The History of Chinese Music

"Yin Yueh" (music) was traditionally considered to be one of the four fundamental societal functions together with morals, las, and politics. Primarily because of this emphasis, every fedual state, dynasty and republic throughout history had established an official music organization or bureau of music.

Shang (ca.16th-11th centuries B.C.), Zhou (1075-221B.C.)

According to literary documents, the Zhouperiod music had always been regarded as the foundation and crystallization of Chinese music for later dynasties. The complete model of court and ritual ceremonial music, music education system, the variety of musical styles, the grand music offices, and instrumentation were seeds of music for the subsequent dynasties.

Qin (221 B.C.-207 B.C.) and Han Dynasties (206 B.C.-A.D. 220)

During this period, therefore were significant inter-and cross-cultural musical influences. among the diverse sub-cultures of Chinese empire, and also between China and its geographic-economic affiliates. In addition to the native court musical instruments, that is, the zithers, panpipes, transverse flutes, vessel flutes, and a variety of barrel-shaped, stick membranophones, bells and lithophones, there were several new instruments introduced during this period. The were derived from regional and foreign sources. The most significant regional instrument to be introduced to the imperial court was the oblong bridged zither, the zheng, which was a native instrument of the former Qin kingdom. With the unification of China under Qin ruler and foundation of the Qin dynasty, the zheng soon became nationally popular, especially within the different types of urban music. Besides, during this period many foreign instruments were introduced China, most important of which were the end-blown di flute with four holes, the cylindrical double-reed jiao oboe, the shukongbou standing harp, and the plucked pipa lute.

In actual practice, three modes are know as the most important ones.

Three Kingdom (220-265), Jin (260-420), and the Northern-Southern Dynasty

From 220-589 A.D., China was no longer a unified empire and in its place reigned a number contending kingdoms and states, the majority of which hardly ruled for more than fifty years before being overthrown by another faction. The most significant musical historical events were importation and assimilation of nonindigenous music, expansion of Han musical style into southern China, new instruments, recognition of solo performance, earliest survival notation, maturity of music aesthetics by Xi Kang, and new conception of tonal systems.

Sui (581-618), Tang (618-907), and Five Dynasties (907-960)
After almost four centuries as a divided nation, China was once again re-united in Sui dynasty. The followed Tang dynasty had a long period of economic, political and cultural growth. Traders, official delegates, cultural and religious missions from Central Asia, Vietnam, Japan, India and Korea were drawn to its brilliant capital center and contributed a cosmopolitan sophistication to Tang China. Foreign musicians resided at the court not only to give performances, but also to provide musical instruction. The huge music bureau of the court, such as Jiaofang, was know to have in its employment thousands of musicians and dancers for daily performing duties. The first music academy, Liyuan ("Pear Garden"), was instituted for performance and training of professional young musicians. Poems by some of the most famous literati of China were set into songs which were almost instantly popular. This body of ageless poetry was celebrated even in subsequent history, in China and abroad.

The banquet music tradition for aristocracy known as yanyue had already been in practice during the ancient zhou dynasty. This music nevertheless, was overshadowed by the court ritual-ceremonial music, which was subsequently reconstructed during the Han dynasty and called yanyue or "elsgant and refined music". It was not until the Sui and Tang dynasties that uanyue or "banquet music" became the major court musical genre for the first time. Yanyue was a court musical performance for the nobles and gentries during a state function and during days of festivity.

The program of banquet music consisted of music of native and national minority Chinese as well as the music of neighboring nations. The foreign music, for example, the music of Samarkand, Bukhara, Fu ran (South Asia), India, and Korea. These seven non-native styles plus the native styles resulted in a total of ten musical divisions by the early Tang dynasty called the shibu ji or "ten performing divisions". However, the division of music was no longer organized by regional and international styles later, but by "standing music" and "sitting music" performance divisions. The standing division performed mostly outdoors, had a standard repertory, and included from sixty to one-hundred and eighty musicians and dancers. The sitting division had more of an ensemble quality, and included from three to twelve musicians and dancers.

This change from divisions of stylistic regions to standing and sitting organization indicated that the sinicization of previously imported style had occured by the early 8th century, and that a national high art form of dance-music genre had been created. Newly composed music took the place of imported musical genres. Although none of the yanyue repertory survived, except by name along, perhepts a trace of the sitting division style might be seen in the gagaku music of Japanese court.

Music of the Northern Song (960-1127), Southern Song (1127-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) Dynasties

The emergence of industry (iron, textile, for example) and increasing commerce caused a growing bourgeoisie population and a society that was more mobile. The printing of books made knowledge more accessible and broad literacy to a briader level. Changes in the arts and literature of this periodled to a new tradition in drama, music, fiction and impressionistic painting that dominated the development in the remaining periods of modern China. The creation of a new style in popular music, dram and literature were
mostly important. The scholar-officials, who were versatile in poetry, painting and music making, found an expanded audience for their song and word production. There were for major vocal genres: the poetic ci song, the art song, narrative music, the zaju variety musical drama. During this period, qin solo repertory also developed into a grand style.

