

# Analysis of the Ancient Poetry Art Song “Qingyu an. Yuanxi”

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**Abstract:** China has a rich history of classical poetry and culture, with ancient poetry art songs making up a significant portion of Chinese art song repertoire. This article analyzes *Qingyu an. Yuanxi* 青玉案·元夕, composed by Li Yan and adapted by Deng Yao, from several perspectives: the definition of ancient poetry art songs, interpretation of lyrics, and vocal characteristics. It further explores the integration of sound and rhyme in the vocal setting and examines the aesthetic qualities arising from the unity of musical composition and poetic rhythm. The study also investigates the vocal treatment and performance practices of this art song, aiming to contribute to the preservation, development, and international promotion of Chinese ancient poetry art songs.

**Keywords:** Chinese Ancient Poetry Art Songs “Qingyu an. Yuan Xi”; Singing Characteristics, Poetic-Musical Integration; Vocal Interpretation

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## 1. Introduction

The so-called Chinese ancient poetry art songs, as the name implies, are art songs composed using classical Chinese poetry as lyrics. Broadly speaking, classical Chinese poetry is categorized into three main types: “ancient poetry” (古体诗), “modern poetry” (近体诗), and “ci” (词). The art song *Qingyu an · Yuanxi* (青玉案·元夕), based on Xin Qiji’s ci, belongs to the genre of ci-based art songs, which are increasingly discussed in vocal pedagogy and musicological studies (Liu & Yap, 2022; Wong, 2015).

A key feature of Chinese ancient poetry art songs is that they often present lyrics directly drawn from classical poetry, requiring only minimal adaptation for musical performance (Sun, 2017). Ci poetry, as a form of regulated verse, utilizes cipai (tune patterns) with strict tonal and structural constraints, resulting in a highly musical and refined poetic form distinct from modern regulated verse (Chang, 2013; Idema & Haft, 1997; Wang, 2007). These characteristics make ci poetry particularly well-suited for vocal settings.

Xin Qiji (1140–1207), though primarily known for bold and heroic verse, displays a softer, introspective tone in *Qingyu’an · Yuanxi* (Yang, 2024; Owen, 1996). The poem begins by vividly describing the festive Lantern Festival—overflowing with lights and music—then contrasts with the figure of a solitary, noble woman whose calm presence symbolizes moral integrity and inner purity amid worldly tumult, reflecting Xin’s own ideals after political disappointment (Yip, 2001; Yu, 2010).

Through skilled use of juxtaposition and symbolism, the poem transitions from external spectacle to internal contemplation. The poet’s spiritual “search” culminates in the moment he “turns and sees her where lantern light is dim,” highlighting themes of transcendence, emotional resonance, and timeless aesthetic appeal (Zhang, 2019).

## 2. Lyrics and Music Techniques

### 2.1 Melody characteristics

In recent years, ancient poetry art songs have gained increasing popularity and influence. Beyond their lyrical foundation in classical Chinese poetry, their melodic design plays a crucial role. The choice of form, mode, and tonality must harmonize closely with the poetic content to fully convey its artistic essence (Liu & Yap, 2022; Wong, 2015).

The art song *Qingyu an · Yuanxi* is composed in F# Yu mode (a traditional Chinese pentatonic mode) and structured in an ABA + coda form. The singer’s incorporation of traditional operatic melodic inflections adds a distinctly ancient flavor, enhancing the historical and cultural atmosphere (Zhang, 2019). In addition, the contrast between the adagio and andante in the first two sections, the gradual progression of emotions, makes the performance of the music more layered (Sun, 2017):



