

# *Comparative Analysis of Musical Morphology between Italian Opera Aria and Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang*

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**Abstract:** This article systematically compares the musical morphology characteristics of Italian opera aria and Sichuan opera Gaoqiang. Through the analysis of structural design, performance techniques, emotional expression, modal system, and cultural values, it reveals the significant differences between the two in form and content. Italian arias emphasize a standardized structure, multi-layered harmonic system, and delicate melodic lines, expressing profound emotions and dramatic tension, reflecting European classical music's pursuit of individual expression and emotional depth. Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang, on the other hand, emphasizes the creation of artistic conception and the intuitive expression of the characters' psychology with its highly fluid structure, varied vocal modes, and rich national flavor, reflecting the emphasis of traditional Chinese opera on local culture and straightforward emotions. Through comparative analysis, this study provides a profound theoretical basis for understanding the differences between Chinese and Western musical expression and cultural values, which helps promote cross-cultural artistic exchange and innovative development.

## **1. Introduction**

Opera, as an art form with a long history, its vocal art takes bel canto as the core, emphasizing the beauty of the voice and the transmission of emotions. After hundreds of years of evolution, opera has formed a unique and rich artistic system. As a derivative and expansion of opera, musicals, while retaining the essence of vocal art, incorporate modern musical elements and diverse performance forms, making the expression of vocal art more diverse and flexible.

Italian opera arias and Sichuan opera Gaoqiang (high-pitched tunes) serve as exemplary musical expressions within their respective cultural systems, profoundly reflecting artistic demands under different historical backgrounds, social structures, and aesthetic orientations. As a core expressive means of Italian opera, the aria, with its delicate melodic lines, complex harmonic systems, and intense dramatic quality, represents a concentration of emotional expression and artistic technique in European classical music[1]. Sichuan opera Gaoqiang, rooted in the folk foundations of traditional Chinese opera, presents audiences with a strong local artistic charm through its unique vocal techniques, rich emotional colors, and strong regional cultural characteristics[2,3]. These two musical forms exhibit significant differences in external forms of expression, structural arrangements, and aesthetic needs, but also share commonalities in deep emotional expression,

character shaping, and cultural values.

A systematic comparative analysis of Italian opera arias and Sichuan opera Gaoqiang can reveal the similarities and differences between the two in terms of musical structure design, performance techniques, emotional transmission, and cultural expression, thereby deepening the understanding of the connotations of Chinese and Western musical art. This comparative study not only helps to clarify the differences in musical expression between different cultures, but also unearths the cultural and philosophical foundations behind their respective artistic characteristics, providing theoretical support for cross-cultural music research. The arias of Italian opera, with their balanced structure and harmonically rich expression, emphasize the profound experience of personal emotions, while Sichuan opera Gaoqiang, through its unique phonetic variations, breathing techniques, and poetic imagery, emphasizes the expression of artistic conception and the psychological state of the characters. The two have their own characteristics in the way they express emotions and the path to achieve dramatic functions, but both strive to achieve emotional resonance and cultural inheritance in music.

Using a structured research framework, this article will systematically sort out the musical form characteristics of Italian arias and Sichuan opera Gaoqiang, and deeply analyze their similarities and differences in structure, technique, emotional transmission, and cultural meaning. It is expected that by sorting out the internal laws and expression logic of the two, it will not only enrich the understanding of traditional musical forms, but also provide a path for theoretical exploration of the integration and innovation of cross-cultural art. As such, the research in this article aims to fit the current era of diverse cultural integration, providing a new perspective and understanding for musical dialogue and exchange between Chinese and Western cultures.

## **2. Musical Form Characteristics of Italian Opera Arias**

### **2.1 Historical Evolution and Development**

As an important component of European classical music, Italian opera arias possess rich historical significance and complex musical expression characteristics. Their morphological evolution and artistic value profoundly reflect the development trajectory and aesthetic pursuits of European classical music. In terms of historical evolution, the aria has undergone a process of gradual complexification and refinement from the opera forms of the Baroque period. Early Italian opera was largely influenced by the musical traditions of the Renaissance, employing relatively simple melodic lines and harmonic treatment to highlight the expressiveness of the human voice[4]. Entering the Baroque period, arias began to adopt the expressive mode of single-voice melody with accompaniment, emphasizing the display of singing techniques and the strengthening of dramatic emotions. At this time, arias gradually formed fixed structural patterns, such as Da capo (return to the head) and binary form, which enhanced the sense of emotional layering and also facilitated singers adding improvisational ornamentation during the performance, demonstrating their personal skills[5].

