

The Integration of Peking Opera Vocal Techniques in Chinese National Vocal Music: A Case Study of the Song: Mei Lanfang

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Abstract: *Chinese folk vocal music draws on the art of traditional opera singing, which can carry forward the national vocal music with Chinese characteristics and become a unique artistic style. Chinese traditional opera singing is inseparable from modern national vocal music. National vocal singing has inherited many characteristics of opera singing to a certain extent. Grasping their commonalities, such as breathing, singing method, cavity, resonance, and pronunciation, will help us extract their essence and use them for our benefit. This article takes the creation of the song Mei Lanfang as an example to conduct a multi-dimensional humanistic interpretation and creative technique analysis of the work and uses the singer's personal experience to explain the feelings during the singing process. The song Mei Lanfang has created a precedent of integrating traditional opera singing methods into national vocal music. It mainly absorbs the essence of traditional Chinese opera and Peking Opera and draws lessons from Chinese folk music singing art skills to become a novel song. By creatively employing Peking Opera techniques, this research offers new perspectives on cultural preservation and innovation, while providing valuable insights for the fusion of global musical traditions.*

Keywords: Peking Opera, Chinese National Vocal Music, Folk Music, Song of Mei Lanfang

1. Introduction

With a history of thousands of years, traditional Chinese opera is the cornerstone of the nation's cultural identity, integrating music, poetry, and the performing arts into a unique aesthetic experience. Among China's most iconic figures, Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) was a giant - a master of Peking Opera whose innovations transcended theatrical conventions and redefined vocal expression and cross-cultural dialogue. However, his contribution is not limited to the stage: it has permeated contemporary artistic practice, particularly in the field of Chinese folk vocal music, a genre that emerged in the 20th century, and this combines Peking Opera singing with indigenous musical traditions. Song Mei Lanfang (2004), composed by Wu Xiaoping and lyrics by Liu Pengchun, is the typical work of this fusion. Created to commemorate the 110th anniversary of Mei Lanfang's birth, the work is both a tribute to his artistic talent and a ground-breaking experiment in integrating traditional opera singing into modern national vocal music (Zhang, 2024).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese music experienced a period of change, and the artistic ideas of the East and the West collided and intertwined (Feng & Zheng, 2024). As the country strives to modernize, Chinese composers and performers seek to create a unique

'national vocal music' that can both assert cultural identity and fit into global musical trends. This musical genre is rooted in folk melodic and operatic traditions but has been refined by vocal training to become a vehicle for artistic expression and patriotic feelings. In this environment, Peking Opera - a quintessential symbol of Chinese tradition - faces practical challenges, as younger audiences are more inclined to mix forms. However, performing the song of Mei Lanfang requires the vocal singer to understand and develop the emotional depth and technical precision of opera singing to ensure that it can inspire future generations. In performance, the singer is required to transcend language and cultural barriers with meticulous breath control, tonal elements (rhyme), and narrative phrasing.

Musically, the composition synthesizes Peking Opera's vocal idioms with Chinese classical forms, employing modal scales and dynamic contrasts. For instance, the melody incorporates Peking Opera's Er Huang and Xipi modal systems, while the piano accompaniment evokes the rhythmic punctuations of traditional percussion ensembles (Xiao, 2011). More than a monumental work, the song Mei Lanfang is a representative work of China's ongoing negotiation between traditional and modern singing. For vocal educators, this study offers a collaborative model for Chinese folk vocal singers to navigate the technical demands of singing—mastering the resonant, speech-like articulation of Peking Opera while cultivating the sustained, vibrato-rich tone of Peking Opera singing. Culturally, it highlights the potential of hybrid genres to sustain traditional aesthetics in an era of globalization, resisting the homogenization of artistic expression. In addition, this article is based on the trend of music culture development and production in the 21st century. It combines the 'authentic' traditional singing method with the 'derivative' operatic singing style to conduct a binary narrative, but rather, the artistic philosophy of the song Mei Lanfang is rooted in the development trend of adaptive innovation. This paper explores how the song Mei Lanfang has become a critical case study in understanding the application and adaptation of Peking Opera techniques in contemporary vocal teaching and performance while inspiring a broader discourse on cultural preservation and innovation.

