century, Eastern opera, through continuous exploration and innovation, had developed its own unique style. The highly representative Chinese opera, "Cang Yuan", with its structured classical opera format, rich storytelling, and distinctive ethnic style, became one of the famous Eastern-themed operas. This further clarified the uniqueness of Eastern opera: the historical attributes within society, cultural representations in characters, and the ethnic qualities within the music. From the perspective of opera itself, this evolution formed a more tangible branch within the framework of classical opera composition, allowing audiences to more intuitively experience the depth of Eastern history and the multifaceted nature of Eastern culture. This represents both a continuation of tradition and an innovative development within classical opera.

From the perspective of today's opera stage, many classical operas are reinterpreted by directors in innovative ways to inspire actors with fresh insights, incorporating avant-garde stage designs to present classic operas with a contemporary touch. Furthermore, with the ongoing exchange between Eastern and Western cultures, the opera industry is witnessing an increasing number of Eastern talents joining in. This includes both opera singers and creators, leading to a diverse array of musical adaptations that blend elements of both cultures.

Many new operas are created using classical operatic composition techniques but with original scripts, combining national and ethnic characteristics to create a variety of distinctive modern operas. ethnicities to produce a wide variety of distinctive modern operas.

There is also an increase in cultural exchange as many Eastern countries are increasingly engaged with the rest of the world. For example, China is actively promoting the touring of classical operas from various countries and publicizing Chinese operas internationally. In addition, tens of thousands of music students go abroad for further education every year. After graduation, they may participate in artist programs worldwide, return to China to perform Western classical and Chinese operas, or engage in various artistic endeavors. Simultaneously, an increasing number of Western music enthusiasts are emerging in China and the Eastern region, contributing to the performance of operas with Eastern themes. This dynamic landscape necessitates opera performers to fundamentally understand and master the key aspects of portraying Eastern characters using the bel canto singing style. They also need to grasp the essential characteristics of Eastern roles created by composers from different countries. This enables them to interpret and perform more flexibly according to the requirements of various styles and the intended meanings they convey.

Starting with Puccini, who pioneered the use of Eastern themes in opera, and continuing with the rise of Eastern operas today, we can see a progressive trend towards the expansion and enrichment of the content and genre of opera. As for female figures of the East, their significance is highly representative, whether within the Eastern region or across the historical epochs. Throughout the historical and cultural development of the East, women's roles have undergone significant transformations. With the rise of agrarian civilizations, they went from a position of high status in primitive matriarchal societies to being gradually replaced by

patriarchal societies. Subsequently, they experienced a decline in social status due to the influence of feudal societal systems, leading to male dominance and female subordination within families. Finally, they have evolved to attain a more equal social status in contemporary times. This journey encompasses both external cultural influences and internal self-awareness. Through the lengthy process of evolution, Eastern women have developed intricate inner worlds, characterized by the subtlety, resilience, and restrained grace that have been nurtured by the river of history. It can be said that Puccini interpreted various aspects of Eastern female characters through the lens of Western sensibilities, while Xu Zhanhai, on the other hand, delved into the multifaceted traits of Eastern women from the position of Eastern cultural heritage. For opera performers, both singing and acting hold equal importance, but portraying Eastern female characters often demands a more nuanced understanding. This goes beyond expressing the content of the drama through singing; it also requires precise control over the character's subtle inner psychology. By tapping into the historical and cultural richness, employing delicate changes in micro expressions, and embodying the restrained temperament of Eastern women, opera performers can bring out their distinctive charm and capture the essence of Eastern aesthetics.

Therefore, I hope that through this research, I can effectively integrate the elements of drama, cultural background, and musical elements in the performance of opera. By combining the elements of drama and musicality in this way, one can unearth vibrant and dynamic characters. Through the overall structure of the opera, it becomes possible to reflect the prominent spiritual themes and real-life significance required of the female protagonist. This approach goes beyond the surface-level storytelling and one-dimensional character portrayals, aiming to bring out the rich and mysterious aspects of Eastern women formed by their cultural and historical backgrounds. This is the purpose of studying the characteristics of the female protagonists in these three operas. By comparing their

commonalities and individual traits, one can summarize multiple approaches and perspectives for interpreting their roles. This will ultimately help in future endeavors to accurately portray Eastern female protagonists in a more comprehensive manner when creating similar characters.

In the future, as the exchange and mutual understanding between Eastern and Western cultures continue to expand, there will be an increased breadth of cultural depth reflected in music. Therefore, the study of Eastern female characters in opera serves as the necessary foundation and guidance for the conceptual perspectives and approaches when portraying similar roles in opera in the future. This foundation should not only be built upon the international framework of opera standards but also align with the unique character images cultivated by Eastern historical and cultural influences. It should enable both Eastern and Western opera performers to skillfully handle rich roles, contributing to the enrichment, expansion, and dimensional extension of the opera cultural industry.

