

Interaction between Music, Stage and Text--on the Creation and Interpretation of the Chamber Opera “Ghost Love”

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Abstract: Cross-media co-operation, which is the exploration of the interaction between music and literature in the form of opera, aims to break through the way of a single creation and interpretation and realize multi-values through multi-dimensional perspectives through the interaction and integration of different disciplines. As an integration of new artistic attitude and aesthetic, it echoes the current trend of multi-style innovation. Multi-context -featured 21st century has also stimulated opera to develop more forms and patterns in the concept of creation and performance. The creation team of chamber opera “Ghost Love” is the catalyst and explorer of the cultural activity, which will give birth to new possibilities by interconnected cross-border activity. Music, text, and stage break the barriers between categories and promote the comprehensive culture that goes beyond traditional art form, which is not only a concern and reflection on social art life, but also contains the trend and law of the development of performance art itself.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Concept of “Cross-Media”

All culture are connected to other cultures. Chinese word “Kua” is translated as Crossover. Explanation of crossover in the *New Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary* is that multi-field or multi-style cooperation, especially music; the academic community does not have an authoritative and accurate concept for cross-media. As an integration of new life attitude and aesthetic, it conforms to the evolution and development of the times. By evolution and development ,we mean by breaking traditional ways and grafting value in other areas or innovating during cooperation between two or more different fields to fulfill its values. Crossover may involve many different fields including design, fashion, architecture, music, video, literature, business, fine arts and other fields, in which efforts are constantly made , forming a colorful, diversified and interactive artistic phenomena.

1.2 “Cross Media” Phenomenon

The cross-media in the art field is a new way in the development of culture and art. The development of art is inseparable from the collision and liberation of ideas and is based on the vitality that is necessary for cultural development. As a modern art creator, Professor Xu Bing believes that traditional language, which means art language is not fully adapted to today's life and work style. Human beings are looking for a language that transcends tradition and can be used in a more direct and visual way. “If you want to bring something new to the art, you must get inspiration from outside the art field or between several fields. It is useless to work hard in the art field only. Currently, the barriers between different art categories are being broken by cross-border cooperation. The creative performers in the fields of music, art, drama and opera are thinking about the possibility of cross-media cooperation and they are further working with artists from different fields such as design art films and dances, leaving something new created. As an new artistic art carrier, the chamber opera is a collection of music, stage and text in the form of cross-media, which can be regarded as a creation.

2. The Introduction to Chamber Opera

Contemporary operas can be roughly divided into opera, chamber opera, and oratorio. Flourished in the 20th century, the Chamber Opera is a small opera that uses small indoor scenes, featuring character singing in the play, and creates a specific musical structure to promote the development of the story, with the small indoor orchestra accompanying. Different from the early operas with epic story, gorgeous stage, tense storyline, and full symphony orchestra, chamber opera has many exploratory and experimental representative works in mainland China with its low investment, small scale, flexible production, close to the audience. The original indoor operas with opera style features include the classical Chinese script, *The Assassin*, and the comedy *Wang Seven, I Love Peach Blossoms*, the conscious stream opera *Spots on the Wall*, and the one-man show *Desperate Book* based on the novel of Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), *A Letter from a Strange Woman*, and *Xu Sanguan*, based on Yu Hua's novel of the same name. The *Ghost Love* is adapted to be displayed on the stage, while preserving the way that opera created.

3. The Creation and Interpretation of Ghost Love

3.1 Background

Chamber opera *Ghost Love*, adapted from a novel of the same name published by Chinese writer Xu Yu in 1937, gave a hit in the Hong Kong Week 2019@Taipei, hosted by the Hong Kong-Taiwan Cultural Cooperation Committee. Xu Yu is considered as a pioneer of neo-romanticism and Chinese stream of consciousness literature, and his work *Ghost Love* has been on the big screen for three times. Of all the adaptation, the most influential one is the *Human Twilight*, directed by the famous oil painter and director Chen Yifei in 1996 and acted by Hong Kong Best Star Liang Jiahui. In 2014, it was adapted from the Shanghai Modern People's Drama Theatre into a stage-playing drama of the same name. The fascinating flashback style and the confusing storyline make it became one of the classic nostalgic dramas of the 20th century. The chamber opera version was launched in January 2018 and was well received after having premiered in the Hong Kong City Hall. The creative team is home to Hong Kong composer Chen Qingen, playwright Yiheng, Japanese opera director Tomo Sugao, stage and costume designer Chen Zhiquan, and Zhang Guoyong, the lighting designer regarded as "Lighting God". Through their unique aesthetic to the East and West Culture and the fusion of music, text and stage, the Chinese Story has been endowed with a multi-dimensional interpretation. On September 27th and 28th, 2019, the show performed in the performance hall of National Taiwan University of Arts and succeeded.

