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Transcultural Dialogue of Poetry and Music: Symbolization of Classical Imagery in the Vocal Performance of the Art Song Feng Qiu Huang

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Abstract:
This paper examines the art song Feng Qiu Huang by Li Yan, focusing on the symbolization of classical imagery within its musical and performance dimensions. The study analyzes the cultural connotations of the phoenix and related images, the structural design of the song, and the fusion of Chinese and Western musical languages. By exploring the song's use of the Pentatonic D Yu Mode, its employment of altered tones, and its organization in simple binary form, the paper highlights the work's unique blending of tradition and modernity. Further attention is given to the interpretive demands placed on vocalists, including timbral choices, diction in Mandarin Chinese, and stage practice. The research demonstrates how classical imagery functions as both a cultural symbol and an expressive resource, enabling Feng Qiu Huang to achieve transcultural resonance. Ultimately, the study argues that the song exemplifies the revival and reinterpretation of classical Chinese imagery in contemporary art song, affirming its enduring artistic and cultural significance.

Keywords:
Chinese art song; Feng Qiu Huang; phoenix imagery; Pentatonic D Yu Mode; altered tones; simple binary form; vocal performance; transcultural dialogue

1. The Symbolic Meaning of Classical Imagery in Feng Qiu Huang

In Chinese traditional culture, the phoenix (fenghuang) as a mythological bird has been endowed with rich symbolic meanings. The feng represents the male and the huang represents the female; together they form "fenghuang," symbolizing the harmony of yin and yang, the unity of heaven and earth, and the completeness of human relations. Particularly in literature and art, the phoenix is often used as a metaphor for love. In the Han dynasty fu poem Feng Qiu Huang (《凤求凰》), Sima Xiangru employs the metaphor "O phoenix, O phoenix, return to your homeland" to express his deep affection and persistent pursuit of Zhuo Wenjun. Here, the phoenix is no longer merely an auspicious bird, but one endowed with qualities of loyalty, romantic idealism, and eternal love. According to ancient legend, the phoenix chooses a single mate for life and never seeks another even after its partner's death. This idea of "exclusivity" in love corresponds precisely with the heartfelt lyrics of Feng Qiu Huang, infusing the work with profound cultural resonance.

In the modern context, classical imagery such as the phoenix is no longer a static cultural relic, but is

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reactivated within the musical construction of the art song. In contemporary vocal performance of Feng Qiu Huang, these images acquire renewed vitality through the symbolic language of the lyrics, the emotional progression of the melody, and the expressive vocabulary of the singer. Musically, the work employs the Pentatonic D Yu Mode to construct the melodic framework, supplemented by modern harmonic techniques, thereby achieving both traditional resonance and contemporary auditory appeal.

In summary, the imagery of the phoenix in Feng Qiu Huang functions as both a cultural symbol and the emotional nucleus of the work. In modern performance practice, the phoenix is not a mere reiteration of antiquity; rather, through musical and multimedia reinterpretation, it undergoes a kind of cultural "rebirth," becoming one of the most expressive symbols in transcultural and transtemporal dialogue.

2. Musical Analysis of Feng Qiu Huang

Li Yan's art song Feng Qiu Huang is a representative work that portrays an ancient story of romantic love. Its musical structure, harmonic design, and emotional expression demonstrate layered artistry. A detailed analysis of this piece should proceed from three main aspects: formal structure, harmonic features, and emotional expression.

2.1 Formal Structure

The song adopts a simple binary form (A–B, repeated), creating a sense of balance and progression through repetition and contrast. The structure can be summarized as follows:

Section	Prelude	A	Interlude	B	Interlude	A	Interlude	B
Measure Count	5	8	2	8	5	8	2	9
Measures	1–5	6–23			24–28	29–47		
Key modulation	Pentatonic D Yu Mode							

The tonal framework is based on the Pentatonic D Yu Mode.