2. Research Subject and Methods

Subject of my research are the Western composer Puccini and the leading female roles in his two Oriental operas, "Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot", as well as the Eastern composer Xu Zhanhai and the female lead in his Chinese opera "Cang Yuan." This research aims to compare the vocal, dramatic, and stylistic features of interpretation between these two composers and the leading female roles in their respective operas. Regarding the research methods, I start with understanding the constitutive elements related to the composers and the operas, such as the authors' biographies, creative characteristics, and relevant influences. I also delve into the basic content of the scores to explore the objective social background and subjective creative meaning of the operas. This is important for the direction of the plot and for the mutual containment and revelation of the purpose of the works. Given the many historical and cultural factors involved, it's necessary to draw on

a wide range of documentary sources and to conduct interviews with relevant people when discussing the backgrounds of Eastern works. On the other hand, I conducted on-site investigations of Western composers and their musical compositions, gaining an understanding of the characteristics of their musical styles. I also compare the latest performance versions with records from different periods and countries to identify and explore more appropriate angles of interpretation for the various elements within the operas. When research on the direction of performance is concerned, it's necessary to develop the corresponding character structures and deep-rooted meanings after establishing the basic facts through extensive preliminary research. With a comprehensive background, one must frequently return to the scores, studying various details related to musical notation, melody, lyrics, and emotions. Building upon the foundation of historical culture and objective background, the language of music is used to convey the dramatic performance, creating pronounced character images that integrate with the development of the plot. Theoretical research is then applied to practical interpretation. Further analysis and research is carried out through continuous refinement. This process gradually leads to updated and more suitable angles of interpretation and performance pathways. This dissertation specifically focuses on the interpretation of Eastern leading female roles as its core research topic and conducts a comparative analysis.

II. Summary of Research

1. Research Process

It primarily approaches the subject from both vertical and horizontal perspectives:

The first part begins by vertically examining the objective content associated with each of the three operas, using real-world contexts as a theoretical basis to study

the subjective thoughts and emotional psychology of the characters. Though they are Puccini's operas with Eastern stories, Japan and China are distinct countries in the same region of the world. Their characteristics, influenced by various aspects such as society, politics, economy, and culture, subtly permeate and impact the thoughts and mindsets of the characters, resulting from the accumulation of historical and cultural factors. By using this concrete and objective evidence to illustrate the reasons behind the formation of character personalities, it becomes possible to explore various aspects of the characters, analyze the complex processes of their inner changes, and, in combination with various real-life factors, comprehensively lead to the inevitable conclusions of the dramatic content. At the same time, there is an analysis of the various musical elements within the opera. On one hand, it begins by examining the integration and balance of music and drama, with the arias of the female protagonist at its core. The focus is on analyzing how music interprets and expresses the dramatic conflicts and inner emotions of the female protagonist. On the other hand, it starts by highlighting the distinct styles of each respective country and different ethnicities within the overall music. This involves exploring how characteristic music and creative methods are applied in areas such as orchestration, arias, and monologues. It is made clear that music and drama work hand in hand, mutually propelling each other. They stand both within the framework of Western music and embody the exotic Eastern colors. By researching the costumes, props, and accessories involved in the play, it supplements the presentation of ethnic characteristics. More importantly, by comparing different performance versions, while focusing on the arias of the female protagonist, it contrasts the varying demands of different directors regarding script interpretation and stage design. This serves to showcase the unique experiences given to the audience by the co-authored creative interpretations in musical aesthetics at different times.

The second part involves a comprehensive comparative analysis across these three operas horizontally in terms of their categories. It delves deep into comparing and analyzing aspects such as the historical background, character traits, culture and music, as well as differences in actual performance. By fully exploring both objective factors and subjective emotions, it contrasts the different characteristics and emphases in these three operas. This reveals the varying perspectives of Western and Eastern cultures in opera creation, the impact of these differences on character development, the unique musical techniques employed, and the consequent adjustments required in singing techniques and performance approaches. In conclusion, it summarizes suitable ways of portraying Eastern female characters and different mindsets, providing a basis for learning and research for relevant performers and music enthusiasts.

2. Essence of the Dissertation

Many performers lack a deep understanding of Eastern culture when portraying Eastern characters. As a result, they tend to stay at a superficial level of singing and emotional expression, failing to profoundly interpret the comprehensive characteristics of the roles and appreciate the nuances of various ethnic traits within Eastern music. Specific for this text is its focus on the purpose of musical performance. It takes Eastern and Western composers' creations of Eastern female protagonists as a comparative starting point. It is grounded in the concrete manifestation of Eastern culture in Western music compositions, from objective existence to subjective consciousness. It uses real-world backgrounds as theoretical foundations to shape the characters and emotions in the opera. It delves into the historical reasons and evolution of the use of Eastern culture and music in the opera, while also highlighting the differences in interpretation of Eastern culture, construction of Eastern female protagonists, and the utilization of Eastern music between Eastern and Western composers. Moreover, it continuously refines and summarizes the interpretative approaches suitable for portraying Eastern

female protagonists in music performance. This primarily emphasizes the foundational role of Eastern history and culture in Eastern-style operas and how it guides character development. It also incorporates the multi-ethnic characteristics of the East into character formation and the unique use of music. Through these research discussions, it thoroughly excavates the distinctiveness of Eastern culture and music, distilling interpretive methods beneficial for musical performances. Simultaneously, it helps fill the theoretical references for the convergence of Eastern and Western music in creation and interpretation of meaning.