Adagio

8<sup>va</sup>

5

东风夜放花千树, 更吹落星如

Figure 1: Opening Adagio of *Qingyu an · Yuanxi*, depicting falling fireworks

The tempo marking Adagio at the beginning indicates a slow and lyrical pace. The first to fourth measures use a series of chord decompositions to create a sense of space and atmosphere unique to ancient poetry and art songs, which makes people unconsciously immersed in it when they hear the prelude (Wang, 2007). The melody changes in the key of A, mainly with eighth notes, which is soothing and full of artistic conception. The first measure simulates the scene of falling fireworks through a series of descending appoggiaturas, followed by a syncopated note of a big jump, followed by two eighth notes and a half note that fall on the highest note 6 of the big jump, which is very similar to the blooming of fireworks. This sets a gorgeous and romantic tone for the lyrics of this song “Stars like rain”(星如雨)“Star” (星)is translated as fireworks, which describes the fireworks all over the sky, and “Stars like rain” refers to the

fireworks falling like rain (Chang, 2013; Zhang, 2019), which echoes the introduction of the prelude.

The interplay between Adagio and Andante in the first two sections supports gradual emotional progression, giving the music rich expressive layers and creating a dynamic contrast that enhances both the poetic imagery and the vocal performance (Sun, 2017; Wong, 2015).

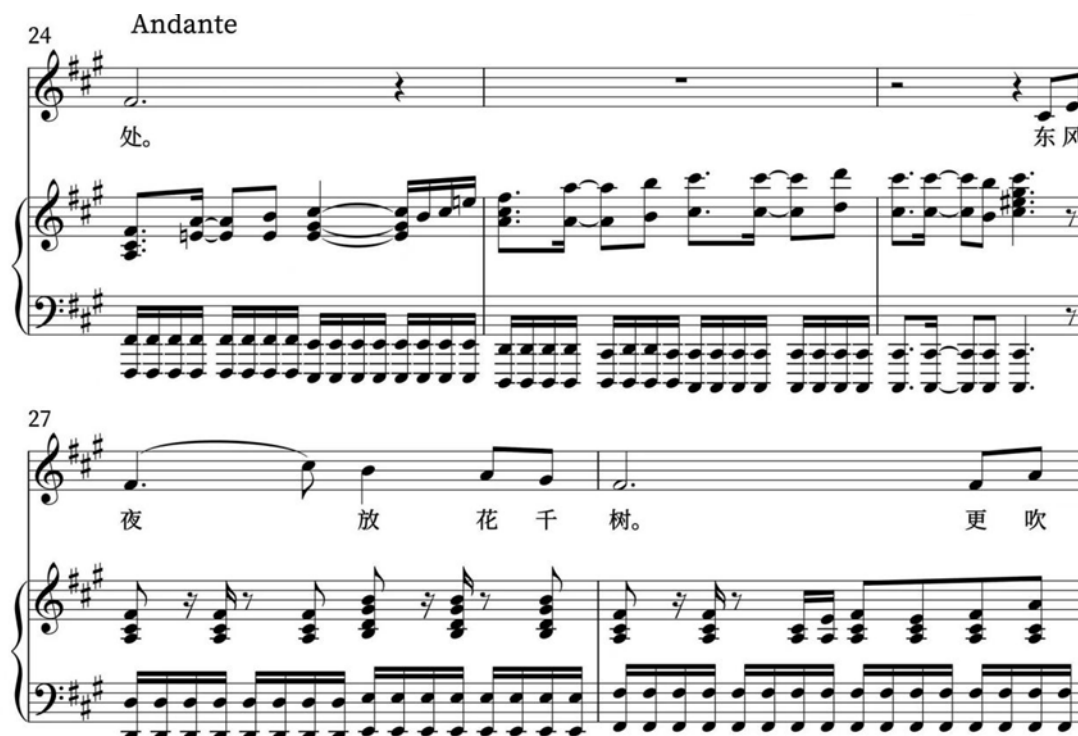


Figure 2: Beginning of the Andante section, showing increased rhythmic motion and expressive contrast

From bar 24, the second section of the work begins, transitioning from the Adagio tempo of the first section to a slightly faster Andante. The accompaniment also changes character—moving away from sustained chords and broken arpeggios to predominantly sixteenth-note patterns, which introduce a more flowing and lively texture. While the lyrics remain the same, the emotional interpretation shifts, offering a new perspective on the same poetic content. This change reflects Xin Qiji’s transcendent emotional world and enriches the expressive depth of the piece (Li & Ma, 2024).