Although there is an increasing amount of research on Chinese folk vocal music, not many studies have systematically explored how traditional opera techniques were formalized and passed down within this genre. Most existing studies usually concentrate on general stylistic comparisons or the social and political factors driving the development of the genre. As a result, they overlook in-depth analyses of vocal techniques and teaching methods. On the contrary, this article contends that the work of Mei Lanfang represents a well-organized combination of Peking Opera vocal music and folk vocal music. It offers a model for integrating techniques and aesthetics. By conducting a detailed analysis of this piece, this article intends to:

- 1) Identify specific traditional opera techniques embedded in the Chinese Folk vocal song creation, e.g., qiāngtǐ (voice projection), yīnfǎ (pronunciation/ articulation), and yīnyùn (rhyme and ornamentation).
- 2) Assess the reference of the song Mei Lanfang to Peking Opera's performing art: chéngshì formula.
- 3) Judge the implications of the fusion for the preservation and future development of vocal pedagogy knowledge principles.

2. Research Overview

2.1 Traditional Opera Vocal Techniques

Chinese folk vocal music emerged in the early 20th century as a careful fusion of Western classical traditions and local musical forms (Cui & Chen, 2023). The genre emerged during a

period of cultural reflection when composers sought to forge a unique national identity under Western colonial influence. Early pioneers such as Xian Xinghai combined bel canto with folk melodies to create works such as 'Yellow River Cantata', juxtaposing Western harmonic structures with the pentatonic scale (Yang, 2024). However, research on the integration of traditional opera vocal singing and Chinese folk vocal singing is relatively rare, and even less so on how to integrate Peking Opera elements into Chinese folk vocal singing.

Traditional Chinese opera, especially Peking Opera, is renowned for its disciplined vocal techniques that have evolved over hundreds of years to convey narrative, emotion, and cultural symbolism. Central to this system are *qiāngtǐ* (voice projection), *yīnfǎ* (pronunciation/articulation), and *yīnyùn* (Rhyme and Ornamentation) —techniques that require rigorous training and embody the aesthetic principles of *xìqǔ* (traditional Chinese drama, '戏曲' in Mandarin). *Qiāngtǐ* refers to the controlled modulation of the resonance of the voice in order to project it to large theatres without amplification, a technique rooted in diaphragmatic breath control and precise laryngeal positioning. Zhao (2022) discovered *yīnfǎ*, includes the nuances of the lyrics, blending the tone of the language with the melodic expression. Unlike the Western bel canto method, which focuses on vowel purity, the *yīnfǎ* incorporates the tonal contours of Mandarin and regional dialects, requiring singers to navigate complex pitch fluctuations while maintaining emotional authenticity. *Yīnyùn* (rhyme and ornamentation), including dynamic modulations, is a vehicle for emotional intensification. These techniques are not merely decorative but structurally integral to an operatic form, often indicating changes in narrative tension or character psychology. The song of Mei Lanfang innovated this tradition by introducing smooth, improvisational opera singing embellishments, which enhanced the realism of dramatic performance in Chinese folk vocal songs. However, the results of previous academic research and analysis have not yet fully standardized these techniques within a modern teaching framework, leaving a gap in their application in systematic cross-genre folk song vocal skills.

2.2 A Blend of Performing Arts

Chéngshì of Peking Opera refers to opera expression, meaning the standard and format of the stage performance form. It is the essential academic term of opera shaping the stage image. The *chéngshì* of Chinese Peking Opera has the saying of 'four feats and five methods', the so-called four feats, namely *chàng*(singing), *niàn*(speaking), *zuò*(acting), and *dǎ*(fighting), which are the four artistic performance means in opera performance, and also the four basic kung fu (kung fu refers to Chinese kung fu) of opera actors or actresses (Zhu & Wang, 2024). As the saying goes: 'Listening to the opera, in fact, is to see the role in the opera'. There is no singing without the voice of the performer and no dancing without body gesture and movement, which means that the opening of the mouth should have *yīnyùn* (rhyme and ornamentation), and the movement of the body requires aesthetic beauty. The *chéngshì* performance of Peking Opera has very strict regulations, from footsteps and postures to the small movements of the fingers. It seems that movements are what any ordinary human can do, but through the details of expression and posture, they become an element that looks simple and elegant but is difficult to imitate in a short time. For example, the *dǎ*(fighting) in Beijing Opera is no excessive pursuit of realism on the stage, and there are many performers to cooperate with the action. There is also a single actor or actress in the spot somersault scene.

