



A Selective Study on Art Songs Composed by Chinese Contemporary Composer Liu Cong

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Abstract

In this article, a nationally renowned Chinese contemporary composer Liu Cong and his representative art songs were introduced. Focuses on Cong Liu's music style, this analyzes his favorite compositional subjects, his salient tonal languages, and many of his compositional inspirations. Selective art songs composed by Cong Liu were also carefully demonstrated.

Key words: Chinese art song; Liu Cong; Composition

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INTRODUCTION

Art song, vocal music compositions usually written for single voice with piano or orchestral accompaniment, is a genre that mainly associates with western classic music tradition. In China, the original composition of art songs started in 1920's. The New Cultural Movement¹ in China during 1915-1921 not only introduced the concept of

¹ The New Culture Movement of the mid 1910s and 1920s sprang from the disillusionment with traditional Chinese culture following the failure of the Chinese Republic, founded in 1912 to address China's problems. Scholars like Chen Duxiu, Cai Yuanpei, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, and Hu Shi, had classical educations but began to lead a revolt against Confucianism. They called for the creation of a new Chinese culture based on global and western standards, especially democracy and science.

democracy and science to the Chinese people, but also brought to their attention the beauty of western art, music, and literature. Inspired by the idea of anti-feudalism and anti-Confucianism, many Chinese composers, especially those who had received their musical training in west, were eager to compose Chinese music by global standards. They began to write music for Chinese Poems with western compositional techniques. As a result, many Chinese art songs in were composed western classic style.

The development of Chinese art songs has witnessed several historic stages. The first acknowledged Chinese art song *Grant River Goes to East* was composed by Liao Hanguo (廖汉果), also known as his penname Qingzhu (青主), in 1920 while he studied law and compositional techniques at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Chinese art songs enjoyed a short-term popularity during 1920s to 1930s, and have been interrupted by the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1927-1950). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Western music along with Chinese music in western style was completely prohibited. After China once again opened its door in the late 1970s, Chinese composers embraced art songs with increasing compositional passion. Nowadays, Chinese art song has grown up as an important component of Chinese contemporary music. Many Chinese composers formed their distinctive personal styles in their art song creations, and have built up an extensive Chinese art song repertoire. Among them, Liu Cong (刘聪) was one of the leading figures.

Liu Cong was born in 1956 in Shenyang, China. He got his bachelor's degree in Music Education from the Art Department, Liaoning Institute of Education and his Master's degree in Music Theory from the Central Conservatory of Music. Now he serves as a professor in composition at Shenyang Conservatory of Music.

Liu Cong is a very talented musician with a wide spectrum of musical interests. As a versatile composer, he

has composed many art songs, piano music, instrumental music, choral music, chamber music, and orchestral music. Besides original compositions, Liu Cong has done tremendous work in arrangements of songs. He has arranged more than 500 Chinese folk songs and songs composed by other Chinese composers into voice-piano versions. He also orchestrated more than 400 songs and instrumental works. In addition, he has published five books and one set of video CDs on the subject of improvising piano accompaniments for songs. As a musical scholar, Cong Liu has published several essays to share his ideas and research findings about compositional techniques. In December, 2007, Cong Liu opened a blog named *Liu Cong's Art Song* to promote the development of Chinese art song. In the blog, Liu Cong labeled his articles as micro-essays. Each article is about 100 to 300 words in length, addressing on musical phenomenon, discussing musical events, or describing compositional concepts. As an active blog writer, Liu Cong has contributed 63 micro-essays, many critiques, and related video and audio materials. Liu Cong currently also works as a conductor and music director at Dalian Philharmonic Orchestra.

Being a professor, a composer, a conductor, a musical director, and occasionally a piano accompanist, Liu Cong is best known for his great achievements in composing art songs. From 1980 to the present, seventy-three art songs composed by Liu Cong were published in multiple song anthologies and musical journals as well as recorded on CDs and performed on television. Thirteen of his pieces have won national compositional awards.