The piece begins with a five-measure prelude in free rhythm, where soft chords and arpeggios outline the main thematic motif. This introduction creates a serene, classical atmosphere and sets the emotional tone for the entire work.

The A section (mm. 6–13) presents the main theme, constructed with four balanced phrases in a traditional Chinese manner of "qi–cheng–zhuan–he" (initiation, continuation, transition, and closure). The opening motif (mm. 6–7) provides the core thematic material, from which subsequent development—including the prelude—derives. Subtle intervallic changes and the use of altered tones convey emotional progression, while smooth, lyrical melodies express the protagonist's longing for love. Harmonically, this section employs simple accompaniment to highlight the expressive power of the voice and the poetic quality of the lyrics.

The B section contrasts with A by shifting tessitura and introducing downward melodic lines. Through descending chordal progressions in the accompaniment, this section conveys hesitation and inner unrest (see Figure 1). The melody here is more dramatic, with chromatic tones outside the primary mode, intensifying the sense of emotional struggle.

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Figure 1: musical excerpt of B section

The interlude (mm. 24–28) recalls the thematic material, pulling back the heightened emotion before repeating the entire A–B sequence. The coda revisits the opening theme, gradually softening the dynamics and creating a sense of cyclical unity.

The harmonic design of Feng Qiu Huang reflects the sophistication of the art song genre. The work combines the characteristics of the Pentatonic D Yu Mode with harmonic progressions derived from Western tonal theory. This hybrid approach enriches the song with both traditional Chinese resonance and the harmonic depth of modern music.

The expression of emotion is the most captivating aspect of the piece. Each section is endowed with specific affective qualities: in the A section, the melody and accompaniment imitate the timbre of the guqin through arpeggiated textures, delicately conveying Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun's longing for pure love. In contrast, the B section intensifies tension by employing dissonant harmonies and wave-like descending melodies, alluding to the inner struggles and uncertainties of love. At its emotional climax, the phoenix metaphor reappears, symbolizing an unwavering pursuit of eternal affection.

Through its ingenious formal design, rich harmonic palette, and profound portrayal of human sentiment, Li Yan's Feng Qiu Huang succeeds in transforming a classical love story into a vivid musical experience that resonates deeply with listeners.

2.2 Analysis of Classical Imagery in the Lyrics

Imagery (yixiang) constitutes a core category of Chinese aesthetic thought. In the realm of music, imagery often refers to the symbolic figures embedded within a work. The text of Feng Qiu Huang depicts an ancient romantic love story, employing numerous classical images through the rhetorical device of metonymy to convey the intensity of emotional longing.

The most prominent metaphor is the phoenix, which in Chinese antiquity symbolized auspiciousness but also frequently stood for love between men and women. The feng and huang together suggest the union of a talented scholar and a beautiful lady, serving as the central image in the love story of Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun. The image of paired birds flying freely becomes a metaphor for the pursuit of love, expressing the yearning for an ideal union.

Another crucial image is the qin (zither). In classical culture, the qin and se (two plucked string instruments)

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symbolized marital harmony. The lyric line “Let the qin speak for me” signifies replacing unspoken emotions with music, embodying expectation and intimate confession.

Together, these classical images construct an idealized vision of love infused with a strong sense of classical romanticism. Through these symbols, the author conveys both profound admiration and a longing for eternal affection.

3. Vocal Techniques and Stage Practice

The vocal performance of Feng Qiu Huang requires not only mastery of traditional bel canto technique but also an understanding of Chinese aesthetic principles. The work demands an integration of Western vocal training with the expressive nuances of Chinese classical imagery, forming a distinctive mode of interpretation.

3.1 Breath Management and Vocal Placement

As the melodic line often unfolds in long phrases with legato motion, the singer must exercise refined breath control. Effective appoggio provides sufficient support for sustained tones and dynamic shaping. In particular, the repetition of key words such as “phoenix” (feng) and “return” (gui) requires the singer to maintain clarity while allowing emotional intensity to accumulate gradually. Correct placement in the resonating cavities ensures brightness and transparency, evoking the ethereal quality of classical poetry.