According to Yu et al. (2024), the *chàng*(singing) of Peking Opera is based on the pronunciation of lyric characters, which pays attention to the orderly rhythm. If the rhythm is longer, the *chàng*(singing) will be extended. Peking Opera vocalization is fundamentally lyric-centric, adhering to strict rhythmic precision, wherein the elongation of rhythmic patterns

corresponds proportionally to the extension of vocal phrases. The deliberate prolongation of melodic lines—termed *tuoqiang* (more extended vocalization)—serves as a performative metric, testing the singer's mastery of the genre's vocal aesthetics and musical syntax, as well as their literary and musical erudition. Beyond its characteristic slow tempi, drawn-out phrasing, and resonant open tones, Peking Opera also employs rapid, densely structured passages marked by heightened rhythmic intensity. This duality of 'slow versus fast' and 'sparse versus dense' reflects the genre's dynamic interplay between contemplative lyricism and virtuosic agility, underscoring its sophisticated balance of structural coherence and expressive spontaneity.

While extant scholarship has established the four conventions of Peking Opera—*chàng*(singing), *niàn*(speaking), *zuò*(acting), and *dǎ*(fighting)—this article will explicitly concentrate on the dual performative dimensions of *chàng* and *niàn* to address the scholarly lacuna regarding the aesthetic integration of Peking Opera vocal elements into Chinese national vocal music. Utilizing the art song *Mei Lanfang* (2004) as a paradigmatic case study, this research analysis seeks to redefine the theoretical frameworks governing cross-genre vocal innovation in China's 21st-century musical landscape. Despite its educational potential, the song has yet to be systematically analyzed in academic literature. Existing studies on national vocal music often reduce hybridity to stylistic juxtapositions (e.g., pentatonic melodies with Western harmonies) rather than exploring the technical synthesis of operatic and Chinese folk music classical techniques, especially for *chàng* and *niàn*. Figure presents the mastery of vocal techniques in Peking Opera in the song *Mei Lanfang*.

| Traditional Opera Techniques in the Chinese Folk Vocal Song Creation: Embodiment | A Blend of Performing Arts | Future Development of Hybridity |
|--|--|--|
| <i>Qiāngtǐ</i> as a diaphragmatic function | Repetition of <i>chéngshì</i> (stylized conventions) in folk vocal music of China  | Hybridity: Peking Opera (traditional)  Chinese national vocal music (modern) |
| <i>Yǔfǎ</i> as linguistic-musical articulation | Constructing vocal identity through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Chàng</i> (singing) • <i>Niàn</i> (speaking) | Third Space: Negotiating musical style via the song of <i>Mei Lanfang</i> 's cross-genre vocal synthesis |
| <i>Yǔwǎn</i> as tonal resonance training | | Adaptation: Adapting operatic elements to Chinese folk music vocal trends |

Figure 1: Mastery of Vocal Techniques in Peking Opera in the Song *Mei Lanfang*.

3. Research Design

This research employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate Research Objective: the integration of Peking Opera vocal techniques into Chinese folk vocal music, using the art song *Mei Lanfang* (2004) as a representative example, following the textual analysis of closely examining the lyrics, including word choice, imagery, and rhythm, tempo. The case study approach is well suited to this research because it enables a comprehensive study of complex

phenomena in a real-world context (Alam, 2021; Mishra & Dey, 2022). This methodology prioritizes depth over breadth, which enables a systematic analysis of how traditional operatic elements—such as *qiāngtǐ*, *yīnfǎ*, and *yīnyùn*—are recontextualized within a vocal framework. Moreover, for Research Objectives (b) and (c), contextual research is necessary as it could help to investigate the artist's background, the socio-cultural climate during the song's release, and relevant historical events (Tracy, 2024). Below, the research outlines the rationale for selecting these methodological designs, specifies the data sources, and explicates the analytical approach to explore the song's hybrid aesthetics.

