Finding the Voice of Chinese Choral Music:

Exploring Integration with Western Choral Traditions

by

Yi Jin

Schulich School of Music

McGill University

December 2024

A paper submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the degree of D.Mus. Performance Studies

Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper explores the integration of Chinese musical elements into Western choral traditions, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges involved. It provides an overview of the historical evolution of Chinese choral music, tracing its roots in Western influences and examining how Chinese composers have adapted and integrated their cultural heritage into choral compositions. Using a carefully curated concert program as a case study, the paper analyzes tonal and modal structures, vocal techniques, and the interpretation of Mandarin text to illustrate the interaction between these two traditions.

Key findings suggest that while Chinese elements—such as pentatonic scales, folk song ornamentations, and traditional vocal styles—can be effectively integrated into Western choral frameworks, the resulting compositions often remain fundamentally rooted in Western structures. This highlights the need for deeper cultural introspection and innovative approaches to establish a uniquely Chinese choral identity. The paper emphasizes the importance of composers engaging more thoroughly with China's diverse folk music traditions and of performers interpreting works with attention to cultural nuance.

By reflecting on the successes and limitations of the concert, this paper underscores the potential for cross-cultural dialogue through music while advocating for a balanced approach to integration. It concludes by considering the role of emerging generations of Chinese choral musicians, whose global exposure may pave the way for a distinct and authentic Chinese choral tradition to emerge.

version française

Ce document explore l'intégration des éléments musicaux chinois dans les traditions chorales occidentales, en mettant en lumière les opportunités et les défis qu'elle implique. Il présente un aperçu de l'évolution historique de la musique chorale chinoise, en retraçant ses racines dans les influences occidentales et en examinant comment les compositeurs chinois ont adapté et intégré leur patrimoine culturel dans des compositions chorales. S'appuyant sur un programme de concert soigneusement conçu comme étude de cas, l'article analyse les structures tonales et modales, les techniques vocales et l'interprétation du texte en mandarin pour illustrer l'interaction entre ces deux traditions.

Les résultats principaux montrent que, bien que les éléments chinois — tels que les gammes pentatoniques, les ornements de chansons folkloriques et les styles vocaux traditionnels — puissent être efficacement intégrés dans les cadres choraux occidentaux, les compositions résultantes demeurent souvent fondamentalement ancrées dans des structures occidentales. Cela souligne la nécessité d'une introspection culturelle plus approfondie et d'approches innovantes pour établir une identité chorale chinoise authentique. L'article met en avant l'importance pour les compositeurs d'explorer plus en profondeur les riches traditions musicales folkloriques chinoises et pour les interprètes de considérer les œuvres avec une attention particulière aux nuances culturelles.

En réfléchissant aux réussites et aux limites du concert, cet article souligne le potentiel du dialogue interculturel par la musique tout en plaidant pour une approche équilibrée de l'intégration. Il conclut en examinant le rôle des nouvelles générations de musiciens choraux chinois, dont l'exposition mondiale pourrait ouvrir la voie à l'émergence d'une tradition chorale chinoise distincte et authentique.

List of Figures

Figure

List of Tables

Table

Introduction

Choral music, traditionally characterized in the West by harmonic or polyphonic singing in SATB format,[1] is not a common practice in Chinese music. As a recognizable and independent genre, choral music remains a relatively new phenomenon in China. Despite over a century of development, the identity of Chinese choral music remains unclear; indeed, finding a unique Chinese choral sound remains a significant challenge.[2] Further, the adoption of choral music in China has been heavily influenced by the West since its inception.[3] Thus, at its outset, the identity of Chinese choral music did not have its origin in its own native culture. Combined with China's vast linguistic and cultural diversity and its political history of opposition to Western cultural artifacts and norms, Chinese choral music has faced significant challenges in establishing a distinct identity—a struggle that will likely persist. However, as I will attempt to demonstrate here, I believe that a unique Chinese choral tradition sprung from and integrated with Western choral influences is possible.

A brief history of the development of Chinese choral music will help clarify this discussion. The earliest form of Chinese choral music emerged during the *School Songs* period between 1902 and 1918.[4] During this time, musicians such as Shen Xingong (1870-1947) and Li

---

[1] Smith, James G., Thomas Brawley, and N. Lee Orr. "Choral music." *Grove Music Online.* 6 Feb. 2012; Accessed 26 Nov. 2024. https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002218820.

[2] Yu, Lei Ray. 2017. *Finding a Voice – A Closer Look at Chinese Choral Music Development in the Early Twentieth Century through Chao Yuan-Ren, Huang Zi, and Xian Xing-Hai.*1.DMA diss. Boston University College of Fine Arts. https://hdl.handle.net/2144/23357.

[3] Ma Go-Shun. 1985. "Choral Music in the People's Republic of China Society." *The Choral Journal* 25 (9): 31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23546836. Around the 1920s, mission churches and mission schools were established in China, bringing Western choral music to the country. Additionally, some of the earliest Chinese choral compositions were created by Mr. Huangzi and Mr. Zhao Yuanren. Mr. Huangzi, the first president of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, was educated at Oberlin College, while Mr. Zhao Yuanren, primarily a linguist, was a professor at Yale University.

[4] Chen, Lang. 2024. "民族建构与音乐转型：学堂乐歌的发明及其内在张力" (*Minzu Jiangou yu Yinyue Zhuanxing: Xuetang Yuege de Faming Jiqi Neizai Zhangli*; Nation-Building and Music Transformation: The Invention and Internal Tensions of School Songs). *Society* 3: 148.

Shutong (1880-1942), who had studied music abroad, returned to China. They began adapting Western choral works, setting them to Chinese text. It was during this period that China's first original choral work, *Spring Excursion*, was composed by Li Shutong.[5]

During the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese composers began experimenting, combining lyrical Chinese elements with Western compositional techniques more deeply. Zhao Yuanren's *Hai Yun* (1927) is a notable example. The text derived from the Chinese poem of the same title, written by modern poet Xu Zhimo (1897-1931). In this composition, Zhao "employs a cross-rhythm between the Chinese language accents against a straightforward 3/4 meter in the piano to create the illusion of the rocking waves." [6] Furthermore, he set the poem to a recognizable Western choral format, namely for SATB choir and soprano solo, which, at the time, was likely unprecedented in Chinese musical works.

The outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s sparked a nationwide movement of patriotic choral singing, resulting in the creation of numerous choral works on wartime themes.[7] These compositions often adapted folk songs or popular secular tunes and were predominantly arranged in two-parts for practical reasons.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, patriotic themes and songs celebrating national development became the primary focus of choral composition. Further, the early 1950s marked an essential period for adapting folk songs into choral works.[8]

---

[5] Zhong, Yujie. 2024. "Li Shutong's Contribution to Modern Music Education in China." *Journal of Theory and Practice of Humanities Science* 1 (4).97. https://www.woodyinternational.com/.

[6] Yu, Lei Ray. 2017. *Finding a Voice – A Closer Look at Chinese Choral Music Development in the Early Twentieth Century through Chao Yuan-Ren, Huang Zi, and Xian Xing-Hai.* DMA diss.59, Boston University College of Fine Arts. https://hdl.handle.net/2144/23357.

[7] Zhang, Liang. 2013. "五十年代前合唱艺术在中国的发展" (*Wushinianqian Hechang Yishu Zai Zhongguo de Fazhan*; The Development of Choral Art in China before the 1950s). *Youth Times*: 47.

[8] Xing, Xiaomeng and Xu Zuguang. 2015. "中国合唱文化的发展与嬗变 [The Development and Evolution of Chinese Choral Culture]". *Journal of Northeast Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 276 (4):175. https://doi.org/10.16164/j.cnki.22-1062.2015.04.032.

The rise of Chinese choral music was abruptly halted during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which witnessed the destruction of many of the most notable choral works developed in the previous decades.[9] Moreover, the further development of choral music was also halted. Staff notation, which had been introduced to China from the West, was forbidden during this period. In its place, a numbered musical notation was introduced. Thus, advancements in choral music in China were actively suppressed, the progress made in exploring choral music prior to this period lost due to political upheaval.

In 1978, the Reform and Opening-Up period in China brought with it a resurgence of choral music. The reinstatement of the college entrance examination system allowed music conservatories to resume admissions, reintroducing staff notation into music education. Furthermore, the liberation of thought and the relaxation of cultural policies provided a more open environment for artistic expression, enabling music creation to draw from increasingly diverse sources.[10]

Chinese composers were now freer to develop choral music, with most choosing to move away from the predominantly political themes of the past. Instead, they embraced themes of natural landscapes, local customs and traditions, and ancient Chinese poetry which has since become a significant source for the choral texts in Chinese choral music.[11] During the 1990s, Inner Mongolian (one of China's autonomous regions) choral music gained attention with

---

[9] Ljunggren, Christian. 2018. *The Choral World: A Chronological, Historical, and Geographical Overview*.Translated by Wang Miao and Zhang Zhihui. Edited by Yu Danhong. Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press 195.

[10] Wan, Yu. 2009. "建国以来中国合唱艺术发展述评" [Review of the Development of Chinese Choral Art Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China]. *The New Voice of Yue-Fu (The Academic Periodical of Shenyang Conservatory of Music)* 4: 177.

[11] Wang, Yuhe. 1991. "中国合唱音乐发展概述（下）" (*Zhongguo Hechang Yinyue Fazhan Gaishu (Xia)*; [An Overview of the Development of Chinese Choral Music], Part 2). *Music Learning and Research* 2: 22.

composers like Se Enkhbayar (b.1956), who blended traditional Mongolian rhythms with Western choral compositional techniques. In the 21st Century, composers like Chen Yi (b.1953), Cui Wei (b.1981), Pan Xingzimin (b.1986), and Zhang Shichao (b.1990) have become renowned for their integration of Chinese elements—such as contemporary Chinese poetry, pentatonic scales, Chinese operas, Chinese folk song singing styles—into Western choral frameworks. Their works will be further discussed in subsequent sections of this paper.

Clearly, Chinese choral music has developed over the past hundred years. However, due in large part to political setbacks, a distinct Chinese choral tradition that is internationally recognized as self-contained can be considered to still be in its formative stages. Only through a critical mass of performance practice, repertoire, and experimentation to find an identifiable sound and compositional style will we know whether a distinct and globally recognizable Chinese choral tradition can be achieved. Responding to this challenge, I built a concert program to explore the parameters of Chinese choral music. The following question guided the initial planning of this performance research project: how can Chinese elements integrate into Western choral traditions? However, the research objective evolved to also consider how the Chinese choral tradition, which is heavily influenced by Western choral practices, can find its own unique identity. To address these questions, I designed a concert guided by the following criteria:

1. Firstly, the repertoire was chosen to represent different periods in the development of Chinese choral music. These periods include the early 20th-century *School Songs* works such as *Spring Excursion*, mid-20th-century works like *The Fragrance of The Night*, and contemporary compositions such as *Spring Dreams* (1997), *Gorges* (2008), *Distance Can't Keep Us Apart* (2012), *Moon in the Mountains* (2021), and *Path* (2021). These

selections ensure the program reflects the evolution of Chinese choral music across a broad historical spectrum. A full list of the seventeen pieces can be found in Appendix 1.