During this section, the harmonic accompaniment continues to use broken chords, but now with greater motion and momentum, enhancing the textural layering of the music. The vocal line also evolves—the emotional tone progresses from soft and delicate to a slightly more assertive expression, requiring greater breath support and vocal control. The singer must align their expression with the evolving emotions of the poem, using deeper breath and more sustained airflow to shape the phrases and highlight emotional nuances (Li & Ma, 2024).

Comparing the performance of the first and second sections, the shift from the tranquil and reserved mood of the opening to the more expressive, forward-moving character of the second part creates a strong contrast in musical interpretation. This contrast not only enhances the emotional arc of the piece but also opens up a space for imaginative interpretation. Furthermore, the use of harmonic functions and accented arpeggios in the piano accompaniment vividly conveys the poem’s inner artistic imagery, allowing the music to fully express its aesthetic intent. (Li&Ma,2024)



Figure 3: Climax of the second section, expressing emotional intensity and inner conflict

The climax of the second section represents the emotional sublimation of the entire song. At this point, interjections are embedded into the melody—sung almost like sighs or lamentations—evoking a sense of suppressed passion beneath the lyricist Xin Qiji’s otherwise restrained character. As the melodic line gradually ascends, supported by the expressive accompaniment, the emotional intensity deepens. The interplay between vocal expression and instrumental support vividly enhances the feeling of longing and internal conflict. This combination allows the music’s inner emotion to reach its resonant peak, enabling the audience to experience a profound sense of empathetic connection and aesthetic beauty (Li & Ma, 2024; Sun, 2017).



Figure 4: Return to Adagio, reflecting calm after the emotional climax

At bar 45, the Andante tempo introduced at bar 24 transitions back to Adagio, with the tempo slowing from approximately  $\text{♩}=66$  to  $\text{♩}=56$ . This shift suggests a waning of excitement, as if the emotional high point has passed. The alternation of melodies between higher and lower registers creates a sense of dialogue or echo, enhancing the expressiveness of the musical

imagery. Meanwhile, the piano accompaniment develops with increasing complexity, contributing to a richer emotional atmosphere and deepening the artistic conception of the piece.



Figure 5: Closing passage, depicting the serene discovery in dim lantern light

The line “I find her there where lantern light is dimly shed” (那人却在灯火阑珊处) marks a turning point in both the poem and the musical narrative. In the composition, the characters “阑” (lán) and “珊” (shān) are each set to half-note durations, emphasizing the gentle slowing of time and deepening the atmosphere of mystery. This sustained phrasing vividly highlights both the scattered, fading lantern light and the elevated, elusive quality of “that person.” The lyrics reflect the emotional climax: after searching through the crowd countless times, the protagonist suddenly turns back and discovers her quietly standing at the edge of the fading lights. The “light is dimly shed” (阑珊处) in the last sentence forms a sharp contrast with the vibrant, bustling festival scene described at the beginning. The final semitone descent leaves the listener with a lingering sense of incompleteness or yearning, creating an open-ended emotional space. This expressive ending enriches the interpretative depth and poetic resonance of the song, allowing for a layered interaction between the singer, the piano, and the audience, and leaving behind a lasting impression filled with imagination and reflection. (Zi, 2022)

## 2.2 Lyrics and Emotions

“Qingyu’an · Yuanxi” is a ci poem written by Xin Qiji, a prominent poet of the Southern Song Dynasty. It vividly depicts the grandeur of the Lantern Festival while simultaneously contrasting this lively scene with the image of a unique and aloof woman. Through this contrast, the poet conveys his noble and unyielding character, reflecting his disillusionment with secular society following political failure (Cao, 2025). From a literary standpoint, the poem employs juxtaposition as its core rhetorical device: the first half portrays a lively, bustling festival, while the second half centers on the solitary, transcendent female figure. This structural contrast enhances the poem’s literary and aesthetic value (Deng, 2025).

