

On the Artistic Characteristics of Homesickness-themed Tang Poems Set to Music

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Abstract: *Homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music occupy an important position among Tang poems set to music. However, as far as the current state of research is concerned, we have not yet seen the results of the analysis of their artistic characteristics by the academic community. To remedy the great pity, this paper uses macroscopic panoramic scanning methods twice to simplify the research objects based on the classification of Tang poems set to music to select the most typical homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music. Then, taking Li Bai's „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” and Zhao Jiping's settings as typical, case studies are conducted in terms of songs’ patterns, singing techniques and cavity audio embellishing for emotional processing, and efforts are made to reveal the laws of their compositions and performances.*

Keywords: *Homesickness; Tang poems set to music; artistic characteristics;*

Introduction

The Chinese Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) is the golden age of Chinese poems with its singular rise of famous poets and the richness and diversity of its poetic themes, and it has occupied an important place in the history of world literature. In the process of creating and spreading Tang poems, composing and singing have been the most wonderful way of performances, especially for the classic Tang poems, which would be put to new tunes by generations of new composers and brought to the world to be sung by generations of new singers, which served as a pair of wings for the spreading of Tang poems and added special values to present-day’s studying on the artistic characteristics of Tang poems set to music.

However, in terms of research methodology, the sheer number of poems by Tang poets and the diverse performance styles of Tang poems set to music poses great difficulties in analyzing the artistic characteristics of Tang poems set to music. With more than 2,300 famous Tang poets and 50,000 Tang poems in circulation, and a wide variety of styles and genres, it is difficult to generalize and analyze the artistic characteristics of Tang poems set to music. Therefore, we can only select the most representative Tang poems set to music and use a combination method of panoramic scanning and case study. Fortunately, previous generations have already laid the groundwork for simplifying our work by compiling the Three Hundred Tang Poems. The Chinese-English 300 Tang Poems, translated by the Chinese translator Professor Xu Yuanchong, was published by the China Foreign Translation and Publishing Corporation in 2007. This provides a more solid basis for us to conduct our research in a context where the two languages are cross-referenced and mutually corroborated and to disseminate our ideas to the world.

As far as panoramic scanning is concerned, if a scientific approach is adopted and typological techniques are used to classify poems set to music according to their subject matter, Tang poems can be classified into the genres of love, family affection, friendship,

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homesickness, depiction of scenery, depiction of things, narration and nostalgia, and so on, and studied in series on this basis. Among all these genres, Homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music are an important category. A further panoramic scan of this category reveals that it is represented by „the God of Poems” Li Bai’s „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”, „The Moon over the Mountain Pass” and „Hearing the Flute on a Spring Night in Luoyang”; „the Sage of Poems” Du Fu’s „Thinking of My Brothers on a Moonlit Night”; and ‘the Buddha of Poem’, Wang Wei’s „Written for My Grandnephew at the Blue Pass”, „the Geek of Poems” Bai Juyi’s „On a Moonlit Night” and Han Yu’s „Showing My Nephew Xiang After Moving to the Blue Pass”, who is one of the Eight Great Poets of the Tang and Song dynasties. Many famous lines still have the power to travel through history and strike a chord in people’s hearts, such as Li Bai’s „Tonight I hear the farewell song of Willow Green”², Du Fu’s „Dew turns into frost since tonight; The moon viewed from home is more bright”³, and Wang Wei’s „Alone, a lonely stranger in a foreign land, I doubly pine for my kinsfolk on holiday”⁴, Han Yu’s „The Ridge veiled in barred clouds, where can my home be seen? The Blue Pass clad in snow, my horse won’t forward go”⁵ and Bai Juyi’s „One night, one grief, one self-same love, Of a lost home; and one moon, full above”⁶. The motivation for their writings was not only the normal homesickness in times of peace but also the fact that people were forced to leave their homes and families due to foreign wars, internal rebellions, political persecution and natural disasters. All these factors make people feel lonely and helpless, so they are also more nostalgic for their hometowns, where they were once born and raised. These unique emotional experiences and expressions are a reflection of the social landscapes and historical development of the Tang dynasty, an important stage in the development of Chinese people’s national sentiments and spirits, and have profound cultural values and historical significances.

1. Research theme, current status of research, and identification of case study subjects

As part of a series of articles examining Tang poems set to music from a genre perspective, this article focuses on homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music and seeks to reveal, in a scientific spirit, their artistic characteristics as well as the composition and performance laws behind these characteristics.