2. Secondly, the selected Chinese composers represented diverse backgrounds and age groups to reflect Chinese musical and cultural diversity, and to enhance the program's variety. For instance, Li Shutong (1880–1942) and Li Jinguang (1907–1993), composers of *Spring Excursion* and *The Fragrance of the Night*, respectively, represent early Chinese choral and pop composition. Chen Yi, the composer of *Spring Dreams* and *Distance Can't Keep Us Apart*, is a Chinese-born American composer in her 70s. Cui Wei, the composer of *Gorges*, is a Chinese-born composer currently based in Montréal and is in her 40s. Pan Xingzimin, the composer of *Path*, is a composer in his 30s who studied in the United States and now resides in China. Similarly, Zhang Shichao, the composer of *Moon in the Mountains*, is in his 30s, but has never studied abroad, and currently resides in China. These differences among the composers highlight their individuality in terms of age, geographic and cultural backgrounds, musical education, compositional styles, and gender perspectives. Such diversity allows Western choristers to engage with and perform these distinctive Chinese works, offering them the chance to explore and appreciate the stylistic contrasts between these pieces.
3. Lastly, incorporating various Chinese musical elements was a key consideration in this program. These elements include pentatonic scales and harmonies, traditional Chinese folk song and opera singing styles, distinctive vocal techniques, and texts in Mandarin. Since these musical and lyrical features differ significantly from Western choral traditions, they offered Western choristers a valuable opportunity to engage with and

better understand Chinese musical culture. This integration not only enriched their artistic perspective but also added greater breadth and depth to the concert's research focus. Overall, this concert program not only assembled works from various Chinese periods and composers with diverse musical and cultural backgrounds, but also served as a practical framework for exploring how Chinese elements can be integrated into Western choral traditions. The subsequent sections of this paper will examine the integration of these elements through three key aspects: tonality and modality, vocal technique, and the interpretation of Mandarin text. In the concluding section, I will reflect on the feasibility of this integration, while also addressing its potential limitations.

Chapter One: Modality and Tonality

Modality: Chinese pentatonic scales and Western modes

To understand how Western compositional elements, such as modality and tonality, have influenced Chinese composers' approach to choral compositions, I have selected several examples from the concert to illustrate how Chinese compositional techniques either align with or diverge from the Western tonal system. Through analyzing these examples, I aim to explore how Chinese choral compositions can incorporate Western choral elements through the framework of tonal theory.

Chen Yi's *The Flowing Stream*, part of her choral arrangement collection *A Set of Chinese Folk Songs*, seamlessly blends Chinese musical elements with Western compositional techniques, resulting in a unique work. In her treatment of melody and tonality, Chen Yi retains the original Chinese Yunnan folk tune *The Flowing Stream*, which is written in *C Yu* Mode — one of the Chinese pentatonic modes. *C Yu* Mode is similar to a C Aeolian church mode or C natural minor scale, but without the VI (Fa) and II (Ti) scale degrees. Chen Yi combines the

Chinese Pentatonic C *Yu* Mode with the Western tonal system, merging it with C Aeolian church mode (or C natural minor tonality). In doing so, she seamlessly blends Chinese pentatonic modes with Western tonal systems, creating a sound that maintains the distinct aesthetic of Chinese music while integrating it with Western compositional techniques.

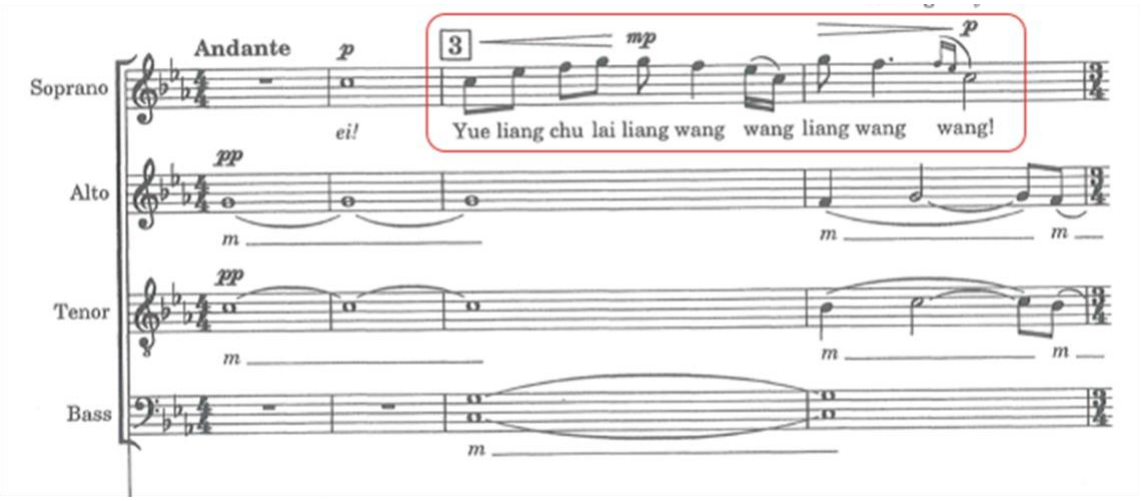

Figure 1: Chen Yi, "The Flowing Stream", mm.1-4, from *A Set of Chinese Folk Songs*, *Volume 1*, (Theodore Presser Company, 1994).

Pentatonic Mode	Tonic Note	Western Mode Equivalent	Omitted Notes from the Diatonic Scales
Gong Mode	(Do)	Ionian Mode or Natural Major Scale	Fa (IV) and Ti (VII)
Shang Mode	(Re)	Dorian Mode	Fa (III) and Ti (VI)
Jue Mode	(Mi)	Phrygian Mode	Fa (II) and Ti (V)
Zhi Mode	(Sol)	Mixolydian Mode	Fa (VII) and Ti (III)
Yu Mode	(La)	Aeolian Mode or Natural Minor Scale	Fa (VI) and Ti (II)

Table 1: Comparison of Chinese Pentatonic Scale and Western Modes.

Another example of the merging of Chinese pentatonic modes with western tonal system is found in *Moon in the Mountains*. Composer Zhang Shichao (b. 1986) merges the Chinese *A Gong* Mode with an A major scale but omits D natural (Fa) and G sharp (Ti), creating a Chinese musical aesthetic within a Western compositional framework.

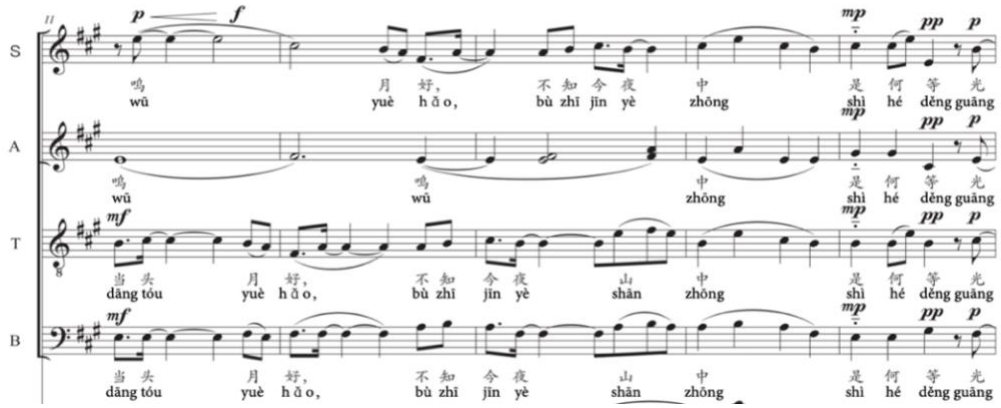

Figure 2: Zhang Shichao, *Moon in the Mountains*, mm.11-15, (Temperament Music, 2021).

Tonality: the use of quartal/quintal harmony in Chinese music

Harmonically, Chinese music is primarily linear and does not align with the Western concept of harmony. However, in Chinese choral works, the incorporation of harmonic material often reflects an adaptation of Western compositional techniques. In the traditional Western harmonic system, chord quality is used to guide harmonic progression, employing elements such as chord function and color to shape the music's direction and structure.

In choral works that utilize the Chinese pentatonic scale, the melody lines typically omit the notes "Fa" and "Ti." Correspondingly, the harmony often employs pentatonic harmonies, predominantly quartal and quintal harmonies, to generate momentum and drive the music forward. Quintal harmony is constructed by stacking perfect fifths—for instance, the chord F–C–G, where F to C and C to G are both perfect fifths. Similarly, quartal harmony is formed by stacking perfect fourths. When combined with distinct rhythmic patterns, these stacked intervals create vivid textures and effective text painting, enhancing the expressive quality of choral works. This approach evokes familiar soundscapes while enriching the choral texture with the unique interplay of traditional pentatonic elements and Western harmonic techniques.

Consider this example in measures 5 to 7 of Enkhbayar's (*b.* 1956) *Praise of the Eight Chestnut Horses*:

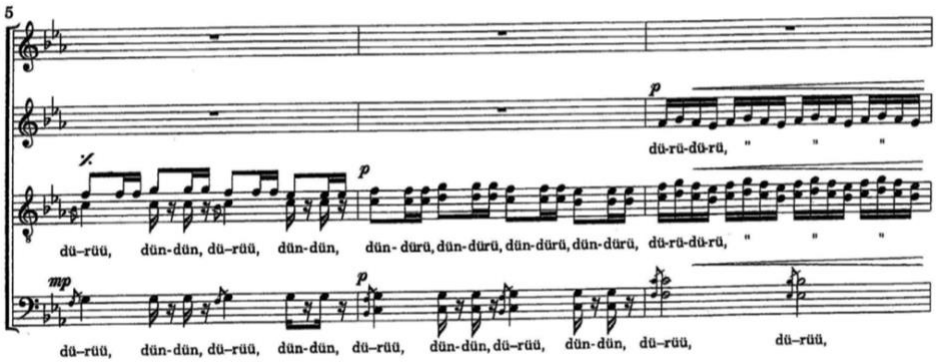

Figure 3: Se Enkhbayar, *Praise of The Eight Chestnut Horses*, mm.5-7 (Cleveland: Earthsongs, 1998).

The passage vividly portrays the sound of approaching horses. Instead of relying on traditional Western functional harmony, the text "dün-dürü, dün-dürü" mimics the rhythmic cadence of galloping hooves. Quintal and quartal harmonies in rapid rhythms propel the music forward. In measures 5 and 6, sparse pentatonic harmonies in the bass, built on fourths and fifths in a lower register, evoke the distant approach of horses. The strategic use of rests amplifies this effect, creating a sense of spatial depth and anticipation. In measure 7, the texture becomes denser as the altos join, while the basses shift to a higher register. The tenor line then introduces a faster rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes, and a crescendo heightens the momentum. Together, these elements conjure a vivid auditory image of galloping horses.

This innovative musical depiction exemplifies the composer's distinctive approach to harmony, drawing expressive power from pentatonic sonorities. By skillfully distributing quintal and quartal harmonies across various registers, dynamically varying their textures, and enriching them with rhythmic and dynamic intricacies, the composer achieves a compelling fusion of Chinese musical traditions with Western compositional techniques to bring the scene to life.

A similar approach to pentatonic harmony can also be found in *Gorges,* by Cui Wei. In this piece, Cui also propels the music forward through use of pentatonic sonorities. To build tension and momentum, she enriches the pentatonic framework with strategic placement of tritones.