The vocal setting of “Qingyu an · Yuanxi” uses the original poem as its lyrics and integrates its literary elegance and emotional subtleties into the musical composition, enriching the work with deep cultural connotation.

The first half of this poem describes the lively scene on the night of the Lantern Festival on the 15th day of the first lunar month, when people enthusiastically revelled and the lights were bright. The line “One night’s east wind, adorns a thousand trees with flowers, and blows down

stars in showers (Ji&Wen,2020).” ( “东风夜放花千树，更吹落，星如雨” ) vividly depicts a grand scene of “fire trees and silver flowers”, making it easy for people to imagine this lively scene. This line uses Cen Sen's poem ‘Suddenly, the spring breeze comes overnight, and thousands of pear trees bloom.’ (忽如一夜春风来，千树万树梨花开) “Fine steeds and carved cabs spread fragrance en route” (“宝马雕车香满路”) and “fish and dragon dance” (鱼龙舞) together depict the scene of people celebrating together. Whether it is dignitaries or ordinary people, they all go out of their homes on this night and celebrate and revel together on the streets, which is very lively. “Music vibrates from the flute, The moon sheds its full light, while fish and dragon lanterns dance all night.” (“凤箫声动，玉壶光转，一夜鱼龙舞”) “凤箫” is a musical instrument, which refers to music here; “moon sheds” (“玉壶”) refers to the moon; “fish and dragon” refers to fish-shaped and dragon-shaped lanterns. This sentence expresses: Under the moonlight, the whole city is brightly lit, everyone is immersed in the festive atmosphere and forgets the time, singing and dancing all night long (Wang & Li, 2020).

The second half of the poem still describes the joy of the Lantern Festival, and at the same time, there is a story about a pair of lovers who meet by chance on the street. The picture is reduced from a plane to a point. By describing his emotional fluctuations, personal joy is integrated with the joy of the festival. “In gold-thread dress, with moth or willow ornaments, Giggling, she melts into the throng with trails of scents (Zhu,2022).(蛾儿雪柳黄金缕，笑语盈盈暗香去): This describes the beautiful women who usually stay at home, but today they are wearing beautiful clothes, wearing gorgeous jewelry, running happily in the crowd, leaving only bursts of faint fragrance wherever they pass (Yang, 2020). “But in the crowd once and again, I look for her in vain, when all at once I turn my head, I find her there where lantern light is dimly shed.” (“众里寻她千百度，蓦然回首，那人却在灯火阑珊处”): This sentence describes that I carefully identified the women who passed by me, but none of them was the one I was looking for. I turned around suddenly but found that my sweetheart was standing in the dim light with sparse lights.

As a graceful poem, this poem “Qingyu an yuan xi” is no less artistically accomplished than the graceful poems of Yan Shu and Liu Yong in the Northern Song Dynasty. The beginning of the poem tries to depict the lively scene of the Lantern Festival, but the author’s main intention is not to describe the scene. He wants to contrast the uniqueness of the person “at the end of the lights” (灯火阑珊处) . The whole poem mainly uses the expression method of contrast to express the author's spiritual pursuit of not being contaminated by the secular world. The last sentence of this poem, “But in the crowd once and again, I look for her in vain, when all at once I turn my head, I find her there where lantern light is dimly shed.” (众里寻她千百度，蓦然回首，那人却在灯火阑珊处) has also become a widely circulated sentence.