3.2 Timbre and Emotional Coloring

The song calls for a timbre that is both warm and delicate, avoiding excessive dramatic weight. In the A section, the tone should remain light and lyrical, symbolizing the tenderness of love. In contrast, the B section necessitates a darker coloring and increased resonance, reflecting inner conflict and yearning. The nuanced use of timbre allows the singer to embody the dual dimensions of lyrical intimacy and emotional turbulence.

3.3 Articulation of Chinese Lyrics

Unlike Western art songs, Feng Qiu Huang is sung in Mandarin Chinese, where the articulation of tones and vowels plays a decisive role. The singer must balance vocal line legato with clear diction of tonal inflections, ensuring that semantic precision does not disrupt musical fluidity. This intersection of linguistic clarity and vocal resonance is a central challenge of Chinese art song performance.

3.4 Stage Presentation

On stage, the performance of Feng Qiu Huang transcends mere vocal display. Gestural language, posture, and emotional embodiment are essential to communicating the cultural imagery of the phoenix. For instance, a poised stance and restrained hand movements can suggest the dignified grace of classical femininity, while subtle expressions of the eyes can convey longing and affection. The integration of music, body, and imagery transforms the performance into a holistic artistic experience.

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4. The Meaning and Value of Classical Imagery

4.1 Cultural Continuity and Innovation

The incorporation of classical imagery in Feng Qiu Huang demonstrates the continuity of Chinese aesthetic tradition. The phoenix, qin, and other symbolic figures are drawn from ancient texts but reinterpreted through modern musical language. This process reflects the dynamic interplay between inheritance and innovation: the past is not merely preserved but actively re-created for contemporary audiences.

4.2 Emotional Universality

Although rooted in Chinese cultural symbolism, the imagery of Feng Qiu Huang conveys emotions of love, longing, and fidelity that resonate universally. In a global context, the phoenix transcends its cultural boundaries to become a metaphor for eternal love that can be understood across different traditions. This universality enables the work to function as a site of intercultural communication, inviting listeners from diverse backgrounds into its emotional world.

4.3 Artistic Value in Performance

The presence of classical imagery enriches not only the lyrical content but also the interpretive space for performers. By engaging with symbols such as the phoenix, singers are encouraged to embody layered emotional states that surpass literal textual meaning. This expands the expressive potential of the art song as a genre, demonstrating how performance can serve as a medium for philosophical and aesthetic reflection.

4.4 Contemporary Significance

In the contemporary era, the revival of classical imagery within works like Feng Qiu Huang contributes to cultural identity formation and international artistic dialogue. It affirms the relevance of traditional symbols in modern creative expression, while also positioning Chinese art song within the global art music landscape. The phoenix thus becomes not only a figure of love but also a symbol of cultural regeneration and transcultural dialogue.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of Feng Qiu Huang demonstrates that classical imagery is not confined to the domain of ancient literature, but acquires new life when integrated into the medium of modern art song. Through the musical framework of the Pentatonic D Yu Mode, the strategic use of altered tones, and the balanced structure of simple binary form, the work achieves both cultural authenticity and innovative expressivity.

On the performative level, the song requires singers to synthesize Western bel canto technique with the aesthetic nuances of Chinese poetic imagery, thus exemplifying a hybridized artistic practice. The phoenix, as the central symbol, embodies both fidelity in love and cultural regeneration, while the imagery of the qin reinforces the theme of harmonious union.

This study concludes that Feng Qiu Huang represents more than a musical setting of a classical text. It

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serves as a bridge between antiquity and modernity, between Chinese tradition and global music practice. The piece not only preserves cultural memory but also reinterprets it for contemporary audiences, underscoring the role of classical imagery as a vital medium for transcultural dialogue.

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