

MUSICAL INVESTIGATION:
Bejing Opera and Western Romantic Opera

Word count: 1, 993

Radio Program Script

CS¹: Hello and welcome to Music Fusion. I'm Carrie Smith and today we have special guest speaker Jon Lee, a specialist in both traditional Chinese and Western Opera, here to talk to us about these two very different operatic styles. On today's program Jon will take us through an in-depth study of both types of operas and answer the question that has been boggling the viewers mind: how can two such different styles of music still come under the same category: opera?

JL²: Hello Carrie, I'm glad to be here today. Well Opera has quite a large spectrum of styles and classifications as it's evolved over the years but I think by basing this study around Beijing opera, what has become China's national opera, and comparing it to the high-art western composer, Puccini, who clearly embraces all the characteristics of the Romantic period of western opera I will be able to make some comparisons between the two styles. The first piece is Puccini's "O mio babbino caro" sung by Laretta in his opera Gianni Schicchi.

[track 1]

CS: Wow, that's quite amazing. For a clearer comparison between the two perhaps you could play us a piece from Beijing opera.

JL: Of course, this piece, sung by Geng Qiaoyun, a well known opera singer, is the aria which is translated to be "Chuncao makes her way to the court".

Composer?
Opera?

¹ CS – Carrie Smith

² JL – Jon Lee

[track 2]

JL: I think that in order to understand why these two seemingly different types of music are still considered opera we must determine what makes an opera ~~and~~ opera. Opera in a way is limitless as it can entail any idea, character, emotion but all must be either sung to a harmonic structure provided through the role of the instruments. The songs in an opera are called arias, which usually follow a recitative, which is a melodic speech set to music. } Strange definition.

What makes operas different is the style in which they are written and the requirements of the singer, which not only differ from period to period but from country to country. If you compare Beijing opera with the Romantic period of western opera the role of the singer differs. In Chinese opera ^{interesting} there are two types of voices: the constrained voice and the natural and relaxed voice. The constrained voice puts a large strain on the larynx which as the name suggests must be constrained allowing the singer to have high-pitched, falsetto voices, which must range from high to low; this practice takes a lot of training. } interesting

The relaxed voice allows the voice to flow naturally, as the larynx is relaxed. The type of voice is dependant on the role of the singer but the majority of roles are sung as constrained voices by tradition. Although, like in Chinese opera the type of voice used in western opera is dependant on the role, during the romantic period Italian composers like Puccini relied on free-flowing voices, which are dependant on a free larynx. } OK.

CS: Interesting. This must explain the difference in the timbre in each voice part. What other features do you think distinguish the two operas?

JL: I think that the most marked difference in the two pieces is not only the types of instruments but also the specific roles that they play in each orchestra. The Chinese ensemble is much smaller than a western orchestra and differs in composition. The Romantic period orchestra consists of the woodwind, brass, percussion, and string sections. The ensemble used for Beijing opera does not have a brass section and the woodwinds are rarely used. This leaves us with the percussion and string section. In the west, Romantic composers saw these instruments as important in order to reinforce the flowing sound and broadcast of sentiments, an essential idea of the time. While there are some instruments in each orchestra that are similar to their counterparts such as the *po* are to western cymbals, most differ especially in timbre. The percussion in western opera is used to provide a rhythm for the piece as it is in the Chinese opera. However, it is given more importance in Beijing opera. The *Tan P'i Ku*, for example, keeps time in the opera. In the percussion section we can also hear that there is the use of a gong, giving a completely different timbral quality. The tempo of the percussion section in both cases is used to depict the emotion that is portrayed in the particular scene of the opera; however, the Chinese opera has a more rigid use of percussion. The strings may have a similar assemblage but differ in tonal quality. In the Romantic Opera many composers stressed the importance of the string section in the orchestra. However, Beijing Opera uses the strings mainly to accompany singing. In each orchestra they can either be plucked or bowed. In Beijing opera the instruments have no more than four strings and on those which are bowed only two. The strings in the Chinese orchestra produce a twanging

The candidate jumps from one style to another without completing an idea...

not only rhythm...

Chinese one?

So what are these emotions?

Is not that the case in Puccini's piece?

sound because of their construction where as the Romantic violin has a smoother and more flowing timbre, which compliment the relaxed voice type.

CS: So even though they differ in orchestra they are both considered to be operas?

JL: Yes, although they are different in timbre, they are both used to accompany the voice and provide a backbone to the piece and therefore the orchestra as a whole has the same role. Even though the instruments in the orchestra seem to be so different we can see the connection between many of the roles of the instruments, such as the percussion.

CS: It has been said that all Beijing opera sounds the same to the listener. Can this be explained?