With the arrival of the Classical period, arias became more concise and clear in structure and expression, while melodic lines tended towards linearity and smoothness. Easily singable melodic structures and clear emotional expression became mainstream, gradually moving away from the ornate rhetoric and complex harmonies of the Baroque period, emphasizing the natural expression of the human voice and the genuine outpouring of emotion[6]. During the Romantic period, opera arias ushered in a new round of changes, typically characterized by free forms and rich emotional layers, emphasizing the singer's personal expressive space and pursuing a profound experience of inner emotions. The freedom of melody was greatly enhanced during this period, the accompaniment became more delicate, and the dual functions of symphonic and vocal expression

were gradually integrated, enriching the emotional tension of the drama.

## 2.2 Structure and Performance Techniques

Arias have the characteristics of comprehensive aesthetics. It encompasses modes, tonality, rhythm, melody, accompaniment texture, harmony, orchestration, dramatic lyrics, language, and so on. However, its main component is the melody. The melody is the soul of an aria, while the accompanying music serves to guide, enhance, embellish and transition. The two are seamlessly integrated and inseparable. However, whether it is the melody or the accompaniment, they both create beauty based on the images and artistic conception provided by the lyrics. Therefore, the lyrics are the foundation of beauty in the art of arias. The three complement each other and form a comprehensive whole.

In terms of structure and performance techniques, Italian opera arias often feature solo performances by singers, emphasizing the continuity and fluidity of the melodic line. The typical aria structure is often a free, linear melody accompanied by a simple accompaniment, highlighting the character's emotional appeals. Traditional "reilè" (melodic repetition sections) structures and rich melodies with ornaments constitute important means of expression[5]. The use of ornaments usually complements the lyricism of the melody, enhancing the delicate expression of emotion. At the same time, techniques such as mode switching, modulation, and imitation are used to enhance the expressive tension of the music. In terms of singing techniques, emphasis is placed on the flexibility of vocalization and the virtuoso display of coloratura, elevating the timbre and texture of the voice to an artistic level, expressing the character's complex inner world.

## 2.3 Emotional Expression and Dramatic Function

Arias have melodious tunes and contain profound emotions. In opera, arias are like the soul of the opera, often playing at the right time at the climax of the plot, serving as a way for characters to vent their inner emotions. Arias have exquisite melodies and a wide range, providing singers with a broad space for performance. For actors, performing arias is not only a rigorous test of vocal skills, but also a challenge to the ability to express emotions. Actors need to possess superb breathing control skills, precise pitch control ability, and rich timbre variation ability. Moreover, they should delve into the inner world of their characters, accurately capture and convey their complex emotions. Actors need to delicately interpret the joys, sorrows, anger and happiness of their characters through the changes in the intensity and rhythm of their voices, guiding the audience to resonate emotionally with the characters and jointly experience a soul-stirring journey. Arias not only serve to render the emotions of characters, but also are an important means to advance the plot of an opera and shape the characters' images[6]. In stage performances, the form of aria is highly dramatic. It shapes the psychological depth of characters through music and singing, intensifies the expression of dramatic emotions, and profoundly influences the emotional resonance of the audience.

## 2.4 Harmony and Tonality Characteristics

In terms of harmony and tonality, Italian opera arias show a transition from the complex harmonies of the Baroque period to the gradual simplification and rationality of the Classical period. Early Baroque arias made extensive use of suspense, gradation, and polyphonic techniques, emphasizing harmonic color changes and the setting of the dramatic atmosphere. The accompaniment usually consisted of stringed instruments, continuo, etc., creating a heavy and expressive harmonic background. Entering the Classical period, the harmonic structure became more balanced and clear, emphasizing the stability of the tonal center, and employing a large

number of conventional modes and sequence techniques to strengthen the sense of order in the music. In the Romantic period, there was a greater tendency to use rich harmonic colors and subtle tonal changes to create a more dramatic atmosphere. This evolution demonstrates a shift from formal regularity to free expression, while also reflecting the continuous pursuit of musical expression in different historical periods.