The ci, often called "long and short verse", generally two stanza in length, was the new type of poetry developed and perfected by poets of the Song dynasty. Unlike the popular shi poetic form of the Tang dynasty, which had a uniform number of words per line, the ci was in irregular meter. Besides, the ci was correlated to music. The text of a ci was created by fitting words to an existing tune, which was of folk or popular origin and perhaps was also from foreign music that came from Central Asia during the Tang period. A ci poem therefore was the "filling in" of words to a given musical modal sequence and rhythm scheme in irregular meter. The practice of using an existing tune in early ci writing was gradually replaced by newly composed melodies by ci poets. In spite of the popularity of ci songs, only a few of the by Jiang Kuei survived.

The textual content of ci is essentially lyric and sentimental. It expresses emotions of love, sorrow and the joy of freeing oneself from the mundane, as well as deep feelings of nature. There are sensuous thoughts of lovely maindends, mournful and longing. Such are the sentiment of ci songs.

The Art Songs

There are two major types of art songs in this period, the xiaoling "short song" and the changzhuan "drum song". The first type of short song is characteristic of 12th- to 13th-century vocal music. It is brief, uses pre-existing tunes and is textually based on the qu form. Qu poetry differs from the previously mentioned shi and ci poetry in that qu is generally written in vernacular Chinese; it is popular poetry written by educated poets. The qu poem usually has rhymed line ending and is largely based on pastoral, seasonal or Taoiststic themes. An important distinction, however, is that individual xiaoling songs were sometimes were performed by a solo singer to the accompaniment of a wooden clapper.

The changzhuan "drum song" was developed during the Northern Song period. It was known for its instrumental accompaniment, which included the single-framed stick drum, wooden clapper and transverse flute. It was also distinguished by two kinds of unique formal structures: (1) the changling from which was "introduction, A, A, B, B, C, C, and finale"; and (2) the changda from which was "introduction, A, B, A, B". Although none of the actual music of this
vocal genre survived, the accompanying instruments were known to have alternated between metered and free rhythmic sections, thereby increasing the dramatization of the text.

The Narrative Songs

During this period there were many types of narrative songs which the zhugongdiao or "melody in multi-modes" was most significant. This form of narrative song was said to have been introduced by a professional narrative singer, Wang Sanquan, to the Northern Song capital of Kaifeng, sometime between 1068 and 1094. A lengthy historical or romantic tale was told through the alternation of narration and song, which was accompanied by an instrumentation similar to that of the drum songs, that is, single-frameedd drum, wooden clapper, transverse flute and occasionally adding the pipa lute.

The Zaju " Variety Musical Drama"

Ever science the Tang period (618-906) there had been a distinct direction toward an amalgamation of the speech, music, and gesturing/dancing performing arts. From the 11th to 13th centuries, we begin to see a culminating fusion between folk songs, drama, narrative music, juggling and acrobatics to form a stage dramatic art. The zaju " variety musical drama" was derived from the fact that various stage arts, from singing to satirical comedy and dramatic recitations, made up zaju.

In large cities, so called " title districts" or amusement centers sprang up where pleasure seekers of different backgrounds could purchase food, amusement, and other novelties. For example, in the Northern Song capital Bianliang (present-day Kaifeng) between 1102 and 1111, there were some fifty theaters located in these amusement centers. Performances were held daily, regardless of the weather, and there were always crowds of spectators. There were different types of entertainment offered: the variety musical dramas which seemed to be the most important feature in the "title districts", storytelling, martial arts, puppetry, and so on.

The zaju variety musical dramas contained four acts, including an introductory prologue which was usually comical and made up Act One. Acts Two and Three were the main body and Act Four was the epilogue. There were five characters involved: (a) a leading male role who was the sole singer in the cast, (b) a supporting male role, (c) a painted face, comic role, (d) an official, and (e) a musician who provided simple instrumental accompaniment on flute and drum. Apart from the singing role, other characters in the drama had narrating or acting (including dancing) parts.

The subject of the zaju dramas covered a wide range of topics. As recorded in the 1398 publication " The Supreme Tone of Universal Harmony" (Taihe zhengyin pu) by the playwright Zhu Quan (sixteenth son of the first emperor of the Ming dynasty), some of the zaju subjects were: enlightenment and immortality, kings and ministers, valiant warriors, traitors, advocates of filial piety or integrity, exiled officials, separation, reunion, and romance.