1. THE FIRST SUCCESS

Liu Cong started to compose art songs since 1980. His work attracted public attention in 1996. In 1994, to celebrate the 45th birthday of the People's Republic of China, Shenyang Conservatory of Music held a literature contest in the theme of "to love our country, to love our hometown". In October that year, all the winners' works were exhibited on a bulletin in the music education department, where Liu Cong worked as an assistant professor. Among those literature works, a poem written by an undergraduate student named Du Xuezhi (杜学志) caught Liu Cong's attention. This poem named *The Love for Hometown*.² It was a short poem with very plain but sincere words. It depicted a young man's inner world before leaving his small village to pursue his dream. The honest emotional expression moved Liu Cong deeply. He decided to compose this poem to an art song. On December 10th, 1994, Liu Cong finished the voice line within one day. He wrote it in Chinese simplified notate form on two pages of letter paper. In the next year, Liu

Cong spent 5 months to compose the vocal line into a complete art song with piano accompaniment. In 1996, an amateur singer, soprano Li Caihong (李彩虹), brought this song to Beijing for a national voice competition. Li Caihong did not go very far in the competition, but Li's coach, the prominent Chinese pianist and voice coach Zhao Bixian (赵碧弦) fell in love with the song, and she later recommended this song to her husband Wang Bingrui (王秉锐), a professor in voice at China Conservatory of Music. Professor Wang later gave the song to his student, soprano Zhang Lihui (张礼慧), who was preparing for the top voice competition in China: The National TV Competition for Young Singers. The expression of the song coincidentally matched with Zhang Lihui's life experience. Her passionate singing along with the beautiful melody deeply moved all the judges and millions of Chinese audiences in front of the TV. As a result, Zhang Lihui became the top winner of the year, and Chinese audiences also recognized this young composer's name. Later, Liu Cong orchestrated this song in 5 different versions. Nowadays, this song is selected into the textbooks for many Chinese music institutes. It becomes one of the required songs for the China International Voice Competition.

The Love for Hometown is composed in a ternary form. The most salient style of this song is the combination of pentatonic scales and parallel major and minor scales. The tonality of the song is ambiguous. The composer switches the tonality back and forth between F major and f minor, sometimes he even overlaps the two parallel scales by using harmonies contrasted with notes from both keys, to depict a conflicting emotion before leaving the hometown: the brightness of major is the longing to the world outside of the valley and all the dreams to be fulfilled, while the melancholy of minor is being reluctant to leave hometown. In the B section, to portrait a vivid picture of the Chinese rural life in the childhood memory, the composer designed a piano texture created by pentatonic scales, which is a Chinese traditional scale and many western composers, such as Debussy, use it to evoke an oriental flavor. In the end of the song, instead of a perfect authentic cadence to end the f minor key of the voice line, composer substitutes it with an imperfect authentic cadence. The V of the cord is placed in the soprano line to create an unfinished sense, implying the leaving is for coming back with a better future. All these strokes signify and intensify the deep and longing emotions and nostalgic feelings.

Compared with contemporary western art songs, the harmony languages and tonal structure of *The Love for Hometown* is nothing new. However, composed in the end of 20th century China, this art song is very unique among many contemporary Chinese art songs. In the late 20th century, China just stepped into the era of reform and opening-up. Western classic music came back to Chinese radio and video programs after years of prohibition during

² Chinese title: 故园恋

the Cultural Revolution. However, it was not yet become a popular art to ordinary Chinese people. In Chinese aesthetics, western classic music is heroic and sublime due to the magnificent sound of western orchestra and classic style singing. Chinese composers generally compose art songs in western style to eulogize the Communist Party, People's Republic of China, or other related historic events and figures. Art songs that depict personal emotions were very rare. *The Love for Hometown* is set in an intimate mood, thus makes people feel attached and real. Besides, Chinese art songs composed in this period are usually composed with very basic harmonic languages. There were not many songs with complicated tonal structures produced in this period as we like to see. Liu Cong's *The Love for Hometown* sounds still familiar to Chinese audiences since it owns Chinese elements and the voice line is very beautiful and tonal, while the shifting and overlap of the related scales make the work sophisticated. The natural and emotional expressions of the poem and the successful performance by Zhang Lihui in the influential TV competition quickly brought the song to the public attention all over China.

