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Transcription of Scores for Selected Repertoire of Chinese Operatic Songs

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Abstract

Chinese music, like other forms of national music based on aural tradition, has its intrinsic difficulties in transmission (Jiang, 2001, p.1). Urbanization has adverse effects on the preservation of indigenous musical culture in China, as folk music, traditionally played or sung in rural areas, is rapidly replaced by music that has a higher commercial value. Chinese opera faces the same problem, as live performances are readily replaced by broadcast (in Hong Kong by DVDs and VCDs); few students will have the opportunity to acquire the essence of the art form through direct contact with actors and singing teachers. Transcription of Chinese operatic scores into Western staff notation will clear a major barrier for students to acquire a solid foundation on Chinese music (Chan, 1999, p.4).

Key words

Chinese operatic songs, transcription of Chinese operatic scores, western staff notation

Introduction

For centuries, the study of music in China has been divided into two main streams: that for the literati and for the practical musicians. For the educated class, the learning of music included the playing of the *guqin* (seven-string zither) and research in music theory, particularly in the areas of pitches, modes and the theoretical basis for constructing instruments. For practical musicians, who often came from a less privileged background, the acquisition of the skill of playing an instrument was by rote. The Chinese music curriculum for

undergraduates at HKBU combines the two traditions, allowing the student to develop a practical skill on the basis of a solid historical and theoretical foundation. The provision of Chinese operatic scores in Western staff notation will allow students to familiarize themselves with the musical aspects of the genre visually, in a form of notation known to them, as opposed to other obscure forms of notation available.

Aims and Objectives

The project endeavours to provide adequate music scores in Western staff

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notation for the teaching and learning of Chinese opera at an undergraduate level in Hong Kong. Selected excerpts from the standard repertoire of Chinese opera in less familiar notations, such as *gongche* and numerical forms, are transcribed into Western staff notation.

Methodology

Ten excerpts from each of the following types of Chinese opera were transcribed into Western staff notation:

1. Kun opera
2. Beijing opera
3. Huangmei opera
4. Yueju (Shanghainese opera)
5. Cantonese opera

Scores of the excerpts were chosen in consultation with academic staff of the Musicology Department at the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music and other professionals to ensure that they were of the right standard for teaching at an undergraduate level. The products will then be presented in computer print-outs using the music software “Encore”, and used in lectures and distributed to students.

Results/Findings

The selected excerpts were duly transcribed into Western staff notation. Input into the computer was a relatively painless process, once the exact locations of what had to be transcribed were precisely identified.

The transcribed scores have been used in

teaching and learning for one semester for two classes. These were particularly useful in the learning of form, melodic contours, relationship between music and words, and timbre for instruments/voice. The scores have provided a visual experience for students who are not familiar with Chinese opera. There is now a better sense of appreciative and analytical powers for the genre, and for Chinese music as a whole.

Discussion

The project relates to the teaching and learning of Chinese music. For music undergraduates in Hong Kong, the tradition of Chinese opera is difficult to appreciate (more so than instrumental music), owing to the large varieties of regional types (about 380 in total), each distinguished by its own dialect, although there are some common features in performance (Zhou, 1995, p.III). For someone unfamiliar with the art, the music may seem a mixture of high melodies and loud playing of drums, gongs and cymbals. The availability of music scores in Western staff notation for a selected repertoire will provide an opportunity for students to focus on a manageable area, while going into greater depth, for the appreciation and analysis of Chinese opera.

Transcription of scores for Chinese opera allows students to approach music of the genre through listening and score reading, a pedagogical means firmly established in teaching and learning of music history, theory and appreciation. The student can also understand the process of

transcription through reading the scores, and should, theoretically, be able to take on a similar task (on a slightly less professional level), should the situation arise (for example, when HKBU music graduates become teachers and have to illustrate a simplified music score to school children). In other words, the project promotes student-centred learning.

The practice of teacher-centred instruction has waned rapidly in higher education in recent years. Different approaches are used to promote learning, and arguably the most effective means is through interactive channels, where feedback of the students can be used to strengthen the curriculum and methods of teaching. The incorporation of the results of this project into the preparation of CD-Roms for Chinese opera will expand the scope considerably for self-learning, particularly in the area of creativity of Chinese music.

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

The inclusion of Chinese music in the curriculum of degree courses is a relatively recent practice (it began in the Music Department of the Chinese University in the early 1970s). The shift in paradigm of teaching and learning means that the standard practice of rote-learning 30 years ago has to be replaced by a model involving a much more active learning process. The provision of Chinese operatic scores means students can learn the genre with less direction from the teacher. Students also found that there was a

medium that they were familiar with in the learning of Chinese music – scores that they could read and understand. There is now an opportunity for students to study the scores in depth: analytical skills are now developed in contrast with observational skills in the past.

Limitations/Difficulties

Because of the enormous repertoire of Chinese opera, it is necessary to be selective in preparing the transcriptions. There are, of course, pros and cons in the notion of involving excerpts in the project. While this will be ideal for beginners of Chinese opera, a more substantial output is needed for the serious scholar (for example, someone who would like to do an Honours Project on a particular type of opera). These students can only be served by the provision of transcription of complete scores.

The most difficult aspect of the transcription of scores is the decision when to notate ornaments as symbols and when to consider them as part of the melodies (Shi, 1993, pp.342-349). Other tricky aspects include the notation of instrumental accompaniments when they are not in unison with the singer, and dealing with scores with irregular metres (Liu, 1993, pp.356-359). These are, however, issues that an ethnomusicologist has to tackle frequently.

Conclusion

The successful completion of the project on the transcription of Chinese operatic

scores in Western staff notation signifies an advance in the concept of teaching and learning Chinese music. As the famous pioneer in Chinese music Yang Yin Liu has said, "The teaching of Chinese music should be done through real musical experience" - the music scores provide an important channel for undergraduates to learn the musical culture of China.

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