

## Reflection and Practice of "Vocal Tune" in Erhu Performance

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**Abstract.** Erhu is a traditional musical instrument with a beautiful sound and exquisite performance. From the perspective of its timbre characteristics and development environment, it is closely related to Chinese traditional opera. Therefore, in the middle of the 20th century, Ms. Huifen MIN, a famous performer, proposed the concept of "vocal tune" which became the new pursuit of the Erhu's creation and performance. As contemporary performers, we should have a deep understanding of the connotation of "vocal tune", feel its value and significance, practice this concept in performance on our own initiative, and promote the overall development of the contemporary Erhu art while the individual performance is improved.

### 1. The Connotation and Significance of "Vocal Tune" in Erhu Performance

#### 1.1 The Connotation of "Vocal Tune" in Erhu Performance

"Vocal tune" is a term used in Chinese opera arts, which refers to the melody and singing of the opera. The "vocal tune" in Erhu performance is to present the Erhu as a performing form and show the characteristics of the tune. Or use the Erhu to imitate the singing and get the singing effect. In the middle of the 20th century, Ms. Huifen MIN had deeply pondered the question why only the Erhu became the most important accompaniment instrument in many traditional instruments during her long-term performance practice. The conclusion was drawn that the Erhu boasts sweet and delicate timbre, tactful and lyric, rich in singing. It is most suitable to combine with human voices and play an important role in following the tune and setting off the singing to keep the tune. On this basis, Huifen MIN has put forward the pursuit of "vocal tune" performing, and adapted many operas to the Erhu music, which opened up a new world for contemporary Erhu arts' creation and performance.

#### 1.2 The Significance of "Vocal Tune" in Erhu Performance

The proposal of "vocal tune" in Erhu performance is either out of the void or just a whim, but the result from Ms. Huifen's MIN deep thinking and exploration during her long-term performance practice, including multi-aspect values and significance. Firstly, it enriches the theoretical research of Erhu performance. Although the Erhu has been the most important accompaniment instrument in opera for a long time, no one has actively explored "why". Huifen MIN made a comprehensive study of this problem from the aspects of the shape and timbre characteristics of Erhu, the types of operas and the style of singing, explained the radical reasons and enriched the theoretical study of Erhu performance. Secondly, it improves the quality of the Erhu performance. As the old saying goes: "String is not as good as bamboo, and bamboo is not as good as flesh", which means that both silk stringed instruments and wind instruments are less expressive than human voice. In western instrumental performance, singing effect is also seen as an important performance pursuit. "Vocal tune" is a new standard that conforms to the Erhu art rules. Taking this standard as the stewardship, a better performance effect can be achieved and the performance quality of the Erhu can be also improved essentially. Thirdly, it enriches the Erhu repertoire creation. In the 1980s, in order to test and consolidate the theoretical achievements of "vocal tune", Ms. Huifen MIN adapted operas such as Xiaoyao Ferry and Deep Night, and later created Honghu Lake Theme Capriccio. These works not only enriched the creation of Erhu music at that time, but also had a profound influence on the later creation. Around the new century, Ming's GUAN Ballad of Lan Huahua and Houyuan's WU

Red Plum Capriccio, both feature distinctive vocal tune. At the present time, "vocal tune" has become an important concept and style of Erhu creation. Finally, it promotes the inheritance and development of opera. The proposal of "vocal tune" is closely connected with the opera itself, so the improvement of the Erhu performance quality and the creation of opera adaptation are also a kind of enrichment and extension of the opera. Especially at present, the popularity and inheritance of opera is far behind that of Erhu and other instrumental arts. Taking "vocal tune" as the connecting point, it also drives the contemporary development of opera art to a certain extent, and opens up a new channel of popularization and inheritance of it.

## **2. The Application of Vocal Tune in Erhu Creation and Performance**

### **2.1 Performance and Application in Xiaoyao Ferry**

Xiaoyao Ferry is a traditional repertoire of Peking Opera. It is also the representative work of the elderly character Qingkui GAO, who performed with accompaniment of Erhu. Huifen MIN selected the piece of "the father and son sad tears in the palace garden" and adapted it to Erhu music, and performed herself to test and enrich the concept of "vocal tone". From the actual effect, Huifen's MIN adaptation is very successful. The performance of "voice tune" became more bright by directly selecting opera materials. In the meanwhile, she has also accumulated experience for opera adaptation techniques.