Since I limit myself to basic research and knowledge of the two composers' works, I may not fully understand or accurately grasp their intentions, and the specifics of the characters in the operas. I had to repeatedly verify, continuously improve, and further explore through learning and practice. I hope that through this thesis, I can begin to explore the ways of portraying Eastern female characters in classic operas. After all, there are many differences between Western and Eastern cultures in expression and interpretation, and there are many unexplored commonalities. Therefore, on one hand, I expect this thesis can provide learning references for more music enthusiasts interested in this area. On the other hand, I also hope that it can encourage more mutual learning and integration between Western and Eastern cultures in the field of music, making the scope of opera more diverse and rich. **There are still many areas in the dissertation that need improvement, and I welcome corrections and suggestions from the teachers.**

Chapter 1: Puccini's Operas "Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot"

I. Giacomo Puccini

1. Brief biography

Giacomo Puccini was an Italian composer from the late 19th into the early 20th century, known for his iconic works such as "Tosca", "Madama Butterfly", "La Bohème", and "Turandot". These operas continue to be performed and cherished around the world, making Puccini one of the greatest opera composers in history, particularly as a representative of the "verismo" opera style.

2. Characteristics of Puccini's dramaturgical and musical style

Being a master dramatist, Puccini regarded equally music, plot, singing, and emotional content in his operatic compositions. He believed that plot and music were interdependent, where the development of the plot directly influenced the direction of musical creation. The interweaving of a rich plot content and musical drama, working together and supporting each other, is what creates complete and unique classic works. His creations are imbued with strong verism, often ending with a tragedy. Through depicting the humble lives of ordinary people, he exposed the darker aspects of society. Puccini emphasized the expression and the release of emotions, utilizing lush and elaborate orchestration to portray the characters in abundant nuances. He excelled in portraying deep emotions of passion and heartbreaking love, and incorporated traditional and folk elements into the orchestration, giving his works a sense of cultural authenticity.

3. Puccini and the future

Puccini's influence on future generations is undoubtedly immense. As a representative figure of the verismo operatic style, and because of his comprehensive use of balance and proportion in composition, Puccini has provided textbook-level guidance for subsequent generations in the realm of opera

creation. Many scholars have acknowledged these aspects. In the future, more and more talented musicians will follow Puccini's creative path and innovate further, composing a plethora of outstanding artistic works. This will contribute to the flourishing development of the music and opera industry.

II. "Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot"

"Madama Butterfly"

1. Background and Overview of the work

"Madama Butterfly" is a lyrical tragic opera created by Puccini, which explores themes of love, betrayal, and sacrifice through the clash of cross-cultural ideas between an American naval officer and a Japanese geisha. Set in Japan but narrated from a Western perspective, the opera highlights the cultural differences between the male and female protagonists.

2. Artistic interpretation of the female protagonists

a. Features of the leading female roles in the dramatic performance

Butterfly's personality is dominated by her past as a geisha. The factors that lead Butterfly to persist in waiting for Pinkerton and ultimately resort to the extreme act of suicide to end her life have, in my view, two main aspects that need to be explained: On one hand, from an internal perspective rooted in traditional psychology, despite Japan's rapid acceptance of new things, traditional beliefs still held a significant place.

On the other hand, from the perspective of external societal pressures, considering the aforementioned content, Butterfly, amidst the various societal impacts and changes in Japan at that time, also hoped to transform herself into an "American" through this path, seeking to embrace America's slogans of "freedom, democracy, and equality." She believed that her marriage didn't belong to the Japanese system, but rather to the American institution of marriage. In reality, Pinkerton himself didn't view this experience as a lifelong commitment, which ironically undermines

Butterfly's dreams and aspirations for the future. Furthermore, when her conservative uncle and extended family opposed the marriage, Butterfly went against their wishes, and for the years she waited for Pinkerton, she rejected all other suitors. In other words, she placed herself entirely within the hope of being with Pinkerton, shutting off almost all potential avenues and relationships that would allow her to establish herself and survive in Japan. She essentially pushed herself into a situation with no way out.

b. Vocal and orchestral language

As an opera with an intimate lyrical style, "Madama Butterfly" delves into the motives and emotions of its characters, focusing on the detailed portrayal of Butterfly's psychological state. As a complex and nuanced character, Butterfly's cultural background and personal experiences influence her decisions and actions. Puccini repeatedly employs musical variations of the same theme, which is the language of the orchestration. He conveys the emotional depth of the story and the complexity of culture through a series of unforgettable arias, duets, and ensembles. These performances often involve intense dramatic acting, making stringent demands on the stamina of the performer. She needs to have strong and sustained vocal control to manage the entire opera.