As far as the current state of research on this topic is concerned, there are no articles in Chinese or English that have examined the artistic characteristics of homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music. If we take the next best thing, we can find articles on the study of Tang poems with the theme of homesickness, such as Zhang Wenqing and Liu Yijun’s „An Analysis of Homesickness and its Artistic Expression in Tang Poems”. This does not match the huge proportion and significant values of Homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music

² Li Bai. 2007. „Hearing the Flute on a Spring Night in Luoyang”. *Chinese-English 300 Tang Poems*, tr. by Xu Yuanchong, 143. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation.

³ Du Fu. 2007. „Thinking of My Brothers on a Moonlit Night”. *Chinese-English 300 Tang Poems*, tr. by Xu Yuanchong, 148. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation.

⁴ Wang Wei. 2007. „Thinking of My Brothers on Mountain-climbing Day”. *Chinese-English 300 Tang Poems*, tr. by Xu Yuanchong, 138. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation.

⁵ Han Yu. 2007. „Written for My Grandnephew at the Blue Pass”. *Chinese-English 300 Tang Poems*, tr. by Xu Yuanchong, 161. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation.

⁶ Bai Juyi. 1988. „On a Moonlit Night”. *Chinese-English 300 Tang Poems: A New Translation*, tr. by Xu Yuanchong, Lu Peixian & Wu Juntao, 298. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation.

and is, it has to be said, a great regret for the academic community. We will next make our efforts to remedy this regret.

Based on the panoramic scans mentioned above, the case study can be analyzed from two perspectives: that of the poet and that of the poems. First, from the perspective of the poet, Li Bai is the most prominent representative of these great poets and has the greatest values for analysis. In terms of his personality, he was an unrestrained man who preferred to drift around the world in the name of righteousness and chivalry rather than to “bend his brow to serve the powerful”, and this character also had a decisive influence on his poems. In his poems, he often used imagery, exaggeration, metaphor and personification, and his romantic style is unique for its majestic, fresh, handsome, unrestrained and suave style, and he is known as a „poet immortal”. His poems, together with Pei Min’s swordplay and Zhang Xu’s cursive script, are known as “the Three Greatest Art Works of Tang Dynasty”. Secondly, in terms of poems, Li Bai’s poems include many works on the theme of homesickness, which have been set to music and sung to this day, especially „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”, which uses only simple colloquialisms with endlessly aftertaste to depict the view in front of himself and express the thoughts from the heart. Because of its great literary and artistic values, it has become an irreplaceable poem in Chinese primary school language books and is familiar to the Chinese people to the extent that almost everyone can recite it. Wherever there are Chinese people in this world, whenever it comes to the Mid-Autumn Festival, it is a time when „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” is recited, chanted, or sung. We will then take Li Bai’s „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” as an example to analyze the artistic characteristics of homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music.

2. „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” embodies typical artistic characteristics of Homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music

This can be explained in two ways:

One is the literary typicality of „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” in terms of the poetic expression of homesickness by the Chinese in the Tang Dynasty. Li Bai left his hometown of Sichuan in 724 AD and traveled eastwards, arriving in Yangzhou, China’s most prosperous industrial and commercial city, in the spring of 726 AD, where he composed „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” in autumn. The poem depicts Li Bai’s thoughts of his hometown as he looked up at the moon on a lonely, sad autumn night when he was ill. At this time, the bright moonlight shined in front of the well railings, making the poet suspect that white frost had fallen on the ground. While raising his head to look at the bright moon, lowering his head to think of his hometown, which should be shining under the same bright moon. This hometown had given the poet infinite warmth and relief during his formative years. When the poet was sick and helpless, the coldness of the moonlight in the environment of Yangzhou and the emotional warmth represented by the imagery of his hometown can be contrasted here across time and space. Metaphor and foil were used in the poem to express a feeling of homesickness that all people have but not all people are capable of expressing, in simple, clear, vivid, fresh, simple and intriguing language. Since then, the moon, as a poetic image, has been closely associated with all Chinese people’s expressions of homesickness. If a group of Chinese people is in a foreign country, all it takes is for one of them to exclaim „The moon is so full and bright tonight” to evoke nostalgia in all of them.

Secondly, in terms of the way Tang poems set to music are transmitted, Tang poems such as „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” are typical in their combination of literary and musical beauty. The reason why Tang poems set to music such as „Thoughts on a Tranquil

Night” has been so widely performed is closely related to the fact that the characteristics of the poem itself and the merits of the musical mode in performance complement each other and are mutually reinforcing. In particular, when set to music, it can bring out the beauty of simplicity that comes from the single syllables of Chinese characters, the beauty of rhythm that comes from the combination of different syllables of multiple Chinese characters, the beauty of form that comes from the rhyming of multiple lines of a metrical poem, the beauty of melody, mood, and emotion that comes from the organic combination of Tang poems with vocal and instrumental music and the beauty of harmony that comes from the use of music to harmonize social relations and help them achieve a state of harmony and symbiosis. It is for these reasons that successive Chinese governments, from ancient times to the present, have always attached special importance to musical composition, performance and education, and even since Qin Dynasty there has been a governmental body called the „Music House” that collected folk songs or poems by literati to set to music for court rituals or banquets, and in contemporary China, there are a variety of government-supported social organizations such as writers’ associations, musicians’ associations, literary artists’ associations, and musicians’ associations, as well as professional colleges and universities that train a wide range of literary and artistic creative talents, thus providing a wide scope for the art of poems to be passed on and innovated in contemporary times.