In the aspect of performing, the opera adopted sliding skills in the performance of vocal tune. Through rolling, pressing and sliding kneading, it imitated the sound effect very similar to human voice. For example, the first sentence, "the father and son sad tears in the palace garden", is the guide of the whole opera with relatively free rhythm. In order to show the Beijing dialect and flavor and the inner mixed emotions of the characters, Huifen MIN first slowed down the playing speed, and then used a slight back slide in the prolongation of tune after the word "father", which is just a reproduction of starting tune for the opera performing. While the prolongation of tune after the word "in" used continuous third back slides, suddenly becoming a pressuring kneading that stopped at "5", which generated a strong sense of setbacks between Yin and Yang. The phrase "palace garden" included several continuous grace notes, which adopted a performing way like back slides, further highlighting the singing color of the melody. Although it is just a phrase, it gives people a sense of echo. The emotion of the work was incisively and vividly expressed. In the sentence "I'm so sad when thinking of the country's affairs", the performance of "country's affairs" starts and stops with the head and end. At the end of throwing bows, the end stops abruptly and decisively. The word "sad" is processed really ingenious. In Qingkui's GAO performing, the word "sad" is not expressed by singing out but spouting out, very determined. In Huifen's MIN performance, each note was plump and spring by pressing-kneading skills, coupled with neatly bowing, the same effect of spouting out with opera performance was achieved. It can be seen that Huifen MIN has a profound understanding and grasp of the opera singing and Erhu performance characteristics. In terms of creation and performance, she fully presented what the vocal tune of Erhu is and how to obtain the performance effect of vocal tune, giving a demonstration for subsequent creation and performance.

### **2.2 The Performance and Application of A Ditty From Henan**

The A Ditty From Henan created by the famous Erhu performer Mingyuan LIU is a masterpiece featuring distinct local music style. The work is complete and refined with musical expression, performed many times by many performers such as Guosheng SONG, Fei SONG, Zhiping HU, Hongmei YU. The works mainly draw on the Henan opera singings, where the upper sentence falls on the unstable tones, and the lower sentence falls on the main tones, thus presenting an dialogue echo of the upper and lower sentences.

In terms of performance, slides are often used in Chinese opera music to correspond to the sighs and groans, ups and downs of the sentences and tones. In addition, Chinese characters itself has the distinction of high and level tones, so slides are widely used. A Ditty From Henan derived from Henan Opera, many melodies are imitations of opera singing, and there are a lot of slides naturally. Taking Guosheng's SONG performance as an example, the work presents a cheerful and festive

mood from the beginning to the 51st bar, and shows the optimistic life attitude and spirit of Henan people. It begins to slow down from the 49th bar, and the "7" appears in the second beat of the 50th bar. For the performance of this tone, Guosheng SONG adopted the technique of sliding kneading which first appeared in the Zhuihu, also called "sliding kneading with raised wrist", vividly mimicking the people's breathing when they speak or sing. From the 52th bar, it entered the adagio section and the melody was more stretched, further demonstrating the joyful mood of the Henan people. The string kneading of this section is more complicated than the first section. For example, the two tones of the second beat in the 58th bar are all pressed with four fingers. The first tone is not processed with the string kneading, while the second tone is heavily pressed, which forms a strong contrast. The appeal of the opera music is greatly enhanced. On this basis, Guosheng SONG will also focus on the second-degree slide playing in the 5, 1, 2 tones, the bow is pressed severely, bowing neatly, the music is of stocky. He deliberately hides the bulge of tones, with fingers Quickly sliding to emphasize the start and end. In the third-degree slide, it is usually a quick slide from the lower position to the 3 tone, highlighting a quick speed. On the big slide, the tones in the middle are usually not played, featuring a distinct contrast. Because the work itself is based on the singing of the opera, in addition, the performer cleverly uses the techniques of slides and string kneading, the effect of the vocal tune is obtained.