3. Comparison of different productions

As one of Puccini's exemplary operatic works, "Madama Butterfly" has been continuously performed around the world for many years, presenting numerous versions. One of the most iconic versions is the film recording featuring the collaboration of Mirella Freni and Placido Domingo. In the 2019 version featuring He Hui, there are significant differences from the Freni version. In terms of vocal technique, Freni undoubtedly sets a textbook-level example that is nearly unmatched. On the other hand, He Hui, with her authentic Asian appearance, brings Butterfly to life as an Eastern character. Her voice possesses both the

delicate tonal quality of the East and the dramatic explosiveness needed, and with her exquisite vocal technique, she naturally embodies Butterfly.

"Turandot"

1. Background and Overview of the work

Puccini's final opera, "Turandot," is set in ancient China and revolves around themes of love, power, and sacrifice. The story follows the beautiful and proud Princess Turandot, who challenges her suitors to answer three riddles; failure results in execution. The origin of the script can be traced back to the 18th-century Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi's play "Turandot," inspired by Persian folktales. His play gained popularity at the time and was subsequently adapted by other writers. Puccini became interested upon hearing about it and began working on this opera in 1920. While the story content and the creative process of Puccini's unfinished masterpiece are well-known, this article aims to emphasize "Turandot" as an opera based on an ancient Chinese story and the importance of establishing its historical context. Chinese dynasties have experienced a history of 5,000 years, with constant battles and assimilation among the 56 ethnic groups, leading to the succession of different ruling dynasties in different eras, each of them emerging with their distinct cultural and social characteristics, resulting in unique Eastern nuances for each era. Although the plot and characters of "Turandot" are fictional, the historical era and social background it draws from directly influence the development of Turandot's character traits, as well as the opera's authentic portrayal and reflection of societal realities. This is in alignment with Puccini's role as a representative of realist opera and his artistic intent. Consequently, there is a necessity to research the prototype era and related societal factors that "Turandot" could potentially correspond to.

2. Artistic interpretation of the female protagonists

a. Features of the leading female roles in the dramatic performance

Regarding the character of Turandot, three factors influence her traits: first, the experiences of her ancestors and the historical defeat of her country fill her heart with hatred, resulting in her coldness and cruelty; second, the cognition of cultural traditions has formed a high recognition of her social status, which make her full of confidence and even arrogant. Both of these factors are influenced by real society. Third, she has never experienced love and, exhorted by the idea of men's animosity and by the duties instilled by her family and country, she hastily defines love and men as evil; this is, of course, a strong self-protective instinct born out of fear of being hurt.

b. Musical language

Puccini employs expansive lyrical melodies to interpret the intense theatricality within Turandot, using various musical elements to accentuate the continuous shifts of her character. Every section of Turandot's arias shows a regal elegance, while also conveying her vulnerable side. This demands extraordinary dramatic ability and stage presence from the performer. The composer employs intense passages exclusively to Turandot's music, which challenge the professional expertise and physical stamina of the singer. However, this aspect makes it one of the most attractive roles for many sopranos. Compared to Turandot's intense and dramatic singing style, Liu's singing leans more toward lyrical and flowing melodies with delicate and beautiful vocal lines. This creates a stark contrast with Turandot's powerful, cold, and robust musical style. Liu's arias feature long, continuous musical phrases, extremely soft dynamics, and warm tones, all of which showcase her gentle and graceful character.

3. Comparison of different stage productions

The score of "Turandot" is marked by soaring melodies, lush orchestration, and rich sound effects. The work is renowned for its grandeur and opulence. The vocal lines of Turandot are intricately woven, with nuanced emotional transitions,

making it one of the most demanding roles in opera. Since its premiere, performances and adaptations have taken place worldwide, resulting in numerous distinctive versions. For instance, in the 1987 Metropolitan Opera production in the United States, the mastery and attention to detail can be observed both in the actors' command of their roles and in the elaborate set designs and costumes. James Levine's expert conducting accurately conveys Puccini's intent, while Placido Domingo's voice and charismatic appearance vividly portray the Prince of Tatars heroic presence. Furthermore, looking at the performance of the female lead, what truly impressed everyone more than this version was Turandot portrayed by the world-famous soprano, Bulgaria's Ghenia Dimitrova. Ghenia's natural vocal attributes are clearly superior to others: whether it's the richness of her voice, the power it exudes, or the breadth of her range, she stands unmatched. In recent years, directors have begun to experiment with various modernized adaptations, sometimes opting for minimalist approaches to provide a unique flavor.

