

The Music Creation Characteristics of Chinese National Opera "Regret for the Past"

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ABSTRACT

The opera "Regret for the Past" is a milestone in the history of Chinese national opera. It was adapted from Lu Xun's novel of the same name and composed by composer Shi Guangnan in 1981, and the libretto was written by Wang Quan and Han Wei. This opera combines traditional Chinese music and Western opera elements. This paper will take the music creation of "Regret for the Past" as the breakthrough point, and focus on the characteristics of music creation in this work and the inspiration of this work to the creation of Chinese national opera, in order to reveal the important position and artistic contribution of "Regret for the Past" in the development history of national opera, in order to provide beneficial inspiration for the creation of Chinese national opera.

KEYWORDS

National opera; Regret for the past; Music creation; Shi Guangnan

1 The Creation Background and Significance of "Regret for the Past"

1.1 Creation Background

"Regret for the Past" is a classical masterpiece of Chinese national operas. It is adapted from the novel of the same name by the famous modern Chinese writer Lu Xun. This opera was created in 1981 by composer Shi Guangnan and librettists Wang Quan and Han Wei, in order to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Lu Xun. It is not only a tribute to Lu Xun in the form of opera, but also an important exploration of the creation of Chinese national opera. At the beginning of the 20th century, China was in an era of great social change, with the victory of the Revolution of 1911 overthrowing the Qing Dynasty, but the new Republic of China did not bring the real social stability and prosperity. In this turbulent social background, Lu Xun, as one of the leading figures of the New Culture Movement, expressed criticism of the old society and pursuit of new ideas through the literary creation. The novel "Regret of the Past" reflects the conflict between new ideas and traditional ideas during the May Fourth Period. It describes the story of a young man and woman, Juansheng and Zijun, who pursue free love and resist the constraints of feudal families^[1]. Shi Guangnan strives to convey the emotional changes of the characters and the complexity of the social environment through musical language.

1.2 Creative Significance

The birth of the national opera "Regret for the Past" marks a major turning point in the creation of Chinese opera, and has made outstanding contributions to the development of Chinese music

and drama art. First of all, this opera breaks through the limitations of traditional drama with the innovative musical means and unique narrative structure, so as to create vivid characters, and depicts a delicate emotional world. Secondly, it skillfully integrates the expression forms of Western opera with the elements of traditional Chinese drama, and fully expresses the inner heart of the characters with expressive arias and recitatives. At the same time, it uses multiple forms such as chorus and ensembles to set the mood, and creates a highly infectious musical drama experience. Thirdly, "Regret for the Past" innovates the narrative techniques of time and space. It breaks the limitation of traditional linear narrative and skillfully connects six scenes taking the cycle of four seasons as a clue, to show the changes and tragedies of characters' fate in the circulation of time and space, inspire later opera creators to boldly explore new possibilities of narrative structures and expand the expression of opera. Finally, the artistic value of "Regret for the Past" is reflected in the level of music and drama, and this opera profoundly reflects the profound thoughts on social contradictions, human predicaments and fate tragedies in Lu Xu's novel. This deep connotation gives the opera an artistic charm beyond the times and regions, so this opera is a milestone work in the history of Chinese national opera, and a representative work of Chinese opera to get rid of the "post-colonial constraints".

2 The Philosophical and Aesthetic Characteristics

2.1 Integration of Tradition and Realism

The national music opera "Regret for the Past" has integrated the Chinese traditional music art with the realistic drama, and embodied the distinct national characteristics and the realistic spirit in the aspects of music language, character shaping, theme expression and so on^[2]. First of all, in terms of musical language, there is a large number of Chinese folk music elements in "Regret for the Past", including Chinese opera singing, folk song and popular tune, and national instrumental music. For example, the lead actress Zijun's verses incorporate the elegance and delicacy of Yue Opera, while the lead actor Juansheng's verses borrow the masculine and fervor of Peking Opera. With the integration of traditional music language, the opera "Regret for the Past" not only inherits the aesthetic essence of traditional Chinese music, but also fully expresses the emotion and fate of the characters. Secondly, in the aspect of character shaping, the character images revealed in the verse of "Regret for the Past" have distinct personalities and strong realistic significance. Zijun is an intellectual woman who pursues freedom and longs for love, but she finally leaves in sorrow under the oppression of feudal ethics. Juansheng is a figure who pursues progress and sympathizes with the weak, but he cannot break free from the constraints of poverty and society, finally hurts Zijun against his will, and leaves only a lament of "what is this for". This kind of character image shaped by singing reflects the social reality of the specific era, and leaves a deep space for people to think. Finally, in the aspect of theme expression, "Regret for the Past" deeply reveals the destruction of feudal ethics to individual fate. The love tragedy of Zijun and Juansheng is exactly the portrayal of the feudal ethics that stifles women's liberation and hinders the social progress. Through the appeal of arias and the conflict of drama, the opera accuses the evil of the feudal ethics, expresses the desire for freedom, equality and progress, and reflects the criticism of the society at that time.

