

## **REVIEW**

by **Prof. Dr. Tony Shekherdjieva-Novak**,

lecturer at AMTII "prof. Assen Diamandiev,

professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Art,

for the dissertation of **Wang Bo**, a full-time PhD student at the Doctoral Program "Music" of NBU-Sofia, Department of Music, on the topic:

***Vocal Interpretation of Selected Songs by Franz Schubert, Richard Strauss, Gabriel Fauré and Qing Zhu, Huang Zi, Li Yinghai.***

for the award of the scientific and educational degree "Doctor", field of higher education 8. Arts, professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Art,

Research supervisor **Prof. Dr. Milena Shushulova-Pavlova**

Performance supervisor **Dr. Natalia Afeyan**

### **Brief biographical introduction of the PhD candidate**

Wang Bo graduated from the Department of Music at the School of the Arts of Inner Mongolia University (IMU) with a Bachelor's degree in Classical Singing in 2011. Inner Mongolia University is a university guided by the major needs of the autonomous region, focusing on structural reform, integrating innovative resources and establishing two "Collaborative Innovation Centres" - the Collaborative Innovation Centre for Cultural Heritage and Development of Ethnic

Minorities in Mongolia & North China and the Collaborative Innovation Centre for Sustainable Economic Development and Governance in High Resources areas.

Having studied from 2012 to 2016, Wang Bo graduated from the National Conservatory of Music in Rovigo, Italy, with a master's degree in chamber vocal music. From 2017 to 2019, she specialized in advanced training in opera singing with Prof. Hidemi Kikuchi, and from 2020 to the present she is studying at the NBU, Sofia, in the Doctor of Music degree, with a specialization in Opera Singing.

As a student of the University of Inner Mongolia, Wang Bo sang in the University Choir, participating in various national and international professional choir competitions and winning a number of awards, including the Gold Medal at the Sixth World Choir Games.

In 2012, she was the soloist at the International Student Music Festival in Perugia, Italy. During her studies at Rovigo, she assisted some of her teachers. 2014 was a happy year for her as she was recommended as a soloist for a tour organised by academies in the Venice region, as the only representative from China. Also impressive was the result of her graduation concert at the completion of her Master's degree - 105 out of 110 points. In 2017, she managed to reach the semi-finals in the eighth National Opera and Voice Competition for Higher Arts Institutions in the chamber music category. In 2017, she became a finalist in the Chinese Division of the Dakli International Vocal Competition in Harikore District. She was invited by the organisers to participate in the Second Music Festival of Baotou Teacher's College, and to give a concert during the festival. In 2020, she won the Outstanding Performance Award in the Chinese Competition, a selection of the 2020 New York International Opera Competition. From 2021, she began her doctoral studies at NBU. She is a soloist of Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, performs with Ardiana Bytyqi, Androniki Antonio, with doctoral students and NBU students on the stage of the Chinese Cultural Center, in concerts at the Catholic Church in Sofia, and participates in the XVIII Boris Hristov Festival of the Arts in Musical Marathon.

The high appraisals of "Doctoral Seminar", "Performance for Doctoral Students", "Chamber Music for Doctoral Students", "World Concert Standards", etc. that Wang Bo received during his studies at NBU-Sofia are impressive.

## **Scholarly publications related to the topic of the doctoral dissertation**

Both of Wang Bo's required publications are from her participation in the Young Research Forum on Music and Dance, volumes 17 and 18. The conference was a national conference with international participation, and the proceedings were double anonymously refereed.

N 1. COMPARING COMPOSERS: QING ZHU AND SCHUBERT - EXPLORING ART SONG EVOLUTION

№ 2. DISCUSSING VOCAL PERFORMANCE FROM CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

### **Presentation of the dissertation**

Art songs possess a multi-layered complex characteristic composed of thoughts, emotions and artistic images. "As a prestigious genre in classical vocal music, (art song) has been highly valued for centuries" (p.1). Already in the abstract leading up to her Ph.D. dissertation, WangBo emphasizes the importance of "the required artful technical skills and a high level of culture and musical literacy on the part of the artist" in performance, and the study of musical aesthetics becomes an indispensable necessity for performers. It is the comparison of the music aesthetic of the East and the West, through the historical processes traced in Western and Chinese music, that are the subject of analysis in the present thesis. As a specific art form, art song carries significant cultural information and sends cultural messages.