2. CONG LIU'S ART SONG STYLE

Liu Cong was delighted in this over-night success. He developed a greater passion and enthusiasm for art song composition. He wrote in the preface of his art songs anthology that art song became the center of his compositional interests since *The Love for Hometown* made him famous. The success of this song has also greatly influenced the styles of Liu Cong's later compositions.

Firstly, he loves to choose poems with eternal themes. In China, art song plays an important role of enforcing people's political ideologies. Especially in the last several decades of the 20th century, majority of Chinese art songs focused on political themes. Different from many other Chinese composers, Liu Cong prefers to compose songs with poems about non-political themes. Before *The Love for Hometown*, he had composed seventeen art songs, such as *Seagull*, *the Little Creek*, *Ah*, *Small Island*, *the Fog of the Yellow Mountain*, etc.. None of them were about politics. The success of *The Love for Hometown* strengthened his criteria in selecting poems. He wrote in his micro-essay W-058³:

Starting from 1980 I found my own way of choosing poems, and the wise choices enhanced my development in the field of art song composition... Songs associated with certain ages or events are easily forgotten due to the change of times and situations... Only themes about nature, love, life, and death are eternal... Music must concern about the emotion and the lives of human beings.

³ He numbers his micro-essay with numbers follow a capital letter W (the initial of "work").

Moreover, in Liu Cong's art songs, he has exerted great efforts to achieve a balance between the contemporary compositional techniques and the traditional aesthetics. In his micro essay W-027, *Wandering between the Modern and the Tradition*, Liu Cong wrote:

When composing songs, the traditional composition techniques are fundamental works. Songs composed just with these techniques only express plain emotions and natural senses. They only imitate the tones and rhythms of languages. They serve, however, as a foundation of composition. Modern musical composition requires many abstract concepts and sonorities that work against the traditional rules. I came from the traditional school, so I understand how difficult it is to success by just basic compositional techniques. While my experiments by using contemporary techniques make me feel like playing games, the results are usually unexpected and hard to control. Music composed with only avant-garde techniques is not from my heart. They can neither move me nor others... Finally I have managed my way by mixing the two together. It works perfectly.

Liu Cong recognized one of the reasons that made *The Love for Hometown* stand out from other compositions is the fine design of tonal structure. Hence he keeps exploring, and has gradually developed a personal style that appears to be a combination of romanticism, post-romanticism, impressionism, and Chinese tradition music. Generally, the vocal lines of his songs sound very tonal and lyrical, very much similar to the art songs in the early romantic era. The piano parts of his art songs are usually rich in texture and sophisticated in tonal structures. Besides, the extensive use of substituted chords and the overlap of related scales created vague ambience, which is similar to the compositional styles of many composers of impressionism. Moreover, Liu Cong infuses many Chinese musical elements in his works once the poem is related with hometown, childhood, memory, or Chinese folk lords, such as the usage of pentatonic scales. His music is profound in the compositional techniques yet singers and audiences friendly, and like an inrush of fresh air among many contemporary Chinese art songs.

3. VOICE COMPETITIONS IN CHINA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CONG LIU'S COMPOSITION

With the first success achieved through a voice competition, Cong Liu's succeeding art songs are greatly influenced by many voice competitions. Taking a close look at the voice competitions in China is necessary for understanding the style of Liu Cong's art songs.

Unlike the singing profession in many western countries, Chinese singers usually seek successes by participating in many competitions instead of going to public auditions. To promote the development of the

original song composition, many major Chinese voice competitions encourage singers to sing one or several newly-composed Chinese art songs to add extra credits on singers' final scores. As required by the competition rules, these newly-created Chinese art songs should be 4 or 5 minutes in length and fully demonstrate singers' singing techniques. Chinese singers have to make great efforts to search for original art songs that are concise in form but also allow them to show their vocal virtuosity.

Having successfully caught the public attention on the TV singing competition, Liu Cong started to receive many compositional contracts from singers who were preparing for voice competitions. The goal of helping singers win voice competitions also greatly affects Liu Cong's compositional style.

To demonstrate singers' voices in the limited amount of time, Liu Cong often composes his art songs into dramatically contrasted binary or ternary forms. The A sections, mostly with repeats, generally set in smooth and tranquil emotions, fully demonstrate the beauty of singers' middle ranges. The transitional intros or B sections lead to the climax sections which mostly consist of big leaps in the vocal lines accompanied by ostinato-like piano patterns. The dramatic expressions are usually resolved into cadenza-like coloratura sections or peaceful codas.