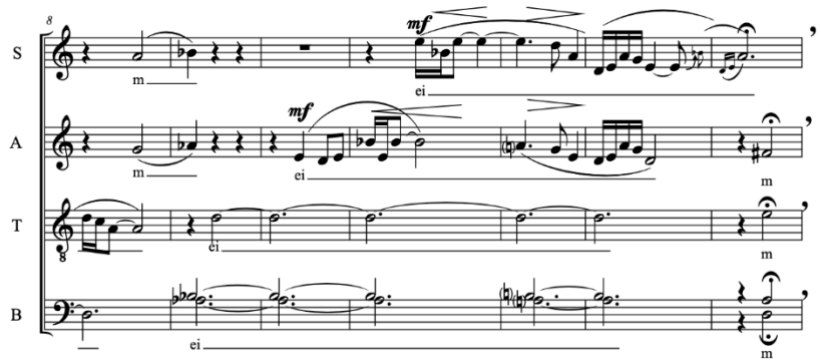

Figure 4: Cui Wei, *Gorges*, mm.8-13, (self-published, 2008).

Chinese pentatonic modes also feature altered tones. Taking C Gong mode as an example (referencing Table 1), its pentatonic scale consists of C-D-E-G-A, which corresponds to a C major scale without Fa (IV) and Ti (VII). In the Chinese modal system, four common altered tones are frequently used. Using C Gong mode as an example again, these altered tones include F (qingjue), F sharp (bianzhi), B natural (biangong), and B flat (run).

In *Gorges*, Cui Wei incorporates the altered tone B-flat (run) and F sharp (bianzhi), as well as B natural (biangong). In Chinese music, a scale consisting of C-D-E-F-sharp-G-A-B is called C *Ya Yue* (雅乐) mode (with the additional F sharp and B natural), while C-D-E-F-G-A-B-flat is referred to as C *Yan Yue* (燕乐) mode (with additional F and B-flat). Cui Wei masterfully merges these two modes, creating a tritone between E and B-flat. Regarding F sharp, rather than using it to build the C- F-sharp tritone within a Chinese musical context, Cui employs F sharp as the third in a D major triad with an added ninth (E). In so doing, Cui infuses the Chinese C *Ya Yue* (雅乐) mode with Western tonal theory. Additionally, the A-flat is a characteristic tone from the Western C harmonic major scale which the composer uses to introduce another tritone, D -

A-flat, further contributing to the integration of Chinese compositional elements with Western tonal theory. From a musical imagery perspective, this use of tritone portrays the perilous and majestic scenery of the Three Gorges, with its turbulent rapids, dangerous shoals, and steep cliffs.

Similarly, Chen Yi's a cappella choral work *Distance Can't Keep Us Apart* represents another excellent example of quintal harmony, as shown below:

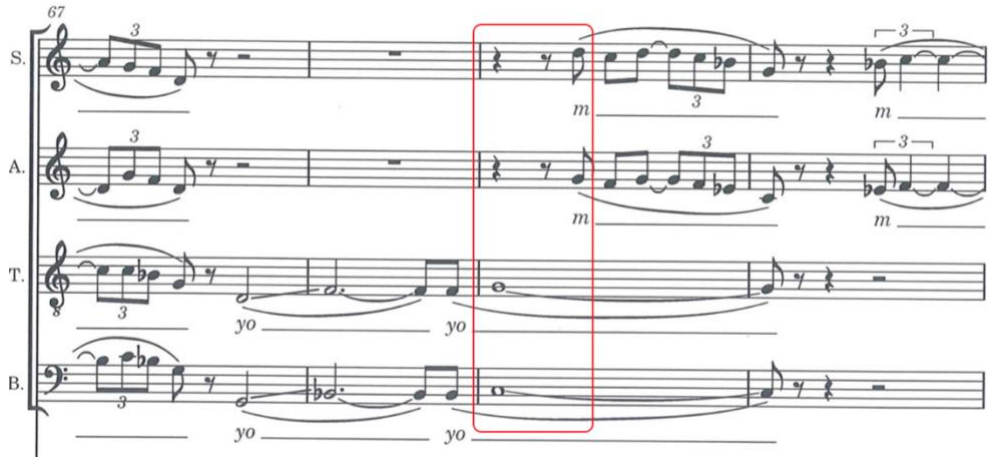

Figure 5: Chen Yi, *Distance Can't Keep Us Apart,* mm.67-70 (Theodore Presser Company, 2012).

These examples clearly illustrate the integration of Chinese pentatonic scales with Western tonal systems. For instance, the musical example of The *Flowing Stream* (Figure 1) demonstrates how the Chinese *C Yu* mode is combined with the Western C natural minor scale and Aeolian mode. Similarly, *Moon in the Mountains* (Figure 2) highlights the fusion of the Chinese *A Gong* mode with the Western A major scale or A Ionian mode.

From a tonal and harmonic perspective, Chinese music frequently employs quartal and quintal harmonies to propel the music forward, as shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5. In contrast, Western choral compositions often rely on functional harmony to drive musical progression. An example of this is *Ancient Prairie* by Latvian composer Ēriks Ešenvalds, which also forms part of this concert research project. These contrasting approaches underscore the unique ways in

which Chinese and Western musical traditions can complement and enrich one another within a single work.

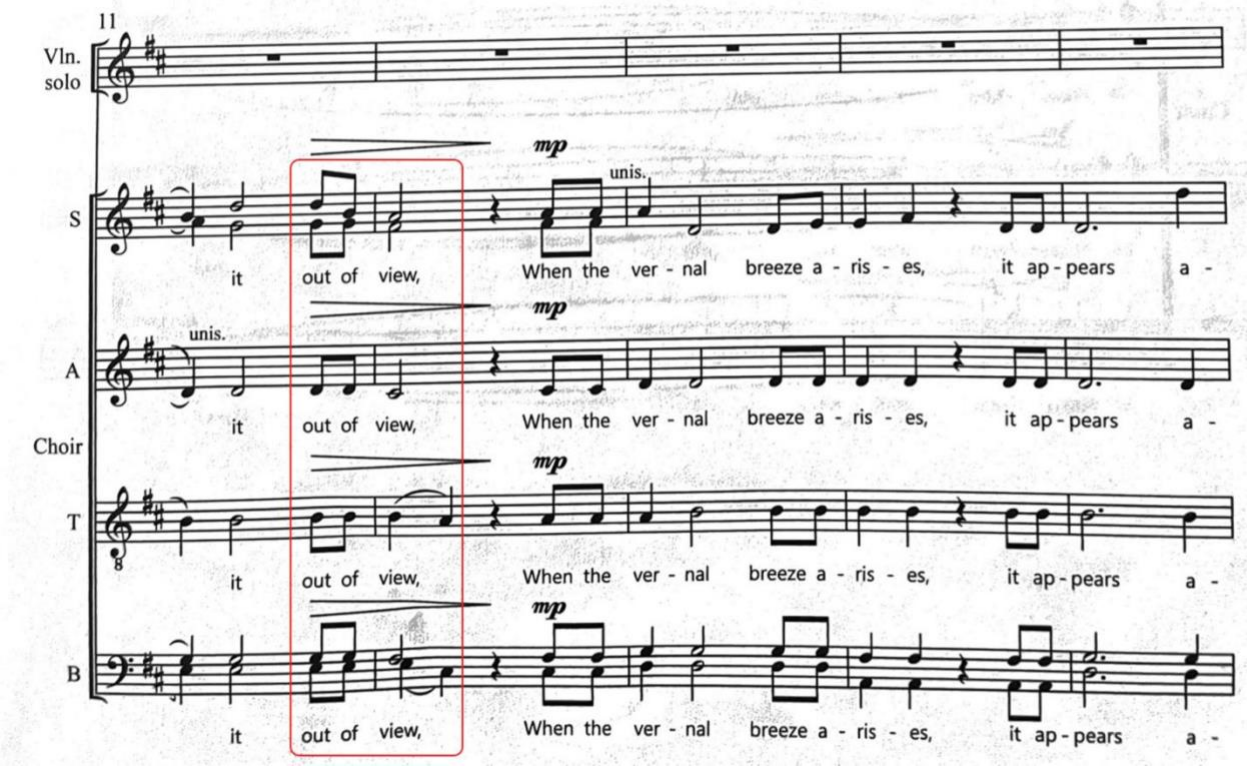

Figure 6: Ēriks Ešenvalds, *Ancient Prairie*, mm.11-15, (Musica Baltica, 2018).

On the text “out of”, the chord is an E minor seventh chord, which functions as the ii7 chord in the key of D major. Moving to the text “view”, the tenor’s first B acts as a suspension, functioning as a non-chord tone. While the bass’s first E could theoretically be interpreted as the seventh tone of an F minor seventh chord, the broader harmonic context suggests that this E serves as a suspension carried over from measure 11. Consequently, the first chord in measure 12 resolves as an F minor triad, functioning as a mediant (iii chord) within the key.

From a harmonic perspective, the ii chord plays a subdominant function, while the iii chord plays a dominant function. Though the iii chord is not a typical dominant chord, this subdominant-to-dominant progression creates a half-cadence impression. Furthermore, the use of the mediant chord in its second inversion introduces an inherent instability, as second-inversion

chords lack the grounding quality of root or first-inversion chords. This instability, paired with the presence of non-chord tones, contributes to a "floating" effect that reinforces the half-cadence and enhances the prairie-like imagery evoked by the piece's title.

The examples above demonstrate an intentional integration of Chinese and Western musical languages, the sum of which can be understood as the evolution of a new musical ecosystem. The pentatonic scale was not simply "transplanted" into a Western framework but co-evolved with it. When the pentatonic scale (or its variations with altered tones) —along with quartal or quintal harmonies—are placed within the framework of the Western tonal system, it generates a sound that is distinctively Chinese. Simultaneously, this fusion creates an auditory grey zone where listeners experience the strengths of both musical languages while finding it challenging to categorize them clearly. This tension and ambiguity may, paradoxically, enhance emotional resonance, pushing the boundaries of musical expression for both Western and Chinese choral traditions. Through such compositions, the relationship between Chinese and Western choral traditions can also be compared to two plant species coexisting in the same soil—each maintaining its unique characteristics while influencing one another to create a new ecological balance. However, whether this coexistence is parasitic, where Chinese music depends heavily on Western compositional structures, or symbiotic, where both traditions gain from the interaction, remains a topic for future research.

To better understand how Chinese elements and Western choral traditions can be integrated, the following discussion will focus on the voice—its adaptability and ability to mimic—to explore the differences between Chinese and Western choral singing. Further, I will highlight important musical and cultural contexts in which Chinese singing occurs to illustrate distinctions between Chinese and Western vocal techniques and styles.

Chapter Two: Vocal Elements

In the previous section, I discussed how Chinese elements have been integrated into Western choral traditions from a tonal perspective, focusing on compositional aspects. In this section, I will explore the integration of vocal elements, focusing on how Chinese *Tuo Qiang* singing style differs from or aligns with Western melismatic singing, as well as the use of nonsense syllables in both Chinese and Western choral contexts. Additionally, I consider vocal techniques that Western singers can adopt to approach Chinese choral music in a more authentic and stylistically informed fashion, highlighting practical methods to bridge the differences between these traditions.

Tuo Qiang (拖腔)

Originating from traditional Chinese opera and folk songs, *Tuo qiang* involves the deliberate extension of specific syllables or words at the ends of phrases or within phrases by adding multiple notes to a single syllable or word. From a vocal ornamentation perspective, *Tuo qiang* is comparable to Western melismatic singing, where a single syllable is set to multiple notes. Another important characteristic of *Tuo qiang* is its role in enhancing emotional and musical expression,[12] particularly in conveying nuanced feelings of joy or sorrow within the framework of Chinese musical aesthetics.

In the work *Spring Dreams*, Chen Yi employs the *Tuo qiang* technique at rehearsal F, where the sopranos perform a melismatic passage on the syllable “Chun” (春, meaning spring)：

[12] Ludden, Yawen. 2013. *China’s Musical Revolution: From Beijing Opera to Yangbanxi.* 264. PHD thesis, University of Kentucky.