The way in which Chinese art song utilizes leading Western compositional concepts and combines them with the best of traditional Chinese culture is an important part of the discussion of the development of Chinese vocal music in the modern era. The purpose of this study is to "give readers from other countries insight into the development of Chinese art songs, highlight their uniqueness, and stimulate interest in the rich tapestry of Chinese artistic expression"(p. 6). The

dissertation uses musical analysis and comparative method to conduct the research. Comparative analysis is an indispensable part of the research methods and helps in the immediate and timely identification of the relevant factors of influence that led to the similarities and differences between the analysed objects. Wang Bo makes a comparative study of three Chinese and three Western composers through which the development of art song in China is indicated. Parallel comparisons are made with other traditional Chinese art forms, revealing the specific Chinese understanding of musical aesthetics in the context of traditional culture.

The dissertation submitted by PhD candidate Wang Bo consists of 95 pages. References include 32 bibliography titles and 8 references used. The volume of the thesis is quite sufficient given the fact that the specific field of Wang Bo's PhD is in performance. By examining three pairs of Chinese and Western composers, it is possible to delineate the unique contributions and styles of each. This provides an in-depth analysis of both their creative styles and aesthetic preferences. This approach makes it possible to realise a more in-depth study of the development of Chinese art songs, as well as to highlight the influence of Western composers at different stages.

**Through chapter one**, the dissertation introduces us to traditional Chinese aesthetics. The period of philosophical thinking in ancient China, in which aesthetics occupied a dominant position, is located from the 6th century BCE to the 2nd century CE. The "Hundred Schools of Thought" had an important influence on culture, the arts and education. Wang Bo comments on the unique Chinese art form created by calligraphy and aesthetics, which pays attention to the balance between the lightness and heaviness of strokes, their sharpness and restraint, and the interplay between rigidity and flexibility. Calligraphy, like the creation of musical melodies or the composition of poetry and music, employs the means to convey a spectrum of expressions.(p.9) The course of Chapter One examines the influence of Confucianism and Taoism and the impact they have on life, ethics, politics, and the arts. The impact of architecture, literature, fine arts, traditional Chinese music, and the position of Buddhist culture in China are examined. Chinese art song itself emerged from the 1920s to the 1940s and experienced its first golden age of development during this same period. The initial stage has particular historical significance for the formation of art song.

**Chapter Two** provides an overview of Western historical art forms. Through ancient Greek aesthetics the beginnings of European music were laid. The emphasis placed on mystical beliefs

and religion leads to the belief that art was used more to promote religious themes and myths, limiting other possible subjects. The spark of the new thought was ignited by the clash between social change and spiritual rigidity, which led to a new humanist movement in Europe: the Renaissance. The advent of the Renaissance released music from religious constraints and its styles and themes gradually became more secular.

**Chapter Three** compares Chinese and Western aesthetics. The profound integration of Western art with the natural sciences, the theory of the golden ratio and the use of linear perspective in the visual arts, harmony theory and tonalities in music, and advances in instrumental and vocal timbres are emphasized. In musical works, musical form represents the formal structure, the way of realizing artistic thinking. These forms are gradually distinguished as a result of many years of creative practice, have a strict and compact structure, and are consistent with musical logic, artistic regularities, and aesthetic principles. The entry (invasion - W.B.) of Western music into China in the 19th century marked the beginning of a new era. It evaluated art from a new perspective.

A comparison of Western composers of the Romantic era and contemporary Chinese composers is made in **chapter four**. Since Chinese musical aesthetics is a discipline that was introduced from abroad, **Franz Schubert and Qin Zhu** are the composers that Wang Bo compares first. Schubert inherited the classical structural forms perfected and established by his predecessors. Wang Bo points out that Schubert's innovative mastery is most evident in his contributions to the genre of art songs. Qin Zhu used the pentatonic scale in his classical Chinese poetic art songs, mostly employing shifts between major and minor tonalities, modulations, and the addition of alternating tones to give the music emotional depth and enhance its expressive power (p.14).