3. An analysis of the musical characteristics of the homesickness-themed Tang poem set to music „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”

3.1. Analysis of song patterns

There are many musical versions composed for „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”, but the one we choose for this article is the version composed by Zhao Jiping. Zhao Ji Ping’s unique perspective on music composition and his ability to combine traditional Chinese culture with Western compositional techniques has led to his highly acclaimed collection „Eight Songs from Tang Poems”. The collection, which features the lyrics of eight famous ancient poems with a unique blend of Chinese and Western musical instruments, was published in 2011 by the Central Conservatory of Music Press, China. The piece is in the form of a single three-part recapitulation, consisting of three sections: the main part, the middle part, and the recapitulation part, with a chorus in the middle part. The whole piece is in 4/4 beat, with a medium tempo and the main tonality is d Shang.

Overall structure	Reproduction of the single trilogy style						
	Prelude	A	Supplementary	B	Interlude	C	Coda
Musical phrases							
Number of bars	4	4+4	4	4+5	2	4+5	4
Modulation and tonality	d Shang	-		d Nature Minor key		d Shang	d Nature Minor key

Table 1. *Overall structure*

Prelude (1-4) consists of 4 bars: a texture consists of pillar chords, septuplet and nonuplet, the last two bars resolve over the i-chord of the d-Shang to prepare the texture for the theme.

The image shows a musical score for the prelude of 'Thoughts on a Tranquil Night'. It is written in 4/4 time and consists of four bars. The first bar starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a septuplet in the right hand and a nonuplet in the left hand. The second bar continues with similar textures. The third bar has a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and includes a *rit.* (ritardando) marking. The fourth bar ends with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a *Tempo* marking, indicating the start of the main theme.

Fig. 1. Li Bai's „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”

Section A (5-16) consists of 8 bars: The presentation structure is an asymmetrical phrase with „short” section followed by „long” section. The second phrase evolves from the first and shows the characteristics of sequence. The texture is all made up of broken chords. The complement (13-16) consists of 4 bars: it compensates for the stability of the termination and reinforces the function of the theme.

The image shows the musical score for Section A of 'Thoughts on a Tranquil Night', which consists of eight bars. The score is presented in two systems. The first system covers bars 5-8, and the second system covers bars 9-12. The melody is written in the treble clef, and the piano accompaniment is in the grand staff (treble and bass clefs). A red box labeled 'A' is placed above the first bar of the first system. The lyrics are in Chinese: '床前明月光，疑似地上霜。举头望明月，低头思故乡。' (Before my bed a pool of light, / As if upon the ground a layer of frost. / I raise my head and gaze at the moon, / I lower my head and think of home.)

72
乡。 噢! 低头思故乡。

Fig. 2. Li Bai's „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”

The B section (17-25) consists of 9 bars: a choral passage that quotes the A section, which can also be seen as a „short first and then long” section structure. The last two bars of the second phrase use an octave rest, while the left hand adds vibraphone music to reach the first high point of the piece.

17
床前明月光, 疑似地上霜。

Fig. 3. Li Bai's „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”

The interlude (26-27) consists of 2 bars: prepares for the recapitulation by lengthening by 2 bars, while the A' section (28-36) consists 9 bars: the recapitulation, with the first phrase is completely repeated and the second half of the second phrase building up to a crescendo as the music jumps upwards to the main note of the d-Shang.

25
床前明月

A'



Fig. 4. Li Bai's „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”

The coda (37-40) consists of 4 bars: Letting the sound come down during elongation. To sum up, the whole piece is a typical repertory triad, with the middle section forming a counterweight to the ends through the chorus, a structural form composed of the principle of repertory, the stable structural scaffolding formed by its ends, which removes the discrete forces created by the contrasts in the middle, and on the other hand restores the main material that initially appears, thus continuing to reinforce its decisive role in the overall composition.