Working closely with singers, Liu Cong understands the strengths and weaknesses of all kinds of voice types. He always bears in his mind how singers feel and what they want to exhibit when he composes songs. Liu Cong's great ability of composing voice lines enables many singers to win competitions with his art songs. Take the influential China National TV Competition for Young Singers for example, since 1996, 30 of Liu Cong's art songs have been adopted by contestants in the competitions (many of them have been performed more than once), 32 singers who sang Liu Cong's art songs have become the finalists of the competitions.

4. SONGS WITH CHINESE ETHNIC ELEMENTS

In 1998, after *The Love for Hometown*, Liu Cong decided to develop this art song to a song cycle in the theme of longing for hometown. Together with Du Xuezhi, the student who wrote the poem of *The Love to Hometown*, they created two songs in 1997: *The Night of Homesickness*⁴ and *Returning to Hometown*. Along with *The Love for Hometown*, the three songs are all very emotional and difficult to sing. To balance the dynamics and style of the song group, they decided to add a light-hearted piece. In 1998, they finished the song *After Rain* (雨后). The key signature of this song is G flat major. In many phrases Liu Cong avoids the 4th and 7th of the key, and

⁴ Chinese title: 思乡夜

adds a flatted third, to create a Hxak Yeet-like folk song flavor. Hxak Yeet (苗族飞歌) is a type of mountain songs that associated with a group of ethnic people called Miao in the southeast region of China. Hxak Yeet in the local language means flying songs. It features a pentatonic scale with a flatted third. The combination of Hxak Yeet and traditional major and minor system gives Liu Cong a lot of inspiration in music compositions. He composed several works in this style, including instrumental works. In the spring of 2002, when he was staying in Beijing, he received a poem *In the Green Valley*,⁵ written by Jin Hongwei (金鸿为). Liu Cong recalls in his micro-essay W-001 *A Story about Development from Small to Big*: the day when he got the poem he almost felt crazy caught up in the sand storm in Beijing. The beautiful scenery depicted in the poem dramatically contrasted with the situation he was in. To appeal for the public awareness of environmental protection, he immediately composed the poem to a short song. Since the poet came from Yunnan province, which is one of the regions where the Miao people lives, Liu Cong again infused the song elements of Hxak Yeet. Later, Liu Cong was requested by a Chinese coloratura soprano to compose a song in folk style for a major competition in China. He developed the short piece by adding many coloratura phrases and a cadenza like coda. Right after finishing the piano-voice score, Liu Cong orchestrated the song.

5. SONGS TO EVOKE THE SENSE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Besides *In the Green Valley*, Liu Cong Composed many other songs about the nature and environmental protection. He wants to encourage more people to cherish the nature he deeply loves. *Bird Singing in the Wind*⁶ is the most successful one among these environmental-protection songs. This song was first composed in 1996, but eventually finished after many revisions and premiered in 2000. The poem written by Fan Xiaobin (樊孝彬) personifies two birds as a newly married couple: The bride is captured and locked in a cage to lure her companions, and the hunting gun is aiming the lonely bridegroom who is attempting to save his wife. The poet hopes to evoke people's awareness of birds' protection by the sad singing of the birds. The poem is relatively short, Liu Cong prolongs it by adding a cadenza-like coloratura section to depict the bird's singing that from being sad to angry, and then to desperation. This song possesses many vocal virtuosity and a high aesthetic value. It is quickly spread out. Chinese soprano Yang Xuejin (杨学进) brought it to the Golden Hall of Vienna, Austria in September, 2009 as one of the repertoires of her recital. It has received

⁵ Chinese title: 在青翠的山谷里

⁶ Chinese title: 鸟儿在风中歌唱

many compositional awards, including the second prize of *China National Art Song Compositional Award* in 2000.