Brief summary

These female protagonists in Puccini's oriental operas - Butterfly and Turandot – present to the audience two vastly different characters. They share some similarities but suffer from their own unique struggles: both exude a mysterious, exotic allure, and despite having vastly different personalities due to their social backgrounds, they both possess the purity of traditional Eastern women. The different emotional states of these two characters give rise to strikingly different musical interpretations and expressions. This might indeed be Puccini's intention: to express different attitudes towards love and the consequences they entail through two entirely different characters. Additionally, by incorporating the historical and cultural context of the time, he reflects the genuine societal reflections and ideological thoughts hidden behind the seemingly prominent

theme of love. Through this, he critically addresses the darker aspects of society, in line with his persistent pursuit of "verism" in his creations.

Chapter 2: Chinese Opera "Cang Yuan"

I. Xu Zhanhai - the author of the opera

Xu Zhanhai, the composer of "Cang Yuan" is one of the most prominent contemporary Chinese composers. His contributions to the field of composition, including opera composition and national instrumental music composition, as well as his work in musical culture management, and music therapy are considered as significant contributions. He also played a vital role in educating numerous professional talents in the field of music. Through his extensive musical career, Xu Zhanhai has developed a unique artistic style. In terms of his creative approach, his works often take patriotism as a dominating idea, using many historical themes as the backdrop for his compositions. Through complex characterizations and experiences, he portrays the real lives and emotions of these characters in different social settings, reflecting the uniqueness of each era. As a result, Xu Zhanhai's music compositions explore diverse ethnic styles. He combines Western classical compositional techniques with traditional Chinese musical elements that have stood the test of time, creating a variety of grand epic works with distinct Chinese characteristics.

II. The opera "*Cang Yuan*"

1. Background and Overview of the work

"Cang Yuan" was created in 1995 and stands as one of the most representative classic works in the history of Chinese opera. It tells the story of the Chinese Torghut Mongolian tribe, who had lived for over 140 years in the Volga River region of Russia during the Qing Dynasty's Qianlong era. Unable to endure the brutal rule of the Russian Empress Catherine II, they, under the leadership of their chief Wobaxi Khan, made a resolute decision to return to their ancestral homeland

in China for the sake of their ethnic survival and freedom. During this epic journey, which spanned over thousands of miles and lasted for seven months, they overcame the military encirclement and pursuit by Russian forces, as well as internal conspiracies aimed at disrupting their return. They made significant sacrifices to finally reach their homeland in the Tian Shan Mountains of China. This opera portrays a grand patriotic epic of a major ethnic migration, filled with complex and poignant dramatic conflicts. The opera features vivid characterizations of key figures like Narengaowa, Wobaxi, She Leng, and Aipeilei, and it sings an anthem of patriotism amid the conflicts of life and death, love and hatred. It also conveys the profound human desire for freedom and peace. "Cang Yuan" combines the typical structure of Western opera with distinct Chinese style and ethnic characteristics, achieving a perfect fusion of music and drama.

2. Artistic interpretation of the female protagonists

a. Presentation of the leading female role

As the sole female lead in the opera, the character of Narengaowa plays a crucial role throughout the entire plot. She possesses typical Mongolian characteristics associated with people on horseback: she is innocent and lively, kind and straightforward, and has a strong sense of justice; her emotions are straightforward. She is incredibly loyal to love, full of hope and anticipation for a bright future, and at the same time, she willingly sacrifices herself for the greater cause of her people's survival. It's evident that her character portrayal is distinct and well-rounded, making it a challenging role to perform and interpret, particularly due to its complexity.

b. Musical language

In terms of music, Xu Zhanhai incorporates elements from traditional Chinese folk songs and musical techniques, using the form of Western opera for his

compositions. He effectively merges Chinese folk music with Western compositional techniques. Building upon the Western operatic style, which typically includes recitative, he incorporates elements of Chinese-style spoken drama, traditional Chinese operatic rhythms, and the four intonations of the Chinese language¹. This makes the music more in line with Chinese traditional culture and content, more suitable for Chinese audiences to understand the recitative and dialogues.

3. Prominence of the work

"Cang Yuan has been staged many times over the years. The 2021 version by the Liaoning Opera House is the most representative. Through years of rehearsing and fine-tuning, this version not only accurately reflects the author's intentions but also demonstrates remarkable creativity in its stage design.

"Cang Yuan", due to its profound epic theme, vividly portrayed characters, unique ethnic music melodies, and classic Western operatic form, has perfectly crafted the fusion of Eastern and Western opera. Over the years, it has stood the test of time, being regarded as one of the finest work since the introduction of Western opera into China. The character of Narengaowa embodies the resilience of the Chinese nation while carrying the distinctive qualities of the Mongolian ethnicity, showcasing the multicultural essence of China. Through her perspective, the opera highlights the most genuine human reflections amid changing times, reflecting the inevitable choices of loyalty to the nation and self-sacrifice in traditional Chinese mentality.