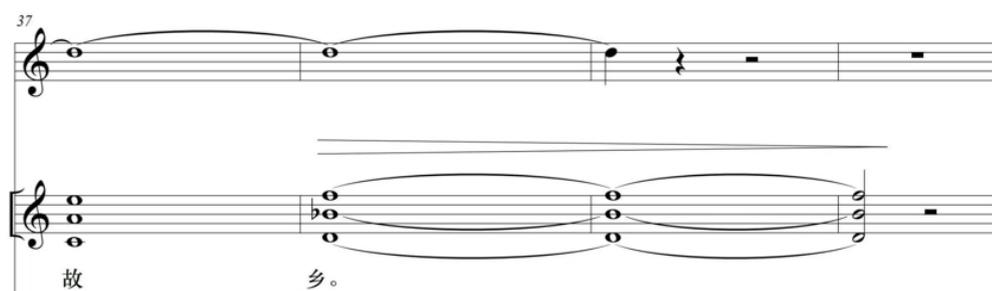


Fig. 5. Li Bai's „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”

It is also important to note that the melody, rhythm, harmony, and use of instruments are all crucial in expressing the emotion in „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” in four ways: firstly, the melody is simple and unvarying throughout, full of the quiet beauty and loneliness of the night. Secondly, the rhythm is relatively simple, using a soft, musical sound with a heavier rhythm at key points to express loneliness and longing more distinctly and more easily for the listener. Thirdly, the harmonies are used to emphasize the mournfulness of the melody. Fourthly, the piano or classical guitar should be the main instrument used in the setting of „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”. The piano has a delicate and bright tone, while the classical guitar emphasizes harmonic and melodic texture and purity, which can play an irreplaceable role in expressing the emotion, atmosphere, and theme of the poem.

3.2. Analysis of singing techniques

Zhao Jiping's score for „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” has developed a unique and individual artistic character in its setting of Tang poems. It focuses on the expression of the mood of „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”. It is a song that would be inadequate if it were sung in either the American or the falsetto style of mixed resonance in folk singing, so a combination of the two is required to avoid shortcomings and to make up for them. Specifically, it is necessary to incorporate the American vocal performance style into the framework of the folk singing style, especially the air singing technique, to create a dark, silent and lonely atmosphere, thus presenting the beauty of both singing styles and combining them into one timbre. This tone creates a sense of „sound and silence” for the listener. However, this makes it much more difficult to sing and requires a higher degree of skill and

artistry. In addition, the singer needs to fully understand Li Bai's true feelings and then 'bring his voice with his feelings', for example, by making a slight pause in the process of singing, with a weak breath or even showing the effect of a broken voice and continuous breath to accurately portray the characteristics of Li Bai's turning thoughts and to realize the "singing" This is a perfect combination of "singing" and "chanting", which ultimately creates the artistic effect of "like a man describing his own words".

3.3. cavity audio embellishing for emotional processing

There is a great difference between Chinese and foreign works in terms of bite, so for singers learning to sing in the American voice, it is important to practice the „outgoing, leading and returning rhymes” of the lyrics when learning ancient Chinese poems and art songs, following the principles of „the flat voice is sorrowful and peaceful, the upper voice is harsh and lifted, the departing voice is clear and far away The rhymes should be 'mournful and peaceful in the flat voice, harsh and lifted in the upper voice, clear and distant in the lower voice, and straight and urgent in the lower voice”. In „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”, the most frequently used rhyme is „ang”: of the twenty words in the poem, the rhymes are „光 (guang)”, „霜 (shuang)” and „乡 (xiang)”. Among the „thirteen rhythms” of our traditional singing theory, the „ang” rhythm has a strong nasal tone and is sung with a piercing nasal closure, which best reflects the rhythm and color of our national vocal music. In „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night”, the words belonging to the „ang” rhythm which accounts for such a large proportion of the rhymes, so care should be taken when singing to close the voice and return to the rhyme in a „nasal piercing” manner to maintain the harmony of the cavity and the stability of the resonance of the head cavity. The poet's loneliness when looking at the moon far away from his homeland and in illness, is thus more appropriately expressed.

4. Conclusion and outlook

In summary, the theme of homesickness occupies an important place among Tang poems set to music and is of great research value. However, as far as the current state of research is concerned, no analysis of its artistic characteristics has been carried out by Chinese and English scholars to date. This is a major regret of the scholarly community. To make up for this regret and lay the foundation for a typical case study in a scientific manner, based on classification of Tang poems set to music, this article focuses on the artistic characteristics of homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music and uses macroscopic panoramic scans twice to simplify the research objects to select the most typical ones. Following this, taking Li Bai's „Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” and Zhao Jiping's corresponding music as typical, the artistic characteristics of homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music are analyzed from the perspectives of song patterns, singing techniques, cavity audio embellishing for emotional processing and making efforts to reveal the laws of compositions and performances of homesickness-themed Tang poems set to music. Our future research on Tang poems set to music can be extended to other types of themes, thus forming a systematic academic outcome.

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