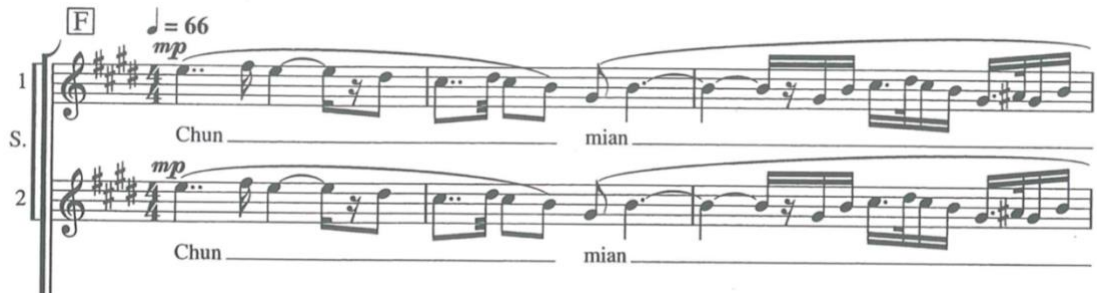

Figure 7: Chen Yi, *Spring Dreams*, Rehearsal F, (Theodore Presser Company, 1997).

When singing "Chun" with *Tuo qiang*, singers should maintain the melisma on the central vowel – the schwa sound, as its IPA is /tʃwən/. Though schwa is typically unstressed, in this context, the schwa should be accented, and the accents should be adjusted according to the *Tuo qiang* style. In this passage, Chen Yi deliberately aligns the stressed notes of the *Tuo qiang* melody with strong beats. For example, in the first measure of rehearsal F, the stresses fall on the E naturals on beats one and three; in the next measure, the accents are placed on the initial C-sharp and the final B natural (syncopation). This approach to stress placement corresponds with the standard accent patterns of 4/4 time in Western music, creating a bridge that enables Western choristers to sing with Chinese vocal techniques more effectively and idiomatically.

Further, this passage also emulates the vocal style of *Dan* (旦) in *Peking opera*.[13] *Dan* roles portray female characters and are generally characterized by delicate sounds and graceful ornamentations.[14] Noting the connection to *Dan* is essential here, as neglecting it could result in an overly rigid articulation, which would be inconsistent with the original melody's serene, nocturnal quality.

[13] Zhang, Qi. 2014. "从《春晓》看本土合唱创作的现代性" [On the Modernity of Local Choral Composition Through *Spring Dreams*]. *Journal of Shaoxing University* 34 (3): 119. https://doi.org/10.16169/j.issn.1008-293x.s.2014.03.012.
[14] Gudnason, Jessica Tan, and Li Gong. 2001. *Chinese Opera.* Abbeville Press Publishers, 12.

As noted, a key function of *Tuo qiang* lies in its ability to enhance emotional expression. In contrast, melisma, from a historical performance perspective—especially during the Baroque period—sometimes served as a showcase for vocal skills, occasionally even diverging from the content of the opera itself. Conversely, in Chinese music, the use of *Tuo qiang* is always intended to emphasize a particular emotion or atmosphere; it is not performative. In this passage, "Chun" symbolizes the joy of spring's arrival. This distinction highlights one of the key differences between the two techniques.

Padding Syllables（衬词）

Padding syllables (衬词) represent another extensively employed vocal ornamentation technique within the Chinese musical tradition, predominantly found in folk songs and operas. *Padding syllables* consist of onomatopoeic elements that serve both melodic and expressive functions. From the perspective of integration between Western and Chinese vocal traditions, *padding syllables* share similarities with Western vocalise and jazz scat singing (such as "doo-be-doo"). However, they differ in that Chinese *padding syllables*, though non-lexical, often convey specific contextual meanings. Consider the following two examples.

Example 1

Gorges by Cui Wei features the rhythmic chant "hei zuo hei zuo" – a *padding syllables* originating from the Three Gorges region. This chanting was traditionally used by boatmen as they pulled vessels upstream against fierce currents, helping synchronize their movements to access their collective strength. This chant depicted in the score and captures the rhythm and intensity of the boatmen's labor.

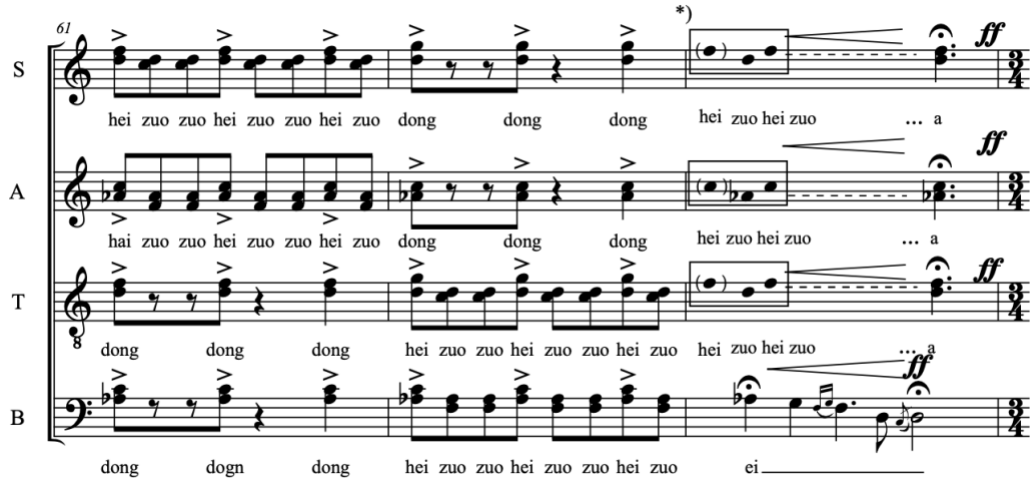

Figure 8: Cui Wei, *Gorges*, mm.61-63 (self-published, 2008).

Inspired by the geography and culture of China's Three Gorges region along the Yangtze River, the piece reflects an area known for its turbulent waters and steep terrain, which posed major transportation challenges in ancient times. In the early 20th century, before land routes were developed, transportation via water was the only way to traverse the Three Gorges. Here, *padding syllables* serve both a functional and ritualistic role, imbuing the music with rhythmic intensity and emotional tension. This repetition vividly portrays the boatmen's daily lives and spiritual resilience having to navigate the water of the Three Gorges.

In the passage shown above, emphasizing the accents is crucial. Each "hei" serves as a marked accent. To reinforce its rhythmic structure and overall sonic effect, the diphthong *ei* should be simplified: omit the "i" sound and use a closed [e]. Additionally, increasing nasal resonance by allowing more airflow through the nasal cavity will help create a more accented sound and enhance the atmospheric quality. This adjustment not only enhances the percussive and vigorous quality of the *padding syllables* but also helps the singers to better phonate in the higher register while reducing laryngeal tension. By adopting this approach, singers can achieve Chinese vocal stylistics with more accurate cultural authenticity, enhance the piece's rhythmic energy, and maintain healthy vocal production.

Example 2

Spring Dreams also employs *padding syllables*. Here, these syllables function as onomatopoeia, specifically imitating the *Chinese gong* and *drum* sounds from *Peking opera*. In performance, rather than connecting pitches, singers should use clear staccato to mimic the sharp, vigorous, percussive effect of these instruments. Additionally, strong breath support is essential, with a quick crescendo to enhance impact:

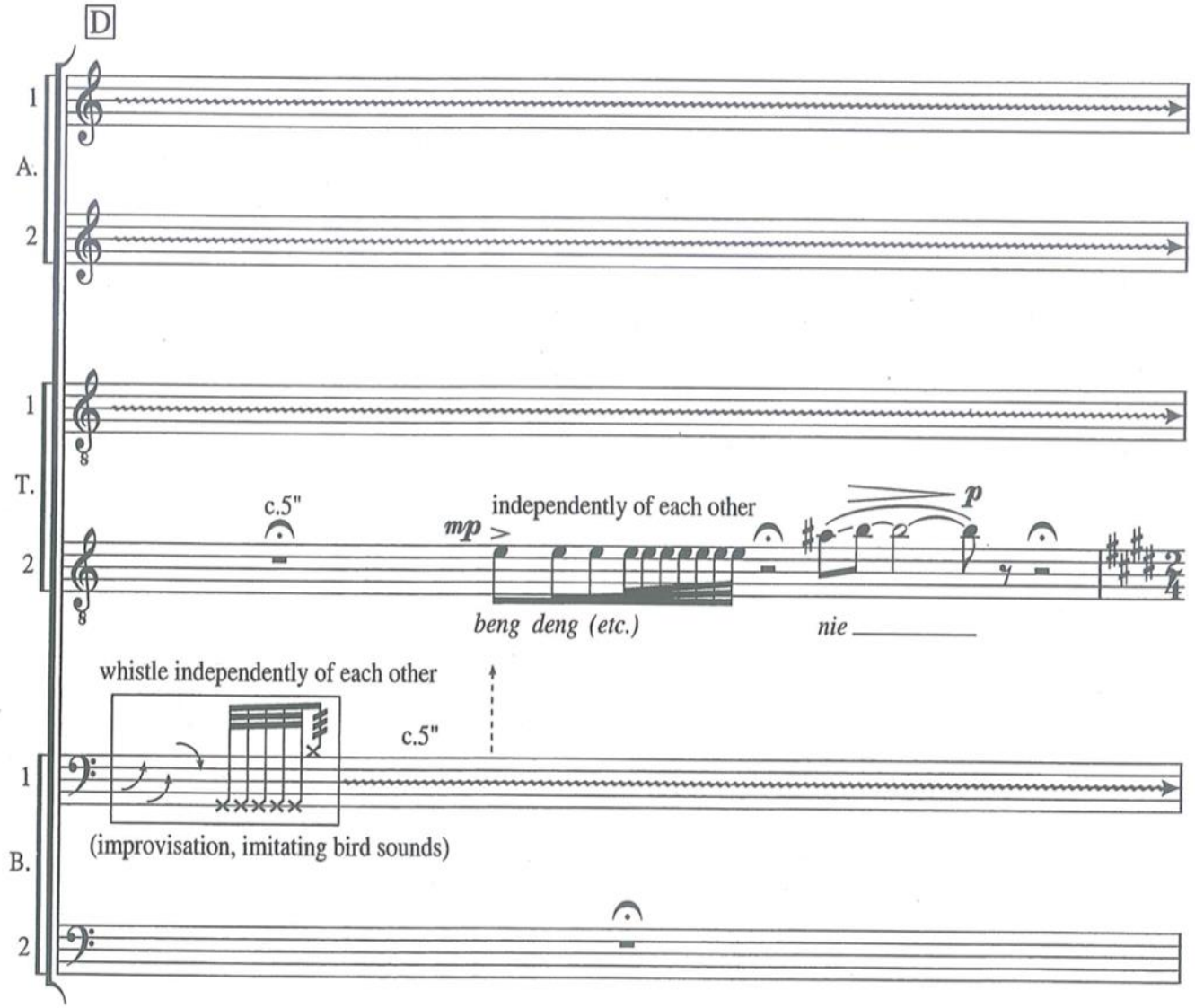

Figure 9: Chen Yi, *Spring Dreams*, Rehearsal D, (Theodore Presser Company, 1997).

