

Constructing and Reforming the Course of Film and Television Sound for Students Majoring in Directing

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Abstract: For students majoring in directing, the course of film and television sound is different from that course for recording specialty students, since they have different professional backgrounds while the course has different teaching objectives. The teacher is required to formulate a suitable teaching program for director specialty students in accordance with their features. This paper elaborates a concrete scheme on course construction from three aspects: the background of course research, what kind of knowledge on sound design should be acquired by students, and how to teach knowledge on sound design to students major in directing. It is hoped that the existing teaching mode of sound design course for director specialty can be reformed, and effective teaching plans can be worked out to help students grasp sound design methods effectively, so as to improve the sound production level of television programs and movies.

1. Introduction

In the field of film and television program production in China, a large number of sound creation projects are completed by directors and post-editors, rather than professional recording staffs. Many students majoring in directing do not have systematic knowledge on sound design, which leads to the poor sound quality of movies and TV programs. In some cases, even some basic technical requirements, such as qualified electrical levels and zero sound quality distortion, cannot be met. Therefore, the course of sound design for film and television should be provided for director specialty students.

2. Research Background

2.1 It is very difficult to establish the course of film and television sound for students majoring in directing

The course of film and TV sound production is a professional core course for students majoring in recording. For non-recording majors, such as directing, photography, screenwriting and editing, it is a basic professional course. In many art colleges and universities throughout the country, that course is in the weak link of the whole teaching system. Because of the shortage of teachers and equipment, many schools do not offer courses related to sound creation. "Many students' works and micro-films are lack of sound awareness because a large number of colleges do not provide sound production courses. This is not conducive to the film and television sound industry and practitioners." ^[1] Related courses offered by schools also have the problem of disconnection between theory and practice.

2.2 Different film and television sound courses for directing and recording major students

First of all, students majoring in recording have learnt professional courses such as electroacoustics, acoustics, principles of recording equipment and recording techniques, and have formed strong ability in identifying and analyzing different sounds. They can accept the professional teaching methods. However, students majoring in directing have no professional knowledge on sound, and they do not have the ability of hearing and recognizing different sounds. It will be difficult to arouse their learning enthusiasm if they are taught in accordance with teaching

materials for recording specialties and in theoretical teaching methods. Secondly, most of the students majoring in film and television directing are liberal arts students. It is difficult for them to have a good command of scientific knowledge. If the teacher instructs them in accordance with methods target for students from the recording department, the teaching effect cannot be good. Thirdly, the art of film and television is the combination of sounds and pictures. It highlights the comprehensive usage of audio and visual language. Students majoring in directing need to understand the key points of sound creation in practice.

3. Students Majoring in Directing should Acquire What Knowledge on Film and Television Sound

The training orientations and goals for director specialty and recording specialty students are different. Students of recording specialty need to acquire systematical knowledge on sound; acoustics, electroacoustics, audio equipment, recording skills and digital audio technology are all courses they need to learn. Students majoring in directing, on the contrary, should acquire the most practical knowledge on sound, as well as basic recording knowledge closely related to pictures. This requires teachers to explore suitable teaching methods, select curriculum contents, focus on important and practical links, and make reasonably detailed teaching plans.

The author has taught the course of film and television sound design for director specialty students for more than ten years. In that process, the author constantly summarizes and adjusts teaching contents, solicits suggestions provided by students in school, and collects feedbacks from graduates who engage in relevant jobs. Through this process, teaching contents are summarized as following five sections.

3.1 Introduction to acoustics

In this section, students need to understand the basic laws and characteristics of sound transmission, as well as the effects of different acoustic environments on recording, so as to understand the impacts of environment on sound creation. Through this course, students can learn to take the impacts of environment on sound creation into account in filming spot selection, and take the initiative of transforming the acoustic environment in the actual recording.

3.2 Introduction to recording equipment

In this section, the basic principles and usage of microphones, sound consoles, hard disk recorders and listening devices are explained. The aim is to help students understand how to select and use microphones appropriately, operate portable sound consoles and hard disk recorders correctly, and understand the importance of standard monitoring in film and TV program production under different circumstances.

3.3 Introduction to production sound recording

In this section, the importance, characteristics and the whole process of production sound recording are explained, so that students can correctly use the technology of production sound recording and establish a correct and reasonable concept on sound creation methods for production sound recording and post-synchronization.

3.4 Sound design

Students need to build up the consciousness of sound design from the stage of script editing, and take sound as one of the main creative elements which serve the film together with pictures. In this section, specific sound design methods are taught, and students are allowed to use them in all stages from pre-planning, production sound recording to post-production.

3.5 Post sound production

This section helps students to understand the process and specific methods of the post-production of sound in film and television programs through the actual operation of audio software.