### 3. Singing Techniques

#### 3.1 Singing skills

This song, composed by Mr. Li Yan and adapted by Mr. Deng Yao, is an art song based on ancient Chinese poetry. It embodies not only the rhythmic characteristics of classical verse but also the emotional depth expressed by the original lyricist, showcasing distinct features of Chinese vocal composition. To perform this piece effectively, the singer must have a deep understanding of both the intonational rhythm of Song Dynasty poetry and the tone and pacing of the lyrics. Clear diction and accurate pronunciation are essential in reciting and singing, especially where specific words or phrases have been musically stylized. The performance should be designed to integrate smoothly with the melodic contour. Singers are encouraged to draw upon traditional vocal techniques used in ancient song performance, such as pausing, pinching, reading, humming, crying, sighing, and trembling—each contributing to expressive nuance (Wang, 2023). Control over volume and timbre is also critical, with emotional expression often relying on freely flowing dynamics and tonal contrast. The singing should emphasize line continuity, with smooth, connected delivery and strong breath control. A low and bright vocal timbre is recommended to convey the contrasting emotions between the upper and lower sections of the song and to reflect the solitude and introspection of the lyricist. (Feng, 2024)

#### 3.2 Singing Process

In the line “One night's east wind adorns a thousand trees with flowers” (东风夜放花千树), the singing must combine rhyme and melody, emphasizing a long, sighing tone at the opening (Smith, 2021). The initial sound should begin with a subtle moment of breath-holding, echoing the feeling of a sudden sigh from ancient times when one is lost in thought. This section should incorporate chant-like breathing, gentle humming, and lyrical phrasing to evoke the poetic charm of recitation fused with song. The performer should approach the interpretation from the first-person perspective, conveying genuine emotional expression (Zhang, 2019).

The subsequent phrase “And blows down stars in showers” (更吹落，星如雨) represents one of the emotional and musical highlights of the piece. A soft, legato approach is recommended here, with a concentrated and delicate tone quality. The timbre should be ethereal and slightly hazy, creating a dreamlike atmosphere that expresses the poet's romantic imagination (Liu & Wang, 2022).

In the lines “In gold-thread dress, with moth or willow ornaments, giggling, she melts into the throng with trails of scents” (娥儿雪柳黄金缕，笑语盈盈暗香去), the focus shifts from a broad environmental scene to intimate detail. The high notes in this section should be approached with delicate restraint. Specifically, a gradually fading high tone is recommended on the phrase “the fragrance is gone” (暗香去), to capture the fleeting nature of the moment and the refinement of the poet's observational style (Chen, 2020).

In the line “I searched for her thousands of times in the crowd”, the singer should take a deep breath before delivering the phrase with a sigh-like quality that captures the sense of longing and persistent searching, while gently returning to the underlying rhyme and rhythmic structure (Sun, 2018).

The climactic line “When all at once I turn my head, I find her there where lantern light is dimly shed” (蓦然回首，那人却在灯火阑珊处) portrays the solitary figure standing quietly under the scattered lights of the Lantern Festival. This loneliness stands in stark contrast to the lively crowd depicted earlier. After its repetition, the melodic development subtly expresses the lyricist's inner purity and unwillingness to be tainted by world affairs. Set in the key of A, this section should be sung using a light, restrained high register, supported by steady breath control, to bring depth and dimension to the character of “that person,” and fully express the lyricist’s emotional isolation. This interpretive approach enhances the overall artistic effect and emotional resonance of the song (Li & Ma, 2024).

#### 4. Conclusion

As one of the world’s ancient civilizations, China possesses a rich cultural heritage, with a long history and profound artistic traditions. Among these, ancient poetry art songs represent a unique synthesis of literary and musical expression. As a derivative art form rooted in classical poetry, these songs not only preserve the essence of Chinese poetic culture but also adapt to the evolution of modern music, forming a distinct genre characterized by its refined aesthetic and expressive form. The art song *Qingyu an · Yuanxi* stands out as a vocal work of exceptional artistic value, marked by expressive dynamics, vivid poetic imagery, and elegant melodic lines. Its integration of traditional lyrics with modern compositional techniques makes it a model of artistic fusion, and a representative example of Chinese vocal art. For students of contemporary vocal music, this piece offers rich educational value. We should learn from Mr. Li Yan’s deep literary insight into ancient poetry and Mr. Deng Yao’s creative adaptation techniques and strive to innovate while preserving tradition. In doing so, we not only enhance our artistic skills but also contribute to the protection and inheritance of traditional Chinese culture in a modern context.

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#### Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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