2.2 Integration of Lyricism and Drama

Lyricism is the core element of "Regret for the Past". Its melodies are beautiful and full of emotion, and through the performer's singing, the characters' innermost emotions are vividly displayed. The lyricism of "Regret for the Past" is mainly reflected in the part of "The Wind is

Blowing”, which is a selection of the scene of autumn. In the melodies of “The Wind is Blowing”, the heavy and graceful melody is compelling, and its fluctuating movement and long melodic lines are unforgettable. By expressing the changes of Zijun’s emotions, this opera work is lifelike in the conflict between musical expression and drama. In addition, there are many descriptions of the past and inner monologues and reflections in the work, which show Zijun’s experience from sweet love to life collapse, fully reflect the drama of contradictions, and inspire the audience’s pity for Zijun’s unfortunate life. Especially when singing “You suddenly hit the storm, the sweet laughter is drowned”, Zijun’s feeling of being at a loss for the sudden changes in her life is vividly displayed. At this time, the composition technique combining recitations and arias pushes the plot to a new climax and further strengthen the dramatic effect of the work. At the same time, in the paragraph of “Life, life, I think hard for you”, Shi Guangnan uses a series of treble to express Zijun’s infinite exclamation on life, and lyrically show Zijun’s intrapersonal changes at this time^[3]. In short, Shi Guangnan uses language and appropriate melodies to highlight and render the dramatic conflict in “The Wind is Blowing”, and give the work full tension. At the same time, he uses affectionate and simple musical language to express the inner monologue of the characters, create a strong lyrical atmosphere and form a unique artistic style, so that the final work itself is highly unified with the characters.

2.3 Integrate Western Music

In the “Regret for the Past”, Shi Guangnan cleverly integrates the characteristics of Western music into the national opera, and creates a unique and moving musical style. This opera not only innovates in musical forms, but also realizes the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures in content and expression ways^[4]. To be specific, Shi Guangnan boldly uses the harmony techniques of Western music in harmony, melody and instrument arrangement in the music creation of “Regret for the Past”, thus making the music more colorful and clearly structured. For example, in the aria part of “A Touch of Sunset” in the opera, the use of multi-part harmony structure makes the melody more three-dimensional and expressive. In addition, the arrangement of musical instruments is another highlight of this work. In “Regret for the Past”, Shi Guangnan not only uses Western strings, brass, woodwind and other instruments in the composition of an orchestra, but also adds traditional Chinese instruments such as erhu, pipa, flute, etc., so that the music set off the grand atmosphere of Western music, and is full of the charm of traditional Chinese culture. For example, in the duet of “Wisteria” that reflects the Zijun and Juansheng’s love, Shi Guangnan uses the softness of Western strings and the singing style of Western opera to make this part of the music express both Eastern charm and the tearful and expressive nature of Western music, and give people strong auditory enjoyment and emotional resonance.

3 The Inspiration for the Creation of National Opera

3.1 Melody Innovation: Break the Traditional Framework

The novel creation ideas of “Regret for the Past” created by Shi Guangnan provide valuable inspiration for the development of Chinese national opera. First, this opera breaks the inherent framework of traditional opera, adds elements of Western drama to the lengthy recitatives and stylized arias, and portrays characters with simple and powerful lyrics and crisp rhythmic tunes, which give the opera a more contemporary and vital form of expression. Second, Shi Guangnan focuses on drawing inspiration from Chinese folk music and Western opera. He integrates a large number of modes, rhythms and tone forms of Chinese folk music in “Regret for the Past”, and draws

on the harmonic texture and polyphony of Western opera to create melodies that are full of national customs and have an international vision, which not only enhances the singability and appeal of the songs, but also expands the musical expression space of national opera^[5]. Many popular passages in "Regret for the Past", such as "Charming Summer Evening" and "Let Love pour out of the heart", fully reflect the melody innovation, sing the inner world of the characters and the style of the times, and become the classic melody fragments in the history of Chinese national opera. It is thus clear that "Regret for the Past" has opened up a new road for Chinese national opera, shows the spirit of jumping out of the traditional framework and daring to explore, and inspires later creators to constantly break through the inherent mode to improve the artistic expression of national opera.

3.2 Diverse Forms: Break through Traditional Structures

In the national opera "Regret for the Past", Shi Guangnan boldly innovates the creative structure. He breaks the linear narrative structure of traditional opera, adopts the non-linear method of multi-perspective switching, and expresses the plot with the time sequence of spring, summer, autumn and winter and the clue of six coherent scenes, and then integrates the fate of characters in Lu Xun's novels with the changes of the times through the transformation of time and space. It not only shows the social image of a specific historical period, but also depicts the struggle and hesitation of the characters' inner world. This innovative structure enhances the drama of the plot and allows the audience to deeply understand the emotional entanglements and ideological transformation of the characters. The "Spring" in "Regret for the Past" includes the song "Heavy Past Events Come to My Heart". The "Summer" includes the duet "Wisteria" and "Charming Summer Evening", etc. The expand the department "Autumn" includes Zijun's arias "The Wind is Blowing" and "Autumn Nocturna", etc. The "Winter" includes "Unlucky Life" and "We Cannot be Separated", etc. The recapitulation "Spring" is also the final song "The Ancient City Silently Looks Forward to Spring". It perfectly reproduces the ternary form, and makes the whole work appear symmetrical and unified^[6]. In addition, "Regret for the Past" also breaks the separation between "singing" and "speaking" in traditional opera, integrates the two together, and uses a large number of "speaking" to narrate the plot with natural and smooth language, so as to portray the dialogues of characters vividly. Based on this, it integrates a large number of musical passages with national characteristics, which not only sets off the atmosphere, but expresses the emotions of the characters^[7].

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