

Technical Reconstruction and Artistic Expression in Bel Canto Performances of Chinese Works from the Perspective of Aesthetic Differences

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Abstract: *From the perspective of aesthetic differences between China and the West, this paper rejects the one-sided emphasis on either technique or style and advocates a pragmatic view of vocal aesthetics, namely that “the cat that catches mice is a good cat, whether it is black or white.” It provides an in-depth analysis of the essential differences between Chinese and Western traditions in timbral aesthetics, linguistic logic, and emotional expression, and argues that bel canto singing must undergo “technical reconstruction” when used to perform Chinese works. This reconstruction includes adjustments to the focus of resonance, the flexibility of the articulatory organs, and the point of breath support in accordance with the phonetic and prosodic patterns of Chinese, while maintaining the openness and smoothness of the bel canto vocal tract. The paper further explores how artistic expression characterized by the integration of voice and emotion can be achieved through technical means. It aims to identify a performance path that preserves the scientific vocal mechanism of bel canto while embodying the spirit and charm of Chinese national aesthetics, thereby providing theoretical support and practical reference for the international expression of Chinese vocal art.*

Keywords: Bel canto singing; Chinese works; Aesthetic differences; Technical reconstruction; Artistic expression; Integration of voice and emotion.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PRACTICAL DILEMMA IN THE CHINESE ADAPTATION OF BEL CANTO SINGING

Introduced into China in the early twentieth century, bel canto singing, with its distinctive artistic appeal and its scientific basis in the physiological principles of human phonation, has taken root and gained wide recognition in China through the sustained efforts of several generations of vocal educators. However, in contemporary vocal performance and teaching practice, an awkward phenomenon is frequently observed: singers may demonstrate refined technique but fail to convey the proper aesthetic flavor. Although they possess a wide vocal range, brilliant high notes, and clear resonance, their performances of classical poetry-based works such as *The Great River Flows East and Night Mooring* by Maple Bridge, or modern and contemporary art songs such as *I Love You, China*, often leave audiences feeling that “the flavor is not quite right.”

The absence of this “flavor” is, in essence, a misalignment between vocal technique and the aesthetic object. Some singers adhere uncritically to the Western paradigm of bel canto singing, treating it as a rigid “mold” and imposing it mechanically on Chinese works. As a result, their singing falls into the dilemma of “having sound but no words” or “having emotion but no expressive charm,” thereby losing its indigenous character. The root cause lies in a failure to clarify the primary and secondary relationship between technique and art. Vocal technique is not an end in itself, but a means of serving artistic expression. Bel canto originally means “beautiful singing,” and its core has always been the pursuit of a beautiful voice. Therefore, when a specific technical norm, such as an overly vertical laryngeal position, hinders the clear articulation of the Chinese language, including the pronunciation of initial consonants and the resolution of rhyme finals, as well as the communication of artistic conception, that technique should be modified or even reconstructed.

The “technical reconstruction” discussed in this paper is grounded precisely in this pragmatic position. This study argues for breaking down rigid boundaries between Chinese and Western singing traditions and establishing a dialectical mode of thinking in which the style of the work and the expression of emotion are taken as the highest criteria. That is, while preserving the artistic and scientific foundations of bel canto singing, vocal technique should be localized, adjusted, and reshaped in accordance with the linguistic features and aesthetic requirements of Chinese works, so as to fully present their distinctive linguistic beauty and beauty of artistic conception. This is not

only an urgent practical issue, but also an inevitable path for Chinese vocal art to move toward greater maturity and confidence.

2. AESTHETIC DIFFERENCES: THE FUNDAMENTAL BASIS FOR TECHNICAL CHOICE

Vocal technique is never an isolated physical movement; rather, it is the projection of aesthetic consciousness onto physiological function. As discussed above, the reason bel canto singing often appears “unsuited” to Chinese works lies in the essential differences between China and the West in cultural genes, aesthetic logic, and linguistic phonology. Without clarifying these differences, technical training alone may easily move in the wrong direction. Therefore, this section analyzes the fundamental distinctions between Chinese and Western aesthetics from three dimensions: auditory aesthetics, linguistic logic, and emotional expression. This analysis provides the theoretical basis for the subsequent discussion of technical reconstruction.