Folk Song Singing Style

Chinese folk songs often feature different singing styles, with one main characteristic being the call-and-response, as exemplified in 弥渡山歌 (*Mi Du* Mountain Song), a type of Chinese folk song. In *The Flowing Stream*, at measure 18, the main melody shifts from the soprano to the tenor, creating the call-and-response effect like that of *Mi Du* Mountain Song. As seen in Figure 1, page 7 shows the soprano as the melody line.

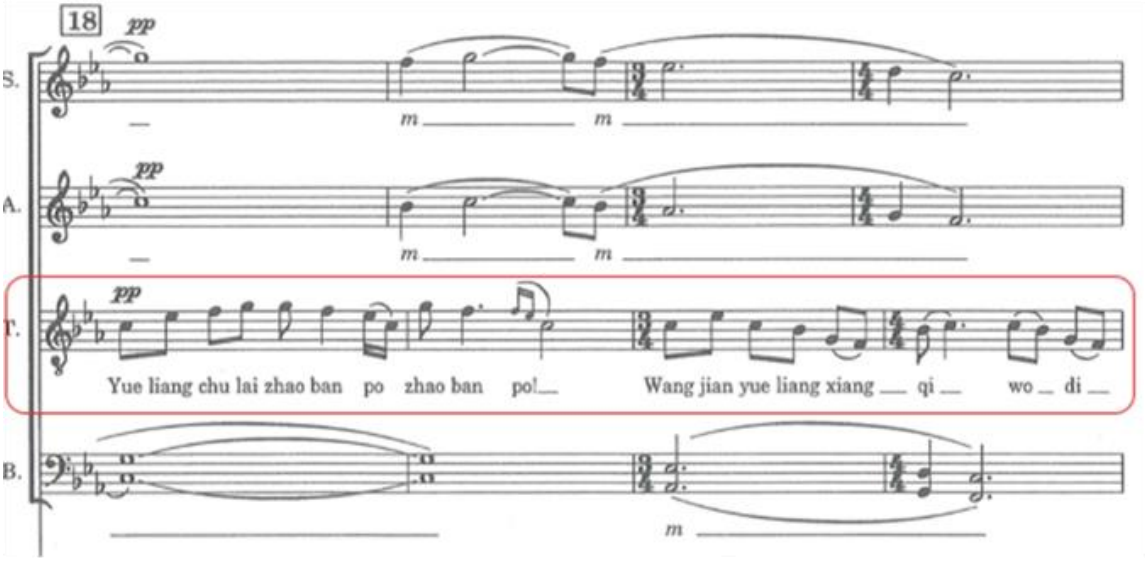

Figure 10: Chen Yi, *The Flowing Stream*, mm. 18-22, from *A Set of Chinese Folk Songs*, Volume 1, (Theodore Presser Company, 1994).

As mentioned above, *Mi Du* mountain song is a type of Chinese folk song. *Mi Du* refers to a county in Yunnan Province where the melody of *The Flowing Stream* originated. *Shan Ge,* meaning "mountain song", is a type of Chinese folk song traditionally performed in mountainous and rural regions. One defining characteristic of *Mi Du Shan Ge* is its call-and-response style, which resembles Western antiphonal and responsorial singing. However, *Mi Du Shan Ge* often features call-and-response exchanges between male and female voices, typically centered on themes of love, with melodies that are gentle and tender. From this perspective, this style also bears resemblance to the duets between male and female characters in Western opera.

Vocal Technique

When non-Chinese vocalists perform Chinese choral works with folk or operatic elements, it is crucial to adjust vocal technique accordingly. For melodic lines with these elements, singers should avoid excessive use of the Western bel canto style. Instead, a focus on head voice is essential, particularly for sopranos and tenors, to achieve a more authentic sound. Singers must also aim for a bright timbre and employ more "straight tone." Although insisting on "straight tone" can be contentious in Western choral settings, for the vocal lines to retain a traditional Chinese character, vibrato must at the very least be limited. A vocal approach with these characteristics would align more closely with Chinese folk songs and operas, which often features clear, sometimes "penetrating" tones, with minimal vibrato and frequent use of falsetto and whistle tones (especially in operas). Choral works with these elements should therefore strive for similar sonorities if they aim for authenticity. To achieve this, Western choral singers can emphasize upper partials, resonating through the upper teeth, to create a straighter sound. All the musical examples discussed in this section should adopt these techniques to enhance musical expression and authenticity.

This exploration of vocal style and technique highlights notable similarities between Chinese and Western vocal traditions. However, it is essential to consider the cultural context and underlying motivations behind specific vocal techniques; disregarding these factors can alter the intended meaning and sonority of a vocal line or even an entire composition.

Reflecting on the rehearsal process, I observed that distinctly Chinese vocal elements were ultimately well-received and accurately presented by Western singers. This suggests, anecdotally, that integrating Chinese and Western vocal elements is achievable when the differences and similarities between the techniques are carefully explained and rehearsed.

Nonetheless, further experimentation with various Chinese and Western vocal styles could reveal opportunities for more nuanced representation of Chinese vocal techniques and foster even greater integration.

One potential area for exploration involves the use of *padding syllables*, commonly found in Chinese folk songs and operas. These onomatopoeic elements, such as the "hei zuo hei zuo" labor chant in *Gorges*, serve both melodic and expressive functions. While *padding syllables* are integral to Chinese vocal traditions, their use is not exclusive to Chinese music; onomatopoeic nonsensical syllables are a shared aesthetic across global vocal traditions. Future compositions that seek to explore cross-cultural or innovative vocal styles could incorporate these elements, enriching the fusion of diverse traditions and opening new avenues for artistic expression.

Chapter Three: Linguistic Elements

In the previous sections, I explored the possible integration of Chinese musical elements into Western choral traditions. In this chapter, I consider the linguistic challenges and opportunities for Western choristers to approach the performance of Chinese works.

Mandarin Chinese Annotation Approaches in Choral Works

Before turning to the discussion of performing in Mandarin Chinese, it is important to address the two primary ways in which the Mandarin Chinese is represented in written form. The first way of representing Mandarin is through a logographic writing system called Chinese characters. In this system, each character represents a morpheme. The second is the *Pinyin* system, an alphabetic writing system that, similar to English, uses individual letters or combinations of letters to represent speech sounds.[15] The *Pinyin* system literally translates to

[15] Lin, Yen-Hwei. 2007. *The Sounds of Chinese*, 5-6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

"Chinese spelling," which has become the standard method of transcription for almost all Chinese speakers since the 1950s.[16]

In comparing the two systems, it is not surprising that the *Pinyin* system, which is based on the Latin alphabet, is easier for non-native Mandarin speakers to grasp. Chinese characters present a relatively high learning barrier for non-native speakers. *Pinyin* simplifies pronunciation processes, reduces the effort needed to learn the language, and facilitates the spread of the Mandarin globally.

In contemporary Chinese choral works, there are three main ways to annotate Mandarin. The first involves using only Chinese characters, as shown in *Vineyard Nocturne*, composed by Chinese composer Lu Zaiyi (b.1943).

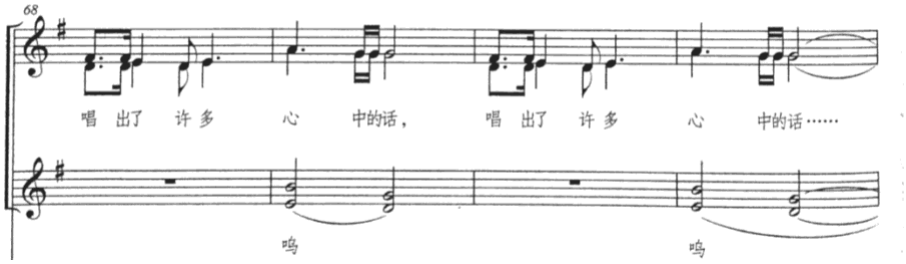

Figure 11: Lu Zaiyi, *Vineyard Nocturne* mm.68-71 (Public Domain,1996).

Another approach is to only use the *Pinyin* system, as demonstrated in Chen Yi's work *The Flowing Stream*：

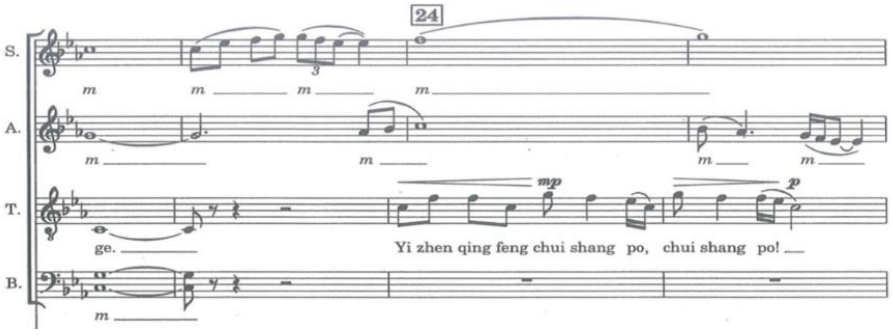

Figure 12: Chen Yi, *The Flowing Stream,* mm.22-25, from *A Set of Chinese Folk Songs*, *Volume 1*, (Theodore Presser Company, 1994).

[16] Wheatley, Julian K. 2014. *Chinese Verbs & Essentials of Grammar*, 15. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.

A third approach combines Chinese characters and the *Pinyin* system, as illustrated in Pan Xingzimin's *Ta Suo Xing*:

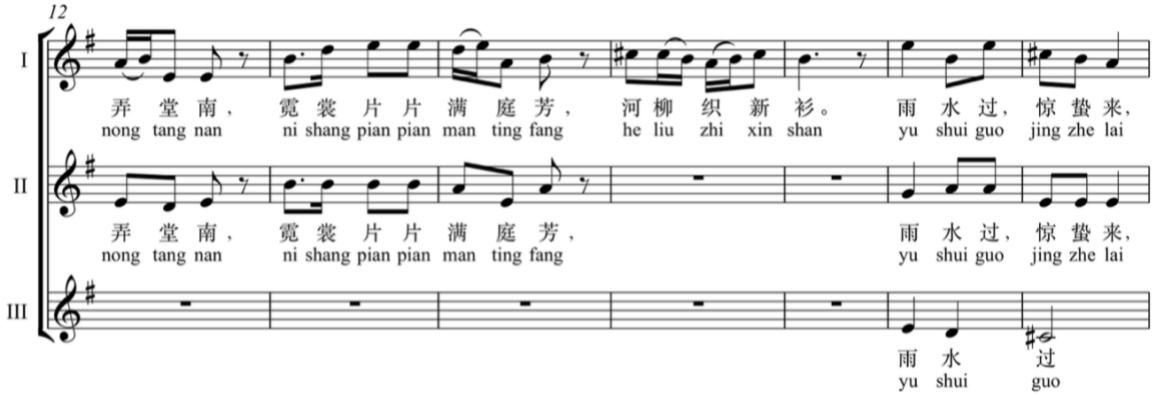

Figure 13: Pan Xingzimin, *Ta Suo Xing*, mm.12-18. (Temperament Music, 2017).

When considering how to facilitate pronunciation, I believe the ideal annotation approach for Western choristers is the *Pinyin* system: it provides a straightforward, corresponding set of conversion rules to International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)—a familiar system for Western choral singers. *Pinyin* allows singers to create personalized IPA annotations based on their native language. Alternatively, IPA can be directly used for annotation based on *Pinyin*. To ensure inclusiveness and authenticity, Chinese characters for the text can be included in program notes. In fact, Chen Yi employed this approach in *The Flowing Stream,* where she converts Chinese characters into the *Pinyin* system (see Figure 12). She also provides pronunciation guides for *Pinyin* transliteration using IPA. She includes this pronunciation guide, along with the Chinese characters and their English translations into the program notes. An excerpt from *The Flowing Stream* demonstrating this approach can be found in Appendix 2.