### **3. The Key Points and Methods of the "Vocal Tune" Performance**

Through the cognition of the connotative significance and case analysis of the "vocal tune" in Erhu performance, it can be seen that the "vocal tune" in Erhu performance is not only a concept of performance but also a pursuit. It corresponds to the art essence of Erhu and can also drive the improvement of musicians' abilities and qualities in multi aspects. The key points and methods mainly include the following aspects.

#### **3.1 To Strengthen Basic Performing Skills**

The "vocal tune" in Erhu performance, in essence, is to make the audience feel that they are not playing the Erhu, but singing. This obviously is based on solid basic skills. It needs to be strengthened especially in the terms of the fluency and consistency of performance. In recent years, there are increasing people learning to play Erhu, with the coverage of three age groups, old, middle and young. There is no doubt that it deserves recognition and gratification. However, due to a variety of reasons, most players don't have a not solid skills, which can be manifested as the obviously changing bows, inconsecutive string kneading and so on. This level is obviously difficult to obtain "vocal tune" performance. This basic skills should be "retained", and the techniques such as string kneading, scales practice, and the compound bows should be used throughout the learning career. Among them, various string kneading methods can be sorted and standardized in the process of string kneading practices to make performance more delicate and natural; the scales practice can help the players to have a profound experience of the tones change and avoid the intonation problems; while the compound bows practices can train the players' endurance and control to ensure fluency and completeness of phrases. Only with solid basic skills can "vocal tune" performance can be achieved.

#### **3.2 To Sing the Works**

The essence of "vocal tune" is imitating human voice, so a key point in the preparation before the performance is singing of the work. The players can regard the work as a vocal repertoire, sing first, fully grasp the form and content characteristics of the work, and then try to play, focus on feeling the difference between playing and singing, and make a targeted adjustment in the subsequent performance. Take the performance of Ballad of Lan Huahua as an example, the song is based on the Shaanxi folk song Lan Huahua, featuring stretched melody and rich in local flavor. It has two distinctive features: one is the use of the "bitter tone" in Shaanxi opera. Another is that each sentence of the lyrics is rhyming, which highlights rhythm and beauty throughout the repertoire. Before playing, the player can listen to the folk songs first, then sing the works, focusing on the characteristics of the bitter tones and lyric rhymes. What should be pointed out is that the singing at this stage is not vocal singing, deliberately pursuing volume, sound effects is not necessary and the

method of falsetto and humming can be applied. We should focus on familiarizing and experiencing the work, and get a more real experience from music style and emotional changes. Based on this experience, we should use the Erhu as your own voice to be both excellent in voice and feelings in the performance.

### **3.3 To listen to the Masters' Performance**

The famous pianist Mr. Cong FU has repeatedly emphasized the importance of listening when he talks about his own performing experience. He believed that listening more enable him to stand in the mountain. Piano performance and Erhu performance are interlinked. In the Erhu performance, especially in the pursuit of "vocal tune" performance, it is also necessary to listen to the performance of famous masters. The purpose is not to require the player to reach the level of masters in a short period of time, but to set a standard by listening and consciously working towards this standard. For example, Ms. Huifen MIN, the proposer of the Erhu "vocal tune", so the "vocal tune" effect is very obvious in her performance. A deeper understanding and experience can be gained through listening to her performance. There are two key points in the process of listening. One is to emphasize contrast, you can sing with the performance, and feel how the player reflects the pursuit of "vocal tune", what deficiencies exist, and how to perfect them. Another one is to record in time. Music appreciation experience is difficult to describe in language and words mostly, you can feel but meant to be unspeakable. But the more so, the more you should actively record in time. While preventing forgetting, it can also be used as an important individual reference material which be frequently read in future performances and you will gain useful inspiration in many aspects.

## **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Erhu is a representative of traditional instruments art with a long history and a variety of types. It still has a vigorous vitality after experiencing thousands of years of inheritance. In the middle of the 20th century, the musicians like the representative, Ms. Huifen MIN, made a comprehensive and in-depth thinking on the development of Erhu art, and put forward the concept and objective of "vocal tune" performance, which strongly promoted the creation and performance, popularization and prosperity of contemporary Erhu art. She also reflects the historical responsibility as a music performer. Therefore, we should pay attention to the pursuit of "vocal tune" today, actively practice this concept, pass on the spirit of exploration and innovation, and generate a spring of power into the development of this ancient art, embodying a special contribution to its development as contemporary people.

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