6. SONGS OF NEW TONAL LANGUAGES

In 1998, Liu Cong started his exploration of new harmonic languages and new sonorities. He did not find a mature personal style or a clear compositional concept at the beginning. There was one idea that was very clear in his mind: He decided to break away from composing overwhelmingly with traditional major or minor chords. *Please Do Not Speak*⁷ was one of his early works of his experiments. This song was composed in 1998, lyrics by Lin Lang (林朗). In this song, Liu Cong tries to avoid major or minor triads, substitutes them by sonorities based on pentatonic scales and whole tone scales, thus creating an ambiguous atmosphere similar to the works by impressionism composer Debussy. Liu Cong composes three verses with similar opening but varied developments, to create a form structure that is similar to balancing binary. This design gives the piano textures more spaces to do variations.

Another atonal song, *The Drizzling Dream*⁸, was composed in 2003 when Liu Cong was polishing his compositional techniques at the Central Conservatory of Music. It was a coursework for his Contemporary Compositional Techniques study. He finished this song under the guidance of his professor Ye Xiaogang (叶小纲), an influential Chinese composer and music educator. Liu Cong skillfully uses the compositional concepts and techniques of the 20th century to compose this song. Both the voice line and the harmonic languages feature more dissonance sounds compared with his other early songs. By this song, Liu Cong became the top winner of the Annual Compositional Competition at the Central Conservatory of Music. The composer puts this song together with his nine other songs about dreams, and names them *The Dream Series*.

7. THE USAGE OF CHINESE HISTORIC CULTURAL ELEMENTS

As a composer who deeply set his feet into Chinese culture, besides Chinese ethnic music, Liu Cong also features many Chinese historic elements in his compositions.

Chinese ancient music scales, historic legends, and traditional folklores are resources of many of his art songs.

In 2009, Liu Cong was invited to compose the background music for a documentary film named *Decoding the Soft Power of Culture*, which is about Chinese historic

culture. For this documentary, Liu Cong composed many music works, including a short piece named *The Elegant Court Dance*. This piece shows in the documentary with two versions: One is played by Chinese traditional instrument Pipa (琵琶) and orchestra, and another is by oboe and orchestra. Later that year, Liu Cong's colleague, coloratura soprano Hu Kun (胡坤), requested a short vocal piece from him. Liu Cong then adapted *The Elegant Court Dance* to a florid vocalise. In this song, Liu Cong adds a lyrical opening section to the part that contrasts with the original music idea. This song is composed with a traditional ritual scale of Chinese court music. In ancient China, there were two types of traditional scales exclusively used in court music. One called Yanyue (燕乐) scale, mainly used in court banquets for entertainments. It is a seven-tone scale similar to the major scale but the 7th is flatted. The other is called Yayue scale, mainly used in the court rituals and significant events. It is a seven-tone scale similar to the minor scale but the 4th is substituted by a sharped 4th. In modern Chinese music, the two traditional scales are used to reflect ancient flavors. Therefore, though without a literary name and lyrics, this piece still implies a vivid court-dance scene.

Another example could be *Flying to the Moon*⁹ composed in 2004. The lyric by Chen Daobin (陈道斌) is adapted from a famous Chinese folklore. Dayu's (大禹) wife Chang'e (嫦娥) hopes to be immortal, so she takes an elixir. As a result, she flies to the moon palace and becomes the lonely goddess of moon. This song is Chang E's lament of loneliness and regret. To draw more Chinese audience especially the young generations to classic style music, many Chinese composers try to compose songs with musical elements of both popular music and classic music. This song is one of these cross-over works. It is a binary form started with an intro and ended with a cadenza-like coda. The A section is composed in a style that similar to that of pop songs, while the B section is composed in a style similar to classic march. The intro and the coda fully exhibit the vocal virtuosity of coloratura soprano and also depict Chang E's signs and the struggling in her mind.

To sum up, the above examples together demonstrated that Liu Cong's art songs have successfully balanced the singers' requirements of showing various vocal virtuosity, the composer's goal of exhibiting advanced compositional techniques, the poets' needs of passionate emotional expression, and the audiences' tastes when enjoying music. Therefore, Liu Cong's art songs are perfect choices of concerts or recitals to singers worldwide, also as material for scholarly studying Chinese contemporary vocal music and song composition.

⁷ Chinese title: 请不要说

⁸ Chinese title: 淋湿的梦

⁹ Chinese title: 奔月

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