2.1 The Contest of Auditory Aesthetics: The Tension between Point and Line

At the underlying level of aesthetic logic, Chinese and Western aesthetics differ significantly in their emphasis on “image” and “form,” as well as on “point” and “line.” This difference directly determines the direction in which vocal sound is shaped. Western aesthetics has been deeply influenced by ancient Greek sculpture and geometry, emphasizing scientific objectivity and three-dimensional structure. When projected onto vocal art, this aesthetic manifests itself in the pursuit of verticality and resonant cavities. Bel canto singing requires a lowered larynx and a raised soft palate in order to construct a deep pharyngeal passage, pursuing mask resonance and a metallic timbre. This vocal aesthetic resembles Western oil painting or architecture: it values a rich tonal foundation, a grand sense of space, and absolute unity across vocal registers, seeking a solid and penetrating sonic entity.

By contrast, traditional Chinese aesthetics is grounded in the philosophy of the unity of heaven and humanity and values dynamic spiritual resonance and linear beauty. Chinese listeners’ aesthetic expectations for the voice do not center on great volume or heavy resonance, but rather on a high-positioned, forward, and bright timbre, often described as smooth, rounded, and lustrous. The vocal line in Chinese singing is comparable to brush movement in calligraphy: it should flow naturally, rise and fall with expressive inflection, and remain continuous and resilient like a line. The aesthetic conflict between the two traditions therefore lies in the following point: if singers mechanically adopt the vertical aesthetic of bel canto, excessively lower the larynx, and over-expand the throat, they may gain vocal thickness, but often at the cost of flexibility and brightness. The voice may become hollow or dark, thereby losing the vitality and expressive charm required by Chinese works.

2.2 The Misalignment of Linguistic Logic: The Tension between Vowels and Rhyme Patterns

Language is the carrier of singing, and the major differences between Chinese and Western language systems constitute the core cause of technical difficulty. Western languages such as Italian are typically vowel-dominant. Their pronunciation is clear and relatively simple; consonants are often placed at the beginning of syllables, and there are no lexical tones. These linguistic features allow bel canto singing to extend vowels to the greatest possible degree and to modify the voice freely within a broad resonant cavity, without excessive concern that word meaning will be distorted. In other words, the extreme legato pursued in bel canto singing is built precisely on the seamless connection of vowels.

In sharp contrast, Chinese is a rhyme-dominant language with a unique threefold structure of initial consonant, final, and tone. The pronunciation of Chinese characters stresses the integrity of the initial, medial vowel, and final, while each character also carries one of the four tones. In traditional Chinese aesthetics, clear diction has always been the prerequisite for rounded tone. In terms of phonetic logic, Western languages emphasize directness: the transition from consonant to vowel and from one vowel to another should be simple, decisive, and immediate. Chinese, however, places greater emphasis on process, namely the articulation and shaping of rhyme. In vocal rhythm, this gives rise to the distinctive aesthetic of a smooth, finely polished vocal line and multiple turns within a single syllable. As vocal theory emphasizes, “speech sound determines timbre, and verbal meaning determines artistic conception.” If a character’s tone is altered because the singer blindly pursues bel canto resonance, or if the rhyme final is blurred in order to maintain the vocal tract, what the audience first perceives is semantic rupture and the loss of expressive charm, rather than the grandeur or beauty of the voice.

This misalignment of linguistic logic ultimately produces direct conflict at the level of physiological vocal

mechanism. To pursue vocal smoothness and unity, bel canto singing often requires a stable, lowered larynx and a fully opened posterior oral cavity. This relatively fixed vocal state can easily make Chinese diction unclear or lead to the phenomenon in which sound envelops and obscures words. Traditional Chinese singing, by contrast, requires the initial to be articulated firmly, the medial vowel to be released clearly, and the final to be completed accurately. This places high demands on the flexibility of articulatory organs such as the lips, teeth, and tongue. When the complex Chinese requirements for articulating initials and resolving rhyme finals encounter bel canto's pursuit of a relatively fixed oral position, the two form a direct physiological confrontation. The tendency to mispronounce words for the sake of vocal beauty essentially replaces the dynamic resonance of Chinese with the open resonance of Western vowels, thereby severing the organic connection between language and music.