Chapter 3: Comparison of the Three Operas

¹ Mandarin Chinese has four basic tones, and they play a crucial role in the language. Here's an explanation of each: 1. First Tone: This is a high, level tone. When pronounced, your voice stays high and flat; 2. Second Tone: This is a rising tone, where your voice starts from the middle range and goes up; 3. Third Tone: This is a tone that starts low, rises to the middle, and then falls slightly. It's like a dipping tone; 4. Fourth Tone: This is a falling tone, where your voice starts high and drops sharply.

These three operas are based on their respective cultures. They incorporate captivating Eastern elements in various aspects, including characters, music, and the societal backgrounds. These operas skillfully blend Western operatic techniques with unique Eastern ethnic styles, resulting in a diverse collection of Oriental-themed opera works.

I. Historical Backgrounds

Puccini composed "Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot" in the early 20th century, a period when Western culture was beginning to influence the East. The mysteries of Eastern culture were not yet widely known to Western audiences, marking the early stages of cultural exchange between East and West. During the creation of these two operas, Puccini extensively studied music elements and cultural characteristics commonly found in Japan and China, aiming to pique the audience's interest in the exoticism of the East. On the other hand, Xu Zhanhai's "Cang Yuan" was composed in the late 20th century. During this period, China had significantly increased its acceptance of Western culture through years of cultural exchange. Additionally, a common ground was found between Western opera composition and China's distinctive culture, allowing for mutual inspiration. This marked a vibrant period of mutual influence between Eastern and Western cultures.

II. Character Traits

The character traits in these three operas are quite distinct: Butterfly embodies the idea of "love above all" to the fullest extent. Turandot, on the other hand, starts from the opposite side. Her extreme obsession with her ancestors' tragic experiences leads to years of cruelty and coldness. Both Calaf's direct approach and Liu's indirect influence guide Turandot out of her extremism, helping her let go of her obsessions, face her inner self, and rediscover herself. As for

Narengaowa, she combines Butterfly's unwavering loyalty to love with a responsibility similar to Turandot's for her nation and ethnicity. She is incredibly loyal to love, full of hope and anticipation for a bright future, and at the same time, she willingly sacrifices herself for the greater cause of her people's survival.

III. Culture and Music

Comparing these three operas, we can see that in terms of culture and ethnicity, Puccini tends to incorporate various horizontal aspects of a given country's culture and characteristics into his operas to enrich their regional features. This is done to pique the interest of Western audiences in Eastern cultures. Xu Zhanhai excels at using the historical culture and ethnic plotlines of a specific era as a foundation. He expands the script and creates music content centered around the cultural characteristics of his own nationality. Artistically, Puccini's operas often use character traits and experiences, with love as the eternal theme. In reality, this serves as a metaphor to reveal the true cruelty of society. His works engage audiences through emotional storytelling, gradually prompting them to contemplate deeper meanings. In contrast, Xu Zhanhai directly bases his work on real and brutal historical events. It diverges to show a rich fusion of emotions, including family, love, friendship and national pride, allowing the audience to more directly experience and understand different emotional needs. Therefore, although both of them created their works in the interplay of emotions and reality, their methods of expression can be said to differ to some extent. These approaches provide fundamental starting points for the stylistic positioning and character portrayal of the female roles in their works. Through the tragic experiences and outcomes of several female protagonists (with the exception of Puccini's unfinished Turandot character), they touch the nerves and emotions of the resonant audience, achieving the philosophical and symbolic themes that the entire opera aims to convey and elevate.

IV. Distinguishing features of the operatic works

The creation of an opera is a comprehensive process. On one hand, it involves the composer's initial composition of the music score and the story script. On the other hand, it requires collaboration from various individuals, including conductors, directors, actors, backstage crew, and more, to present the final product to the audience. Among these, actors play the most direct role in conveying the performance. Therefore, different works have specific character setups and requirements for actors. This is especially true for opera actresses, who already have very detailed voice type distinctions and who will choose different suitable types based on the needs of the role.

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Conclusion

I. Research findings

Opera, as a form of stage art, has its origins in the musical theater of ancient Greece; it emerged in Florence, Italy, around the 17th century. It is a complex and multifaceted genre of classical music that combines vocal performances, orchestral compositions, and dramatic elements. Through various musical forms like arias, duets, and ensemble pieces, opera expresses its narrative and elevates its themes, making it one of the highest forms of stage performance. In the production process, opera operates as a highly collaborative art form, bringing together composers, directors, conductors, and performers. All the elements involved in its production must seamlessly come together to create a cohesive whole. This process can be complex and challenging, but when it finally comes to life on the stage after rigorous rehearsals, it immediately immerses the audience in a powerful and moving experience. The orchestra and performers, synchronized in the music, transport the audience into the story. The ability to connect with the audience and evoke feelings fuels the desire for excellence in the performer, creating an intimacy between the stage and the audience.