3.2 Motivation

In 2013, the producer of Hua Yi Tang, Xiao Yingxin, was invited by the Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Services Department to organize a "Yu Guangzhong Poetry Concert". That was a grand event combining music and poems which includes the classic masterpieces of Chinese composers for more than 30 years, and integrates with Mr. Yu's works. Both time-honored works and commissioned new works are there. As the concert premiere was strongly echoed, they were invited to tour Singapore, Kaohsiung and Taipei. When re-enacted in Hong Kong in 2015, well-known cultural commentator Zheng Zhengheng wrote a report in *Ming Bao* to think highly of innovative idea that combines text and music, hoping to further explore the treasure in Chinese literary and build on the legacy of Chinese cultural. At the end of this report, Mr. Xu Yu was mentioned as the literary contributor of "China's modern literary giants", making producers began to read hordes of literary works of Mr. Xu and read the short story of *Ghost Love* overnight. The text in the book and the imagination between the words make a picture of the sadness shown in the mind, and the space stimulates the imagination of text, music, and cross-domain cooperated stage. Chen Qingen, the writer of this drama, once said on different occasions: "If one wants to create a Chinese opera of one hundred to one hundred and twenty minutes, it's not enough to let the music advance the plot and give full play to singer's voice, one may also take the language's characteristics into consideration, which means obeying the ups and downs of the lyrics, and remain not to be trapped

by it.” Thanks to inspiration of many years of writing, Yiheng has made the script language more sophisticated to create a broader opera stage by breaking through the understanding of the inherent concepts and making the text to better echo the music.

3.3 The Plot and Character

The theme of love between human and ghosts can be seen everywhere in the opera, novels, movies and musicals. The thread running through *Ghost Love* is love and entanglement between ghosts and people. There are one male and one female protagonists in the drama. The man claimed to be a “person”, and the other woman claimed to be a “ghost”. They ended with a sad ending after going through love and hate, kindness and evil, illusion and reality.

In 1945, it was thirty-four years of the Republic of China. On the beach of Huangpu River in the dark night, a man met a female ghost who smoked a cigarette. The moon was clear and the man fell in love with the female ghost who looked like the clear moon. He wanted to uncover the mystery and understood everything about her. Ten years after that sad story in 1955, the man went to Hong Kong alone. He recalled the memory of that dark night in a cold and wet Shanghai winter night when he encountered a female “ghost”, attracted by her beauty and mystery, and eager to fall in love with her, but repeatedly failed. The truth lies behind the story declares the problem of action and inaction how to get out of the imprisonment. Only when we open the world of ghosts, we can know what people are!

3.4 The Stage Interpretation

The chamber opera *Ghost Love* is a second-time original opera after the *Xiao Hong* co-created by Hong Kong composer, a professor of music at the University of Hong Kong, Chen Qingen and a talented female writer, YiHeng, which is a new realm of combination of music and Chinese literature. The vocalists Ke Daiwei, Huang Riheng and the soprano Mo Zihui played the role of man, ghost and moonlight respectively. Began to direct opera at the age of 18, director Tomo Sugao is the producer of the New National Theater in Tokyo and the Berlin Opera House and he is regarded as one of the 108 most influential artists on Japan. Using “Gate” as an important image in the stage design of the chamber opera *Ghost Love*, the staffs want a concrete but abstract concept to symbolize the inner memory of the hero. The female “ghost” in the play claims to be a ghost. She and her husband participate in the revolution, but her husband was murdered by traitors within the organization, leaving her lose hope for life. The emotional entanglement between the “real” human and the “fake” female ghost makes them want to escape the chains of life and find an exit. In addition to the two characters, they also use “Moonlight” as a narrator and alludes the development of the plot through the change of the shape of the moon. ‘Men’ starred by famous tenor Ke Daiwei is unconstrained and plays the role of “alcoholic” in two-thirds of the opera. He interpreted the emotional bond from curiosity to love to empathy in half drunk and half-awake. He witnessed the meeting between “people and ghosts”, “emotion and love” in the past and the present, and greatly showed the hero's passionate emotions out. The vocal range is extremely wide and grows in length, which has great challenges to the singer's physical strength and brain power. “Ghosts” acted by young soprano Mo Zihui is fascinating and full of mystery. Before the rehearsal, she did a lot of pre-work, including read the originals and scripts, learn from the existing stage performances such as movies and dramas to try to figure out the inner world of the characters and interpret a complex psychological change in a “female ghost”, who is helpless like a walking dead. It's extremely difficult to bring out inner struggles and fears with melody that is rich in sound. The “Moonlight” played by the male bass Huang Riheng is a cold-eyed bystander, using a low-profile recitative to show the movement of the situation, highlighting the overall atmosphere, which is unique and irreplaceable. The director of *Ghost Love* was Liao Guomin, who was once praised as “a remarkable commanding wizard” by US media. He is good at opera and has cooperated with the composer Chen Qingen several times, they have perfectly presented the blend of Eastern and Western cultures.

4. The Conclusion

The story of *Ghost Love* takes place in Shanghai, where the East and West cultures meet. The music created by composer Chen Qingen concentrates on a couple's love affair, and the special writing style helps set a strong mystery and sentimentality tone to the drama. The writer Yiheng pays attention to the depiction of the inner world of the character, and his writing style gives the symbolic connotation, which shows exploration of the philosophy of life and human nature. Shape, sound and rhyme are important elements in Chinese opera. Before the creation, the ups and downs of Chinese lyrics and the importance and stress of each sentence are marked to provide a reference for music creation. The use of instrument corresponds to the character image. For example, the "female ghost" uses the bassoon and the Japanese cymbal, while the "human" uses the flute and the violin. All that echo more in the shaping of the drama characters. The *Ghost Love* team brought wonderful performances to Taiwan and also *Ghost Love* perfectly echoes Hong Kong Week theme "Text, Stage, Music". While enjoying the beautiful performance, we also saw more possibility of cross-border cooperation!

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