

“New Music” for “New Spirit”--School Music and Songs in Modern China

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Abstract: School music and songs in China refer to the singing culture in the early 20th century with the establishment of new schools. They generally refer to the music classes or songs created for school singing. The new music of modern times, represented by school music and songs, has entered a new stage. Due to the special background of the times, the school music has been cherishing the most valuable quality of modern music thoughts since its birth: the spirit of resistance to the old forces and the passion of patriotism. School songs created a new era in the history of Chinese music, and had a great impact on the development of the whole modern history.

1. Introduction

The new music at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries marks the beginning of a new stage in the history of Chinese music. This new music refers to the creation of new songs represented by school music by learning western music. The compilation and creation of school music songs has become the beginning of the development of new music in the 20th century. Its rise is not from the demand of China for its noumenon, but for the purpose of reforming Chinese society and realizing ideological enlightenment. The emergence of this pragmatism music value has a profound historical background.

2. The Background of the Rise of School Music and Songs

As early as the Tang Dynasty, western religious chants have been introduced into China. This can be proved in *Ancient Roman Nestorian Hymn for Worshipping the Trinity* of 635 A.D. discovered in Dunhuang. In the Yuan Dynasty, there was a “chant” activity in the Catholic Church which was established in most of the capital cities at that time. In the Ming Dynasty, western music once again entered China with the ancient piano offered by Italian missionary Matthew Ricci to the court. But none of this allowed western music to enter China on a large scale, but only in private churches run by courts and Christian missionaries. During the Westernization Movement, the Qing government sent a large number of overseas students to study abroad and learn advanced western technology. In the reform movement, western music, as an integral part of western culture, entered China with the powerful current of Western learning. Kang Youwei proposed that “In order to establish national schools, all townships are ordered to set up primary schools. The people of the whole country, who are required to enter school from the age of seven or above, are taught literature, history, arithmetic,

geography, physics, singing and dancing. If they graduate eight years later and do not go to school, their parents will be punished.” [1] This is the first time in modern Chinese history that music is officially proposed as a compulsory course for schools. With the wide opening of music courses in the whole country, music education has been given a unique and important role. In the view of reformists, the strong foundation of the country lies in talents, while the cultivation of talents lies in school education, and music is a crucial part of school education. “If we want to improve the quality of the people, poetry and music is one of the elements of spiritual education, which can be known by some people who have a little knowledge,” Liang Qichao said in *Poetry Notes of Ice-drinking Room*, “Today, if you do not engage in education, you will be able to sing a subject if you are serious about education. It is really a school. No one in the country can make new music, and the shame of society is also true.” [2] Huang Zisheng thinks that “Today, the Western civilization is originated from Greece and Rome. The so-called spiritual education is not afraid to be cautious about music.” To improve the governance of the masses, we must start from the improvement of society today, and the society will be revitalized if we want to integrate society with pottery. The spread of the reform thought and the wide establishment of primary and secondary schools all over the country directly promoted the rise of school music and songs. [3] Meanwhile, western music also takes the school music songs as the carrier to “enter the Chinese land on a universal social scale”. [4]

3. The Popularity of Singing Activities

As for why singing can become the main means of “innovative spirit”, we should start from the characteristics of singing which are different from other arts. The author summarizes it as the following points: first, singing is easy to speak, and learning is relatively simple. Wo Sheng in *the Value of Music* said: “if you look at children, you don't know anything. You can't understand the beauty and interest of sculpture and painting. If you sing alone, you can understand the height and length. Therefore, the taste of music is prior to his intelligence, which is for the beauty of music is easy to feel.” [5] Second, the form of collective singing can cultivate students' cooperation and collective view. “Students in the same class, singing the same song, adjusting their rhythm and voice, uniting with each other and having the same voice, can arouse children's common heart.” Third, the sonorous and powerful songs are easy to inspire people's patriotism. Feng Zikai, a famous painter and musician, recalled the singing of *Mian Xue (Study Assiduously)* in his school at that time: “we were learning to sing in the late Qing Dynasty, when there were many difficulties and people were in turmoil. When we sang “the East Asian continent is going to sink”, we felt that the land under our feet is going to sink. “ [6] Fourth, the lyrics of scientific knowledge and moral concepts can be spread among students' entertainment. Shen Xingong in *Singing Teaching Method in Primary Schools* said “Singing is the only combination of morality and beauty; In the past, Confucius taught people with poetry, which is the principle of deep education.”

As an art form, singing is most closely related to human life and language, so it is easier to learn and spread than poetry, painting, architecture, sculpture and dance. The characteristic of words is to teach people moral knowledge, while the melody can stimulate sympathy and emotion. Once the words and music are combined into songs, this kind of educational thought will make children sing and feel better through the unique “emotional” function of music. Therefore, singing is the fastest and most effective way to convey new ideas in various art categories. It is because of this characteristic that all walks of life give it the task of “revitalizing the spirit” in the new period, and it is in this special social and historical background that school songs rise.

4. The Influence of School Music

First of all, school songs have contributed a number of early excellent vocal music works to the history of modern Chinese music, which is the pioneer of “new music” creation. Through the singing of music songs and school music education, western basic music theories and skills began to spread systematically and widely in China. Through the school music education based on music and song, the school began to systematically import western music knowledge, such as teaching the notation, introducing the staff, establishing the form of collective singing, starting new song creation, etc. With the development of school music, new music has a wide influence on the public, and has developed rapidly. It has become a major trend of modern Chinese music, and gradually occupies a dominant position. At the same time, a large number of excellent music works also came into being, its melody is short and smooth; rhythm is simple, bright, regular, easy for the masses to learn, which has a huge impact on the music creation of later generations in China.

Secondly, the school songs made the singing form of “collective singing” deeply rooted in the hearts of the people and laid the foundation for the mass singing movement. The simple and regular melody and sonorous lyrics make the singing activities not only widely carried out in schools, but also expand its influence in society. “School music is not only a course in the general sense, but also a popular art form.” [8] Third, the emergence of school music has brought profound changes to the social outlook and people's spiritual outlook. Under the influence of the idea of saving the nation by music, the social role of musicians has changed greatly. Some of these “musicians” devoted to the dissemination of western music theory are engaged in the research of music theory, while others are engaged in the creation of “new music”, gradually bringing China's music onto the road of specialization.

5. Conclusion

The rise of school songs has a profound background of the times. From the beginning, it has shouldered a burden far beyond its own carrying capacity. Therefore, school songs pay more attention to the lyrics than the music itself. That is to say, for this kind of art of combining lyrics and melody, lyrics should achieve the educational purpose for students and the public as far as possible, while melody becomes an auxiliary, mainly for the easy entry and dissemination of new ideas. It was because of this historical responsibility related to the fate of the whole country that all sectors of the society at that time gave an unimaginable enthusiasm for the spread and development of school songs, which made school songs develop rapidly across the country and took the first step in the development of China's new music. In my opinion, the value of school music lies not in the extent to which it has transformed the national spirit, but in its enlightenment of ideas: the enlightenment of advocating science, freedom and equality, patriotism and the spirit of striving. Since modern times, music has been able to have such a wide and far-reaching impact on Chinese society, and school songs bear the brunt. It can be said that school songs created a new era in the history of Chinese music and had a great impact on the development of the whole modern history.

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