### **3. Musical Form Characteristics of Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang**

#### **3.1 Historical Background and Development**

As an important form of traditional Chinese opera, Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang boasts rich historical connotations and distinct artistic features. Its musical form is deeply influenced by regional culture, folk art, and the demands of opera performance, showcasing a unique aesthetic value. Regarding its historical background and development, the origins of Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang can be traced back to the mid-Qing Dynasty, developing and growing alongside the gradual formation and maturation of Sichuan Opera. Early Gaoqiang music was influenced by folk songs, ballads, and local operas from the southern Sichuan region, integrating diverse folk elements to gradually form a singing system unique to Sichuan Opera[7]. With the passage of time, after multiple changes and evolutions, Gaoqiang has been continuously enriched in terms of content expression, singing style, and performance techniques. Its structure has become increasingly diversified, evolving from simple singing to a comprehensive performance system that integrates singing, recitation, acting, and acrobatics, gradually becoming a core means of expressing character and plot development.

#### **3.2 Structure and Performance Techniques**

In terms of structure and performance techniques, the musical form of Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang exhibits a high degree of fluidity and variability, possessing both a long-lasting charm and a flexible rhythm. Gaoqiang employs varied musical structures, including long phrases, short phrases, and repeated passages, flexibly adapting to the different needs of the plot. During the singing, the singer creates a rich and flavorful timbre effect through skillful breathing, special breath control, and rich vocalization techniques[8]. The accompaniment is mostly based on Sichuan Opera's stringed and woodwind instruments such as the Huqin, Dizi, and Yueqin, supplemented by percussion instruments and drumbeats, forming a well-coordinated musical support. Gaoqiang's performance techniques emphasize the "lyrical flavor" and "vigorous strength" of the singing, vividly displaying the character's inner emotions and personality traits through delicate changes in the vocal line, trills, slides, and other techniques. In the performance process, the singer often combines movements, gestures, and stage arrangement to integrate music with dramatic actions, showcasing a rich theatricality.

#### **3.3 Emotional Expression and Character Portrayal**

Emotional expression and character portrayal hold a central position in Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang. Gaoqiang's singing style emphasizes the unfolding of multi-layered emotional spaces through variations in vocal timbre. Its artistic characteristic lies in showcasing the nuances of characters' emotions and psychological states—joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness—through the rise and fall of tones and changes in rhythm, thereby strengthening the personalized expression of character images. Gaoqiang's dramatic treatment emphasizes integrated performance methods of "singing, acting, recitation, and acrobatics." The aria is not merely singing, but a psychological portrayal of the

character and a deep expression of the situation. The characters' personality traits, emotional fluctuations, and plot progression are all conveyed through different Gaoqiang arias. Gaoqiang in such scenes often employs diverse modes such as lyrical, impassioned, and tragic, fully demonstrating the complex emotional entanglements within the characters' hearts. During the performance, actors need to flexibly adjust their intonation, rhythm, and vocal style according to changes in the characters' psychological states, so that the audience can aurally perceive the characters' true emotions, forming a strong dramatic appeal.

### **3.4 Mode and Rhythm Characteristics**

In terms of mode and rhythm characteristics, Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang exhibits a rich and diverse system of national modes, emphasizing an artistic style of "lingering charm and vigorous power." Gaoqiang often draws on the modal characteristics of southern Sichuan folk songs, adopting a multi-modal system based on the pentatonic scale, integrating the pentatonic scale, modulation, as well as glides and repetitions in the melody to enhance the expressiveness of the music. Its modal structure generally emphasizes "charm," pursuing "charm in the heart, charm in the voice." The design of the modes pursues freedom and variation, so that each Gaoqiang excerpt can accurately express the character's state of mind. In terms of rhythm, Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang relies on a dynamic rhythm supported by drum beats and rhythmic patterns, featuring both fast-paced excitement and slow lyrical passages to meet the diverse emotional needs within the plot. During the performance, actors can adjust the tempo at any time according to changes in the plot, using changes in rhythm to strengthen dramatic conflict and emotional impact, making the music an indispensable driving force for plot development.