2.3 Divergent Paths of Emotional Expression: The Confrontation between Drama and Artistic Conception

The ultimate orientation of aesthetic difference lies in the different cultural cores of emotional expression. Western opera emerged after the Renaissance and emphasizes the liberation of human nature and dramatic conflict. Its aesthetic core is theatricality. Whether in Puccini or Verdi, works often require singers to reveal characters' love, hatred, passion, and conflict through strong vocal contrast and grand bursts of volume. This aesthetic is outward-facing and expansive, requiring singers to possess powerful vocal function capable of filling large theatrical spaces.

Chinese art, by contrast, is deeply influenced by Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist culture. Its aesthetic core lies in artistic conception and implicitness. Chinese works value the ideal of being joyful without excess and sorrowful without harm, and they pursue the beauty of suggestive openness in which words may end while meaning continues indefinitely. Whether in art songs based on classical poetry or in folk songs, such works often require delicate tone, subtle changes in timbre, and the transmission of emotion through scenery. This aesthetic is inward-looking and expressive in a freehand manner. It does not require absolute vocal volume, but it does require the voice to possess strong expressive power and vivid imagery.

Therefore, when many bel canto singers perform Chinese works, they are accustomed to applying the powerful voice and strong dramatic tension used in arias to the treatment of delicate Chinese pieces. The result is often excessive force, which destroys the original elegant and far-reaching artistic conception of the work. Such performances may sound Westernized in accent and manner, lacking the cultivated literary quality of Chinese culture.

In summary, the aesthetic differences between China and the West do not imply superiority or inferiority; rather, they reflect different cultural genes. Western aesthetics tends toward three-dimensionality, scientific structure, and dramatization, whereas Chinese aesthetics tends toward linearity, freehand expression, and expressive charm. This difference determines that bel canto singing cannot simply be transplanted into Chinese works; instead, it must undergo technical reconstruction. While maintaining the breath support and openness of the vocal tract in bel canto singing, namely its scientific foundation, we need to move the focus of resonance forward to adapt to linear aesthetics, liberate the articulatory organs to accommodate Chinese phonology, and control vocal color in accordance with the expression of artistic conception.

3. ARTISTIC TREATMENT: AESTHETIC-ORIENTED TECHNICAL RECONSTRUCTION

If aesthetic differences constitute the theoretical basis, then technical reconstruction provides the practical path. In the process of performing Chinese works through bel canto singing, we should not force the works to adapt to technique in a Procrustean manner. Instead, we should adhere to the pragmatic principle that "means serve ends" and carry out a Chinese-style refinement and reconstruction of bel canto technique. This section discusses how artistic treatment that "makes Western techniques serve Chinese expression" can be achieved from three dimensions: vocal production, diction, and vocal ornamentation.

3.1 The Chinese-Style Transformation of Vocal Technique: Fine Adjustments to Resonance and Timbre

Bel canto singing emphasizes the expansive volume produced by full resonance, whereas Chinese works often require more delicate and varied timbres. Therefore, while preserving the scientific foundation of deep breath support and a stable larynx in bel canto singing, it is necessary to make precise adjustments to the balance of resonance.

Traditional bel canto pursues the fullness and depth of chest resonance. However, when performing Chinese works, especially folk song adaptations or songs based on classical poetry, excessive chest resonance can make the voice sound heavy and suppressed. The proportion of chest resonance should therefore be appropriately reduced, and the focus of resonance should be shifted upward. While maintaining an open pharyngeal cavity, singers should make greater use of head, nasal, and mask resonance. This high-positioned vocal state can ensure vocal penetration while also producing the bright and clear timbre favored in Chinese aesthetics, making the voice sound more agile and intimate.

Chinese national singing, especially Chinese opera, places great emphasis on the integration of full voice and falsetto, often using falsetto or mixed voice in the upper register to express an ethereal and distant artistic conception. Traditional bel canto, especially in dramatic tenor and soprano singing, tends to rely on full-voice function, or chest-dominant production, to reach high notes and display vocal power. When handling the high notes of Chinese works, singers should not pursue only fullness and volume. Instead, they should draw on the Chinese operatic aesthetic of “a cloud veiling the moon” and use the mixed-voice technique of bel canto by incorporating an appropriate degree of falsetto quality into the full voice. This can not only address the problem of squeezed or blocked high notes in Chinese national singing, but also make the upper register sound transparent, relaxed, and marked by an Eastern sense of implicit beauty, thereby preventing the voice from sounding overly direct or aggressive.