4. How to Teach Knowledge on Film and Television Sound for Students Majoring in Directing

4.1 Explaining profound theories in simple language

Students majoring in directing are mainly liberal arts students, but studying recording theories needs a certain foundation on science knowledge. Therefore, in order to help arts students understand scientific knowledge, teachers should explain profound theories in simple language. Through practical operation, students can understand the complex sound knowledge, distinguish different sound qualities, use recording methods correctly, and create standard and beautiful sounds in line with the relationship between sound and picture. To explain profound theories in simple language, the teacher can employ metaphors, analogies and other easy-to-understand narrative methods, and demonstrate concrete samples to transform theory into audible and recognizable illustrations.

4.2 Explaining through analogies with knowledge on video

The students majoring in directing are familiar with knowledge on video, but relatively unfamiliar with knowledge on sounds. Therefore, the author often uses similar concepts of video to make analogical explanations when describing the basic concepts in the field of audio theory. For example, when talking about the directivity of microphone, the author analogizes the collecting ability of microphone to different fields of view brought by different focal lenses. When it comes to the mixing ratio of direct sound and reflected sound, the author compares it with the virtual and real focuses in composition. The distortion of sound can be explained through the excessive exposure; the fading-in and fading-out effects of sound can be analogous to those effects of picture in editing; the importance of microphones for sound quality can be analogous to the importance of lens for picture quality. By analogy with video knowledge, students are more likely to understand relevant audio knowledge more easily.

4.3 Cultivating auditory perception in time

The sensitivities to sound vary greatly from students majoring in directing to students majoring in recording. Directing specialty students only have ordinary auditory perception. The differences in sound qualities cannot be taught by simply theoretical explanation. Students need to establish the corresponding sense of hearing in time so as to transform the theoretical knowledge into auditory perception. In order to cultivate students' auditory perception in time, the author brings recording equipment into the classroom, so as to combine theory with practice closely. The practice section accounts for a large proportion in the course of film and television sound creation. The author divides students into groups of four. They need to sit with members of the same group in class to facilitate practice. When the teacher mentions a knowledge point, students need to do practical exercises to obtain the corresponding sense of hearing. The method can generate students' learning interests, and helps them to compare different sounds and sound changes, and then form the auditory impression and memory. The teaching of theoretical knowledge goes afterwards. In this way, the degree of acceptance can be enhanced. Knowledge can be quickly digested and absorbed; favorable teaching effects can be achieved.

4.4 Explaining knowledge on film and TV sound based on the combination of sounds and pictures

Sounds in film and television programs are created based on audio-visual language, so the premise of sound creation training should be the combining sounds and pictures. Students need to have deeper and more accurate understanding on the relationship between sounds and pictures. "The visual images and sounds in the film and their combination should be treated as a symbolic audio-visual system. They are no longer the film production 'skills' that only mastered by creators. As a product of the symbolic system like the written language and mathematical language, it needs the apprehension of audiences." ^[2] Since audiences need to be trained in film interpretation, directors, as creative subjects, need to learn relevant skills systematically under the coexistence of audio and visual symbols.

4.4.1 Sounds in films and TV programs needs to be created from the director's point of view

In film and television program production, sounds and pictures work together to complete the expression. The teaching of film and television sound can not only focus on sound elements. Just like the famous recorder Tao often said, “the recording department cannot jump out”. The recording department cannot only concern how to show the expressive power of sound. The purpose of sound is to help audiences receive audio and visual information naturally when they watch the movie. Therefore, sounds in film and television need to be created in from the director's point of view. Sound producers should think about the relationship between sounds and pictures, and combine sounds with corresponding pictures. Sound creators tend to focus on the expressive power of sound elements, but from the director's point of view, they need to choose a more suitable combination of sound and picture and highlight the more expressive element.

Another significance of thinking from the director's point of view is to extend the director's thinking on sound production. People tend to depend on eyes when receiving information; directors tend to focus on vision in the sound-picture relationship. In the art of film and television production, sound and picture are presented after magnification. The expressive force of sound in films and television programs is becoming more and more obvious. Therefore, in ordinary lectures, the author intentionally asks students to “turn off” their vision and “turn on” their hearing sense. Students are required to think about following questions. Can the same information be expressed through sound elements instead of pictures? Can the sound element occupy the dominant position in this case? In which cases sound has stronger expressive power and can arouse the imagination of audiences and mobilize their participation? Broadening students' thinking is the only way to help them consider comprehensively and make rational choices.

4.4.2 Practice in real shooting

Directing students also have advantages in learning film and television sound, since they need to learn the courses of photography, editing, scriptwriting, directing, as well as film and television lighting. Schools can learn from the teaching methods of foreign countries. The teaching of sound creation can be realized in accordance with the actual film production process.