It is worth noting that when annotating the pronunciations of j, q, and x, Chen Yi did not strictly adhere to standard Chinese pronunciations but instead opted for sounds more familiar to Western singers. For example, her annotations represent j, q, and x as [dʒ], [tʃ], and a sound between "s" and "sh," respectively. These are closer to the phonetic norms of Western choristers.

Conversely, native Mandarin speakers would pronounce these sounds closer to [ʐʈɕ], [ʈɕh], and [ɕ]. On this point, conductor Song Pingyi says: "The j initial consonant is a voiced alveolo-palatal affricate consonant. It is articulated with the tip of the tongue placed behind the alveolar ridge, while the dorsum of the tongue is lying flat and creating a closed space between the dorsum of the tongue and the hard palate."[17]

This approach reflects Chen Yi's intention to balance retaining the linguistic authenticity of Chinese while reducing the learning curve for foreign singers. In her pronunciation guide, Yi emphasizes that: "These guides should be considered only approximations; for authentic pronunciation of the Chinese texts, it is most helpful to work with a native speaker."[18] This indicates that her guide might have slight variations from standard Chinese pronunciation for certain phonemes, such as j, q, x, as mentioned above. However, for the vast majority of Chinese sounds, the differences between the pronunciation derived directly from the *Pinyin* system by Western singers and the actual Chinese pronunciation are minimal. For example, the pronunciation of *du* in the *Pinyin* system corresponds closely to [duː], and *shan* aligns closely with [ʃan].

Mandarin Chinese Pronunciation: Concert Approach

In this concert, I intentionally selected pieces that included diverse approaches to annotating Chinese text. To ensure consistency and accessibility, my first step was to ensure that all pieces were annotated with the *Pinyin* system. Additionally, I applied Chen Yi's pronunciation guidelines, combined with my personal understanding and approach to Mandarin pronunciation within choral settings, and provided IPA annotations for all Chinese pieces.

---

[17] Song, Pingyi. 2023. *A New Approach to Mandarin Chinese Lyric Diction in Choral Music*. 32. Doctoral dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
[18] Chen Yi. 1994. Program notes from *A Set of Chinese Folk Songs, Volume 1,* Theodore Presser Company.

Further, I provided English translations for each lyric line. I intentionally avoided delving into a detailed discussion of tones within the *Pinyin* system in earlier sections. This decision was based on practical considerations for the performance and rehearsal process. Given significant time constraints on learning Mandarin pronunciation, I decided to avoid addressing tone markings, which would have slowed the learning process significantly. Further, tones have minimal impact on singing accurately in Mandarin. Choristers can achieve a standard rendition of Chinese lyrics even without tone markings in a choral setting.

The following example, taken from the first line of *Spring Excursion*, illustrates my approach to annotation:

春游 (Spring Excursion)
Text and music by Li Shutong (1880–1942)

春风吹面薄于纱 (*Text in Chinese Characters*)

Chūn Fēng Chuī Miàn Bó Yú Shā (*Pinyin System*)

[tʃwen feŋ tʃwəi mjan bɔ jü ʃa] (*IPA Transcription*)

(Spring breeze brushes the face, softer than gauze) (*Translation of the entire sentence*)

I applied this approach to all the Chinese pieces performed in this concert. I further created three types of audio recordings for each lyric line to facilitate the learning process: slow, word-by-word pronunciation with tones; slow, word-by-word pronunciation without tones; and full-sentence recitation with tones at a normal speaking pace. The version without tones was primarily designed to help Western singers learn Mandarin pronunciation in conjunction with IPA, while the two versions with tones were intended to help them internalize the natural flow and rhythm of Mandarin.

Despite these resources, unsurprisingly, the choristers still needed a significant amount of time to become accustomed to singing and speaking in Mandarin. Therefore, during rehearsals, I emphasized and rehearsed specific sounds that were especially challenging. For example, in my experience, typically when Western choristers sing the word "日" (rì), meaning "sun," the standard Chinese pronunciation is IPA [rɨ]. However, upon first encountering the *Pinyin* system, Western singers often mispronounce it as [ri:] or [rə].

Another example is the word "天" (tiān), meaning "sky," with its IPA being [tjɛn]. The challenge here lies in the glide of [i] or [u] which, in Mandarin, must transition quickly to the next vowel, in this case, [ɛ]. The word "光"(guāng), IPA [gwaːŋ], meaning "light," presents similar difficulties. Here, the [u] also needs to transition to the next vowel, [a], smoothly and quickly. For phonetic combinations like "ang" or "ong", Western choristers may need to pay particular attention. The key is to sustain the sound between [a] and [ng], ultimately resolving to [ng]. Identifying and troubleshooting these common difficulties will be a main preoccupation of those wishing to explore Chinese choral music and for whom the language is especially unfamiliar.

Despite these challenges, it was clear that the choir became increasingly comfortable singing in Mandarin as rehearsals progressed. This process shows that it is possible for a choir that consists entirely of Western choristers to prepare for and potentially perform a full 90-minute concert featuring predominantly Chinese choral repertoire within just two weeks. As a native Mandarin speaker, I found their pronunciation to be highly satisfactory.

However, this observation also led me to reflect on the following: if singing in Mandarin is feasible for Western choristers, why is the performance of Chinese choral works in the West so limited? Beyond logistical preparations, such as IPA annotations and study tracks, I believe

several other factors contribute to this phenomenon. Firstly, many Chinese composers are self-published and thus information on their compositions and background is often found only in Chinese. Therefore, their reputations and achievements are not celebrated outside of China.[19] This creates a hidden barrier for Western conductors who often lack an avenue for discovering and engaging with these compositions. Secondly, contemporary Chinese choral music faces aesthetic challenges. Many composers feel pressured to cater to mainstream tastes by producing simple, and at times overly commercialized, "pop-style" choral works.[20] This focus on mass appeal often comes at the expense of artistic quality, resulting in a relatively limited amount of highly refined Chinese choral compositions.

In teaching Western singers to perform in Mandarin, achieving an appropriate balance is crucial. If certain pronunciations prove overly complex and disrupt vocal production, therefore reducing rehearsal efficiency, choral directors should consider adopting alternative pronunciations that better align with the singers' linguistic habits. While Western audiences may not notice subtle variations, native Mandarin-speaking listeners may or may not be accommodating of such adjustments. But I would argue that these modifications are a small price to pay for having Western choirs engage with Chinese choral music and consequently for Chinese compositions to gain further exposure and appreciation. However, making such modifications should be a conscious choice, and choristers should be made aware of the decision to ensure that artistic, cultural, and linguistic integrity is maintained. Put simply, choral conductors and choirs should only make linguistic concessions minimally and when necessary.

---

[19] Song, Pingyi. *A New Approach to Mandarin Chinese Lyric Diction in Choral Music*.2. Doctoral dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2023.

[20] Tian, Xiaobao. 2009. "当下中国合唱的多元化发展道路" The Diversified Development Path of Contemporary Chinese Choirs. *Chinese Music* (中国音乐) 4: 173–77.

Lastly, just as Chinese speakers may have a Mandarin accent when speaking English, Western singers should approach Mandarin with confidence, unafraid of how their accents might affect the performance. Striving for pronunciations with authentic accents is important, but foreign accents should not deter choristers from fully engaging in the Mandarin as best they can; they should nevertheless feel proud of their linguistic heritage and its impact on their Mandarin pronunciation. In fact, certain pronunciations presented by Western singers may bring fresh interpretations to Chinese choral pieces, while also blending Chinese elements with Western choral traditions. This fusion creates a unique interpretation, embodying another layer of integration.

Concert Research Project Reflection

In this section, I reflect on both the successes and challenges of this concert, as well as the insights gained throughout the process.

Firstly, this concert was likely atypical for an all-Western choir, as most of the pieces were either composed by Chinese composers or incorporated Chinese musical elements, with twelve pieces sung entirely in Mandarin. Considering the discussions and analyses from earlier sections, coupled with the fact that the concert was largely well-executed by the choir, I cautiously propose that integrating Chinese elements into Western choral traditions is feasible—though perhaps only to a limited extent.

Despite the concert featuring substantial Chinese musical elements—such as pentatonic scales, *Peking* and *Kun* opera-inspired singing styles, Chinese folk song ornamentation, adapted Chinese vocal techniques, and Mandarin lyrics—the compositions were predominantly framed within a Western musical structure. Key aspects like the SATB (soprano, alto, tenor, bass)

format, the use of time signatures, and triadic chord structures all stem from Western musical traditions. In this context, the Chinese elements functioned primarily as stylistic features, imbuing the music with a distinctly Chinese character.

This observation raises an important question: does Chinese choral music lack a unique identity rooted in its own musical traditions and cultural expressions? Moreover, what we term "integration" in this context may in fact reflect a superficial borrowing of Chinese elements to embellish fundamentally Western compositions, rather than a deep synthesis of the two traditions. This suggests the need for further exploration of how Chinese choral music can assert a more distinct identity and how genuine fusion between the two traditions might be achieved.

For example, the use of pentatonic scales is often considered sufficient to convey a distinctly Chinese quality for pieces considered to be Chinese choral music. However, the pentatonic scale is not unique to Chinese music. Variations of the pentatonic scale appear in musical traditions around the world, each with distinct applications and stylistic nuances. For example, Hungary and other Eurasian regions also use pentatonic structures in their folk music traditions.[21] This suggests that merely incorporating pentatonic scales does not inherently confer a composition with an authentic Chinese character; rather, it reflects a broader, shared musical language that transcends cultural boundaries. In Western compositional techniques, *parallel organum* often involves only perfect fourths or perfect fifths, where one melodic line is paired with another that moves in parallel perfect fourths or fifths.[22] This technique shares similarities with quartal and quintal harmonies, both of which use perfect fourths and perfect fifths to move the music forward. The main difference lies in that quartal and quintal harmonies stack two

[21] Zoltán Juhász, and János Sipos. 2010. "A Comparative Analysis of Eurasian Folksong Corpora, Using Self Organising Maps" *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies* 4 (1): 2 https://musicstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Juhasz_JIMS_10040101.pdf.
[22] Griffiths, Paul. 2009. *A Concise History of Western Music*. Cambridge University Press. 25.

perfect fourths or fifths to create a chord-like structure (distinct from traditional triadic chords, which are stacked in thirds). In contrast, *parallel organum* emphasizes an intervallic approach rather than a chordal one. Nevertheless, both approaches use perfect fourths and fifths to achieve certain musical effects or to drive musical development.

