

Chinese opera is a deeply rooted cultural tradition that has evolved over centuries from ancient rituals and folk entertainment to a highly developed form of dramatic art. With numerous regional styles and forms, each representing the unique culture of its area, Chinese opera remains a testament to the diversity and longevity of China's cultural heritage.

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PECULIARITIES OF CHINESE VOCAL TECHNIQUE

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ОСОБЛИВОСТІ КИТАЙСЬКОЇ ВОКАЛЬНОЇ ТЕХНІКИ

Vocal techniques in Chinese music, particularly in Chinese opera and traditional folk singing, are highly distinctive and differ significantly from Western vocal styles. These techniques are deeply rooted in cultural aesthetics and are tied to the unique characteristics of the Chinese language, such as its tonal nature, as well as the storytelling traditions found in various forms of opera and folk performance. One of the key vocal techniques and characteristics of Chinese music is the technique of opera singing.

Chinese opera incorporates various vocal techniques that are used to express emotions, highlight character roles, and advance the narrative. The singing in Chinese opera is highly stylized and emphasizes clarity, projection, and ornamentation.

In Chinese opera, there is frequent use of “falsetto”, especially for “Dan” (female) roles that are traditionally played by male actors in genres like “Peking opera” (京劇, Jīngjù). The performers must skillfully switch between “true voice” (zhēnshēng, 真人聲) and falsetto (jiǎshēng) to achieve a clear, high-pitched tone, which is considered elegant and graceful for female characters.

This technique is used to produce a bright and piercing sound that can cut through the accompaniment of instruments, projecting the voice over a large performance space without the use of amplification.

Similar to Western operatic technique, Chinese opera performers use both “head voice” and “chest voice” to achieve different vocal colors. “Head voice” is typically used for high-pitched, ethereal passages, while “chest voice” gives power and authority, often employed by male characters or in more dramatic moments.

Gliding between pitches, or “glissando”, is an essential technique in Chinese opera singing. Singers frequently slide between notes to create emotional emphasis or transition smoothly between different pitches. This technique is especially important in “Kunqu” (昆曲) and “Peking opera”, where it contributes to the stylized, flowing nature of the music.

Chinese opera vocal lines are often ornamented with various “grace notes” and “turns” that make the melodies more intricate and expressive. These ornaments, such as quick upward or downward slides, add complexity and are a hallmark of operatic performance.

In Chinese opera, great emphasis is placed on “clear enunciation” of the lyrics, as the words and their tones play a crucial role in conveying meaning. This is especially important because Chinese is a tonal language, and a slight change in tone can alter the meaning of a word. Therefore, singers must ensure that their pronunciation is accurate and that the tones of the words are preserved, even while singing.

“Jinsheng” (tight voice) refers to a controlled, tense vocal production often used in emotional or intense scenes, where the singer’s voice may sound more pressed or strained for dramatic effect.

“Fangsongsheng” (relaxed voice) refers to a more open, relaxed vocal production, used in calm, lyrical passages. It contrasts with the more forceful sound of jinsheng, helping to create a dynamic emotional range.

Chinese folk singing emphasizes more natural and earthy vocal production, differing from the highly stylized techniques found in opera. Folk singers often sing in a straightforward, unadorned manner, but with clear projection and emotion.

In many Chinese folk singing traditions, singers use a “straight tone” with little to no vibrato, creating a pure, direct sound. This reflects the simplicity and sincerity of folk music, which often conveys stories of rural life, nature, or love. The lack of vibrato allows for greater clarity and precision in the articulation of words, which is important in a tonal language like Chinese.

A nasal vocal quality is often favored in Chinese folk singing, especially in northern folk music styles. Nasality helps in projecting the voice over long distances, which was practical for singing in open spaces. It also gives the voice a sharp, piercing character that is culturally associated with folk traditions.

Like in Chinese opera, folk singers often use “melisma” — singing multiple notes on a single syllable — to create an ornamented, flowing vocal line. This technique is common in regions like “Yunnan” and “Sichuan”, where folk songs are known for their melodic complexity.