4. Result

4.1 Music Score — Textual Analysis

According to Zhang (2019), Chinese (also referred to as Mandarin and Putonghua) is a language with strict several tone requirements, and different meanings are expressed by distinguishing the four pinyin tones of Tone 1 yīnpíng, Tone 2 yángpíng, Tone 3 shàngshēng, and Tone 4 qūshēng —In semiology explanation, in the pinyin transcription system, tones are marked with diacritics (from T1 to T4 as '—', '/', 'v', ' \ '), which are marked on the vowel nucleus of a syllable. These diacritics resemble the pitch shape of these four tones, i.e., high-level, high-rising, falling-rising, and high-falling. Although there is an International phonetic alphabet for reference, each language has its own special pronunciation tone rules for rise and falling that cannot be replicated when singing (Ye, 2022).

Apart from tones, Chinese characters are composed of two parts: initial consonants and finals (Trísková, 2011) (In Mandarin, initial consonants refer the *shēngmǔ*, finals refer the *yùnmǔ*). Although the arrangement of initial consonants and finals is the same between some Chinese characters, their meanings are not exactly the same because of the four different pinyin tones (as mentioned before). At the same time, in Chinese people's daily conversations, people often express the different emotional changes by changing the four pinyin tones, pitch, emphasis, and urgency of our voices. This is why some foreign scholars sometimes fail to master the pronunciation rules of Chinese when learning Chinese, which causes unclear semantic expression. Similarly, in the singing of Peking Opera, *yīnfǎ* and *yīnyùn* is also extremely important. Singing requires the correct operation of *yīnyùn*, and the rhyme of the finals in the performance is particularly important. This is like casting a net to catch fish. The net is tightened before casting, and the net must be retracted in time after it is cast, so that the fish can be salvaged, otherwise nothing will be gained.

Peking Opera pays great attention to 'Chinese character first, voice second', and puts 'character' and 'tones' on the same level. This definition makes a Chinese character be separated into three parts: the 'head', the 'body', and the 'tail', as a very vivid metaphor. In other words, this requires the performer to have a very high basic skill in pronunciation. If the performer only pronounces the 'head' and confuses the 'body' and the 'tail', it will cause unclear pronunciation and incomprehensible phenomena. Therefore, just as mentioned in the example of 'casting a net to catch fish', when singing the lyrics of Peking Opera songs, singers should pay attention to the pronunciation control of the 'tail' consonant of Chinese characters.

The pinyin of the '水' in the first page (Figure 2) of the song *Mei Lanfang* is 'shui'. The length of time this Chinese character should be sung is one dotted quarter note plus one eighth note, which is a duple meter long. When singing, the opera vocal technique considers that the performer should not immediately return to the *yīnyùn* of 'ui' after pronouncing the initial

consonant 'sh', but should keep the sound of 'u' unchanged after biting the initial consonant and then return to the yīnyùn of 'i', and there is no need to open too much space in the mouth, so that there is a Peking Opera flavor. At the same time, this detail also requires the music student to sing this work, not according to the previous understanding of national folk vocal songs, but to keep this unique Peking Opera style in mind at all times, and we must follow the pronunciation principles of opera. Besides, the pinyin of the '烈' in the second page (Figure 3) is 'lie'. This word has two bars, which is two duple meters long, so after pronouncing the yīnyùn of 'li', keeping the mouth shape and the internal structure of the vocal tract unchanged, then open the mouth slightly to both sides, and then pronounce the yīnyùn of 'e', and drag the tone. Emphasizing the importance of pronouncing this kind of character is crucial. The tongue, especially the root of the tongue, should remain relaxed, the second duple meter should be dragged out.