3.2 The Scientific Standardization of Articulation and Diction: Balancing the Relationship between Words and Vocal Sound

Language is the foundation of vocal music. The greatest difficulty in singing Chinese through bel canto lies in balancing the bel canto resonant space with Chinese diction, or in placing Chinese characters within the vocal tract. Bel canto emphasizes the continuity of vowels, whereas Chinese singing values clear diction and rounded tone. If singers completely adopt bel canto habits of articulation, the initial consonants may become unclear. If they articulate entirely according to ordinary speech habits, the vocal line may be disrupted. It is therefore necessary to establish the concept that “words are carried within the voice, and the voice contains the words.” The bel canto principle of vowel unification may be used to handle the Thirteen Rhymes of Chinese. When articulating the initial consonant, the movement should be agile and firm, but it must not disturb the stability of the larynx. When sustaining the medial vowel, the sound should quickly return to the bel canto resonant space, maintaining verticality and continuity in the vocal line.

Chinese rhyme-final articulation is highly diverse, including nasal finals and finals ending in *i* or *u*. In performance, the movement of resolving the rhyme final should be handled in a rounded and natural manner, as the organic closure of a musical phrase rather than as a rigid attachment. The key to overcoming the problem of sound enveloping and obscuring words lies in placing the initial consonant on the point of breath support, allowing the initial to be carried by the breath as it moves out of the oral cavity. In this way, the effect that “diction carries great weight and naturally moves the listener” can be achieved.

3.3 The Stylized Treatment of Vocal Ornamentation and Breath: The Source of Expressive Charm

Expressive charm is the soul of Chinese vocal art, and it often arises from refined breath control and the use of vocal ornamentation. Bel canto singing emphasizes deep and sustained breath, such as diaphragmatic support, which provides the driving force for performing Chinese works with broad melodic lines, such as *The Yellow River Lament*. However, Chinese works often contain subtle emotional fluctuations and distinctive breathing points. In addition to maintaining strong breath support, singers must also learn to use techniques such as hidden breaths and quick catch-breaths, as well as breath accents and pauses, so as to convey the artistic conception of Chinese culture through variations in breath intensity. The frequent use of portamento, grace notes, and vibrato, including straight tone and flexible vibrato, is crucial to the stylistic expression of Chinese music. In traditional folk singing, these techniques sometimes depend on localized muscular movement in the throat, which can easily lead to vocal tension. Therefore, all techniques of vocal ornamentation should be built on stable breath support and a relaxed larynx.

The path of technical reconstruction for performing Chinese works through bel canto singing lies at its core in breaking away from dogma and adhering to pragmatism. In other words, all technical means, whether bel canto resonance or Chinese diction, should serve the style and emotion of the work. Through the upward adjustment of the resonance focus, the balance between words and vocal sound, and the stylized treatment of breath and vocal

ornamentation, singers can use a scientific vocal mechanism to convey authentic Chinese expressive charm and truly achieve an integration of Chinese and Western approaches, with voice and emotion fully fused.

4. CONCLUSION: INCLUSIVENESS AND THE INTEGRATION OF VOICE AND EMOTION

Starting from the perspective of aesthetic differences, this paper has argued that the tension between bel canto singing and Chinese works is, in essence, a dialectical unity between scientific vocal function and national aesthetic spirit. The breath and resonance of bel canto provide the scientific basis for protecting the voice, serving as the “scientific vessel,” while the linguistic expressive charm and linear aesthetics of Chinese works constitute the artistic soul, or the “national wine.” In performing Chinese works, singers should not act as mere “carriers” of technique, but as “designers” of art. It is necessary to break down rigid boundaries between singing traditions, adhere to the principle of taking one’s own aesthetic needs as the foundation while making use of what is available, and effectively solve problems such as sound enveloping and obscuring words and emotion failing to match the work through the localized reconstruction of resonance focus, diction and rhyme-final articulation, and breath-based vocal ornamentation.

Looking ahead, Chinese vocal art should uphold an artistic view characterized by functionalism and inclusiveness. Technically, it should absorb all scientific methods that can extend artistic vitality and optimize vocal quality; stylistically, it should preserve all expressive means capable of accurately conveying the artistic conception of Eastern aesthetics. When technique becomes invisible and pure emotion and expressive charm flow naturally, the highest state of integration between Chinese and Western approaches is achieved. Singing the most moving Chinese voice through the most scientific method is not only the inevitable path for the Chinese adaptation of bel canto singing, but also the key to bringing Chinese vocal art to the world.

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