In some regional folk styles, singers use falsetto to achieve a light, airy sound, especially in songs that are meant to evoke pastoral or romantic imagery. This is particularly prominent in “Hakka” folk songs, where male singers may use falsetto to express tender emotions.

Apart from opera and folk music, China also has a rich tradition of “narrative singing” (说唱, shuōchàng), in which stories are told through a combination of speech and song. This genre includes forms like “pingshu” (评书) and “dagu” (大鼓), which are accompanied by drums and other instruments.

In narrative singing, performers switch between “spoken narration” and “melodic singing”. The rhythm of the speech is highly controlled, often timed with percussion instruments to create a rhythmic flow that blurs the line between speech and song.

This technique allows for greater flexibility in storytelling, as performers can emphasize certain parts of the narrative through melodic embellishments.

In certain forms of narrative singing, the voice itself becomes a percussive instrument, with rapid changes in tempo, pitch, and dynamics. The singer may emphasize specific syllables in a sharp, percussive manner, mirroring the accompanying drumbeats.

Given China’s vast size and cultural diversity, vocal techniques in traditional music vary significantly across different regions:

- “Cantonese opera” (粤剧, Yuèjù) features a more lyrical and soft vocal style, with emphasis on falsetto and fluid transitions between notes;
- “Huangmei opera” (黄梅戏), from Anhui and Hubei, is known for its sweet, melodic lines that resemble folk songs more than the declamatory style of Peking opera;

- “Sichuan opera” (川劇, Chuānjù) includes rapid changes in pitch and tone, often to enhance its famous “face-changing” performances, creating an exaggerated and highly expressive vocal style.

Chinese opera singers undergo rigorous training to develop the strength, control, and precision required for operatic singing. This training includes:

- “breath control”: Mastery of breath is crucial in Chinese opera, as singers must sustain long, drawn-out phrases while maintaining clarity and projection;
- “projection”: Since traditional Chinese opera performances were often held in large outdoor spaces without amplification, singers are trained to project their voices with great force and clarity;
- “character portrayal”: Singing is closely tied to the portrayal of specific characters, so the voice must reflect the personality and emotional state of the role being played.

The vocal techniques of China are diverse, shaped by the various forms of traditional music and regional styles. Whether in the highly stylized world of Chinese opera or the more natural expressions of folk singing, Chinese vocal techniques emphasize clarity, precision, and emotional expression. From the piercing falsetto of Peking opera to the nasal, straight-toned delivery of folk songs, these techniques reflect Chinese music’s deep cultural traditions and aesthetic values.

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Its diverse cultural history and regional distinctions shape China’s rich vocal traditions, giving rise to various “vocal schools” across its vast territory. These schools, particularly within Chinese opera and folk music, reflect unique styles, techniques, and approaches to vocal performance.

We present a detailed overview of famous vocal schools in China that specialize in opera and traditional singing.

“Peking Opera (京劇, Jīngjù) Vocal School”.

“Peking Opera” is the most famous form of Chinese opera, and its vocal schools are divided according to different role types. Each role has a distinct singing style and vocal technique, and prominent performers have often founded their own schools or styles (流派, liúpài). Some of the main vocal schools in Peking Opera are:

1. “Mei School” (梅派, Méipài) was founded by Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳), one of the most famous Chinese opera performers. He created this school based on his performances of “Dan” (female characters). Mei’s style is characterized by “elegance, grace, and subtlety” in both singing and movement. His voice was clear and melodious, often using “falsetto” to depict young female characters. The “Mei School” focuses on “lyricism” and “emotional depth”, using soft and controlled vocal tones that convey inner feelings with delicacy.

2. “Cheng School” (程派, Chéngpài) was founded by Cheng Yanqiu (程硯秋). He was another master of the “Dan” role. His school is known for its “tragic intensity” and a more “melancholic” tone compared to the “Mei School”. Cheng’s vocal style features slower tempos, “heavy vibrato”, and “deep emotion”, often focusing on roles that portray suffering