For the exercise of producing short videos, students need to keep in mind that sound production runs the whole process. Director students shoot short films every semester, so at the beginning of the semester, the author cooperates with teachers that assign short film tasks, such as teachers of the basic directing and screenwriting courses, and coordinates with them in teaching progress and scoring, so as to urge students to consider all aspects in short film production comprehensively.

In practical lessons, scripts for students' end-term tasks are shot according to sub-lens books. Students need to consider the recording scheme of the same period, and distribute lighting according to the requirements, so as to understand the coordination between microphone operators, cameras and lighting equipment, and understand the difficulties and key points of recording in the concrete practice.

4.4.3 Sound design in the stage of playwriting

Students need to design the sound of the whole film after the playwriting, including the overall sound style of the film and the design of different parts. When choosing the scene, they can realize recording problems and work out the recording plan for the same period in the early shooting, and coordinate the relationship between picture shooting and production sound recording. When the production sound recording is not suitable due to the reasons of picture shooting and scene selection, the director needs to decide whether to choose the production sound recording or not. In addition, in the stage of script, sound design should be done for every scene of the whole movie, so as to determine the scheme of recording environmental sound and effect sound, as well as the creation of background music.

4.4.4 The model of joint teaching with professional teachers

Films differ from literature in its unique combination of film thinking and audio-visual language.

In teaching, the combination of audio and visual expression runs through the whole process. Professional teachers' participation has a significant effect on training students' ability of combining sound with pictures.

(1) Joint comments at the end of term

At the end of each semester, teachers of practical courses need to comment on students' works. But these opinions are provided from their own professional perspective. After consulting other teachers, the author introduces the model of joint comment. Professional teachers also need to take part in the comment at the end of each term, which can help students to form the comprehensive understanding on film and TV program production. In this way, students can learn to analyze four-dimensional films as a whole.

(2) Analyzing classic films together with professional teachers

Schools often arrange film exhibitions on related topics. In these exhibitions, the author organizes professional teachers to analyze movies from their own professional perspectives such as directing, screenwriting, photography, recording and editing. Students speak highly of that kind of activities, since they can not only understand the overall picture of TV and film creation, but also establish the correct understanding on four-dimensional movies.

(3) Joint teaching with professional teachers

In this way, students can form a comprehensive concept on film and television production, understand the importance of collaboration and specific methods of cooperation in the production process, understand how to balance the trade-offs between different types of work from a global perspective, and formulate the best plan. The author once carried out group training among freshman students, and organized teachers of editing, special effects, color matching as well as film and television sound courses to work together. It was found that there were many similarities between sound creation and video production. Students can build synaesthesia when they understand; they are easy to receive and integrate professional knowledge in a three-dimensional way. In addition, professional teachers and ordinary teachers can encourage and learn from each other to realize ideal teaching effects.

4.5 Increasing the proportion of practice links and focusing on application.

For students majoring in directing, theoretical explanation is very important. Students can know the reasons after they understand the theory, and draw inferences in their future work. But if the theory is taught too much and students cannot digest and absorb the theory through practice, the theory cannot play its role. The film and television industry is highly operational, so we need to pay attention to the design of practical courses and its proportion in teaching. In many foreign universities, it is a common practice for teachers to let students prepare lessons by themselves before each lecture. Teachers then prompt the main points in class and analyze difficulties in understanding. Then, through the design of practical links, students can digest the theory in practice. Finally, through the comment link, students can understand the application of relevant theories again. Domestic schools can also learn these practice methods. In this mode, students prepare lessons at first; teachers explain difficulties and key points afterwards; students then digest and absorb theories in practice.

4.6 Keeping pace with the times

With the development and changing of the production methods of film and television program, an increasingly number of producers prefer to use more convenient audio and video equipment. As far as the picture is concerned, shooting with single-lens reflex camera has become a trend of development. So the recording scheme for SLR shooting is becoming increasingly important. Now it is very common for students to buy video equipment by themselves. Therefore, in the process of teaching, teachers need to explain the corresponding audio schemes for popular portable video devices in time. From microphones to portable recorders, from listening earphones to microphone

poles, teachers need to provide students with cost-effective audio equipment options.

5. Conclusion

When teaching director specialty students for the course of sound design in film and television programs, the author constantly explores effective methods and sums up experiences. In the end, above teaching methods are summarized for that course after more than ten years accumulation. Through the implementation and improvement of this set of teaching program, students majoring in directing can accurately grasp the key points and difficulties of sound creation in sound design projects and practical operations, and possess certain sound design abilities. After this course, students will consciously pay attention to the importance of sound from the early stage of recording, be able to record qualified simultaneous sounds, and create simple post-production sounds. These achievements are also the teaching aims of the film and television sound course for students majoring in directing.

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