Research has shown that when portraying female characters with an Eastern cultural influence, it is not always easy to capture their inner psychology and temperament. Their characterizations are often deeply rooted in historical and cultural contexts, which, as a basis for character interpretation, affect both singing and performance. Female emotional fluctuations serve as the most accessible points of resonance for the audience, making the character a medium through which the author conveys ideological messages. As a result, the audience's identification with the character and, in turn, the author's true intentions are heightened. Therefore, Eastern female characters are not just about depicting their own stories; more importantly, they embody the unique qualities of Eastern women. This mystique is rooted in the multifaceted nature of these characters, which have been shaped by the rich historical and cultural processes. They are both tender and resilient, and they carry various distinctive qualities from different

ethnic backgrounds. In combination, these qualities create complex and balanced Eastern characters. They are a blend of inner and outer beauty.

This shows that cultural background plays a fundamental and guiding role in the plot and composition of operas. Culture often emerges from the sedimentation of historical epochs. Particularly in the case of works depicting the East, historical context and ethnic culture profoundly influence the specific characterization of the roles. "Turandot" and "Madama Butterfly" are both works from the early 20th century, classical operas created by the Western world to understand the East. On the other hand, "Cang Yuan" is a work from the late 20th century, born from the East's own understanding of its culture and created using the operatic style of the West. These three works predominantly portray stories set in periods somewhat distant from their own time, and they have crafted entirely different character traits from their respective historical and cultural contexts. Understanding and comparing these cultural backgrounds can lead to a more precise portrayal and interpretation of the characters. We can see from the historical backgrounds and cultural contexts of the first two operas that Puccini, as a veristic author, aimed to reveal the harsh realities behind the eternal theme of love. He portrayed the characters of several women as having virtues such as kindness, sincerity, resilience, and devotion hidden beneath the ignorance of society. This allows us to deeply intertwine our understanding and self-awareness in the realm of real-life circumstances and emotional aspirations. Xu Zhanhai makes use of a similar approach. The female protagonists in these three operas, due to their different life experiences and environmental influences, have developed distinct character traits. The author reflects the hardships brought about by reality through their portrayal. Whether it's Liu sacrificing herself for love, Butterfly escaping from the world, or Narengaowa's selfless sacrifice, they all represent the author's critique and resistance against the cruel realities while expressing genuine emotions with the utmost intensity.

In addition, the portrayal of Eastern women in these operas goes beyond just romantic love; it also delves into their self-awareness and points of concern, which need to be interpreted: Looking at Puccini's operas set in the East, for instance, Butterfly's loyalty to love represents, in a broader sense, her desire to break free from the constraints of her historical paradigm. She hopes to escape her past life and the traditions of society, ultimately changing her identity to live the beautiful life she has longed for. This also reflects the inevitable clash and fusion between the feudalism based on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Bushido in Japanese society at the time and the gradually infiltrating American cultural liberalism. From this perspective, love becomes a means for Butterfly to redefine her living environment. For Turandot, love serves as a guiding thread compelling her to confront her true self. Calaf's sincerity and passion, as well as Liu's willingness to sacrifice, all surround Turandot, gradually helping her thaw her numbness and break free from the "burden of the ancestors." Love prompts her to regain her thoughts and rediscover the warmth within herself. Xu Zhanhai's "Cang Yuan" uses Narengaowa's love story as a "thread" running through the plot. While it carries significant weight and conveys deep emotions, it primarily serves to express epic national spirit and the honor and disgrace of the country. Love, in this context, becomes a subsidiary element that helps modulate the lyrical aspects. This illustrates that the portrayal of Eastern women goes beyond just the theme of love; it also encompasses themes of changing one's destiny, redeeming one's inner self, and serving the greater national cause. It touches on the realms of reality, spirituality, and the elevation of the soul through sacrifice – all of which hold practical and profound significance, aligning with the ethos of realism in opera. Therefore, the portrayal of Eastern female characters in opera demands a deeper exploration of the characters themselves. It necessitates an understanding of the historical context they exist in and the real-world meanings they convey. This broader perspective is crucial for an authentic interpretation of Eastern women in

opera. Focusing solely on the romantic aspect might dilute the rich tapestry of Eastern culture and history that underpins their multi-faceted personalities.