Similarly, Claude Debussy, a French Impressionist composer, incorporates perfect fifths and modified quintal harmonies in his music.[23] For example, consider the second movement of his a cappella choral work *3 Chansons de Charles d'Orléans*, shown below：

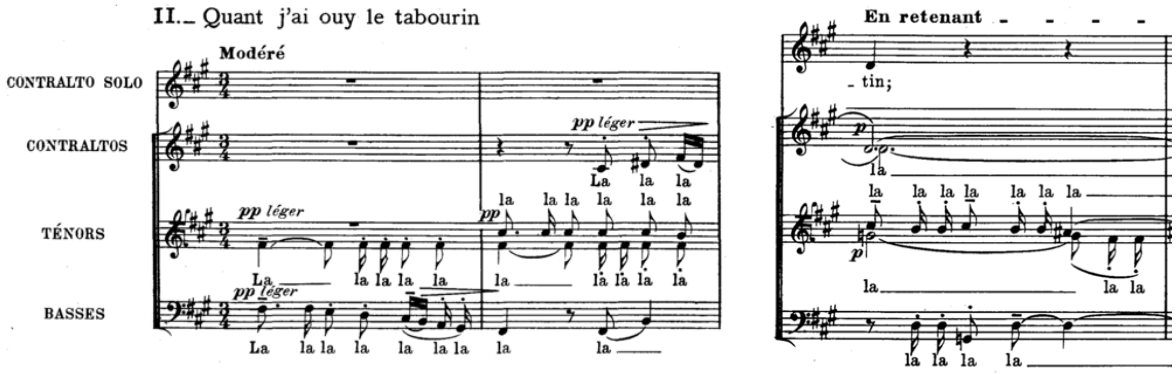

Figure 14: Debussy, Claude, *3 Chansons de Charles d'Orléans*, movement II: *Quand j'ay ouy le tabourin*, mm.1–2 and m.30 (Paris: A. Durand & Fils. Plate D. & F. 7179. 1908).[24]

In measures 1-2, Debussy uses the interval of a perfect fifth (F sharp – C sharp) to create a foundational framework, around which other voices move. In measure 30, he layers intervals of C sharp - G - D. While this is not strictly quintal harmony, it still relies on stacked fifths, which aligns closely with the concept of quintal harmony: a chord with two stacked perfect fifth intervals. Alternatively, this passage could also be treated as establishing a perfect fourth (D - G) as a foundational framework, allowing the remaining voice to move within that structure.

---

[23] DeLone, Peter. 1977. "Claude Debussy, Contrapuntiste Malgre Lui". College Music Symposium. Last modified on November 12, 2018. https://symposium.music.org/17/item/1763-claude-debussy-i-contrapuntiste-malgre-lui.html.

[24] Debussy, Claude, *3 Chansons de Charles d'Orléans*, movement II: "Quand j'ay ouy le tabourin," measures 1–2 and measure 30 (Paris: A. Durand & Fils. Plate D. & F. 7179. 1908: https://ks15.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/b/b2/IMSLP37901-PMLP81775-Debussy_-_3_Chansons_de_Charles_d'Orl%C3%A9ans_(SATB).pdf.

Debussy's use of parallel fourths and fifths and quartal and modified quintal harmonies share similarities with the use of these compositional elements in Chinese choral music, such as *Praise of the Eight Chestnut Horses and Gorges* (Figures 3 and 4) in my recital program. Both Debussy and Chinese composers use perfect fourths and fifths, as well as quartal and quintal harmonies to drive the music forward instead of using triadic chords. The use of these compositional elements by both Debussy and Chinese composers demonstrates a shared musical affect to produce a desired result, but they ultimately remain distinct expressions that have meaning within their respective social and musicological histories.

Another example demonstrating the meaningful but limited integration between Western compositional technique and Chinese music is found in Chinese composer Cui Wei's a cappella work *I Will Be Seeing You.* In this piece, Wei incorporates the melody of the traditional Chinese folk tune *Jasmine Flower*. See the excerpt below:

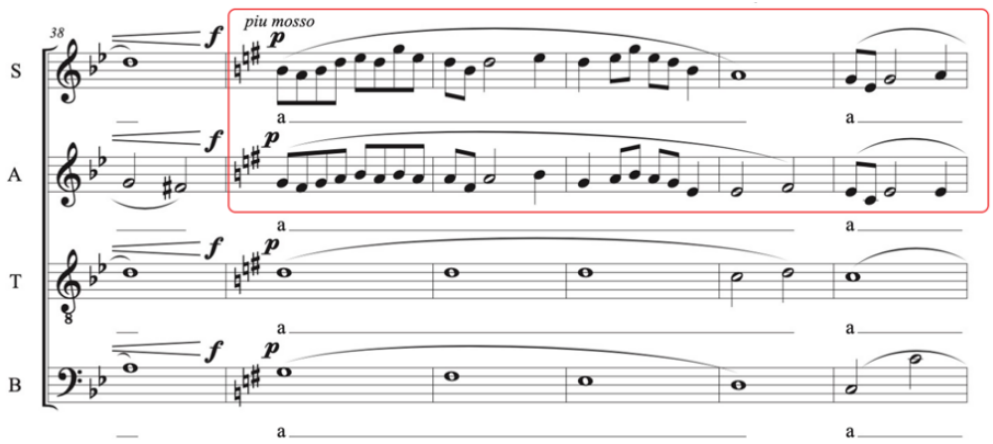

Figure 15: Cui Wei, *I will be seeing you*, mm.39-43, (self-published 2014).

Besides the *Jasmine Flower* melody, the compositional techniques in this piece are predominantly based on the Western tonal system. For instance, Cui Wei employs G harmonic minor and G natural major scales, passing tones, and triadic harmonies built on thirds, such as the G major and D major triads. Additionally, the piece is sung in English. Thus, even though it

incorporates one of the most iconic Chinese folk melodies and is composed by a Chinese composer, this piece should not be considered a Chinese choral work. Rather, the addition of the *Jasmine Flower* melody serves merely to add a Chinese aesthetic to the piece.

There is historical precedent for this compositional approach. We also find the *Jasmine Flower* melody in Italian composer Puccini's *Turandot* opera, which also includes Chinese cultural elements.[25] However, despite the addition of these Chinese elements, no one would classify *Turandot* as a Chinese opera. This is because Puccini's interpretation is infused with the social, cultural, and musical influences that defines his work's structure and style. Ultimately, it is perhaps inevitable that these influences restrict composers to the contexts in which they find themselves. However, if done respectfully, it appears possible to successfully integrate cultural and compositional styles in a limited way.

The question then becomes, what is the impetus for adding Chinese musical element into choral compositions in even a limited manner? One possible reason may be that the addition of Chinese elements such as pentatonic scales and nonsensical syllables from *Peking opera*, are relatively accessible for a non-Chinese choir. To add other elements, such as Chinese text, could limit the reach of a given composition and thus diminish the possibility of introducing aspects of Chinese choral works, language, and culture to a broad audience.

Conversely, compositions that incorporate Chinese elements in a more authentic and prominent way—for instance, by using ancient, unaltered minority folk songs or traditional folk narrative Chinese music—might appear more distinctive and recognizable in a Chinese musical

[25] DMD, Scott Nakamura. 2016. *Review of Puccini and the Romantic-Exoticism of Turandot. Operaphila* (blog). September 20, 2016. https://www.operaphila.org/backstage/opera-blog/2016/puccini-and-the-romantic-exoticism-of-turandot/.

context. However, from a practical perspective, such choral works would be more challenging for non-Chinese choirs to interpret and perform. Thus, prioritizing accessibility should not be construed as cultural appropriation, or automatically criticized for being inauthentic. Rather, attempts to create works containing Chinese elements but written in a predominantly Western style should be cautiously celebrated as a composer's attempt to create musical bridges between cultures. However, as mentioned earlier in this paper, Chinese choral music is a young enterprise. A focus on accessibility may contribute to the Chinese choral music's continued to struggle to establish a unique identity.

Moreover, there appear to be even more challenging barriers. One such barrier is China's vast geographical territory rich with cultural and musical diversity that inherently seems to stand in the way of establishing a standardized Chinese choral tradition.

For instance, *Praise of Eight Chestnut Horses*, featured in this performance, incorporates distinctive and unique Mongolian elements such as throat singing (*khoomei*) and long-song (*urtiin duu*).[26] Sung in Mongolian, it captures the bold and unrestrained spirit of the region, highlighting its strong local identity. Similarly, *Lift Your Veil*, also featured in this concert, is a folk song from the Uzbek ethnic group in Xinjiang Province. It demonstrates certain musical similarities with traditional Uzbek music, reflecting connections to Uzbekistan. In contrast, Chen Yi's *The Flowing Strea*m (Figures 1 and 10), incorporates the *Mi Du* Mountain Song from Yunnan Province in southwestern China, known for its distinctive call-and-response style, an essential element of Chinese folk singing traditions. Further, Zhang Shichao's *Moon in the Mountains* (Figure 2), integrates *Kun opera*, a classic form of opera from the Jiangnan region in

[26] Lin, Pei Chi. 2018. *A Performance Guide to Se Enkhbayar's Choral Tone Poem Önchin Botog (a Lonely Baby Camel) for SATB Soloists and SATB Chorus (with Divisions) a Cappella.*University of North Texas. 24. https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1157562/m2/1/high_res_d/LIN-DISSERTATION-2018.pdf.

southeastern China, celebrated for its gentle and elegant style.[27] Together, these examples illustrate how regional musical diversity influences and enriches Chinese choral compositions while simultaneously complimenting efforts to develop a unified and unique Chinese choral tradition.

Historically speaking, Chinese music dates to the Shang Dynasty (c. 1776–1027 BCE); however, this rich legacy is primarily instrumental.[28] In contrast, the documented development of China's vocal music, particularly choral music, as discussed earlier, only began in the early 20th century with the emergence of the *School Songs* period. As previously mentioned, *Spring Excursion*, is the first recognized choral piece in Chinese music history. It was written using Western compositional elements, such as diatonic scales, V-I cadences, the staff notation, and an ABA structure.[29] The establishment of Chinese choral music during this period was closely related to composers like Li Shutong (1880–1942), Zhao Yuanren (1892–1982), Xie Xinghai (1905–1945), and Huang Zi (1904–1938). Having studied abroad, these composers returned to China and applied Western compositional techniques, particularly the tonal system—which includes modes and tonality, polyphonic writing, different music forms, and various compositional techniques. These Western compositional techniques were readily adopted by other Chinese composers and had a significant impact on the development of Chinese choral music.

---

[27] Wang, Yue. 2019. "Kunqu Opera in the Last Hundred Years in China." *Review of Educational Theory* 2 (4): 59. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337767596_Kunqu_Opera_in_the_Last_Hundred_Years_in_China.
[28] Kuttner, Fritz A. 1964. "The Music of China: A Short Historical Synopsis Incorporating the Results of Recent Musicological Investigations." *Ethnomusicology* 8 (2): 121. https://doi.org/10.2307/849856.
[29] Yip, Mo-Ling Chan. 1994. *The Emergence and Development of Chinese Choral Music in the Twentieth Century*. The University of Texas at Austin.54. https://proxy.library.mcgill.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/emergence-development-chinese-choral-music/docview/304113191/se-2.

If Chinese choral music is to find its own voice, it will need to develop unique characteristics through musical innovations that flow from the nuances of Chinese language and culture with, at the very least, the appreciation that its history has been heavily influenced by the West. Some may perhaps view this as a drawback. I instead suggest viewing this lineage as an opportunity to find new soundscapes to explore that further celebrate Chinese music history and heritage.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges raised, I firmly believe that Chinese musical elements can be meaningfully integrated into Western choral traditions without compromising the authenticity of either. However, as it stands, these elements often serve as superficial markers rather than forming the foundation of a genuinely distinct choral tradition. Chinese choral music remains fundamentally rooted in Western frameworks, reflecting the need for deeper cultural introspection and innovation.

To move beyond this pattern, Chinese composers could benefit from a richer exploration of the nation's extensive folk music heritage—a tradition deeply intertwined with the daily lives and customs of China's diverse ethnic communities. By conducting thorough research and creatively adapting cultural resources, composers have the potential to develop choral works that authentically embody a uniquely Chinese musical identity.