**Richard Strauss and Huang Zi, Li Yinghai and Gabriel Fauré**, and their musical aesthetics and compositional style are the other two pairs of Western and Chinese composers who are the objects of Wang Bo's study.

In the **Conclusion**, the doctoral candidate draws deductions from her research: a number of elements such as melody, accompaniment and poetry are integrated into the performance of art songs, and despite their simple structure, their content is extremely rich and they are always in direct relation with the composer's emotions, and poetry plays a dominant role in their entirety. Analysing Schubert's era, Wang Bo interprets the development of the art song through Romanticism: While preserving the characteristics of poetry, music saturates art songs with soul,

allowing the portrayal of complex emotions, the creation of a poetic atmosphere, and even a dialogue with the human voice, which becomes another important component in the core of the performance (p.17). Through her dissertation, the doctoral candidate seeks to contribute to "the interdisciplinary study of art song and to provide a better methodological approach for all those trained in classical singing".

Throughout the long history of Chinese art song, its present form is the result of a continuous process of combining and blending Chinese and Western vocal styles. This continuous blending is the basis of its constant evolution and development. In the works of Chinese composers, one can trace how, on the one hand, they borrowed and integrated European musical forms and styles and, on the other hand, applied traditional Chinese musical structures and tonalities to preserve Chinese national specificities.

Studies such as this dissertation enable singers to bridge cultural differences. The performance of art song should be preceded by musical and aesthetic analysis, which is a thorough study of musical characteristics, compositional techniques used, and musical language so that musical images can be convincingly constructed.

### **Contributions of the dissertation**

- A systematic summary of the aesthetic characteristics of various aspects of traditional Chinese art - calligraphy, painting, architecture, etc.;
- highlighting their relationship to music based on a system of aesthetic characteristics;
- discussing the dual nature of Chinese traditional music with its simple structure but complex nuance - the aesthetic pursuits of artistic expression;
- the aesthetic feature of the pursuit of "linear beauty" in traditional Chinese art, a feature prevalent in a number of art forms with musical characteristics, is explored;
- the aesthetic features manifested in the development of Western music in different periods are discussed;

- the guiding influence of the relationship between reason and sensibility on musical development is outlined;
- the relationship between rationality and sensibility is commented upon, delving into the rise of Humanism in the late eighteenth century and its relationship to the 'Chinese style' popular in Europe at the time;
- discusses the cultural exchange between Eastern and Western modern aesthetics, from a historical perspective, through which new avenues of thought about musical composition were discovered (as an example, Gustav Mahler's use of the works of the Tang dynasty Chinese poet, Li Bai);
- the study attempts to show the commonalities between Western music, which entered China in the late 19th century, and Chinese aesthetics from a practical and aesthetic point of view;
- discusses the aesthetic similarities and differences between Eastern and Western culture in terms of "lyricism," "nationality," and "poetry";
- the study accepts the Romantic period as a possible context for the three Chinese composers under study and conducts parallel comparisons between their compositional styles and aesthetic approaches with Western composers with whom they share similarities;
- analyses for the first time the structure of Qin Zhu's art song Da Jiang Dong Qu in terms of three structural features: recitative, interlude and aria. Through formal analysis, it is proved that this art song follows the structure of an aria with recitative elements.

The **abstract** has a length of 19 pages and corresponds to the content of the work.

On the basis of what has been said so far, **I positively evaluate the doctoral dissertation and propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree of Doctor of Arts in 8.3 Music and Dance to doctoral candidate Wang Bo.** I congratulate the

supervisor Prof. Dr. Milena Shushulova-Pavlova for the precise work on the theoretical part of the PhD, and Dr. Natalia Afeyan for the artistic part of the PhD.

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**Prof. Dr. Toni Shekherdjieva-Novak**