## **4. Comparative Analysis of Musical Forms**

### **4.1 Differences in Structural Design and Performance Techniques**

Regarding differences in structural design and performance techniques, Italian opera arias often employ fixed forms, such as the Da capo (A-B-A) structure, emphasizing melodic repetition, ornamentation, and variations. The normative structure reinforces the emotional layers of the drama. The performance techniques emphasize the independence and linear development of the melody. Vocal technique is particularly emphasized, using rich ornamentation and ascending or descending passages to highlight the fluctuations of the character's inner emotions. The performance style focuses on showcasing individual singing skills, emphasizing the singer's personal expressive space, and pursuing delicate and rich emotional portrayals. Supported by complex harmonic backgrounds, arias tend to enhance emotional depth and dramatic tension, shaping highly expressive dramatic scenarios through changes in modes and harmonic support.

In contrast, Sichuan Opera's Gaoqiang (high-pitched) style has a more fluid and improvisational structure. Its sections vary in length, with a high degree of freedom, focusing on creating artistic conceptions and the instantaneous expression of the character's psychology. Performance techniques emphasize the charm and lyricism of the singing voice, accompanied by body movements and gestures, integrating music and stage performance. Gaoqiang vocal techniques emphasize breath control, portamento, breath changes, overtones, and special vocalization methods, pursuing a realm where sound and color are both present. Its performance mechanism is more focused on showcasing personalized improvisation and dramatic authenticity in emotional transmission, emphasizing the performer's shaping of the character's vitality, with stronger interaction between music and performance.



## 4.2 Mechanisms of Voice, Melody, and Emotional Expression

In terms of voice, melody, and emotional expression mechanisms, Italian arias pursue the lyricism and linear development of the melody. Through the smooth undulation of the melodic line and the wide variation of the vocal range, the depth of the character's inner emotions and dramatic context is strengthened. The rhythm control of the music is delicate, and the dynamic changes are rich. Through the undulation of melody and rhythm, the complex psychological state of the character is effectively expressed. The continuity of the melody and the exquisite ornamentation align with the refined, delicate, and profound aesthetic pursuit of European classical music.

Sichuan Opera's Gaoqiang style relies more on the specific charm of tonality and vocal style in emotional expression. Through modulation, portamento, and changes in vocal color, the joys, anger, sorrows, and pleasures of the characters, as well as psychological changes, are displayed. Its vocal expression emphasizes lingering charm, highlighting the national and regional characteristics of the vocal style, expressing a strong local cultural aesthetic. In voice operation, it emphasizes the expressive force of the integration of voice and emotion, using special vocalization techniques to emphasize the character's personality and the tension of the situation. In contrast, Sichuan Opera's Gaoqiang style pays more attention to the instantaneous explosion of emotions and the creation of artistic conception, emphasizing the principle of "using sound to convey emotion," and emphasizing the fusion of vocal style and artistic conception to stimulate the audience's emotional resonance.

## 4.3 Cultural Dimensions of Harmony and Modal System

Regarding the cultural dimensions of harmony and modal system, the Italian aria system is deeply influenced by the European modal system, exhibiting a high degree of tonal stability and richness in harmonic color. From the Baroque to the Romantic period, harmony gradually shifted from complex polyphony to variations within a simple tonality, emphasizing modal changes, harmonic color, and integration with melody to enhance the changes in dramatic context. The harmonic treatment is complex and diverse, capable of creating an unpredictable atmosphere, thereby reflecting the inner world of the characters.

The modal system of Sichuan Opera's Gaoqiang, on the other hand, is rooted in the Chinese traditional music's pentatonic scale and the artistic concept of mode modulation. Based on the pentatonic scale, combined with specific modes and modulation methods, it forms a modal structure with strong national characteristics. These modes emphasize lingering charm and profound artistic conception, pursuing the aesthetic concept of "rhythm in sound, rhythm in the heart." Modal changes rely heavily on key changes, glissandos, and subtle modal adjustments to match the changes in the plot and enhance the effect of emotional expression. Its harmonic system is relatively simple, but it strengthens the expressiveness of the music and creates a strong national and regional character through changes in tone and rhythmic support.