Furthermore, in terms of music, the portrayal of Eastern female characters must pay close attention to the ethnic nuances within the music. Eastern cultures, due to their long history and rich traditions, have developed a wide array of distinct ethnic characteristics, each with its unique emphasis on melodies and musical sensibilities. For example, in Chinese music, the dominant ethnic mode is composed of the bright major thirds Gong, Shang, and Jue, with the addition of Zhi and Yu, which corresponds to the Western notes do, re, mi, sol, la, while the so-called "accidentals" fa and si, forming small minor seconds, are incorporated differently, creating another set of composite modes. Consequently, much of Chinese music features bright, harmonious, and pleasing tones. In contrast, Japanese traditional music often makes effective use of the small minor seconds between si and bsi to emphasize a subdued and melancholic feeling, reflecting a different cultural aspect. Even within a single country like China, different ethnic groups possess their unique musical characteristics, which directly influence the expression of character traits in opera. Puccini, when depicting Eastern operas, incorporated music styles from various Eastern countries, reflecting the Western perception of the East. On the other hand, Xu Zhanhai combined Chinese ethnic scales with Western scales and added numerous detailed Mongolian musical elements to showcase typical Mongolian musical culture. This makes the work's regional attributes more pronounced and assists in characterizing the roles more vividly. As performers, we shouldn't focus solely on our individual arias but also need to immerse ourselves in the entire musical palette that the composer has designed for the characters. For instance, in Puccini's "Madama Butterfly", the recurring motif of the "cherry blossom" conveys a sense of innocent romanticism and gentle melancholy that mirrors Butterfly's youthful and delicate nature. In Turandot's case, although her personal arias are composed with cold and

exaggerated dark tones, her entrances and transitions incorporate elements of the gentle folk tune "Jasmine Flower" from China's Jiangnan region. This indirectly hints at the idea that Turandot herself possesses a softer, traditional Chinese feminine side, hidden beneath the mask of hatred. Therefore, even in musical segments that don't involve the performer's singing, it's crucial to carefully perceive and internalize these musical nuances and infuse them into the character to enrich their inner depth.

In summary, to portray Eastern female protagonists more accurately, one must start by examining various elements related to the characters. It's crucial to delve into the reasons behind their character development, especially within a context that aligns with the societal background. Understanding their inner world through their real-life experiences and challenges is essential. Additionally, it's important to combine the character's precise characterization with the stylistic elements of the music, interpreting and expressing their traits through both musicality and dramatic interpretation, creating a more accurate and multi-dimensional portrayal. To summarize, on one hand, the in-depth study of character traits in the drama plays a crucial role in the overall opera, as their formation is rooted in the historical and societal context, leading to the inevitable development of their story arc. On the other hand, an emphasis on interpreting the musical style is essential. This style serves as an impression that helps the audience intuitively understand the character's inner thoughts and emotional tone. Moreover, incorporating distinctive ethnic characteristics in the music can highlight the character's unique flavor, allowing the audience to sense their personality traits through the musical style.

By combining the elements of drama and musicality in this way, one can unearth vibrant and dynamic characters. Through the overall structure of the opera, it becomes possible to reflect the prominent spiritual themes and real-life significance required of the female protagonist. This approach goes beyond the

surface-level storytelling and one-dimensional character portrayals, aiming to bring out the rich and mysterious aspects of Eastern women formed by their cultural and historical backgrounds. By comparing their commonalities and individual traits, one can summarize multiple approaches and perspectives for interpreting their roles. This will ultimately help in future endeavors to accurately portray Eastern female protagonists in a more comprehensive manner when creating similar characters.

Furthermore, I hope to have gone beyond mere research and to have put these findings into practical use as a theoretical basis. Through continuous refinement, dialectical thinking, and evolution, I aimed at developing better and more suitable methods of interpretation, which could be applied in performances on various stages. To achieve this goal, I have made multiple visits to the Puccini Opera House in Italy and have engaged in discussions with relevant individuals, gathering various materials. I have also initiated discussions for collaborations between Eastern and Western operas, actively working towards these developments. As a result, we may witness more and more talented actors portraying Eastern characters in the future, expanding the stages for different styles of opera and contributing to the global cultural integration between East and West.

II. List of Contributions

1. The research has clearly identified a more appropriate interpretation method and path for female leads in Eastern operas. This will greatly assist performers in their dramatic interpretation and musical understanding of Eastern female characters.
2. The research has revealed the historical and cultural aspects behind Eastern characters and music and has identified key points of mutual influence between

Eastern and Western music. This will contribute to expanding the breadth and depth of future integration between Eastern and Western music and culture.

3. This research leads to the creation of a number of learning and performance platforms. They provide opera performers with more opportunities to learn and practice. This also creates the potential for future internationalisation of Eastern opera.

4. The dissertation introduces the prominent composer Xu Zhanhai, who is one of the pillars of contemporary Chinese music. It includes an interview given by him exclusively for the dissertation, revealing valuable insights into the development of national Chinese and international classical music.

5. The author has engaged in in-depth discussions with Mr. Franco Moretti, the director of the Puccini Opera House in Italy, about the characteristics of Eastern and Western music operas, has introduced Eastern opera into the realm of European classical music, has laid the groundwork for future collaborations in the creation and performance of relevant Eastern operas, and has deepened mutual influence and interactions.

6. Through the research, a means of mutual influence and element exchange has been established in the performance of Eastern opera among the three ancient music nations of Italy, Bulgaria, and China. This provides a reference for the promotion of their respective musical cultures.

Research is an ongoing process of exploration, and there are still many areas where I need to improve. Therefore, I will continue to study diligently in the future, explore and innovate with a dialectical mindset, and contribute more to the field of music performance.

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