The zaju script provided an opportunity for social commentary and in many ways the variety musical dramas characterized the philosophical and social attitudes of 13th-14th century China. Taoist religiophilosophical themes and morality were reflected in the variety dramas. The quest for a simple life, one in harmony with the fundamental law of nature, was seen as a worthy goal in contrast to the vain delusions of worldly fame and material wealth. It must be
historically recalled that 14th century China under Mongol rule offered limited and miserable opportunities for the educated Chinese (Han Chinese) class as a whole. Many of the gentry intellectuals turned toward dramatic endeavors, which created an abundance of playwrights during this period. Writing became not only a livelihood, but more importantly, a way to escape the political and social upheaval. Taoism and its advocacy of a simple life in nature as the path to obtaining immortality severed as a means to justify one's own existence in the face of a hopeless socio-political environment.

Ming-Qing Dynasties

The Ming-Qing period was highly productive musically, resulting in developments that are important not only in this period but as highlights in the whole continuum of Chinese music. Kun and Peking operas, the art of qin, and regional instrumental music are some of the substantial areas that warrant more detailed coverage and thus are included as special topics in the second part of this book. Other prominent developments of the period include the areas of theory and musical literature, which will be introduced below.

The Ming-Qing period represents a highly cultivated time and a growing literate society. Among the class of literati officials, the arts of prose-poetry writing, qin zither playing, calligraphy, and chess playing became the highest goals. Regrettably, by the 19th century, creativity was replaced by cliche, imitation and conservatism; the arts of this time are generaly criticized as becoming lifeless and stagnant. However, a great scholarly contribution of this period was the printing of large collections, anthologies and encyclopedic works, many of which have been preserved until our time. An example of a comprehensive publication for the qin zither is the Yongle qinshu jicheng ("A Collection of Qin Essays") printed in twenty volumes. Its contents embody the history, music, theory, tuning methods and poetry on the qin. One of the most significant qin manuscript-notation collections in existence is the Shenqi mipu ("Mysterious and Secret Notations") published in 1425 by Zhu Quan (the sixteenth son of the first Ming emperor). Subsequently, there were over a hundred more qin manuscript-notational handbooks printed in the Ming-Qing period. Another substantial notational collection is the 1746 publication of 81 volumes, the Jiugong dacheng nanbeici gongpu ("Nations of Northern and Southern Songs in Nine musical Keys") that was compiled by Zhou Xiangyu under imperial auspices.

In addition to the practice of music and literature, a small group of literati-gentry scholars were also preoccupied with the acoustical principles of music especially related to their investigations in mathematics and numerology. Among these was a distinguished prince, Zhu Zaiyu(1536-ca.1610), who was an eminent musicologist, mathematician and astronomer in Chinese history, perhaps better known in the later two fields than in music. Prince Zhu is credited with the development of the equal-tempered scale of twelve pitches.

Prince Zhu's theory for an equal-tempered scale was not implemented into music practices in China.

Besides the prodigious publications and dissemination of qin music and practices, significant musical developments of this period occurred in the area of urban centers such as Peking and Suyang (Suzhou and Yangzhou) were entertainment in nature. The source of this entertainment music was usually folk dervied, that is, from the farms and villages, but which was polished for
city/urban consumption.

In Peking the important forms of urban music included the narrative genres such as tanci (not to be confused with southern tanchi), lianhualao ("The Falling Lotus"), and bajiaogu ("Eight-cornered Drum Song"). These were performed outdoors in the open areas of the marketplaces usually by travelling performing troupes. Their earnings were donations from by-standers. These performances of musical instruments. Loud instrumentation, such as the shifan ten varieties of gong and drum ensemble of the fengyang flower drum dance, was not popular in the open air. In many instances these presentations were not for purely musical reasons, but to gain the attention of passers-by for the sale of herbal medication or other products.

The outdoor performances catered to the commoners, meanwhile the indoor performances catered to an audience made up of gentry-officials and wealthy merchants. The performing hall would be set up with tables and chairs to allow the audience to partake of tea and delicacies while enjoing the production. The presentation was usually operatic: Kun opera and other regional operas.

During this period the influx of folk songs into cultural centers and their subsequent stylizations led to the growth of many forms of provincially (or regionally) indentified operas. Operatic genres such as the Han opera of Hubei province, Chuan opera of Sichuan province, Xiang opera of Hunan province, Min opera of Fujian province, Qinqiang of Shaanxi province, and Lu opera of Shandong province, to name some primary forms, had their formation sometime during the mid-16th century but did not reach the height of their development until the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Of these operatic genres two styles became so widely appreciated that they can be characterized as national dramatic genres. These were the Kun opera, which flourished especially in the Ming dynasty, and the Peking opera, which reached its zenith in the Qing dynasty.

Reference

Source: http://www-camil.music.uiuc.edu/musedex/taiwan/Chinese-history/ChHistory.html

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