## 4.4 Shaping Roles and Dramatic Emotions

In terms of shaping roles and dramatic emotions, European arias utilize complex melodies, harmonies, and structural changes to shape the deep psychological states of characters. Through the development and undulation of melody, the use of ornaments, and the transformation of modes, they delicately present the inner world and emotional fluctuations of the characters. As a carrier of character and emotion, singing emphasizes personalized expression, which can not only show the character's loneliness and anger, but also express their tenderness and pathos. The richness and frequency of changes in the music provide multi-dimensional channels for the complex emotions of the characters, highlighting the Western drama's ultimate pursuit of "soul depiction."

Sichuan Opera's Gaoqiang, on the other hand, adopts a performance method centered on vocal music, realizing the shaping of character and plot emotions through varied tones, rhythms, and artistic conceptions. Its singing focuses on stylized charm and personalized expression, emphasizing the use of vocal music to express the characters' joys, sorrows, psychological changes, and personality characteristics. The changes in vocal music not only reflect the specific personality of the characters, but also show the rhythm and tension of the plot development. The shaping of roles relies more on the modal changes of vocal music, phonetic rhythm, and singing skills, emphasizing the artistic pursuit of "emotion in sound, sound in emotion," integrating the instantaneous outburst of emotion with a calm artistic conception.

#### 4.5 Artistic Aesthetics and Cultural Values

In terms of artistic aesthetics and cultural values, European arias embody a pursuit of "individual expression," "emotional depth," and the "integration of music and drama," emphasizing the exquisite and delicate nature of the music itself and the rich experience of emotions. Their structured norms and diverse techniques aim to showcase the rich inner world of characters and the emotional layers of the drama. The aesthetic goal is to deeply engage the audience emotionally, creating resonance. This aesthetic concept is rooted in the combination of "rationality and sensibility" in European classical culture, reflecting humanism's focus on the individual soul.

In contrast, Sichuan Opera's Gaoqiang, as a traditional Chinese opera performance style, places greater emphasis on the aesthetic pursuits of "lingering charm," "profound artistic conception," and the "unity of object and self." It focuses on the profoundness of the sound, the expressive richness of the melody, and the creation of artistic conception, emphasizing the principle of "using sound to convey emotion" and valuing the integration of vocal music with stage setting, artistic conception, and character personality. Sichuan Opera's Gaoqiang emphasizes the creation of the scene's atmosphere, the characters' spiritual state, and the inheritance of regional culture, highlighting national cultural identity and local aesthetic tastes. Its artistic value lies in showcasing the unique charm of national culture and the directness of emotional expression, emphasizing individuality, intuition, and the genuine expression of emotions.

From a holistic perspective, Italian arias, through their structured norms, delicate techniques, emotional depth, and rich modes, embody European culture's in-depth portrayal of dramatic characters' psychology and the artistic expression of complex emotions. Sichuan Opera's Gaoqiang, relying on modulation, melodic charm, and the creation of artistic conception, demonstrates the aesthetic spirit of "using sound to convey emotion" and the pursuit of humanistic spirit in traditional Chinese culture. Although the two differ in their musical forms and reflect distinct cultural values, they both demonstrate a high pursuit of "emotional expression" and "dramatic shaping" within their respective cultural backgrounds, providing valuable artistic treasures for the dramatic arts in China and the world.

#### 5. Conclusion

This article, through a comparative analysis of the musical characteristics of Italian opera arias and Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang, reveals the profound differences between the two in structural design, performance techniques, emotional expression, modal systems, and cultural values. Italian arias, with their standardized structure, rich harmonic system, and refined melodic lines, emphasize the delicate expression of personal emotions and the manifestation of dramatic tension, embodying the pursuit of depth of expression and technical complexity in European classical music. Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang, on the other hand, with its fluid structure, varied vocal modes, and distinct regional aesthetic, focuses on artistic conception and intuitive expression. Through the close integration of

vocal charm and performance, it demonstrates the emphasis of traditional Chinese opera on emotional directness and national cultural identity. This contrast not only reflects the fundamental differences between East and West in musical expression and cultural values but also highlights their respective artistic pursuits in depicting the psychology of dramatic characters and expressing emotions. Overall, the artistic features expressed by the two within their rich cultural heritage provide a deep theoretical basis for understanding the diverse expressions of Chinese and Western music and lay a solid foundation for cross-cultural artistic exchange and innovation.

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