Figure 2: First Page of the Musical Score of Mei Lanfang.



Figure 3: Second Page of the Musical Score of Mei Lanfang.

As mentioned in Section 2.1 of this article, the flexible control of the qiāngtǐ and singing breath is equally important in both the singing of Peking Opera and the study of Chinese folk vocal songs. The first task for scholars who study music singing and want to sing opera-style songs with qiāngtǐ is to achieve the standard of 'unobstructed qiāngtǐ'. First, opening mouth and taking

a deep breath, and keep yawning or sneezing. This will help expand the size of the front and back of the mouth, stabilize the larynx, and naturally lift the upper palate, so that the different organs that contribute to singing are in an optimistic state. This habit will be formed by the singer through day-to-day practice and constant exploration, and eventually the effect of opening the mouth is the correct position and state.

In the ending of the song Mei Lanfang, the pitch of the character '城' ('cheng' in pinyin) in the sentence '留与江山看成堞' ('remaining with the river and mountains as battlements' in English translation) (Figure 4) is the B flat pitch of the small clef 2 group. It appears as a high note in the whole song, and we need to store more solid breath as a support before singing. Taking a deep breath first, as deep as yawning and smelling the fragrance of flowers. While inhaling, the body should not be tense, but should be relaxed, and then let the voice be sent out of the mouth based on the rich breath to reach a high position of excitement. In addition, the pitch of the fourth character '山' ('shan' in pinyin) is the F sound of the small clef 2 group, which is also not low. Controlling the breath well, unless there will be problems of breath floating, breathing leakage, or even broken voice when singing this sentence.



Figure 4: Last Page of the Musical Score of Mei Lanfang.

4.2 Contextual Research and Genre Analysis

A qualified singing performer should have both timbre and form and spirit. Imagine if a singer stands on the stage like a machine and simply shows his/her voice, few people would define him/her as a good singer. A qualified singing performer should have both timbre and form and expression. Imagine if a singer stands on the stage like a machine and simply shows his voice, few people would define him/her as a good singer. As far as the stage performance art of Peking Opera is concerned, it covers the changes in the development of Peking Opera over hundreds of years and has never lost its important role. Peking Opera singing pays attention to the 'expression' of the performers, that is, both spirit and form, but it is not just a mechanical display of excitement or sadness. Because the theme of 'external appearance is born from the internal emotion', the inner spirit of the character is displayed by the external affectionate characteristics, so we must achieve unity of appearance and inner, so that the detailed expressions and specific body movements are real enough. Such characteristics also exist in Chinese folk vocal performances.

In the song Mei Lanfang, the character '解' ('jie' in pinyin) in the sentence '迢迢求索路自押自解' (Figure 5) has a dragging tone for three bars (six beats). The performer should flexibly

adjust the strength and sense of ups and downs, and pay attention to the sound waves in the score. There are also *chàng* feature in performing art in Peking Opera in the singing of lyrics, *chàng* in *chéngshì* here in this context, representing the requirement for needing to be extended to express more emotions. This is a need for a sense of space. Audiences constantly infuses it with their own knowledge and life experiences to gain a more real aesthetic feeling, making the song less abstract in understanding and easier to empathize. If singer sing the pinyin 'jie' rigidly in the score when singing, the song will lose the charm of Peking Opera genre.



Figure 5: Character '解' in the Musical Score.

Niàn, literally means to polish the pronunciation of the lyrics and the background emotions conveyed by the song during the singing process, so as to match the background and emotions of the song. Through the perfect coordination of 'mouth, tongue, teeth and throat', to produce clear and distinguishable sound is the focus of vocal training (Ye, 2022). Sometimes it may be necessary to adjust the position of different breathing ports according to the length of the lyrics or the emotional expression of the song. In the first half of the song, relatively narrow and delicate pronunciation skills are required to sing. In this process, we need to mention some frequently used technical details again, such as wave, vibrato, long and short appoggiatura and staccato. These marks would be displayed in the score, but sometimes the composer may not mark them one by one on paper. This requires learners to combine the emotional processing of the song and the social background to reasonably play and create in actual practice, so that the song can come alive. Through the perfect coordination of 'mouth, tongue, teeth and throat', to produce clear and distinguishable vowels is the focus of vocal training.