Performers and interpreters also have a crucial role to play by engaging with music on a deeper level, focusing on the composer's intentions, cultural narratives, and artistic vision rather than relying on surface-level labels. This approach could shift the conversation from an identity struggle to one that celebrates the creative intent and cultural richness behind the music. Emerging Chinese choral musicians, with their increasingly global education and exposure, are

uniquely positioned to contribute to this evolution. As more musicians return to China with diverse experiences gained from studying abroad, they will play an instrumental role in shaping a choral landscape that bridges traditions and fosters an environment where distinctively Chinese choral music can flourish.

Over time, Chinese choral music may find a delicate balance between Chinese and Western influences, developing into a tradition that is both deeply rooted in cultural heritage and reflective of modern global perspectives. Alternatively, it may continue to embrace and adapt the Western framework, charting a unique developmental path. Whatever direction this journey takes, the pursuit of a distinctive musical identity will remain a powerful source of inspiration, encouraging Chinese choral musicians to explore their heritage and create music that resonates with cultural authenticity and emotional depth. In this ongoing evolution, the foundation for a truly unique Chinese choral tradition may yet emerge, enriching the global choral music landscape.

Appendix 1

Concert Program

Repertoire List	**Language**	**Composer**	**Composed**
Gorges (峡)	Nonsense Syllables	Cui Wei (1981 -)	2008
Spring Excursion （春游）	Mandarin	Li Shutong (1880 -1942)	1912
Spring Dreams （春晓）	Mandarin + Nonsense Syllables	Chen Yi (1953 -)	1997
Ta Suo Xing （踏莎行）	Mandarin	Pan Xingzimin (1986 -)	2017
Vineyard Nocturne （葡萄园夜曲）	Mandarin	Lu Zaiyi (1943 -)	1996
Maillied	German	Pan Xingzimin (1986 -)	2022
I Will Be Seeing You	English	Cui Wei (1981 -)	2012
Distance Can't keep Us Apart	English	Chen Yi (1953)	2012
Ancient Prairie	English	Ēriks Ešenvalds (1977 -)	2018
Fragrance Of The Night （夜来香）	Mandarin	Arr. Liu Wenyi (1945 -) Composed: Li Jinguang (1907 -1993)	N/A, approximately 1944
The Flowing Stream （小河淌水）	Mandarin	Chen Yi (1953 -)	1994
Moon in the Mountains (山中月)	Mandarin	Zhang Shichao (1990 -)	2021
Lift Your Veil （掀起你的盖头来）	Mandarin	Arr. Meng Weidong (1955 -) Collected: Wang Luobin (1913 - 1996)	N/A, approximately 1939
Alleluia	Latin	Cui Wei (1981 -)	2014
Path （路）	Mandarin	Pan Xingzimin (1986 -)	2021
Praise of The Eight Chesnut Horses （八骏赞）	Mongolian	Se Enkhbayar (1956 -)	1991
Breath as One （呼吸）	English+ Mandarin	Wu Zhuoxian (1977 -)	2015

Appendix 2

Program Notes of *A Set of Chinese Folk Songs Volume 1*

Mandarin Pronunciation Guide
Written by Chen Yi

PRONUNCIATION GUIDES TO PINYIN TRANSLITERATION

These guides should be considered only approximations; for authentic pronunciation of the Chinese texts, it is most helpful to work with a native speaker.

COMPARISONS TO ENGLISH

VOWELS

a = as in *car*
e = similar to *her*
i = as in *pizza*
o = as in *more*
u = as in *tuba*
ü = same as German

CONSONANTS

b, d, f, h, j, p, t, k, l, m, n, s, sh, y, w = same as English
z = English dz sound as in *beds*
zh = similar to *j* sound, but more explosive
ch = English ch, as in *China*
q = similar to *ch* sound, but more explosive
c = ts
g = hard g, as in *gong*
x = similar to English s, but with the tongue arched up (in between English *s* and *sh)*
r = similar to English r, but with the tongue arched back

COMPARISONS TO INTERNATIONAL SYMBOLS

VOWELS

		i	/i/	u	/u/	ü	/y/ German "ü"
a	/a/	ia	/ja/	ua	/wa/		
o	/ɔ/			uo	/wɔ/		
e	/ə/	ie	/jə/			üe	/yə/
ai	/ai/			uai	/wai/		
ei	/əi/			u(e)i	/wəi/		
ao	/au/	iao	/jau/				
ou	/ɔu/	i(o)u	/jɔu/				
an	/an/	ian	/jan/	uan	/wan/	üan	/yan/
en	/ən/	in	/in/	uen	/wən/	ün	/yn/
ang	/aŋ/	iang	/jaŋ/	uang	/waŋ/		
eng	/əŋ/	ing	/iŋ/	uəng	/wəŋ/		
ong	/ɔŋ/	iong	/jɔŋ/				

CONSONANTS

b	/b/	p	/p/	m	/m/	f	/f/
d	/d/	t	/t/	n	/n/	l	/l/
g	/g/	k	/k/	h	/h/		
j	/dʒ/	q	/tch/	x	as described above		
z	/dz/	c	/ts/	s	/s/s as in "slow"		
zh	/ʒ/	ch	/tʃ/	sh	/ʃ/		
r	/r/	w (u)	/w/	y (i)	/j/		

Syllables in *italics* in the choral text are nonsense syllables for padding, not part of the poems.

A SET OF CHINESE FOLK SONGS is also available for sale in the original Chanticleer men's chorus version (312-41682); the school version with String Orchestra and Percussion is available on rental.

Chinese characters and text translations of *The Flowing Stream*
Written by Chen Yi

2.The Flowing Stream (Yunnan Love Song) 小河淌水

The rising moon is bright, my sweetheart is in the deep mountain, he is like the moon walking in the sky. My sweetheart! The flowing stream around the mountain is clear aside. The moon is shining over the hillside, looking at the moon and thinking of my sweetheart, the breezes are sweeping past the hillside. My sweetheart! Don't you hear I cry?

月亮出來亮汪汪，想起我的阿哥在深山。
哥象月亮天上走，哥呵！
山下小河淌水清悠悠。

月亮出來照半坡，望見月亮想起我的哥。
一陣清風吹上坡，哥呵！
你可聽見阿妹叫阿哥？

Bibliography

Articles

Chen, Lang. 2024. “民族建构与音乐转型：学堂乐歌的发明及其内在张力 (Minzu Jiangou yu Yinyue Zhuanxing: Xuetang Yuege de Faming Jiqi Neizai Zhangli; Nation-Building and Music Transformation: The Invention and Internal Tensions of School Songs).” *Society* 3: 148.

Kuttner, Fritz A. 1964. “The Music of China: A Short Historical Synopsis Incorporating the Results of Recent Musicological Investigations.” *Ethnomusicology* 8 (2): 121.

Ma, Go-Shun. 1985. “Choral Music in the People’s Republic of China Society.” *The Choral Journal* 25 (9): 31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23546836.

Tian, Xiaobao. 2009. “当下中国合唱的多元化发展道路 (The Diversified Development Path of Contemporary Chinese Choirs).” *Chinese Music (中国音乐)* 4: 173–77.

Wan, Yu. 2009. “建国以来中国合唱艺术发展述评 [Review of the Development of Chinese Choral Art Since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China].” *The New Voice of Yue-Fu (The Academic Periodical of Shenyang Conservatory of Music)* 4: 177.

Wang, Yue. 2019. “Kunqu Opera in the Last Hundred Years in China.” *Review of Educational Theory* 2 (4): 59. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337767596_Kunqu_Opera_in_the_Last_Hundred_Years_in_China.

Xing, Xiaomeng, and Xu Zuguang. 2015. “中国合唱文化的发展与嬗变 [The Development and Evolution of Chinese Choral Culture].” *Journal of Northeast Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 276 (4): 175. https://doi.org/10.16164/j.cnki.22-1062.2015.04.032.

Zhang, Qi. 2014. “从《春晓》看本土合唱创作的现代性” [On the Modernity of Local Choral Composition Through *Spring Dreams*]. *Journal of Shaoxing University* 34 (3): 119. https://doi.org/10.16169/j.issn.1008-293x.s.2014.03.012.

Zhong, Yujie. 2024. “Li Shutong’s Contribution to Modern Music Education in China.” *Journal of Theory and Practice of Humanities Science* 1 (4): 97. https://www.woodyinternational.com/.

Zoltán Juhász, and János Sipos. 2010. “A Comparative Analysis of Eurasian Folksong Corpora, Using Self Organising Maps.” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies* 4 (1): 2. https://musicstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Juhasz_JIMS_10040101.pdf.

Dissertations

Lin, Pei Chi. 2018. *A Performance Guide to Se Enkhbayar’s Choral Tone Poem Önchin Botog (a Lonely Baby Camel) for SATB Soloists and SATB Chorus (with Divisions) a Cappella.* Doctoral dissertation, University of North Texas, 24. https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1157562/m2/1/high_res_d/LIN-DISSERTATION-2018.pdf.

Ludden, Yawen. 2013. *China’s Musical Revolution: From Beijing Opera to Yangbanxi.* Doctoral dissertation, University of Kentucky, 264.

Song, Pingyi. 2023. *A New Approach to Mandarin Chinese Lyric Diction in Choral Music.* Doctoral dissertation, 2, 32. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Yip, Mo-Ling Chan. 1994. *The Emergence and Development of Chinese Choral Music in the Twentieth Century.* Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 54. https://proxy.library.mcgill.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/emergence-development-chinese-choral-music/docview/304113191/se-2.

Yu, Lei Ray. 2017. *Finding a Voice – A Closer Look at Chinese Choral Music Development in the Early Twentieth Century through Chao Yuan-Ren, Huang Zi, and Xian Xing-Hai.* Doctoral dissertation, Boston University College of Fine Arts, 24–30. https://hdl.handle.net/2144/23357.

Books

Griffiths, Paul. 2009. *A Concise History of Western Music*. Cambridge University Press. 25.

Gudnason, Jessica Tan, and Li Gong. 2001. *Chinese Opera.* New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 12.

Lin, Yen-Hwei. 2007. *The Sounds of Chinese.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 5–6.

Ljunggren, Christian. 2018. *The Choral World: A Chronological, Historical, and Geographical Overview.* Translated by Wang Miao and Zhang Zhihui. Edited by Yu Danhong. Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press, 195.

Wheatley, Julian K. 2014. *Chinese Verbs & Essentials of Grammar.* New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 15.

Program Notes & Music Scores

Chen Yi. 1994. Program notes from *A Set of Chinese Folk Songs,* Volume 1. Theodore Presser Company.

Debussy, Claude. 1908. *3 Chansons de Charles d'Orléans,* movement II: "Quand j'ay ouy le tabourin." Paris: A. Durand & Fils, Plate D. & F. 7179. https://ks15.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/b/b2/IMSLP37901-PMLP81775-Debussy_-_3_Chansons_de_Charles_d'Orl%C3%A9ans_(SATB).pdf.

Websites

DeLone, Peter. 1977. "Claude Debussy, Contrapuntiste Malgre Lui." *College Music Symposium.* Last modified November 12, 2018. https://symposium.music.org/17/item/1763-claude-debussy-i-contrapuntiste-malgre-lui.html.

DMD, Scott Nakamura. 2016. "Review of Puccini and the Romantic-Exoticism of Turandot." *Operaphila Blog.* September 20, 2016. https://www.operaphila.org/backstage/opera-blog/2016/puccini-and-the-romantic-exoticism-of-turandot/.

Smith, James G., Thomas Brawley, and N. Lee Orr. "Choral music." *Grove Music Online.* 6 Feb. 2012; Accessed 26 Nov. 2024. https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002218820.