JL: In Romantic opera, in which dynamics are one of the main ways of expression, in Beijing opera, there are none. Specific structures are used to express certain sentiments. Since the accompaniment does not change only the words change the piece. There are three specific musical patterns that can be used. The Hsi P'i style is quick and light; it is played to accompany normal conversation and to express extreme happiness, agitation or excitement. The Erg Huang is used to demonstrate reflection and the Fan Erh Huang, which demonstrates great depths of depression. *Interesting ...*

CS: Perhaps we should go through the examples more in-depth and then compare them to get a clearer idea of their relationship.

JL: Good idea Carrie. Lets look back at Puccini's "O mio babbino". The piece is from Gianni Schicchi. Lauretta, the main character, is trying to convince her father to allow her to marry her boy friend, Rinuccio. In this piece she is basically emotionally blackmailing him saying that death would be a happier prospect than not marrying Rinuccio, giving a grim prospect a glimpse of humor. The aria starts with an introduction, common in the Romantic period, by the string section in A flat minor. The strings are constantly undulating from the root position to the first inversion of A flat minor. The strings move slowly across the measure, which help hide the pulse. Just before the harp joins and leads the voice into the piece. At the fourth measure of the piece Lauretta joins the orchestra in A flat major with her first melodic phrase. The strings modulate to E flat major but the voice remains in A flat major. At bar 13 when Lauretta sings *volgio andare* the voice joins the orchestra in E flat major. However, before the voice has made this change in measure 11 at *a comperar* the strings are already in F minor. The first melodic phrase, which lasts 8 bars ends in E flat major in the voice but the orchestra continues leading us into the second melodic phrase. *Good harmonic progression amek 1518*

[track 3]

JL: The second melodic phrase is much longer than the first lasting 14 bars. It begins by repeating the same material as the first melodic line. However, it then spirals into completely new material; the vocal line is extended into D flat major; this acts as a

release to the piece. The orchestra has modulated around the subdominant of D flat major. After Laretta sings *ponte vecchio* at the 18th measure of the piece the piece returns to A flat major, and continues for the rest of this phrase this way.

[track 4]

CS: Now you've mentioned quite a bit on the musical structure but don't you find that particularly in Romantic music it is important to state the importance of the portrayal of emotion in this piece?

debatable

JL: In this particular piece because it primarily sad with a hint of humor, Puccini exaggerates the emotion of the piece; it is said that he was mocking his sentimental nature. Because Laretta wants to grab attention of her she is very melodramatic. As a result, while we are initially introduced with a sense of hope because she expresses her desire to buy a ring but as soon as she realizes what life would be like if she does not marry Rinuncio the piece spirals upwards into a series of high notes; this is because this is where Laretta emphasizes her pain. This distinguishes this part from the rest of the piece. After this section she sings the phrase *O Dio* very quietly illustrating her pain and catching the attention of her father. The last melodic phrase introduced in the piece really attempts to underline the pity the father must feel for Laretta. As a result the orchestra picks up the opening and the voice descends into a swirl of emotion. It comes in on the second half and is repetitive of the first original melody. As a result the voice sweeps between higher and lower notes. The voice repeats the phrase in order to ensure that her

convincing

father is 'under her spell' and will do what she says. On the last phrase there is normally a *portamento* on the last high note of the piece. By the end of the piece her father is sure to make sure that she will marry Rinnuncio.

[track 5]

CS: Beautiful. I think we should now take a look at the aria from the Chinese opera that you first introduced to us at the beginning of the program, sung by Geng Qiaoyun.

[track 6]

JL: The piece begins with percussion, which presumably is the Tan P'I Ku, the drum which keeps time. After the beat is established it is followed by the introduction of the strings. In this piece we can hear that there are both strings that are plucked and bowed. They lay out the basic theme that the singer will follow. The range is quite limited because of the construction of the instruments used, which contain few strings. Because of Chinese tradition emotions are expressed in the style that is played, rather than the dynamics and other qualities used commonly in western music. This piece is played in the Hsi P'i style this can be seen because of its light and quick nature. Going more specifically into the type of voice it sounds very nasal, this is because this particular part must be sung with a constricted larynx.

OK but what about the text that is being delivered? In order to make a clear comparison with Puccini's pieces we need to know the text of this aria ...

[track 7]


CS: Does Beijing Opera use techniques we do; like word painting to illustrate the lyrics?

JL: In Beijing Opera emotion is demonstrated in the particular structure that is used. As a result, there is not much range in the voice. One must also remember the additional pressures that the singer has because of his or her constricted larynx.

CS: This has been quite amazing. Two different types of music joined under the name opera because of their intention. Two different timbres joined by many concepts. We have truly answered our question: How could Chinese and Western opera be classified under the same name – opera? Thank you Jon, it's been great to have you here today. That's all the time we have for today. Join us next week on Music Fusion.

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Some interesting points such as the vocal technique in Chinese Opera and their use of Dynamics. Also ~~some~~ the harmonic analysis of Puccini's aria was satisfactory. Nevertheless, the analysis of the Chinese aria was not as complete and therefore the comparison was limited.



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