For example, in the second paragraph of the third part of the song, the character '血' ('xüe' in pinyin) (Figure 6) is five bars long, or ten beats, for artistic expression reasons. This requires a smoothing singing process, and it is very demanding for the singer to bite the 'ü' sound in 'xüe'. When dragging the tone, the mouth shape cannot change, and the space in the mouth must be maintained. While trying to figure out the niàn skill of this character, performers should understand that they cannot sing this character too coherently, ensuring the pitch and the rests and waves in it, and there must be a sense of frustration, but the singing voice could be broken and the breath must be continuous. Respiratory ventilation after the first eighth note of the third beat of this character is essential, so that the genre of Peking Opera can be obtained. Many domestic vowel training models based on Bel canto emphasize the transition and connection among the five Italian vowels 'a, e, i, o, u', which often ignores that the connection of 'ü' and

other vowel or consonant are often applied in Chinese and the languages in many other countries in the world and they usually only trains the pronunciation of this sound alone (Ye, 2022).



Figure 6: Character '血'('xue' in pinyin) in the Musical Score.

The *chéngshì* skills of Peking Opera are an important means for Peking Opera performers to shape characters. The use and standardization of *chéngshì* skills not only enhances the communication between Peking Opera performers, but also enhances the audience's cognition and understanding of the program expression connotation, assists Peking Opera performers to convey the characters to the audience, and enables the audience to have a deeper understanding of the characters. *Chéngshì* techniques are a language of Peking Opera performance.

5. Conclusion and Implication

The art song Mei Lanfang (2004), composed by Wu Xiaoping and lyricized by Liu Pengchun, represents a pivotal contribution to the development of Chinese national vocal music. It exemplifies the recontextualization of traditional Peking Opera techniques to address contemporary artistic and educational needs. By merging operatic vocal techniques such as *qiāngǐ* (voice projection), *yīnfǎ* (pronunciation/articulation), and *yīnyùn* (rhyme and ornamentation), along with the *chéngshì* (performance style) of Peking Opera, with the aesthetics of Chinese folk music, the song not only honors Mei Lanfang's legacy but also creates a dynamic "third space" where tradition and modernity engage in creative dialogue. This study highlights that the integration of diverse elements is not a mere amalgamation but a deliberate fusion, providing a model for reinterpreting intangible cultural heritage through innovation rather than static preservation. The article contributes significantly to musicology and cultural studies by positioning hybridity as a generative process that expands expressive possibilities while preserving cultural heritage. This research underscores the importance of hybridity in fostering the living, evolving force of China's operatic traditions in a globalized world.

Despite the challenges faced by traditional Chinese art forms, such as Peking Opera, including a decline in audience and institutional support, the integration of Peking Opera vocal techniques into Chinese national vocal music, exemplified by the song Mei Lanfang, offers profound implications for cultural preservation and artistic innovation. The study of Mei Lanfang reveals how traditional elements, such as voice projection, articulation, and ornamentation, can be merged with Chinese folk singing techniques to revitalize cultural heritage and redefine creativity across genres. This preservation-through-innovation model is in alignment with UNESCO's concept of safeguarding intangible heritage, emphasizing the need for dynamic reinvention rather than static preservation. As seen in the integration of Peking Opera's chéngshì modal system with folk music, this model ensures that Peking Opera remains relevant to new generations. However, this approach requires institutional support, with governments and conservatories prioritizing funding for cross-disciplinary collaborations and hybrid compositions. Without such efforts, traditional art forms risk becoming museum pieces rather than vibrant cultural practices. The song Mei Lanfang exemplifies how hybridity can serve as a creative force, challenging the binary opposition between "authentic" tradition and "derivative" modernity. Instead, hybridity can expand expressive vocabularies while honoring heritage, ensuring the continued relevance of China's operatic traditions in the globalized world.

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